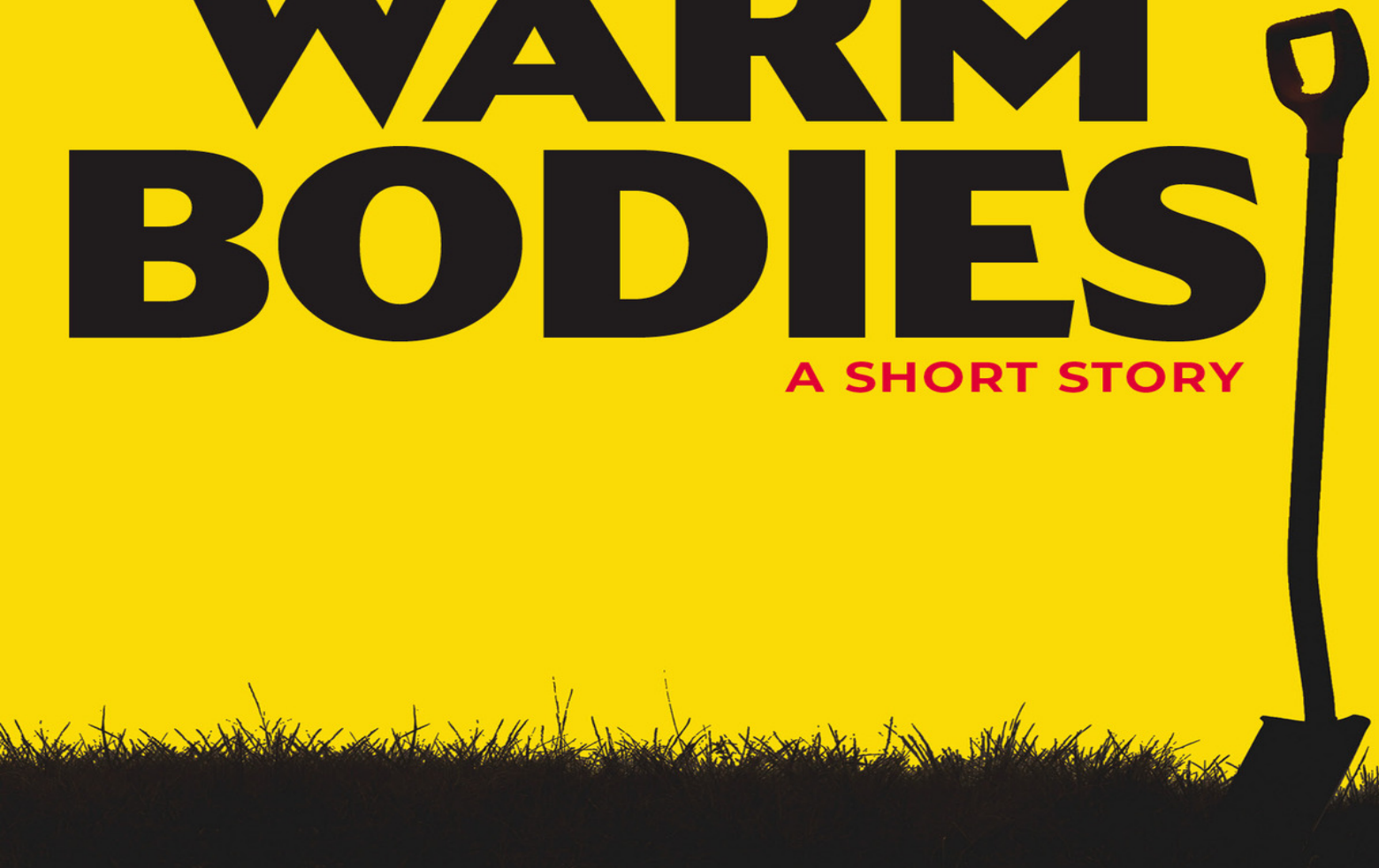
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A SHORT STORY



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
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eISBN: 9781662536366

Cover design by Will Speed
Cover image: ©Andrei Metelev / Shutterstock



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For the Brenda in all of us.

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Well-behaved women seldom make history.

—LAUREL THATCHER ULRICH

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 20 MEMBERS

BETH 8.59 a.m.
Who spotted another dog poo on the path this morning?

LINDA 9.01 a.m.
WHERE?

BETH 9.01 a.m.
Outside my house this time. Disgusting.

ROSE 9.02 a.m.
Who would let their dog do that?

BETH 9.02 a.m.
I can only go by what was captured on the Ring doorbell camera. And it was a blurred image of the offending dog and owner.

LINDA 9.03 a.m.
AND?

BETH 9.03 a.m.
You know me, I don't like to point fingers, but it had more than a passing resemblance to Brenda.

SADIE 9.04 a.m.
Which one, the dog or the owner?

EMILY 9.04 a.m.
😏 You are terrible, Sadie!

BETH 9.05 a.m.

I could be wrong, I'd hate to place blame where it's unwarranted . . .

LINDA 9.05 a.m.
I'M SORRY THAT HAPPENED TO YOU. 😢 LEAVING YOUR DOG'S MESS BEHIND IS THE KIND OF THING SOMEONE DOES IF THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT THEIR VILLAGE.

SADIE 9.05 a.m.
Brenda's not one of us. Renters have no emotional or financial investment in the area where they live.

TRACY 9.05 a.m.
Hear hear. How many times have we extended the hand of friendship to her?

DOLLY 9.06 a.m.
More times than I care to mention. She didn't volunteer to help decorate the church at Easter or Christmas . . .

BETH 9.06 a.m.
. . . never comes to the village hall coffee mornings . . .

NELLY 9.07 a.m.
. . . doesn't participate in the litter picking . . .

BETH 9.07 a.m.
Has she ever donated anything to the bake sale?

SADIE 9.07 a.m.
Once. Remember that coffee and walnut cake?! Hasn't she heard of nut allergies? Nothing says charity like anaphylactic shock.

BETH 9.08 a.m.
It was so hideous to look at, I'm surprised it didn't slither off to the bin all by itself in shame.

TRACY 9.08 a.m.
Someone should say something to Brenda about her dog. Remind her she needs to start cleaning up after it.

DOLLY 9.09 a.m.
Definitely!

BETH 9.10 a.m.
Or one of us should give the 💩 back to its rightful owner. Right on her doorstep.

TRACY 9.10 a.m.
Yes! Great idea!

BETH 9.11 a.m.
Now ladies, I was kidding.

ROSE 9.13 a.m.
No, I think you could be on to something. Teach her a lesson.

BETH 9.14 a.m.
No matter how justified you might feel this is, I'm afraid that as chair of the parish council, I can't be seen to be condoning that sort of behaviour . . .

LINDA 9.16 a.m.
WE SUPPORT EACH OTHER IN THIS VILLAGE, BETH. WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW CAN'T HURT YOU. 😉

BETH 9.17 a.m.
❤️

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CHAPTER 1
TODAY

Darling, which of these wellies do you want to wear today?' I shout from where I'm crouched, half in the hallway and half inside the cupboard under the stairs. 'Elsa or Bluey?'

'Elsa!' comes a little voice from the kitchen.

'Are we missing a word?'

'Please.'

My youngest grandchild, Esme, appears and plonks herself on the bottom stair. She tugs at the blue-and-silver boots plastered with images of her favourite Disney character until they fit. Between giving her breakfast, cleaning her teeth and helping her change from her pyjamas into her day clothes, sometimes I forget how long it can take to get a four-year-old ready and out of the house. I yawn – the result of a long, unexpected evening that saw little sleep – as I reach for the plastic bag on the kitchen worktop.

I open the front door and immediately spot a dog poo on the doorstep.

'Urgh.'

'Why's that there?' Esme asks, and I tell her I have no idea. It's not our dog Oscar's, and he begins sniffing around it until I tug him back with his lead. Allergies mean his vet has put him on a special diet that gives his waste a chalky colour. And this one here is dark brown. The gate ahead is closed, so unless the dog that left me this gift is able to open and close a latch, it's deliberate. I frown. I can only assume it's kids messing around because I don't know anyone in the village who would do something so petty. I take a stone from the rockery and push the offending item on to the soil before the three of us begin our walk.

In one hand I hold Oscar's lead, and in the other, Esme's soft, warm fingers entwine with mine. I love being around her, and missed her while she was away with her mum this weekend. Which in hindsight was a blessing, given recent events. She wants to carry the bag of scrap food, but today's buffet is a little heavy for her and it drags along the pavement. I

offer to carry it, but she refuses. She's a stubborn little soul. Her mum, Lucy, says it skipped a generation and she gets that from me.

We make our way through the quiet streets of Stretton village on the edge of Northampton, where my daughter, her three children and I live. Being here is a world away from our old house in a not-so-great part of town. Our cottage is by no means large, and sometimes it can feel a little cramped with the five of us under its roof. But at least the kids no longer have to share a bedroom with me or their mum, and they have a huge garden to play in.

We muddle along without complaint because I'm aware how many grandparents don't have the opportunity I do, to be hands-on with their grandchildren every day of the week. So, it's something I'll never take for granted. I love our home, even if it's only rented. In fact, I still pinch myself each time I walk along these chocolate-box streets, passing thatched cottages, pubs and the village hall, occasionally serenaded by church bells that chime on the hour. There's a community here if I choose to be a part of it. And perhaps one day I'll take up my neighbours' offers to join them in whist drives, Women's Institute meetings, book clubs and Pilates classes. But for now, I've politely declined.

Not out of choice, but out of necessity.

Esme breaks the sound of birdsong in the sycamore trees above us. 'How long will it take to get there?' she asks. We have travelled this route together by foot or by pushchair at least once a week since we moved here eighteen months ago. Yet she asks me this same question every time. I think it's only to hear my cryptic response.

'How long is a piece of string?'

'Fifty million miles,' she giggles, and I tell her she's close.

In truth, it's only fifteen minutes from our cottage to Holmfield Farm. Once we leave the village outskirts, it's a short walk to our destination along a single-track road. Oscar squats suddenly on a grass verge.

'Urgh, Granny, he's doing a poo!' Esme shrieks.

I pull out a biodegradable bag from my pocket and scoop it up, using the handles to tie a knot before we continue our journey. Esme loves nothing more than to sing, so she launches into the chorus of 'Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious', a word she has been practising ever since watching the film *Mary Poppins* with her older sister Jessica. She also

wanders the house talking in a terrible cockney accent. Lucy's branded it her Dick Van Dyke era. Today, I join in until the farm is in sight.

A handful of brick outhouses and vast, wooden sheds with corrugated-iron roofs surround a timeworn sandstone farmhouse. There are fields as far as the eye can see, some used for crops, others for herds of sheep with thick coats ready for shearing. We carefully negotiate a cattle grid before opening and closing a metal gate, which alerts Michael, the farmer, to our arrival. He is tinkering with the engine of a muddy blue tractor, his German Shepherd, Barney, by his side. The dog is the first to approach us, and a nervous Oscar takes shelter behind me. But Barney shows me more attention than he does Oscar. His tail wags as he sniffs at my legs and hands. I try to gently push him away but he's not having any of it. And it's making me uncomfortable.

'Ahh, look who's here,' Michael says with a smile that takes up the lower portion of his face. 'My two favourite girls.'

He says the same thing every time we arrive. And, as if on cue, I reciprocate his smile with one of my own, although mine is more reserved. Michael has been widowed since before we moved to the village and he has grown-up children scattered about different parts of the country. He's certainly what many women would consider to be a catch. He hasn't tried to disguise his soft spot for me and there's often a fluttering in my stomach when we meet. But romance isn't something I want to explore. It has nothing to do with my age: at fifty-eight, I'm not ready to shut up shop. It's also not because of the limited time I have, what with my jobs and co-parenting three grandchildren while my daughter works. It's that relationships require honesty and openness. And I'm capable of neither.

A now-whining Barney still won't leave me alone and circles my legs until Michael uses a stern voice to tell him to go away. Finally, and to my relief, he does as he's told.

'Have you come to feed the pigs?' Michael asks Esme. He has no grandchildren of his own and seems to have a soft spot for my youngest. He's told me before how she reminds him of his only daughter when she was Esme's age.

'Yes!' She grins as she lifts up the bag to show him the scraps we've carried with us. 'I love piggies.'

She follows this up with an oinking noise and I can't help but think it won't be long before she makes the connection between the bacon

sandwiches she loves to eat for weekend breakfasts and her favourite farmyard animal. I'll leave it to Lucy to tackle that one.

Michael leads us towards three pens where twenty-five or so pink-and-brown stocky, adolescent pigs shuffle towards us. They are always ravenous.

'Do you have time to join me for a cup of tea and a slice of cake afterwards?' he asks. I don't get why he always sounds so hopeful, because I turn him down every time he suggests it.

'Can we, Granny? Please?' asks Esme.

'I'm sorry but I have work to do when I get home,' I lie. 'Perhaps next time.'

Michael offers a casual shrug, but I know he's disappointed. He flashes me another crooked smile, which I interpret as *you'll change your mind eventually*, before returning to his tractor.

'Ready?' I ask Esme, and she nods excitedly.

'Can I pour the food out?'

'Not today, darling,' I reply as I open the bag. Inside is a Tupperware tub containing the scraps. I prise open the lid and scatter the contents by hand on to the straw bedding below. The animals gobble it up as if it's their last meal on earth.

'They're greedy pigs!' Esme giggles as two grunt loudly over a browning lettuce leaf. Then she squints and points to something on the ground the pigs have yet to eat. 'Look at that parsnip,' she says. 'It looks funny.'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'It looks like a finger.'

I don't correct her. Instead, I smile to myself.

'Oh yes, you're right,' I reply. 'So it does.'

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CHAPTER 2
A MONTH EARLIER

I'm supposed to appear surprised when I'm called into the school assembly hall. But full disclosure: I have already managed to wheedle out of my granddaughter Jessica what the plans are for today. I hate surprises but love that eight-year-olds can't keep secrets to save their lives. Not like adults. We can lie at the drop of a hat.

As I enter through the double doors, all six classes are waiting for me, sitting cross-legged on a scuffed parquet floor. They cheer and applaud when I arrive. I could give Meryl Streep a run for her money as I place my hand over my mouth in mock astonishment.

'Come up and join me, Brenda – Mrs Houghton,' welcomes head teacher Mr Armstrong.

I follow him up three steps and on to the stage, and glance across at the beaming children. I spot a grinning Jessica in the second row from the front, and I give her a thumbs up.

'Well, Brenda,' begins Mr Armstrong, 'you've worked here for so long now that you're like part of the furniture! How many years has it been?'

'Ten, I think.'

'Which is why we wanted to take this opportunity to tell you how much we'll miss you now that you're leaving us.'

It was cleaning the primary school that first made me fall in love with Stretton village. It's what the relocation app Rightmove describes as a 'much sought after and affluent location' where properties are in high demand. But it never crossed my mind I'd ever be able to afford to live here.

The cottage's previous owner was Albert, an elderly widower, who I also cleaned for two afternoons a week. His daughter Frankie paid me extra to ensure her dad's fridge was regularly stocked. Then, knowing my circumstances and soon after he lost his battle with pneumonia, she asked if I'd be interested in renting the house.

‘I don’t want it going to anyone else, especially in the village,’ she admitted to me. ‘Dad was still on a hospital ventilator when the neighbours started slipping notes through the letter box asking for first refusal when I sold it. They’re heartless.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘Most of them probably want to buy it to knock it down and build something bigger. But I grew up here and I’m not having my memories bulldozed for profit. And unfortunately for them, I don’t need their money. I’d rather rent the property out than sell it to vultures.’

Of course I said yes.

‘So, Mrs Houghton,’ Mr Armstrong asks, ‘how will you be spending your early retirement?’

‘I’m going to continue my hobby of upcycling old furniture,’ I tell everyone, ‘and then there’s my allotment and grandchildren, which I’m sure will keep me busy.’

It wasn’t until recently that I began exploring my creative side through furniture restoration. I have a practical mind, so I’ll try my hand at anything from refurbishing wardrobes to console tables and desks – whatever I can buy for a bargain on Facebook Marketplace or eBay. I strip them back to basics and either return them to their former glory or give them a more modern touch. It brings in a nice, consistent income.

Although not as much as my other job does. That job is the reason I can afford to retire from cleaning.

I accept a beautiful bouquet of red peonies and white lilies from Mr Armstrong, and an enormous card drawn and signed by all the children, which I’ll treasure.

Soon after, when I’ve returned to the staffroom and am hanging up my tabard one last time, my phone vibrates. Not my actual phone, but the burner. The one my family don’t know about. A text message appears from the only number stored in my contacts.

‘Monday,’ it reads. ‘Time tbc.’

Right. I pause, then shift gears into a different mode of thinking. I begin making a mental list of what I’m running low on and what I’ll need to purchase. Then I wonder what the package will contain. Because no two are ever the same.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 20 MEMBERS

BETH 10.17 a.m.
Was anyone else woken up by the delivery outside Brenda's house last night?

SADIE 10.18 a.m.
No, what time was this?

BETH 10.18 a.m.
11.45 p.m. Who orders deliveries at that time?

NELLY 10.19 a.m.
It was probably one of those Deliveroo or Just Eat drivers. They don't care how much noise they make.

BETH 10.20 a.m.
No, it was a transit van not a motorbike. And it's not the first time she's had these midnight callers, is it?

DOLLY 10.20 a.m.
Remember when I thought she was being burgled and was about to call the police?

BETH 10.22 a.m.
I've been in that house. There really isn't much worth stealing unless you're building a shrine to bad taste. Last night's truck was parked on the path too. Imagine Delia trying to get past it in her wheelchair. She'd have been forced to use the road.

LINDA 10.24 a.m.

ISN'T DELIA HOUSEBOUND? WHY WOULD SHE BE OUT AT THAT TIME OF NIGHT?

BETH 10.25 a.m.
You're missing the point, Linda. Anyway, I've been taking photographs of each dangerously parked vehicle and making a note of the times. It might be useful if someone could show them to the community police officer the next time he patrols the village. I'd do it myself, of course, but it might be perceived as a conflict of interests, what with my position on the parish council.

EMILY 10.30 a.m.
Leave it with me, Beth. Send me the pictures and I'll have a word with him. You do enough for this village already.

BETH 10.32 a.m.
Thank you, Emily. I live to help others.

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CHAPTER 3
29 DAYS EARLIER

Oh lovely,' I grumble as I stand by the open door, fanning my face with my hands. I shouldn't be surprised by the heat pouring out from the inside of this shed.

The structure is made of a thick, high-density polyethylene plastic, and it's virtually airtight. And it's where I'll be spending much of today. Prisoners of war have suffered better treatment. We're also in the midst of an unusually warm May, and I'm dressed head to toe in a white plastic hazmat suit and two pairs of gloves. Covering my face is an ex-military gas mask which only adds to the feeling of claustrophobia. The first time my daughter Lucy saw me kitted out like this, she told me I reminded her of a character from *Breaking Bad*. I assured her I had no plans to build a meth lab in here. I was terrible at chemistry at school and once singed both eyebrows with a Bunsen burner.

When it was being erected, Lucy was unsure why I needed a shed this big. At six by eight metres, I conceded it is on the large side. But the garden is a third of an acre, so the shed feels proportionate. I also reminded her that we don't have a garage, and I need somewhere watertight to store the furniture I upcycle because there's no space for it in the house. I paid extra to have the shed soundproofed so my hammering or sanding won't irritate the neighbours if I'm working late at night. It's a plausible, if not entirely truthful, reason.

I'm inside for all of eight minutes before I lift up my mask and wipe the sweat from my hairline with a thick sheet of kitchen roll. I really should have forked out for air conditioning. But a year and a half ago money was tighter than it is now and I couldn't predict the longevity of my business. It wasn't even really a business then. Not like it is today.

I circle a painted console table I worked on yesterday, eyeing it from all angles. Only when it was delivered did I realise it featured more coats than Carrie Bradshaw's closet. So, I've been intermittently dousing it in

solvent-based chemicals to strip it, which emits powerful fumes, and only the gas mask stops me from burning a hole in my septum.

But I'm not here for the table. I'm working on a separate project which was delivered last night. Hours pass until a buzzing noise catches my attention. Someone is outside, pressing the bell. I approach the door and stop at the display screen resting on the table. From the camera hidden in a nearby bird box, I spot my grandson Noah waiting outside. He is two months shy of his sixteenth birthday and the resemblance to his dad is striking. Thank goodness appearances are all they share. He is his mother's son, not his father's.

'Hi,' I ask through the intercom. 'Who's that?' My family don't know I can watch them from in here.

'It's me,' he replies in an unsettled pitch. 'Mum says dinner's ready.'

I look at the clock on the wall above the chest freezer in the corner of the shed. How on earth is it almost five o'clock already?

'Okay, sweetheart, tell her I'll be out soon.'

I watch the screen as he hesitates. Curiosity gets the better of him, and he reaches out to slowly turn the door handle. He knows he shouldn't, that this is Granny's workspace. But it's locked from the inside, so he lets go and returns to the house.

I need to get changed. My plastic suit is like a second skin but one that doesn't breathe. So, the longer I wear it, the more the trapped moisture becomes a soaking-wet dampness that clings to me until I start peeling it off. Eventually I'm down to my underwear, and with more paper towels I pat away the sweat from my chest, back and armpits. I open a bag, pull out the shorts and T-shirt I was wearing earlier and change back into them. Once outside, I take a gulp of fresh air and lock the door. Then I follow the sound of laughter coming from the kitchen and slip back into Granny mode.

'Have you met that community policeman who patrols the village?' Lucy asks as she removes a tray of cooked enchiladas from the oven. She places it on heat-resistant mats.

'No, why?' I ask.

'He approached me as I was getting out of the car earlier.'

My fist clenches, a reflex action. 'What about?'

'Apparently someone has complained about the number of deliveries we've been getting.'

'Who?'

‘He didn’t say. They’ve been taking photos too.’

‘The police?’

‘No, whoever reported us.’

I swallow a stone in my throat. ‘It’s not illegal to get furniture delivered,’ I argue, ‘otherwise Wayfair would be out of business.’

‘It’s the ones you receive in the early hours,’ Lucy continues, then passes me the cheese grater and a slab of cheddar. I turn my back to her, taking the opportunity to hide my flustered face and reddening chest. I thought my deliveries were cloaked under the cover of darkness and wouldn’t garner attention from the neighbours. Clearly, I was wrong.

‘Anyway, the policeman said he’d be grateful if you could ask the furniture delivery drivers not to park on the pavement.’

‘I’ll ask them to be more considerate,’ I reply. ‘I’m sure that’ll go down *really* well.’

‘He was very nice about it.’

If I’m not wrong, a faint flush appears in her cheeks as she says this.

Esme appears in the kitchen and the conversation switches to her forthcoming birthday party. But I’m not really listening. All I’m thinking about is how I have appeared on one of my neighbours’ radars. And, as a result, the police’s too. *Damn it.*

I need a moment to myself to think, and I can’t do that amongst the noise in here, so I make an excuse to momentarily return to the shed. Once inside, and with the door firmly shut behind me, I’m distracted by a faint white light coming from under a rug covering the chest freezer. I must not have closed it properly earlier after I opened it to grab a bottle of cold water. It likely shifted a second bottle that kept the lid from shutting.

As I move the lid back into position, I glance briefly at the human torso stored inside. I’ll have to deal with that later tonight when my family are asleep. Sometimes I forget that, when you freeze a warm body, the fluids inside can make it expand. This one must have done just that, with enough force to push the lid open a crack. Once I had to unplug the freezer and wait for a body to defrost before I could remove it.

In my line of work, fresh is best.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 20 MEMBERS

BETH 12.02 p.m.
No prizes for guessing who I saw in Aldi this morning with her trolley stacked high?

SADIE 12.03 p.m.
What were you doing in Aldi? 🤔

BETH 12.04 p.m.
Waitrose was out of Essential Focaccia so needs must. Anyway, I don't think the words 'organic' or 'unprocessed' are in Brenda's dictionary because nothing she bought was fresh. Frozen chicken dippers, frozen pizzas, ice cream, biscuits, crisps, sweets, white bread rolls . . . urgh. I think I developed Type 2 diabetes simply by looking at the contents of that trolley.

LINDA 12.04 p.m.
MY SISTER SWEARS BLIND SHE ONCE DEVELOPED COVID BY WATCHING TOO MUCH OF THE NEWS.

CASSIE 12.05 p.m.
I know what it's like to have kids the age of her grandchildren. They will eat you out of house and home given half a chance.

BETH 12.07 p.m.
They're not termites, Cassandra. If someone doesn't step in now, mark my words, those children will be on an NHS waiting list for weight-loss jabs before you can say Ozempic.

SADIE 12.10 p.m.
Or in a queue waiting for Pizza Hut to open. 🍕

DOLLY 12.11 p.m.
😀

SADIE 12.12 p.m.
Now you mention it, I saw Jessica recently wearing a crop top with her belly hanging over the waistband of her jeans. It reminded me of a pigeon on a washing line. I'd never have allowed my Ella-Mae to dress like that when she was that age.

BETH 12.13 p.m.
Maybe someone should give Brenda a store map to help her find the chiller that contains salads.

TRACY 12.13 p.m.
Or we could pop some healthy recipes through her letter box?

ROSE 12.14 p.m.
I can do that if you like, Beth?

BETH 12.15 p.m.
That would be very neighbourly of you.

CASSIE 12.15 p.m.
Perhaps we should tread carefully? Brenda might not even be aware of the negative effect she's having on her grandchildren.

BETH 12.16 p.m.
Ignorance is no excuse. Calories won't disappear just because you don't read the labels on a packet of party rings.

CASSIE 12.18 p.m.
I do wonder if we're being a bit harsh. Are we not giving what the kids call 'Mean Girl Energy'?

BETH 12.19 p.m.

If Mean *Woman* Energy means looking out for the young, then we are all guilty as charged.

CASSIE 12.20 p.m.
You'll be telling us 'children are the future' next. Look, Beth, I have to ask, why are you so anti-Brenda? Is it because of Kelly?

BETH 12.21 p.m.
What are you suggesting?

CASSIE 12.22 p.m.
I know how upset you were when Albert's family turned down your daughter's offer to buy his cottage. Didn't it lead to Kelly accepting a new job and moving to Kent?

BETH 12.24 p.m.
I'm NOT anti-Brenda, or anyone else for that matter. But Albert promised us first refusal on that cottage until Brenda gaslit Francesca with a sob story and she went against her father's wishes. And I think we can all agree Kelly and her family would have been a much better neighbourly fit.

CASSIE 12.25 p.m.
I'm only saying this as a friend, but perhaps you need to tone it down a little? You're not coming across well.

BETH 12.26 p.m.
Am I not, Cassandra? Well, what do you suggest I do about that then? I AM ALL EARS.

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CHAPTER 4
TWENTY-FOUR DAYS EARLIER

They say diamonds are a girl's best friend. They're not for me though. My kind of diamond comes on a cutting disc for an angle grinder. Because those things can slice through skin and bone like a knife through butter.

I've returned home to the shed from one of two allotments I maintain, and prepare myself to give it a deep clean. First, I slip into a fresh hazmat suit, then I switch on the indoor pressure washer. It's what can't be seen that's important: the devil is in the detail. A stream of cold water shoots out first – hot water and steam enhance the smell of blood and other fluids which I don't want escaping outside. There are some stubborn lumps of putrefied fat that take an extra-long blast because they're a nightmare to wash away. You also need a high-strength soapy detergent because the weak stuff turns the floor into a slip-and-slide. Twice I've gone arse over tit and ended up bruising my coccyx.

As I clean, I take a moment to reflect on the first time I cut up a body professionally and how it made all kinds of mess. It was back at our old house, and it was a hell of a job trying to rinse blood, shards of stray bone and slivers of flesh down the plughole. I wore my toughest Marigold gloves, but some traces of blood still found their way under my cuticles like old nail varnish. I was scraping it out with a file for a week.

Nowadays – and thanks to an online 'how to' guide for amateur embalmers – I ensure blood is completely drained from a body before I set to work. And it has saved me so much clean-up time. Each bucket of claret is poured away down a storm drain at the end of my garden instead of being mopped up from the floor.

The stench of death took some time getting used to. Especially as bodies have a habit of emitting gases and leaking liquids as they decompose. Purge fluids include the aforementioned blood, digestive juices, liquefied tissue, urine and faeces. I used to place a dab of VapoRub under

my nose to mask it. However, too much makes your eyes stream like Niagara Falls. Buying a gas mask was a gamechanger. It's cumbersome, makes my face sweat and clogs up my pores, but it stops any secretions from accidentally splashing my eyes. Believe me, even now I feel queasy when I remember how I once accidentally nicked someone's bowel and my mouth and chin were sprayed with stomach acid.

Once we moved into the cottage and the shed was erected, I stored the first deliveries in a chest freezer I bought online from a bankrupt supermarket. My belief was that a frozen body would be less messy, and easier to disassemble. I soon learned that, without power tools, it was an absolute ball-ache.

I also bought myself a stainless-steel autopsy table at an auction of old medical apparatus. It has a hydraulic height adjuster to make it easier to roll a body on to.

I point the jet of water towards the ceiling and work on that next. I'm methodical with my approach to dismembering. I typically work from top to toe, first detaching the head from the neck with an oscillating saw, which is great for cutting through bone. And sometimes I'll use the angle grinder. But I learned quickly to attach a plastic bag around it to catch the blood spray or else it gets everywhere. I move on to the arms next, separating the limbs from their sockets with the aid of a rechargeable saw or my trusty grinder. They'll often need a little manipulation by hand too, and I'll never get used to the popping sound when a ball leaves its socket. I chuckle to myself about the time I'd forgotten to recharge my tools so resorted to the electric knife we use to carve the Christmas turkey to cut through some particularly stubborn tendons. Some are as tough as fisherman's rope.

Next to come off are the hands. You'd be surprised at how heavy they are once they're detached. Finally, it's the femurs and tibias, followed by the ankles, feet and toes. Until everything has been separated, like a human jigsaw.

If I'm not listening to an audiobook or podcast through my headphones, I'll talk to these corpses as a hairdresser chats to a client. I'll ask them about their day, what their plans are for the weekend or what they've been watching on TV. And I'll answer for them too. I don't need reminding there's a fine line between madness and sanity. But talking somehow makes what I do feel a little less insular. Most people get to chat to workmates about their job, or a friend that can relate. But I am not most

people. It’s not like there’s a WhatsApp group or a Mumsnet thread I can join to discuss badly placed incisions, a stubborn thorax, or where to buy cheap replacement blades for a Gigli saw. So, if I can’t talk to anyone living, I talk to the dead. And they’re great listeners.

I often create detailed backstories to explain why they’re here on my table. There’s the convicted paedophile caught abusing yet another child and removed from society by vigilantes. The crack-cocaine-addict mum whose children died in a housefire the night she left them while she got high. The married man who gets his kicks from hurting prostitutes. The drugs kingpin who thinks nothing of targeting children or using them to deliver his products. The human trafficker. The con man who scams the elderly. The slum landlord who takes advantage of penniless families. The corrupt MP who put himself before the people he represents. The sociopath, the psychopath, the manipulator, the narcissist, the sadist, the greedy and the negligent.

But I’d be kidding myself if I believed the only people I dispose of are those who deserve it. Because it’s more than likely that many are ordinary people who have found themselves in extraordinary circumstances. The woman punched once too often by her partner and accidentally killed; the kid caught up in a gang he didn’t know how to leave; the man who couldn’t pay back a loan shark; the person caught in the crossfire of a war between others.

Once the bodies are cut up into manageable chunks, the challenge arrives of where to dispose of them. I’ve taken to burying the parts in two separate locations. The first is on land I rent cash-in-hand from farmer Michael. A kind of allotment, it’s about a quarter of an acre in size, awkwardly shaped and located between two of his fields that my cottage backs on to. It contains clumps of bushes alongside trees that are of historical interest to the village and so covered by a preservation order. He can’t do anything with this space, so I pay to use it under the guise of growing vegetables and fruits. Nobody knows my potatoes, tomatoes and cabbages are being fertilised by the body parts beneath them.

The second location is an actual allotment close to my former home. It’s registered under Albert’s name – the man who owned my house. His daughter was happy for me to maintain it, and when there’s no one else about it’s where I bury the other body parts in compostable bags lined with lime to speed up the decomposition process. If the parts are ever discovered

– which I honestly believe is unlikely – it'll be long after I myself have become worm food. I also use the allotment to start small fires in a metal garden incinerator and burn the DNA from my metal tools and plastic suits, gloves and gas mask filters. Then I dispose of any remaining bits and pieces in public rubbish bins as and when I pass them.

It's taken trial, error and twelve dead strangers to reach the mindset where I really believe I'm good at what I do.

Now, I unplug the pressure washer. Once this shed dries, I'll spray the walls, ceiling and floor with luminol to highlight any trace amounts of blood that I might've missed. Then I'll scrub it all with hydrogen peroxide, bleach and enzymatic cleaners. I take as few risks as necessary. However, if the police do ever come knocking at my door, the autopsy table, chemicals and a handful of my tools will take some explaining. It's unlikely I'd need rib shears or suction apparatus to upcycle a chest of drawers.

Okay, I think as I survey the shed one last time for today. I'm finished for now. I leave it to dry out, lock the door behind me and return to the house. Once I've showered, I search for Oscar's lead in the porch. I'll take him for a walk before I pick up Esme from nursery. But something on the doormat catches my attention. It's a book. *Fifty Recipes to Keep Your Family Healthy*, reads the cover.

I don't think it belongs to Lucy or the kids and I'm sure it wasn't here when I picked up the post earlier. It must've only recently been pushed through my letter box. I flick through it but there's no note or suggestion as to who it's from. However, passages have been highlighted with a fluorescent-yellow marker, specifically ones criticising processed food along with advocating providing children with fresh produce.

Why have I been sent this? I rack my brain, and the only conclusion I can draw is that it relates to a supermarket shop I did recently. I filled my trolley with enough frozen party food to feed fifteen of Esme's nursery friends for her upcoming birthday party. A face jumps out at me: Tracy, who lives in the house opposite and always seems to have me in her sights. Was she watching me unload shopping bags from the car? Does she believe that was typical of what I feed my family? She's hardly the size of a supermodel herself. People in glass houses shouldn't throw donuts. If this was a one-off, I might not think too much about it. But it has come so soon after the complaint to the community police officer about my out-of-hours deliveries. Coincidence is what people believe when the truth is too hard to admit. But

if it’s not Tracy, then who is it? Because I’m convinced I’m being targeted by someone.

I need to stay razor sharp. Because once I find out, I’ll need to cut the head off this poisonous snake, figuratively speaking. Well . . .

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CHAPTER 5
TWENTY-ONE DAYS EARLIER

Lizzie is already sitting at a table in the rear of the village café on Michael's farm when I arrive. He opened it a year ago and it's proved popular with more than just the locals. He must've needed a sideline, and God knows I can relate to that. It's midday and there's already a pot of tea with wisps of steam emerging from the spout waiting for me, alongside two scones on plates and small jars of clotted cream and strawberry jam.

'Sorry I'm late,' I say as I lower myself on to a wooden chair. 'It's been quite a morning.'

'I've only just got here myself,' she replies, but I'm sure she's only saying it to make me feel better. Lizzie would be early for her own funeral.

'I was caught in traffic coming back from the supermarket,' I lie. I was actually stuck in my car outside the allotment close to my old house, waiting for someone to leave. An elderly man was taking an eternity to trim flowering peonies from his bushes. For obvious reasons I prefer to wait until there's no one else near my plot of land before I bury body parts. Even if that man had seen me, there'd have been no reason for him to think I was behaving suspiciously. But I'm nothing if not super cautious. I suppose I could have left with a plan to return later but I hate leaving limbs in the car. Even if wrapped in bags and with a handful of air fresheners scattered about, this balmy May does my Toyota no favours.

I probably consider Lizzie my only friend in the village. When she comes around for coffee, she's always accompanied by a never-ending supply of freshly baked cakes. And she'll keep me informed about the village's comings and goings. She has no idea she is my eyes and ears. I suppose I'm kind of using her, but I do also value her friendship, even if I keep her at half an arm's length – as opposed to everyone else, who gets the full-arm treatment. She was the first neighbour who appeared at our front door to welcome us, the week we moved in. And we try and make the time to catch up once a fortnight, swapping stories about our grandchildren, her

voluntary work and my furniture upcycling. Of course, she knows nothing of my side hustle.

I feel a pair of eyes upon me and turn my head just as a woman about my age a few tables away averts her gaze. She's hardly subtle and my paranoia appears again, making me wonder if I'm being watched. If she's the one who contacted the police about me. She looks harmless, but then I know more than most how appearances can be deceptive.

'Do you know who she is?' I ask Lizzie, looking in the woman's direction.

She cranes her neck from behind the corner table where we sit. 'No, I don't think so.'

'Is she from the village?'

'Sorry, I have no idea.'

No, I decide, it's not her. If she was trying to go about her business unnoticed, she wouldn't be wearing snake-print leggings that make her legs look like two anacondas swallowing wild deer whole.

I hesitate before I say anything else, thinking of how I'm going to phrase this. I don't want Lizzie to think her friend has a screw loose. 'Can I ask you something?'

'Of course,' she says as she heaps cream on to her scone. 'Fire away.'

'I know you go to the occasional village coffee morning and Pilates class, so have you ever heard anyone talking about me?'

'In what way?'

'Negatively.'

She takes a bite from her scone and considers the question. There's a little lump of jam on her bottom lip. It reminds me of the time I wiped my mouth, post-dismemberment, forgetting I hadn't slipped my gas mask back on – and without realising there was deep red chunk of spleen on my sleeve.

'I don't think so, because you keep yourself to yourself, don't you?' Lizzie says. 'Why do you ask?'

I recount the complaint to the police about my night-time deliveries and the recipes pushed through the letter box. 'I might be being paranoid, but it feels as if someone has me on their radar,' I explain, taking a sip of my tea. 'As if they're judging me.'

'I know that you might've ruffled a few feathers when you moved in, as others had their eyes on Albert's old place,' she says. 'But that was some

time ago now – I'd be surprised if someone was holding a grudge against you for this long.'

'That's what I keep telling myself, but there's still a niggling doubt in the back of my mind, telling me there's no smoke without fire.'

'Look, if I hear anything, I'll let you know,' she offers, 'but I'm sure there's nothing to worry about.'

I wish she was right.

Michael appears and approaches our table to say hello. His face is a little worn, a result of years of toiling the land in all weathers. Manual labour has rewarded him with a muscular frame, and his piercing blue eyes have yet to develop that soft, milky dilution that comes to us all with age. He's still on the right side of handsome. And I'd be lying to myself if I denied my attraction.

He asks us about our plans for the rest of the afternoon and reminds me the offer still stands to join him for tea and cake when I'm free one day. I offer a non-committal maybe, then he tells us he hopes we enjoy our scones and winks as he waves us goodbye. I'm almost too embarrassed to look at Lizzie. She can barely conceal her smile.

'Something you want to get off your chest, Brenda?' she asks with a mischievous glint in her eye. I feel my cheeks reddening.

'No,' I say, but my face gives me away.

'It appears someone would like to help you butter your scones,' she says, before giving me a wink of her own.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 20 MEMBERS

BETH 2.00 p.m.
Guess who I saw in Michael's farm café yesterday?

ROSE 2.05 p.m.
Who?

BETH 2.07 p.m.
Brenda. I dropped in for a sugar-free, gluten-free, vegan carrot cake on my way back. Honestly ladies, I was embarrassed for him. She couldn't have been more obvious if she'd thrown herself across the table and begged him to take her there and then.

DOLLY 2.08 p.m.
Why, what was she doing?

BETH 2.09 p.m.
It was her body language, the way she was dragging her tongue over her scone, licking cream from the knife. It was like a scene from Fifty Shades of Grey.

CASSIE 2.09 p.m.
Were there scones in that book?

SADIE 2.09 p.m.
Do you remember when Linda chose it for book club thinking it was a memoir about growing old?

DOLLY 2.10 p.m.
I swear it wasn't a coincidence when she needed a pacemaker fitting a month later.

TRACY 2.11 p.m.
Did you overhear any of Michael and Brenda's conversation?

BETH 2.12 p.m.
It was hard not to. She made a point of letting him know she had no plans for the rest of the day while making it crystal clear she'd be available for a little afternoon delight if he gave her the nod. It was absolutely pornographic. It's Michael I feel sorry for. Poor man . . . putting him in an awkward position like that.

DOLLY 2.13 p.m.
By the sounds of it that's not the only position she wanted him in.

SADIE 2.13 p.m.


BETH 2.15 p.m.
Anyway, Brenda must have cataracts not to have noticed how red Michael was going. You'd think she'd know better at her age.

CASSIE 2.15 p.m.
Weren't you and Michael quite close once, Beth?

BETH 2.16 p.m.
What are you implying, Cassandra?

CASSIE 2.17 p.m.
Oh, I wasn't implying anything. I meant I thought you spent a lot of time together after Rachel died. You were always at the farm for one reason or another.

BETH 2.18 p.m.
Rachel was a very dear friend of mine and I promised her on her deathbed that I would keep an eye out for people who might want to

take advantage of his vulnerable state. He's a very eligible man and I'd hate to think of someone like Brenda manipulating him. That is all.

TRACY 2.19 p.m.
You're a good friend, Beth. Rachel is barely cold in the ground. People like Brenda have no shame, do they?

BETH 2.20 p.m.
No, they really don't.

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CHAPTER 6
TWENTY DAYS EARLIER

Dinner time is, by far, my favourite part of the day. It's not always easy to get my grandchildren to open up about what their days have involved, but when they do, Lucy and I are a captive audience. We listen as they discuss their friends, playmates, lessons, who has annoyed them or what they have learned. It's a small glimpse into the worlds they're building away from us. So, I treasure this time because I know there's an invisible countdown clock ticking above our heads. One by one they will grow up and leave us. Noah will be the first to go, followed by Jessica. And I dread the day when Esme packs her bags and flies the nest.

Noah briefly protests when I remind him it's his turn to clear the table, and I make my way to the adjacent kitchen to start filling the sink with hot soapy water. Their dining room chatter serves as a reminder that, if I have to dismember and dispose of the dead to keep the family coffers full, then so be it. Everything I do is to give them the opportunities I never had, and which I was unable to offer their mum when she was their age. Their childhoods are so different from mine. I had no brothers and sisters, only an aggressive father and a mother who used alcohol to numb the physical and mental anguish he inflicted upon us. Such a large portion of my early years was spent living quietly, trying my best not to cause upset. I'd float around their house like a ghost, in fear of waking the beast. That's why I want each of my grandchildren to make a mess, be noisy and cause chaos. To be the child I never was.

'Do you want a hand with the drying-up?' asks Lucy as she breezes into the kitchen with an empty casserole dish.

'Yes please,' I say. 'There are dry tea towels in the drawer.'

She glances at the dishwasher. 'I'll never understand why you don't use that more.'

'Because it's old and costs a fortune to run. Besides, I like it when we get a few minutes to ourselves like this.'

I love being around my daughter. She's my only child, but that hadn't been my plan. I'd hoped to have three at least. To build the family I never had. But history repeated itself when, knowing no better, I did what my own mum had done and married a man who hated women almost as much as he hated himself. Lucy was my wake-up call. It wasn't until I reached thirty-two and she came along that I found a reason to leave her father before I too ended up turning to alcohol for support and drinking myself into an early grave. It was far better to live in a bedsit above a shop with a toddler, 120 miles away from the city in which I'd been all my life, than to sit at home awaiting the next punch.

'There is something I want to talk to you about,' Lucy says suddenly.

'That sounds ominous,' I reply.

'It's nothing to worry about. In fact, it's really not a big deal and probably not worth mentioning at all—'

'Lucy, you're babbling,' I interrupt.

'That community police officer who visited last week.'

My stomach clenches. 'Yes?'

'Well, I sort of bumped into him when I was picking up Jessica from school earlier. He'd been doing a "stranger danger" talk for the kids.'

'And?'

'And I kind of asked him if he wanted to join me for a coffee sometime.'

I'm taken aback. Not once since Harry disappeared has she shown any interest in anyone who might have caught her eye.

'Oh, okay,' I try to say casually. Inside, I want to yell *no*, because the last thing I need is a police officer anywhere near this house. 'What did he say?' I continue.

She blushes. 'Well, he gave me his number, so I think it was a yes.'

'That's lovely,' I reply. 'When might you meet up?'

'I don't know, I haven't texted him yet. I wanted to ask you what you thought first.'

What I want, and what I have always wanted, is for Lucy to fall in love with a decent man who treats her and the children properly. But not right now, not while I'm doing what I'm doing in that shed. And certainly not a man whose job it is to be suspicious of everyone and everything.

'I think you need to go with your gut instinct,' I reply. 'What is that telling you?'

‘That he’s a better man than Harry.’

A chill runs through me every time that nasty rat-faced bastard intrudes upon my thoughts. As she was growing up, never did I consider that Lucy might fall pregnant at fifteen to a man almost a decade older than her, then become a mum by her sixteenth birthday. I wanted so much more for her than that. I sometimes wonder if the women in this family are genetically predisposed to be attracted to the wrong men. We’re like flies to shit.

‘Well, that’s not difficult,’ I scoff. ‘Most men are better than Harry.’

‘Do the kids ever talk to you about him?’ she continues.

‘Only when he first left, and I think that’s because they were afraid he’d return. But not anymore. And of course Esme was born after he went so I doubt she ever thinks of him at all.’

Lucy pauses to consider her words. ‘I searched for him online recently,’ she admits.

Again, she catches me off guard. This is turning into quite the confessional. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I wanted to see if he’s found some other gullible woman to abuse.’

‘And?’

‘And nothing. His social media accounts are still closed. There’s no trace of him anywhere. I was tempted to contact his mum to see if she’s heard from him.’

‘Lucy, I don’t think that’s—’

‘I know what you’re going to say and that’s why I didn’t do it,’ she interrupts. ‘I just worry there will come a time when the kids ask why he turned his back on them and left.’

‘Noah is old enough to remember what he did to you. And if Jessica and Esme ask, I’m sure you’ll find the right words.’

‘What if he gets in touch with them directly and lies to them about what happened between us?’

‘He won’t, darling. If he came back into their lives, he’d have to face up to his behaviour. And he doesn’t have the guts to do that.’

And I mean that quite literally. Because I pulled them out of his abdomen myself before scattering his body parts across the county.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 19 MEMBERS

BETH 2.45 p.m.
Ladies, just a polite reminder, Book Club starts at 7.30 p.m. tonight at my house. Please don't be late.

LINDA 2.45 p.m.
SORRY, I DIDN'T GET A CHANCE TO FINISH THE BOOK IN TIME.

BETH 2.46 p.m.
How far did you get?

LINDA 2.47 p.m.
THE END OF THE PROLOGUE.

ROSE 2.48 p.m.
They made it into a TV miniseries. You could stream it.

LINDA 2.49 p.m.
GOOD IDEA. WHAT'S DOES 'STREAM IT' MEAN?

BETH 2.49 p.m.
Probably best you sit this one out, Linda.

LINDA 2.50 p.m.
OH OKAY.

ROSE 2.50 p.m.
Cassie, do you want me to call in for you on the way?

BETH 2.51 p.m.

I'm afraid Cassandra won't be joining us tonight. She is also no longer a member of this group.

ROSE 2.52 p.m.
Really? Why?

BETH 2.55 p.m.
We have always been a safe space for like-minded neighbours. Should anyone decide they are no longer in alignment with our opinions, they aren't obliged to stay and I wish them all the best in a group that better suits them. Does anyone else think they might be a better fit elsewhere?

BETH 3.00 p.m.
No? Moving on then. No prizes for guessing who had *another* midnight caller last night? My Ring doorbell captured a car backing up on Brenda's driveway and she answered the door to a man. AGAIN.

TRACY 3.07 p.m.
How can you be so sure it was a man if it was dark?

BETH 3.07 p.m.
Because it's ALWAYS a man.

ROSE 3.07 p.m.
Why do they always visit so late?

BETH 3.08 p.m.
Well, I have my suspicions. Let's just say, she seems to be VERY popular with her clientele. Her MALE clientele. But who am I to speculate?

ROSE 3.08 p.m.
Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?

TRACY 3.09 p.m.
OMG!

DOLLY 3.09 p.m.
No way!

LINDA 3.10 p.m.
IS SHE RUNNING A MEN ONLY BOOK CLUB?

BETH 3.10 p.m.
I think it best we pop you on mute today, Linda. I'll see the rest of you later where we can discuss this in more detail.

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CHAPTER 7
SEVENTEEN DAYS EARLIER

Good morning,' the woman who is standing at my front doorstep begins. 'Mrs Houghton?'

Unexpected visitors make me skittish. I eye her up and down, slowly pushing my toes towards the base of the door to prevent it from being pushed open against my will. I don't know why she would do that, but you can never be over-prepared.

'Yes. And who are you?' I ask politely.

'My name is Carly Hardacre and I'm with Northamptonshire Social Services.'

She flashes her photo identity card attached to a lanyard hanging from her neck.

'Right . . .'

'May I come in?'

'What's this regarding?'

An intrusive thought sneaks its way in, wanting me to tell her that I can't talk right now as I have two feet that need detaching from their legs waiting for me in the shed.

'This is perhaps a conversation we should have inside.'

'Alright,' I say, and reluctantly open the door. In the bedroom window of the house opposite, I catch a shadow moving behind a net curtain. Tracy's house.

I shut the door and lead Carly into the lounge. When Oscar trots in from the garden and sniffs around her feet, she doesn't seem bothered. I offer her a seat and give her the once-over. She looks about Lucy's age, late twenties or early thirties, but unlike my daughter, she wears no make-up and her nail polish is chipped at the tips.

'So, what's this about?' I ask.

She leans forward and tucks a loose strand of dyed brown hair behind her ear. It could be my imagination, but she appears a little hesitant to have

this conversation. Almost as if she is here because she's been told to. 'Well, some concerns have been raised about . . . *unusual activities* . . . that might be occurring in your property.'

I swallow hard as my brain speeds like a Formula One race car. What has she heard? Have I not been careful enough? Or worse, does she actually know something? No, she can't. Because if she did, she wouldn't be here alone. There'd be a van of police officers behind her and there was nothing but an Interflora delivery truck parked in the street when I answered the door. Besides, they wouldn't send a social worker in first. They'd be using a battering ram to break down my door.

'What do you mean by "unusual activities"?' I ask, attempting to keep my tone measured.

Carly momentarily breaks eye contact. 'Visitors at unsociable hours.'

'My daughter has already had a conversation about this with the policeman who patrols the village,' I say.

'Really?' she replies with a hesitant frown.

'Yes, we've asked the drivers to park more carefully and not to block the pavement. I restore furniture and sometimes my customers can't pick it up during the day.'

Carly lets out a long breath. 'Look, I'll be frank with you, Mrs Houghton. Concerns have been raised that this property is being used for prostitution.'

I glare at her, assuming I've misheard. And then my laugh arrives before I can stop it: something traversing a snort and a snore. 'Prostitution!' I repeat. 'Oh, my Lord. Why on earth would you come up with an idea like that?'

'I'm not allowed to say.'

'Carly,' I reply, 'now I'll be frank with you. It's been so long since I've been to bed with a man, I could recertify myself as a virgin. I live here with my daughter and my three grandchildren. It's a family home and certainly not a brothel.'

'I know this probably comes as a surprise.'

'Believe me, if I was selling my body, I'd be in debt from the amount of refunds I'd be giving.'

The corners of her mouth twitch as she tries to suppress a smile. 'I'm not here to accuse you of anything, only to protect the welfare of everyone living under this roof. Including yourself.'

I could fight against this and order her to leave, but it would only make me look more suspicious. So, I lean into it, as my grandson would say.

‘What can I do to assure you I’m not running a knocking shop?’ I ask. ‘You’re more than welcome to look around while I put the kettle on. Check there’s no tip jar on my bedside table.’

‘I don’t need to do anything like that.’ She pulls out a notepad and pen from her bag. ‘I just need to ascertain a few facts.’

She follows me as I move into the kitchen and boil the kettle. She asks about my family, how long we have lived here, where the children’s father is, how we afford to rent it. I hand her a mug of tea and lean against the worktop, answering all her questions. But being open with a stranger is alien to me. I’m polite with the rest of the villagers but, Lizzie aside, I wouldn’t describe any as friends. This way, I can protect myself and my family from scrutiny. At least that’s what I thought I was doing until recently, because by the looks of it my secret-squirrel approach is backfiring. It’s cast suspicion upon me. People are always scared of what they don’t know. And perhaps, on this occasion, they’re right.

‘So, someone can make up a malicious lie and you automatically believe it?’ I say.

‘We are required to investigate any accusations made, especially when children are involved. And which, as a grandmother, I’m sure you’ll understand. I’ll report back to my supervisor, but between you and me, I doubt very much this will go any further. It sounds to me like a misunderstanding.’

Carly appears interested in my upcycling projects, so I show her photos of some of the completed furniture.

‘Well,’ she says as she finishes her tea and packs her notepad and pen away in her bag. ‘Thank you for being so open with me.’

She points to the garden shed and I nod when she asks if that’s where I work.

‘Would it be okay if I had a look at what you’re working on before I go?’ she asks.

I think quickly. ‘Actually, most of my recent projects were picked up last night,’ I lie. ‘That’ll be something else that’s annoyed the neighbours.’

‘No problem,’ she says, and I breathe a sigh of relief. ‘But I’d still like to see inside anyway, if that’s okay? My girlfriend has always wanted to get into upcycling, so it’ll give me an idea of what space she’ll need.’

Shit. My mind goes blank and I can hear myself saying ‘of course’ when what I actually want to say is ‘go away and leave me alone’.

My chest thrums as I lead the way through the kitchen and out into the garden. I’m trying to think of anything that might put her off. I’ve lost the key to the back door, a wasps’ nest has appeared overnight, I just remembered a sewerage pipe burst earlier this morning . . . I even consider faking a heart attack, which might not be too far from the truth. What the hell am I going to do when she sees what’s inside that shed?

And then I spot it. A solution. Noah’s cricket bat propped up against the side of the shed. Carly is talking to me about something, but her words blur into the background. Because a strange calm is washing over me, the kind that comes when you finally accept the inevitable and realise it’s pointless trying to resist. I can even rationalise this. I am going to keep myself and my family safe, come what may. I reach for the bat, grabbing the handle, knowing that what I’m about to do is wrong on almost every level. *Almost*.

God help me, I think as I raise my weapon into the air.

‘Sorry,’ she says suddenly, just as I’m turning to face her. ‘My phone’s vibrating and I need to take this call.’

She is too engrossed in whose name has appeared on her screen to notice what I’m holding or that it’s now shoulder-height.

‘Hello,’ she says into the receiver and turns to face the house.

If I could see myself right now, I might even laugh at the ludicrousness of it. A middle-aged woman standing with a cricket bat above her head, readying herself to beat a social worker to death.

‘Okay,’ she says into the phone, ‘I can be there in twenty minutes.’

I let the bat fall with a thump on to the lawn.

‘I’m sorry but I have an emergency call-out,’ Carly says.

‘Another time,’ I reply. What I really mean is ‘over my dead body’. Well, hers.

I follow her through the house and to the front door, and spot it as it begins to close.

The shadow that lurked behind the net curtain in Tracy’s house is still there. They are watching Carly leave. I call their bluff and remain where I am. Watching them, watching me. And I wait until they know that’s what I’m doing, until they are the first to move away.

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CHAPTER 8
THIRTEEN DAYS EARLIER

Well done, Noah!' I shout as he scores his second try for his school's rugby team. It's supposed to be a gentleman's sport, but it doesn't look like that from where I'm standing on the touchlines. I hate it when he returns home with stud marks on his face or bruises all over his body. It's the last match of the season so he'll have a few months to recuperate. Injuries aside, come rain or shine, me or his mum are here, cheering him on, perhaps sometimes a little too vocally and much to his embarrassment.

I look around at the other spectators and two catch my eye. I recognise them from the village. Late forties or early fifties, full faces of make-up, not a wrinkle between them. They've approached me before, asking if I wanted to get involved with this, that or the other; and each time I've declined, they've looked at me like they have a sour taste in their mouths. But I have neither the time required to invest in their projects nor the willingness to allow them to get to know me. I must keep myself to myself.

I don't like their righteous expressions and how small they make me feel. And once again, anxiety and paranoia spread through me, causing me to spiral. Is it only Tracy in the house opposite who's watching me, or do more of my neighbours have me in their crosshairs? Was it these two who reported me to the police and social services? Suddenly, there's a cheer as Noah scores again. I missed it but join in with the applause. Now I'm frustrated at myself for allowing these women to ruin my afternoon. I turn my head until they're no longer in my peripheral vision.

In a different life, Noah wouldn't need me here. His dad would be proudly cheering his son on. But even if I hadn't killed Harry, he wouldn't have made time for his lad. Harry wasn't the type to think of anyone but himself.

I'd be rewriting history if I told myself killing him was a spontaneous act, or an accident. Because, truth be told, it was completely premeditated. I

hated that bastard. And I did it to protect my daughter from any more of his outbursts of temper.

Lucy had phoned moments after his last vicious attack. And I broke just about every speed limit to drive the ten-minute distance between my house and hers. There, I found her with her face battered and bruised, her arms cut and marked. It was worse than I'd imagined. And, more worryingly, the groin of her maternity jeans was stained with blood. She was seven months pregnant with Esme.

'The baby,' she whimpered. 'Am I losing her?'

'I'm sure you're not. She's going to be alright,' I said, even though I didn't believe the words tumbling from my mouth. 'But just to be on the safe side, I'm calling an ambulance.'

I pulled my phone from my pocket to dial for help and held her hand as I spoke to the operator.

'It's my fault if something happens to her,' Lucy continued after I'd hung up. 'I provoked him.'

'No, darling. It's never your fault. Not the last time and not now.'

'I shouldn't have asked him about the casino. But he'd promised to stop gambling, then I found the receipts in his pocket. It's when he doesn't think I trust him that he gets angry. I shouldn't have said anything.'

'Where is he now?'

'He's probably gone back to the casino. He'll come home when he's calmed down or run out of money.'

I sat by Lucy's side on the floor, willing the ambulance to hurry. I couldn't stop my eyes from shifting to her jeans, unsure if she was even aware of just how much blood she'd lost. But I didn't acknowledge it for fear of upsetting her further.

'How is this going to get any better?' I asked, probably more for myself than her.

'It will,' she replied, with such hope. 'Once the baby arrives. When he holds her, everything will be different.'

'You've said this before, darling.'

'I know, but this time it will be. I can feel it.'

It was wishful thinking, because nothing had changed when Noah and Jessica were born and it would be the same with Esme. He'd play the part of Doting Dad for a few short weeks, but the Harry of old would soon return. Masks always slip, no matter how tight you wear them. The more I

watched my daughter's face contort with pain, the more I detested the man who did this to her. And he was going to keep doing this until he killed her. I'd only recently read that 120 women are killed by their partners every year. I knew that if I didn't step in and do something, Lucy would be the 121st.

Paramedics arrived soon after, and while it broke my heart to send her to hospital alone, someone had to stay with Noah and Jessica. I found my granddaughter in her bedroom, fast asleep, arms wrapped tightly around the Paddington Bear teddy I'd bought her as a baby. I caught the whites of Noah's eyes reflected in the landing light when I opened his door a crack.

'Are you alright?' I asked tentatively.

'Why doesn't Dad like us?' he asked, his face devoid of emotion.

'He does. He loves you all.'

'Then why does he keep hurting Mum? Dads aren't supposed to behave like that, are they?'

'No, darling, they're really not.'

Years of watching his mother being hurt was sucking the childhood from him. At twelve, he had the worries of someone twice his age.

'I hate him, Gran.'

There was nothing I could say that was going to make this any better. But why was I trying to defend his father to him? Noah had just made it clear he could see through him. If Harry didn't care about being seen as a decent person by his children, why on earth should I?

'I wish he was dead,' Noah whispered.

'You don't mean that.'

That's what I should have said. But I didn't. Because I'd been wishing the same thing about Harry for years.

'Actually, your dad is a bully and a fucking arsehole,' I said to my grandson's obvious surprise. 'And I hate him every bit as much as you do. I wish he was dead too.'

It was the first time anyone had ever told him their truth. Perhaps it wasn't my place to, but with my daughter's blood still on my clothes, I no longer cared. I lay down next to Noah and he reached out his hand to hold mine.

'Am I going to grow up and be like him?' he asked hesitantly.

'No, you're absolutely not,' I replied, and squeezed his hand. 'You are a kind, decent lad and nothing like your father.'

I remained there until finally he drifted off to sleep. In the darkness of his room, I recalled the times Lucy had tried to blame clumsiness or illness for her bruises or the cancellation of prearranged dates. I never believed a word of it. I saw the black eyes the make-up failed to cover. The missing tooth from a landed punch. How she clenched her ribs when she rose from the sofa. My daughter was reading from the same script as my mother. And, for a time, me too.

I cannot count how often I confronted Lucy, begging her to leave Harry, offering her and the kids a safe space under my roof. But she always made excuses for him, like I almost had to Noah, because she was convinced she brought out the worst in a good man. That she didn't support him enough, that he was just blowing off steam. That he would kill himself if she left him. That she couldn't survive without him.

But she could. Even if she didn't believe it, I did. And I was going to make it happen.

The referee sounds the final whistle of Noah's rugby match and returns me to the present. I applaud my grandson when he's awarded player of the match.

'I'm so proud of you,' I say out of earshot of his teammates.

'And I am proud of you,' he says back to me, looking me dead in the eye.

'Why?' I ask.

He squeezes my hand and smiles. This small gesture makes a huge impact because it's accompanied by an expression I haven't seen before. It's a look I'm unsure how to interpret at first, until, for a split second, I wonder if he knows. If he has pieced together the sudden disappearance of his father and our conversation that night in his bedroom and he's realised what I have done to protect those I love. And if he does, the smile he gives as he leaves me to head back into the changing rooms suggests understanding and gratitude.

I need a moment to myself to process this. I brush past my two neighbours without acknowledging them as I return to my car. Let them talk about me if they want to. They have already taken too much of my attention today and they don't deserve a second more.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 19 MEMBERS

TRACY 4.15 p.m.
Well, that was a waste of time.

BETH 4.17 p.m.
What was?

TRACY 4.18 p.m.
Social services just called. I was right, the woman I saw leaving Brenda's house WAS one of theirs. They wouldn't tell me what was said, only that 'they won't be investigating prostitution claims any further'.

BETH 4.21 p.m.
😤 What was their reasoning?

TRACY 4.23 p.m.
Not enough evidence, apparently.

SADIE 4.23 p.m.
What else do they need? Trustpilot reviews? A red lightbulb in her window?

BETH 4.24 p.m.
And when you first called them, you told them everything we discussed?

TRACY 4.24 p.m.
Yes. I read your email script to them word for word.

BETH 4.25 p.m.
Are you sure?

TRACY 4.25 p.m.
I promise.

BETH 4.26 p.m.
Well, this is very disappointing.

NELLY 4.26 p.m.
Should we contact the police instead?

SADIE 4.27 p.m.
I bet they'll tell you the same thing. That's Britain for you. Broke and woke.

BETH 4.28 p.m.
Perhaps one of us should email Albert's daughter at that fancy bank in London to tell her what's been going on at her house. I'd volunteer but I don't want to appear as if it's sour grapes over that debacle with my daughter and the house.

TRACY 4.29 p.m.
I don't mind doing it, if it'll help?

BETH 4.30 p.m.
That would be wonderful, thank you. BTW have you remembered to adjust your Ring doorbell camera so it faces Brenda's house directly?

TRACY 4.31 p.m.
Yes, but it's been quiet over there lately.

SADIE 4.31 p.m.
Maybe that visit from social services put the willies up her.

ROSE 4.33 p.m.
A bit like her gentlemen clientele.

DOLLY 4.34 p.m.

😂😂😂😂 Maybe she's smuggling them in through the back?

SADIE 4.35 p.m.
See Rose's last comment . . .

BETH 4.37 p.m.
Ladies, you're above making comments like that. But Dolly, you might just be on to something . . .

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CHAPTER 9
NINE DAYS EARLIER

I'm having trouble concentrating on simple, mundane tasks. Despite my best efforts, I can't remove from my head the image of those women's smirking faces on the rugby touchlines. Four days have passed and I'm still struggling to let them go. They've been triggering memories of intimidating mums who I'd wait behind at the nursery gates when Lucy was small. I was a single parent by then, having moved from Bristol to Northampton to escape her dad. I had no friends and was working two badly paid, cash-in-hand jobs. I'd feel these women's eyes behind me scanning me up and down as we left, ripping me to pieces, judging me on what I wore instead of what I'd been through to get us this fresh start.

'Mum!' comes Lucy's voice above the loud clatter. 'Can you give me a hand?'

We are inside a neighbouring village's hall in a Disney's *Frozen*-themed room. It's Esme's fourth birthday party and we tried to book Stretton's village hall four months ago, but Tracy, the witch in charge of bookings, claimed it was unavailable. However, it looked empty when I passed it half an hour ago. Another reason for her to top my shitlist.

Lucy's pouring orange squash from a large plastic jug into a line of paper cups with different characters from the film emblazoned across the sides.

'I need the party bags from the car,' she explains. 'We forgot to bring them in.'

'I'll go get them,' I reply, and make my way towards the exit. I know I'm not being present. I should be enjoying watching my granddaughter having the time of her life with her friends. Instead, I keep switching between worrying which of my neighbours has it in for me, and giving Harry more thought than he deserves.

It was Lucy's second night in hospital when Harry finally resurfaced. It was past 1 a.m. and while Noah and Jessica were fast asleep upstairs, I

remained in the kitchen, tracking his movements on the Find My Family app installed by Lucy on her phone. He was driving in the direction of home.

The first Harry knew he had company in his garage was when he clambered out of his car and was struck on the back of the head with a spade. I don't know if it was that single blow of metal against bone that killed him, or landing at speed, forehead first, on the concrete floor. It didn't matter. The fact is, he was dead. No pulse, no heartbeat, no anything. My only regret was that Harry wasn't aware it was me who'd struck him. Because what would have angered him the most was dying at the hands of a woman.

I wrapped his body as tightly as I could manage in two bed sheets I took from the airing cupboard, and left him there, out of sight, on the back seat of his car behind the closed garage door. I returned to him the next morning after walking the kids to school and nursery, then dragged his now-rigid body into his own house. I'd never been more grateful for a downstairs bathroom, as I don't think I'd have had the strength to pull him up the stairs.

I remember deciding early on to dismember him because he'd be far easier to remove from the house in pieces than as a whole. I once worked part-time behind the counter of a Turkish kebab takeaway, but there's a big difference between carving meat into a polystyrene box and hacking parts of your son-in-law into the ironically named supermarket 'bags for life'.

But needs must. And once I got started, I slipped into a sort of autopilot. It took until the early afternoon before he was fully dismembered, using his own tools I found in his shed. I bagged him up, spent an hour cleaning the bathroom and still made it on time for the school run. Sade could have written 'Smooth Operator' about me. Neither child was aware when we got home that their dead dad was in pieces inside the garage.

The following day, I drove around Northampton, searching for places I could dump Harry, piece by piece, bin bag by bin bag. I spent an hour wandering the grounds of Northampton General Hospital searching for medical waste bins whose contents would be incinerated. However, I learned the waste had to be in special coloured bags or tubs before being locked in cages ready for collection. So, I looked online for ideas, bought some yellow waste bags from Amazon and found a local undertaker. Early the next morning, I dumped parts of Harry in bins on their premises. The

rest went into a household-waste, non-recyclables, rubbish-tip skip destined for landfill. Finding Harry in there would be like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Finally, I left Harry's car parked in an estate with a reputation for high crime rates and left the keys on the dashboard. I kept his mobile phone – like all good narcissists and people with bad memories, his passcode was his date of birth – made a couple of vague posts on social media alluding to fresh starts, illustrated with inspirational quotes, and a few weeks later I deactivated all his accounts. As far as I am aware, he was never reported missing to the police, not by his own parents or even his wife. Which demonstrates how missed he was.

To begin with, Lucy appeared quietly relieved when Harry didn't return home, as if his disappearance was giving her body time to recover. But when Esme arrived seventeen days early, I sensed she missed him. Or at least the idea of him.

In the days that followed, I read the messages she sent to his phone asking where he was. I'd long deleted the Find My Family app she'd once installed on it. She'd send him photographs and videos of Esme. Because, despite everything, she still thought him worthy of being in their lives. I was tempted to reply to her on his behalf, telling her their marriage was over, that he'd met someone else and no longer wanted anything to do with her. And perhaps that would have been less cruel than not responding at all and giving her false hope.

Meanwhile, I expected to suffer sleepless nights, plagued by guilt and regret. Instead, I felt nothing but relief. Because I had done what my mum should've had the strength to do to my dad, and what I should have done to Lucy's father. We enabled men like that by staying with them. I had taught my daughter it was okay to accept that behaviour. I hoped to God what I did to Harry had broken the cycle for Jessica and her sister.

For Lucy, I think it only really sank in just how little Harry cared for his family when a final notice arrived in the post from his bank, warning her of an impending eviction. He had been almost a year behind on their mortgage payments. They left their house with only the clothes on their back, the kids' toys, and some furniture we hadn't been able to sell. And they moved in with me.

In the months that followed, we tightened the belt on our finances, sweeping our pride under the rug to make use of food banks. I'd buy cheap

old furniture to upcycle and sell on. But despite our efforts, we were always living hand to mouth. I couldn't see how this was going to improve for any of us.

And then an idea struck me.

An idea born out of desperation and so completely and utterly insane. But if executed with care and precision, it could change my family's fortunes.

Today and back in the present, I close the car boot and start carrying armfuls of the party bags that we assembled around the dining room table last night. Fifteen excited pairs of eyes lock on to them as I re-enter Esme's party.

Sometimes I imagine how Lucy might feel if she discovered why Harry vanished. And how I really make my living. While she might be able to understand my reasons for doing it, I doubt she'd forgive me. But even if she vowed never to speak to me again, I'll go to my grave believing I did the right thing.

A loud clunking sound catches my attention and I turn to see the large wooden doors of the village hall closing. I can't work out who the man walking towards Lucy is, until she gives him a broad smile and he reciprocates. Only then does the penny drop.

It's the community police officer.

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CHAPTER 10

I can't take my eyes off him. So much so that I've overfilled one of the children's cups with orange squash and it splashes on to the plastic tablecloth. Why the hell has Lucy invited him here?

I can see why she's attracted to him though – he's a handsome lad. Over six feet tall, short dark hair, a warm smile and bright-blue eyes. If I was thirty years younger, he'd probably turn my head too. He's not in uniform, and wears combat trousers and a T-shirt that shows off his broad shoulders. I try and focus on filling the other cups but I can't keep my eyes off him. Why is he here? Who invites someone on a first date to a kids' birthday party? And who accepts? Then I understand why, when a little boy leaves the table and runs towards him shouting, 'Daddy'. Esme goes to nursery with every child here, so not only is my village part of the area he covers in his role in the police, but his son and my granddaughter are friends. I don't know how this can get any worse. But it turns out it can when Lucy brings him over to me.

'Mum, I'd like you to meet Connor,' she says nervously.

'Hi,' I say politely.

'He's our village community police officer,' she adds.

He reaches out to shake my hand. 'Lucy is bigging me up. I'm actually a police community support officer,' he clarifies.

'What's the difference?' I ask.

'We work alongside the police, but we don't have their full powers.'

That's like taking away Batman's mansion and making him live in a two-up two-down. It might be a smaller house, but he's still Batman.

His son isn't done with needing his father's attention, so Connor asks if he can have a minute and follows his boy.

'So, I guess you texted,' I say to Lucy, trying not to sound annoyed.

'Yes – that's okay, isn't it? There's no pressure at a kids' party.'

No, not for you, I think. For me, well, you might as well have slapped me across the tits with that cardboard cut-out of Olaf propped up in the corner of the hall.

We both turn to stare at him as he pushes his son around the village hall in a *Frozen*-themed ride-on sleigh.

‘He seems nice,’ I say.

‘I thought so too. We’ve been chatting online for a few days.’

‘Where’s his son’s mum?’

‘She walked out on them last year. So, it’s just Connor and Josh. Like me and the kids.’ She notices my put-out look. ‘And you, of course,’ she adds. Then Lucy hesitates and I know she’s trying to find a way to say something. ‘I was thinking we could invite Josh round for a playdate with Esme soon.’

‘That sounds like a nice idea,’ I say, when of course it isn’t. ‘I’m sure Esme will love it.’

‘Or maybe we could just invite them both to Sunday lunch one weekend? What do you think?’

What I think is that I’d rather share a bottle of Chianti with Hannibal Lecter than allow Connor inside my home.

‘Honestly? I think it might be a bit early for that,’ I say, as gently as I can.

‘Do you think so?’

She genuinely respects my opinion. ‘I think this is the first person you’ve shown any interest in since Harry, and I don’t want to see you jumping into anything too quickly like you did with him.’

‘I was a kid then,’ she says.

‘And you have kids now. So, you have to put them first. Do you really have the time and effort to put into a relationship right now?’ She visibly deflates in front of me, which doesn’t so much prick as stab my conscience. I am a terrible person. ‘Look, I’m not saying you shouldn’t ever start dating, just perhaps not yet. Esme will be in reception next year so you’ll have much more time then to date.’

What I mean is that if I keep going at my current pace, I will have earned enough for a reasonable pension pot and can retire properly.

Lucy nods her head. ‘Yes, you’re right,’ she says, and then gives me a hug and returns to the children.

I turn back to Connor and watch his son laughing hysterically at a face his dad is pulling. Something tells me if he’s this good a parent, he’d be a pretty good partner too. And I hate myself for taking the potential of that away from the person who deserves it the most.

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CHAPTER 11
FIVE DAYS EARLIER

I shade myself from a sunny May morning under a parasol and drink a glass of tonic water. It may or may not contain a more than generous splash of gin. A figure across the fields catches my attention. I'm almost certain it's Michael walking Barney. Even catching a glimpse of Michael from a distance sends a rush of heat to my cheeks, which I try and blame on the weather and not the flush of attraction.

I allow myself to imagine taking him up on his frequent invitation for cake and a cup of tea. He seems to be genuinely interested in me, and Esme loves to spend time at his farm as much as he likes her being there. However, my experience of men is that, if they aren't trying to control you, they want to provide for you and they expect you to be grateful for that. And I don't need providing for. Perhaps I'm doing Michael a disservice and he is different, I don't know. But I can't take the risk of finding out. I wish it wasn't like this.

The dog comes to a sudden halt and pays a lot of attention to something. He's going round in circles, sniffing, by the looks of it. My heart slowly begins to sink. Because he is focusing on the piece of land I rent from Michael where I grow my vegetables. But, more importantly, bury body parts. I can only assume that Barney has picked up a scent.

I worry now if I've not been cautious enough. The parts are wrapped in heavy plastic sheeting, buried at least four feet underground to reduce the odour, and covered with a layer of stones and gravel. Short of encasing them in concrete, what else can I do? I grab my phone and zoom in as far as it will allow to see Barney starting to dig, his front paws going twenty to the dozen. *Oh shit*, I think, and I'm now on the edge of my seat wondering what the hell to do. Do I shout at Michael, to try and distract him? Wave at him? Beckon him over? Because where he goes, Barney will surely follow. Eventually, and to my relief, Michael grabs the dog's collar and pulls him away and the two continue their walk.

My nerves are shredded so I physically jump when my phone pings upon the arrival of an email. It's from Albert's daughter, Frankie. Again, I'm in panic mode, this time worrying if she's about to inform me she's decided to sell up and is giving me my marching orders. I don't know how much more my nerves can take.

> Hi Brenda,
> Hope you're well. Just wanted to bring to your attention an email I've received. It's anonymous, claiming to be from someone in the village, telling me how concerned your neighbours are about what's going on in Dad's house. They say the police and social services are often there – they've even sent me photographs of them on your doorstep.

I stop reading and shut my eyes. These bitches will stop at nothing to try and make trouble for me. And why? God only knows. I take a breath and return to the email, waiting for the date of the eviction notice. It doesn't appear.

> Of course, I've been in touch with the police and social services and both tell me there's nothing to be worried about. But whatever you've done, you have annoyed a few of those stuck-up cows. And do you know what? Good on you because that village could do with a bloody good shake-up. So, keep doing what you're doing!
> With love to the family,
> Frankie x

Thank God she is on my side. But it makes me realise that almost everyone in this village is a threat to me, my family and my livelihood.

I need a distraction, so I take from my pocket my burner phone, the one my family doesn't know about and which I hide in the shed. I'm only ever contacted via WhatsApp because of its end-to-end encryption, but there are no new messages. As far as I'm aware, only one other person in the world has this number. I don't know their name or what they look like because I've never met them in person or even heard their voice. But I have placed my freedom and my fortunes in their hands.

The Broker – my nickname for them – hasn't been in touch for a fortnight. I wonder if it's a quiet month or if they've fallen foul of the law themselves. If it's the latter, I don't believe they'd turn me in: I like to think there's a code of conduct in our world. But maybe I'm fooling myself, and if push came to shove, they'd offer me up like a canapé at a party. All I can trust is my instinct. And so far, it's served me well. Like Elton John, I'm still standing. Unlike those who've ended up lying on my autopsy table.

I suppose I have Harry to thank for helping me tap into my talent for dismembering. Because I was consumed by a feeling of a job well done after I disposed of him. I knew I could do it again if I had to: not the actual killing part; just the dismemberment and burial.

Out of curiosity, I looked online to see if there were others out there who'd done that. And although they were few and far between, they existed. Seven barrels of hydrochloric acid were found in a French garden containing the remains of nine people. The owner and his racist friends had sought out and murdered Afghan asylum seekers. A woman in Ireland had dismembered and burned three young women her husband had murdered. A man in Haiti was sentenced to ten years in prison for dismembering and hiding the bodies of murdered gang members.

For each one of these people behind bars, how many others were there, quietly going about their business? Could I be one of them? Could I make the bodies of those killed by other people simply disappear?

Each time the rational side of me tried to encourage the impulsive side to see sense, I'd remember how, each Saturday, me, Lucy and the kids would queue outside St John's Church waiting for the doors of its food bank to open. Hoping we weren't seen by anyone we knew. Relying on the generosity and kindness of others is humiliating. My grandchildren deserved more than that.

But where would I find people who needed someone like me? I could hardly advertise on a postcard in the window of a corner shop or on a

Facebook community page. There were no gangs in Northampton like those in Haiti. You're more likely to see Jehovah's Witnesses roaming the streets than machete-wielding thugs.

It was a Channel 4 documentary that eventually gave me the idea: a programme about how weapons like guns are readily available to buy on the dark web. A YouTube tutorial showed me how to access it. Eventually, I stumbled across two private forums where the topic of conversation alluded to the best places to dispose of a dead body. No one, as far as I could tell, knew of a service as unique as what I was proposing. Perhaps there was a reason for it. That relying on a third party was an unnecessary risk. Nevertheless, a week after tentatively explaining my proposal, I received my first message, from someone claiming they might be able to put some work my way.

> I'm an intermediary: a facilitator who is able to bring together people who offer differing, but aligned, skillsets. I have contacts who require the services you are offering. What are your qualifications?

My sum total was cutting my son-in-law into pieces in the bathroom of his family home and disposing of him without anyone discovering what I'd done. I decided to be honest with them. The more ordinary and unassuming I appeared, the more appealing I might be.

> I'm a grandmother. I work as a cleaner at a local primary school. I have no track record in this business. No social media footprint. No arrests, no convictions, no one beyond my family gives me a second glance. And I'm good at what I do.

More conversations continued, followed by ten days of silence until a message offered me a trial run. One body for £5,000, paid in cash. I would be expected to dismember and dispose of it within five days and provide photographic evidence.

What did they do?

We aren’t paid to ask questions.

The following evening, with a thrumming in my chest and legs like jelly, I waited for my first delivery in a barely lit country lane in the nearby town of Leamington Spa. Every thought ran through my head – this was someone’s idea of a joke; I was caught in a police sting; I’d fallen prey to a serial killer and *I* was delivering my own body tonight. Soon after, a car appeared and the young male driver frisked me before surveying the area with night-vision binoculars. Only when he was satisfied that I didn’t pose a risk did he carry a sleeping bag, clearly with someone inside, and drop it in my boot. How I’d get it out when I got home was clearly my problem.

‘Half now, half on receipt of the photographs,’ he told me as he thrust a brown padded envelope into my chest. Inside was £2,500 in £20 and £50 notes, along with a burner mobile phone with only one number stored in its address book. ‘Fuck it up and you’ll end up like him,’ he added, with a gaze aimed squarely at my boot.

I was as good as my word. The next day, and with everyone out of the house, I set to work in the bathroom. And by mid-afternoon a handful of photographs had been sent of the man, age indeterminable going by his badly beaten face and body, disposed of in the same places I’d left Harry.

The rest of the cash appeared in a second envelope pushed through my letter box overnight. The knowledge that they had my address without me having given it was a concern. But I felt no guilt for my actions. Not a single shred of it. And first thing the following morning, I paid my blood money into a savings account at the bank. Now, I deposit it in much smaller amounts to avoid suspicion. I’ve even informed HMRC of my income, claiming it’s from upcycling, so I’m taxed on it.

The next WhatsApp message arrived three weeks later, followed by a body two days after that. My new career was in motion.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 19 MEMBERS

TRACY 11.30 p.m.
Is anyone still awake?

DOLLY, ROSE, TRACY, LINDA, SADIE, BETH 11.31 p.m.
Yes.

TRACY 11.32 p.m.
BIG NEWS! You're right, Beth. Brenda is DEFINITELY up to no good. As sure as God made little apples, she is doing something she doesn't want the rest of us to see.

BETH 11.32 p.m.
Such as?

TRACY, 11.33 p.m.
Every night this week, there's been light coming from inside her shed . . .

LINDA 11.34 p.m.
HOW CAN YOU SEE HER SHED FROM YOUR HOUSE?

TRACY 11.35 p.m.
I'm at Don and Sharon's, next door to Brenda's. They're in Malta so I've been doing cat feeds. And from their spare room there's a clear view straight into her back garden.

ROSE 11.35 p.m.
You need to be careful, Tracy. You could get into trouble for invading her privacy.

TRACY 11.36 p.m.

She has been in and out of that shed nine times since 10 p.m. NINE TIMES!

LINDA 11.37 p.m.
YOU'VE BEEN THERE AN HOUR AND A HALF? HOW MUCH DOES THAT CAT EAT?

TRACY 11.37 p.m.
She was wearing one of those plastic suits you see the police in at crime scenes.

LINDA 11.38 p.m.
WHAT, THE CAT?

TRACY 11.39 p.m.
No! Brenda! Keep up! I swear she was also wearing some kind of mask. And before you ask, Linda, I mean Brenda, not the bloody cat. She keeps pouring buckets of something down the storm drain out back. Explain that.

DOLLY 11.39 p.m.
Chemicals she uses for whatever she does with old furniture?

BETH 11.40 p.m.
Then she needs reporting to the Environment Agency because that's hazardous. And if she is using chemicals, I bet it's not for the reasons we think.

DOLLY 11.41 p.m.
What are you suggesting?

BETH 11.42 p.m.
Bright lights? Plastic suits? Scurrying around at night? People coming to her house at all hours? Isn't it obvious? She's running a cannabis farm.

LINDA 11.42 p.m.

WAIT, YOU THINK SHE'S EATING PEOPLE?

BETH 11.42 p.m.
Cannabis, Linda. Not cannibal!

TRACY 11.43 p.m.
OMG

DOLLY 11.43 p.m.
Really? That's a bit of a leap.

BETH, 11.44 p.m.
You read about it all the time. Rented suburban homes turned into drug dens. Mark my words, she'll be harvesting kidneys and people trafficking next.

SADIE 11.45 p.m.
I think maybe you have the wrong end of the stick with this one, Beth.

ROSE 11.47 p.m.
Are we being a little too quick to judge?

BETH 11.48 p.m.
Ladies, I'll remind you that you're under no obligation to remain in this group, as Cassandra can confirm if you'd like to contact her.

SADIE 11.49 p.m.
Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it.

ROSE 11.49 p.m.
Sorry Beth.

DOLLY 11.50 p.m.
Let's talk about it in the morning, Tracy. You must be shattered. Why don't you go home and get some sleep?

BETH 11.52 p.m.
No, hold fire and give me ten minutes.

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CHAPTER 12
LAST NIGHT

Oh, sweet Jesus. What is happening right now? My shoulders are squared, my lips pursed. I will my pulse to ease, my breathing to become less shallow. But my body and mind have become two separate entities, neither working together, each refusing to listen to the other. Because this is a first for me. I'm in uncharted territory.

Then the enormity of the moment hits me and I think I want to be sick. I clamp my hand over my mouth just in case the thought becomes a reality, but thankfully it doesn't get that far. Get a grip, Brenda, I tell myself. You have a job to do so get on with it. There's no time for sentiment when you're working your fingers to the bone. Literally.

Why? Because there are two bodies lying before me. One on the table, one on a sheet on the floor.

And I know both of them.

The first arrived earlier this evening, a last-minute text followed by a delivery. I recognised his face as soon as I removed the bin liner wrapped around his head. He's local, Riley something or other, I don't know his surname. A lad a little older than Noah. They went to the same school and he played in the rugby team three years above my grandson, but they trained together. I vaguely recall Noah once telling me Riley had dropped out of school and fallen in with the wrong crowd when a shoulder injury ruined his chances of a training programme run by the Northampton Saints rugby club.

I have no idea what has happened since for him to end up with me. Regardless, it's such a waste of a young life. Someone wanted rid of him quickly because they paid The Broker and me an extra £5,000 to dispose of him sharpish.

The second – and more concerning – body belongs to a woman with multiple stab wounds to her stomach and chest. Inflicted by me. She is on the table, the last drops of blood draining from her jugular through tubing

and into a bucket by my feet. She will be ready to work on in a few minutes, so for now, she can wait.

My eyes return to Riley. ‘You’re just a baby,’ I say aloud. Whatever he did can’t be terrible enough for him to have lost his life. He’s the youngest they’ve ever sent me. Rigor mortis has been and gone and now purple blotches are beginning to form on his body where blood is pooling. We all look so innocent after death comes calling.

Something about him is really getting to me. Perhaps it’s because he’s not much older than Noah, or that I’ve seen him in life before death. And now I’m about to dispose of him as if he never existed. I’ll be leaving loved ones with questions they’ll never find answers to. Forever kept in the dark. Maybe he has a grandma who loves him as much as I love my brood. Perhaps she has been worried sick since he vanished, wondering when she might see him again. Maybe she hurries to the window each time she hears the sound of gravel underfoot, hoping it’s him traipsing up the driveway while quietly fearing it’s someone else with terrible news.

No, I tell myself, this kind of speculation is not helping. In a room filled with death, I force myself to think of my family. The people I am doing this for. Principles and morality are all well and good, but they won’t put food on the table or clothes on their backs, or keep a roof over their heads.

Turning to the woman, I detach the needle from her femoral vein and ready myself to begin the same procedure on Riley. I touch his cheek and tell him that I will be gentle with him. He didn’t ask to end up in here. Not like her. She is the only person ever to walk voluntarily into this slaughterhouse.

Now I’m ready to start working on her properly. I look her in the eye, even though both are firmly shut, never to open again.

‘Right,’ I say as I locate the correct tool that will remove her head from her body. ‘Are you ready, Lizzie?’

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CHAPTER 13

Lizzie has been dead for a little over an hour and a half and I'm still furious with her. It's almost 1 a.m. and I should be in bed, not dismembering my only friend in this godforsaken village. I'm well within the three-hour timeframe before rigor mortis sets in. She will remain flexible until then, her supple joints easy to dismantle. I guess those Pilates classes she was always talking about have worked in both of our favours. I place my hand upon the top of her chest. She's no longer warm to the touch, but she's not cold either. If I don't begin work now, I'll have to wait a couple of days for the decaying process to begin.

'Why couldn't you leave me alone?' I ask her body now. 'Why couldn't you keep your nose out of my business and let us be? What harm were we doing to you?'

I carry the bucket containing her blood outside and pour it down the drain at the end of the garden. Then I check the oscillating saw contains enough charge to work on two corpses in one night and I set to work. I show respect to everyone who ends up on my table. But I'm making an exception for Lizzie. Because I'm angry at her for forcing my hand and making me go back on my word and kill for a second time. Or perhaps my indignation is misplaced, and it's myself I'm annoyed with because it's my own stupid fault she's ended up in the shed in the first place.

Earlier, I'd been preparing to dismember Riley when I was caught short. I left the shed unlocked while I returned to the house to use the bathroom. I've treated Lucy and the kids to a weekend at Blackpool Pleasure Beach: rollercoasters, Nickelodeon Land, Sea Life, the full works. So, I assumed I wouldn't need to secure it from prying eyes. Wrong.

Something outside caught my attention as I made my way back through the kitchen. A shadow at first, followed by a shape. A person. Each of the houses on this side of the village has a hedge with a gate that leads to a public access trail through Michael's fields. Frozen, I watched this figure slowly open my gate, then cross my garden. But before I could even weigh up my options, they stopped at the shed instead of approaching the house.

And the moment they pulled open the door and slipped inside was when I really hit panic mode.

Only seconds passed before I followed them. I don't know who was more surprised: me realising it was Lizzie, or her seeing the dead body of a teenage boy lying before her. She was as pale as him by the time she turned around, unable to get away fast enough. When she realised she wasn't alone, her eyes sprang from their sockets like they were on cartoon stalks. My closing the door behind me exacerbated her fear.

She clocked the metal table, the tools of my trade scattered about, the disinfectants, the box of hazmat suits and of course the body. There was no chance of me convincing her this wasn't exactly what she thought it was. So, I didn't try to insult her intelligence.

'Why are you here, Lizzie?' I asked as calmly as I could, given the circumstances.

She swallowed hard as she tried to find her voice. 'What . . . what did you do to him?' she said, glaring at the young man.

'I didn't do anything.'

'He's dead. You've killed him.'

'He was dead when he arrived here.'

'People don't just turn up at a house dead.'

'They do if you live here.'

I didn't owe her an explanation. But for some reason, I couldn't help myself. Perhaps I needed to offload. I explained how I'd advertised myself on the dark web and recalled the dozen people I'd dismembered so far and where I'd disposed of the body parts. By the time I finished, it was as if the biggest burden had been lifted from my shoulders. The slogan on that old TV ad for British Telecom still holds true: *It's good to talk*. And I knew Lizzie wasn't going to tell anyone, because unless she could convince me otherwise, she wasn't going to leave this shed alive. Our friendship was about to hit a dead end.

'So you're not a prostitute,' she said a little too quickly. 'You're a butcher.'

'How do you know I was accused of being a prostitute? I haven't mentioned it.'

Lizzie hesitated for a beat too long, realising her slip-up. 'People talk.'

'It was you who reported me to social services, wasn't it?' I continue. 'The recipe book, talking to the police, the parish council letter, the email to

Albert's daughter. All you. Why? You're supposed to be my friend.'

'You don't belong here,' she snapped with a sudden, ill-advised confidence I'd not seen in her before. 'You've never belonged here. This house shouldn't have been yours.'

The penny dropped. 'You were one of the people Frankie told me about. Making offers on it before her dad was even dead.'

'If you hadn't taken advantage of her grief, my daughter and my grandchildren would be living here, not more than a hundred miles away. You get to be with your family every day – I have to make do with FaceTime.'

'That's not my fault,' I protested. 'Look around you. Do you think I enjoy living this life? That I get pleasure out of what I do? Scrubbing the blood of others from my nails to put food on the table and a roof over my family's head? Because I really don't.'

'Move out of my way, I'm leaving,' she said.

To her credit, she offered no false promises that she wasn't going to raise the alarm. But her tremulous tone was giving her away. She was frightened of what was coming.

'You know I can't let that happen,' I replied.

Her eyes were wet as she cleared her throat. 'You can and you will.'

'You're in no position to make demands.'

Lizzie took a sharp intake of breath and screamed long and loudly, before pounding her fists against the walls. 'Help me!' she yelled over and over again. I didn't so much as flinch.

'It's soundproofed,' I said.

It was in that moment that she realised she had nothing to lose. So, she grabbed the nearest object, a scalpel, and launched herself at me. But Lizzie was no match for my strength or speed. I had already pulled a knife from the block in the kitchen as I made my way to the shed. And as she lurched at me for a second time, I hit her weapon with mine and sent the scalpel flying across the floor. Then I plunged my knife into her stomach, once, then twice, then three more times, leaving it there on the last. She reached to take hold of the handle, but it was too deeply embedded to pull out. Instead, she fell to her knees and looked up at me, helplessly.

It was nothing like my son-in-law's death, instant and clean. Lizzie's death was messy and chaotic. And the noises she made were inhuman. Like when you pinch the neck of a deflating balloon and release the air to make

it sound like it’s shrieking. And if I didn’t know better I’d say it was her final spiteful act, spewing blood everywhere. I grabbed a bucket as she lingered, and lifted her head, tilting it to capture as much blood as I could. Her final moments were spent making gurgling, guttural sounds until finally she gasped her last breath. And now she lies before me, like pieces of a jigsaw never to be put back together.

I’m acutely aware of the problems her disappearance is going to cause me. While she is widowed and lives alone, it won’t be long before her absence is noticed. I need to buy myself time, so I take her phone from her blood-sodden trousers that I left shoved inside a bin bag. I scroll through her messages to see who I might contact to lessen the impact of her disappearance.

I stop when I reach a WhatsApp group entitled Village Vibes. There are nineteen active members in here. Some names I recognise, others I’m unfamiliar with. Curiosity takes hold and I begin to scroll through their messages. To my shock, there’s a lengthy conversation where I am the sole focus of their gossip. They take every opportunity to rip me and my family to shreds, commenting on our movements and everything from the clothes I wear to who visits my house and when. I’m documented with the depth of an MI5 investigation. The ringleader is someone called Beth who never gets her hands dirty. Instead, everyone seems keen to do her dirty work for her, as if offending her might cause them to be ostracised from the coven. The name isn’t familiar but all of Beth’s messages have been sent from the phone I’m holding in my hand.

It takes a moment for the penny to drop. Beth as in Elizabeth. Elizabeth as in Lizzie. Different names for the different roles she plays. The friend and the foe. Well, sorry girls, but your queen has just been dethroned.

An idea comes to me that makes me smile. Lizzie isn’t only deserving of what came to her in the final moments of her life. She’s going to reap what she sowed in death too.

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CHAPTER 14
TODAY

They're greedy pigs!' laughs Esme as two of them scrap over a browning lettuce leaf. Then she squints and points to something lying on the ground in the pen at Michael's farm. The pigs have yet to gobble it down. 'That parsnip,' she says. 'It looks funny.'

'What do you mean?' I ask.

'It looks like a finger.'

I've forgotten my glasses, so I squint to get a better look. I smile to myself.

'Oh yes, you're right,' I reply. 'So it does.'

Of course it does – I severed it from Lizzie's hand myself not five hours ago. Other parts of her are already being digested by these pigs, following my first farmyard excursion today at sunrise. Clutching a supermarket carrier bag containing Lizzie's hands and feet, I hurried through the village to give her a fitting send-off. She liked to believe she put a lot of herself into this community. And I'm ensuring her legacy continues. Because once these pigs are sent to the slaughterhouse, their meat will be sold in the local butcher's to feed the friends and neighbours who enabled her. They all deserve to have a little of Lizzie inside them. The rest of her sits in plastic bags, weighed down by rocks and stored in a hollowed-out stump of a tree in the land I rent from Michael. I'll bury her properly tomorrow, once I have cut up that boy Riley.

His death still plays on my mind, so I've decided to do something I haven't before. I looked online and found an app that offers postmarks from all over the world stamped on postcards. Once I find the address of his family, I'll type a message using the app on Riley's behalf and pretend he has extricated himself from trouble and gone travelling. I don't know if it's the right thing to do, but it must be better for them than never hearing from him again.

My family returned home an hour ago from their Blackpool excursion. They have no idea what the last few hours have been like for me. I'm completely exhausted and running on little more than fumes. And I have no intention of letting them see that.

Esme remains distracted by the pigs. Checking there's no more of Lizzie left in the tub, I allow her to throw the remainder of the vegetables in their direction. Then I take a few steps back and remove Lizzie's phone from my pocket. I've already used her face to disable the biometrics needed to operate the device. Now I need to convince her friends there's a reason she's gone AWOL. And I'm going to have a little fun with it.

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VILLAGE VIBES WHATSAPP GROUP: 19 MEMBERS

BETH 9.20 a.m.
Morning girls. I'm afraid I won't be able to help with the summer fete this year. Something important came up.

SADIE 9.22 a.m.
That's a shame. You okay, hun?

BETH 9.23 a.m.
I've had to make a last-minute trip to Kent to visit Kelly. She's not been well, poor thing.

TRACY 9.24 a.m.
Is she alright?

BETH 9.25 a.m.
She's had another chlamydia flare-up.

TRACY 9.26 a.m.
Oh, okay.

BETH 9.27 a.m.
Bless her, every time she pees, it's like she's pouring out the sun one drop at a time.

LINDA 9.27 a.m.
MY MUM ONCE USED YOGHURT TO TREAT HERS.

SADIE, 9.28 a.m.
Don't you use yoghurt for a yeast infection?

LINDA 9.29 a.m.
IT WAS CHEAPER THAN ANTIBIOTICS BUT THE GRANOLA MADE HER ITCH FOR DAYS.

ROSE 9.30 a.m.
How long will you be away for, Beth?

BETH 9.32 a.m.
What with that and a flare-up of her irritable bowel syndrome, if it's anything like last time, it might be a few weeks. I'm sorry to let you all down.

LINDA 9.33 a.m.
WILL YOU BE BACK FOR THE NEXT BOOK CLUB?

BETH 9.33 a.m.
I'm not sure. But Linda, while you're online, I've been meaning to ask, why do you always type with capital letters?

LINDA 9.34 a.m.
MY GRANDSON TOLD ME TYPING IN CAPITALS GIVES MY PHONE A BETTER SIGNAL.

SADIE 9.36 a.m.
I think he might be pulling your leg.

LINDA 9.40 a.m.
HE CAN'T BE, HE'S AT SCHOOL.

BETH, 9.41 a.m.
Anyway, I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye. So, look after yourself girls, and I'll see you soon.

NELLY, 9.42 a.m.
You'll be missed.

TRACY, 9.43 a.m.
Sending healing prayers. 🙏

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CHAPTER 15
TODAY

You can shove your healing prayers up your arse, Tracy, I think. But I don't type it. None of them really care about Beth or anyone but themselves. They're only putting on a show of compassion because it's expected. I bet they've already set up a separate WhatsApp group to talk about her behind her back while she's away.

It's their last batch of messages that concerns me though. Specifically, those posted by Tracy, who's been spying on me from my next-door neighbour's bedroom window. If she watched Lizzie – I can't get used to calling her Beth – enter but not leave my garden, I'm sure she'd have alerted the police by now. As far as I'm aware, she hasn't. I'm still going to have to keep a close eye on her.

I likely only have a limited window of opportunity to keep up the story that Lizzie is playing Florence fucking Nightingale with Chlamydia Kelly, and not that parts of her are dissolving in the stomach acid of the pigs ahead of me. From what I can tell by the pattern of communication between Lizzie and her virtuous-vagina'd daughter, they talk once a week, typically Sunday evenings, and text every few days. I can respond to typed messages, but not phone conversations. Their last chat was two days ago, according to her call records. And in their last text, Lizzie once again brought up the subject of my cottage and assured Kelly that by autumn I wouldn't be living here anymore. That's how long she must've predicted it would take to drive me out.

I reckon I have around five days before she begins to wonder why her mum isn't answering her calls. There will be only so long I can keep making excuses as to why she can't talk before it arouses Kelly's suspicions. Then the search for her missing mother will begin. By then, Lizzie will have been shat out in this pen and used as fertiliser on the fields. Finally, she will be put to good use.

Esme and I have been here for half an hour and are getting ready to leave when Michael's dog Barney returns to us of his own accord, ignoring Oscar and making me the object of his attention again. Maybe it's attention he needs? I bend over to scratch him behind the ears then turn my back on him. But he lingers, sniffing at my feet, ankles and legs. If he could talk, I'd be arrested within the hour.

'Barney!' Michael shouts, startling me. I shove Lizzie's phone back in my pocket as Michael tries and fails to divert his dog's attention back to his master. 'Sorry,' he says as he approaches us again. 'He's only doing what he's trained to do.'

'What do you mean?' I reply.

'Old Barney here had a career in Northants Police before seeing out his retirement with me. He was a cadaver dog.'

I swallow a stone in my throat. 'A cadaver dog?'

Michael nods. 'German Shepherds are pretty adept at sniffing out the dead.'

For a fraction of second, I could swear he gives me a knowing glance. No, I'm imagining it.

'Some have been known to find bodies that are weeks, months or even years old,' he adds. 'Barney gets particularly agitated each time we walk past that piece of land you're renting from me. Sometimes I have to drag him away, silly sod.'

I desperately hope my chest isn't offering any outward signs that my heart is trying to beat its way out of my ribcage.

'Perhaps there's a badger sett or a fox den underground,' I suggest. 'That's the scent he's picking up on.'

'Yes, probably,' says Michael, and I breathe a little easier as Barney finally loses interest in me and trots towards the pen. 'It was the pigs who had his attention first thing this morning,' continues Michael, pointing towards the animals. 'Dawn had only just broken when he started barking down at the farmhouse. I thought we had trespassers the way he was carrying on. I let him out, but he didn't run any further than here.'

He must've sensed me. Michael looks me in the eye before his gaze moves above us. I follow his line of sight. It's a security camera attached to the top of a pole and it's pointing to the pen. I've never thought to look out for one.

‘There’s a dozen of them about the farm,’ he says casually. ‘My son insisted on having them fitted after some of the sheep were stolen back in January. Top-of-the-range cameras, he says. They pick up anything, and anyone, no matter the light.’

The way his eyes return to mine tells me he has already viewed recorded footage of me taken in the early hours of this morning, emptying bags for his pigs to consume. Then his conversation suddenly pivots in a direction I don’t expect it to take.

‘Beth posted on the Village Vibes WhatsApp group a few minutes ago, referring to the other members as “girls”,’ Michael says. I gulp as he puts his phone close to his face and reads her message. *My message*. ‘But she never uses the word “girls” in reference to women. She once called Tracy out when she referred to the cast of *Sex and the City* as “girls”. She was adamant women shouldn’t be, I quote, “infantilised”.’ He laughs. ‘Sanctimonious old bint. Thought you might like to know for future reference. But the mention of chlamydia was a nice touch.’

I want the ground to give way beneath me and swallow me whole. I’m frightened that, if I open my mouth to try and defend myself or offer an explanation, I might be sick instead, like I almost was last night. Michael slips his phone back into his pocket and sees by my bewildered expression that I have questions but don’t know where to begin.

‘Rachel, my late wife, was a member of that WhatsApp group,’ he expands. ‘I never understood why because she wasn’t like them. She saw the good in people while they only seem to care about the bad. She’d read aloud their messages, both of us disgusted by some of the things they said about others who weren’t in the group and who were supposed to be their friends. A few years ago, they bullied some gay dad who’d adopted a boy. Spread all kinds of unfounded rumours he was a paedophile until he moved out of the village. Nasty business.’

Michael pinches the bridge of his nose. ‘Anyway, after Rachel died, nobody thought to remove her from the group. I didn’t have the heart to throw her phone away, and once, when I was scrolling through her photographs, messages from their conversation kept appearing. They were talking about Rachel, criticising everything about her, how she “tried too hard” to be nice, even accusing her of using her cancer to gain sympathy. After she lost weight and most of her hair, they said the wig she bought reminded them of a scarecrow. I should have called them out there and then,

but I didn’t. But sometimes, when I’m feeling particularly petty, I’ll let Barney take a shit on the pavement outside their houses when I’m taking him for his night-time walk. Anyway, I’ve kept up to speed with who that group has in their sights, and I think we both know who’s been ruffling a few feathers lately.’

Michael watches Esme as she strokes the back of a pig.

‘Do you want to know something funny about pigs?’ he says to her, and we both nod, me at a loss for words. ‘It’s not true they can eat anything. The nerve endings in their lips and mouths actually make them very sensitive. So, there are things they can’t have, like food with bristles on. Throw them a dead hedgehog, for example, and they won’t touch it.’

Esme giggles while all I can muster up is an ‘okay’.

‘And it’s always interesting to see what their bodies can’t digest,’ he directs to me. ‘Like teeth. They could chew their way through a jaw, but they will always shit the teeth out.’

It’s said with such certainty that for a moment I wonder if he knows this from experience.

‘So, you can never take for granted what you will and won’t see again once it reaches a pig’s stomach,’ he adds. ‘You have to be careful. Most other things are fair game.’

‘Okay,’ I mumble.

‘Well,’ he sighs, ‘I should leave you girls to it. There’s about a hundred and one jobs that need to be done around here. See you again soon, I hope. You’re always welcome. Any time. Day or night.’

Before he leaves, Michael looks up at the security camera once more. He grabs a wire attached to the side and gives it three hard tugs before it separates from the unit, rendering the camera useless. He rolls the wire up and leaves it wrapped around a hook.

‘Don’t tell my son.’ And he winks before whistling for Barney and making his way towards the café.

‘Michael,’ I say, suddenly finding my voice. ‘That offer of tea and cake. Next time, perhaps?’

‘It’s an open invitation,’ he replies without looking back at me. ‘I look forward to it.’

And I think so might I.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was at lunch at a London restaurant with my long-time editor Vic Haslam when she first asked if I'd ever consider writing a novella. I immediately, but politely, declined. What did I know about writing a book that was under my typical 90,000 words? I know many skilled authors regularly write shorts for magazines and newspapers, but the last time I attempted one was back in the 1980s and I was still at school.

However, in the weeks that followed, Vic's suggestion planted a seed in my head. Maybe, if the right idea came along, I could give it a go. And when I came up with the story of a middle-aged grandmother dismembering bodies for a living, I decided a short story might be the right format for it. So, later that week, I put finger to keyboard to see where *Breaking Brenda* (the original working title) took me. I also decided not to tell anyone about it, apart from my husband, Other John, because if I couldn't manage it, nobody would know I'd failed.

It wasn't until I'd finished a few drafts that I told an enthusiastic Vic what I was working on and she couldn't wait to see it. Within a couple of days, she'd finished reading it and said she loved it. And here we are: you have just finished reading or listening to my first short story. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Writing and publishing are never one-person jobs. So the usual thanks go to my behind-the-scenes heroes, like Other John, early readers like my mum Pam, fairy grandmother Tracy Fenton, Louise Beech, Mary Wallace, Mandie Brown and Rhian Molloy, along with my Amazon Publishing team including my editorial foster mother Sammia Hamer, the eagle-eyed Sam Eades and Gemma Wain. Also Lex and the team at the Tandem Collective and my audiobook narrators, the latter of which bring my stories to life so brilliantly. A special thanks also goes to Ben Swift for his help in body dismemberment, cutting tools and all things blood and gore. Any errors and embellishments are mine, not his.

And finally, a special thank you goes to each of you readers and listeners who have downloaded this book. If you've been with me throughout my other fourteen books, then I thank you. Or if you're a first-

timer and have taken a punt on me because this story caught your eye, you also have my gratitude. I hope you all stick around and see where else my crazy train might take us.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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John Marrs is an author and former journalist based in Northamptonshire, England. After spending his career interviewing celebrities from the worlds of television, film and music for numerous national newspapers and magazines, he is now a full-time author. This is his fifteenth book. Follow him at www.johnmarrsauthor.com, on Instagram @johnmarrs.author and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/johnmarrsauthor.

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