

THE FAMILIES OF 16 CHEYNE WALK

The Lambs

Henry Lamb Sr and Martina Lamb

Henry Lamb Jr, their son, who also calls himself Phineas Thomson

Lucy Lamb, their daughter, once married to Michael Rimmer; mother to Libby, Marco and Stella

Libby Jones, Lucy's daughter, formerly Serenity Lamb; in a relationship with journalist Miller Roe

The Thomsens

David Thomsen and Sally Thomsen

Clemency Thomsen, their daughter, now living in Cornwall

Phineas Thomsen, their son, also referred to as Finn Thomsen, now living in Botswana

Birdie Dunlop-Evers, musician

Justin Redding, Birdie's boyfriend

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Prologue

June 2019

Samuel

‘Jason Mott?’

‘Yes. Here. That’s me.’

I stare down at the young man who stands below me ankle-deep in the mud of the banks of the Thames. He has sandy hair that hangs in curtains on either side of a soft, freckled face. He’s wearing knee-high rubber boots and a khaki gilet with multiple pockets and is surrounded by a circle of gawping people. I go to him, trying to keep my shoes away from the mud.

‘Good morning,’ I say. ‘I’m DI Samuel Owusu. This is Saffron Brown from our forensics team.’ I see Jason Mott trying very hard not to look as if he is excited to be in the presence of two real-life

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detectives – and failing. ‘I hear you have found something. Maybe you could explain?’

He nods, eagerly. ‘Yes. So. Like I said on the phone. I’m a mud-larking guide. Professional. And I was out here this morning with my group and this young lad here’ – he points to a boy who looks about twelve years old – ‘he was poking about and opened up this bag.’ He points at a black bin bag sitting on some shingle. ‘I mean, rule number one of mud-larking is no touching, but this was just sitting there, like someone had just dropped it there, so I guess it was OK for him to open it.’

Although I know nothing of mud-larking rules, I throw the young boy a reassuring look and he appears relieved.

‘Anyway. I don’t know, I mean, I’m no forensics expert . . .’ Jason Mott smiles nervously at Saffron and I see him flush a little. ‘But I thought that they looked like they might be, you know, human bones.’

I pick my way across the shingle to the bag and pull it open slightly. Saffron follows and peers over my shoulder. The first thing we see is a human jawbone. I turn and glance at her. She nods; then she pulls on her gloves and unfurls some plastic sheeting.

‘Right,’ I say, standing up and looking at the group gathered on the mud. ‘We will need to clear this area. I would kindly ask for your cooperation.’

For a moment nobody moves. Then Jason Mott springs into action and manages to corral everyone off the beach and back up on to the riverside where they all stand and continue to gawp. I see a few smartphones appear and I call up. ‘Please. No filming. This is a very sensitive police matter. Thank you.’

The smartphones disappear.

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THE FAMILY REMAINS

Jason Mott stops halfway up the steps to the riverside and turns back to me. ‘Are they . . .?’ he begins. ‘Are they human?’

‘It would appear so,’ I reply. ‘But we won’t know for sure until they have been examined. Thank you, Mr Mott, for your help.’ I smile warmly, hoping that this will send a signal that he must stop asking questions and go away.

Saffron turns back to the bones and starts to lift them out of the bag and on to a plastic sheet.

‘Small,’ she says. ‘Possibly a child. Or a small adult.’

‘But definitely human?’

‘Yes, definitely human.’

I hear a voice calling down from the riverside. It is Jason Mott. I sigh and turn calmly towards him.

‘Any idea how old they are?’ he shouts down. ‘Just by looking?’

Saffron smiles drily at me. Then she turns to Jason. ‘No idea at all. Give your details to the PC by the car. We’ll keep you posted.’

‘Thanks. Thanks so much. That’s awesome.’

A moment later Saffron pulls a small skull from the black bag. She turns it over on the plastic sheeting.

‘There,’ she says. ‘Look. See that? A hairline fracture.’

I crouch. And there it is. The probable cause of death.

My eyes cast up and down the beach and along the curve of the river as if the killer might at this very minute be running from view with the murder implement clasped inside their hand. Then I glance back at the tiny ash-grey skull and my heart fills both with sadness and with resolve.

There is a whole world contained inside this small bag of bones.

I feel the door to the world open, and I step inside.

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PART ONE

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1

July 2018

Groggy with sleep, Rachel peered at the screen of her phone. A French number. The phone slipped from her hand on to the floor and she grabbed it up again, staring at the number with wide eyes, adrenaline charging through her even though it was barely seven in the morning.

Finally she pressed reply. ‘Hello?’

‘*Bonjour*, good morning. This is Detective Avril Loubet from the Police Municipale in Nice. Is this Mrs Rachel Rimmer?’

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Speaking.’

‘Mrs Rimmer. I am afraid I am calling you with some very distressing news. Please, tell me. Are you alone?’

‘Yes. Yes, I am.’

‘Is there anyone you can ask to be with you now?’

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‘My father. He lives close. But please. Just tell me.’

‘Well, I am afraid to say that early this morning the body of your husband, Michael Rimmer, was discovered by his housekeeper in the basement of his house in Antibes.’

Rachel made a sound, a hard intake of breath with a *whoosh*, like a steam train. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘No!’

‘I’m so sorry. But yes. And he appears to have been murdered, with a stab wound, several days ago. He has been dead at least since the weekend.’

Rachel sat up straight and moved the phone to her other ear. ‘Is it – Do you know why? Or who?’

‘The crime scene officers are in attendance. We will uncover every piece of evidence we can. But it seems that Mr Rimmer had not been operating his security cameras and his back door was unlocked. I am very sorry, I don’t have anything more definite to share with you at this point, Mrs Rimmer. Very sorry indeed.’

Rachel turned off her phone and let it drop on to her lap.

She stared blankly for a moment towards the window where the summer sun was leaking through the edges of the blind. She sighed heavily. Then she pulled her sleep mask down, turned on to her side, and went back to sleep.

2

June 2019

I am Henry Lamb. I am forty-two years old. I live in the best apartment in a handsome art deco block just around the corner from Harley Street. How do I know it's the best apartment? Because the porter told me it was. When he brings a parcel up – he doesn't need to bring parcels up, but he's nosey, so he does – he peers over my shoulder and his eyes light up at the slice of my interior that he can see from my front door. I used a designer. I have exquisite taste, but I just don't know how to put tasteful things together in any semblance of visual harmony. No. I am not good at creating visual harmony. It's OK. I'm good at lots of other things.

I do not currently – quite emphatically – live alone. I always thought I was lonely before they arrived. I would return home to my immaculate, expensively renovated flat and my sulky Persian

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cats and I would think, oh, it would be so nice to have someone to talk to about my day. Or it would be so nice if there was someone in the kitchen right now preparing me a lovely meal, unscrewing the cap from a bottle of something cold or, better still, mixing me something up in a cocktail glass. I have felt very sorry for myself for a very long time. But for a year now, I have had house guests – my sister Lucy and her two children – and I am never, ever alone.

There are people in my kitchen constantly, but they're not mixing me cocktails or shucking oysters, they're not asking me about my day; they're using my panini-maker to produce what they call 'toasties', they're making hot chocolate in the wrong pot, they're putting non-recyclables in my recycling bin and vice versa. They're watching noisy, unintelligible things on the smart-phones I bought them and shouting at each other when there's really no need. And then there's the dog. A Jack Russell terrier type thing that my sister found on the streets of Nice five years ago scavenging in bins. He's called Fitz and he adores me. It's mutual. I'm a dog person at heart and only got the cats because they're easier for selfish people to look after. I did a test online – *What's Your Ideal Cat Breed?* – answered thirty questions, and the result came back: Persian. I think the test was correct. I'd only ever known one cat before, as a child, a spiteful creature with sharp claws. But these Persians are in a different realm entirely. They demand that you love them. You have no choice in the matter. But they do not like Fitz the dog and they do not like me liking Fitz the dog and the atmosphere between the animals is horrendous.

My sister moved in last year for reasons that I barely know how to begin to convey. The simple version is that she was homeless.

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The more complicated version would require me to write an essay. The halfway version is that when I was ten years old our (very large) family home was infiltrated by a sadistic conman and his family. Over the course of more than five years the conman took control of my parents' minds and systematically stripped them of everything they owned. He used our home as his own personal prison and playground and was ruthless in getting exactly what he wanted from everyone around him, including his own wife and children. Countless unspeakable things happened during those years, including my sister getting pregnant at thirteen, giving birth at fourteen, and leaving her ten-month-old baby in London and running away to the south of France when she was only fifteen. She went on to have two more children by two more men, kept them fed and clothed with money earned by busking with a violin on the streets of Nice, spent a few nights sleeping rough, and then decided to come home when (amongst many other things) she sensed that she might be in line for a large inheritance from a trust fund set up by our parents when we were children.

So, the good news is that last week that trust finally paid out and now – a trumpet fanfare might be appropriate here – she and I are both millionaires, which means that she can buy her own house and move herself, her children and her dog out, and that I will once more be alone.

And then I will have to face the next phase of my life.

Forty-two is a strange age. Neither young nor old. If I were straight, I suppose I'd be frantically flailing around right now trying to find a last-minute wife with functioning ovaries. As it is, I am not straight, and neither am I the sort of man that other men wish to form lengthy and meaningful relationships with, so that

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leaves me in the worst possible position – an unlovable gay man with fading looks.

Kill me now.

But there is a glimmer of something new. The money is nice, but the money is not the thing that glimmers. The thing that glimmers is a lost jigsaw piece of my past; a man I have loved since we were both boys in my childhood house of horrors. A man who is now forty-three years old, sporting a rather unkempt beard and heavy-duty laughter lines and working as a gamekeeper in Botswana. A man who is – *plot twist* – the son of the conman who ruined my childhood. And also – *secondary plot twist* – the father of my niece, Libby. Yes, Phineas impregnated Lucy when he was sixteen and she was thirteen and yes that is wrong on many levels and you might have thought that that would put me off him, and for a while it did. But we all behaved badly in that house, not one of us got out of there without a black mark. I've come to accept our sins as survival strategies.

I have not seen Phineas Thomsen since I was sixteen and he was eighteen. But last week at my niece's birthday party, my niece's boyfriend, who is an investigative journalist, told us that he had tracked him down for her. A kind of uber-thoughtful birthday present for his girlfriend. *Look! I got you a long-lost dad!*

And now here I am, on a bright Wednesday morning in June, cloistered away in the quiet of my bedroom, my laptop open, my fingers caressing the touchpad, gently guiding the cursor around the website for the game reserve where he works, the game reserve I intend to be visiting very, very shortly.

Phin Thomsen was how I knew him when we lived together as children.

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Finn Thomsen is the pseudonym he's been hiding behind all these years.

I was so close. An F for a Ph. All these years, I could have found him if I'd just thought to play around with the alphabet. So clever of him. So clever. Phin was always the cleverest person I knew. Well, apart from me, of course.

I jump at the sound of a gentle knocking at my bedroom door. I sigh. 'Yes?'

'Henry, it's me. Can I come in?'

It's my sister. I sigh again and close the lid of my laptop. 'Yes, sure.'

She opens the door just wide enough to slide through and then closes it gently behind her.

Lucy is a lovely-looking woman. When I saw her last year for the first time since we were teenagers, I was taken aback by the loveliness of her. She has a face that tells stories, she looks all of her forty years, she barely grooms herself, she dresses like a bucket of rags, but somehow she still always looks lovelier than any other woman in the room. It's something about the juxtaposition of her amber-hazel eyes with the dirty gold streaks in her hair, the weightlessness of her, the rich honey of her voice, the way she moves and holds herself and touches things and looks at you. My father looked like a pork pie on legs and my lucky sister snatched all her looks from our elegant half-Turkish mother. I have fallen somewhere between the two camps. Luckily, I have my mother's physique, but sadly more than my fair share of my father's coarse facial features. I have done my best with what nature gave me. Money can't buy you love but it can buy you a chiselled jaw, perfectly aligned teeth and plumped-up lips.

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My bedroom fills with the perfume of the oil my sister uses on her hair, something from a brown glass bottle that looks like she bought it from a country fayre.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ she says, moving a jacket off a chair in the corner of my room so that she can sit down. ‘About last week, at Libby’s birthday dinner?’

I fix her with her a *yes, I’m listening, please continue* look.

‘What you were saying, to Libby and Miller?’

Libby is the daughter Lucy had with Phin when she was fourteen. Miller is Libby’s journalist boyfriend. I nod.

‘About going to Botswana with them?’

I nod again. I know what’s coming.

‘Were you serious?’

‘Yes. Of course I was.’

‘Do you think – do you think it’s a good idea?’

‘Yes. I think it’s a wonderful idea. Why wouldn’t I?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, it’s meant to be a romantic holiday, just for the two of them . . .’

I tut. ‘He was talking about taking his mother; he can’t have intended it to be that romantic.’

Obviously, I’m talking nonsense, but I’m feeling defensive. Miller wants to take Libby to Botswana to be reunited with the father she hasn’t seen since she was a baby. But Phin is also a part of me. Not just a part of me, but nearly all of me. I’ve literally (and I’m using the word ‘literally’ here in its most literal sense) thought about Phin at least once an hour, every hour, since I was sixteen years old. How can I not want to go to him now, *right now*?

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‘I won’t get in their way,’ I offer. ‘I will let them do their own thing.’

‘Right,’ says Lucy, doubtfully. ‘And what will you do?’

‘I’ll . . .’ I pause. What will I do? I have no idea. I will just be with Phin.

And then, after that – well, we shall see, shan’t we?

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3

August 2016

Rachel met Michael in a pharmacy in Martha's Vineyard in the late summer of 2016. She was waiting for a prescription for the morning-after pill to be dispensed to her by a very young and somewhat judgey man. Michael stepped ahead of her and greeted the pharmacist with a brisk, 'Is it done yet?'

The judgey pharmacist blinked slowly and said, 'No, sir, it is not. Could I ask you to take a seat? It won't be much longer.'

Michael took the seat next to Rachel. He folded his arms and he sighed. She could sense that he was about to talk to her, and she was right.

'That guy', he muttered, 'is just a delight.'

She laughed and turned to study him. Fortyish, to her thirtyish. Tanned, of course; at the end of a long Martha's Vineyard summer,

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there was nobody left without a tan. His hair was due a cut; he was probably waiting until he got back to the city.

‘He’s a bit judgey,’ she replied in a low whisper.

‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘yes. Strange, in one so young.’

Rachel, at the time, had been conscious of the only-just-showered-off sweat of a boy called Aiden still clinging to her skin, the tender spots on her inner thighs where his hip bones had ground into her flesh, the sugary smell of his young man beer breath lingering in the crooks and crevices of her body. And now she was here, flirting with a man old enough to be Aiden’s father whilst waiting for emergency contraception.

It really was time for Rachel to go home now. The summer had been desperate and dirty, and she was used and spent.

The pharmacist pulled a paper bag from a clip on the carousel behind him and peered at the label. ‘Ms Rachel Gold?’ he called out. ‘I have your prescription.’

‘Oh.’ She smiled at Michael. ‘That’s me. Hope you don’t have to wait too long.’

‘Line-jumper,’ said Michael with a sardonic smile.

She typed her PIN into the card reader and took the bag from the pharmacist. When she turned to leave, Michael was still looking at her. ‘Where are you from?’ he asked.

‘England.’

‘Yeah, obviously, but whereabouts in England?’

‘London.’

‘And whereabouts in London?’

‘Do you know London?’

‘I have an apartment in Fulham.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Right. I live in Camden Town.’

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‘Whereabouts?’

‘Erm.’ She laughed.

‘Sorry. I’m an Anglophile. I’m obsessed with the place. No more questions. I’ll let you get on, Rachel Gold.’

She lifted her other hand in a vague farewell and walked quickly through the shop, through the door, on to the street.

Two months later, Rachel was eating lunch at her desk in her studio when an email appeared in her inbox titled ‘From the American Anglophile to the English Line-Jumper.’

It took her a beat or two, her brain trying to unscramble the sequence of seemingly unconnected words. And then she clicked it open:

Hi Rachel Gold,

This is Michael. We met in a pharmacy in Martha’s Vineyard back in August. You smelled of wood smoke and beer. In a good way. I’m going to be staying in London for a few months and wondered if there was anywhere in Camden you’d recommend for me to explore. I haven’t really been to the area since I was a teenager – I was looking to score some hash and ended up buying a stripy rucksack and a bong instead. I’m sure there’s more to the locale than the market and the drug dealers, though, and I’d love an insider’s point of view. If you are reeling in horror at the appearance of this missive in your inbox, please do delete/ignore/call the police. (No, don’t call the police!) But otherwise, it would be great to hear from you. And my slightly anal

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knowledge of London postcodes led me to your email address, by the way. I googled 'Rachel Gold' then 'NW1', and up you popped on your website. How apt that a jewellery designer should have the surname Gold. If only my surname were Diamond we'd make the perfect couple. As it is, it's Rimmer. Make of that what you will. Anyway, I'll hear from you if I hear from you, and if I don't, I'll buy something from your website and give it to my mother for her birthday. You're very, very talented.

Yours,

Michael

xo

Rachel sat for a moment, her breath held, trying to decide whether she wanted to smile or grimace. She brought the man's face back to mind, but she couldn't find the full extent of it. Michael C. Hall's face kept appearing and smudging it out. At the bottom of his email though was a company name. MCR International. She googled it and brought up an anonymous-looking website for what appeared to be some sort of logistics/haulage type organisation, with an address in Antibes in the south of France. She googled Michael Rimmer Antibes and after some hunting around, finally found him on a website for local news, clutching a champagne flute at a party to celebrate the launch of a new restaurant. She blew his face up and stared at it for a while on her screen. He looked nothing like Michael C. Hall. He looked . . . basic handsome is how she would describe it. Basic handsome. But in the

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way his white T-shirt met the waistband of a pair of blue jeans there was something sexual. Not tucked in. Not pulled down. Just skimming the edges of each other. An invitation of sorts. She found it surprisingly and suddenly thrilling and when her eye returned to his face, he looked more than basic handsome. He looked hard. Almost cruel. But Rachel didn't mind that in a man. It could work in her favour if she wanted it to.

She shut the email down. She would reply. She would meet him. She would have sex with him. All of this she knew. But not yet. Keep him waiting for a while. She was in no rush, after all.

4

June 2019

I go for a run the following morning. I must be honest and say that I really don't like running. But then neither do I like going to the gym and seeing all those perfect boys who don't even glance in my direction. The gym used to be my playground, but no longer. Now I dress down, keep my eyes low, grit my teeth until I feel that comforting, satisfying connection between my feet, the ground, my thoughts and the beat of the music in my ears, and I keep doing that until I've done a full circuit of Regent's Park. Then my day is my own.

But today I can't find that sweet spot. My breath grinds through my lungs and I keep wanting to stop, to sit down. It feels wrong. Everything has felt wrong since I found out that Phin still exists.

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My feet connect with the tarmac so hard I can almost feel the bumps of the aggregate through the soles of my trainers. The sun appears suddenly through a soft curtain of June cloud, searing my vision. I pull on my sunglasses and finally stop running.

I've lost my way. And only Phin can guide me back.

I call Libby when I return home.

Lovely Libby.

'Hello, you!'

She is so very the sort of person who says 'hello, you'.

I return it as fulsomely as I can manage. 'Hello, you!'

'What's new?'

'New? Oh, nothing really. Just had a run. And a shower. Just thinking about what we were discussing at your birthday dinner the other night.'

'The safari?'

'Yes, the safari. Lucy says I shouldn't come.'

'Oh. Why?'

'She thinks that you and Miller want it to be a romantic getaway for just the two of you.'

'Oh, no, nonsense. Of course, you'd be welcome to come. But we've hit a snag.'

'A snag?'

'Yes. Miller called the lodge the other day to ask about an extra person on the booking and apparently Phin has . . .'

She pauses.

'Yes?'

'He's gone.'

I sit heavily on the nearest chair, my jaw hanging slack with shock. 'Gone?'

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‘Yes. Said he had a family emergency. Didn’t know when he’d be back.’

‘But . . .’ I pause. I’m fuming. Libby’s boyfriend Miller is a well-regarded investigative journalist. He’s spent a year of his life tracking Phin down (not for me, you understand, but for Libby) and then five seconds after finally tracing him, Miller’s clearly done something utterly stupid that has resulted in Phin taking flight, the journalistic equivalent of stepping on a twig during a stag hunt.

‘I don’t understand,’ I say, trying to sound calm. ‘What went wrong?’

Libby sighs and I picture her touching the tips of her eyelashes as she often does when she’s talking. ‘We don’t know. Miller could not have been more discreet when he made the booking. The only thing we thought is that Phin somehow recognised my name. We assumed, you know, that he would only have known me by my birth name. But maybe he knew my adopted name. Somehow.’

‘I’m assuming, of course, that Miller made his own booking under a pseudonym?’

There’s a brief silence. I sigh and run my hand through my wet hair. ‘He must have, surely?’

‘I don’t know. I mean, why would he need to?’

‘Because he wrote a five-thousand-word article about our family that ran in a broadsheet magazine only four years ago. And maybe Phin does more than just sit on jeeps looking masterful. Maybe he, you know, uses the internet?’ I clamp my mouth shut. *Nasty nasty nasty. Don’t be nasty to Libby.* ‘Sorry,’ I say. ‘Sorry. It’s just frustrating. That’s all. I just thought . . .’

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‘I know,’ she says. ‘I know.’

But she doesn’t know. She doesn’t know at all.

‘So,’ I say, ‘what are you planning to do? Are you still going?’

‘Not sure,’ she replies. ‘We’re thinking about it. We might postpone.’

‘Or you could . . .’ I begin, as a potential solution percolates, ‘. . . find out where he’s gone?’

‘Yes. Miller’s doing a bit of work on the reservations guy. Seeing what he can wheedle out of him. But seems like no one there really knows much about Phin Thomsen.’

I draw the conversation to a close. Things that I cannot discuss with Libby are buzzing in particles through my mind and I need peace and quiet to let them form their shapes.

I go to the website again, for Phin’s game reserve. It’s a very worthy game reserve. Internationally renowned. Unimpeachable ecological, environmental, social credentials. Phin, of course, would only work in such a place.

He told me when he was fifteen years old that he was going to be a safari guide one day. I have no idea what route he took from the house of horrors we grew up in to get there, but he did it. Did I want to be the founding partner of a trendy boutique software design solutions company, back then, when I was a child? No, of course I didn’t. I wanted to be whatever life threw at me. The thing that I would be after I’d done all the normal things that people do when they haven’t grown up in a house of horrors and then spent their young adulthood living alone in bedsits, with no academic qualifications, no friends and no family. I wanted to be *that thing*. But, in the story that this spinning Rolodex of endless and infinite

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universes gave to me, this is where I am and I should be glad and grateful. And in a way I am. I guess in another of those universes I might, like my father before me, have sat and got fat whilst waiting for my parents to die so that I could claim my inheritance. I might have lived a life of boredom and indolence. But I had no option other than to work and I've made a success of my life and I guess that's a good thing, isn't it?

But Phin, of course, Phin knew what he wanted even then. He didn't wait to be formed by the universe. He shaped the universe to his will.

I head into work and find the same lack of focus plagues me through a conference call and two meetings. I snap at people I've never snapped at before and then feel filled with self-loathing. When I get home at seven that evening, my nephew Marco is wedged on to the sofa with a friend from school, a pleasant boy I've met before and have made an effort to be nice to. He gets to his feet when I walk in and says, 'Hi, Henry, Marco said it was OK if I came. I hope you don't mind.' His name is Alf and he is delightful. But right now I don't want him on my sofa, and I don't even spare him a smile. I grunt: 'Please tell me you're not planning to cook?'

Alf throws Marco an uncertain look; then they both shake their heads. 'No,' says Alf, 'no, we were just going to hang.'

I nod tersely and head to my room.

I know what I'm going to do. And I really do have to do something, or I'll explode. I can't sit around waiting for the lugubrious Miller Roe to sort this out. I need to sort it out myself.

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LISA JEWELL

I go on to Booking.com, and I book myself a four-day, all-inclusive ‘Gold Star’ stay at the Chobe Game Lodge in Botswana.

For one.

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5

October 2016

At thirty-two years of age, Rachel tried not to dwell too much on the fact that her entire adult existence was a mirage. Her flat was owned by her father, who also bankrolled her business. It had happened so gradually, this reliance on her father's adoration and generosity, that she hadn't noticed when it had tipped over from being 'what parents do to help their kids get started in life' to something she was too embarrassed to talk about. Her jewellery business was making money but was not yet in profit. She could fool herself that it was in profit once a month when her allowance arrived and tipped her accounts over from red to black. But really she was at least a year away from making a proper living, and even then it would depend on everything going right and nothing going wrong. In six months she would be thirty-three, a long way from the

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benign shores of thirty, the age she thought she'd be when she finally became fully independent of her father.

But to the objective onlooker, Rachel Gold cut an impressive figure: five foot ten, athletic, groomed, slightly aloof. She looked like a self-made woman, a woman who made her own mortgage payments and paid for her own gym membership and had her own Uber account.

On a Friday evening in late October, a week after the unexpected email from the American guy, to which she had still not replied, Rachel went for drinks after work with the woman from the studio next door in her complex on the cusp between West Hampstead and Kilburn. Paige was twenty-three and still lived with her mum, but made her own money, enough to pay her mum some rent, enough to pay for her own holidays and her own drinks and her own eyebrow tinting. Paige made jewellery from base metals, unlike Rachel who used gold and platinum. Paige lived below her means and saved. She'd left art school only two years earlier, but she was already more of a grown-up than Rachel.

In the pub Rachel got the first round: a bottle of Pinot Grigio. There were heaters on the terrace, so they drank it outside, with blankets draped over their knees. Rachel asked Paige about her love life. Paige said, 'Nil. Nada. Zero. Zilch. You?'

'A guy,' Rachel began, hesitantly at first and then with an unexpected swell of certainty that this was a conversation she needed to have. 'I met him in the States, this summer, then he stalked me down on the internet and wrote to me via my website. Said he's going to be in London for a few months and wants to meet up. I kind of . . .'

She placed the wine bottle into the cooler. 'I kind of

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can't stop thinking about him. At first I was like, I dunno, thought maybe it was a bit creepy. He's older, as well.'

'God. How much older?'

'Like, maybe, ten years? Early forties, I'd say. Here.' She turned her phone to face Paige, showing her the photo of Michael Rimmer she'd saved into her camera roll.

'Hot.'

'You think?'

'Yeah. In that way. You know?'

'What way?' She narrowed her eyes at Paige, not wanting her to echo back her own strange thoughts about this unexpected man.

'Looks like he'd fuck you hard. Then lie there, bollock naked, with his arms behind his head and ask you to get him a drink.'

'Fuck.' She snatched the phone back from Paige's hand.

'Which could be, you know, a good thing? Yes?'

'God. I don't know. Yeah, maybe. But no. Good and bad, I reckon. I'm going to be thirty-three next year. Is that what I want?'

'I dunno – you tell me?' Paige peered at her quizzically, a challenge in her gaze.

'No. No. I mean, yes. For fun. But not for marriage, babies, all that.'

'Is that what you want?'

'No, not really, but I might want it and I don't want to be stuck with a guy who doesn't do nurture then, do I? You've got to have a guy who nurtures if you're doing babies. And this guy' – she cast her gaze down again at Michael Rimmer clutching his champagne glass in a tacky Côte d'Azur restaurant – 'he does not look like a nurturer.'

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LISA JEWELL

‘Well,’ said Paige. ‘If you’re not ready for babies and marriage, why don’t you just go for him as your last one that’s not “the one”. He’s only in London for a few months. Just use him.’

A surge of nervous energy passed through Rachel at Paige’s suggestion. She’d just put Rachel’s own thoughts into words.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Yeah. Maybe I will.’

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6

June 2019

Lucy approaches a young man in a tight grey suit clutching a folder. She puts a hand out towards him and he shakes it.

‘Max Blackwood,’ he says. ‘You must be Lucy. Lovely to meet you. Did you find it all right?’

‘Absolutely,’ she replies, ‘just popped it into Google Maps. Getting about is easy these days, isn’t it?’

‘Very true,’ he replies and then regales her with stories of Google Maps getting it wrong and guiding people up dead-end roads and into meadows full of sheep and people’s back gardens. While he talks, they walk slowly towards the house. Lucy tries not to betray her awe and excitement. She’s wearing clothes picked out for her by Henry, her brother. He said, ‘If you’re looking at million-pound houses you need to look like you have a million

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pounds.’ He’d dragged her up and down Marylebone High Street, in and out of trendy French boutiques, and made her buy a house-hunting wardrobe of soft T-shirts and tailored trousers and sweeping maxi dresses and blazers and bright white trainers with metallic patterns. Then he put her into a salon for three hours with a man called Jed who chopped eight inches off her sun-frazzled hair and streaked the rest of it with strands of vanilla blonde.

Henry had made her have her teeth whitened shortly after she moved in with him. She’d noticed him flinching every time she smiled and eventually said, ‘Is there something wrong with my teeth?’ and he’d said, ‘I suppose it’s easy to lose sight of things like that when you haven’t had regular access to a mirror for so long.’

Such a shit, her big brother. He hid it with a mischievous veneer of dark humour, but she sometimes suspected that the darkness ran much deeper.

She flips up her sunglasses from her nose to her hair and looks at the house in front of her. It’s a four-bedroom former vicarage just outside St Albans. It has an orchard and a wooden swing set and a trampoline and a two-hundred-foot lawned garden with a ramshackle gazebo at the end. It has stone-mullioned windows with gargoyles stationed above. It has a double front door with brass knockers and boot scrapers and built-in benches either side. It’s scruffy and a bit tired. The curtains she can see through the windows are sun-bleached and shredded. But it is essentially one of the most beautiful houses she has ever seen in her life. She maintains a poker face and says, ‘It’s lovely.’

‘It really is,’ he says, sorting through the keys in his hand to

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find the one that unlocks the front door. ‘Not the sort of place that comes up very often. Are you familiar with the area at all?’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘My daughter lives in St Albans, near the centre.’

The words still give her a shiver of pleasure. *My daughter*. Libby Jones. Serenity Lamb. The daughter she had to leave behind as a baby, and then found again a year ago, when she’d just turned twenty-five. She has soft blonde hair, Libby Jones, and pale blue eyes, and she holds your gaze when you talk to her in a way that makes you feel you can say anything to her and she will absorb it without judgement. She has a London accent: not a cut-glass English accent like Lucy, who went to a school where they made her wear a straw boater and a blouse with a pie-crust collar, but an accent with the edges cut off and flattened, bits missing at the ends of certain words, an accent formed at comprehensive schools and in suburban terraced houses. She has freckles on her arms and wears her hair in a side parting; she tucks it behind her ear every few minutes, and sometimes she touches the tips of her eyelashes with her finger, as if checking that they’re still there. She smells of vanilla. She washes her hands a lot. She likes fruit. Her handwriting is very neat. She is amazing.

‘Oh,’ says Max, now, turning to smile at her. ‘That’s good. She’ll be happy to have Mum up the road, I’m sure.’

The house is empty. The owners have already downsized to a new-build apartment. They’ve left the bare bones of some furniture behind, to create the impression of a much-loved family home, but in effect the sparseness of it serves only to highlight the fact that the intense universe which once existed within these four

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walls has come to an end: children flown, the noise and chaos of a family unit truncated down to two middle-aged people in a flat somewhere, existing quietly in the spaces between visits and phone calls.

‘It is a bit of a doer-upper,’ Max says now, searching for light switches as he goes. ‘The owners did spend quite a lot of money on it when they bought it, but obviously that was over twenty years ago. So, it is a *little bit* last century, let us say.’

Lucy already knows she’s going to buy it. She knew she was going to buy it the moment she saw the details on the internet. It has an unconventional layout. Lucy was brought up in a house with symmetry at its core: a central hallway with evenly sized rooms that mirrored each other on either side. She does not want symmetry. She wants nooks and crannies and funny little alcoves and unexpected passages leading to rooms that don’t make sense.

Upstairs the bedroom doors still bear the names of the children who once slept behind them. Oliver. Maddy. Milly.

They’re soft names but the damage those children appear to have wrought in their house doesn’t back that up: ripped wallpaper, felt-tip scribbles, something neon green stuck to the cheap carpets underfoot – slime probably.

After a year living in Henry’s immaculate apartment, having to remove her shoes at the front door, having to use special sprays to mop up benign spillages, adopt a coded system of cloths for different surfaces, having to constantly police her children to make sure they aren’t about to drop anything or stain anything or damage anything, she wants this – a house to bash about in, a house to drop slime in, a house to absorb them and their imperfections.

She ignores the rust stains in the sinks and the toilet bowls, the

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green water marks around the bath taps, the missing pane of stained glass covered over with brown chipboard in the laundry cupboard. She will happily pay a million pounds for a house that is scuffed up and kicked about, for dirty carpets and broken windows and a trampoline with moss growing on it. She will pay anything to put walls around the small family that she has brought up on streets, on beaches, on sofas, in temporary accommodation – and, for the first few years of Marco’s life, in the home of an abuser.

Once the tour is over she walks back to her car and takes the particulars from Max, shakes his hand again and bids him farewell. She places the papers on the passenger seat, then puts Henry’s address into Google Maps. But before she pulls away, she types a quick text to Libby:

Just seen the house in Burrow’s End. It’s perfect. Going to make an offer. Eek!

Then she sets the phone into its holder and pulls away, watching her house in the rear-view mirror until it’s completely swallowed up by trees.