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Keep You Close

Written by Lucie Whitehouse

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keep you close

'Masterful ... An addictive
psychological thriller'

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before
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WHITEHOUSE

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Prologue

Before she opens the door – before she even sets foot on the drive – she is on her guard. She knows he’s there, he’d told her he would be, and yet the house is dark. If he’d left for any reason, he would have texted – *Gone to buy wine. Back in ten* – but when she checks her phone, there’s no message.

The moon slips between a gap in the clouds, sending a momentary gleam across the house’s blind eyes. It is still early, not even seven, but with the emptiness of the street, the absence of any human-made sound, it feels like the small hours. The only movement comes from the wind shivering the leaves on the evergreens, rattling the thin branches of the willow that bows its head on the drive.

She glances over her shoulder then crunches across the gravel and up the steps to the front door. The carriage lamp is off so she locates her keys in her bag by touch.

A strange pressure on the door makes it harder than usual to open, as if someone is pushing against it from the other side. When she turns to close it behind her, a gust of wind seems to come from within the house and slams it shut. In the silence, the sound is violent.

She is not imagining it: the wind *is* coming from inside the house. There must be a window open but where? Not at the front, she would have noticed. But why would he open a window at all? It’s below freezing outside.

Something's happened. As soon as she thinks it, she knows she's right.

'Hello?'

She puts on the light and the hallway materialises around her. The draught, she realises, is coming down the stairs. She stands at the bottom and calls up but again there's no answer. The sitting-room door is open and she slaps the light on, goes quickly to the fireplace and picks up the poker.

When she reaches the landing, fear forms a fist in her stomach. The cold air is coming from the very top floor. The studio. She climbs the final set of stairs with her pulse thrumming in her temples.

In the glow of the moon she sees the chaos of sketches strewn across the worktable and the floor. When she sees the open skylight, the stepladder underneath, the poker drops to the floor with a heavy clang. She is almost sick with fear but a break-in, even an intruder, is not what frightens her now.

As she starts to climb the ladder, her hands are shaking.

He is waiting for her at the top, perspective making him a colossus, his feet planted wide. The wind snatches at the sheet of paper in his hands but she doesn't need to see it to know what it is. She has lost him forever; that is clear – his face is closed. Hard. Vengeful.

The paper buckles and cracks, wind-whipped. There is nothing she wouldn't do, literally nothing, for it to be torn from his hands and erased from his memory. To go back even one day.

Behind him is the roof-edge. She can feel its power, the force field it exerts, the weird push-and-pull. It's so raw, unprotected – a four-storey fall, death almost guaranteed. He sees her looking and steps to one side.

'Do it,' he says.

One

The parcel of fish and chips was warm under Rowan's arm as she agitated the key in the lock. 'Come on.' She pulled the key out then jammed it in again just as the automatic light timed out and plunged the hallway into darkness. At the same moment, she heard the first shrill note of her ringtone.

'Christ's sake.' Leaving the key in the lock, she pulled the phone from her pocket. Its screen was a bright rectangle in the dark. A London number but she didn't recognise it. 'Yes?' Impatience made her brusque.

'Rowan?'

She hadn't heard it in years – a decade – but she knew the voice immediately. The sound of it was otherworldly, seeming to reach through time as well as space, light from a distant star. Her heart gave a beat like a punch in the sternum. It was a moment before she could speak.

'Jacqueline?'

'Yes. Yes, it is. Oh, I'm so glad I've got you – thank God. I didn't know if you'd still be on this number – you weren't on her phone. I've found an old address book but most of the stuff in here's useless – everyone's moved and changed number or . . .'

'I haven't.' Rowan's stomach clenched and, despite the cold, there was suddenly sweat on her forehead. Something had happened to Marianne. 'How are you? How—'

A low keening sound came wheezing down the line, a single corrosive note. It went on and on, only for five or six seconds in reality, but to Rowan it felt like forever. She knew that sound, how time stretched around it, became irrelevant, a joke. The aching, hollowed-out kind of loss that could never be made better.

‘I’m . . . heart-broken,’ Jacqueline said, as if she understood the true meaning of the word for the first time. Then, after a pause, ‘Marianne’s dead, Rowan.’ The sound again, its eerie, awful note. ‘She came off the roof into the garden. Her neck . . .’

A momentary flash, the floor giving way underfoot, and the horrifying image of a body in freefall.

Jacqueline was talking and crying at the same time. ‘It was Sunday night, in the snow, but she wasn’t found until Monday morning. She was out there all night in the dark. She was soaking – freezing cold. Her skin – Rowan, they told me her fingers were frozen. I can’t stand thinking about it but I can’t stop—’ She broke off and started sobbing desperately.

Marianne’s hands – the long fingers with the nails she’d kept short for her work, always stained with ink or paint. Her hands – frozen, white. Lifeless. Rowan closed her eyes as pain and horror swept through her.

In the dark hallway, the sound of Jacqueline’s sobs was harrowing, too much to bear. Rowan put out a hand and ran it up and down the wall’s cold flank. Where the hell was the light button? She was on the brink of tears herself now, grief threatening to bubble up and overwhelm her. She took a deep breath but her voice shook as she said, ‘Came off – do you mean, she . . . slipped?’

A hard swallow at the other end, an audible attempt at control. ‘The police said it was an accident. She used to go up there for cigarettes when she was working – you remember, don’t you?’

I remember everything. ‘She was still doing that?’

‘In the snow, the roof would have been slippery and . . . she slipped,’ said Jacqueline, and to her horror, Rowan understood that she was telling herself, too. ‘But no one saw her. No one can tell us what actually happened. After Seb died . . . I used to worry – I banned her from going up there – you remember?’

‘Yes. Yes, I do.’ Rowan’s skin was prickling, cold running down her back. ‘Jacqueline, there’s no chance she could have . . .?’ She couldn’t say the words. ‘She didn’t . . .? I mean, did it ever come back? The depression.’

‘No. I don’t think so. She’d have told me, wouldn’t she? She wouldn’t have tried to hide it? But I don’t know – unless she thought it would hurt me.’ A gulp. ‘As if anything could hurt as much as this.’

‘There wasn’t anything going on that might have upset her? Brought it back?’

‘No. Everything was going so well. Her work – she’s got a show coming up in New York, a solo exhibition . . .’ Jacqueline stopped talking and for a moment there was silence on the line.

Rowan heard footsteps outside and then the rattle of keys against the front door. Before she could compose herself, the door swung open and the fox-faced man from the ground-floor flat slapped the light on. Blinking, she raised a hand, as if it were completely to be expected that she would be standing here in the dark. She felt his eyes on her back as she gripped the key in the lock and forced it. At last, the door yawned open, revealing the steep flight of stairs immediately on the other side.

‘Jacqueline,’ she said, but the back of her throat was dry; she coughed, tried to swallow. ‘I’m so, so sorry. What can I do? I’m still in London, just south of the river – if there’s anything you need, anything at all, will you tell me?’ She reached the top of the stairs and carried the fish and chips to the kitchen where she dropped them straight in the bin. ‘I’m

studying at the moment, I'm a student, so I'm around, I'm flexible.'

'Thank you.' There was another pause. When she spoke again, Jacqueline's voice had an edge that Rowan could only remember hearing once before, that dreadful night in the kitchen. 'I had a call this morning,' she said.

Rowan felt a cold hand come to rest on the back of her neck. 'A call?'

'From some poisonous little cretin at the *Mail*. He wanted my "reaction". *My reaction*. Can you imagine?' The horrible keening wheeze again, twisted with laughter. 'What did he *think* my reaction was going to be?'

'My God, that's . . . monstrous.'

'It's not just the *Mail* – they're all here. I'm surrounded.'

'What?'

'Men with cameras – just like old times, sitting across the street in their cars. Waiting. I hate them,' she said savagely. 'I want to fetch Ad's old cricket bat from under the stairs and get out there and batter them, crack their heads open. I would – if it weren't for him, I'd do it. Can't you see it? A picture of me on the front page of the *Mail*, all pig-eyed and wild. *Bereaved Mother of Sex-scandal Artist Hits Out*.' The laughter became bleak sobbing.

'Jacqueline . . .' But what could she say? What would make the slightest difference?

'It's all right.' With an effort, she brought the crying under control. 'It'll die down when they realise there's no fresh meat. They'll just rehash the old stories and move on. But if they *do* track you down, could you . . . ?'

'I wouldn't dream of speaking to them.'

'Thank you.' Real relief in her voice. 'Rowan, look, I know you and Marianne had lost touch with each other but you were such an important part of her life – and not just hers, all our lives.'

'I loved her – all of you.'

‘Please come to the funeral. It feels right for you to be there. It’ll be next week, Thursday, at the crematorium in Oxford. We’d all like it if you were there. We . . .’ She stopped talking as she realised. ‘Adam and I would, I mean. Both of us. We’ve missed you. I told Marianne that she should get in touch with you again, that with proper friends, it doesn’t matter if you have a stupid row and lose touch, however long it goes on.’

‘It was my fault, too. I should have . . .’ But what? What could she have done that she didn’t?

Rowan stood phone in hand as the news reverberated through her body. *Dead*. She felt the grief coming closer and closer, gathering, and then it broke over her, a wave of despair. She took the few steps to the sofa, swept the books onto the floor and lay down, curling in on herself as if she were being beaten, blows raining on her head and back. Marianne was dead. Gone beyond contact forever. She would never see her or speak to her again.

She cried silently, as if the sadness were too powerful for sound. It was a physical, muscular thing: her back ached, her mouth stretched open until her cheeks hurt. She was shocked by the depth of it: she’d lost Marianne as a friend years ago; surely, after all this time, she couldn’t really have thought they would make things up, be close again. Now she knew that part of her *had* still hoped, had nursed the idea that one year, perhaps, there would be a Christmas card with a tentative note. But now the possibility was gone forever. This was it, the full stop. The decree absolute. And to announce it – the irony – her first contact with the Glass family for ten years.

When the tears stopped, she sat up. She felt raw, hollowed out, and when she stood, she caught sight of her swollen eyes in the cheap sixties mirror above the fireplace. Her skin looked sallow and her hair was dark at the roots, its winter colour. It

had reached the length, a couple of inches below her shoulders, at which its weight killed any volume; she would have to have it cut before the funeral. She wondered if Jacqueline and Adam would think she'd changed. She doubted it: she hadn't really. Her face was still round and unlined, never arresting and elegant as Marianne's had been even at sixteen, but pretty in a safe, old-fashioned way she'd never particularly liked, like a girl in a Victorian soap advert.

She went to the window and raised the blind, releasing a wall of cold air that had worked its way in around the rotten sash the landlord was too mean to replace. The wind was harring light-stained clouds across the rooftops, rattling the topmost branches of the cherry tree that had been the reason she'd taken the flat. It had been a riot of flirty blossom when the agent had shown her round. 'Like frilly pink knickers at the *Folies Bergères*,' she'd said and the woman had looked at her as if she were mad.

Across the road, blue light flickered behind the curtains of the old woman who stood at her door each morning and berated her luckless Jack Russell in a language that Rowan had never been able to identify. The street was deserted.

The snow that had fallen here on Sunday had been gone by Monday morning, ploughed up and ruined even as it was coming down, leaving everything sodden and muddy, litter and dead leaves plastered to the pavement. She pictured the garden at Fyfield Road: the lawn white over; the wide stone steps to the patio padded and pillowy; the branches of the silver birch like lace against a creamy sky. The image was crisp and clean as winter light, and Rowan felt a burst of pure longing that she quickly suppressed. The snow at Fyfield Road hadn't been perfect. It had been lethal.

Now she made herself examine the thing that had struck her the moment she heard it: the story didn't make sense, not, at least, the version that Jacqueline wanted to believe. Marianne couldn't have slipped. She had vertigo, paralysing

vertigo: she never went near the edge of the roof, not within twenty feet of it. Not once in all the countless times they'd been up there had she ever moved – inched – more than three feet away from the safety of the hatch. Not once.

With a crack, Rowan yanked the blind shut. Her heart beat against her ribs as she left the front room and went down the narrow landing, feeling the usual rush of cold as she opened her bedroom door. Stooping, she moved her hand gently through the darkness until she touched the hessian shade of the bedside lamp. Down on her knees on the old rag rug, she cast around beneath the bed until her fingertips found the glossy cardboard box. She paused then pulled it out into the light.

For a minute she looked but didn't touch. Originally it had held printing paper, the expensive ivory stuff she'd bought at Ryman's in her final year at university when she started thinking about job applications. In August last year, when she'd split up with Anders and packed the car, she'd chocked it carefully next to her on the passenger seat, within arm's reach, but she couldn't remember how long it had been since she'd opened it. Over the years, it seemed to have become heavier, and it had power now, a presence. Hearing the pulse of blood in her ears, she had the idea that it wasn't her heart that was beating but the box's: *open, open, open.*

'Marianne's dead, Rowan.'

Quickly she picked up the box and turned it over. The Sellotape was yellowing, and when she tried to peel it off, little dry shards of it stabbed the tender flesh under her thumbnail. There was a small *whoomph* of suction as she lifted the lid.

On top was a wad of tissue to hold the contents in place. Immediately underneath, fingers curling towards its palm, was a hand – her hand: the short round nails, the pronounced vein over the knuckle of her index finger, the teardrop scar on her thumb that she'd had since the age of five when, Mrs Roberts' attention focused on one of her afternoon chat

shows, no doubt, Rowan had put her fist through the glass in the kitchen door. The drawing was black and white, just ink on a page torn from a spiral-bound sketchbook, but it had energy, reality: it brought the hand to life. Even someone who'd never seen an artist's work before would have known this was good. No, not good – exceptional.

Her hand rested, palm up, on a single line that ended in a whorl like the top of a fiddlehead fern: the arm of that button-back chair. Into Rowan's head came a vivid snatch of memory. A Saturday morning in late May or the first week in June, the air already warm at nine o'clock. Marianne wore a red-and-white striped Breton T-shirt and her denim dungarees; her hair was in a knot on the top of her head. Green Flash tennis shoes grungy with age; no socks. The chair had been standing on the pavement outside a house in Observatory Street. It was antique, with lovely arms and ball-and-claw feet, but it had been reupholstered in tarty cherry-red velvet and overstuffed to the point where it looked positively buxom. Marianne had stopped; she'd always had an appreciation of the dissonant.

'How would you describe it?' she asked. It was a game they played all the time, challenging each other: describe that colour; that sky, that man.

'Strikingly incongruous – a lady of the night dragged blinking from the knocking shop into the light of a Christian morning,' Rowan said.

Marianne laughed. 'Exactly.' She put her hand out and stroked the velvet. 'I love it. I want to paint it.'

'Take it,' said a disembodied voice, and they'd turned round to see a man in jeans and a baseball cap standing in the doorway. 'Seriously. It was my aunt's. I've never liked it – that's why I put it out. If you want it, it's yours.'

They'd lugged it back to Fyfield Road, one arm each. The size and heft of it. 'Like trying to carry an old drunk,' Marianne said. It had taken them an hour and a half to go less than a mile and the episode had assumed an epic quality: *Marianne*

and Rowan versus The Chair. There was blood when Marianne cut her finger on a rough piece of wood under the seat, sweat, and tears of hysterical laughter when they'd finally reached the house and Adam, opening the door, said, 'Why didn't you ring? I would have come with the car.'

Suddenly the drawing blurred and Rowan swiped her hand across her eyes. The pain in her chest was intensifying. How could Marianne be dead?

She lifted the drawing out of the box by its edges and laid it in the circle of lamplight on the rug. Underneath was another drawing of her hand, this time holding a Victorian glass etched with swallows in flight, their tails tiny tapering Vs. In the next, her palms were pressed together as if she were praying; in the one underneath that, she was holding an old paperback *Heart of Darkness*.

Altogether, she had seven sketches of her hands but, over the years, Marianne must have drawn forty or fifty in pencil and charcoal, pen and ink, some done quickly, impromptu, on the back of an envelope; some carefully posed and laboured over. That was how she worked: she drew things again and again and again until she was satisfied, until what was on the paper reflected her mental conception in every detail. Also in the box were several drawings each of an intricate silver vinaigrette that had come down through Seb's side of the family; of a plate of blemished windfalls; and then of the grey-striped cat that used to climb over the wall from the Dawsons' place. Jacqueline was allergic but Marianne had let it into the kitchen one afternoon and it made a beeline for the sofa where her mother liked to read.

'Read?' Marianne's voice all of a sudden, deep, dust-dry and as immediate as if she were sitting on the bed, released from the box along with the pictures. 'Nap, you mean. Let's have some honesty here.'

Rowan felt herself smile and her eyes filled with tears. She caught them quickly with her cuff before they could fall and

damage the sketch. For the first time, it occurred to her that, quite apart from their personal significance, the drawings might be valuable. Even the paintings in Marianne's first exhibition had gone for several thousand pounds each and she was almost unknown then. And now, of course, there was a finite amount of her work: that would have a huge effect on prices.

So far all the drawings had been A4-sized or smaller – here was a holly-leaf skeleton on pale blue Basildon Bond note-paper, its tracery of veins cobweb-fine – but towards the bottom of the box was a thick piece of paper folded several times. Rowan opened it gently and laid it out on the bed; at its full extent, it was perhaps five feet long.

There she was, drawn in charcoal, her nineteen-year-old self, naked. She was sitting on a kitchen stool, facing away, bare heels hooked over the upper rung, head bowed so that her face was hidden from view, her hair tied up, because Marianne wanted to study the 'machinery', as she'd called it, of her neck and back: the muscle, the round ball of bone at the top of her spine, the twin tendons where her neck met her shoulders. Her scapulae were sharply delineated, their edges shadowed with hatching. Had she weighed less then? She looked at her neck and thought how narrow it was, how vulnerable.

Her neck.

The drawing had been made late in the year, maybe already December, and just before they'd started, while they'd been eating lunch at the kitchen table, a cloudburst had strafed the garden with hail. The house was cold; the space heater had to be on for half an hour before Marianne's room was warm enough for Rowan to undress.

The drawing had taken the whole afternoon and, eyes fixed on the floor, Rowan had watched her tripod shadow deepen and stretch like a spill of viscous ink in the fading winter light. Marianne worked without talking, the silence broken only by

the low whirr of the heater and the scuff of her feet as she shifted position at the easel. Whenever the heater cut out, which was often, Rowan could hear the scratch of charcoal on paper and Marianne's breathing. She'd synchronised her own so they breathed together, in and out, in and out, and it had become a meditation. Her mind had emptied but she'd become hyper-aware of her body: the tiny hairs on her arms that stood up just before the heater clicked back in, the straightness of her spine, the tendons in her feet tensed against the curve of the rung. Time became fluid, she imagined it eddying around the legs of the stool, and then she'd had the idea that what they were doing was creating someone else, a third person in the space between them: the image that Marianne was making on the paper using her own brain and eyes, and Rowan's body.

Kneeling on the rug now, Rowan bent her head until her forehead touched the sketch. The pain in her chest had spread to her stomach. She sat up and traced a finger down the charcoal line of her back, over the curve of her haunch, the rounded square of a shoulder. Marianne's hand had been here, brushing the paper as she drew the lines to make this other person, the shadow Rowan who would be nineteen and her friend forever.

She sat back on her heels. However valuable they were, she wouldn't sell the sketches unless it was literally a case of starving otherwise.

And even if she were starving, there was one she would never let go. It was still in the box, the last one, wrapped in several layers of tissue of its own and carefully Sellotaped. She lifted it out gently. Like the others, it was featherweight, just a single sheet of paper torn from a sketchbook, but resting it between her hands, Rowan could feel how solid it was, how heavy. She turned it over and examined the old tape but there was no need to undo it and look at the drawing inside. It was enough just to know it was there.

dizzying. Like the box of sketches, the envelope pulsed with energy. Once, as a small child, she'd stood at the feet of a pylon and heard the electricity humming overhead. Alive. Deadly.

Now, a decade later, the day after Jacqueline's phone call – it couldn't be a coincidence.

Rowan hesitated a second longer then snatched up the envelope as if someone from the other flat might lunge out from their doorway and grab it. She held it pressed against her chest as she unlocked her door then, turning awkwardly on the bottom step, locked it again from the inside and flicked the catch on the deadbolt.

If she'd had cigarettes in the house, she would have smoked them. Instead, she poured a glass of wine and drank it like medicine as she paced the short distance between the kitchen sink and the sitting-room window. The bass coming up through the floor felt like a heartbeat now. Either Placebo or Muse: pounding, anxious music.

The envelope was on the table, a magnet whose poles reversed constantly, pulling then repelling her. She wanted to open it but the idea made her nauseous.

Marianne's handwriting – broadly spaced letters; risers and descenders that spiked and plunged like the trace on a heart monitor. Extraordinary to see it again after so long, like getting mail from a different life. At university, they'd written; the letters had shuttled back and forth between them, Oxford to London, every few days. They'd texted and emailed, too, of course, but the letters were different, long and discursive, written late at night, as if, without ever saying so, they'd been continuing the conversations they used to have up in Marianne's room when the lights went out and they lay in their beds in the dark. Rowan had looked for this writing for ten years, every day at first, and then, protecting herself

from disappointment, less and less often until she'd let herself hope only around certain key dates: Christmas, New Year, their birthdays. The anniversary.

And that it was *this* address; that told her something, too. That Marianne had known to write to her here could mean only one thing, realistically: that she'd got Rowan's Christmas card and opened it. Saved it. Despite everything, the thought made her heart swell.

The envelope was postmarked five days ago – Marianne had posted it the day before she died. Five days. Had it taken that long to make it the sixty miles from Oxford or had it been downstairs before today? She'd been back late every evening this week; she hadn't once collected the post directly from the mat. Perhaps it had been in the pile and she just hadn't seen it. Perhaps the people downstairs had picked it up with their mail by mistake. Marianne had died in the evening – it might have been sitting on a kitchen worktop in the flat downstairs as she fell from the roof at Fyfield Road.

Rowan took a swig of wine and picked it up. Hands trembling, she tore it open and pulled out a matching cream postcard with the same black writing.

I need to talk to you.

Nothing else, no signature, not even an *M*, but there didn't need to be. Blindly, Rowan pulled out a chair and sat down. She stared and the words started to pulse on the paper, their edges blurring then straightening, blurring again.

Why? What had happened? Because something had – this eliminated any doubt.

She stood up quickly, nearly knocking over the chair, and ran the few feet to the sink where she threw up the wine and what little remained of her lunch. As she straightened up, the film of sweat on her forehead turned cold.

After all this time, she'd begun to believe that it could stay buried. With each year that went by, she'd imagined it sinking deeper and deeper, new earth settling on top, making it

harder and harder to uncover. Now she could see that she had been naïve. What Marianne had done was only buried, not gone. It had been there all the time, lying dormant, waiting for the moment when it would stir, stretch and break out into the light.