

## Chapter One

*Tuesday 17th March*

I am engulfed in emptiness. I'm not in my bed. I am not in any bed.

In the instant my eyes flutter open I know there is something wrong. Seriously wrong. It's dark. I'm suspended in a threatening, airless blackness. I'm lying down but am disorientated because I'm on a cold concrete floor. A floor that looks as though it's waiting to be tiled, but something immediately suggests to me, it never will be. My mind is lazy and unable to process why I think this. I can't remember when I last slept on a floor, a million years ago when I was a student and would bunk in on another student's room if I was too drunk to get home. I try to sit up; my limbs feel heavy, my head sore. I try to stand up but as I do so, I am yanked back down, my left hand is tethered. Chained. I hear the rattle of the chain at the same time as I feel the cold tug. Am I dreaming? My head pulses, swells and then bursts, I close my eyes again, my lids are like sandpaper scratching, I open them for a second time, giving them a chance to adjust to the darkness. Is it my dizziness that's leaving everything unfamiliar? Shaky? I feel slow, behind myself.

How much did I have to drink last night? I try to remember.

I can't. And then – this is terrifying – I realise I can't remember last night at all. I feel sick. I can smell vomit, suggesting I have already been sick. I should not be waking to the smell of vomit. Where is the smell of my husband's early morning breath? There is no smell of toast from the kitchen, no traces of the Jo Malone Lime Basil and Mandarin room spray that I sometimes wake to. I'm somewhere dusty, not damp, a little overwarm. Am I in a hospital? No. What sort of hospital makes patients lie on the floor, chains them? There are no sounds. My boys are not arguing in the kitchen, the TV is not blaring, no doors opening, slamming, no demands, 'Mum, where are my football shorts?' I wait, sometimes I wake to something more serene. Sometimes it is Radio 4 and the smell of coffee.

Nothing.

Alarm and horror flood through my body. My organs and limbs turn to liquid and I can't coordinate my movements. None of us are that naïve anymore. The news doesn't always enlighten or inform, often it terrifies. My foggy mind realises I must have been drugged. I have been abducted. The terrible thing that you read about that happens to someone else – someone other – has happened to me.

Panicked, I tug hard at the chain, there's no give. I scramble about in the darkness. Trying to understand my environment. I can't move far because of the chain, which is attached to a radiator at one end and through a zip tie that is tight around my wrist on the other. The chain is about a metre long. As my eyes adjust, I see that I am in a room that is about three metres long by just over two, like a standard guest room. The walls are manila. It is clean and bare. I am not in a derelict warehouse or abandoned cottage. It's bland to the state of anonymous. I imagine that is the point. I could be anywhere. There's no furniture in the room. None at all. Not a bed, a mattress, a lamp. Nothing to soften or comfort. Just a plastic bucket. I realise what this is intended for and my stomach heaves. I can see the outline of a door and a boarded-up window. I can't reach the door as it's in the far corner, or the window as that's at the end of the wall opposite the one with the radiator I am chained to.

I go to check the time, but my Fitbit has been removed. Not knowing what time it is, or even what day it is for sure, sends spikes of isolation and confusion through my body. Still, I have my voice. I can shout and maybe attract attention. I fleetingly consider that shouting will attract the attention of

whoever it is that brought me here. He could do a lot worse to me than chain me up, but I have no choice.

'Help! Help me! Help!' My voice shatters the dead unnatural silence. I yell over and over again until I become hoarse. The pain in my tender head intensifies.

No one comes.

No one responds.

The silence stretches. I stop yelling and listen. Hoping to hear something, cars in the distance, people in the street, birdsong, as the light has started to eke around the boarded window. A new day, but which day is it? Nothing. It's like I'm in a vacuum. Then, I hear footsteps coming towards the door.

'Please, please let me out,' I whimper. I'm crying now. I'm not sure when I started crying. Tears and mucus pour down my face. I don't want to be weak. I want to be strong, brave, resistant. That's what you imagine you'll be in a situation like this but it's beyond me. It's a ludicrous fantasy. I am just terrified. I will beg, plead, implore. Anything to stay safe. Anything. 'Please, please don't hurt me. Please.'

Then I hear the distinct sound of the keystrokes of an old-fashioned typewriter being pounded. A sort of shuffling rat-tat-tat. Slow, precise. Like a hostile countdown. Next, the hurried juddering whirl of paper being forcefully pulled out of the machine's roller. It is incongruous, this passé sound is the domain of busy newspaper rooms in decades gone by. Who has a typewriter anymore? There is rustling, as the piece of paper is pushed beneath the door. I stretch to reach it, but it is tantalisingly out of my grasp. I lie on the floor and carefully, oh so slowly, edge it nearer with my toes until I can drag it close enough to snatch it up.

I am not the villain here.

## **Chapter Two**

*Leigh*

*Sunday 15th March*

Sunday. The boys are out. All three of them. I probably shouldn't refer to Mark as one of my boys, not really. It's a bit infantilising and he's not that sort of man at all. He's very capable. Strong. Powerful. It's just shorthand. And it sounds a bit formal and pedantic if I say my husband and sons are out.

Plus, not strictly accurate.

My husband and his sons are out. The thought flickers into my head, nips hard and cruel. Even now. This sudden and brutal distinction wounds. Although, it hasn't been sudden, has it? Not really. I might as well be honest with myself. It's always been there. An imbalance that we are both aware of and try not to acknowledge ever. An imbalance that has been impossible to ignore for these past few months, Oli has started being insistent on highlighting the difference.

They are my sons. I always think of them as my sons, I love them as though they are. I couldn't love them more.

I really couldn't.

I have done everything a mum can. I have bathed them, nursed them, fed them, shopped for them, I have played with them – oh the endless, mindless games! I have taught them. Not just their alphabet and how to tie their shoelaces, I've taught them how to swim, ride their bikes, measure out cooking ingredients, fasten buttons, tie knots, tell the time, cross the road. I try to teach them everything I can about the world. I want to stuff them full of knowledge and fortitude and curiosity because these qualities will sustain them when I'm away from them. But sometimes – maybe it's all the time – kids are not pliable. They don't note or understand your grand motivations. They don't know you are trying to keep them safe, help them grow. They just think you are the strict parent, the one that obsesses about homework and teeth cleaning.

They are my sons. No matter what Oli says.

It's breaking my heart. Everyone warned me that this stage would come, somewhere in their teen years when they test boundaries, want to develop their own identities, set their own agendas, create new worlds, generally turn into little shits. My best friend Fiona jokes that Oli could be doing far worse things than calling me Leigh. He could be ditching school, shoplifting or getting high every night. I should be grateful, she says. I'm not, I'm heartbroken. Because this is not a stage, it's a protest. A point. It is true I'm not their biological mum but I'm the only mum they have, so you'd think he'd accept I'm doing my best. We used to be so close.

We had another row about it this morning. I filled out a parental online form about his Prom night. Just stuff about allergies (he has none) and giving him permission to get the coach that's taking the kids on to the afterparty (I agreed). Nothing controversial. He said I had no right. I'm paying for the bloody party.

Mark just said it wasn't the day to get into it. He always says that. We shouldn't get into it on a school day because kids doing GCSEs are under enough pressure, we shouldn't get into it during the weekends or holidays because it will bring the mood down. We shouldn't get into it on a day ending in 'y'. Although we are always into it. Oli seethes. Grunts. Sulks and is monosyllabic a lot of the time.

When they go out – look, this is an awful thing to admit – but sometimes, when the door slams shut behind them, and I know there are walls between us, the silence changes. There's often a silence that's claustrophobic and accusatory but I feel freer. Without anyone's gaze on me, it is easier to think.

They are visiting Mark's sister-in-law. Mark has stayed close to his first wife's family, her sister in particular. Usually I also go along to see Paula and her family, when Mark and the boys go, but today there are a number of reasons why I thought it was best that I leave them to it. I pointed out I have some phone calls to make, there is a stack of washing up to be done and the kitchen floor needs mopping. Sunday lunch has been quite eventful. While we were eating, our cat, Topaz, jumped onto the counter and paddled in the discarded, greasy baking trays in the kitchen, leaving a trail of oily footprints everywhere. He's a big, greedy cat and somehow, he managed to pick up the chicken carcass and throw it onto the floor, where it slithered and slid, leaving a trail of smeared poultry fat. Finding the cat hunched over the chicken carcass, gnawing on the bits of remaining flesh, led to a mini crisis as Seb panicked that the cat was going to choke on a chicken bone. He didn't, he just spat and clawed aggressively when I separated him from his prize. I'm not especially house proud. Before I was a mother and wife, I used to keep my flat neat enough but then one day I read a fridge magnet that said, A CLEAN HOUSE IS THE SIGN OF A WASTED LIFE and I realised I agreed with it more than almost anything else I had ever read.

I can't bear waste.

Especially wasted time.

However, even with my fairly relaxed standards, I couldn't leave the kitchen swilling in bird fat; the boys would walk it through to the carpets, Seb – who is a bit clumsy – would no doubt slip on it. So, I said I'd stay behind and make everything shipshape.

Besides I hate graveyards.

Today is the anniversary of Frances's death. Eleven years to the day since they lost their real mother. Mark's first wife. My predecessor. The forerunner. Mark is taking the boys to visit her grave. Frances's sister, Paula, her husband and their three daughters are going too. Frances is buried just minutes from Paula's house and Paula often visits the grave – keeps it tidy by weeding and supplying fresh flowers. Paula's three girls visit the grave so frequently that they talk about it in the same way as they talk about visiting their nana or going to the playpark. 'Shall we go and see Auntie Frances?' they cheerfully ask on a regular basis. I think it's because they like buying flowers at the florist – what little girl doesn't? Paula's kids weren't even born when Frances died but Paula keeps her alive for them, and for my boys too. She is forever telling Oli and Seb stories about Frances. She's in a unique position to do this and I think it's important for them to feel comfortable talking about Frances. I don't think she necessarily has to be the main topic of conversation every time they see their aunt, sometimes it might be nice if Paula talked to the boys without breaking off mid-sentence to exclaim, 'You like chocolate fudge cake? Of course you do, your mother loved chocolate fudge cake' (well, who doesn't?) or 'you remind me so much of your mum when she was your age. The spitting image.' The boys actually look like their dad, but I suppose they might have mannerisms inherited from Frances that I'm unaware of. I am not disrespectful of Frances. I understand that by all accounts she was a wonderful woman. Kind, patient, funny, clever. No one has a bad word to say against her (which honestly, I find a little hard to swallow – none of us is perfect). I also understand some people get a great comfort from visiting graves, they like to show their respect and demonstrate gone but not forgotten. I think grave visiting is morbid. And in this case, a power play.

It's just a fact that Paula and I are not close. We don't argue but we don't gel. Never have. We are polite with one another. I suppose her cool detachment towards me is understandable. Mark could get a new wife; she could never get a new sister. I realise if Frances hadn't tragically died of cancer, I would never have become Mark's wife, Oli and Seb's mum, because they were not the sort of couple that would ever have split up. They were happy. Mark would never have noticed me.

But Frances did die.

It takes a lot of strength and determination not to think of myself as second choice. Second place. I am constantly reminding myself, I'm not Plan B, I'm just a different path. I do visit her grave with them on her birthday and even Christmas Eve, just before we dash off up the M1 to see Mark's parents – although that drives me mad, because there are a ton of things that have to be done on Christmas Eve and all of them are time sensitive. I just think making a thing out of the death anniversary is a bit much.

I'd rather wash the kitchen floor.

I am going to do the housework first and then settle down to my telephone calls, catch up with friends and family. It will be my treat after the drudgery. I'll make plans for the coming week, discuss bars and restaurants that are worth a visit, remind myself that there are more ways to validate my life than my success – or otherwise – in parenting Oli and Seb, being Mark's wife.

Don't get me wrong. We're a very happy family. More often than not. Very happy. It's just sometimes – and any mother will tell you this – sometimes being a mum seems a bit thankless, a bit hopeless. Well, if not hopeless, then certainly outside of your control. I think that's the hardest lesson I have had to learn as a parent; no matter how much I try, I am not able to guarantee my sons' happiness and success. There are constant outside forces at work that disrupt things. Forces that matter to them more than I do. Friendship groups, strict or nagging teachers, Insta likes and follows, whether or not they are picked for a team or invited to a party, whether they think they are tall enough, too fat, too thin, too spotty. Whether they are the best at something, at anything. It was easier when they were younger; a cuddle, a colourful Elastoplast or an ice lolly solved just about everything.

I like to listen to music when the house is empty. Two reasons. One, to fill the void that is normally owned by the noise of video games beeping, music blaring and the TV streaming, and secondly because when the boys are home, I rarely get to pick what music is played. Oli likes hip-hop and rap, Seb pretends to like these things because he lives in awe of his big brother and tries to ape his every move – adopting his style, claiming his tastes in music, food, TV shows – much to Oli's annoyance. Because both the boys like hip-hop and rap, the angry lyrics and heavy, insistent beats tend to thud through our rooms whenever they are about; my preferences are not considered. No one would call me a muso. I stopped following bands when Oasis and Blur started to slip down the charts. Most of the music I like is blacklisted on Radio 1, but I do like dancing. I like a beat thrilling through my body. I guess I'm the musical equivalent to that person who says they know nothing about wine, except what they like to drink.

Sometimes I'll hear a track that Oli and Seb are listening to and I'll say, 'What's this? This is good.' Up until about six months ago that would make Oli smile, he'd excitedly show me some incomprehensible YouTube video and tell me facts about the singer: they've been in prison, they've preformed on a yacht to crowds on the shore, they gave away ten million in cash in their local hood. The worlds he describes are alien to me; I remember when the most surprising thing a pop star could do was wear eyeliner. But I liked to listen to him enthuse. I liked to see him animated, I felt honoured that it was me he chose to share his excitement with. I miss that. I miss him.

I once made the mistake of commenting that after hearing Taylor Swift on Radio 1, I considered her my spirit animal – because if you listen to her lyrics, she writes the things I feel. Well, felt, when I was young and vulnerable. It appears those things don't change for a woman no matter how woke a world becomes. It was around this time that I noticed Oli change towards me. When I said the spirit animal thing, he didn't get the sentiment, couldn't see my joke or my attempt at connection. He was hor-rified. Suddenly furious that I might encroach on his world of youth and possibility, crushes, and illicit under the covers (solo) activity.

'You don't even know what a spirit animal is,' he snapped. 'Another person can't be your spirit animal.'

'I know, I was making a joke!' I said, smiling trying to get him to engage. 'But she is brilliant, isn't she? It's as though she understands everything there is to understand about secret long-ings, triumphs and mistakes.' After hearing her on the radio, I had downloaded her latest album. I pressed play on my phone. 'Listen.' I began to dance around the kitchen. We first bonded over dancing, me and Oli. He used to climb onto my feet, and I would step with him, in a strange slow shuffle dance, the way my father had once moved with me. Obviously, he's far too big now. He's taller than me! He's a great dancer. I like watching him. It takes a confident teen to dance anywhere, let alone in the kitchen with his mother. That day, when I said the thing about Taylor Swift, Oli just scowled, said

Taylor Swift was crap and then disappeared to his room. I can't remember him dancing with me since.

Wallowing in the luxury of an empty house, I pump up the volume and listen to her touching lyrics and dazzling melodies whilst I mop the kitchen floor. She sings about young love and irresponsibility. Mark and I never had that. He was a father when I met him and I became a mother the day I agreed to be his girlfriend – or at least a stand-in-mother, an almost-mother. Yet as I listen to the words, I am flung even further back into days defined by spectacular failures, magnificent consequences. I like to dance, it's a great source of joy to me. I adore the sheer extravagance of it. The alone time on a Sunday afternoon seems deliciously illicit, indulgent. I start to sway my hips, move my feet, click out a beat. Soon the lyrics and rhythm infiltrate my body like a stranger. I give in to it. No, that suggests resistance – I jump in to it. I let myself go. I let it all out. I'm normally in control of everything: myself, my family, time. I'm relatively self-conscious, constantly aware of the impression I make. But when dancing, that drops away. My arms and legs loosen, I shake my hips and my head. I start to use the mop as a fake dance partner and spin and twirl.

Outside, the sky dips from bruised grey to a dark indigo as I clean and dance. Mark texts to say that he and the boys have gone back to Paula's for supper. Decision made. I'm not being consulted, just kept up to date. But I was only planning a sandwich tea, it's not like I can complain. When the floor is clean, and all the surfaces are gleaming, I put away the mops, cloths and bucket but – a regular Cinderella determined to go to the ball – I continue to dance. My stomach becomes clammy with sweat, my hair sticks to the back of my neck, and I am loving it! The pleasure, the freedom is absolute.

That's why I am so angry with Mark and the boys for taking it away. The pleasure. The freedom.

I hear them. Their laughter. Loud and unruly. It is pitch black outside now and I have the light on in the kitchen, it is as though I am on a stage, performing but also exposed. Mark, Oli and Seb are stood at the glass patio door, laughing like hyenas. I wonder how long they have been watching. They pile into the house, still laughing. Carelessly ridiculing me.

'Quite the performance,' says Mark. He kisses me briefly, his cold lips bite against my blushing cheek. 'I forgot my key, so we came around the back.'

'God, Mum, you dance like Grandma,' says Seb. I don't. Their grandmother still does the twist – to her credit – I'm a little more 90s. Yes, stuck there, probably but it is not the twist, it's a lot of jumping up and down and arm waving. Still, I understand the point Seb is making. Hurriedly, I pull my arms to my sides. If I could chop them right off, I would. I imagine reaching for the carving knife, clean and gleaming on the kitchen unit.

'Wash your hands. Thoroughly. Sing "Happy Birthday" twice, like we've been told,' I say. No one responds.

'You are such a loser, Leigh,' mutters Oli. Barging past me, he grabs an apple from the fruit bowl I've stocked, bites into it aggressively. He shakes his head. Not the way I did when dancing, not with joyful abandon, but with despair. Disgust. 'Embarrassing.'

I turn to Mark and plead with my eyes for him to say some-thing, I know he understands me, but he just shrugs. His eyes say, don't bring me into this; it's your battle. Sometimes being a wife and mother feels like death by a thousand cuts. I straighten my shoulders, force out a smile, albeit a small one – no one is going to think I am deliriously happy right now, but I don't want to cause a scene. Or maybe I do, but Mark doesn't. I am master over my own body. I choose what to reveal. I

keep my face relaxed, my brow unfurrowed, my chin stays high. Unreadable. You are not meant to feel like an outsider in your own tribe. It's unnatural.

'Can we get a dog?' Seb asks.

'No,' I snap. He's been asking this question on and off for about six months. Normally I'm more serene and make an effort to let him down gently but I don't have the patience, the energy. How would a dog fit in with my lifestyle?

Seb looks startled, his face is shadowed with a hint of worry. I instantly feel guilty. Twelve-year-olds shouldn't worry about their parents. He's an observant and kind kid. Funny and light-hearted himself, he wants the same brightness in everyone's world. 'What's wrong?' he asks.

How do I tell him everything is wrong, except perhaps him? Although even loving him is complicated. There is no pleasure in my life that is absolute. I am entirely to blame for that fact.

'Nothing, I'm just tired. Look, why don't you go and have a shower? I'm going to call Fiona. I'll come up and see you before you turn your lights off.' He nods, dashes off obediently, willingly, wanting to believe I'm just tired.

I pour myself a healthy-sized glass of wine and tell Fiona about Oli's loser comment. I try and fail to make it sound like I think it is no big deal. She knows me too well to be fooled. I'm glad, I don't want her to ignore the situation, the way Mark does. I need her to sympathise, to affirm that it's unfair, that I don't deserve to be treated this way. There's been a suggestion that Oli and Seb ought to see a grief therapist. Actually, the idea has been mooted more than once. I think Fiona was the first one to bring the idea to the table and she does so again tonight. She's my best friend. I love her, she means well but her timing couldn't be worse.

'Why would the boys need therapists?' I demand.

'To process their grief.'

'What grief?'

'For their mother.'

'I'm their mother,' I assert hotly.

'Their birth mother,' she replies patiently.

'She died years ago. They were practically babies. I've been their mother for nearly a decade.'

'Yes, that's my point, they were very young when they lost her. Too young to process it. Maybe they need help in doing so now.'

'I'm their mother,' I say again. 'I don't want some therapist poking about in their minds disturbing things.'

'What's the matter, Leigh? I know something is up with you.'

She doesn't ask if it is Oli. Is it work? She leaves it open-ended and suddenly the question seems wild and dangerous. What if I told her? What if I confessed? The question opens up a wide chasm of longing. I wonder whether I'll ever be able to close it down.

I can't answer that question.