

## Chapter 1

Something wasn't right.

Honor knew it before she'd even opened her eyes, as she drifted, dreamy, up to the surface of herself, waking to it, like a psychic nagging toothache. Turning restlessly, she tried to locate it, stretching, trying to shift - what? Yes, today, that's it, this shadow date. Shuffling across to Eliot, she tucked her body against the warm length of his, sliding her arm around his waist. He stirred and murmured. *Could I tell him?* She asked herself the same question every year. *Relieve myself of this secret?* The same answer came: no, she couldn't. That was the price of being married to a man raised in the strict Catholic tradition, even if he did pick and choose his commandments to suit his own convenience.

With a heavy sigh, she eased herself quietly out of bed.

At breakfast, listening to the chatter of her three children, Thea's eight year old excitement about today's school dance show, she reminded herself why she did it: to protect them – and herself.

As she drove to work, through leafy North London suburbs, the trees blossoming in the spring sun, sadness wound itself around Honor like a shawl. She shivered. *If I could only do for myself what I do for my clients. They tell me their secret selves and then they're free.* No wonder she could provide relief, she knew just what it felt like to carry that burden. *I envy my own patients.*

Awaiting her first client of the day, Honor glanced at her watch, picked up a notebook from her desk, and went to the easy chair at the far end of the room. Her new client would arrive any minute, and she needed to remind herself of the background of this new case: Tisi Clements, aged thirty four, referred by her GP, suffering from a relatively common case of anxiety and depression, with no discernible unusual features.

Tisi arrived a few minutes late, out of breath, and effusively apologetic, quite out of proportion to the transgression. Barbara showed her in and asked what they both wanted to drink; Honor noticed how exceptionally deferential and grateful Tisi was, as though it was unusual to be offered a perfectly ordinary standard of hospitality. And she addressed Honor as Doctor Sinclair.

“Tisi, please do call me Honor.... ”

This again drew the most profuse apologies. Honor wanted to put her at ease. “Why don’t I take a few minutes to explain a little about what I do, and what I could offer you, if you felt I was the right person to help you?”

Tisi interrupted immediately, in a breathless, high-pitched voice. “Oh Doctor, I know you’re the right person, I couldn’t be more sure of it. I actually know someone who came to you; she said you were a miracle worker, completely brilliant. So I know you could make me feel better, and that would be so great, it’s all been dreadfully difficult, and I badly need some help....”

Honor raised a hand to halt her, and smiled gently. Inwardly, she was slowing and deepening her own breathing, hoping that she could soothe Tisi with her calmness, and protect herself from being infected with the depths of Tisi’s anxiety, always a challenge at the first meeting. The very act of admitting to oneself that things are now bad enough to see a therapist, and can no longer be solved by a long chat with a good friend over a glass of wine,

can drive stress levels sky high. Honor was finding it unusually difficult to create the atmosphere of gentle calm that would lead to the trust needed for a soothing and constructive discussion.

“Let me talk for a while, Tisi. You sit back, make yourself comfortable; relax. Let me tell you a little about how we might work together.”

Tisi drew breath to speak again, so Honor smiled and raised an eyebrow at her. Tisi exhaled, gave a little laugh, and then sat back, though Honor noticed she sat with her back poker straight, and fidgeted, playing with her hair and examining her fingernails.

As Honor spoke, she took stock of Tisi’s physical appearance. She could learn a lot from her first impression of a client’s presentation, demeanour and behaviour. Tisi was an attractive woman, groomed to the glossy standard of a fashion model. Her shiny brown hair, past her shoulders, was expertly cut in a straight style, with some light streaks at the front. She was tall and slim, though quite curvy: a wide belt on a blue grey dress accentuated her small waist; though the pull of the dress across her thighs suggested a disproportionate heaviness. Subtle jewellery in gold and diamonds glinted at her hands, ears and neck. Her high-heeled shoes of soft grey leather and suede were an expensive, designer brand. If they hadn’t been meeting professionally, Honor would have asked her where she’d bought them.

Tisi’s make up was subtle and immaculate: smudgy dark eye shadow accentuated her luminous blue eyes. She had flawless skin, high cheekbones and a delicate jaw line: the kind of face that you wanted to go on looking at.

As Honor talked, deliberately, in low, hypnotic tones, she felt Tisi relax a little, though her energy never completely lost its jagged, brittle quality. Her immaculate exterior, alongside her frenetic energy and her incessant apologies, were a little disturbing: her outer poise and polish so at odds with her interior world. Such a disconnect between inner and

outer reality could be expected in therapy clients, but the mis-match was more jarring than Honor would expect from a client with such a straightforward clinical profile.

Psychotic patients, such as Honor encountered in her psychiatric practice at the hospital, were, in contrast, much more integrated: chaos and confusion reigned both inside and out, perfectly matched. For them, recovery was more obvious: they started turning up for sessions wearing the same colour socks, or in regular trousers instead of pyjamas. Diagnosis was simpler: everything was more clearly and definitely wrong, so there was less need to seek out the more subtle clues.

“I must emphasise, Tisi, it’s difficult for us to know how our work will proceed. I’m sure I can be helpful, but I don’t want to mislead you and promise outcomes that may not be possible.”

Tisi sighed, her shoulders dropped and her head sagged. A tear dripped onto her hand.

“But that’s not to say I can’t help you.” Honor felt her own throat constrict, in sympathy. Tears, usually so necessary to the healing process, were often her undoing; it had taken her many years of training and hard work to learn the best ways to evoke and direct them in clients, without feeling overwhelmed by her own old wounds.

Honor gestured to the box of tissues on the table, and Tisi took one, dabbing her eyes and raising her head. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Please help me. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s happening to me; I can’t control my thoughts.”

“Why don’t you tell me a little of what’s bothering you? So that I can understand something of what’s on your mind, and get an idea of how I might help you? Take your time.”

Tisi took a deep breath and launched into a long explanation, with many detours and sub stories. It took all Honor's concentration to piece together the basics of her story. Essentially, she was devoted to her son and daughter, aged four and six respectively; she worked full time, and found the demands of her career combined with motherhood particularly stressful. Her husband, to whom she had been (happily, she thought, until last week) married for ten years, was having an affair with a woman at work. He considered himself to be in love with this woman, who happened to be a distant friend of Tisi's, and he was considering leaving his family in order to make a new life with her - though he was not entirely sure. He criticised Tisi for her lack of attention to him: he felt neglected since the children were born, and this, he said, made him vulnerable to the attentions of another woman. In short, in his opinion, his behaviour and the resulting circumstances were all Tisi's fault.

Tisi was unable to tell this story without several bouts of tears; and tirades of anger against her husband, Don.

“And what would you like to have happen between you and Don now?” Honor said.

More tears. “I want it to go back to how it was before I knew. I cannot bear knowing that this has gone on for over a year. I keep thinking of times when we were together and she was there... or good times we had together, and knowing he was thinking of her.”

“That's very painful for you...”

“How could he? How could you do that to someone you love? I could never do that, never, I could never hurt him like this.” She leaned forward, her head on her knees, gripped by despair.

Honor waited until the deepest of her sobs had subsided. She swallowed the lump in her own throat. *If she was my friend, or my daughter, (especially if she was my daughter) I'd tell her to go home and pack her husband's bag and throw him out. Take the pain now, don't live with the anguish. And God knows, I should know. I've tried in two marriages.* But she wasn't her friend or her daughter, she was her client. So she must listen closely, question sometimes, and interpret occasionally. But she must never, never offer guidance or advice.

"I can see how badly hurt you are; and that's something we'll explore, over time, if we decide to work together."

Tisi sat up, dabbing her smudged eyes, and gazed at Honor with a haunting depth of sadness.

"What do you want going forward?" Honor spoke gently, looking directly into Tisi's eyes. "What do you want to happen next? That's what I can help you work towards."

Tisi's entire body tensed, her eyes flashed, and her jaw clenched; her face transformed into a savage mask. "I would like him to die."

Honor sat back in her chair and regarded Tisi calmly. Inwardly, she deepened her breathing. Some years ago, she had learned how to manage her energy, so that she could rapidly control and soothe her own emotions, while she was at work at least. She had never regretted the years it took to practice and perfect this technique.

"You would like him to die..."

Tisi broke into fresh sobs. "You see? I can't think straight; and I can't control my thoughts. I'm ashamed to say it, but I must, so you can help me, so you can stop me doing some of the things I think of doing. I need someone to stop me. I need *you* to stop me."

Honor gave a slight nod, steadied herself, and thought carefully about her next

sentence. “Tell me the thoughts in your head.”

“The other night, something terrible happened, that frightened me so much. I’d put the children to bed, they were asleep; Don was already in bed. I’d asked him to sleep in the spare room once I found out about Jackie...”

*(Jackie! Honor’s heart jolted at a horrible, ten year old memory of her ex best friend.)*

“... but he refused. He said that until we decided what to do, he’d sleep in his own bed... and since I didn’t want the children asking awkward questions or being disturbed by what was happening, I felt forced to continue sleeping in our bed myself. My daughter often comes into our bed at night. Don says that’s yet another problem, as if there’s some long list of problems, most of which I’m ignorant of, but all of which are my fault. So I had a hot bath to calm myself down; but the bathroom’s such a mess, we’re having a wall knocked down, there’s builder’s dust and tools everywhere, so I didn’t stay in there long. I sat on the toilet, and as I sat there I noticed, next to my foot, a large hammer, next to the builder’s tool bag.”

Honor was listening with growing concern. By and large, she believed that most things are better said out loud, but she also thought that, at the extremes, some things are best left unsaid. There are some things a person simply doesn’t want to hear themselves say: it’s too shocking. So she thought about stopping Tisi at this point.

But Tisi continued. “I picked it up, it was heavy in my hand. I was overwhelmed by the desire to walk into the bedroom and smash Don’s head in. I could imagine it, vividly, the hammer hitting him, hard, several times, and the blood, everywhere, all over the pillow, ruby red. And the satisfaction of seeing his face change.”

Honor knew she needed to stop her now. “And what stopped you doing that?”

“If only I could say it was compassion, or humanity; but what stopped me was

thinking how it was impossible to do that and not get caught. I could imagine myself being arrested. I wouldn't have minded that, it would have been worth it, but then the children, what would have happened to the children?"

"So it was your sanity that stopped you. That was your sanity, your understanding of consequences."

Tisi held Honor's eyes with hers. Honor could sense Tisi beseeching her for something, if she could only guess what.

She must be terrified.

Heartbroken, betrayed, and terrified of herself.

And furiously vengeful.

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Is she a danger? To herself or to others?

The question had come, unbidden, into Honor's mind, as she'd listened to Tisi's stream of enraged invective against her faithless husband. Honor doubted that she was a danger to herself, her fierce protection of her two young children would see to that. *But I wouldn't want to be in her husband's shoes right now, not for anything.*

If Honor could only forget the expression on her face, she would feel easier. Surely she'd been speaking metaphorically, when she said: "I want him to die"?

If she was a danger to her husband, there was only one course of action: Honor must section her for his safety; and take a woman away from her children. As a mother herself, it was hard to imagine a worse fate.

This was a dilemma she had always hoped to avoid. Where her best, often anguished, judgement could never really be tested: who knew what would happen in an alternative set of circumstances? She simply hoped that, overall, in the greater scheme of things, she was



doing more good than harm.

Her session notes would provide clues: she knew she was likely to over-react, on today of all days. The woman had disturbed her: vague memories and sickening feelings were signalling to her, as though a ghostly serpent, uncoiling, awakened ghostly old memories.

To calm herself, she settled into her armchair feeling it absorb and hold her, making her safe, as though the chair was imbued with all the knowledge, experience and wisdom of her long career as a psychiatrist. She leaned back and looked upwards, spotting, in one corner, a small and perfect silvery cobweb, its inhabitant moved in newly today, she suspected, as the daily office cleaner knew how Honor hated cobwebs. They can only appear in neglected places, she felt, places abandoned and unloved. She didn't want any of her people or places to have cobwebs. Or herself.

The room, her working home for so many years, was spacious, and softly lit. From her seat, she could look to the other end of the room, her office area, her antique walnut desk and leather chair. Her laptop computer was the only item on the desk: she didn't like clients to see it littered with post, files, pieces of paper, books lying opened at some reference page. She scooped all of that into the desk drawer before a client arrived.

Opposite her was the comfortable sofa for clients, with a soft pillow at one end for those who preferred to lie down, and a woollen blanket folded at the other end. Many clients had swaddled themselves in that, as they spilled out their tears of griefs long past, yet still so live. Insights and realisations can be shivering.

Honor scanned her notes: she wanted to recall as many details as possible of this therapy session. She needed a walk to clear her head. The day was fresh and bright, and the park across the road from her office was looking its best, with well-mowed green lawns, deep

herbaceous borders, and beds of purple and magenta petunias. She breathed in the fragrance of fresh cut grass as she walked along the neat pathways.

She passed the children's playground, the young mothers grouped together, one eye on their toddlers on swings, the other on each other, catching up on their news. Scraps of their conversations wafted by her: What age for potty training? Back to work or not? The world changed, but some things didn't: the pressing and crucial concerns of young mothers, who loved their children but wanted some fulfilling work to do as well.

She walked on a little further, leaving behind the noise of the toddlers' shrieks and the women's laughter, to arrive at a small wooden bench, under a willow tree, empty apart from an abandoned copy of the *Sun* newspaper at one end. Sitting down, looking around, she absorbed the sight and sounds around her, and recalled the end of her session with Tisi.

"Shall we meet again next week Tisi? What d'you think?"

"Oh yes please, Doctor, I know you can help me. D'you think I'm crazy?"

"You're terribly upset, that's clear; and you have reason to be. But it's important, especially for your children, that you're able to keep calm and clear-headed. You may have difficult decisions ahead, and I'd like to help you work them out."

"Yes, yes, of course, Doctor, thank you so much."

"But there's a condition, if we're to work together effectively, something I must insist upon."

"Of course, anything you say, just tell me, I'll do it."

"You must do no harm to yourself, or to anyone else; do you understand?"

Tisi looked down. "No, of course I won't. Though I guess I can have my fantasies..." she gave a short laugh.

Honor would have felt more confident if Tisi had met her eyes when she spoke.

*I'm pretty sure she'll be fine.* It was quite a step from wishing someone dead to actually murdering them after all. Who hadn't, at some point, wished that someone would simply disappear? Meaning dead, of course, what else? And yet, on an almost daily basis, the newspapers reported terrible acts of violence and revenge in families, amongst people who were meant to love each other.

No, she didn't need to worry unduly about Tisi. Not about her killing her husband. About her finding some kind of peace, well, that was another story: the pain of her betrayal by her husband would take a long time to subside, as Honor knew only too well. She was aware that aspects of Tisi's story were bringing back some distressing memories, not least the way Tisi's husband, Don, was using Tisi's behaviour as an excuse for his own. As though it wasn't bad enough having an unfaithful husband: being blamed was a second betrayal. And how unfortunate that Don's mistress was named Jackie. Honor had met a Jackie of her own, aged five, on their first day of school. They had looked at each other, with a childish moment of instant recognition, reached out their hands, and that was it. Friends for life. Though it hadn't quite worked out like that. Friends until ten years ago anyway.

Honor looked up, at the sunlight filtering through the long green fronds of the willow, and felt the sun's warmth on her face. She closed her eyes and sighed deeply.

As she stood to leave, she noticed the newspaper at the end of the bench and a photo caught her eye: a girl's face, looking vaguely familiar. (And the date, reminding her again of today, of Thomas. She pressed her hand against her heart, feeling it contract around its deepest wound.)

She sat down again and leafed through the paper to find the story. There was a double page spread about the girl, Bella, with a big picture of her, dressed in a tiny dress, and a close

up of her face. Something about her reminded Honor of ... whom? Bella was one of that breed of rather pretty, very available, not particularly talented glamour girls who seemed to fill the tabloid press and reality TV programmes. What had she actually done? She had stolen the boyfriend of another girl, and, since the boyfriend in question was a famous pop singer, this was, apparently, headline news.

Who did she look like? Reading with increasing curiosity, Honor discovered that Bella came from Cardiff, a few miles from the town where she herself had lived until she was in her late twenties. She stopped, gasped, and spoke aloud, "Oh! Madalena!" Dropping the newspaper to her lap, she leaned back, breathless. So, Bella was Madalena's daughter. No wonder she looked familiar.

*Madalena. Another ghost from the past, on a day of ghosts. More than a coincidence, surely? Jackie.... Madalena... two reminders.*

The article described Madalena as a stunning Beyoncé lookalike, living a life of luxury with Jack, her long-term partner (*so they never married then....*) and Bella, their only daughter. So she had finally got what she wanted, a wealthy husband, or partner anyway. It was true, she was very beautiful. Since she was about sixteen. Before that, she'd just been some gawky kid: Honor had no idea, at that point, how dangerous she would become. She had set her cap at Thomas with relentless determination, obviously thinking he would be the one to give her the life she wanted.

*I almost lost him to her completely.*

Honor stared at Bella's face, and held the picture out in front of her, to get some distance on it, examining her face. What was it about her? With her straight black shiny hair, and light eyes, she showed little evidence of her mother's ethnic origins. She squinted, trying to look through the picture as though it was a complicated magic eye diagram, looking

for its deeper, more meaningful structure. Her heart jumped as she saw who Bella was: the striking resemblance, that extraordinary bone structure. Bella looked just like Thomas's mother.

The paper crumpled in her lap. She couldn't be. Could she? She lifted the paper again, looked at the picture, and then searched the text: how old was this girl? Twenty-one. So that would be? Her brain calculated rapidly, pulling back memories, and placing them in sequence. When was it, the year that Madalena tortured her? The year that Thomas was torn, undecided.

Honor squeezed her eyes shut, holding back tears, and leaned forward, folding her arms across her chest. She swallowed, hard and painfully, stifling the sob that bubbled in her throat. Pressing the heel of her hand against her breastbone, she rocked herself a little, then sat up and wiped her eyes.

She held up the paper and stared into the eyes of Thomas's daughter.

Yes, it could be. It could have happened.