Secrets will always resurface

BLACKWATER

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Chapter 1

Zoe

The first thing I knew, I was buried. I woke up and there was the forest, the trees all around, and there was soil over me and this plastic thing – a tarpaulin. It was over my mouth, and I couldn't breathe. There was dirt on my face. I clawed at it – the air, I needed air— until I felt the cold night touch my skin and I could breathe. I was alone. The sound of tyres in the distance, driving away. In my head, the space where memories should be, it was like a blank white space. I didn't know how I'd got there. I reached for my name and found it. Zoe Ashton. That was my name. *Zoe*. I clung to it like a branch when you're drowning.

I don't know how long I walked around in the forest. I had on these strange clothes, a big sweatshirt and jeans that didn't fit. Like a man's clothes. I found my way onto the road, and there were cars roaring past. Someone beeped at me. I didn't know where I was, or how I got there or anything about myself. It was like....when I was a kid, like I was seven or so, I had my tonsils out and they gave me an anaesthetic. It was like I'd been... switched off. Like a light. Memories were blooming in the blank of my head, confusing, bursts of colour and sound. The last thing I could remember before the forest was getting ready to go out. It was summer. Bright till after ten. Time must have passed but I didn't understand how. I kept walking, even though I felt dizzy and strange, and after a while, I found myself somewhere I recognised. There was a bridge, and a bus stop, and a sign that said Blackwater. A river, very full, rushing past. Blackwater. The name sank into my head like a stone in water. I knew this place. I was home.

It should have made me feel better, but it didn't. When I went past the bus stop, I had this memory — like a déjà vu of walking past it another time, only then I was drunk and I grabbed onto the glass side of it so I didn't fall, and my head hurt. When was that? Now, I put up my hand to my head and it came away sticky. There was blood on me. What was going on?

I started feeling scared then, or even more scared, so I ran. Except I couldn't. At school I was on the cross-country team but now I couldn't make my legs work. I was...weak somehow. The town looked different. Like some shops had shut and new ones had opened, and there were lots just empty, with white paint smeared on their windows. It looked poor.

Depressing. Before I even knew it I was standing outside's Dad's office.

Ashton Building Supplies. But it was closed too, all boarded up, the sign peeling off. I remembered a morning, Dad going off to work, same as always. Mum there at the table, saying *Zoe you have to eat something*. It felt like a long time ago. I started to run again, panting. There weren't many people about, because the shops were shut, but the pubs and takeaways were open. I banged into one man holding a bag of chips and he shouted at me, watch where you're going love. And I was so afraid. I had to get home. Find Mum and Dad, and this would all make sense.

I ran down our road, limping a bit. My ankle hurt but I didn't remember why. I found our house and was so grateful I could have cried. Home. No lights on — was it later than I thought? I ran up the front path and realised I didn't have my key, I had nothing in my pockets at all. Where was my handbag, my phone? Mum would kill me if I'd lost it. I banged on the door, already thinking what I'd say to them, how I'd explain what had happened.

I'd say, Mum, Dad, I woke up in the forest and I don't know where I've been. I banged and banged for ages, shouting, 'Mum! Dad! It's me, Zoe!' But there was no answer. I went round the back of the house but same thing there. All the lights were off and the curtains weren't pulled. Mum always pulled them – she hated people 'looking in at us'. In the end I got a rock from the garden –the grass wasn't cut either, it was as high as my knee – and knocked the window in. I hoped I wouldn't get in trouble. I don't know what else I could have done. Inside, the place was dirty and dusty and all the furniture was gone. Spaces on the walls where we used to have framed pictures. Me, Mum, Dad. Our family of three. I went up the stairs to my room. All my stuff was still there. The bed, the wardrobe, all my makeup and posters and shoes. A thick fur of dust on everything. On my mirror were pictures of me and Danny, arms round each other.

It all kind of got to me then. I was so tired, and I hurt all over. I looked in the dusty mirror and saw....well, it was me, but it wasn't. I was *old*. Lines on my face. Some grey in my hair even. I didn't recognise myself. It was like a bad dream. I was so scared, but instead I ran out of the room, down the stairs. I was shouting like a madwoman. *Mum! Dad!* I ran out the front door, to the neighbours, banging on their door, never even thinking what time it was.

Mr and Mrs Smith were our neighbours. They were getting on a bit, but they'd know me. They'd help. But the woman who opened the door was young, about thirty, and she had a baby over her shoulder. She was in her pyjamas and she looked tired and cross. I stepped back. 'Wh-where's Mrs Smith?'

She just stared at me. 'We bought the place five years ago. Who are you?' My head was swimming.

I almost shouted at her. 'The people next door. Where did they go?'
She called over her shoulder – 'Gary?' Then she looked back at me
and said quickly –'She moved to England. After what happened.
He's....well, he got taken away a few months back. Place is going to ruin
since. It's bringing down the value of the whole street!'

And she closed the door in my face. I didn't know what to do – my mum and dad were gone – and what was Mum doing in England! Had they split up? What was wrong with Dad? I banged on the door again. 'Please! Help me!' But she shouted back, 'I've called the police!'

What was happening to me?

Steve

I was the one who found Zoe Ashton. I pulled her from the River Black, ten years back. It was three days after she disappeared on a night out in town, and we'd been searching everywhere for her. Hoping for the best but knowing that every day it was getting more and more unlikely. That night I was driving past the river, about seven o'clock. It was a sunny evening. The water almost looked nice—you know how normally it's so black and freezing, dark as a killer's heart. That night it was gold, shining. There were some kids on the riverbank, drinking, up to no good, but I heard through my windows that they were screaming about something. Not messing screaming. Proper screaming. I stopped the car and got out. 'There's a body,' they were shouting. 'In the water.'

I should have waited, I know. Called in a dive team, done things properly. But I just bucked the jacket off me and went in. Of course I thought it might be her. I suppose I'd some idea she could still be alive. It was freezing in the river. Hurt me all over and deep down into my lungs, so I almost sank to the bottom with the shock. I swam to the weir gate, and

sure enough there was something caught in it. I saw the white face, the arms like drowned branches. I saw the blonde hair trailing like weeds, the sparkle of her dress, like fish scales in the water. It was her.

It was a closed casket at her funeral. Too much damage to the face. But then, ten years later, I get this call from a young couple. They bought the house next door to the Ashtons' place, a few years back. Said there was this girl claiming to be Zoe. I sent a patrol car to pick her up — they said she fought them, tried to lock herself in the house, but in the end they brought her in. She sat there in the interview room shaking like a leaf, saying she woke up buried in the forest and she couldn't remember anything, and was it really 2018? Like a joke, like people do in films about time travel. Last thing she remembered it was ten years back, or so she said. I didn't know what to do at first. Thought she was one of the mental health cases we get.

When I asked her name, she said it. 'I'm Zoe Ashton, my mum's Katrina and my dad's Mark, we live at 64 Yew Street, except they're not there.' Then she blinked. 'Steve!' Like she was just recognising me. 'Holy God, Steve, it's me, Zoe!' Well, that was it for me. I try to be kind, but some people just take the piss, waste our time. The bad old days may be over but there's plenty in this town still think the peelers deserve whatever they get.

So I snapped at her. 'Stop lying! You're not Zoe.'

She went pale. 'Steve! Please, you have to help me. I don't know where Mum and Dad have gone – where are they?'

I got up and went to my desk – I wasn't supposed to leave her by herself, but I was angry by then. I got the framed article about me finding the body, marched back in. They gave me a commendation for bravery, you see. Well, she turned even paler then and I thought she was going to faint. 'I don't understand,' she said.

I said to her, 'Zoe Ashton is dead and buried these years – I saw her body go in the ground. So who the hell are you?'

'Call my uncle,' she said. 'Phil Ashton. He works with you. Ask him to come, he'll know me!' I almost laughed at that. I was meant to call up DCI Phil Ashton, retired, and tell him his dead niece was sitting in my station? Then she said: 'Call Danny. She'll recognise me. Please, Steve!' I had to try hard not to lose my temper at that. It was a small town; most people would know that my sister had been Zoe's best friend. But that didn't mean I was biased or I messed up the case. Paul Morris did his time, didn't he?

I told her I'd go and make the calls. It was a weekday; not much happening in town, not since the Forum closed and two of the pubs went under. I looked at her through the two-way window and she was shivering. She looked awful. Skinny and pale and her hair all ragged. Men's clothes. You hear stories, don't you? Women turning up after decades. Locked cellars. Sheds in the garden, innocent-looking. And she had a look of Zoe, the same blonde hair. But I'd seen Zoe dead. I'd pulled her body out, wet and heavy. Phil Ashton identified her himself. I couldn't ring him and put him through all that again.

So instead I went out to see Loretta, the desk sergeant. Like me, she's been in the same job these years, but unlike me, she never wanted to go upwards. I asked her to ring the mental health team, all the while thinking: Zoe Ashton, after all this time. When they came I walked the girl out, nice and gentle – maybe she didn't know what she was saying – and when we got to the car park and she saw the ambulance she gave me this look like I'd betrayed her, and she ran. I was left stood there like a dope, the paramedics cooling their heels, and I said to myself there'll be a hell of a lot of paperwork if this girl ends up doing herself, or someone else, an injury.

But when I went back inside, I found myself thinking about Zoe's grave, and the body in the river that day, and most of all this: what the hell were we going to do about Paul Morris if word of this got out? Because if a dead girl was back and saying she wasn't dead at all, what did that mean for the man who went to prison for her murder?

Chapter 2

Paul

'My name's Paul, and I'm a murderer.' That's what we had to say, at the start of our stupid meetings. Me and the other ex-prisoners, the ones who'd done terrible things, killed or raped or hurt. Ruined lives. Ruined people.

I didn't kill Zoe Ashton. I said that when they arrested me and when they sent me to prison, and I was still saying it now I was out and I had to go those meetings to teach me to manage my anger. Sitting in a cold church hall with a load of murderers and abusers. They said I was full of anger, that it made me snap and kill Zoe Ashton, a girl I didn't even know. Maybe she turned me down, they said. Maybe I just wanted to hurt her. The mad thing was, I was stuck with those stupid probation conditions until I 'expressed remorse', but how could I be sorry when I didn't do anything?

Some wise guy once said you can prove anything with facts. The facts about me and Zoe Ashton were this. We went to the same school, yeah. But she was in the year below me, and I'd only started there a few years before, when me and Mum moved to this shithole Irish town. Before that we lived in Liverpool. A real city. A place where not having white skin doesn't mean people stare at you crossing the street. Yeah, probably I met Zoe out and about in town. Zoe was popular, I know. he was netball captain, in the school plays, probably would have been head girl if she hadn't died. The papers called her a golden girl.

That's fact one. Fact two: the last time Zoe Ashton was seen alive, she was at the Forum club, where my band, Live Wire, were playing. When they found her body in the river three days later, she still had the ticket from it in her jacket pocket. That's how they knew it was her, at first. So

yeah, we were in the same place that night, but do you know how many people were too? It was the last night of school for the summer. Everyone was off their heads, me included. I never saw her there, or if I did, I was too pissed to remember.

Fact three: Zoe Ashton and myself were both on Blackwater bridge at 1.47am that night. The security camera from a passing bus showed it, though I've no memory of it myself. There's me by the bus shelter, heaving my guts up over the bridge. I was meant to be on that bus going home. Then there's a girl in a sparkly dress, wobbling over the bridge towards me. They showed the video in court during my trial.

Fact four. When they came and arrested me – three days later, the day her body was found in the river – they tested the jacket I had on me that night and found some of Zoe's blood on it. Only a spot. But enough.

Fact five. When they took my wallet, they found a ten-pound note in it from a batch that Zoe's dad had taken out of the bank that same day to pay his workers. He ran a building company, before everything. He gave the tenner to Zoe on her way out the door. So she'd get home safe.

Fact six. They found Zoe's Nokia phone by the river, near where her body was. It had last been called from my phone number, and also from some payphones in town. No one ever came forward to say the calls were from them, but the other number, that was mine for sure.

I couldn't explain facts four, five or six. I'd never been able to, even though I had ten years in prison to think it over, sitting in a cell listening to men shout and scream and worse. But I didn't do it. You'd know, wouldn't you? If you killed a girl? They said I must have taken her from the bridge, after the bus went by. Dragged her down to the river bank. Hit her with a rock, maybe, then thrown her in.

Every night, I was meant to go to the police station and sign in. Prove I'd not absconded or broken my probation, be a good boy so they didn't send me back to prison. I was heading to the station after my anger meeting - I hated those things, the tea in the plastic cups and the stale biscuits they bought cheap in Poundland, the heaters that never worked so we all sat round in our coats, watching Kevin, the trainer, write stuff on the whiteboard. There was all sorts in the group. A woman who smothered her baby. A man who murdered three people with the RA. And me. That black kid who killed poor wee Zoe. Niece of DCI Phil Ashton, who ran this town back then, and believe me that didn't help me one bit.

Anyway, there was me trudging through the cold streets of the town, thinking about Kevin telling me I had to engage with the group more or they might send me back inside, and as I headed into the station car park, the dark bit by the trees, someone ran clean into me. Then she stepped out of the shadows and I saw it was this girl, with straggly blonde hair. I didn't recognise her at first. She struggled with me. She seemed terrified. 'Let me go,' she said, 'they're after me!' I thought she was some madzer. Then I saw her face in the streetlight, and it was a face I knew better than my own, though I hardly knew her at all before I was arrested. A face on all the news reports I read in my cell, trying to work out how this happened to me. But it couldn't be her. She was dead. I blurted out, 'Who are you?'

And she said a name that made my head swim. 'I'm Zoe Ashton. But they won't believe me! They think I'm dead!'

'I know,' I said. 'I'm Paul Morris. I'm the one who killed you.'

Well, I didn't know what to do. She was babbling, crying, saying her parents were gone and the police wouldn't believe she was her, that Steve Bramall tried to have her sent away. So I took her home with me.

Ten minutes later she was sitting in my Ma's living room. Shivering, her jumper pulled down over her hands. Scared, eyes darting round the room. She asked me three times was the door locked. I couldn't get my head round it. She said she woke up earlier that night in the forest – it sounded like someone had buried her, but she couldn't remember anything. Nothing at all since that night in 2008. There was blood on her head, under the hair, but she wouldn't let me help her. She said the last thing she remembered was going out that night, the one she went missing, being out at the Forum. 'It was your band,' she said, like she was remembering. 'I know you now. You were at my school. But I don't understand. We hardly knew each other. They said you killed me?'

'That's about right.'

'But...I'm not dead. I'm here.'

I didn't know what to say to that.

Then she asked the question I should have thought of sooner, if I hadn't been in total bloody shock. If she wasn't dead, then who was that buried in her grave? Who did Steve Bramall pull out of the river Black, ten years ago?

Phil

The first I knew of it was when Steve Bramall rang. He's still a DS at the local station, though he could have reasonably expected to be in charge at his age. What happened to Zoe, Paul Morris's assault claim, it broke him. Broke all of us.

I thought about Zoe most days. On bad ones, I got down the photo albums and looked at the pictures of her as a wee girl. Katrina. Mark, my brother. Jackie. All gone now. Steve was embarrassed to be ringing, I could tell. Some nutcase saying she was Zoe, after all this time. I didn't know what to say for a long time. All I could think was: not now. Please, not now.

Though when would have been a good time for the whole rotten mess to surface, I don't know.

Here's what I remember about that night. I was round at Mark and Katrina's. Mark's my brother. Younger by eight years. I always looked out for him. Or so I thought, before all this. I guess I was just kidding myself, about a lot of things. My wife Jackie, God rest her, stayed at home. We were having a barbecue, since it was a nice night – Midsummer's Eve, longest day of the year – and we drank a wee bit too much, I suppose. About eight, Zoe comes thundering down the stairs in some piece of cloth she calls a dress, on her way out for the night, and I tell her to give her old uncle a kiss. Katrina comes out to take a picture and I go to get in it with her, but Trina orders me away. I was a bit put out by that, I'll admit. Zoe posed for it, rolling her eyes then snapping into a smile, then her and Trina got in some fight about what time Zoe had to be home, and she stomped out, slamming the door. That picture, the one Trina took, was the one she gave to the police when Zoe didn't come home that night. She's smiling, in a denim jacket and sparkly dress, her blonde hair round her face. Happy.

I suppose I see why Trina didn't want a picture of the two of us. Still, it hurt. When Zoe went, the rest of us carried on drinking, and the next time I saw her, she was dead. It was me identified the body. Worst day of my life. It was three days after she went missing, and I was at the morgue with Mark and Trina. Mark was drunk again, I could tell. He'd passed out the night of the barbecue. He didn't even know Zoe hadn't come home. If she'd been mine, I'd not have slept a wink till she was in and safe in bed. Jackie and myself never had any weans. Just never happened. Anyway, we were at the morgue, and they came out to say they were ready for us. Trina turned to me and her face was white, her eyes red. 'Phil. Will you do it. I can't.'

And of course I couldn't say no. I was a police officer most of my life. It used to be me took people in to see their dead loved ones, asked them to really look, to make sure. Most of the time our brains can't take it in. They say it's not them, it can't be. But usually it is. This time it was me going in, down the corridor with the smell of bleach and death, looking through the window with the plastic curtains and there she was. So small on the table. Just a wee dead girl, blonde hair, sparkly dress, face battered by the rocks in the river.

When I came back out Trina started crying. 'Tell me it isn't her, Phil.' I said nothing, and she screamed in my arms, and I thought she was going to fall to the ground. I saw Mark looking at me over her head. Maybe he always knew, or at least suspected. We never talked about it. I gave him money, and he took it, and we never discussed the reasons why.

That was ten years ago. Jackie was already bad and getting worse, though it took me a while to see it. I'd lose her too a few years later. People will tell you stories about it, what happened to Jackie, but we don't know for sure. It could have been an accident. It was dark, and she maybe didn't see she was on the train tracks. That's what I tell myself, anyway. Then Trina moved away, over to England, started up her charity for parents with murdered kids. Trying to wring some good out of it all. Mark, he went further and further into the bottle. Lost the business, would have lost the house only I still paid the mortgage. I don't know why. The last place we saw Zoe, I suppose. And then this girl, saying she was Zoe. I didn't know what to think. What would I say to Trina? I'd have to ring her in London. And she'd say, how can that be, Phil, when you identified her body and we buried her? And I'd have to tell her there was a way, just maybe. A small chance this could be true. I'd have to tell her everything I didn't tell her ten years ago.

Chapter 3

Danny

I'd just got Darcy to bed and come downstairs when Nathan told me our Steve had rung. 'Why didn't you get me?' I said. Steve's my brother, after all; usually he'd want to talk to me.

Nathan said nothing for a moment. 'He was asking about Zoe.'

'Zoe?' It was a long time since I'd heard anyone say her name. I thought about her, of course, all the time, but she'd been gone for so long. 'What about?'

'About that night. What I was doing. What you were doing. I think we should talk before we go back to him. Make sure we're – on the same page.'

I stood in the doorway. He was sitting at the kitchen table and I saw he'd poured himself a whiskey. He never drinks on weeknights. 'Why now?' I said. Zoe was dead. Paul Morris served his time, he was already out of prison. Why would Steve be asking about Zoe?

I looked at my husband, his head bowed at the table. Make sure we're on the same page —it was the same thing he'd said to me ten years ago. 'What's going on, Nathan?' I said. He didn't answer me. He just took another drink of his whiskey.

Here's what I remember about that night. I was meeting Zoe at the Forum – it was the last night of school, we were going to have fun. My ma and da were pretty strict, you see. Da's a minister and they're, well, they believe certain things. They thought Zoe was a bad influence, because her ma and da were soft. I told mine I was staying at Zoe's to revise for exams, and they believed it somehow – I was a good liar then. I'd had to be. So that night

we were in the club, hanging out, dancing. Paul Morris's band were playing. The lead singer, Nash, he's pretty famous now. We were having fun. Drinking, sure, but everyone was. The fella who owned the Forum used to let you in so long as you had your provisional licence, see. So I didn't really understand why Zoe lost it when I said I was leaving.

'You're going to see *him*,' she said. 'I can't believe this, Danny.' Yes, Zoe was my best friend. But friends fight sometimes. And Zoe and me had been fighting a lot those past few months.

The problem was Nathan. I was already seeing him at that point, though we couldn't tell anybody. Zoe didn't approve. She knew I could only ever meet him if Ma and Da thought I was with her, but she still gave me a hard time about it. That night she lost the rag because she couldn't go home without me, since I was meant to be sleeping over there, so she'd have to stay in the club by herself. I didn't see what the big deal was. Loads of people from school were at the club— it took the police weeks to collect everyone's statements. For months afterwards everyone talked about it. I saw her go out the door. I saw her with Paul Morris. I saw her get into a car. Most of it was rubbish — people just liked the drama, or they thought they remembered, but they didn't.

Anyway, I went off to meet Nathan, and it was so hard in those days, seeing him every day but having to pretend we weren't a couple. He told me it wouldn't be forever, just until I left school. After what happened to Zoe things went faster. We got married the day I turned eighteen. That night, the night Zoe disappeared, Nathan and me had a fight, and I ran out of his flat. Went back to the club, but Zoe had already left, so I had to go home to mine. Ma and Da were asleep, and I sneaked into my room. I thought I'd got away with it.

The next morning, Zoe's mum called Steve to say she'd never come home, and Steve came round. He'd long since moved out of home – he and Da didn't really see eye to eye. And that's when the questions started. When did I last see Zoe? Why hadn't I stayed at hers like I was meant to? I thought they'd catch me on the CCTV from the club, leaving early, but it turned out it was broken, and the only camera they could pick Zoe up on was that one from the bus. Walking over the bridge –back into town. If Zoe had gone home straight from the club, she'd never have crossed the bridge at all. I never understood that, where she was going, or where she was coming back from. Anyway, Paul Morris was on the bus tape too. On the bridge with Zoe, the last time she was seen alive.

I told Steve the truth – that Paul and Zoe were both in the club when I left. I said I'd gone home because everyone was drinking and I didn't want to. It was partly true. The only thing that was different was I left two hours earlier than I said, to go to Nathan's.

Paul Morris went to prison for killing her. I always asked myself - if I hadn't left Zoe, would she still be alive? Would we both have kids now, still be friends here in Blackwater, or would she have left to travel the world, do all the things we talked about in the back row of Maths class? I knew there was no point in thinking like that. But I did, all the same.

I couldn't sleep for ages after Nathan told me about Steve ringing. I waited for him to come up to bed, but he didn't. After a while I went down the stairs and he was at the computer, clicking at something over and over. News sites. I saw him take out his phone. He typed something into it and I heard the whoosh of a text going out. Then a ding of one coming in. When he read it, he put this head in his hands, and made a sort of noise. I thought he was going to cry. I don't know if he ever came to bed; I fell asleep and woke up alone. This morning, when he went to work, I said I'd

drive myself in later, that I had some marking to do - and I checked the computer search history, but it had been wiped. And I asked myself the same question I did back then, the first time he said we had to make sure we were on the same page. What has he not told me?

Zoe

I slept for a long time. W waking up was like digging myself out of the ground again. I woke up breathing in a scream. Some terror in me – I'd slept in, I had to get up and do something, but I didn't know what. I asked myself questions, trying to calm down. Who are you? I'm Zoe Ashton. How old are you? I'm seventeen. But I wasn't seventeen. It was 2018, somehow. I must have been twenty-seven or eight. I'd lost the last decade of my life and I didn't know how. Someone called Theresa May was prime minister. Something Brexit was all over the news. I felt like I'd woken up from a coma. The worst thing was, everyone thought I was dead. I wanted my mum, for her to walk in and tell me it was all a mix-up, they didn't forget me, she'd been waiting for me all this time. But Mum had moved away, I didn't know where Dad was, and they buried me. Or someone, anyway. They sent a guy called Paul to jail for my murder. I remembered Paul a wee bit, from school. He was in a band. The same one we saw that night at the Forum. I didn't think we'd ever said two words to each other. And now I was camping out in his house, hiding from the police, trying to work out what you were supposed to do when you were alive but nobody believed you. When everyone thought you were a murder victim.

I decided that the first thing I had to do was find Mum and Dad.

Mum was in London, apparently, and Dad was maybe in a nursing home.

Paul had been keeping up with things all these years, saving any clippings

about the case. She started some kind of charity for parents like her, who've lost a child to murder. Paul showed me a picture in the paper, and I was shocked. She looked so old. She'd stopped doing her hair, and it had gone grey. Paul also told me Auntie Jackie was dead. She got hit by a train, just outside of town. I couldn't understand. When I thought about her, for some reason I got this sick feeling in my stomach. You know like when you have a big night out, and you wake up the next day and you're just sure you did something awful, but you can't think what? I felt like that. But why? Did I know Auntie Jackie was dead? Did I know any of this?

Here's what I remembered. That night, Mum and Dad were having a barbecue. Uncle Phil was there but Auntie Jackie wasn't. I didn't know why. I was going out, to meet Danny at the Forum. Dad gave me some money to get home, hugged me. Mum said my dress was too short.

I wondered where Danny was now.

When I got up, Paul said I could have a bath. I didn't know how long it was since I'd washed, but I had dirt under my nails, and something else. Blood. Someone or something had hit me on the head, and buried me in the woods. It hurt when I undressed. My arms were sore, and my legs and feet chafed from walking back into town. I pulled the baggy grey sweatshirt over my head, and looked at myself in the mirror. I couldn't stop a sound coming out of me. It wasn't just the saggy beige bra, like the kind old ladies buy in Marks and Spencers — a kind I'd never have worn before — it was my stomach too. It was all wrinkly, and there was a scar down the middle of it. It looked like a Caesarean scar. At some point in the last ten years — when I'd been dead, but not dead - did I have a baby?

Trying to remember was like trying to catch one of those dandelion clocks. As kids we thought they'd grant us wishes, but if you grab too hard they slip right through your fingers. What did I remember? Going out the

door, Mum taking the picture. Uncle Phil there. Dad, a bit drunk, slipping me a tenner for a taxi. The Forum with Danny, laughing, dancing. Drinking. Then we had...a row? That's right. She wanted to go and meet...someone. I couldn't remember who, but it was someone she wasn't supposed to see, someone her parents would be angry about. I was raging she left me because.... she was meant to be staying at mine. If I went home without her, Mum and Dad would know and maybe tell her ones. So I had to stay out, by myself. I couldn't remember what I did after that.

I lay in Paul's bath with my hands on this new body I found myself in. Like a suit that didn't fit. If I had a baby, wouldn't I remember? Was it a boy or a girl? How old were they? I couldn't remember anything. Just glimpses, like trying to hang onto a dream. A room with gauze curtains. Going to open them and someone shouting, *Caoimhe*, *get away from there*. I didn't know anyone called Caoimhe – or if I did, I couldn't remember. A van. Looking out at countryside passing by. I remembered feeling afraid. So afraid I couldn't move, and my breath was frozen in my lungs. Why? What was I afraid of – or who?

Mum was gone. Dad was gone. If I couldn't find them, there was only one person I could turn to, and that was Danny. Surely she'd know something. When I got out of the bath, I asked Paul did he remember her and he made a face. 'Danielle Bramall? She testified at my trial.' I couldn't believe it. 'She said she left you at the club because you wanted to get drunk.'

That made no sense to me. It was usually Danny who wanted to drink and stay out. Her parents were so strict. She'd have told them she was staying at mine that night, for the barbecue. They wouldn't have known we were going to the Forum. I needed to see her. 'How can I find her?' I asked Paul. The world seemed to have changed so much. Phones were like

computers now. 'Will we look her up online?' We'd tried that for Mum, but she wasn't on Facebook or any of those sites. Maybe she'd changed her name. She could have re-married for all I know.

'No need,' said Paul. 'I know where she is.'

Chapter 4

Paul

I sat in my living room, thinking: Zoe Ashton's in my house, having a bath. It was mad. The girl I was meant to have killed, hit on the head with a rock or something and thrown in the river, she was here and she was alive.

What did it mean for me, now Zoe Ashton wasn't dead after all? The ten years I'd spent in prison were for nothing? Could I get my life back, have a job, take the uni place I had ten years ago? My life stopped at eighteen. University, gone. The band, moved on without me. Our singer, Nash, he turns up on Jools Holland from time to time. He's doing well. That could have been me. And Mum. Mum who always believed in me, brought me here from inner Liverpool with the gangs and the drugs, looking for a better life. I'll never forget her face in court, when they dragged me down to the cells. She died six months later, they said from her MS, but I know better. It was grief. Shame. Whoever really did kill the girl in Zoe's grave, they killed my mum too. I didn't understand how this could have happened. Did they not check, when they found a body? DNA tests and that? I remembered they tried to say none of my DNA was left on the body because of the river. That I'd put her in there for that reason. The blood on my jacket and the other things, that was enough to get me sent down.

That night, before I went out to the gig at the Forum, I got Mum settled – she was having one of her bad weeks, bed-ridden, so I left her a cheese sandwich. She told me what she always did – be good, don't get into trouble. I wouldn't have thought I could get in trouble, on a night out with my mates in my own hometown. At least, I thought it was my hometown. I'd soon learn they didn't see me as one of them, even after years living there. I thought I was so cool that night. Hair done, jacket on,

packed-out show to play. Today Blackwater, tomorrow the world was what Nash used to say. I was sky-high just on the crowd, the music. Nash was talking sending out demos, taking a year out of uni to make it big. Mum would have killed me, but I believed it that night. I believed I could do anything.

Yeah, I was drunk too. I was eighteen, just finished school, in a band. Course I was drunk. I don't remember getting home. I don't remember seeing Zoe on the bridge. You can see in the bus video that I'm pissed, puking my guts up as she's staggering towards me. And the police had their story for what happened, what I did to her. But ten years on there I was, in my old house that had been so empty and cold since I came back, and the girl I went to prison for murdering was in the bath.

I asked her did she remember anything about the last ten years. She said just bits, like her memories were smashed and she could only see little shards of them. She was afraid, I could see that. She jumped every time a car went by outside, and she kept asking if the door was locked. What had happened to her? How did you live all that time, get an ID or a job, if you were supposed to be dead? Did that mean she'd been tied up in a basement somewhere? I couldn't think what to do. If Steve Bramall — heroic Steve who dived into the river Black and pulled out Zoe's body — if he didn't believe this was her, then he wouldn't believe me. He'd have her put away, and maybe they'd find some way to send me back to jail. We had to prove this was Zoe first. She wanted to go to her friend, Danny — Danielle Bramall - but I said not yet. She testified against me — she might not have believed it either. I didn't trust her. We had to find someone who'd definitely recognise Zoe. Since we didn't know how to contact her mum, her dad seemed the best place to start.

I remembered from the victim impact statement they read at my parole hearing, that Zoe's dad was in some kind of nursing home. He drank himself into a breakdown after she died, lost his business, lost his wife. I kept track of things as best I could when I was inside, always hoping to clear my name one day, and anyway it's a small town. You hear things. He was in some home called Sunny Fields. Sounds awful, doesn't it? When I told Zoe, she just went really still for a minute or so. She did that a lot. It was weird. She said her dad always drank too much, and she knew it and her mum knew it, but they never talked about it. She asked me would I take her there. It was a term of my release that I didn't go anywhere near Zoe's family, but what could I do? I needed to sort this as much as she did. I said yes.

Nursing homes give me the creeps. They always smell like cabbage and death. Like prison. On the way there in the car, Zoe sat so far down in the seat she was practically lying. Her hands were clenched tight every time we stopped at lights. When we got there, we both put our hoods up over our heads, since neither of us was exactly meant to be here —she was dead, and I killed her. They were happy enough to let us in to see him all the same—I guess a nursing home doesn't need much security.

I remembered Zoe's dad from the trial. He was only about forty when she died – or didn't die, I guess. Now he looked seventy. He was sitting in a chair by the window, surrounded by all these old folks. He'd drunk himself away to nothing. I saw men inside like that, who'd gone in hard on the drink or the drugs and looked twice the age they really were. I waited while Zoe went up to her dad, and I saw she was shaking. 'Daddy,' she said, so quiet I could hardly hear her across the room. 'It's me. Zoe. Daddy, I don't know what's going on but I'm not dead, I promise it. I've just been...away. I don't know what happened to me. I think someone took me.'

He didn't say anything for ages, just looked kind of past her. Then he started to scream. It was a noisy enough room, all the babbling of the other people, and the TV going, but everyone went dead quiet. He was screaming, 'You're not Zoe, Zoe's dead! She's dead! It was all his fault!' And I saw he was crying. It was a horrible thing.

There wasn't time to find out what he meant, or who. Everyone was staring, and the supervisor was coming over, a grim look on her face. I grabbed Zoe's arm and we beat it out of there, back to the carpark.

Zoe started to cry too. 'He doesn't know me,' she said. 'My dad doesn't know me and I've no idea how to contact my mum. I'm....alone.'

I said, 'I'm alone too. None of my friends will talk to me and my mum's dead. I guess that makes two of us, then.'

'I guess it does,' she said, and her voice shook. 'Paul I – I'm so sorry. I don't know how any of this happened.' I said it wasn't her fault, but the truth is, how would I have known? I'd no clue what happened on that night ten years ago, and for all I knew, it was her fault somehow. I was just following her to the car, when I saw the very last person I wanted to run into, coming right towards us.

Phil

Where was she, this girl who said she was Zoe? Steve Bramall had lost her, let her run off into the night. He said she'd nothing on her, no phone, no ID, no money. She couldn't have got far. I was asking myself, where would Zoe go, then I realised that was daft. She wasn't Zoe. This was just some mad girl. I couldn't think what to do after Steve's call that night. I even drove round town, looking for a girl with blonde hair. No sign of her, just the cold empty streets of the town, the boarded-up shops and takeaways. In the morning I went out again, and I found myself driving towards Mark's

nursing home. He was my only family left, and I could hardly bear to see him after all I'd done, but I made myself. Atonement, maybe. Same reason I lived on in Blackwater, when there was nothing there for me. People knew me in the streets, and I could see the looks of pity. Everyone knew my brother was a drunk, my niece was murdered, and my wife was.... troubled.

I parked at the nursing home, already feeling that same dread and sickness. Some days I had to sit in the car for ten minutes before I could get up the courage to go in. Mark was barely fifty, he shouldn't be in a place like this. God love him, he didn't know what day it was. He was always a drinker, and things got worse when Zoe was born. He must have known the truth, though he'd never have said. So we all went on, living the lie. Most days he didn't recognise me, or he swore and threw things. He was a state. But I went all the same.

I was walking up the gravel path with the roses on either side - I paid for him to be in a nice place, same way I paid the mortgage on the house—when I saw them. That boy, Paul Morris. The nerve of him to be there. I felt my heart jump, rage sloshing in my veins, and remembered what the wee doctor said last time, her face serious. 'You have to keep calm, Phil. Your heart.' I wanted to tell her to call me DCI Ashton. But nobody did any more, except Steve Bramall. I was ready to go and smack that boy. Then I saw her. The flash of pale blonde hair. The blue eyes that were just like Trina's. She was so white, so frail. It was Zoe. My Zoe. Except it couldn't have been. Zoe was dead.

She saw me at the same time and her face lit up, though I could see she'd been crying. Had she been in to visit Mark? Why would some stranger do that, torment a dead girl's da? She shouted, 'Uncle Phil! It's me! Oh thank God, it's me, I'm back, but no one recognises me, they think I'm dead. Please, will you help me?'

God help me. I stood frozen as she ran up to me. Expecting a hug maybe, after all this time. Her favourite uncle, the one who spoiled her with d presents and sweets hidden up my sleeve. But it couldn't be her. So I backed away. 'Who the hell are you?' I shouted. 'I'll have you arrested! You leave my brother alone! You leave him!' And I legged it back to my car and drove home, breaking the speed limit, and I let myself in and opened the bottle of whiskey that had sat there, seal untouched, for ten years. The last time I touched a drop. The night Zoe died.

It couldn't be her. She was *dead*. But as I sat sitting here, and I don't know how much time went by, I realised I could hear a noise. The phone ringing. And I already knew who'd be on the other end.

Chapter 5

Steve

I didn't sleep a wink that night. Kept seeing the girl, her ratty blonde hair, the eyes that were like Zoe's. *Steve, it's me. Where's Danny?* Telling myself anyone could know about my sister. Finding that the more times I said it, the less I believed it. In the morning I knew I had to go and see Danny. Ask her to tell me the truth. Because didn't I always know she was keeping something back? I'd made calls that night, painful ones. To Nathan, to Phil Ashton. To Zoe's mother in England. She wasn't happy to hear from me, not at all. I said I was sorry, that the girl must need help, but I'd felt she should know. When I hung up, I asked myself why I'd called and upset her, if I thought this was just some crazy girl off the street.

Ashton called the station, terrified. The other lads said Zoe would be at some boy's, or a mate's, but I knew her, you see. She wouldn't have done that. I went round to Ma and Da's - I'd been living by myself since I was eighteen, since we didn't get on. They didn't approve of me being in the police. I went by myself, hoping to keep my sister out of it. Hoping we'd find Zoe safe, just a misunderstanding, brush it all under the carpet. Now as far as the folks knew, Danny was staying at Zoe's that night, but there she was asleep in her own bed at seven in the morning. Da dragged her out. 'You wee slut. What have you been doing?'

Danny was as white as the walls. 'Nothing, daddy,' she said. 'Nothing. I swear it. Zoe was fine when I left her.'

I told her Zoe hadn't come home, and she made this noise. Sort of like a yelp. Like a dog when you step on its tail. She said what happened was, Zoe had been at the club with some fellas from their school. They

were drinking, and Danny didn't want to, but she didn't want to get Zoe in trouble either. So she walked home and snuck into her bed.

I listened to Danny tell her story in front of Ma and Da, and later on when another officer interviewed her down at the station, to make it legit. She was blameless, just trying to help her friend. Except I knew my sister. There was something she couldn't, wouldn't tell me. And I'd let it slide for ten years, because we had our guy in custody. We had Paul Morris with his number on Zoe's phone, her cash in his wallet. No need to dig too deep. Besides, Phil Ashton ran this town back then, and he made it clear I wasn't to look much further, I'd to make sure Paul Morris went to prison and stayed there. And I did, though not without ruining my own career.

I thought Danny would be off to school already, but when I swung by her house, Nathan's car was gone and hers was still there. I was relieved, to be honest. I do my best with him, but the fact is he was my sister's teacher and he married her the second she was eighteen. Hard to believe it didn't start before then. I knew Ma and Da thought so — I that was why they hadn't spoken to Danny in ten years. When I went inside, Danny was on the computer. She was due with their second any day now. She looked surprised to see me. 'What's the matter?'

I thought I'd better just tell her. Even saying it out loud felt mad. 'A girl turned up at the station last night, and she's saying she's Zoe.'

She was quiet a long time. 'How?' was all she said.

'I don't know. She asked about you. Knew who you were.'

'Anyone could know that.' But I could see in Danny's face the same thing I was feeling: doubt.

'Danny. If there's something you didn't tell me, back then – if you thought it didn't matter for some reason – you need to tell me now.'

She bit her lip. I could see how tired she was. 'Steve....' she started. 'You know how Ma and Da are.'

I did.

'That night...I left Zoe there in the club, but it was before I said. Like hours before. I went...somewhere else.'

I took a moment to process. 'Where did you go?'

'To meet someone.'

I understood. 'Nathan?'

She nodded. 'Please don't judge. Not now. Anyway, I left Zoe there, said I'd come back for her, and I did, but when I got there she was gone.'

'Gone where?'

'I don't know!' Her voice broke. 'I thought she'd gone home, and she wasn't answering her phone, so I snuck back into Ma and Da's. I thought I'd make up some lie about coming home early, say I didn't feel well or something. Then you came round and said she was missing.' Danny was crying. 'I'm sorry I lied, Steve. I was scared at first, and then I thought, if I said something, maybe he'd get off. Paul Morris. You always told me trials can collapse for the wee smallest thing.'

It was true. But I couldn't tell how much damage she might have done with that one small lie. That meant Zoe had maybe left the club much earlier than we'd thought. The window we'd been looking at was wrong, all this time. Then I realised what Danny had said. 'You rang her? From your mobile?' We hadn't found any calls from Danny on Zoe's phone. I knew because we'd studied the records in detail – it was a big factor in the case against Paul Morris. The only calls to Zoe's phone that night were from Paul's mobile, and some payphones in town. We hadn't been able to trace who those were made by.

'I don't remember,' she said quickly. 'A payphone, maybe. But how could this be her, Steve? The body....did you not do a DNA test or whatever? Is it even possible?'

I was silent, thinking of the gaps I'd helped to create in this case, the holes we hadn't filled. 'Anything's possible,' I said.

Danny

After school, I was doing bus duty in the freezing cold. I was shouting at the kids by rote – stop running, be careful, don't push – but all I could think about was Nathan. The way he said, we have to be on the same page. The text messages.

Sort of ironic I ended up teaching at our old school. When I was here I did nothing but break the rules, roll my skirt up too high, sneak fags behind the bike sheds. And worse, of course. But time goes by and you change, and now I'm Mrs Anderson, the strict English teacher, and the pupils scatter when I walk by. I was just worrying about what Steve told me, this girl who said she was Zoe, when I saw some people hanging round the gates. Usually I know all the parents, but these two looked weird from a distance. Raggedy. Sort of...desperate. I thought maybe they were on drugs, because we've had trouble with that sort of thing. But when I got closer, my body somehow knew before I did. I felt nauseous, like I was back in the early stages of morning sickness. Oh God. I knew that hair, the way she stood. It was Zoe. My dead best friend. And with her was Paul Morris, the boy who killed her.

I thought I was going to faint, right there on the pavement. That fella Paul grabbed some passing kid, running of course, and said, 'Go and tell them Miss Bramall's not feeling well.'

'It's Mrs Anderson,' I gasped. Zoe was staring. How could she be there?

'Holy God, Danny,' she said, and her voice was just the same. 'You married him? Nathan?'

I could see Paul recognised the name too. 'You mean – you married Mr Anderson? The art teacher?'

My breath was coming fast. 'Deputy head now.'

Paul had worked it out. He was smart. 'You were seeing Mr Anderson – while you were still at school?'

I'm used to this kind of reaction.. But he married me, didn't he? He got me out of Ma and Da's house, stuck with me all this time.

There was a lot of explaining to do. We went to a coffee shop nearby, Zoe and me just staring at each other. So much ground to cover. She told me how she'd woken up in the forest, and she didn't remember anything. Last thing she remembered was her and me going into the Forum. Paul's band on stage. It was so weird being there with him, when the last time I saw him he was in the dock of the court and I was testifying against him.

Zoe said, 'Paul said...in court, you said you left because I was drinking, and you didn't want to? Is that true?'

I had to be careful. I didn't know what Zoe remembered. I didn't even totally know what I remembered. It was ten years ago. You think you remember something properly, but you don't. 'I went to see Nathan. I – I did leave you there. I'm sorry. I thought you'd be OK! 'I couldn't stop looking at Zoe. She was older. Her face lined, as if life had been hard these past ten years. Where had she been?

She said, 'So what happened to me that night?'

'I – we thought Paul took you, or he got you on the bridge, or--'

'I didn't,' he said. His voice was flat. I remembered the things I'd said about him in court, and I wanted to be sick.

'Would I have gone anywhere else?' Zoe asked. 'If I didn't want to go home?'

I took a deep breath. I hadn't told anyone this part before – keeping Zoe's secrets, all these years since. I didn't think I needed to. It was so obvious Paul had killed her. 'Do you not remember?' I said to Zoe. 'When I came back to the club and you weren't there, I thought maybe you'd gone to see him.'

'Him?' She looked blank, but her eyes flickered, and I could tell there was a part of her that remembered.

'Jonny,' I said. 'The guy from the God's Light group.'

'What's God's Light?' said Paul, frowning.

But Zoe knew the name, I could see. You see, there was something else about the week Zoe....died. I don't know what word to use any more. It was the last week of school, and the years above and below us had their exams, GCSEs and A levels. Our year didn't have much to do, so we got a dossy week – talks and lectures. Videos in class. One day we had these people come in to talk to us. They were holy Joe sorts. A religious group that went around schools talking about Jesus, singing songs and that. All of them young, not much older than us. One of the guys was cute. Zoe kind of liked him. I remember he stopped her in the hallway afterwards and said something to her, and she went so red, and when she went into her next class all the girls made a 'whoo-woo' sound. Jonny, that was his name. I was pretty sure that the week Zoe disappeared was the same week the holy Joe lot were in town, but back then our Steve didn't seem to think it mattered. Everyone thought it was Paul who got her. But what if they were

wrong? What if everyone only saw what they wanted to, what was obvious? What if they needed to look a bit deeper?

When we were in the cafe, there was a moment when Zoe started acting weird. Her whole body went very stiff and still. She was staring past me out the window, like she'd seen a ghost, but all I could see was some cars parked up, a white van. 'Are you OK?' I asked.

She shook herself. 'I'm fine. Sorry – Paul, can we go back now? I can't be out for long.'

I saw Paul frown. 'Why not?'

But Zoe didn't have an answer. She just said, 'Please, Danny, will you help me? Can you tell Steve it's really me?'

I said I would, but I I already knew I wouldn't call him. Not until I figured out what happened that night, and what, if anything, my husband knew about it. And I wouldn't tell Nathan why Steve was asking those questions, that Zoe was alive. Like he said, we really needed to make sure we were on the same page.

Chapter 6

Zoe

After we saw Danny we went back to Paul's. Funny how I hardly knew him at school, but now he was the most important person in my life, and me in his. If he could prove I was alive, we could get his conviction dropped. But how could I do that when no one would believe me? I needed someone to recognise me. At least Danny knew me, but I didn't know how much help she'd be. She was hiding something. She had that same look on her face she used to get when she lied to her parents.

Paul made beans on toast, and when we sat down to eat he was looking at me funny. 'Why did you want to rush home?' he said. 'You sort of freaked out there.'

'I saw someone,' I heard myself say. 'Outside the school. In a white van. I....I have this memory of waking up in the back of one just like it.

Jolting around. There was this like, blue plastic sheet — a tarpaulin, is that what you call them? There were red streaks on the floor of the van. I think it was blood.' There were other memories coming back to me — mud on my bare feet, and the sound of crying, and feeling afraid; being in the forest and feeling something push hard on my head — but I didn't know how to make sense of them.

Paul was frowning. 'Who did you see?'

'I don't know. The driver, I think I recognised him, but I don't know where from.'

'Did he see you?'

'I don't know. I just know....I feel scared. Do you think it could be – the person who left me in the forest?' Who buried me, was what I meant.

Paul sat and thought about it for a long time, very still. 'Here's what we have to do,' he said. 'We have to find the girl that's in your grave. She's been dead for ten years. Somebody must be looking for her, right?'

Something sparked when he said that —a girl, a grave — but I didn't have time to think about it because just then someone started hammering on the door. Paul tensed. I knew he'd been through hell. People thought he killed me. He opened the door and someone pushed in past him, shouting, 'Where is she? Where is she?'

It was a woman. She was thin – too thin really. Glamorous for her age. Jeans, a nice silk top. Lots of makeup. She was pulling a wheely suitcase, like she'd just come from an airport. I didn't know her for a while – she'd changed so much. I guess I had too. 'Zoe,' she said. She was so pale under her makeup, I thought she might faint. 'Oh my God. It's you. It really is you.'

And then I knew. At least one of my parents recognised me. 'Mum,' I said, and I started to cry. 'I'm back.'

I saw that Uncle Phil was behind her. 'Zoe,' he croaked. 'Oh my God. I'm sorry, pet, I – it was a shock. It's really you?'

'It's really me,' I said. 'I'm here. I'm not dead after all.'

There was a lot to say to each other — mostly from Mum, since I couldn't remember where I'd been. She'd got on the plane first thing that morning, after Steve Bramall rang her the night before. She had to see for herself, this girl who said she was her daughter. Paul left us to it, even though it was his house. He was polite that way. I couldn't believe anyone would think he was a killer. Mum said the last time she'd seen me was going out the door to meet Danny. Dad was drunk, of course. He passed out. Her and Uncle Phil stayed up drinking, and she didn't realise I hadn't come in until

the next morning. She cried when she said that, like she should have waited up for me.

It's strange how memory works. When she said that about her and Uncle Phil, I remembered something. About that night. Where I went, when Danny left me in the club.

'Uncle Phil!' I shouted. 'I went to your house. Didn't I — that night? I remember!' I remembered Auntie Jackie then - I could picture her face, red and angry, all twisted up with crying, and she was drunk too, the same way Dad got sometimes. She stank of brandy. I remembered I'd gone there, hoping to wait for a few hours till Danny called me, but Uncle Phil wasn't back yet, and she was so crazy, saying all these mad things, that I had to leave again. So I would have gone back into town, back over the bridge, just as Paul was waiting on it for a bus....

'She threw a glass!' I remembered, suddenly, the fear of it, the pain in my head. A bit of it cut my face. I don't think I noticed at first. Then I remembered running away from their house, crossing the bridge, shaking on my stupid heels, feeling the wind and the spray from the river, so black and tumbling over the rocks. Maybe I saw Paul at the bus stop, like the CCTV showed, maybe I didn't notice him. I was so upset. And after that I just....disappeared. And I can't remember where I went for ten years. 'But why was she angry with me?' I looked at Uncle Phil's face to see if he knew I was there that night. I could see that he did, even though he wasn't there himself. He was at my house. With Mum.

Uncle Phil had been quiet for a long time, staring at his hands. 'Trina,' he said to Mum. 'I think it's time we told her the truth, don't you?'

I looked between them. Mum and Uncle Phil. And all of it made sense. Why Auntie Jackie was so angry that night. He's not here, he's with your slut of a ma, just like before. You know the truth, don't you, Zoe? Why

Mum didn't want me in the picture with him. Why she always kept him at arm's length, why he bought me such good presents, and why Mum would always say, a bit cross, there's really no need Phil. You spoil her. I just thought it was because I'm the only kid between the two brothers. But no.

'Does Dad know?' That was the first thing I said, and I saw Uncle Phil flinch. Mum said she wasn't sure. 'He loved you, Zoe. He loved you so much he couldn't cope when we thought you were gone. It drove him crazy, even though....'

'Say it,' I challenged her. 'He loved me even though I'm not his daughter after all? I'm his niece?'

Phil

It had been years since I saw Trina. She didn't want to stay in Blackwater after what happened – too many painful memories. Some people deal with loss by getting rid of everything else too, burning their lives to the ground and starting again. Trina didn't even come back for Jackie's funeral, and I suppose I don't blame her.

We were sitting there, all of us, in that lad Paul Morris's front room. He was in the kitchen, pretending to make tea or something. I couldn't even look at him. Ten years, stolen from him. I remembered I was even angry he didn't get a longer sentence. I knew what it was like in that prison. Especially when you're not from around here. Not... white. And it was all for nothing. But someone was dead all the same. There was a girl in Zoe's grave, either way. What were we going to do about that?

Katrina had lost a lot of weight, let her hair go grey. But she still looked the same to me. 'What happened, Phil?' Her eyes were boring into me. 'You identified the body.'

'I – I don't know. I thought it was her. The hair – the dress.... She had Zoe's things.'

'You should have let them do the DNA test. So what if people found out?' I could have said I did it for her, so it wouldn't all come out, on top of the fact Zoe was dead. But I said nothing.

Zoe was trembling. 'Tell me what you know,' she said, looking between her mother and me. 'What happened after Auntie Jackie attacked me?'

The first thing to say is why I didn't want a DNA test on what I thought was Zoe's body. She's my daughter, not my niece. Jackie and myself, we couldn't have children. Trina and me....well. You can guess. We tried not to let it happen again, and for years nothing did, but it had started up around the night of the barbecue. Mark was drinking a lot again, and when he passed out, I stayed the night there. Jackie knew, of course. That night, Zoe went to our house. She couldn't go home because her wee friend Danny had snuck off to see some boyfriend, and Danny was meant to be staying at Zoe's. Jackie knew rightly where I was, and she'd had some drinks. Her and Mark had that in common. Maybe it's something that happens when you know your spouse is in love with someone else.

Well, she told Zoe the truth. That we'd lied to her all this time, me and Trina. Jackie said Zoe was upset, and ran off into the night. When I came back the next day, I saw the broken glass and the spray of brandy on the wall and I just cleaned it up. I did wonder, of course, if Jackie had hurt Zoe, but she swore she hadn't. Of course, it was only minutes after that when Trina rang in a panic, saying Zoe wasn't in her bed, she'd never come home. I couldn't tell my officers she'd been at my house. I made them start looking for her, and then we found her, and it looked like it wasn't Jackie's fault anyway. I'd always thought it was my fault, that Zoe was dying as Trina

and I were together, my brother passed out upstairs, my wife drunk just a few miles away. It was my fault Zoe ran into town, alone, upset, and Paul Morris got her on the bridge. I'd lived with that for years. But that wasn't what happened.

Zoe listened as I explained why I'd persuaded Steve Bramall we didn't need a DNA test on the body he found. It's an expensive test, and it takes a while. I thought it was a risk, that maybe everything would come out, just causing more hurt to Mark and to Jackie. And I'd identified her- I saw her body. That was what I believed, I swear to God. And that was why some other poor lost girl was in Zoe's grave, and our Zoe had been alive all that time and we didn't know.

'Where were you, sweetheart?' said Trina, talking gently, stroking Zoe's lank, long hair. What was Zoe feeling when she ran over the bridge that night, in her high heels, her sparkly dress? Blood on her head? 'Where did you go to after that, Zoe? You must remember something,' Trina said again. 'After the bridge, what happened then?'

'I don't know. There's only flashes, here and there. There's – a white van, maybe. A caravan. I think I lived there. I remember – being cold, and afraid.'

I said, 'Travellers? You were living with them?'

'I don't know. I don't think I was taken, exactly — not locked up or anything like that. But I feel like I couldn't get away, all the same.' Then Zoe said, in a burst: 'I think I had a baby. I can't remember!' A strange look went over Trina's face. Shock, and sadness, and maybe even happiness for a second, until she digested what it might mean, if Zoe's been missing ten years and she has a baby. Visions of girls locked up in basements. Children born there, who've never seen daylight.

Trina held her hand. 'It's not your fault, whatever happened. It's not your fault.'

Zoe was crying now. 'I don't know who to ask – somebody must know where I've been! And the girl in my grave. Who is she? We have to find out.'

I stood up. 'I'll call Steve Bramall,' I said. It was time to face the truth. I was ready to admit the lies I'd told ten years ago – lies that have meant Zoe being gone from us all this time.

Chapter 7

Steve

I stayed too late in work again. I kept going over the file, over and over, hoping it would give me different answers, even though it hadn't for ten years now. Zoe disappeared on a Friday night, the last day of school. I was out on patrol, and there was the usual run of pukings and punch-ups. I didn't get off work till four in the morning. Then I went home, and I'd only been there an hour or two before we got the call from Zoe's ma. I remember Katrina Ashton sounded panicked, like she was struggling to breathe. She kept saying, 'I just fell asleep Steve, anyone can fall asleep!' As if we'd judge her for going to bed when her almost-adult daughter was out. The husband, Mark, he'd been passed out. I think he was still drunk when I went round to the house. You always hear on TV that that we wait twentyfour hours to look for someone who's missing. That isn't totally right. If there's reason to worry we'll look for them, and this was our boss's niece. After I talked to my sister, we knew that Zoe had likely left or disappeared from The Forum. I think that was the moment –sitting in the living room of the house I grew up in, Ma and Da in dressing gowns and Danny so white and shaking, terrified like- that was the moment I knew this case wasn't going to end well. And sure enough, after three days of looking, I found Zoe's body in the river.

Except I didn't. Phil Ashton rang to tell me how wrong I'd been. I could hear it in his voice he was overwhelmed. 'Steve, lad,' he said. 'That girl who turned up. I don't know how to explain this but – it is Zoe.'

I thought he was losing it. 'Phil, no, it can't be.'

'It is. Steve – Trina's here. She knows her own daughter.'

'But – how?'

'The DNA – we never did it. It wasn't her, Steve. It was someone else.'
I thought that was strange at the time, when he asked me not to run
the test, but sometimes people object for religious reasons or whatever.
And we had family identification. We had a missing girl, blonde, seventeen.
We had a dead girl, blonde, about the same age. What are the odds, that
some girl who looked like Zoe would turn up dead in Blackwater just as we
were looking for her?

When I first started at the police, they told us one thing. If something seems like a coincidence, ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's not. Someone made it happen. If you find a dead girl when you're looking for a missing one, chances are they're connected.

The first thing I needed to do was get out the missing persons' cases. Not just for that year, but even further back. Luckily, all those files were digitised last year, so I just needed to run through them for a blonde girl aged sixteen to thirty. I called up the pathologist's report again. Zoe had perfect teeth – of course, she had loving parents, a good diet. Whoever we found in the river had no dental work either. Who was this girl?

One of the strange things about this border region is the imaginary line we have running through the countryside. Someone goes missing in the south, they can slip over here and they may as well have vanished. I don't have records on them, and the Gardai don't have them on cases north of the border. The River Black is the border here, and technically that meant the body in it was my jurisdiction, but it could just as easily have been put in on the other side, or the girl could have gone missing in the South sometime before that. I needed someone from the Gardai to find out who this missing girl was.

Luckily, I've got a pal down there and with his help, after hours of sifting through, we found someone. She'd gone missing in 2005, so three

years before that body turned up in the river. She was eighteen when she disappeared. Easy to mistake a seventeen-year-old girl for one a few years older, especially when the face is damaged like the dead girl's was. She disappeared from Galway, which is why she wasn't on our system. Her name – Caoimhe Callan. And this was the thing that got me – the week of her disappearance, a youth group had been in the town, and they'd come in to give a talk at her school. A few people mentioned it in their interviews. The group was called God's Light, sort of a religious crowd. The kind that's a bit too close to a cult for my liking. The name rang a bell.

I clicked on the picture of Caoimhe, waited for it to load. When I saw her, my heart turned over. She could have been Zoe's sister. The name was nagging at me – God's Light. Where had I heard that before? I did a quick search through the Zoe file and there it was. Something Danny had said back then. A group called God's Light had visited their school the week before Zoe vanished. And the truth gnawed at me, no matter how hard I ignored it. Did I make a mistake back then? Was I just so sure I'd found Zoe, like a big hero, that I missed the truth? Did I send an innocent lad to jail?

This girl, Caoimhe, missing. Last seen with a church group. Zoe, missing for ten years, gone the week the same group came to town. Like I said – this wasn't a coincidence. Somebody made this happen.

Paul

It was weird, meeting Zoe's mother. The only time I saw her before was in court, when she couldn't even look at me for crying. No one really knew what to do. They were all sitting there in my mum's front room. Her mum – Katrina –just kept saying, 'But how could this happen? Phil, you identified the....whoever it was.'

Phil Ashton was a broken man. 'I thought it was her, Trina. God help me.'

He said maybe they'd exhume the body, if Steve Bramall took it to his superiors. A judge could declare Zoe was alive after all. And for me – I'd get my life back, or what was left of it. I should have been happy. Most of me couldn't believe it, the same way I couldn't believe it when they came to my house ten years ago and arrested me. Telling Mum not to worry. Sure it was some big mistake. And then, hearing they'd found blood on my jacket, her money in my wallet, her number on my phone. I still didn't know how those things could be true. So I knew that this could be taken away from me too. We had to find out exactly what happened back then, or else there would always be people in this town who believed I killed Zoe.

I kept thinking of something Danny Bramall – Danny Anderson - said. About this God's Light group. I remembered it, vaguely. The younger kids were well into it, all that clapping hands and singing songs about stomping the devil. Nash said it was the lamest thing ever.

It's funny how neither me or Zoe can remember that night properly. I was so pissed. But I didn't tell the whole truth before, when I said I remembered nothing. That's never true, is it? You always get flashes, even when you're black-out drunk. I remembered the sound of the river, the rush of it, filling my ears. I remembered soft ground under me. I guess I passed out after puking over the bridge. The police found mud on my jacket. White van, Zoe said. Did I see a white van by the river that night? Did I remember voices? Lights? Did I see something that maybe could have got me out of this nightmare, but I was just too drunk to understand?

There was one more thing I remembered. Just a sliver of memory, like a shot from a film or something. I always pushed it away, wanting to believe what I was sure was true – I couldn't have hurt Zoe. But I had this

flash of a girl with blonde hair, lying very still on the river bank. Blood on her face. Voices, talking fast, sounding afraid. I didn't know what they were saying, but I knew it was men. Who were they? And who was the girl?

When Zoe's mum and uncle went into the garden - I think to talk about what had just happened, the fact he was Zoe's da not her uncle at all - Zoe and I sat in silence. I could see her frown, like she was trying to put together the memories in her head. I was doing the same. 'A white van,' I said.

Zoe looked up. Her face was haunted. 'You remember something?'
'Maybe. I don't know. Down by the river – there were people camped
out. Tents, fires. A van, I think.'

She was nodding. 'Do you think it was them? God's Light? If I went away with them, with this guy...'.

She couldn't say his name. 'Zoe, if you remember something, you have to say. Tell Steve.'

She was biting her lip so hard it was white.

'I – I don't know. I'm scared.'

Something snapped in me. 'For God's sake. I went to prison, Zoe! For ten years!'

Zoe put her head in her hands. 'I know. I know we have to. Paul, it's so unfair what happened to you. I wish I understood why it did. But I –I don't know what I remember! The man who was watching me earlier, at the school. I think – I think maybe he took me. It's all just – so hazy, you know? I remember meeting him, like Danny said. At school, when they came to give us a talk. He was cute, and the things they said - about loneliness, and being there for us, and how God would always love us, even if everybody else let us down. I remember that made me feel special. What if, after Auntie Jackie went mad at me, what if I went to see him?'

'Do you think so?' I was trying so hard not to get excited. Here it was at last, the light through the dark walls I'd looked for all this time.

'I – yeah, maybe.' She swallowed hard. 'But I think he has my baby. Paul – I think he's here to get me back.'

Chapter 8

Danny

Nathan worked late that night; I called him five or six times and he just let the phone ring out. After a while, he sent a text to say he was busy. No kisses. I was going mad, pacing up and down in the living room. Darcy knew something was wrong; she was crying and getting on, wouldn't eat her dinner. In the end I put her in the car and I found myself driving to Paul Morris's house. I knew I had to tell them the last bit of truth. I had to do it, get it all out of my life. What I didn't expect was to see Zoe's uncle and her ma there too. It was so weird, being in a room with people I'd never expected to see together. Like a bad dream or something.

I put Darcy down on an armchair – she was half asleep – and I stayed stood up. I told myself: I'm not a terrible person. I'm a mother; I love my wee girl, my husband. I did what I did back then to protect the man I love. But maybe there's more important things than love. I said, 'Listen, I haven't been honest,' and I started to tell them the truth about. The whole truth, for once.

I went to see Nathan that night. He had a flat behind the market. But we had a fight - I wanted to stop covering things up, since I was nearly seventeen, but he refused. Said he'd get fired if anyone found out, and maybe even go to prison because I was underage. I was sixteen then, but the stupid law was different here. It changed the same year, but too late for us. Too late to stop everything happening. Anyway, I ran out of his flat and went back to the Forum. I shouldn't have left Zoe there by herself. All I can say is I was young, and selfish, and I thought I was in love. I thought she'd be fine. It was our hometown. Nothing ever happened there. How was I to know? None of us did. When I got back there, Zoe had gone.

Home, I guessed, and I knew I'd be in trouble if her ma and da told mine I hadn't slept there. I had to ring her, get her to cover for me somehow, but my phone was out of battery from texting Nathan all night, trying to persuade him to let me come around. I remember I needed change for a payphone, and I had a tenner in my purse. Zoe had given it to me in case I needed to get back from Nathan's. There was a guy outside the Forum, pissed and stumbling around. I think he was looking for the toilets and got lost or something. I asked him for change and we swapped. He gave me a fiver and a lot of shrapnel – he was too drunk to count but I didn't care, I was in such a panic – and I gave him the tenner. The one Zoe had given me. I asked if I could borrow his phone too, and I rang Zoe off it, but she didn't pick up. I tried her a few more times on the way home, from pay phones, but again, nothing.

After I said all this, Zoe was sitting bolt upright, staring at me. 'Who was the guy?'

Paul was shaking, and I saw that he knew. Maybe he remembered too. 'It was me, wasn't it?'

I nodded. I couldn't look at him. He shouted, 'That's why I had her tenner! That's why her number was on my phone! Jesus Christ, Danny - you knew that, all this time?'

I was ashamed. 'I....I thought you did it. The blood on your jacket, the bus video...I thought that one wee clue wouldn't make a difference, and if I told the truth they'd find out I left Zoe there, and Nathan would be in prison.' Nathan had begged me. We have to be on the same page, Danny. I tried to explain. 'I was underage, he would have -- God, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry.' Paul just stared at the carpet, his hands in fists. I'd sent him to jail, maybe. Who knew what piece of evidence had swayed it one way or another.

Zoe was putting it all together. 'The blood, that was because of the glass Auntie Jackie threw at me. Paul must have brushed against me at the bus stop, when I was coming back into town. The tenner in his wallet, that came from you, Danny. The bus video – just a coincidence; we were there at the same time. The phone number – Danny rang me. But my clothes? How did they get on the other girl? And who was she?'

I shook my head. 'I don't know. I swear, I thought Paul did it.' Paul made a small noise. I still couldn't look at him.

Zoe's uncle said, 'If you remember anything else, Danielle, you have to tell us now.'

'I've told you everything,' I said, and I could hear how shaky I sounded. It was true. Except for the secret messages Nathan was getting. Was it just a coincidence, or did he know something? He was my husband. I had to at least talk to him before I went any further.

I made an excuse about the baby and scooped up Darcy, waddled out to my car, but Paul followed me. 'You know something else,' he said. Accusing like. It was dark on the street, and for a moment I felt scared. I could see how angry he was, like the whole ten years was suddenly coming down on him like a ton of bricks.

I fumbled Darcy into her carseat. 'I don't know. I – Paul, please. I need to figure this out.'

He stepped away, but I hated the way he was looking at me. 'You lied. About the money. The phone. You sent me to jail.'

'I'm so sorry. But everyone believed it, you see.'

'That's the hardest bit,' he said, quietly. 'That everyone, people who'd known me years and years, thought I could do a thing like that.'

'I'm going to make this right,' I said, my voice all choked up like I was going to cry. 'Give me till tomorrow.'

His face was tight. I felt so ashamed, but there are worse things than shame, so I got into the car and drove away, with him watching me all the while in the rear mirror. I was driving badly, I suppose – crying a bit. As I turned out of Paul's road, I had to swerve to avoid someone turning in. A white van, covered in dirt.

Phil

Things started happening fast after Trina turned up. Steve Bramall got onto the Gardai, and found out about this group, these God's Light lot. We looked into them at the time, of course, but they'd moved on by then and anyway, we had our fella. Paul Morris. I wasn't supposed to be on the case, too close to it, but this is a small place. I trained each of the officers working on it. Of course they wanted to do right by Zoe, their boss's niece. I know it looks bad, the way we rushed him to court, the things he said about coercion, assault in the cells, but look at the evidence and tell me you'd have done any different. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time, my niece's blood on him, with her money in his wallet and her number on his phone. Bad luck, that's all it was. Sometimes, when I can't sleep at night, I think about all the people I sent to prison over the years, and wonder if any of them were just unlucky too.

Anyway. Once Steve started looking, it turned out the Gardai had been watching this God's Light crowd for years. They'd move into a town, camp out like travellers, and of course people would complain about it, the noise and the campfires. But despite all that, they seemed like good kids. Clean-living, spreading God's word.

I always thought I knew Zoe. I spoiled her, I suppose. It turns out I knew nothing about her. Back then, she was fighting with Trina all the time, and she saw that her da was drinking, the business going under. She felt – I

don't know, lonely. Trapped, the golden girl of the town. Expected to be netball captain and head girl and top in all her exams, then on to university in Queen's or even England. Maybe she just....didn't want it any more. And that's what they're so good at, these people. They can spot the vulnerable girls, the ones who are lonely and empty inside, even if they look perfect on the outside, and they offer them something. Acceptance. Love. What kind of life did Zoe have these past ten years, if she was with them? On the road for months, camping, living in vans, cooking over fires. She must have been cold, dirty, afraid. I didn't know if she had enough to eat. And a child! I told myself she'd have wanted him or her. She wouldn't have been forced into it. Maybe no one took her — she went of her own accord with that group, or that was how it was starting to look. But I didn't know if that made things better or worse.

Trina was in the garden of Paul Morris's house when I went out, huddled up on a bench. It was cold. I saw she was smoking. She started up again when Zoe died, saying it didn't matter now if she died young too, since she'd never have any grandkids to live for.

'You'll have to stop again,' I said, nodding to it.

She looked confused for a moment, then she almost laughed. 'Christ, Phil. I don't know what to think. I buried my daughter ten years ago, and now she's here? And there's a baby?'

'I don't know what to believe. There's no way to trace such a child – since Zoe was officially dead, they won't have been registered under her name. Maybe they're not registered at all.'

'They're looking for this group?'

'Steve will find them.'

'He didn't find Zoe.' She took another drag on her cigarette, and I wondered what to say, whose fault this really was, mine or hers or Steve's

or even Zoe's. How far back do you go? I didn't know Jackie had worked it out that night, that I was Zoe's father, but I suppose it was because Trina and me had started up again and she'd found out. And why did that happen? Because Mark was drinking, because his firm was going under, because the recession was hitting? You can trace every crime back decades if you try. Enough to drive you mad.

'I'm sorry, Trina,' I said, though I knew it was pointless. 'I thought I was doing the right thing.'

'You couldn't have known,' she said, and the weight in my chest eased. 'I'm sorry about Jackie. I should have come to the funeral but – she wouldn't have wanted me there.'

That was true. Jackie had said some terrible things to Trina after we buried Zoe. Her anger too wild to have compassion for a mother putting her child in the ground. I always thought that was why Trina moved away. Trina sucked on her cigarette, then took it out and looked at it like she was disgusted. 'I thought it was my fault,' she said. 'We'd been fighting so much. Zoe knew I was lying about something. Sneaking about. She just wanted me to tell the truth, and I couldn't. I kept thinking – if I'd gone easier on her, if I'd not lied so much, then maybe she'd have come home that night instead of going to yours. And we'd not have lost her.'

'We can't blame ourselves.'

'I know. But I do.'

'What do we do now?' I said.

'First thing, we should give this poor lad back his house. Can we go to your place?'

'Of course! But I meant...in general.'

Trina said, 'She's come back to us, Phil. Zoe and her child, if we can find them. I thought that when she died, I'd died too. That I'd just go on

breathing in and out for a few more years, then I'd be dead as well and maybe I'd see her again. But – she's back. She needs her family.'

I held my breath in the cold garden. I wanted to ask what she meant – a family? All of us? Now Jackie was gone and Mark might as well be? To answer, Trina put her cold hand in mine, and we sat there holding on, as if letting go would mean losing everything all over again.

Chapter 9

Steve

Things were happening. After ten years of nothing, of thinking all those questions were answered, everything was moving so fast it made my head spin. So this was what we knew. A girl called Caoimhe vanished in 2005, possibly with the God's light group. If she was still with them when they came to Blackwater three years later, wasn't it possible Caoimhe somehow ended up dead that night, and Zoe took her place and went off with them? They live mostly off the radar, that group, always moving from town to town. She could have used Caoimhe's ID if she ever needed one; they looked enough alike. I needed to look up the girl's parents, get permission to exhume the body. If we could prove it wasn't Zoe, that was Paul Morris off the hook. Then, we'd have a new murder inquiry on our hands. The question of who killed Caoimhe Callan, if it was even her in the grave, and why they wanted us to think it was Zoe.

I went round to Phil Ashton's house that evening. Zoe and her mother were staying there now. It was an awkward meeting. Her mother all stiff with me, and I could tell she was biting her lip to ask why we hadn't investigated properly at the time. But it was the family who identified the body. I just did what they asked of me, but all the same I know I should have tried harder. I know I failed, and Paul Morris went to jail for it. Thank God he wasn't there. I couldn't have faced him. When we brought him in, ten years back, and it looked for sure like he'd done it, we weren't very — well, we weren't exactly gentle with him, if you take my meaning.

Phil Ashton's house was sad. All those rooms sitting empty, and you could see he spent all his time in the one sagging armchair. I asked them to tell me what they'd worked out, and they did. Danny's lies. I knew she'd

been keeping something from me, so now we had an explanation for the money and the phone call. But we still didn't know what had happened that night, where Zoe disappeared to, or how this other girl ended up dead.

'The weird thing is the clothes,' said Zoe. 'Someone put mine on her. Right?' She was rubbing her own arms, like she was cold, or she was remembering that night. I saw Trina Ashton look away, and I didn't like to think what that meant, that someone had taken Zoe's clothes off her. 'Why would they do that?'

'I don't know,' was all I could say. 'We'll find this group, and we'll know more then.'

And we did. The Gardai traced them to a town in Cavan, and within hours the place was surrounded. I drove down, got there in less than an hour. It was a desolate sort of place, just a muddy field outside of the town, pitch-black and freezing in the dark. We found ten adults living there in a bunch of caravans, hand to mouth, no plumbing, no electricity. They wore baggy jumpers, the women in long skirts to the ground, their hair right the way down their backs. Like Zoe's. There were three kids, too. They didn't want to cooperate – they ran when we turned up, like they were afraid to let us see them. We took them all the nearest Garda station, got the kids fed and looked after, interviewed the adults. There was a woman who called herself Star, and she'd been with them long enough to remember everything. She was about fifty, I'd say, long grey hair, her face rough like a farmer's. She admitted it all. Caoimhe Callan had lived with them since she ran away in 2005. It was a tactic of the group's. They'd go into schools and church groups, and look out for vulnerable girls. The ones who were sad, and lonely, not happy at home. Caoimhe was one, and she'd run away with them. She'd been happy with them, Star said. They were all

happy. A family. I asked why it was always girls, and she looked confused. 'That's how it is. Men need women.' That was what she said. 'It's what God wants – why he made Eve, so that Adam wouldn't be alone.'

I had to just let that go. 'What happened that night?' I asked her. 'When Zoe Ashton went missing.'

She didn't want to tell me, pretended not to even know the name, but when we threatened to take the kids away, she did. They'd been camping by the river, she said. Caoimhe had gone to get chips for everyone— up onto the main road — and a while later a man ran up, carrying her body, screaming for help. She was dead. He'd hit her with his car, right on Blackwater Bridge. Nothing could be done for her. She said, 'That's when this other girl turned up. Crying, walking funny, like she was drunk. It was a mess — but Jonny sorted it all out.'

'Who's Jonny?' I asked. Turned out he was a leader of sorts. They had no pictures, of course.

'How was she?' I said. 'Zoe.'

Star said she was in a state, crying, her head bleeding. Jonny put her in his van and him and the man who'd hit Caoimhe had a long talk. All the while her body was just lying there on the river bank, in the mud. Her eyes wide open. Star said the women did what they could for her, but she was dead. I asked did they not think to call an ambulance, and she just stared at me like that never would have crossed her mind.

'What happened next?' I asked. She said when Jonny and the man came back, it was all agreed. Jonny was going to take Zoe away with him, as Caoimhe, and the man would get rid of the body and make it so no one ever came after Zoe.

'And Zoe went along with this?' I asked. I couldn't imagine it. Letting everyone think she was dead? Letting her parents mourn her, some

innocent fella go to jail?

Star shrugged. Said Zoe wasn't well – she'd hurt her head, and she was out of it for a few days, sleeping in the van for hours at a time, and when she got better she was wearing Caoimhe's clothes and answering to that name. Star was under the impression there'd been a falling-out with Zoe's family. That she didn't want to go back to them.

'Jonny's very persuasive,' Star said. 'He'll have told her the family were bad, that they didn't want her. That she had a new family now. It's what he does.'

'Who was the man?' I asked her. 'The one who hit Caoimhe.'

She didn't know his name. A young fella. Educated.

'White or black?'

She looked at me funny. 'White. He was white, sure everyone's white around there.' Yes, she said, Zoe had lived with them for ten years, under Caoimhe's name. Yes, there was a child. A boy. Zoe had taken him away with her when she ran.

'When she ran?' I said.

She told me Zoe had run away from the group a week before, in the middle of the night, taking the child with her. Star thought she maybe wanted to go back to her hometown in Blackwater, since they weren't far from the border at the time. She wanted to take the wee boy to see her parents. But Jonny went after her.

I asked who Jonny was to Zoe, though I had a feeling I already knew. Star said he was Zoe's - well, they called him her husband but I doubt it was legal. Anyway, Jonny had gone to look for her, to bring her back with him. And he hadn't returned since.

I had to warn her.

Danny

Nathan was still out when I got home from Paul Morris's house. I fed Darcy, put her bed, then went back to pacing. I knew I should eat something, for the baby, but I couldn't. I felt sick. I kept thinking about what I'd done. The way Paul looked at me. As soon as I spoke to Nathan, I'd go to our Steve and tell him everything. Maybe then I'd feel like I could breathe again.

Finally, what seemed like hours later, I saw the lights of his car in the driveway. When he opened the door I was waiting for him. He was shaking, sweating right through his shirt. He just looked at me. 'You know.'

'I don't know anything. Why are you acting so weird? Who are you texting?'

'I – I swear, Danny, I never meant for any of this to happen.'

I put my hand on my belly, trying to stay calm. 'Tell me what happened, or I swear to God I'll go straight to our Steve.'

He put his head in his hands. 'When you ran off that night, after we had that fight, I got in the car to find you. Drove around. I – you remember we'd had wine. I shouldn't have been driving. But I needed to find you – I was worried you'd do something.'

Tell people about us, he meant. 'What did you do, Nathan?'

'I drove by the river. Over Blackwater Bridge. There was - I didn't see her at all, didn't even know she was there until – the wheels. Oh God, the way the wheels went over her. I never want to feel anything like that again. She was just this young girl, about twenty maybe. She had a bag of chips in her hand, and they spilled all over the road. I got out and I saw she – she was dead. I didn't know what to do. I picked her up – she was so light. I got blood all over myself. I heard voices and in the distance I could see lights, so I just carried her towards them. There was a group of them camping by the river. The ones who came to the school.'

'God's Light.' I heard the words coming out of my mouth, though my face felt frozen.

He nodded. 'The man in charge – Jonny was his name. He was at the school– he'd met Zoe there. We made a deal. He said Zoe wanted to go away with him – something had happened that night, some row with her family. We'd pretend this girl was Zoe.'

'So what – you took her clothes off?' I couldn't even start to imagine it. Some girl lying dead.

'I didn't see Zoe,' he said. 'She was in his van, I think. He brought me her clothes – she had this sparkly dress – and we dressed the, the girl in them. I thought that would be a good....a good way to make her look like Zoe. If she was in the water a while, her face might....'

'So you – what, you put her in the river?'

He nodded again. 'A few days later Steve found her. I waited for them to do the DNA test, find out it wasn't Zoe, but they never did.'

I understood now. The baby inside me was spinning and kicking. 'You knew all this time? That Zoe was alive, that another girl was dead? That Paul didn't do anything?'

'He saw,' said Nathan, wretched. 'He was there by the river, puking his guts out, a real mess. So when they arrested him, and he had that money and the blood on him — it all seemed like it was meant to be, you know? I thought I was going to prison, and then — it all worked out somehow. I had you. Darcy. All these years, I've been waiting to hear from Jonny. He told me if it ever came out, he'd ruin me. But it never did. Until now.'

But not for Paul. And that was my fault. Between us, Nathan and I had done this. 'Jesus Christ. You told Jonny Zoe was here?'

'I had to.' I heard how whiny his voice was. 'He wanted her back.'

'But – she might not be safe! We have to go to Steve.'

'I wouldn't do that.' Another voice. I jumped. There was someone in my house! A man, standing by the front door. He wore an old, dirty bomber jacket and jeans. He was tall and thin and I recognised him. The guy from school. Jonny. And he was leading a child by the hand. A little boy of about four. Blonde hair, blue eyes, just like Zoe. And then I understood everything.

Chapter 10

Zoe

I felt like I was going crazy. Back with Mum again, in Uncle Phil's house, and she kept crying because she hadn't seen me for ten years and thought I was dead, but to me I only saw her yesterday. There was a hole in my head where the past decade should have been. What happened to me after the bridge? Danny said I liked this Jonny guy. Would I really have gone off with him, left Mum and Dad and let them think I was dead? It was all so blurry. I guess I was injured, plus I'd been drinking. I might have run to Jonny if I was upset and angry with everyone. But I didn't know what happened after that. And I couldn't shake this feeling someone was following me. The man I saw near the school. I knew his face. Was that Jonny? And what about the baby? Where were they now? How old were they? How could I not know these things about myself, my own body and my own mind? All I knew was, that man I saw – it was the same face I saw in my memories, the little lightning flashes I couldn't keep hold of. The ones where I was in a van, the world passing by outside, or in a locked room staring at a window high on the wall. The white van, jolting me around in the back. The feel of a child in my arms. It was almost like the memories were there, behind a door in my head, but I was too afraid to open it. I still couldn't remember if I had a boy or a girl. What their name was. It was a terrible feeling. My mother lost me, and I lost my child. We'd lost each other, because of the lies we told.

Mum and Uncle Phil were in the kitchen of his house – he'd been avoiding me since they told me the truth, it was all so strange – when Danny rang on the house phone. I could tell from her voice something was wrong. 'Are you on your own?' she said. I was in the living room, pretending to watch something on TV. I said yes.

Danny gulped. 'Can you come to my house? It's....maybe you won't remember where I mean, but I live in Carroll Close.'

'The new houses?'

She almost laughed then, or cried. 'They were new. Years ago. Number ten. Please Zoe – can you just come, by yourself? Don't tell anyone. Especially not Steve, OK? I wouldn't ask but – I need you.'

In the old days, I'd have done anything Danny asked me without question. Lied to her parents for her. Covered in school. But did I even know her anymore? She'd let Paul go to jail without saying a word. Could I trust her?

'Please, Zoe,' she said. I knew Mum would never let me out by myself, not now she had me back. And the idea of going out alone, in the dark, was terrifying. But it was Danny. We'd always kept each other's secrets. So I picked up Mum's jacket, a nice leather one – the only clothes I had were those strange men's ones - and slipped out the door, as quietly as I could. I felt a hard lump in the pocket: Mum's phone. Paul had given Mum his number, just in case I remembered anything else, and I didn't know why, but I sent him a quick text. It took me a while to figure the phone out. I just wanted him to know where I was – like he was the one keeping me safe, the first person to believe I was me.

The streets were dark and quiet, and my trainers bounced on the pavements. I went quickly, watching every shadow, looking out for a white van. So strange that my feet remembered the streets of this town, as if I never left, when I'd been gone for ten years. I wondered if they would come back to me, those years I'd been gone. I felt somehow that, when I did remember, it wouldn't be memories I wanted to have.

When I got to the door, Danny answered. The house seemed strange somehow. Too quiet. Her belly came out the door before she did, and her

face looked like she'd been crying. 'Zoe, I'm so sorry. I had no choice. He's got the kids.'

I just had a moment to think – kids? I thought she only had the one so far – when the door opened wider and I saw him. The tall, thin man from outside the school. He was sitting at the table, opposite Mr Anderson – Nathan, I should call him now. Nathan had a black eye. There were two kids there. One was Danny's – a little dark-haired girl, sucking her thumb, sitting on the sofa. The other, on the tall man's knee, was a boy. Blonde hair, blue eyes. He was maybe three or four. And just like that it all came back to me. This was my son. His name was suddenly in my mouth. *Adam*. And the tall man, I knew him too. Jonny. The man I left Blackwater with, ten years ago. The man who'd had me, all this time.

Paul

Before all this happened, I barely knew who Zoe Ashton was. Some fit girl in the year below. But that night ten years ago, Zoe became the centre of my life. And now that she was back from the dead, she still was. I felt weird when she left my place to go to her uncle's. Almost like I didn't want to let her out of my sight, in case all this went away.

So when she sent me a text message a few hours later, saying Danny was acting weird and she was going over there, I knew it wasn't right. I called Steve Bramall, who was on his way back from Cavan, where the Gardai had busted the God's Light group. He was exhausted, I could tell. But he told me what they said at the camp. Zoe had run away from them a week ago, and this Jonny guy had gone after her. I guessed he'd caught up with her outside Blackwater. A row maybe — he hit her. She had blood in her hair when I ran into her outside the police station. So he panicked, tried to bury her in the woods. But she wasn't dead, and she came home,

only she couldn't remember. The trauma wiping out the last ten years. I learned in prison it can happen that way, that you can reset to the last time things were normal, which for Zoe, and for me, was ten years ago. What if this Jonny fella was still after her? Steve said the police were looking out for him, that he'd send people to drive past Phil Ashton's house.

'But she isn't there,' I said. 'She went to Danny's.'

Steve was quiet for a long time. I could hear the sound of his engine in the background. 'I'm almost back,' he said. 'I'll go to Danny's and check they're OK. He'd hardly know where Danny lives, even if he is about.'

'I'm going round,' I said. 'You can't stop me.'

He sighed. 'I'll meet you there. But Paul – whatever you do, don't go in till I get there.'

I walked to Danny's cul de sac. It was quiet, all the houses closed up for the night. I used to feel so lonely walking back from signing in at the police station, looking at the lights from the houses I passed. Knowing Ma was dead and nobody was waiting for me in my cold, lonely place. That could all change now. I couldn't get the last ten years back, but I could move forward without this...stain on me. It all depended on Zoe.

As I got near to Danny's house, I saw Steve waiting for me, on the dark side of the pavement. He motioned for me to be quiet and pointed. Parked on the other side of the street was a white van. Steve said, 'Paul, you're not trained. We should wait for back-up.'

'If he's there, they might be too late. Anyway, I can handle myself. You learn to in prison.'

He sighed again. 'Wait outside. It might be nothing, OK?'

He knocked on the door, and I hid in the bushes beside the front door. Danny had a nice house. You'd think she had everything, really. A house, a husband, a kid and one on the way. She got to keep all that because she lied, while Zoe got to be God knows where for ten years and me, I got a prison cell.

No one answered the door for a long time, and then Danny's husband opened it. I stood back, in the shadows. Mr Anderson, ten years older. 'Steve!' he said, and his voice was all fake and friendly. 'Bit of a bad time, pal.'

'Where's Danny?' said Steve.

'She's - she can't come to the door.'

'I want to see my sister, Nathan.'

'She's in the bath.' Nathan's voice shook.

Steve turned as if he was going to leave, then he put his shoulder to the door and rushed in past Nathan, who fell down. He was shouting. 'Danny? Zoe?' I hung back like he'd told me to— or maybe I was just scared—and then another man was rushing at Steve, a tall, wiry one, and he had Steve on the ground. Now, Steve Bramall is a big fella, used to play rugby in his day, and this guy flipped him like a child. The door slammed. That was when I saw Zoe and Danny, through the window. They were both on the sofa, holding kids in their arms. One I recognised as Danny's daughter. The other....I guessed that was Zoe's son. Zoe was white with fear, shaking. So was Danny.

Through the window I could hear the man say, all nice like: 'Now, officer, there's no need for any of this. It's a family matter. Caoimhe's going to come home with me and our son—'

'My name is Zoe,' she said, her voice shaking. 'Zoe!'

He went still for a moment. Then he slapped her across the face, hard. The little boy – she'd turned her head to protect him – started to cry. And I got a glimpse of what Zoe's life had been for ten years, why it had taken her that long and a child of her own to get the courage to come back.

'Please, Jonny.' She was crying now. 'I just want to be with my mum, my family – I can't go back.'

Steve Bramall was groaning on the floor, blood on his head. Nathan was doing nothing, useless, slumped in the corner. Danny was shouting, 'Help him, help him, Nate.' But he didn't do anything.

Jonny took Zoe by the arm, dragging her up. 'I can't let you go. You're mine. Now come on. Get in the van, we're going home.'

'I am home!' she shouted. I saw that her nose was bleeding. 'Blackwater's home.'

'We're going!' He screamed at her, right in her face, and then he was dragging her towards the door, really pulling her so her feet dug into the carpet. The little boy –he looked about three- was crying hard. So was she. Steve tried to get up, slipped back down again. He needed a doctor. I didn't know what to do.

Danny seemed too scared to move, with her little girl in her arms and her pregnant belly. 'Nathan! Stop him!'

'I can't,' said Nathan, so quiet I could hardly hear him. 'He knows what I did.' I saw Danny look at her husband. Seeing him for what he really was, maybe. A coward, a liar. Worse.

The front door opened, and suddenly I could hear everything much more clearly. He would see me in a second.

Beside me, in their little garden, they had a garden gnome. A stupid thing with a fishing rod. I knew what I had to go. I picked it up. I didn't think twice.

The night was a long one after that. I had this idea, very clear in my mind, that even if I'd killed Jonny— they'd taken him to hospital - I wouldn't go to prison. I'd served my time for something I'd nothing to do with. Maybe it would....carry over or something like that. Even though that's not how it

works. But you don't always think clearly at times like this. Ask Nathan Anderson, who hit a girl with his car on a night ten years ago, and caused all the rest of this to happen. Ask Zoe, who'll be paying for a bad decision, one she made when she was hurt and drunk and upset, for the rest of her life. Ask Danny, who told a lie to save her own skin, not knowing it would send an innocent man to jail. There were questions to answer and documents to sign, but as I sat there in the police station, wrapped in a blanket, I kept thinking about the moment after I did it – when the heavy stone connected with Jonny's head – when Zoe and her boy stepped into my arms and she cried against my shoulder. The same way her blood got onto me that night on the bridge, though I didn't remember it. 'Thank you, Paul,' she said. 'Thank you. You saved me.'