

## **The Killing of Mummy's Boy.**

***'I slit someone's throat,' the man told the woman on the 4.20 from Waterloo to Portsmouth.***

Two strangers. One interest. Murder. Ben slit a man's throat. Sandra's son, Carl witnessed a stabbing. When Sandra discovers she is being stalked, she turns to the least likely person for help with horrific consequences. Hate, fear and lies boil over in this Isle of Wight-based page-turner with love at its black heart.

***'Terrifying'***

**\* \* \* \* \***

**Trish Jackson**

***'Don't read alone'***

\* \* \* \* \*

Lee Cradock

***'Gripping. A real page turner'***

\* \* \* \* \*

Mary G

***'I couldn't put this book down. It was impossible to guess the identity of the stalker, and the author did a wonderful job of projecting Sandra's terror, her protectiveness toward her son, and the emotional turmoil she experienced when she realised she was attracted to Ben.'***

\* \* \* \* \*

Trish Jackson. Author

***'Weirdly, I could put this book down. I had to. I didn't want to finish it too quickly. I wanted to savour its surprising twists and turns. I wanted to appreciate the very human strengths, weaknesses and foibles of its protagonist and the taut, tantalising plot. In the end, of course, I couldn't put it down and stayed up till 2am to find out what happened. If you're picking it up for the first time, you have been warned.'***

\* \* \* \* \*

Paul Burke. Author.

# The Killing of Mummy's Boy

Joan Ellis

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For Doug

With thanks to the man on the train  
for showing me the workings  
of the criminal mind.

**The Killing of Mummy's Boy**

## Chapter one

[Waterloo to Portsmouth 2013]

'I slit someone's throat,' the man told the woman on the 4.20 from Waterloo to Portsmouth.

It was Sandra's first journey back to London since she had moved to the Isle of Wight a few years before. Having a stretch of water between her and the mainland made her feel safe. The Solent could be expensive to cross; some people thought twice before making the journey. She liked that.

Once on board, she had found an empty table and taken off her coat before absentmindedly plucking a stray blonde hair from her cardigan. A man was watching her from the aisle. She followed his gaze. To her embarrassment, her fingers were resting against her left breast. Flummoxed, she struggled with her case, making several unsuccessful attempts to lift it onto the luggage rack.

'Let me,' he said.

Now it was her turn to watch as he swung the case up over his head and positioned it on the shelf. His white T-shirt rode up revealing the lower half of his torso. Her eyes tracked the thin line of black hair that ran from his navel and disappeared under the waistband of his jeans. He flopped down in the seat opposite and honed in on the box of doughnuts she had put on the table. The glossy icing and the multicoloured hundreds and thousands glinted through the cellophane window. They were her treat. She couldn't get them on the island and always made a point of buying half a dozen from the kiosk at Waterloo station.

'Did you make those?' he asked.

They were obviously manufactured; the brand name was emblazoned across the side of the box. She shook her head.

'My sister bakes cakes for the café on Ryde beach. Do you know it?' he asked.

She glanced at him, momentarily trying to picture where he meant before shaking her head and checking her phone. No messages. She sighed and slid the phone into the pocket of her handbag where she kept her Oyster card. The travel card wasn't there. Panicking, she rechecked her bag and looked underneath the seat. Nothing. She must have dropped it after topping it up at the station. Luckily, the card was registered so at least she wouldn't lose any money. Quickly, she took out her mobile again, scrolled down the address book and clicked.

'Hello, I'd like to report a lost Oyster... sorry...can you hear me now?' she shouted. 'My name? Sandra, Sandra Williams...Dove Cottage, Isle of Wight. PO30 5AB.'

She bit her lip impatiently.

'5A 'P'? 'P' for 'papa'? No, it's 'B', 'B' for ...'

The man smiled at her and her mind went blank.

'Bravo,' he whispered over the top of his newspaper.

She gave him the thumbs up by way of thanks.

'B' for 'bravo',' she said. 'Yes, the card is registered...hello...can you still hear me?'

The line went dead. Irritated to have lost the signal, she sighed and locked her phone. The man threw down his newspaper, making her jump and reached into the pocket of his jeans. Fanning out three Oyster cards on the table, he pushed one towards her.

‘Here,’ he said.

His nails were bitten, his cuticles ragged and bloody.

‘No, thanks, it’s yours,’ she replied.

‘Have it,’ he insisted.

‘No, I don’t need it. I’ll get a replacement. Why have you got so many?’ she asked lightly.

He shrugged, gathered up the cards and put them back in his pocket.

‘I always lose something when I go to London,’ he told her.

‘Where in London?’ she asked, leaning forward, seizing the opportunity to talk about her home town.

‘Leyton. Me girls live there.’

East London, of course, his accent was a giveaway. But a Dad? She would never have guessed he had kids. He seemed free, uninhibited by responsibility. Only someone with children knew the particular pain they could bring. As her friend had warned her when she had told him she was pregnant, ‘Congratulations! You’ll never be so happy or unhappy in your life.’ At the time, it had struck her as nothing more than a jaded comment probably the result of one too many sleepless nights. She had no idea what he meant. Now, sadly, she knew only too well.

‘How old are they?’ she asked, genuinely interested.

‘Eight and nine. Haven’t seen ‘em for years,’ he said dismissively as if ‘years’ was just another word for ‘hours’.

She raised her eyebrows at him.

‘Been away,’ he told her by way of explanation.

Based on his muscular appearance, she imagined him on an oil-rig, braving all weathers.

‘I’m Ben, by the way. Drink in The Lud, down the road from me in Ryde. Know it?’

She nodded.

‘Never seen you,’ Ben said. ‘I Know it but I don’t drink there.’

‘Why not?’ he asked, offended.

She shrugged hoping her indifference would draw the conversation to a close but he was not easily deterred.

‘What’s wrong with it?’ he demanded.

‘Nothing,’ she lied.

Sandra had nipped in there once to use the toilet. She could still smell the inside of the cubicle and picture the misspelt filth scrawled on the walls. There was no paper left on the roll and she had resorted to using the inner cardboard tube.

Ben leant towards her, his elbows on the table and stared into her eyes. Alarmed, she recoiled and looked around for somewhere else to sit but the carriage was full. Four young race-goers on the opposite table were imbibing ready-mixed gin and tonics from cans. One of the two women lay

slumped against her partner's shoulder, her weight pinning him against the window. The other man was boasting loudly about his winnings.

Sandra's ex-husband had been a gambler and would have lost the family home from under them, had she not divorced him when she did.

She picked up a copy of The Metro from the floor and flicked it open creating a barrier between her and her unwanted travelling companion.

'Can I see that?' he asked pushing his copy of The Times towards her. 'I can't read this.'

If her newspaper distracted him, she was happy to let him have it. She folded it and placed it on the table. Without so much as a glance at the front page, Ben jettisoned it onto the seat next to him.

'You've kept yourself nice, for your age,' he said addressing his remark to her chest.

She was wearing her low-cut, cream top. Her hand moved towards her throat and her fingertips felt for her rose locket. She rubbed it gently against her thumb, anxious to cover her chest with her arm as she did so.

His face was set in a permanent smile, like a dolphin's. His biceps bulged under the thin fabric of his T-shirt. Despite herself, she smirked.

'What you doing later?' he asked.

'My husband's meeting me at Ryde,' she lied without missing a beat.

He looked at her left hand and grinned knowingly. No wedding ring. He let out a little snort, disguised as a cough. Sandra inwardly admonished herself. She was getting careless, having removed the ring earlier and forgotten to put it back on. A cheap metal band, it made her fingers itch but she chose to wear it as part of her disguise of normality and respectability. Usually, it kept any unwanted attention at bay too.

'Off to see my girl now,' he told her gleefully.

Relieved she would soon be free of him, she smiled.

'She's a prostitute.'

Sandra gasped. It was clear from Ben's ever widening grin he enjoyed her reaction.

'She'll do anything for me. Dresses up ... got all the gear. Last time, she wore her Grand-dad's sailor suit.'

From the tawdry description, Sandra pictured a scrawny blonde, dead behind the eyes, sporting an ill-fitting white shirt and blue trousers, a nautical cap at a jaunty angle, splayed across a crumpled bed waiting for Big Ben to strike.

'Just doing what me Dad told me, 'Never hurt a woman, Ben. If you want sex, pay her, don't rape her.'

Sandra gasped but tried to mask how unnerved she was. She had to get away from him, stand in the corridor, if necessary. Before she could move, he jumped up.

'Just nipping to the loo, watch my stuff,' he ordered.

This was her chance. Once he had disappeared, she could lock herself in another toilet and stay there until she reached Portsmouth Harbour.



Just as she was about to move, one of the men opposite stood up, blocking her exit, and made several frustratingly abortive attempts to extricate more drink from his rucksack on the luggage rack. He swayed back and forth battling with zips and buckles. Sandra was so desperate to get out she was about to offer to do it for him when he succeeded in liberating two cans and sank gratefully back into his seat.

‘Miss me?’ Ben asked sitting back down.

Not wanting to antagonise him, she forced a smile. To put some distance between them, she checked her mobile again.

‘Has it gone six?’ he asked in an agitated tone.

Again, desperate to appease him, she checked the display and shook her head.

‘Can’t miss the Hover,’ he said.

She relaxed, almost laughed with relief. He was catching the Hovercraft that meant he would get off the stop before her at Portsmouth and Southsea.

‘You’re in great shape. Bet you’ve never had kids,’ he said, leaning over table.

He was so close, she could see the lumps of mercury filling his back teeth.

‘I’ve got a son,’ she told him then immediately regretted it.

Fortunately, he wasn’t listening. His eyes were all over her.

‘Why haven’t you seen your children for so long?’ she asked in an attempt to distract him.

‘Been inside,’ he replied lifting his eyes from her cleavage and looking her in the eye, keen to gauge her reaction.

Sandra looked over at the men opposite for help but their fixed grins were evidence of too many G&T’s. Useless.

‘What for?’ she asked, faking nonchalance, her heart beating in double time.

Sandra wondered if he could hear it thudding. By the look on his face, he enjoyed having her undivided attention and made the most of it, taking his time to reply. Any hope he had been sentenced for a minor crime began to fade.

‘This and that...my third time,’ he boasted, the fear he induced forcing her to hold his gaze.

‘What did you do?’ she demanded, her voice rapid but strained.

‘I slit someone’s throat.’

‘Teas, coffees, sandwiches?’ the steward asked halting the refreshment trolley alongside their table.

Sandra’s relief at his arrival turned to disappointment when she turned to look at him. The steward would be no help. His frail body failed to fill what appeared to be the smallest sized uniform. She must weigh more than he did.

‘Stick some ice in there for us, mate,’ Ben smiled, holding up a small plastic cup.

Young and keen, the lad obliged, scooping in ice-cubes.

‘Cheers,’ said Ben, calmly filling his cup from a bottle he had concealed inside a plastic bag.

She watched, disgusted as he knocked back the drink.

‘Cider?’ he asked proffering the cup.

She shook her head, discreetly wiping her sweaty palms on the seat. Desperate to convince herself he wasn’t a murderer, she tried to convince herself he was just another petty criminal who had to big himself up in order to gain kudos with the lowlifes who hung out in the Lud. To her horror, he seemed to read her mind.

‘Here’s my ID card,’ he said flashing a small plastic card just long enough for her to recognise the official government insignia. ‘I have to keep it with me in case I get stopped by the police.’

Sandra took it as confirmation of his crime and contemplated moving again. Supposing he came after her? She didn’t want to provoke him. If he were to attack her, who would come to her aid? Have-a-go heroes rarely travelled by train these days.

‘You wouldn’t do it again, would you?’ she asked trying to keep her voice slow and steady. She hoped her tone conveyed more of a statement and less of a question.

‘What?’ Ben asked, casually refilling his cup. ‘I wouldn’t do what again?’

The cider bubbled over the top of the beaker and ran down his hand. He sucked it lasciviously off his fingers, one by one, his smirking eyes never leaving hers.

‘Slit someone’s throat,’ she said loudly hoping another passenger would overhear and rescue her.

‘Nah. That was year’s ago,’ he replied casually as if murder was nothing more than harmless boyish behaviour he had long grown out of.

Sandra froze. He might have a knife. Not wanting to goad him, she struggled to fix her features into a neutral expression.

When she had boarded the train, she was unaware of his existence. Now she was privy to his worst crime. At least she hoped it was his worst.

Perhaps she could get off at the next stop? Slowly, she reached into her bag and took out her phone. Her hand was shaking.

*‘On train with murderer. Help,’* she texted her friend, Rob.

Logically, she knew there was nothing he could do but she had to let someone know, just in case. Why had she allowed this to happen? What was she doing still sitting here, let alone talking to him?

‘Is that work?’ he asked watching her wait anxiously for her phone to respond.

She nodded rapidly. Best not say anything, she was a hopeless liar. He would see right through her. Then again, it was partly true; she did work with Rob.

‘Tell ‘em you’re busy,’ he laughed. ‘Tell ‘em you’re with me.’

Rob’s reply flashed up on her screen.

*‘Murderer?!!! What you like?! x’*

Oh no. He thought she was joking. Trust Rob. There was no point replying.

The train stopped. Her body flooded with adrenalin, ready to run. If she timed it right, she could get off just before the doors closed ensuring he couldn't follow her. As she was about to make a dash for it, the aisle filled with the people who had just got on. They milled about with their bulky bags, wandering through the train looking for somewhere to sit, blocking her exit. Her heart sank as the whistle blew and the train pulled away.

Fear turned to anger as she watched him wedge the bottle under the crook of his arm and refill his cup.

'Haven't you had enough?' she shouted.

What was she playing at? He had probably cut someone for less. But it was unnerving enough sitting opposite a self-confessed murderer, let alone a drunk one.

'Last little drop,' he said surprisingly good-naturedly as he screwed the cap firmly back on the bottle and lifted the drink to his lips.

'Perhaps if you drank less, you'd see more of your kids.'

She shocked herself. Why wind him up? If the past few years had taught her anything, it was not to say a word out of place. But, she couldn't stop, delivering the words like gun-fire.

'You drink too much,' she told him, picturing her ex-husband downing another Scotch. Turned out it wasn't the only thing on the rocks, their marriage was floundering too.

'You sound like my Mum,' Ben laughed.

She flinched. Just hearing the word 'mum' unnerved her. Did it still define her? She knew it did but believed her son may have other ideas.

'You're right. Too much drink ain't good,' he said staring intently at her throat. 'Nice pendant. Can I 'ave it, 'ave it for my girl?'

'No,' she said her fist tightening around her precious rose necklace.

Her cheeks flushed. He saw and laughed.

'I'm going to call you 'Rose' like the one round your neck.'

How dare he? She opened her mouth to say something but stopped.

'Not upsetting you am I, Rose?'

He reached across the table and placed his hand gently on her forearm. She pulled away as if scorched.

'Sorry, shouldn't have done that, should I, Rose?'

His slow, apologetic tone was almost convincing.

'Don't mind me touching you, do you, Rose?'

'My name's Sandra,' she asserted before she could stop herself.

'I know. Sandra. Sandra Williams.'

He laughed. She froze. Of course, he must have been listening when she reported her lost Oyster card. How could she have been so careless, giving out her details in public?

‘It’s going be nice tomorrow,’ Ben said. ‘I’ll fire up the barbie and have a party. Wanna come? You can get the number 9 bus from Newport. You live there, don’t you?’

‘No,’ she said quickly.

‘Yes, you do. You’ve got a Newport postcode,’ he said. ‘Dove Cottage, Isle of Wight. PO30 5AB.’

Her insides liquefied. Her cottage was in Shorwell, a remote village five miles south of Newport but close enough to share the same postcode. Her neighbour only ever used his house at weekends. The set-up had always suited her but now a murderer knew where she lived she would relish a regular presence on the other side of the party wall.

If he was aware of the terror he had induced in her, he did not show it. Her mind somersaulted as she tried to recall what other information she had let slip.

‘Sandra,’ he repeated slowly, rolling the letters around his mouth as if tasting them. ‘S-a-n-d-r-a? Nah, that’s not you. No, you’re my Rose.’

She shifted uneasily in her seat, hoping the group opposite had overheard. It was too much to hope for. The older man was still jammed against the window. Much to his delight, every time the girl inhaled, her breasts threatened to escape her bra. The other girl, her stilettos discarded, rubbed her foot slowly against the other man’s ankle.

‘Come to my flat. 150 East Hill, Ryde. I’m always there. I don’t do nothing.’

Of course, he didn’t. The leach.

‘How do you pay your girl then?’ she asked recklessly, calling his bluff.

Perhaps, his sordid tale: the murder, the prostitute and the neglected children, was nothing more than his attempt at a sick chat-up line.

‘I give her this,’ he said brandishing the half-empty bottle of cider.

‘You’d better stop drinking it all then,’ she chided as if admonishing a child.

Her misguided boldness was akin to madness and just as uncontrollable.

‘You’re right, Rose. Last little drop.’

He unscrewed the lid and poured himself another cupful, downing it in one.

‘How did you cope, locked up for years?’ she asked still trying to trip him up.

‘Inside you’re fed, warm and got no bills to pay. And I could get anything I wanted,’ he gave her a sly look, teasing her, tempting her to find out more.

‘How?’ she asked.

‘Let’s just say you ladies are designed to carry more luggage than men,’ he said with a wink, his eyes on her crotch.

She picked up the newspaper and put it across her lap. This time Sandra knew better than to show she was shocked.

‘Let’s say a woman smuggles you in a mobile phone, how do you charge it?’ she asked desperate to catch him out.

‘Wire off a kettle flex and screws out the bedstead. Easy.’

Sandra wasn’t convinced. He could have seen it in a film or on television. Unfortunately, his next admission erased any doubt.

‘I was inside with Bewley before his trial.’

Sandra swallowed hard and looked away. Bewley had been found guilty of murdering a young boy years ago. He had always protested his innocence but the weight of evidence against him was overwhelming. His victim had been the same age as Sandra’s son and shared the same name, Carl. Consequently, the case always had an uneasy resonance for her. She listened intently to Ben.

‘After the trial, Bewley confessed to his cellmate. When me and the boys on the wing heard, we wanted to put him over the railings.’

He looked at her to ensure she understood he had meant to kill him. She blinked.

‘The screws wouldn’t let us do the bastard but they looked the other way when we kicked his head in.’

Sandra recalled seeing Bewley’s picture on the front page of every paper shortly after he was sentenced, his face so badly beaten he was unrecognisable from his earlier mug-shots. Only the headlines shouting his name confirmed his identity.

‘Not upsetting you, am I, Rose?’

She shook her head. Again, he reached across and touched her arm. This time, she did not dare pull away.

‘Come with me, Rose. I get my passport in a few days. We can go anywhere we want.’

Out of nowhere, the idea took hold. Like a wild fire in her mind, igniting long-forgotten sensations. For a moment, she fantasised about what being with a brute like him would be like. She imagined him being very different from her po-faced ex-husband.

‘Rose?’ he said squeezing her arm gently.

Her eyes flickered towards him but she said nothing. Suddenly, he got up. Sandra held her breath but he simply lifted her case down as the train approached his stop, Portsmouth and Southsea.

‘Can I have one?’ he asked nodding at the doughnuts.

‘No.’

‘No?’

The dolphin smile disappeared. In its place, a look so powerful it compelled Sandra to open the box. Calmly, as if being offered them at a party, he selected the chocolate one before walking towards the door.

‘See ya around, Rose.’

## Chapter two

[Isle of Wight 2013]

Sandra reminded herself to keep her big mouth shut in future.

She couldn't wait to leave the carriage and stood the short journey to Portsmouth Harbour, desperate for the train to stop and the door to open. She half ran, half walked along the platform and down the slope towards the Catamaran. Knowing she had plenty of time before the next boat, she headed for the toilet dragging her case into the cubicle behind her. After locking the door, she collapsed against the wall, her hands clammy, her mouth dry. The acrid stench of industrial cleaner caught in the back of her throat making her feel sick. What a fool. Given she prided herself on her newfound anonymity, she had done a great job of etching herself in Technicolor on a psychopath's brain.

Using her thumbnail, she prised open her rose locket, turning it to study the picture of her son's face. If just looking at an image could wear it out, Carl's photo would have faded long ago.

Here was proof of the happy, carefree life they had once shared. Carl was smiling, his eyes screwed up, squinting into the sun, overjoyed with his new scooter, her gift to him on his seventh birthday. It was taken in their garden at Muswell Hill. That glorious, perfumed space that had been the backdrop to so many golden and indolent days with her little boy. She could still smell the chamomile lawn and hear his laughter as he rode down the long manicured sweep of grass towards the back of the house.

'Watch me, Mum! Watch me!' he yelled, swerving to a halt beside the yew hedge. 'Wow! Did you see that?'

She grabbed her camera from the bench.

'Smile, Carl.'

Immediately, he grinned obligingly into the lens. As she pressed the shutter, he laughed and sped away.

Then, the scream.

Instinctively, she dropped the camera and ran towards the front garden. The scooter was on its side, the back wheel spinning. Carl was a little way off, face down on the path, a trickle of blood meandering like a worm across the paving stones. Frantically, she squatted beside him.

‘Carl! Carl! Talk to Mummy.’

She knelt down on the ground beside him, muddying the knees of her white trousers.

‘Carl?’

‘My...head...hurts.’

‘Mummy kiss it better,’ she said, brushing her lips against his grazed cheek.

‘Get off,’ he said pushing her away and getting to his feet.

Staggering backwards before getting up, she was relieved to see it was just a flesh wound. Nothing a dab of antiseptic and a plaster wouldn’t put right.

She was his mother but had been unable to protect him then and she certainly could not shield him from danger now.

That job fell to strangers, trained police officers heading up the Witness Protection Programme.

It would soon be Carl’s birthday but unlike all those years ago, she could not take his photo this year. The most she could hope for was a call, made from an untraceable location, as always. At least she could hear his voice and speak to him. Texts and emails were too risky. Carl wrote letters but each one took six weeks to reach her after going through the rigorous security process demanded by the Programme. She looked forward to holding the pages he had held and reading the words he had written. Recently, the paper had reeked of cigarette smoke. Who could blame him? He needed something to relieve the stress.

Sometimes it seemed like he was the one being punished, banished as he had been to the furthest corner of the country, alienated from his family and friends. Even his new job left him feeling frustrated and unfulfilled.

Sandra suffered too. Every day, she feared he would be killed in a reprisal attack, his life taken in return for the life sentence his evidence had secured.

She shivered and checked the time on her phone. The Catamaran was leaving in four minutes. She unlocked the door and ran through the departure hall to join the queue, relieved to be just another face in the crowd.

‘You cut that fine!’ the ticket collector said with a smile.

Ignoring his comment, she hurried down the tunnel and onto the boat, choosing to sit alone by the window. Looking out across the Solent, she replayed her encounter with the stranger on the train and felt inwardly embarrassed at how flirtatious she must have appeared. Fancy even talking to the man, let alone leading him on just to make herself feel a little less invisible. Pathetic. As for telling him she had a son, that was an unforgivable breach of trust. But her words could not be unsaid.

Blending into the background had never been her forte. Less of a wallflower and more of a burgeoning rose, people remembered her. What had been a blessing in her previous role as Director of a London PR agency had become a curse, ensuring she was often remembered for things best forgotten.

Her innate sense of right and wrong left her compelled to speak out if she witnessed an injustice and she had always encouraged Carl to do the same. Now look where it had got him, living in fear with

an invented past and an uncertain future. Even his name had been changed, supposedly to protect the innocent. It rankled with her that he had been forced to live a lie for telling the truth.

‘If you go back to London, you will be murdered,’ the police officer had told Carl. ‘There’s always someone happy to step up, a family member out for revenge or someone from the gang who wants to be seen as some sort of hero. Unfortunately, you weren’t to know it but you couldn’t have picked a more notorious family, the Elliotts will not let this go. You’re the enemy, they want you dead.’

The words had cemented themselves into the very fabric of her being, the bricks on which her new life would be built. Sandra wasn’t eligible to join the Witness Protection Programme but instinct told her to leave London. If the Elliotts couldn’t find Carl, they would come after her.

Suddenly, her phone vibrated in her pocket making her jump. Automatically, she clicked on the email. Much to her annoyance it was just an online bookseller suggesting new titles. Recently, she had bought several paperbacks from them and since then they had bombarded her with new titles she might like to read. Smart.

Such technology in the wrong hands meant Carl’s whereabouts were just a click away. These days, social media made it all too easy to track someone down. Carl couldn’t afford to leave a digital footprint. The police had made that very clear. Even a photo of him could give away his whereabouts. All it would take to flush him out would be an iconic landmark or a stretch of familiar scenery. It would be tantamount to giving the enemy his co-ordinates.

As the Catamaran slowed, a voice announced their arrival at Ryde. Sandra joined the throng of people threading their way off the boat and up the ramp. Some headed towards the station to catch the old London Underground train that ran along the pier. Others enjoyed reunions with loved ones in the car park where they embraced before loading their luggage and driving away to what Sandra imagined were idyllic lives.

She set off resolutely on the long walk down the pier, enjoying the feeling of being suspended over the water and getting glimpses of the waves below. At that moment, the island struck her a uniquely beautiful place. Something about the view of the town from half a mile out to sea reminded her of Venice with its elaborate, arched palazzos hugging the waterfront. It may have been a leap of imagination not shared by others but it didn’t bother her; she only had herself to please.

Her phone vibrated again. A text.

*‘Hope you didn’t chat up any more murderers on the boat!!!! x’*

It was her friend, Rob, carrying on what he thought was a harmless joke.

Annoyed, she threw the phone into her bag.

The sound of the Hover skimming the waves alarmed her, reminding her of the man on the train. He would have caught the earlier one and arrived here about an hour ago. She could just make out The Lud across the road from the pier and hoped Ben wasn’t waiting outside to greet her.

She told herself she was being silly. Although their encounter had unnerved her, doubtless it had been nothing more than a game to him. He would have forgotten her already. Nonetheless, her legs shook, her right foot like a puppet’s, pawing uselessly at the pavement, momentarily unable to take her weight. She held onto the railings to steady herself, suddenly aware she was shivering.

Eventually, she reached the end of the pier and rounded the corner into the bus depot where she was relieved to see the No 9 to Newport.

‘Shorwell, please,’ she told the driver breathlessly, handing him the fare.



She went upstairs and sat in the front seat where she tried not to glimpse inside other people's homes. But with their curtains open, their cosy lives were laid bare. She looked away, not wanting to be reminded of the normality she would never again experience.

The bus terminated at Newport where Sandra changed onto the No 12.

'Hello, there,' said the driver. 'Been anywhere nice?'

She smiled briefly and showed him her ticket before finding a seat near the door.

To most people, familiar faces and friendly greetings were a charming aspect of island life but recently Sandra had found it an unwelcome intrusion.

As they neared Bowcombe, the houses gave way to fields and farms. The sheep and cows were a welcome sight.

The driver stopped at The Crown in Shorwell without her even having to ring the bell. It unnerved Sandra; he must have remembered where she lived from a previous journey.

'Have a good evening,' he said closing the doors behind her.

Sandra walked along the narrow lane and up the stone path to her cottage. It was in darkness. She wasn't the sort to leave lights and lamps on timers, never convinced anyone would be fooled into thinking she was at home when she wasn't.

Turning the key in the lock, she pushed open the door and automatically clicked on the light. The smell of curry greeted her. She had made a large pan of madras the night before she left so she wouldn't have to cook when she got back. She was looking forward to the bottle of Chablis waiting for her in the fridge. Three glasses was usually all it took to blot out the past and have the required soporific effect.

She carelessly wheeled her case over the mail, having noted it was mainly brown envelopes and nothing from Carl.

She bent down and collected up the letters. The impersonal marketing shots could go straight in the bin and the bills would have to wait. A flier with the headline, 'No wind farms in West Wight' took her interest. She picked it up, revealing a small, rectangular plastic card. It was obviously some clever piece of advertising, a mock credit card perhaps to convince people to want one. For a moment, she was back at work, pitching smart ideas to clients. For a moment, she felt good, like her old self. Then, she examined it closely.

It was an Oyster card.

## Chapter three

[London 2011]

Chopping shallots always made Sandra cry. Smaller than onions but more potent, they got her every time. She dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a piece of kitchen towel before referring back to the recipe book propped open on its stand on the vast marble work surface. Dessert, dark chocolate mousse, was prepared and chilling in the fridge. The fillet steak in brandy sauce would be cooked when her three colleagues arrived. She had invited them to dinner by way of thanks for the hours they had put in on a successful pitch. It was a big win for the agency, securing her yet another pay rise. She glanced at the clock, seven thirty. They were due at eight.

The cast-iron pan was heating on the hob. As she poured in a thin stream of olive oil, she heard Carl's key in the door and smiled to herself.

'Hi love. You're late. Good day?' she asked, her back to him, slicing vegetables with her Sabatier knife.

Chop, chop.

'How was college?' she persisted.

Chop, chop.

'Carl?' she called, wondering whether she needed to cut up another shallot. No, stick to the recipe, four should be enough.

Chop, chop.

'Just need to sit down,' he replied.

'How did the exam go? Coffee in the pot but if you fancy something stronger, I've just opened a nice bottle of ...'

'Just need to sit down, Mum.'

Chop, chop.

‘Go through to the lounge, love. Relax. I’ll be with you in a sec.’

Chop, chop.

‘Just need to sit down. Just ...’

Chop.

She turned to see her son, c clutching the work surface with both hands, his face ashen. He looked like his insides had been sucked out. She dropped the knife and ran to him.

‘Carl!’

Her arm around his waist, she helped him to a seat.

‘What’s wrong? Are you in pain?’ she asked kneeling beside him.

‘Just need to sit down,’ he repeated, his voice thick, his body distorted and awkward like he was made out of Meccano.

She stroked his cheek gently like she did when he was a child. He turned away. Her fingers were wet.

‘I just left him, Mum.’

‘Who?’

He looked at her, his eyes full of tears. She barely recognised him. Flakes of rusty blood c lung to his straw blond hair.

‘I left him dying in the dirt like a rat. His throat cut. Blood.’

‘Who?’

‘Dunno. Some bloke.’

‘Where?’

He looked up and glared at her. She reached out to touch his arm. The sleeve of his denim jacket was spotted with red.

‘The park.’

‘What? D’you mean the one at the back of us?’

Carl nodded, his eyes closed.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

‘His throat was cut, Mum.’

‘Oh my God,’ said Sandra gently brushing his fringe out of his eyes. Specs of dry blood attached themselves to her fingertips. Horrified, she wiped her hands down her skirt. ‘Are you hurt, darling?’

He shook his head.

‘What happened?’ she said gently.

'I was walking along the path, opposite the skate park when I heard shouting. A bloke had just let his dog off its lead and the thing had gone racing off into the bushes so when I heard screaming, I thought it was attacking someone. I ran in and saw some guy slumped against the wall.'

'And?' she prompted.

'Blood. The slit was like a smile.'

'Did you see anyone else?' she asked anxiously.

Carl looked straight ahead as if he was reliving the moment. He sniffed loudly and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

Turning to pull a square of kitchen paper from the dispenser, she noticed the pan was smoking. Grabbing the handle, she threw the skillet into the sink and turned on the cold tap creating a cloud of smoke. Her eyes stung.

'Did you see anyone else?' she repeated turning off the tap.

'Yes,' said Carl, chewing his lip. 'He was grinning. Smirking, proud of what he'd done.'

Sandra spun round, shaking

'How do you know it was him?'

'He had a knife. He was covered in blood. So much blood. I didn't know that ...'

'Oh my God,' she interrupted, her voice thin and raspy. 'Why didn't he run when he heard you coming?'

'I don't fucking know. Don't ask stupid fucking questions.'

Sandra rocked backwards, shaken by the velocity of his response. She had never heard him swear. Then again he had never witnessed a murder before. Who could say how he should react? Carl lifted his hands to his face, his long slender fingers covering both eyes, pressing hard against the sockets. She could hear him sobbing.

'Carl, I'm so sorry, come on,' she said putting her hand around his shoulders.

Immediately, he pulled away. His face was one big open mouth making him look like a macabre clown. As he spoke, a line of drool, like albumen, swung from his lips.

'I ran away. Your precious fucking son left a dying man. Happy now?' he roared, raising his clenched fists above his head. 'I left him for a fucking jogger to find. There you go, Mum. Bet you're proud now, eh? Still think we're so fucking superior because we live in a big house and I went to a private school? Well do you?'

This wasn't Carl talking. He had witnessed evil, seen one man kill another. It suddenly occurred to her it could have been far worse. A few moments earlier and it could have been Carl lying there, bleeding to death.

'Carl, don't torture yourself, don't dwell on it.'

'You didn't see it. Christ.'

He was right. A terrible image had been indelibly inked on his memory, one of the many things in her son's life she could do nothing about.

As a single parent, she had often felt inadequate. She knew she lacked certain qualities that Carl's father had in spades. He was, when the mood took him, very funny and could make Carl laugh, tricking him out of a tantrum. He could be surprisingly patient too. It crossed her mind to ring him. She had his number somewhere. But what was the point? Somehow, he would make it all her fault. Best keep him out of it.

What Carl had seen had been horrific and unprecedented. She could do nothing to erase the graphic images left behind, let alone salve his torment. At some level, she understood his ordeal had only just begun.

She took out a bottle of Remy Martin and poured him a large glass.

'Here,' she said gently pushing the glass into his hand.

He took a mouthful, his face hidden behind his long blonde hair.

'You phoned the police?' she asked.

Carl looked up, his eyes wired, his tone hard.

'Oh yeah, I stood there, took out my phone and dialled 999, while the bloke cut me too. Of course, I didn't call the fucking police.'

'Sorry, don't worry, I'll ring them,' she said, putting her arm around him again. 'He can't have got far and I daresay the jogger has reported it by now.'

Carl fell against her, gripping her arm. He was hurting her, his fingers pressing into her flesh until they found the bone. She eased away and took his hand in hers.

'Carl, this is very important,' she said slowly and steadily to ensure she held his attention. 'Did the killer see you?'

He nodded and vomited just as the doorbell rang.

That night, two mothers lost their sons.