

Prologue

When Thomas Grey arrived home that evening, he sensed immediately that something was different.

He was tired from a long shift at the restaurant, from talking to snooty customers and stressed-out co-workers, and he'd been planning to get home and just chill out in front of the TV.

But the moment he stepped inside his little flat, he got a weird feeling in his chest. A feeling that something wasn't right.

Thomas stood still in the hallway, and as the front door fell shut the darkness enveloped him. Suddenly his heart started beating wildly in his chest, and the hair on his arms stood on end. He stood there in the silence, listening hard. But even after several moments had passed and he hadn't heard a sound, he still couldn't shake the feeling that there was somebody there.

He'd lived alone for several years now, since moving out of his parents' house. He didn't yet have many friends in Margate who would have popped round to see him, and his family were too far away to just drop in. His flat was small and sparsely furnished, and the building was nothing special. Who would want to break in here? There was nothing to steal.

Except...

Suddenly a chill ran down his spine. He managed to pull himself together and hurried into his bedroom, where he went straight to the little bedside table and wrenched open the top drawer. Relief flooded through him when he saw the gleam of gold inside the drawer. The jewellery, a valuable family heirloom. It was still there.

Thomas let out his breath with a heavy sigh. Perhaps the strange feeling was just overtiredness after all.

But then he heard a noise behind him. Very brief, very quiet, barely noticeable. The next moment Thomas felt a stabbing pain in his chest, and heat radiated through his body.

Thomas looked down in surprise. He saw the gleaming metal sticking out of his chest. A *knife*, he thought. There was a long, bloody knife sticking out of his chest.

Someone had rammed it through his body from behind.

Thomas felt no pain, but his vision started to cloud. He staggered, his legs gave way beneath him, and he fell to the floor. He couldn't even feel his bedroom carpet. Thomas could feel nothing now apart from the heat spreading through his upper body.

Indistinctly, he caught sight of the figure who'd been standing behind him. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Only that they were tall and thin and still holding the knife he'd seen sticking out of his chest.

Without making a sound, the figure stepped over him to the bedside table and the still-open drawer, and picked up the gleaming piece of jewellery.

"I'm sorry," whispered the figure, whose voice he heard as if through a waterfall. "But you had to die, Thomas Grey."

He didn't understand the meaning of the words – and he never would.

Because a moment later Thomas's head fell to one side, the world went permanently dark, and he died on the blood-soaked carpet of his bedroom floor.

Chapter 1

The Lions Bar on the Albert Dock was so full I could barely hear the music above the hubbub of voices. As I looked up from the cocktail menu, which I knew by heart anyway, my best friend Willow leaned across the wobbly table between us and frowned.

"Have they put their prices up again?"

I couldn't help but smile as I shrugged my shoulders. "I guess they can afford to."

Willow snorted and looked around at the crowd of people. I could tell from her face exactly what she was thinking, and not only because I'd known her since I was a little kid. Willow was an open book – she was terrible at hiding her emotions. She'd always been like that. And right now she was wishing (as I was) that we could go back in time. We used to come here loads as teenagers, to drink milkshakes and gossip about people at school. Back then the Lions Bar hadn't been overrun with tourists, and we would always get a table by the window with a view of the water. But that wasn't the only thing I missed about those days.

“I’m just going to have another beer,” grunted Willow, signalling to the waiter before he disappeared into the crowd again.

It would probably take another half hour for this beer to arrive, just like the last one.

I ran my finger around the rims of the shot glasses we’d drunk out of earlier, and felt a slight rumbling in my stomach. “How much holiday have you got left?”

“Two weeks.” She leaned forward on her elbows, looking sceptically at me across the table. “And since you’re asking me that question I’m assuming you’re not coming back to Cambridge with me?”

Hoping to avoid the question for a moment, I downed the last of my beer, wallowing in the comforting warmth of the alcohol and the crowd. I was tired – and until now I’d felt quite content. I always did, as long as I could ignore the fact that I was eventually going to have to think about my future.

Willow waited patiently, without taking her eyes off me. She ran a hand through her short brown hair. Last time she’d come back to Liverpool for the holidays her hair had been long, below her shoulders, and now it was cut just below her ears. I couldn’t help wondering how much more she was going to change while she was at university, so far away from me. Whether the next time she came home she’d have a tattoo or a nose piercing or something. I felt a strange mixture of jealousy and nostalgia, a yearning for the days when we’d drawn chalk flowers together in our backyard.

“No,” I said slowly, just loudly enough for her to hear. “I’m not coming back to Cambridge.”

For a moment I saw something like disappointment cross her face, but then she shrugged and cupped her chin in her hands. “Never?”

“I don’t know.” An uncomfortable tingle ran down my spine.

Willow had been back in Liverpool for a few weeks, and until now we’d steered clear of this subject. But I’d known it would come up if we went out drinking at our favourite bar. I’d tried to prepare myself, to think of some answer to give her, but now all I could do was sigh and look at her apologetically. “Would you be really angry if I didn’t come back to Cambridge at all?”

For a moment Willow looked surprised, then her face softened. She leaned over the table and took my hands in hers. Her fingers felt warm. She stroked my gold rings and shook her

head. “Come on, Harper. When have I ever been angry with you? Like properly angry? I can’t remember a single time. Our friendship is like something out of a cheesy rom-com. If you want to drop out of university I’m the last person who’s going to stop you, trust me. I’m just worried you’re doing it for the wrong reasons.”

I felt myself frowning. But before I could ask what she meant, the waiter popped up beside us.

“Can we get two pints please?” said Willow at once with a big grin. “We need a pick-me-up.”

“I can certainly help with that.” The waiter smiled, took two shots from his tray and set them down on our table. “From the guys over there.” He pointed to a group of men a few tables away, who immediately started beckoning us over, laughing and whistling.

I pressed my lips together to hide a smile.

“How kind.” Willow picked up her glass straight away and raised it in the men’s direction. I reckoned they must be in their mid-twenties. None of them were really my type, apart from one guy sitting on the edge of the group who looked at me with an almost shy smile and raised his glass to me.

I raised my glass to him in return, and Willow and I downed our shots.

“Two pints coming up,” said the waiter, before melting back into the crowd.

“They definitely want us to go and sit with them.” Willow waggled her eyebrows.

I turned back to her. “Don’t you have a girlfriend?”

“No, it’s not like that. I was dating this girl at uni, but it wasn’t serious. We decided to stop seeing each other before the holidays.” She nodded cheerfully at the other table. “And some of those guys are quite hot, don’t you think?”

I gave my friend a piercing look. She’d never been the type for casual flings, so I suspected it was her girlfriend who’d made the decision to split up. But since Willow clearly didn’t want to talk about it, I let the subject drop.

“Okay, we can go and sit with them,” I said. When her eyes lit up, I added: “But first you need to tell me what you meant just now. That you’re worried I’m dropping out for the wrong reasons – what reasons?”

She pursed her lips. “Well,” she said slowly. Then she heaved such a big sigh that I got that queasy feeling in my stomach again. “Last year you gave up everything. And I genuinely do understand why you did it. You wanted to be there for your family after your sister’s accident. For your mum. For your family’s business. That was really good of you, Harper.”

Again she took my hands in hers and I couldn’t stop the memories from filling my mind. Sitting there with Willow in halls, watching a trashy film and eating caramel popcorn, and then getting that phone call. I couldn’t even stand the smell of caramel popcorn now. It reminded me too much of that awful moment.

“But Danica is doing well,” Willow went on insistently. “She’s come to terms with her new situation. Your mum is doing well. The business is doing well. Things have settled down now, but you’re still here. I just worry you’re giving up on your degree for other people’s sake.”

I opened my mouth but I couldn’t get the words out at first, so I just shook my head weakly. When the waiter came back with our pints, I clutched the cold glass as if to stop myself from falling. “That’s not why,” I said after a few moments. “Not only that. Obviously I did put everything on hold because of the accident. But spending time in the workshop has reminded me that this is what I like doing. Making jewellery, making things for the customers. I love it.”

“I know you do. Even as a kid you were making your own earrings. I still have that dragonfly necklace you made me when we were in Year Six.” Willow beamed, and for some reason she looked almost relieved. “So is that your plan now? To take over the business from your mum? Become a goldsmith?”

“Mum doesn’t want me to.” I shrugged, a little irritated. “She wants me to do a degree and get a proper job. I know I’m old enough to make that decision myself... but maybe she does have a point. I probably do need a Plan B. It’s just that going back to my English degree doesn’t feel right. I have no idea what to do instead, though... I was hoping I could just put off making the decision for a bit longer.”

Willow nodded understandingly. “Not everyone’s lucky enough to know what they want to do in life.” Like Willow herself, who had announced loudly every day at primary school that she was going to be a teacher when she grew up.

I smiled sincerely, remembering the good things about our time at university. Getting to live with Willow. The student parties. And some of the lectures had been interesting too. Perhaps it wouldn't be such a bad thing to go back to uni – once I knew what I really wanted to do. Once I was ready to return to reality.

I picked up my pint glass and grinned at my friend. "Come on then, let's go and see if these guys have got any good chat." I gestured towards the nearby table, and one of the men called out: "Yeah! Come and sit with us, plenty of room!"

Willow grinned. "Given that they're all wearing football shirts, I think I can guess what the topics of conversation are going to be. But hey, maybe they'll surprise us." She linked arms with me as we walked over and squeezed in beside the men on their bench.

I enjoyed spending the evening with my best friend without having to think any more about my future. I enjoyed the conversations around me and the cute smile of the shy guy, who soon started telling me about his degree in medical engineering, his eyes shining as he spoke. After a while the music got louder, and we started dancing, and I felt I could really let myself go.

It felt good.

Willow and I left a few hours later after what must have been our fifth round of shots and our fourth pint. I felt good, even though we had to cling onto each other to make sure we got home in one piece. But that didn't stop us laughing the whole way.

"Man, the dock is so pretty," said Willow after a while, as we stumbled along by the water's edge. "It's one of the few things I miss about Liverpool. Apart from you obviously." She punched me playfully in the ribs and I laughed.

"I should hope so too."

Willow leaned against me as we weaved across the cobblestones, shoulder to shoulder. "It's ages since we've been on your dad's boat," she said. "Is it still moored here?"

"Of course," I slurred, trying to concentrate on walking in a vaguely straight line – we were both dangerously unsteady on our feet. "If it hasn't been nicked by now. But what would anyone want with an old rust bucket like that?"

"Especially one that's been vandalised. All that graffiti." Willow giggled into her hand.

It was us who'd graffitied the boat. Even now, so many years later, I could still remember the rage I'd felt as I'd defaced the walls. Now I could only smile weakly at the thought of it. "I reckon it must still be here." As I turned to look at the boats bobbing on the water, I spotted a movement out of the corner of my eye in the direction we'd just come from. And suddenly I got the feeling I was being watched. But when I looked more closely, there was nobody there. I must have been mistaken.

"Mhmm," Willow agreed. Her eyes were closing.

I laughed and poked her. "Hey, don't fall asleep. I can't get you home on my own. In fact I'm not even sure I can get myself home on my own. I swear the dock has started spinning."

Willow grunted, but luckily she opened her eyes. Leaning against each other, we staggered on. I kept getting that prickly feeling on the back of my neck, but every time I looked behind me the street was deserted. My alcohol-fuelled brain was obviously playing tricks on me.

The cool night air on my face helped to clear my head slightly. As soon as we'd left the dock behind us I found I was able to concentrate on the little shops that lined the streets on either side. And eventually we came to the shop whose sign said, in gleaming letters, 'Bell's Goldsmiths'.

We lurched towards the door beside the shopfront and, after a few moments, managed to get one of our keys into the lock and stumble into the hallway.

"Shhh," urged Willow, although she was making plenty of noise herself, hanging off the creaky banister as she climbed the stairs. "My mum will kill me if she hears us."

"Martha won't kill you. At most she'll make you a nice hearty soup to help you get over your hangover," I chuckled.

When we reached the first floor, Willow leaned against the door of her family's flat and gazed at me reproachfully. "She's only like that to you and your sister. Not to me."

I clapped her on the back as I squeezed past and headed for the next flight of stairs. "Coffee tomorrow?"

"Yeah. But not before twelve," Willow murmured without looking at me, and disappeared into her flat.

I grinned, then set off up the stairs. Luckily I could hold my alcohol better than my best friend. By the time I stepped inside our flat, my vision had come back into focus and I felt sober enough to tiptoe quietly into my room. My mum wasn't here at the moment, she was visiting our grandma in Ibworth – a long way from civilisation and from any kind of phone signal. But my sister Danica would already be asleep. And for a sixteen-year-old she'd been known to give some pretty fierce lectures, even worse than my mum's.

As I entered the room, our dog Reginald, asleep in his basket at the end of my bed, lifted his head drowsily before curling up into a ball again.

I grinned and went into the bathroom to clean my teeth and put my pyjamas on. But no sooner had I switched off my bedroom light than my conversation with Willow started running through my head. I sat on the edge of my bed, staring at the fairy lights wrapped around the bedframe, and remembered the conversation I'd had with my mum. How she'd said that being a goldsmith was her dream and I shouldn't let it influence me. That I should follow my own path – even though she knew all I wanted to do was to carry on goldsmithing, to spend hours in the workshop making jewellery. It was true I'd come back because of my sister, but I'd never been as unhappy about it as Willow had feared.

I fell back on the bed and tried to clear my mind of thoughts about my future, but it didn't work. I'd sobered up too much. And something was calling to me from the ground floor.

The gold earrings I'd started work on that afternoon, maybe.

I glanced at my watch. Just after two a.m. Far too late to go back into the workshop. But sod it – I couldn't sleep anyway.

When I got up and slipped into my cardigan and slippers, Reginald lifted his head again and gave me an almost reproachful look. He was so old that the fur on his muzzle had turned almost completely grey.

"I'll be back soon," I whispered, though I knew he probably couldn't understand. But as I stepped into the hallway, I heard the plodding of his paws behind me and turned around. He gave me the puppy-dog eyes. Resistance was futile. My heart was too soft for this hound.

"Okay," I murmured, picking him up so he wouldn't have to walk down the stairs himself, old and dodderly as he was. "But no barking, okay?"

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by Anne Lück



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And as I went downstairs, I felt that lovely warm tingle I always felt when I stepped inside the workshop.