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**Opening Extract from...**

# Dear Amy

Written by Helen Callaghan

Published by Michael Joseph

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# Dear Amy

HELEN CALLAGHAN

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# Prologue

Katie Browne is packing.

She gropes under her bed, seizing her blue backpack with the faux leather trim and begins stuffing clothes and toiletries into it with frantic energy, her eyes blinded by tears.

There is very little sense or order in this packing, but that's all right, because it is the act of packing and not the objects themselves – the grey and green leggings, the Union Jack make-up bag puffed up to bursting with all of her lip colours, the maroon jersey top with gold stitching that makes her feel so mature and sophisticated – that makes the difference.

Katie is leaving for good this time. She is never coming back. She has had *enough*. She flounces down on the bed, pulling on the pair of shiny red-brown ankle boots that her dad bought her a month ago.

On the window of her little room, the rain taps with increasing insistence, as though urging her to think again.

Nearly tripping over her discarded gym bag with her still damp swimming kit nestling inside, Katie swings the blue backpack over her shoulder, all the while aware of the hateful murmur of the television downstairs in the living room and its chorus of canned laughter. They've turned the volume up but she is sure she can hear hidden whispering, her mum talking to that useless lump Brian about her. As though he had any right to an opinion.

As though *he* was her dad.

She is not staying here. That's for definite. She's not going to be treated like this in her own house, which has now become Brian's house.

Brian, the big lazy sod, sitting there on the couch with his tattooed guns and loose jeans, like a low-rent Essex Buddha, one arm casually slung around her mother; always hogging the remote for the TV. Brian who thinks he can have an opinion on what she wears, where she goes, how late she can stay out.

And her mum just sits there, letting him have his way. 'He works so hard, love. Can you not be a little more respectful?'

Brian can *fuck right off*.

She'll go to her dad. Her *real* dad.

Katie stomps down the stairs while popping her headphones in her ears, but not fast enough to tune out her mother's sharp, 'Where do you think *you* are going?' from behind the closed door of the living room, just before she slams out of the house and walks with brisk purpose down the street.

It's horrible outside. October now, and Cambridge's slow, hazy summer has given way to jet-black nights and sheets of stinging rain, blown at her by a cold wind that whips through her hair and bites the tips of her fingers. Katie pulls up her hood and taps through her phone and Taylor Swift starts singing into her ears; a tiny bright noise.

She strides, nearly running, up the road with its leafy canopy of dark trees, and turns the corner on to Elizabeth Way and its constant roaring traffic.

In her pocket Taylor Swift is displaced by a comedy ringtone – a man declaring, 'DANGER, DANGER, IT'S YOUR MOTHER CALLING!'

With a deft gesture, Katie swipes *Decline* and speeds up. The road is rising as it bridges the dark waters of the winding Cam below. Katie shivers, imagining swimming in it, with its fish and tangling weeds and muddy depths littered with broken bottles and rusted bicycles.

She torments herself with the image of her white foot caught in sharp spokes, thin wisps of blood drifting out of her wounds up to the surface, where she cannot follow them.

With a snap she shakes her head, dropping the horrid dream, returning to the real world of her own clicking heels on the drenched pavement and the approaching and retreating lights of the cars on her right as they roar past her with a hiss of crested water. She gets such morbid, mortifying thoughts sometimes, and she doesn't understand where they come from.

Things were never like this when I was a kid, she thinks. She didn't mind when Brian told her to do things; she never fought with her Mum the way she does now. Back then she was just Katie, who liked to swim and liked to race and liked to win.

It had been enough then. But somehow it wasn't enough any more. Now everything was confusing, and it seemed she was always angry, always stressing out over every little thing . . .

'It's your age, love,' Brian had said once, when she'd made the mistake of mentioning it to him. 'There's nothing you can do. The only way out is forward.'

The phone buzzes once more against her curled fingers in her pocket, and as she takes it out and swipes *Decline* again, she becomes aware of a car pulling up beside her, its red brake lights glowing like hot coals through the rain.

The door swings open, and inside is an older man, with a baseball cap crushed down on his head. He cranes towards her, one muscled, knotty forearm holding the door handle. He is smiling at her, showing all of his teeth, almost as though he's in pain.

She has never seen this person before and she offers him an indignant stare, steps back and moves to walk on.

'Katie Browne? Is that you?' He has to raise his voice as the rain is getting harder.

Her gaze narrows as she pulls out her headphones, which tangle in her damp hair. ‘Yeah. How do you know me?’

It’s an unfriendly answer, and she can see him flinch a little, as though offended.

‘You used to go to the youth club in Hartington Grove. I drove the bus there, don’t you remember?’

She doesn’t. Furthermore, she hasn’t been to that youth club for about two years, since she started at St Hilda’s and began swimming properly, as she no longer has the time.

She shakes her head.

‘No? Well, I remember you.’ He chuckles, and it’s high, almost wheezy. ‘Look, you’re soaked through – can I give you a lift?’

There’s a long moment then as Katie considers. The man clearly knows who she is, and he must be a responsible person if he’s connected to the youth club. It is absolutely pouring now, each new raindrop raising its own tiny corona of water as it hits his car, the asphalt and the railings on the bridge. The sound of it fills everything. His car looks warm and dry.

But what she also considers is that this man could not possibly have spotted who she was with her hood pulled forward as she walked along – he must have passed her in his car, circled back. She considers the fact that his face sparks not the slightest twinge of recognition, and yet he can identify her, deeply hooded, in the midst of a rainstorm at night.

The disconnect between their acquaintances is too much, too alarming, and Katie realizes that however bad it looks or makes him feel, there is no way in the world she is getting in that car with him.

‘Thanks a lot,’ she says, being polite, thinking fast, ‘but I’m only going to the steps. They’re two seconds away.’ She gestures to the other end of the bridge, towards the roundabout. ‘My dad’s waiting for me,’ she adds, and this qualifying titbit, walking out of her mouth,

surprises her – not just the words, but the little quaver of fear that enters her voice on the word ‘waiting’, an unwelcome note they can both hear. ‘I’d only get your car wet.’

Something twitches in his face again, but then his smile is back. ‘All right, if you’re sure, love. Get out of the rain soon!’

He proffers her a friendly wave with his free hand and the car door slams shut. Within seconds he has pulled smoothly away, without looking back.

Her sense of relief is extraordinary, and she considers for a second abandoning her escape, returning home, slipping up the stairs to her bedroom and facing the storm when it comes.

She calls her dad, wanting him to come and get her. After two rings she is switched to voicemail, his recorded greeting chirpy yet impersonal.

Her coat and hood are now sopping with rain.

She tries to shake the feeling that this side-lining of her call is deliberate, in the same way that she is snubbing her mother’s calls. She would admit to herself, if pushed, that the reason she never phoned him before setting out is that he would almost certainly try to persuade her not to come over.

Her dad is always telling her that he will ‘be there for her, no matter what’, and yet whenever she actually *needs* something, like for him to turn up and watch her swim in a gala, or stand up to Brian, or, say, pick her up in the pouring rain after she’s had an encounter with some creepy man, the call goes straight to voicemail.

Her cheeks burn and she ignores them.

Now that she’s reached the bottom of the steps of the pedestrian exit, she starts to consider her situation more calmly. She is in a warren of residential streets near the river, outside a closed beauty shop.

Katie pauses under the awning, wondering whether to try again or simply abandon the whole venture, when she hears steps: someone



walking along Abbey Road, with heavy boots and a brisk, rolling gait, a person hidden by the intervening wall.

She thrusts the phone back in her pocket and waits for whoever it is to pass by her, but the steps just stop – there is no sign of anyone when she finally abandons the shelter of the beauty shop’s porch and returns to the street, and she guesses that they must have turned into one of the houses nearby.

Well, whoever they were, they aren’t here now, and she needs to get a move on. She has a plan.

Just beneath Elizabeth Way and along the riverbank there is a footbridge – just a few minutes’ walk from here. She can re-cross the river there and make her way along the well-known streets back home. No car can follow her over it, and anything would be better than waiting here.

Young as she is, Katie knows that the suggestion of decamping to her dad’s house when there’s a crisis is like throwing a match onto the petrol of her mum’s insecurity. That’s why it was a great plan when Katie was furious and wanted to hurt her mum, but not so good when, like now, she’s exhausted, a little scared and soaked to the bone.

If she can sneak up to her room before they see the backpack she can just say that she went out for a walk to clear her head. There would still be a bloody awful row, but not as bad as it could be.

She heaves her wet rucksack over her shoulder – everything in it must be damp, what a stupid night this has been, she thinks. That bloody Brian, he lives to wind me up – and sets off under the overpass, the river gurgling and pattering placidly on her right, the huge concrete pillars on her left. Above her head, cars roar.

The well-lit tracery of the footbridge is visible just ahead and she smiles slightly to herself. She will go home and get dry and, once they’ve stopped shouting at her, she’ll get into bed and stream some

rubbish TV to her laptop. In fact, her mother might even decide not to continue their fight, but instead take pity on her bedraggled state and make her a mug of hot chocolate and some toast to enjoy in front of the telly – it's been known to happen before. Katie knows that their rows make her mum feel horribly guilty, but she never understands why.

This fantasy pleases her as she trudges along the rails on the side of the river, so it takes her a second or two to work out that someone is walking up behind her – someone in heavy boots walking quickly, too quickly.

She jerks around, but not fast enough, and there is the shocking intimacy of arms – strong, knotty arms – snaking around her waist, her neck, forcing her head back, a big rough hand covering her mouth.

'Ah, Katie,' he whispers, and his breath is hot against her chilled cheek as she tries to scream, to struggle. 'I think we got off on the wrong foot there.'

# 1

I've always had this thing about magpies. They're meant to be unlucky if you see one on its own, but they always give me this sudden burst of optimism whenever I catch sight of one perched on grass or rusted railings, in its tuxedo of feathers and cocking its head at all comers. I admire self-possession in the animal kingdom.

One of them was watching me from the chestnut branches as I left my own portion of the animal kingdom, namely St Hilda's Academy, where self-possession isn't as highly a sought virtue as self-restraint. I was in the school car park under its leafy canopy of trees, loading my bulky bag into my little red Audi A3 convertible. I was highly strung and restless, or at least more so than usual, casting my glance at the bag containing all of the day's collected essays which were threatening to spill out of the top.

So much for my weekend.

I got into the car alongside the offending bag and shut the door.

On the dashboard lay a copy of the *Cambridge Examiner*, which I hadn't had time to read yet. I thumbed idly through it. PUBLIC ENQUIRY ENDS IN SEMI-RIOT shared the front page with RESIDENTS PROTEST ONE WAY SCHEME. Within were the little boxes of print naming the damned souls caught trying to pilfer tinned veg and pairs of tights from the local supermarket, or breathlessly describing acts of low-impact, mundane vandalism, alongside a photo of a gloomy pensioner shaking his head at youth's folly and the world's wickedness.

There was nothing in there about Katie Browne. There had been nothing for a week.

I was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Somewhere between the letters complaining about the failure of parents to control their children in restaurants, and the feature on Cambridge fifty years ago (it appeared to be the same seething, overheated one-horse town as now – the horse in question was posed in the photo on Magdalene Bridge sporting a floral collar and looking glum and disappointed with its lot), was ‘Dear Amy’, the column I write. In it I presume to advise the lovelorn and wits-ended.

I met the *Examiner’s* editor through his fifteen-year-old son Conor. Conor was in my English class, but having trouble concentrating on my lessons – on everyone’s lessons, to be honest. He was acting up and distracting the others, and starting to display an uncharacteristic but growing anger. The editor, Iain, was constantly being summoned to speak to the Head of Year about this, with his new wife in tow; a pale brunette with a triangular face who was about ten years his junior. Whenever I ran into her she clearly, judging from her expression, thought she might have bitten off more than she could chew in terms of the whole blended family thing, and the received wisdom, even amongst the kids, was that this was the root of Conor’s defiant truculence.

But for some reason, I had a funny feeling about Conor.

After a disastrous double lesson during which he threw a pen at me and kicked over his chair (in the genteel atmosphere of St Hilda’s, this latter act was received like the burning of the Reichstag – the kids were literally paralysed with shock), I finally tackled him in my tiny office – not about his new stepmother, but about his best friend Sammy, who sat beside him and had giggled surreptitiously throughout his antics.

And after some prodding it all came out, like uncorked champagne – he had feelings for Sammy, feelings he couldn't explain, not ever, and he didn't know what to do, and I must understand, no one could know. Sammy would never speak to him again. He would be destroyed.

I could have wept at his confusion and panic.

'I'll never tell a soul,' I said. 'But if you aren't going to talk to Sammy about your feelings . . . ?'

'Never.'

' . . . and I can see why you wouldn't, you're going to have to come up with some way of living through this. You can't get yourself expelled just because of unresolved sexual tension.'

He regarded me mournfully, rubbing his hands through his untidy red hair like a caricature of worry, while I sorted him out with some counselling switchboards outside the school.

'Ring them. They understand how you feel. You're still very young and these things are confusing, but the more you talk, the less scary it will all become. In the meantime, I'll thank you to attend to your lessons and we'll overlook the thrown pen for now. And we'll say nothing to your parents. Understood?'

'Yes.'

The editor, Iain, was soon amazed at the change in him. He rang me up late at night, having got my number from Conor, and pitched the idea of an advice column to me on trial – he was looking for someone to run it. That was last year, and *Dear Amy* is still going strong.

As for Conor, he doesn't hang around with Sammy as much any more, and when we meet in corridors or pass in the grounds, his eyes always light up and he gives me a cheerful, approving little nod, as though I passed the trial, and not he. Whatever is going on in his life, I am no longer worried for him.

I had deliberately put the paper there to remind me that I needed to call by the offices and pick up the rest of Dear Amy's caseload for the week. There's an email address for Dear Amy, but many people still believe the anonymity of the Internet is little better than a ruse and opt for snail mail. I might pull a face sometimes, but in truth I enjoy the work – it feels useful and does a good job of challenging all my assumptions on a weekly basis.

I nearly ran over a few of my pupils on the way to the *Examiner* offices as they stepped off the kerb during a spot of horseplay on the Fen Causeway, not one of them paying attention to the traffic. I swerved hard and my brakes squealed. Three boys with identical artfully messy hairstyles turned, startled, to offer me obscene gestures before recognizing me and then lapsing into comical shock. I swept past them, honking, aware I should be pulling over, giving them a piece of my mind, but also aware that no one in the crushed traffic behind would thank me. Justice would have to wait to be served.

'You daft muppets,' I muttered to myself, reaching over the passenger seat to adjust my bag, which had nearly spilled its contents into the footwell during these death-defying manoeuvres. I glared into my rear-view mirror. 'You were nearly roadkill, Mr Aaron Jones.'

My hand on the steering wheel was trembling. I stared at it in surprise, as though it belonged to somebody else. The almost-accident must have shaken me more than I realized.

I have an ambivalent attitude to children. They drive me mad; I can't stay away from them and miss them horribly when they're not in my life. Some time after we got married I learned that I couldn't have children myself, and my husband Eddy suggested that I quit teaching and perhaps take private adult students for Greek and Latin. I tried it. Two months later I went for the job at St Hilda's, as an alternative to smashing all of our crockery and jumping off the nearest railway bridge.

It's the only job I do well.

And as Eddy has since ran off with his boss, it's just as well I have something to occupy me full time and put food on the table.

When I reached the *Examiner* offices the staff were just leaving. This is always the case, even if I arrive early, or at eight o'clock at night. Wendy was clearing her expensive little phone and a just-washed mug bearing a screenprint of her three children off her desk and packing them into her handbag. She gave me a brisk smile.

'Hallo, Margot.' She reached into one of the pigeonholes behind her desk. 'Not so many this week.' She handed me a little bundle of letters tied together with a blue rubber band.

She always says this. I can never quite shake the feeling that she's waiting for me to say, 'No, there isn't, is there? I should just give up,' before leaving and never coming back.

Somehow, and without understanding why, I sense that this would please her.

I pulled the band off the letters and glanced idly through them. One in particular caught my attention. It was addressed simply in capital letters: 'DEAR AMY, THE CAMBRIDGE EXAMINER, CAMBRIDGE'.

A strong but childish hand had written the address. The 'o's were very round and the loops regular, almost fussily so.

On an impulse I tore it open. Tucked inside was a piece of crumpled, sweaty paper. Wendy put her coat on, pretending to be oblivious. She was waiting, not very patiently, for me to give some clue as to what it is I'd been sent. I didn't, of course. I never do.

I had a cold presentiment as I unfolded the letter. Before I'd even read them the words screamed 'Haste!' and 'Panic!' at me. Wendy came to my side, ready to leave, and I quickly folded it up, having only got as far as 'Dear Amy', and shoved it into the pocket of my jacket.

‘Anything interesting?’ she asked.

‘No, no – can barely read it, to be honest,’ I lied. I decided to head the inquiry off by changing the subject. ‘I see there’s been nothing in the paper about Katie for a while.’

‘Who?’ She clearly had no idea who I was talking about.

‘Katie Browne,’ I said, trying to keep my voice even. ‘The missing girl.’

Her mouth opened wide in exaggerated apology. ‘Oh, of course, yes, sorry. She was one of yours, wasn’t she?’

‘She was in my class two years ago.’

Wendy sighed. ‘It’s a worry, isn’t it? When they run off like that.’

‘If she ran off. That remains to be proven.’

‘Well,’ said Wendy, her eyes sliding sideways to the door, ‘the police have been talking to Iain – they seem to think she’s run off. They’ve talked to her family and friends, and I’m sure they’d know best.’ She patted my arm gingerly. I suspect I appeared a little intense to her. ‘I mean, you get your letters. You must know that not everything is how it seems in people’s lives.’

I didn’t reply to this rather obvious statement. I was well aware of what the police thought, and what Wendy thought. One of the investigative team had visited the school the day before yesterday and told us that Katie had been unhappy at home for a while – something I had already suspected.

But I couldn’t shake the feeling that whether she’d been unhappy or not, something about her disappearance felt wrong.

I had a memory of arrogant yet guarded dark eyes raking me from the back of the class; long brown hair drawn up into a ponytail.

‘I’m locking up now.’ Wendy jangled the keys.

‘I’m ready.’ I felt a bit light-headed. Perhaps almost mowing down those three delinquents was still bothering me. An evening spent



worrying about having their names called out at tomorrow's assembly would do them all good.

We walked in silence to the car park. My feet were numb with cold inside the thin leather of my boots. There was an icy wind blowing, tingling like needles thrown against my exposed cheek. It was winter again, but funnily enough, I don't mind. I prefer it to summer.

We said our goodbyes and parted. Wendy and I must make an effort to be civil to one another, as we are mutually aware that without it our lack of affinity would quickly blossom into dislike. Wendy is fussy, smug and nosy, and I . . . well, I'm how I am. I don't envy her children once they get a little older. I was glad to see her go.

The evening was already drawing in, amazing me by how dark it had grown so early. It always catches me off guard at this time of year, a constant revisiting of annual surprise. Sometimes I feel like a goldfish, with the glass walls of my bowl providing a continuous source of novel amazement each time I swim around them.

Once safe in the car I drew the letter out of my pocket and leant back.

*Dear Amy,*

*Please please PLEASE help me! I have been kidnapped by a strange man and he's holding me prisoner in this cellar. He says I can never go home. I don't know where I am or what to do and nobody knows I'm here.*

*I don't even know how long I've been gone, but it seems like forever. I'm afraid that people will stop looking for me. I'm afraid he'll kill me.*

*Please help me soon,*

*Bethan Avery*

There was nothing else except for the panicked, childish handwriting. No return address or clue as to where it had come from.

There was a postmark on the envelope declaring it was mailed in Cambridge yesterday, but that was all the help I was getting.

‘This is a prank,’ I said aloud, but my voice quavered, and I didn’t really believe it. Occasionally I get some very shocking letters, nothing more than extremely nasty sexual fantasies seeking some kind of release from the subconscious void their creators imprison them in. I’d rather they were released via the post than any other way, but there was something about this letter that got to me.

Other thoughts were brewing in my mind too. Thoughts about Katie Browne, the girl who went missing, who vanished with nothing but a small bag of clothes. She was a scholarship girl, a county-level swimmer from one of the council estates in Cambridge, and had never been genuinely happy in the rarefied atmosphere of St Hilda’s. I could sympathize.

Frankly, I was very worried for Katie Browne.

As for my letter, it was easy enough to sort out. I started up my car and headed for the police station. If there’s no Bethan Avery reported missing, then I hope the sod that wrote this is enjoying the belly laugh they’ve had at my expense.

‘What are you doing here?’ I demanded, surprised.

My not-quite-ex-husband was standing on the front doorstep, leaning against the door when I arrived home with the early darkness and mist. In his slim-fitting dark suit and neat small collar he looked like a particularly stylish missionary, or perhaps an urban vampire summoned out of the fog. Something about his posture appeared studied, composed for my benefit.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

Eddy’s full lips compressed. ‘You said you wanted to talk about the settlement.’

I sighed, exhausted, as I walked past him to the front door and turned the key. ‘Haven’t you heard of calling first?’

‘Your phone was off.’

I had been telling Eddy that we needed to talk about the division of the household, of our shared lives, for weeks now. I had noted each morning as I came down the stairs that he had not yet made any moves to redirect his post. That he’d shown up at all to discuss the mediation was an excellent sign, though of course he hadn’t bothered to ask first. It was still a point of principle for him that this was his house too.

I see it all rather differently. I came into this marriage with this house, which I had bought as little more than a run-down shell when I first moved to Cambridge, and thriftily renovated over the course of seven years; each improvement, each upgrade, was a reflection of my own internal home improvement, my recovery. I sat in its dusty, bare living room on the threadbare sofa the owners bequeathed with it, and dreamed of the house’s better days. I chose each of the paints – striking violets, subtle lemons, warm greys – and applied them to the walls and trimmings with the sort of passionate focus usually associated with Great Masters in their ateliers, each night looking over my shoulder at the clock and realizing with a little patter of shock that it was three, four in the morning, and my arms ached and I had to go to work in five hours’ time. I chose the unfussy dull pewter of the fittings in the bath that I sit in for hours, the spiky light fixtures, the contrasting rugs (the stains seem to choose themselves). I scoured and treated the reclaimed furniture myself, sitting in my varnish-spattered dungarees on the grass in the tiny garden with my cup of tea, admiring the deconstructed pieces drying on their sheets of newspaper – a wooden picnic spread out on my lawn.

It was partly my determined independence in this, and in other things, that attracted Eddy to me in the first place. Not that he is big on DIY. He uses his hands for other things, as it turns out.

‘Come in,’ I called over my shoulder, just to establish who was in whose territory, though as I did, I felt a little shiver of superstition – vampires must be invited over the threshold, after all.

I shook it away. Yes, we were strangers now, perhaps we always had been, despite our best efforts, and it felt very painful, as though emotions, like body parts, could be sprained or dislocated. On the other hand, we should at least be able to have a civil discussion about practical matters without mauling one another any further.

We went into the kitchen, and within seconds were blinking in the glare of the overhead fluorescents. Outside, the wind was drumming impatiently on the windows. I rubbed my eyes and stretched, hearing my bones click.

‘Coffee?’ I asked.

He nodded and I switched on the kettle, throwing my coat over the back of a chair.

‘Bad day?’ he asked.

‘Huh?’ I asked, fishing two mugs out of the cupboard.

‘Did you have a bad day?’

‘School was the same. I almost ran down some of the kids on the way to the *Examiner*.’

‘Hit any?’

‘Um, no.’

‘Just kidding.’ He shot me a look. ‘And you’re well?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘I mean, in yourself.’

‘I know perfectly well what you mean,’ I replied precisely, closing the topic off.

I spooned ground coffee into the scratched cafetière, aware that of the two of us, I was being the difficult one. I hadn't even returned his query and asked about his day at work, nor would I, considering the reasons we were getting divorced.

But I could concede something; make conversation.

'I made a big prat of myself at the police station, though,' I muttered.

'You went to the police station over it? Did their parents . . . ?'

'No, not about the kids,' I said. 'I got a letter today at the *Examiner*.' Suddenly I didn't want to tell Eddy about this – I was asking to be patronized – but it was too late now. I stood up and walked over to the window.

'What kind of a letter?'

Behind me, I could hear him foraging through the fridge for milk – he took his coffee white. Outside, the fog drifted over the hedges, veiling the surrounding houses.

'I wouldn't like to get caught out on a night like this,' I said to myself after a moment.

'Are you going to tell me what kind of letter it was?'

'A crank letter,' I said. 'Somebody claiming to be Bethan Avery.'

'Who?'

'Bethan Avery. She was a teenager who was kidnapped and presumed murdered in the nineties.'

Eddy blinked and squinted, as though consulting some lost vault of memory. 'Bethan Avery . . . I know that name. She was from around here.' There was a pause. 'I remember it being in the local papers. So you thought this letter was real, did you?'

I offered an acceding shrug. 'I thought it might be.'

'Huh. That's pretty sick. Why did you take it to the police? I wouldn't have thought there was anything they could do.'

I stood by the kettle, which was now happily gouting steam into the air. ‘I wanted to check it against the missing persons,’ I said, and immediately regretted it.

Eddy laughed. ‘Bet they found that pretty funny.’

‘They did,’ I said coldly. Eddy’s laughter hitched, paused. ‘I personally don’t understand the cause for hilarity.’

‘Oh come off it, Margot.’

‘I just don’t. If this kind of thing was less amusing to them, perhaps they’d have found out what happened to Katie Browne.’

In the interests of prudence, Eddy didn’t reply. Privately, he too thought that Katie had fled her humdrum life for the bright lights of the M25.

‘You wouldn’t remember it being on the news anyway,’ he said after a few moments, trying to be diplomatic. ‘You would have been living in London then.’

But still, for a sudden freezing moment I felt like I hated him. In the drawing darkness I had turned the letter over and over, long after I knew its cry by heart. I’d imagined being torn away from your friends and home, shoved into a dark little prison, raped, battered, murdered, your dismembered limbs cast into the dark depths of a swiftly moving river – first the splash, then the ripple, then nothing, ever again, Or perhaps, by the light of the moon, your murderer had stood over the pit containing your poor, pale remains, shovelling wet worm-infested earth over them. Months, maybe years, later, the bones might be found, to be held, worn and weathered, in plastic-gloved hands; to be pieced together like a jigsaw, with scientists breathing through masks as they wash the mud out of crevices in shins and skull, before wrapping them in rubber sheets and labelling them with numbers.

Heaven save us all from rape and murder and the anonymity of ignominious unmarked graves, which the weather beats uncaringly.

Though all of that was hardly Eddy's fault.

I set the mug in front of him on the table with a wry smile of concession. I had a sudden memory of him pushing me up against this table. There had been no words, just fumbling and heavy breathing and damp hot skin and nothing else but us in the world. Afterwards we'd realized we'd left the blinds open. Anyone could have seen us, we giggled to one another, thrilled at our own reckless daring.

'And you a convent girl,' he had murmured into my hair. 'You wicked minx.'

Of course, there's a hedge and a low wall separating the house from the street, so no one could have seen us, unless they'd been lurking on our front lawn, actively looking through the windows. You'd be lucky to get a mobile signal in this part of the village, never mind an audience. But it had pleased us both to think of ourselves as flagrant strutting libertines. At least at the time.

'One of your magpies was in the front yard when I got here,' he grunted after awhile. 'It must have been waiting for you.'

I softened slightly, spared him a smile. 'Yeah. It's there a lot.'

Somehow we moved into the living room, which was not part of my plan – the living room, with its squashy, overstuffed sofa and multitudinous brightly coloured cushions was a place where he had always made me feel happy, safe and comforted. Many were the times I had curled up against his chest here, as we watched absurd TV together. Remembering this made my throat swell unhappily and my heart ache with cold. It was no place for this new Eddy who was now comforting somebody else. But somehow, as he accepted the mug, and moved off towards the hall as we had done so many times before, I couldn't find a way to prevent it, as though habit were a riptide, pulling us both along, and to object now would seem ill-humoured, a little mean.

I was trying to be civilized, after all.

The couch sank to accept us. Eddy drank his coffee, made expert small talk that didn't touch on the subject of his new *inamorata*, his job, or the mediation arrangements. It was as though nothing remotely strange or strained was happening. I could not have done better in his shoes. It was like a dance, and he led. I had no idea how to steer matters back on course, so decided to wait for an opening, my back against the armrest, between a rock and a hard place. Who knew when I would get him back here again, and in such a good mood?

I hugged my empty mug to my chest.

'Have you eaten?' he asked.

'Who, me? No.'

'We could call for a takeaway,' he said, kicking off his shoes, and for an instant it was like it had always been, me sitting on the couch, watching him perform this ritual every time he came in from work. 'The Mai Thai delivers on a Friday. Are you in the mood for steamed sea bass?'

And yet not how it had always been.

'Won't Arabella be missing you?' I asked.

He shrugged, as if this was of no matter. 'Well, as you say, we need to talk.'

I glanced at the antique wall clock, a wedding present from my friend Lily. It was nearly quarter to eight.

Lily had never liked him.

'Sure,' I said.

'Good girl,' he said complacently, flashing me that full-lipped grin, those brilliant teeth. 'And I've got a bottle of Sancerre in my case to go with it.'

So sea bass with lemongrass and Sancerre followed, and Eddy and I did indeed manage to talk about the financial settlement, though



I was left with the disquieting impression that he didn't actually say all that much. Clearly the fair thing to do was for each of us to keep what we had owned before we met – me the house; he his po-faced 'loft apartment' in Hills Road, where he had held court in bachelor princedom before our marriage. Each to our own – our own cars, our own furniture. We could come to some arrangement about the things we had bought together – which over a little less than three years did not amount to very much.

He regarded me with those wide grey eyes, nodding, and I was encouraged by the lack of opposition (then again, why should he object?) but now that I thought about it, I could not recall any actual agreement.

'So what do you think about that?' I asked him. I felt flushed and oddly relaxed – we are going to get through this, I thought. We are going to negotiate this like grown-ups, and maybe, perhaps in time . . .

'I think we need more wine.'

'That's a given,' I said wryly. 'But what do you think about the plan for mediation?'

He glanced into his glass, offered it a tiny smile and put it on the table.

'I think, why are we talking about this now?' he said, turning that smile on me. 'I thought the rule was that after ten we didn't discuss business.'

Lily's wall clock said it was ten o'clock exactly.

'That rule was for work, not business,' I murmured, unaccountably blushing. 'And it applied when we were still married.' I drew back into my corner of the couch.

But he was leaning forward, his arm snaking up the sofa towards me.

'Margot,' he said, in that sultry golden voice of his, 'we *are* still married.'

I opened my mouth to object, to draw away, but his lips were on mine, and he tasted so good, so sweet, and I'd been so lonely. I was opening up to him, letting his arms meet around my back, feeling his hard chest and tight belly against me, and I was shaking, I wanted him so badly, I . . .

I . . .

What the hell was I doing?

I pushed him away. 'No.'

He rocked back, clearly surprised, as I ducked out from under him and rolled straight to my stockinged feet.

'I think you need to leave.' I folded my arms tightly across my chest.

'Margot,' he pushed his blond hair out of his eyes, as though stunned at my changeability. 'What's the matter?'

I was trembling, the floor shaking beneath my feet.

'You left me for another woman and now you're here on a booty call, that's what the matter is.' I rubbed at my face, which now felt cold and damp, like the rest of me – drained and humiliated. 'How dare you? How fucking dare you?'

'I didn't see you objecting . . .'

'Pay attention, Eddy. This is me objecting. This is me objecting *right now*.' I flung out my arm and pointed to the door. 'You sleazy bastard. Put your shoes on and get the fuck out.'

Something flashed in his face then, a series of emotions at war with desire. Should he be conciliatory, apologetic? Should he feign ignorance of what had offended me? Should he be cheeky, seductive? But mostly he wanted to be angry that I had exposed him, and that was what won out.

'You're mental, Margot. You're crazy.'

'Get out!' I bellowed. My own shame was vanishing now, consumed by a very real anger, a furious rage. 'Get out of my house and don't come back!'