



**‘One of my favourite Australian writers!’**

**LIANE MORIARTY**

# THE LIARS

**One secret could destroy everything**

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PART ONE

# BIRTHING SEASON

Female humpback whales go to extreme lengths to keep their babies safe. When a mother senses danger, she flips over and pulls her calf onto her belly, lifting it out of the water away from the predators. But killer whales are relentless in their attack. They separate the calf and drag it away. The mother fights back.

It can be a fight to the death.

# 1

## MERI

THE LOCATION APP ON MERI'S PHONE PINGED AS SHE WAS SHIFTING THE last cardboard box. She knew what the notification would say: *Taj has 0% battery. Ask him to recharge.* Her son was always forgetting to plug in his mobile, unlike his twin sister.

'What's in the box?' her husband asked from the other side of the garage.

'Mum's old *National Geographics*, I think.' Meri hadn't been able to throw them away in previous clean-ups.

After brushing off the dust, she slid a knife through the crusty tape. But instead of a magazine cover with the distinctive yellow border, she found a pile of exercise books. The top one had a heart-shaped label: *Meredith Carmody, Year 9 English, Kinton Bay High School, 1998.*

Year 9. The same as her twins now.

Turning her back to Rollo, she shielded the book with her body and flipped it open to a story in her neat teenage handwriting.

### *THE KILLING CAVE*

*A furious wind shrieks through the Killing Cave, echoing off the dark sandstone walls. It's an angry clamour of ghosts—the ghosts of tough men, convicts and soldiers who perished in their search for new lands.*

As she read, a shiver ran through her. What the hell were these school books still doing in the garage? She'd meant to throw them out years ago.

A memory came to her—searching through the big thesaurus in the school library to find the perfect adjectives for this story. God, such horrendously melodramatic writing. Not that Meri would be showing anyone, especially not Rollo. They never talked about the cave in Wreck Point National Park. No-one did. Hopefully the whole area was inaccessible now.

Rollo was stacking crates of snorkelling equipment on the metal shelves. If she did show him the story, would he brush it off with some patter about the past being past? Although the past was with them every day: they lived in her childhood home and the twins went to their old high school. Her husband even sported the same blond shaggy haircut as back then; Rollo couldn't be bothered trying a new style. That was his attitude: *If it ain't broke, don't fix it.*

'Do I need to put that box of magazines back on the shelf?' he called out to her.

She could hear the relief in his voice to be doing this job again—moving the summer gear off the boat to make room for a full load of whale-watching passengers. Forty *paying* customers. Maybe they could afford to get the leaks in the roof fixed at last.

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‘No, it’s not the *National Geographics*—just some of Mum’s old papers.’ After years of avoiding the topic of the Killing Cave, the lie came easily. ‘I’ll put them in the recycling.’

Meri lugged the box to the bins beside the garage. Out of Rollo’s sight, she opened the exercise book again.

*Underneath the howl of the ghostly wind is another sound—the deep drumbeat of a relentless sea smashing against the rocks thirty metres below. The mouth of the cavern opens onto the tall, majestic trees of the forest, but there must be a secret crevasse leading to a hidden pathway between the rock platform and the ocean.*

The description went on for three full pages. At the end, in red pen, were Miss Wilcox’s comments: *An intense, atmospheric piece, Meri. Well done on conveying the sensory details but I want you to dig deeper into this story. Tell us exactly who are the ghosts? How did they die? Why are they angry? Keep going and show me next week. Excellent work! 19/20.*

Miss Wilcox. Their enthusiastic young English teacher. Meri must have written the story in first term; later, they’d stopped talking about the cave, and their teacher had gone.

Meri ripped the exercise book in half, tugging at the old staples. Pages scattered onto the ground. Gathering them up, she scrunched them into a big ball and threw it in the bin. Then she dumped the rest of the exercise books on top.

Somewhere in those pages, adorned with pictures of Big Ben and the Union Jack, was a plan for her future career—working as a journalist on BBC television. A teenage dream, inspired by her father. Before he’d abandoned them.

Above the back fence glowed the same old view of the same old sky. A view she'd had forever. Tonight, it resembled an oil painting, feathery wisps of pink and gold clouds luminescent on a violet backdrop. Ha, she still liked descriptive words after all.

Twenty years since school and she'd never experienced a northern hemisphere sunset, never been to the BBC news studio. At least she'd made part of her dream happen: working as a reporter on the *Coastal Chronicle*. Not quite the hard-hitting journalism she'd imagined.

Staring at the clouds, Meri sighed and tried to follow Rollo's optimistic approach. *How good is life?* he'd say. She began counting out five things for which to be grateful.

1. *This beautiful sunset.*
2. *Another week of July school holidays, which means more whale-watching bookings.*
3. *Taj and Siena are happy, doing well at school, and hanging out with nice friends. Taj's strange pains from last term have disappeared.*
4. *Tonight, we'll eat the chicken casserole Rollo has cooked and watch a movie on Netflix. Ah, the excitement of a Saturday night in Kinton Bay. Oops, that isn't quite gratitude.*

She was trying to think of a fifth thing when Rollo appeared from the garage, wiping his dusty hands down his boardies. Most of the men in Kinton Bay wore shorts all winter, as if to say, *We live in a seaside town, it can't possibly get cold here.* Of course, it did. Right now, the temperature was dropping with the sun. Meri zipped her hoodie to halfway.

'I'm all done.' Rollo grinned. 'You ready for a drink?'

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‘Sounds good.’

Before going inside, Meri checked the location app. It listed Taj *At Home* because his phone had died—really, he was working at the fish and chip shop on Dolphin Street. With tourists returning at last, he had more evening and weekend shifts. Siena’s location showed an address in Harbours End—Jasminda’s house, where she was having a sleepover.

Best friends’ sleepovers: they had been Meri’s alibi for parties when she was a teenager. For a few seconds, Meri could smell the earthy dankness of the Killing Cave. Taste the sweetness of a Bacardi Breezer. Feel the hard rock jutting into her back, rough hands fumbling under her shirt. Fear and bewilderment paralysing her. Those first parties at the cool teenage hangout—Meri and her friends had been so excited. So naïve.

Swallowing hard, she focused on the sunset again. As much as she’d tried to block out that year, the fear remained. The danger of being fifteen—the age when everything had changed.

That was why Meri insisted on the location app now. So she knew her teenagers were exactly where they should be.

Safe.

## 2

### SIENA

THE UTE HIT A DIP IN THE DIRT TRACK, BOUNCING THE PARTY OF teenagers in the tray. While the others hooted, Siena gripped the cold metal edge with one hand and clutched the mobile with the other. She had to take extra care 'cos it wasn't her phone—she'd swapped with Jasminda. Mum would freak if she turned off the location app, so she'd left it at her best friend's house in Harbours End.

The darkness made it hard to see how far they'd driven into Wreck Point National Park. They'd entered through the main gate about five minutes ago. Siena had been wondering how the party gang broke in each time, but they just opened it with a key. From Hayley's dad.

Mottled trunks shimmered in the headlights, ghostly sentries lining the track. Forest red gums. *Eucalyptus tereticornis*. She'd had to practise saying the Latin name for her YouTube video on the last project: protecting koala habitat. Forest red gum leaves were their main food source. At school, almost twenty kids had joined her new koala club. No-one from this gang though; if they knew about it, the teasing would be brutal.

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The guy on her right, Axel, had a guitar nestled between his legs, and his thigh pressed against hers. Every time they went over a bump, he slid closer. Siena inched away from his touch again. But it was impossible to maintain a gap with so many bodies crammed into the back of the ute. Twelve? Thirteen people? Arms and legs entwined.

At school last term, Hayley and her friends had been talking about Axel—an older guy who kept turning up to the summer parties. He had some kind of connection: Was he Jackson's cousin?

'Have you been out here much?' she asked him.

'Heaps.' Axel took a swig from his VB can. Gulped then grinned. His eyes raked across her chest. 'You'll enjoy your first time.'

Siena let go of the ute's side and crossed her arms over her baggy black jumper. With her dark hair in two long plaits, she knew she looked even younger than fifteen. How old was he? Hard jaw, rough stubble, brown wavy hair nearly to his shoulders—at least twenty. Sleazy with a capital S. Any other time, she would've told him straight: *You're too old to be hanging with schoolgirls.*

Not tonight. Tonight, he was her ticket to the cave—a secret party in a secret location.

Although Siena had no intention of partying with this gang.

With Axel eyeing her up like another cold beer to drink, Siena realised, too late, that she shouldn't have come alone. But Jasminda had reckoned it would be easier to cover for Siena if she stayed at home. 'And that group won't let me hang out with them anyway,' her best friend had said. 'I'll ruin your chances.'

Jasminda was probably right: she'd only arrived in KB four years ago and her parents were both tech specialists who worked at the council. Unlike Siena's dad, who was considered cool, and had grown up with Hayley's father, Owen.

When the school holidays started last week, Siena had tried to find the cave with her mate, Kyle. Twice, he'd borrowed his sister's car and driven them out here on his P plates; Mum would die if she knew. Kyle understood the history of this place. He'd spent heaps of time in this national park; this was his Country. But they still hadn't been able to find the cave. Each path they followed brought them down onto the small half-moon of Wreck Beach, or back into the dense bush.

Her parents thought the trips to the national park were with Jasminda for a geography assignment. If they knew the real reason, Dad would say: *Why do you wanna dredge up the past?* And Mum would insist Siena go old school—use her newspaper records and the Kinton Bay Historical Society.

But Siena wanted to tell the real story, not repeat the same old lies. Even if only her teacher and history class heard her presentation, it might start waking up this closed-minded town.

The big bonus of this project was hanging out with Kyle. But when they hadn't been able to find the cave together, she'd come up with this plan.

The party gang always boasted about their wild nights in the cave. At six o'clock this evening, she'd tracked them down near Main Beach. The girls were from Year 9, the boys older. This was a normal Saturday night for them—quick feed from the fish and chip shop before driving into the national park for a drinking party.

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Hayley had introduced her to Axel. 'This is Siena. She's a nerd. The smartest in our year.'

Her brother would have disagreed: *You're not top in maths, I am.*

Siena watched Axel strumming his guitar, his voice deep but off-key. He had all the moves: flicking his hair; tapping his foot to the beat; the slow, sexy grin. A bad boy. That was why the girls were fighting over him.

'Let me come to the cave,' she'd said. 'I'll film you singing and put it online. I've got a YouTube channel.'

Hayley had made a face and whispered to her friends, but Axel was keen. 'Cool. The acoustics are epic out there.'

At the end of the fire trail, the ute rolled to a standstill. Red gums rose around them, branches stretching high above their heads, blocking the faint moonlight. With the engine switched off, Siena could hear the forest alive in the darkness.

A harsh rasping call. The masked owl.

A warning to stay away.

And then movement and laughter as the group scrambled out—some jumping over the side, others climbing down the tailgate. Siena moved fast to get away from Axel, onto solid ground. In the mass of bodies, Hayley tripped on the rubber mat and lurched off the ute. Siena was in exactly the right spot to catch her.

'Huh, Siena the virgin,' Hayley slurred. 'You're gonna have a good time tonight and get luck-luck-lucky! But keep your hands off Axel—he's mine.'

As if Siena wanted a good time with any of this gang.

Around them, the guys heaved cases of beer onto their shoulders. Bottles clinked in backpacks.

‘Let’s get this party started!’ Hayley shouted.

The others whooped and shone their torches crazily into the treetops. Jerks, they’d disturb the koalas in their night-time feeding.

From the fire trail, there was no sign of a path. But the gang set off between the low bushes, their torch beams creating circles of light among the ferns. Siena tried to memorise the entry point.

In the black of night, the ocean sounded close, waves crashing against rocks.

Wreck Point. Where it had all started.

‘Come on, babe!’ Axel grabbed her hand and pulled her along the track. Siena tried to extract her fingers, but instead of letting go, he caressed her palm with his thumb.

‘Wait a minute,’ she said, stalling. ‘I have to do up my shoe.’

She crouched down, pretending her lace had come undone. Ahead, sneakers pounded the earth, and the smell of weed drifted in the air. Figures faded into darkness. From what she’d heard, the gang would traipse through the scrub to the cave. They’d light a campfire, drink, smoke and party. They’d frighten the nocturnal creatures. Crush plants and insects underfoot. Disrespect the animals. The land. The history.

Siena shivered.

‘You cold, babe?’ As she stood up, Axel draped a heavy arm over her shoulders.

Her assignment would be worth it, as long as she didn’t have to put up with much more of Axel’s sleazy crap. They’d lead her to the cave and she’d come back next week with Kyle. Then

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she would vlog it on her YouTube channel as an introduction to her history assignment.

'Let's go!' Axel nudged her and his guitar banged against her hip. Pushing it away, she noticed the skull-and-crossbones strap for the first time.

Somewhere in front of them, one of the guys let out a howl, long and low. The eerie noise curled upwards and hung in the treetops. Axel's arm had crept around her lower back. Freaking hell, she needed to get away from him.

'You know what they call this place?' he whispered, his breath hot and beery against her cheek.

Of course she knew. That was why she'd come.

'You are now walking towards'—he paused for effect, like a bad actor in an American teen slasher movie—'the Killing Cave.'

Axel slapped her bum. To give her a fright. To get a quick feel.

Despite his corny performance, Siena jumped. This scumbag had no idea of the bloodshed that had happened here.

The sheer terror of the girl and her family.

*A girl my age.*

With legs trembling, Siena stepped forwards into the black night.

# 3

## MERI

MERI WAS DRIVING PAST ST PAUL'S, ON HER WAY TO THE HOSPITAL, WHEN her phone beeped. The Sunday morning service had finished so she could park in front of the sandstone church to check the text message.

*Jasminda's mum will drop me off after lunch.*

On the location app, the small circle of Siena's face was still at Melaleuca Drive in Harbours End. Meri had checked it four times last night and as soon as she'd woken up this morning. Finding that old exercise book had made her even more vigilant than usual. According to the app, Siena hadn't left the house at all. Good. No spontaneous parties on the beach. Her daughter didn't have a boyfriend yet; that would be an extra level of worry.

Rollo refused to download the location app. 'We don't need helicopter parenting in Kinton Bay, hon. We know almost everyone in town.' But sometimes she'd whisper the name of his old school friend and he'd stop arguing about it.

At least her husband agreed that Siena's passionate nature made her more vulnerable. Since primary school, she'd been on

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one mission after another. First, saving the loggerhead turtle, then the sea lion, then the southern corroboree frog. In their small high school, she'd been campaigning for LGBTQIA+ awareness, ending violence against women, and more support for mental health. Her latest crusade was back to nature again—protecting the local koala habitat. She threw herself into every cause with such intensity.

Meri was proud of her daughter, sure that some of Siena's activism had been inherited from her. At uni, Meri had marched against the war in Iraq and protested about refugees in detention. She'd written articles for the student paper on the gender pay gap and abortion laws.

News and newspapers, issues and investigations were in their blood. Meri's dad used to discuss politics at meals, condemning the greed of Wall Street and cheering on the trade unions. He'd grown up in London's East End, his own father a printer and union rep at *The Guardian*. The stories had fuelled Meri's ambition to live in England and report for the BBC.

Taj cared about causes too, but he didn't seem to feel things as deeply as his sister; it meant Meri watched Siena more closely.

'I'm responsible,' Siena complained. 'I don't need this stupid location app.'

'I have to keep you safe. It's my job as a parent.'

'But I'm almost an adult!' Siena would yell. 'Back in your day, fifteen-year-olds were working down the mines.'

'Ha ha. Smart arse.'

'Seriously, Mum. In your day, there were no phones. You had a free-range childhood.'

*And look what happened to us.*

\*

From up here by the church, Meri could see the township of Kinton Bay nestled in a horseshoe shape around the harbour. St Paul's had been built in 1864, the sandstone blocks carted to this spot on the hill. The town founder, Geoffrey Kinton, had envisioned equality for all men and a settlement without a church—a world away from the class structures of the old country. But as the town grew, so too had the number of births, deaths and marriages. Another founding family, the Redpaths, lobbied for a church and won. Meri had been at St Paul's for all the significant moments in her life—she couldn't imagine Kinton Bay without it.

The bay sparkled, the sunshine a silver shimmer across its middle. A few yachts and cruisers dotted the water, a jet ski zigzagged around Grotto Rocks. Rollo's catamaran was powering up the bay, about to pass through the heads and out to sea. A full boat of paying passengers. Meri sent a quick prayer towards St Paul's: *Please let them see lots of whales and tell their friends to book a cruise.*

Visitors liked the small-town feel of Kinton Bay. Five thousand permanent residents plus holidaymakers in summer: families from inland farms on their once-a-year beach holiday; backpackers who felt they'd discovered a hidden treasure; and grey nomads enjoying the slower pace of life. Some had fondly labelled it 'the seaside town stuck in the nineteen-seventies'.

But the town—and Rollo's whale-watching business—needed the tourist dollar. At the marina, two of the five restaurants were closed for winter. Meri suspected one had gone bust. She should look into it, write a story for the *Chronicle*. But there was no point: Neville didn't like to report 'bad news'. He'd prefer to promote the new wine bar opening in Spring.

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The town's development committee said the trouble with Kinton Bay was its location: a bit too far from Sydney for a day trip, and too small to compete with the nearby tourist hubs of Port Stephens and Port Macquarie. What would Geoffrey Kinton think of the town he'd founded? Scrambling to make a profit in summer, struggling for cash and visitors in the off-season.

A tall wire fence encircled the block of land next to St Paul's. The sign read: BLUE WATERS PANORAMA RESIDENCES, but it was a patch of dirt, the only building so far a small portable shed. Would Geoffrey Kinton have welcomed the developer pushing for multistorey apartments here? Better than a church, he'd probably say, but Meri foresaw a white elephant, vacant for nine months every year. Great views for the guests, though. Down below, in the green stretch of park along Main Beach, the bronze statue of Geoffrey Kinton glinted in the sun. Across the road stood the cafes, surf shop, and Mick's fish and chips, where Taj worked. The street behind had the supermarket, two clothes stores and a chemist. The *Coastal Chronicle* office was the next block back, along with the Red Cross shop and the Historical Society. Halfway up the other hill, on the road leading out of town, squatted two low, flat buildings surrounded by trees—the bowling club, and Meri's destination this morning, the hospital.

Behind her, obscured by undulating slopes and pockets of bush, sat her own house.

Sunlight reflected off the brass bell atop St Paul's. The UV index must be high today. She tapped out a quick text to Siena: *Put on sunscreen*. While the twins didn't remember attending the funeral here, they knew the sparkling sun had killed their grandmother. At forty-seven. Way too young.

But the sunshine wasn't going to last. The weather bureau had forecast one of the biggest storms this decade, starting tonight. Oh god, the leaks in the roof . . .



Inside Kinton Bay Community Hospital, Meri located Glenda O'Riordan in the Seahorse Ward. The older woman was sitting up in bed, flicking through *Woman's Day*. A section of her pinky-purple hair had been shaved and her scalp sported a large gauze bandage.

Glenda also had twins—Blake and Derek. They were two years older than Meri but neither would be visiting their mum today. From a young age, they'd been notorious around town. Meri's father had given them a weekend job at the bowling club 'to keep them out of trouble' but it hadn't lasted long. Funny how things turned out. Back in high school, Meri never could have imagined her own father leaving town and the O'Riordan twins' mother virtually becoming part of her family. And not in a million years did she envisage marrying their friend, the scruffy stoner Rollo. What had they called their gang? The Wrecking Crew. God, that school book was bringing it all back.

'How are you feeling?' Meri patted Glenda's hand and placed packets of chocolates and nuts on the tray table.

'Bit fuzzy from the drugs.'

Bruising spread across Glenda's face from her nose to her right ear. Bloody hell, she looked like she'd been in a brawl at the 'Time'n'Tide.

'You're looking good.' Meri offered up a comforting lie.

'Thought it'd be the fags or the booze that got me. Not this.'

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Two days earlier, Glenda had tripped down her back steps with a basket of wet washing in her arms. She'd landed head-first on the concrete path. Luckily Ninetta Nelson had dropped in ten minutes later and found her dazed and bleeding among the scattered shirts and undies. Weird, though. Meri thought Ninetta and her son Lance didn't usually socialise with Glenda now that their construction company was attracting big investors.

'You'll be fine,' Meri insisted. 'Think of this as a nice rest from work.'

Glenda had spent decades looking after others, cooking and cleaning. When Meri's father was managing the bowling club, Glenda had worked there. Later, during Mum's treatments, Glenda was the glue that held them all together: babysitting the twins while Meri drove Mum to specialists in Newcastle; preparing lunches and dinners; always chatty as she kept the wheels turning. Mum had appreciated Glenda's easy way; the twins loved her songs and stories. Rollo joked that she'd saved their marriage. Her help had given Meri precious time with Mum at the end; she would always be grateful to Glenda for that.

'I'm not used to people waiting on me.' Glenda shook her head. 'I reckon the kitchen here could do with my two cents' worth. Overcooked chicken and undercooked veg.'

'Let them look after you, even if it's not the best food.' Meri opened a bag of mixed nuts for her. 'Siena will come in this afternoon.'

Glenda picked out the cashews from the packet. 'You're blessed to have a daughter. Girls look after their mothers.'

Her own twins were nothing like the O'Riordan boys; Meri was raising her son to be just as caring as her daughter.

‘Taj is doing an assignment today. Whales again for every subject.’ Meri laughed. ‘He thinks the teachers haven’t twigged. He could bring you fish and chips after work tonight if you’re still hungry.’

For almost two weeks last term, Taj had been home sick with stomach pains. Unusual for him. All the medical tests had come back normal. Just as Meri had begun to worry about anxiety and bullying, the pains stopped. Now, he was catching up on his schoolwork over the holidays.

‘I keep falling asleep early,’ Glenda said. ‘What about lunch tomorrow?’

‘Absolutely. Taj will deliver Kinton Bay’s finest fish and chips to your bedside.’

‘With seafood sauce, please.’ Glenda grinned. ‘Did I tell you they’ve approved Derek’s parole?’

Meri managed to smile. ‘Great. When?’

‘Tenth of November. Only five months away. He’ll be home for Christmas!’

‘Wow, Christmas,’ Meri repeated. The worst kind of Christmas present for Kinton Bay. Rollo and Owen would start planning how to avoid their old mate. Not easy in a small town with one pub.

Meri glanced up and found a distraction: a large bouquet of flowers above Glenda’s bed, almost too big for the vase and the shelf. ‘Impressive bunch! Who sent those?’

Glenda’s grin drooped. ‘Lance and Ninetta dropped by earlier with them.’

Trust Lance to splash cash on the biggest bouquet. But why was he visiting Glenda?

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‘That was nice of them,’ Meri said, hoping Glenda would explain. ‘And lucky that Ninetta—’

Glenda groaned. In the hospital gown, without her usual bright blouse and gold necklace, she seemed shrunken and scared.

‘Are you okay? Did Lance upset you? Or does your head hurt?’

The older woman didn’t answer, but stared at the blank wall opposite her bed. ‘I want purples and pinks at my funeral,’ she finally whispered. ‘Same colour as my hair. Purply-pink balloons. Flowers. Everything.’

‘Fuchsia,’ Meri said automatically. Her mind was elsewhere: Mum’s funeral at St Paul’s twelve years ago, the twins asleep in a huge double stroller which took up most of the aisle. It was because of Mum’s illness that Meri had gone ahead with the unexpected pregnancy—she’d assumed Mum would have more days to spend with her grandkids.

‘What’s fuchsia?’ Glenda asked.

‘Purply-pink. Like the flower. Sorry, you know I work with words.’ Meri’s cheeks were burning in a similar colour. Oh god, did Glenda have some bad test results? ‘You gave me a shock talking about funerals. But don’t be silly, Glenda. You’re not going to die.’

‘I dunno, I just feel . . .’ Glenda reached for Meri’s hand. ‘Promise me something.’

‘Of course. Anything. You’ve been our guardian angel.’

Meri expected a simple request, like organising a substitute cleaner for her clients.

‘Use your newspaper. Use your police contacts.’ She pinned Meri with her blue eyes and tightened her grip. ‘Do everything you can to find Blake for me. I want to know what happened to my son.’

Forcing herself not to pull her hand away, Meri nodded.

But she couldn't follow through on the promise. She just couldn't start an investigation into what happened the year she turned fifteen.