

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN

THE
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BESTSELLER

A SLOW FIRE BURNING

IT'S THE QUIET ONES YOU HAVE TO WATCH

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HAWKINS

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impossible to resist'

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'A *Slow Fire Burning* twists and turns like a great thriller should, but it's also deep, intelligent and
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having something to say that feels
real and complex and true
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best. Here are characters you want to spend
time with, living in a world you believe in, and
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'A *Slow Fire Burning* is a treat: utterly readable, moving in parts and saturated with the kind of localised detail that made *The Girl on the Train* so compelling'

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Paula Hawkins is masterful'

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'Tense, suspenseful and wholly surprising ... you won't be able to put it down'

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'A *Slow Fire Burning* absolutely held me with its compelling, multi-generational cast of women and the brilliantly evoked pathos of damaged lives'

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'Superbly told, its twists and turns reveal the slow fire burning inside each character which might just destroy them'

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'I inhaled this novel, a gripping exploration of the damage that secrets can do. Hawkins' writing draws you in from the first word and refuses to let you go until the last'

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'Her best book yet.
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The **ingenious beginning** snared me
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Paula Hawkins worked as a journalist for fifteen years before writing her first novel. Born and brought up in Zimbabwe, she moved to London in 1989. Her first thriller, *The Girl on the Train*, became a global phenomenon, selling over 23 million copies. Published in over fifty languages, it was a No.1 bestseller around the world and a box-office-hit film starring Emily Blunt.

Paula's most recent thrillers, *Into the Water* and *A Slow Fire Burning*, were also instant No.1 bestsellers. In 2021 *A Slow Fire Burning* was nominated for Thriller of the Year at the British Book Awards.

Also by Paula Hawkins

THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN
INTO THE WATER
THE BLUE HOUR

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A Slow Fire Burning

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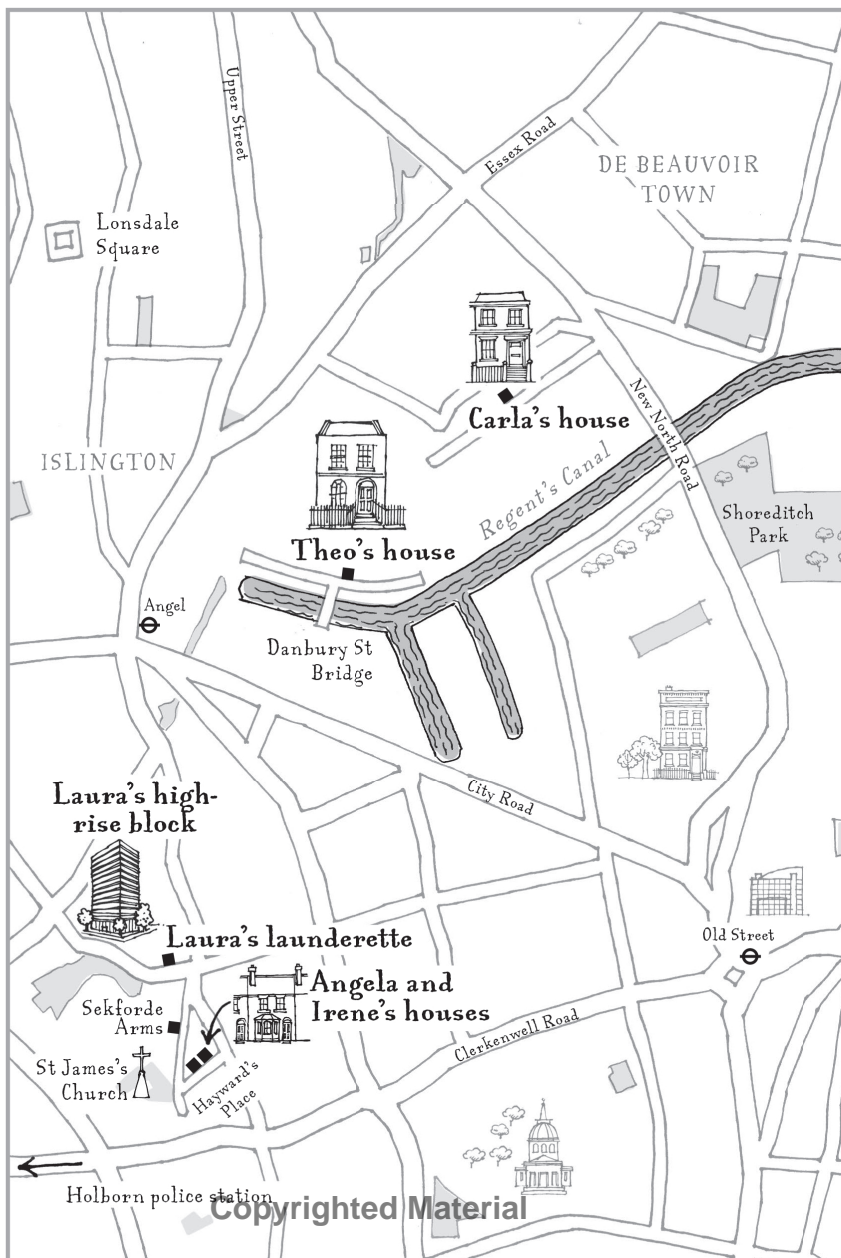
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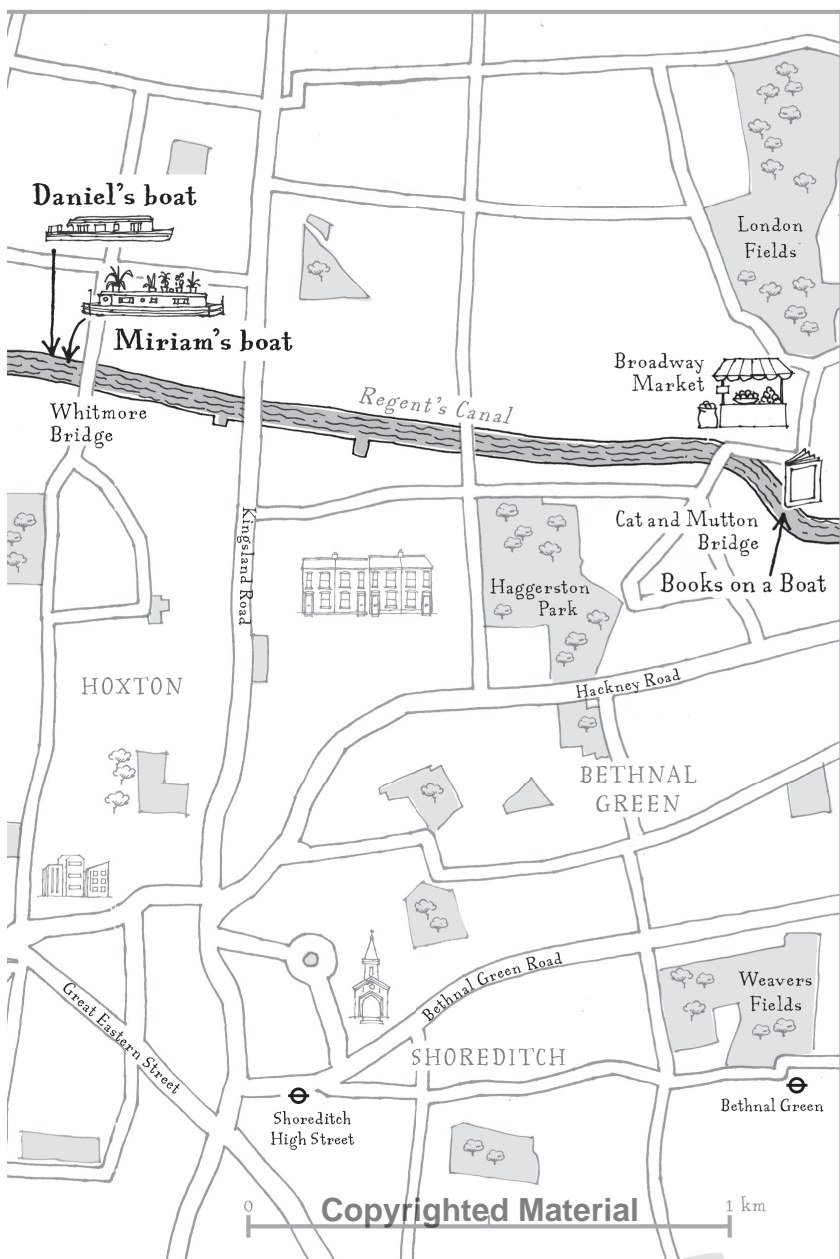


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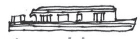
This book is dedicated to the memory of
Liz Hohenadel Scott, whose radiance made the
world a warmer place. She will be forever missed.

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Daniel's boat



Miriam's boat



Whitmore Bridge

Kingsland Road

Regent's Canal

London Fields

Broadway Market

Cat and Mutton Bridge

Books on a Boat

Haggerston Park

Hackney Road

HOXTON

BETHNAL GREEN

SHOREDITCH

Weavers Fields

Shoreditch High Street

Bethnal Green

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1 km

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'some of us are made to be carrion birds,
& some of us are made to be circled.'

Emily Skaja, 'My History As'

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Blood-sodden, the girl staggers into the black. Her clothes are dishevelled, hanging off her young body, revealing expanses of pale flesh. Shoe lost, foot bleeding. She is in agony, but the pain has become inconsequential, eclipsed by other sufferings.

Her face is a mask of terror, her heart is a drum, her breath is the stricken pant of a fox gone to ground.

The night's silence is broken by a low hum. A plane? Wiping blood from her eyes, the girl looks up at the sky and sees nothing but stars.

The hum is louder, lower. A car changing gear? Has she reached the main road? Her heart lifts, and from somewhere deep in her gut she summons the energy to run.

She feels rather than sees the light behind her. She feels her shape illuminated in the black and knows that the car is coming from behind her. It's coming from the farm. She turns.

She knows, before she sees, that he has found her. She knows, before she sees, that it will be his face behind the

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wheel. She freezes. For a second she hesitates, and then she leaves the road, takes off running, into a ditch, over a wooden fence. She scrambles into the adjacent field and runs blind, falling, picking herself up, making no sound. What good would screaming do?

When he catches her, he takes handfuls of her hair, pulls her down. She can smell his breath. She knows what he is going to do to her. She knows what is coming because she has already seen him do it, she saw him do it to her friend, how savagely he—

'Oh, for God's sake,' Irene muttered out loud, snapping the book shut and slinging it on to the charity-shop pile. 'What utter drivel.'

1

INSIDE LAURA'S HEAD, Deidre spoke. *The trouble with you, Laura, she said, is that you make bad choices.*

Too fucking right, Deidre. Not something Laura expected to say or even think, but standing there in her bathroom, shaking uncontrollably, blood pulsing hot and steady from the cut to her arm, she had to admit that imaginary Deidre was bang on the money. She leaned forward, her forehead resting against the mirror so that she wouldn't have to look herself in the eye, only looking down was worse, because that way she could watch the blood ooze out of her, and it made her woozy, made her feel like she might throw up. So much blood. The cut was deeper than she'd thought, she ought to go to A&E. There was no way she was going to A&E.

Bad choices.

When at last the flow of blood seemed to slow, Laura took off her T-shirt and dropped it on the floor, she slipped out of her jeans, dropped her knickers,

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wriggled out of her bra, inhaling sharply through her teeth as the metal catch scraped against the cut, hissing, 'Fuck fuck mother of fuck.'

She dropped the bra on the floor too, clambered into the bathtub and turned on the shower, stood shivering under the paltry trickle of scalding water (her shower offered a choice of very hot or very cold, nothing in between). She ran the tips of her wrinkled fingers back and forth over her bone-white, beautiful scars: hip, thigh, shoulder, back of skull. *Here I am*, she said quietly to herself. *Here I am*.

Afterwards, her forearm wrapped ineffectually in reams of toilet paper, the rest of her wrapped in a threadbare towel, sitting on the ugly grey pleather sofa in her living room, Laura rang her mother. It went to voicemail, and she hung up. No point wasting credit. She rang her father next. 'You all right, chicken?' She could hear noises in the background, the radio, 5 Live.

'Dad.' She felt a lump rise to her throat and she swallowed it.

'What's up?'

'Dad, could you come round? I . . . I had a bad night, I was wondering if you could just come over for a bit. I know it's a bit of a drive, but I—'

'*No, Philip.*' Deidre, in the background, hissing through clenched teeth. '*We've got bridge.*'

'Dad? Could you take me off speaker?'

'Sweetheart, I—'

'Seriously, could you take me off speaker? I don't

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want to hear her voice, it makes me want to set fire to things . . .’

‘Now, come on, Laura . . .’

‘Just forget it, Dad, it doesn’t matter.’

‘Are you sure?’

No I’m not no I’m not no I’m fucking not. ‘Yeah, sure. I’m fine. I’ll be fine.’

On her way to the bedroom, she stepped on her jacket, which she’d dropped in the hallway in her rush to get to the bathroom. She bent down and picked it up. The sleeve was torn, Daniel’s watch still in the pocket. She took the watch out, turned it over, slipped it on to her wrist. The toilet paper around her forearm bloomed scarlet, her limb throbbing gently as the blood pulsed out of her. Her head swam. In the bathroom, she dropped the watch into the sink, tore off the paper, dropped the towel on the floor. Climbed back under the shower.

Using a pair of scissors to scrape beneath her fingernails, she watched the water running rosy at her feet. She closed her eyes. She listened to Daniel’s voice asking, *What is wrong with you?* and Deidre’s voice saying, *No, Philip, we’ve got bridge,* and to her own. *Set fire to things. Set fire. Set fire set fire set fire.*

2

EVERY SECOND SUNDAY, Miriam cleaned out the toilet. She had to lift the (always surprisingly, unpleasantly heavy) cassette out of the little toilet at the back of the boat, carry it through the cabin and out on to the tow-path, and from there a full hundred yards to the loo block, where the waste had to be tipped out into the main toilet and flushed away, the cassette rinsed out to clear whatever remained. One of the less idyllic parts of narrowboat living and a task she liked to carry out early, when there was no one else around. So undignified, to ferry one's shit about among strangers, dog-walkers, joggers.

She was out on the back deck, checking she had a clear run – that there weren't any obstacles on the path, bicycles or bottles (people could be extremely anti-social, particularly late on Saturday nights). It was a bright morning, cold for March, though white buds on glossy new branches of plane and birch hinted at spring.

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Cold for March, and yet she noticed that the cabin doors of the neighbouring narrowboat were open, just as they had been the night before. So, that was odd. And the thing was, she'd been meaning to talk to the occupant of that boat, the young man, about overstaying. He'd been in that mooring sixteen days, two full days longer than he was entitled to be, and she'd intended to have a word with him about moving along, even though it wasn't really her job, not her responsibility, but she – unlike most – was a permanent fixture around here and that imbued her with a particular sense of public-spiritedness.

That was what Miriam told DI Barker, in any case, when he asked her, later on, *What was it made you look?* The detective was sitting opposite her, his knees almost touching her own, his shoulders hunched and back rounded. A narrowboat is not a comfortable environment for a tall man, and this was a very tall man, with a head like a cue ball and a perturbed expression, as though he'd been expecting to do something else today, something fun, like taking his kids to the park, and now he was here with her, and he wasn't happy about it.

'Did you touch anything?' he asked.

Had she? Touched anything? Miriam closed her eyes. She pictured herself, rapping smartly on the window of the blue and white boat. Waiting for a response: a voice, or a twitch of a curtain. Bending down, when no such response came, her attempt to

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peer into the cabin thwarted by the net curtain coupled with what looked like a decade's worth of city and river grime. Knocking once more and then, after a few moments, climbing up on to the back deck. Calling out, *Hello? Anyone at home?*

She saw herself, pulling on the cabin door very gently, catching as she did a whiff of something, the smell of iron, meaty, hunger-inducing. *Hello?* Pulling the door open all the way, climbing down the couple of steps to the cabin, her last *hello* catching in her throat as she took it all in: the boy – not a boy, a young man, really – lying on the floor, blood everywhere, a wide smile carved into his throat.

She saw herself sway on her feet, hand over mouth, pitching forward for a long, dizzying moment, reaching out, grabbing the counter with her hand. *Oh, God.*

'I touched the counter,' she told the detective. 'I think I might have held on to the counter, just there, on the left-hand side when you come into the cabin. I saw him, and I thought . . . well, I felt . . . I felt sick.' Her face coloured. 'I wasn't sick though, not then. Outside . . . I'm sorry, I . . .'

'Don't worry about it,' Barker said, his eyes holding hers. 'You don't need to worry about that. What did you do then? You saw the body, you leaned against the counter . . .?'

She was struck by the smell. Underneath the blood, all that blood, there was something else, something older, sweet and rank, like lilies left too long in the vase. The smell and the look of him, impossible to

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resist, his beautiful dead face, glassy eyes framed by long lashes, plump lips drawn back from even, white teeth. His torso, his hands and arms were a mess of blood, his fingertips curled to the floor. As though he was hanging on. As she turned to leave, her eye snagged on something on the floor, something out of place – a glint of silver mired in sticky, blackening blood.

She stumbled up the steps and out of the cabin, gulping mouthfuls of air, gagging. She threw up on the towpath, wiped her mouth, cried out, 'Help! Somebody call the police!' But it was barely seven thirty on a Sunday morning, and there was no one around. The towpath was still, the roads up above quiet too, no sounds save for the throb of a generator, the squabble of moorhens ghosting gently past. Looking up at the bridge above the canal, she thought she might have seen someone, just for a moment, but then they were gone, and she was alone, gripped by paralysing fear.

'I left,' Miriam told the detective. 'I came straight back out of the boat and . . . I called the police. I vomited, and then I ran to the boat and called the police.'

'OK, OK.'

When she looked up at him, he was gazing around the room, taking in the tiny, neat cabin, the books above the sink (*One Pot Cooking, A New Way with Vegetables*), the herbs on the sill, the basil and coriander in their plastic tubs, the rosemary going woody in a blue-glazed pot. He glanced at the bookcase filled

with paperbacks, at the dusty peace lily sitting on top of it, at the framed photograph of a homely couple flanking their big-boned child. 'You live here alone?' he asked, but it wasn't really a question. She could tell what he was thinking: fat old spinster, tree-hugger, knit-your-own-yoghurt curtain-twitcher. Poking her nose into everyone else's business. Miriam knew how people saw her.

'Do you . . . do you get to know your . . . neighbours? Are they neighbours? Don't suppose they really can be if they're only here for a couple of weeks?'

Miriam shrugged. 'Some people come and go regularly, they have a patch, a stretch of the water they like to cover, so you get to know some of them. If you want to. You can keep yourself to yourself if you like, which is what I do.'

The detective said nothing, just looked at her blankly. She realized he was trying to figure her out, that he wasn't taking her at her word, that he didn't necessarily believe what she was telling him.

'What about him? The man you found this morning?'

Miriam shook her head. 'I didn't know him. I'd seen him a few times, exchanged . . . well, not even pleasantries really. I said hello or good morning or something like that, and he responded. That was it.'

(Not *quite* it: it was true that she'd seen him a couple of times since he'd moored up, and that she'd clocked him right away for an amateur. The barge was a mess – paint peeling, lintels rusted, chimney all

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askew – while he himself looked much too clean for canal life. Clean clothes, white teeth, no piercings, no tattoos. None visible, in any case. A striking young man, quite tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, his face all planes and angles. The first time she saw him, she'd said good morning and he'd looked up at her and smiled and all the hair had stood up on the back of her neck.)

She noted this, at the time. Not that she was about to tell the detective that. *When I first saw him, I got this strange feeling . . .* He'd think she was a nutcase. In any event, she realized now what it was, what she'd felt. It wasn't premonition, or anything ridiculous like that, it was *recognition*.

There was an opportunity here. She'd had that thought when she first realized who the boy was, but she'd not known how best to take advantage. Now that he was dead, however, it felt as though this was all meant to be. Serendipity.

'Mrs Lewis?' Detective Barker was asking her a question.

'Ms,' Miriam said.

He closed his eyes for a moment. 'Ms Lewis. Do you remember seeing him with anyone? Talking to anyone?'

She hesitated, then nodded. 'He had a visitor. A couple of times, perhaps? It's possible he might have had more than one visitor, but I only saw the one. A woman, older than he was, closer to my age, maybe in her fifties? Silver-grey hair, cut very short. A thin

woman, quite tall I think, perhaps five eight or nine, angular features . . .'

Barker raised an eyebrow. 'You got a good look at her, then?'

Miriam shrugged again. 'Well, yes. I'm quite observant. I like to keep an eye on things.' May as well play up to his prejudices. 'But she was the sort of woman you'd notice even if you didn't, she was quite striking. Her haircut, her clothes . . . she looked *expensive*.'

The detective was nodding again, noting all this down, and Miriam felt sure it wouldn't take him long to figure out exactly who she was talking about.

Once the detective had gone, officers cordoned off the towpath between De Beauvoir and Shepperton, moving along all the boats save his, the crime scene, and hers. At first, they'd tried to persuade her to leave, but she made it clear she'd nowhere else to go. Where were they going to house her? The uniformed officer she spoke to, young, squeaky-voiced and spotty, looked perturbed by this shifting of responsibility from her shoulders to his. He looked up at the sky and down at the water, up and down the canal and back to her, this small, fat, harmless, middle-aged woman, and relented. He spoke to someone on a radio and then came back to tell her she could stay. 'You can go back and forth to your own . . . uh . . . *residence*,' he said, 'but no further than that.'

That afternoon, Miriam sat out on the back deck of her boat in the pallid sunshine, taking advantage of

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the unusual quiet of the closed-off canal. With a blanket pulled around her shoulders and a cup of tea at her elbow, she watched the policemen and the scene-of-crime officers scurrying back and forth, bringing dogs, bringing boats, searching the towpath and its borders, poking around in the murky water.

She felt oddly peaceful, given the day she'd had, optimistic almost, at the thought of new avenues opening up before her. In the pocket of her cardigan she fingered the little key on its keyring, still sticky with blood, the one she'd picked up off the floor of the boat, the one whose existence she'd withheld from the detective without even really thinking about why she was doing it.

Instinct.

She'd seen it, glinting there next to that boy's body – a key. Attached to a little wooden keyring in the form of a bird. She recognized it straight away, she'd seen it clipped to the waistband of the jeans worn by Laura from the launderette. Mad Laura, they called her. Miriam had always found her quite friendly, and not mad at all. Laura, whom Miriam had witnessed arriving – tipsy, Miriam suspected – at that shabby little boat on that beautiful boy's arm, two nights ago? Three? She'd have it in her notebook – interesting comings and goings, they were the sort of thing she wrote down.

Around dusk, Miriam watched them carry the body out, up the steps and on to the street where an ambulance was waiting to take him away. She stood as they

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walked past her; out of respect, she bent her head and said a quiet and unbelieving *Go with God*.

She whispered a thank-you, too. For by mooring his boat up next to hers and then getting himself brutally murdered, Daniel Sutherland had presented Miriam with an opportunity she simply could not allow to slide by: an opportunity to avenge the wrong that had been done to her.

Alone now and, despite herself, a little afraid in the darkness and strange quietude, she took herself into her boat, bolting and padlocking the door behind her. She took Laura's key from her pocket and placed it in the wooden trinket box she kept on the top bookshelf. Thursday was laundry day. She might give it back to Laura then.

Or then again, she might not.

You never knew what was going to turn out to be useful, did you?

3

MRS MYERSON? DO you need to sit down? There you go. Just breathe. Would you like us to call anyone, Mrs Myerson?’

Carla sank down on to her sofa. She folded in half, pressing her face to her knees. She was whimpering, she realized, like a dog. ‘Theo,’ she managed to say. ‘Call Theo, please. My husband. My ex-husband. He’s in my phone.’ She looked up, scanning the room, she couldn’t see the phone. ‘I don’t know where it is, I don’t know where I—’

‘In your hand, Mrs Myerson,’ the woman detective said gently. ‘You’re holding your phone in your hand.’

Carla looked down and saw that so she was, gripping her mobile tightly in her violently trembling hand. She shook her head, handing the phone to the policewoman. ‘I’m going mad,’ she said.

The woman pressed her lips into a small smile, placing a hand on Carla’s shoulder for just a moment. She took the phone outside to make the telephone call.

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The other detective, DI Barker, cleared his throat. 'I understand that Daniel's mother is deceased, is that right?'

Carla nodded. 'Six . . . no, eight weeks ago,' she said and watched the detective's eyebrows shoot up to where his hairline might once have been. 'My sister fell,' Carla said, 'at home. It wasn't . . . it was an accident.'

'And do you have contact details for Daniel's father?'

Carla shook her head. 'I don't think so. He lives in America, he has done for a long time. He's not involved, he's never been involved in Daniel's life. It's just . . .' Carla's voice cracked, she took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. 'It was just Angela and Daniel. And me.'

Barker nodded. He fell silent, standing ramrod straight in front of the fireplace, waiting for Carla to compose herself. 'You've not lived here very long?' he asked, after what Carla imagined he thought to be a respectful pause. She looked up at him, bemused. He indicated with one long forefinger the boxes on the dining-room floor, the paintings leaning against the wall.

Carla blew her nose loudly. 'I've been meaning to hang those paintings for the best part of six years,' she said. 'One day I'll get round to getting picture hooks. The boxes are from my sister's house. Letters, you know, photographs. Things I didn't want to get rid of.'

Barker nodded. He folded his arms, shifting his

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weight from one foot to the other, and opened his mouth to say something but was cut off by the front door slamming shut. Carla jumped. The woman detective, DC Chalmers, scuttled into the room, ducking her head apologetically. 'Mr Myerson's on his way. He's said he won't be long.'

'He lives five minutes away,' Carla said. 'Noel Road. Do you know it? Joe Orton lived there in the Sixties. The playwright? It's where he was killed, bludgeoned to death, I think, or was it stabbed?' The detectives looked at her blankly. 'It's not . . . *relevant*,' Carla said. She thought for a horrible moment she might laugh. Why had she said that anyway? Why was she talking about Joe Orton, about people being bludgeoned? She *was* going mad. The detectives seemed not to notice, or not to mind. Perhaps everyone behaved like a lunatic when they received news of a family member murdered.

'When did you last see your nephew, Mrs Myerson?' Barker asked her.

Carla's mind was completely blank. 'I . . . *Christ*, I saw him . . . at Angela's house. My sister's house. It's not far, about twenty minutes' walk, over the other side of the canal, on Hayward's Place. I've been sorting out her things, and Daniel came to pick some stuff up. He'd not lived there for ages but there were still some of his things in his old bedroom, sketch-books, mostly. He was quite a talented artist. He drew comics, you know. Graphic novels.' She gave an involuntary shudder. 'So that was, a week ago? Two weeks?

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Jesus, I can't remember, my head is just *wrecked*, I . . . !
She scraped her nails over her scalp, pushing her fingers through the short crop of her hair.

'It's perfectly all right, Mrs Myerson,' Chalmers said. 'We can get the details later.'

'So, how long had he been living there down on the canal?' Barker asked her. 'Do you happen to know when—'

The door knocker clacked loudly and Carla jumped again. 'Theo,' she breathed, already on her feet. 'Thank God.'

Chalmers got to the door before Carla could, and ushered Theo, red-faced, perspiring, into the hall.

'Christ, Cee,' he said, grabbing hold of Carla, pulling her tightly against him. 'What in God's name happened?'

The police went over it all again: how Carla's nephew, Daniel Sutherland, had been found dead that morning on a houseboat moored near De Beauvoir Road on Regent's Canal. How he'd been stabbed multiple times. How he'd likely been killed between twenty-four and thirty-six hours before he'd been found; how they'd be able to narrow that down in due course. They asked questions about Daniel's work and friends, and did they know of any money troubles and did he take drugs?

They didn't know.

'You weren't close?' Chalmers offered.

'I hardly knew him,' Theo said. He was sitting at

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Carla's side, rubbing the top of his head with his forefinger, the way he did when he was anxious about something.

'Mrs Myerson?'

'Not close, no. Not . . . well. My sister and I didn't see each other very often, you see . . .'

'Despite the fact she lived just over the canal?' Chalmers piped up.

'No.' Carla shook her head. 'We . . . I hadn't spent time with Daniel for a very long time. Not really. Not since he was a boy. When my sister died I saw him again, as I said. He'd been living abroad for a while. Spain, I think.'

'When did he move to the boat?' Barker asked.

Carla pressed her lips together, shaking her head. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I honestly don't.'

'We had no idea he was living there,' Theo said.

Barker gave him a sharp look. 'He must be fairly close to your home, though. Noel Road, wasn't it? That's what? About a mile from where the boat was?'

Theo shrugged, and rubbed his forehead harder, the skin turning quite pink up near his hairline. He looked as though he'd been in the sun. 'That may well be, but I'd no idea he was there.'

The detectives exchanged a look. 'Mrs Myerson?' Barker looked at her.

Carla shook her head. 'No idea,' she said quietly.

The detectives fell silent then, for quite a long time. They were waiting for Carla to say something, she imagined, for her or for Theo to speak.

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Theo obliged. 'You said . . . twenty-four hours, is that right? Twenty-four to thirty-six hours?'

Chalmers nodded. 'We're estimating time of death some time between eight p.m. Friday night and eight a.m. Saturday morning.'

'Oh.' Theo was rubbing his head again, staring out of the window.

'Have you thought of something, Mr Myerson?'

'I saw a girl,' Theo said. 'Saturday morning. It was early – six, maybe? Out on the towpath, going past my house. I was standing in my study and I saw her, I remember her because she had blood on her. On her face. On her clothing, I think. She wasn't drenched in it or anything, but . . . but it was there.'

Carla gawped at him, incredulous. 'What are you talking about? Why didn't you tell me?'

'You were sleeping,' Theo said. 'I got up, I was going to make coffee, and I went to get my cigarettes from the study. I saw her out of the window. She was young, probably not much more than twenty, and she was coming along the towpath. Limping. Or swaying, maybe? I thought she was drunk. I didn't . . . really think much of it, because London is awash with strange, drunk people, isn't it? That time of day, you often see people on their way home . . .'

'With blood on them?' Barker asked.

'Well, perhaps not. Perhaps not the blood. That's why I remembered her. I thought she'd fallen, or been in a fight. I thought—'

'But why didn't you say anything?' Carla said.

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'You were *asleep*, Cee, I didn't think—'

'Mrs Myerson was asleep at *your* home,' Chalmers interrupted, frowning. 'Is that right? You stayed the night with Mr Myerson?'

Carla nodded slowly, her expression one of utter bewilderment. 'We'd had dinner on Friday, I stayed over . . .'

'Although we're separated, we still have a relationship, you see, we often—'

'They don't *care* about that, Theo,' Carla said sharply, and Theo flinched. Carla pressed a Kleenex to her nose. 'Sorry. I'm *sorry*. But it's not important, is it?'

'We never know what's going to be important,' Barker said enigmatically, and started moving towards the hall. He handed out business cards, said something to Theo about formal identification, about family liaison, about staying in touch. Theo nodded, slipping the business card into his trouser pocket, and shook the detective's hand.

'How did you know?' Carla asked suddenly. 'I mean, who was it who reported . . . who found him?'

Chalmers looked at her boss, then back at Carla. 'A woman found him,' she said.

'A woman?' Theo asked. 'A girlfriend? Was she young? Slim? I'm just thinking of the person I saw, the one with the blood. Perhaps she . . .'

Chalmers shook her head. 'No, this was someone living on another of the narrowboats, not a young woman, middle-aged, I'd say. She noticed that the

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boat hadn't moved in some time and went to check up on him.'

'She didn't see anything, then?' Theo asked.

'She was very helpful, actually,' Barker said. 'Very observant.'

'Good,' Theo said, rubbing the top of his head, 'very good.'

'A Mrs Lewis,' Barker added, and Chalmers corrected him: 'Ms.'

'That's right,' he said. Carla watched the colour drain from Theo's face as Barker went on, 'Ms Miriam Lewis.'

4

'HE STARTED IT, all right? Before you say anything. He started it.'

They were waiting for her when she got home. Must have been, because they banged on the front door literally thirty seconds after she'd got in from Iceland. She'd not even got her breath back – she was on the seventh floor and the lifts were out again – and there they were, and it just made her angry, and nervous too. So, like a fucking idiot, she started talking right away, which she knew full well you shouldn't do. It's not like this was her first time in trouble.

Granted, usually it was a different sort of trouble. Public intoxication, petty theft, trespass, vandalism, disorderly conduct. She'd been found not guilty of simple assault on one occasion. One ABH charge pending.

But *this* wasn't *that*. And she realized that almost right away, because as she stood there huffing and puffing and running her mouth off, she thought, Hang on, these are *detectives*. They'd said their names and ranks

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