

## Mary Grand

### The Key

I come into the hallway. Ben is staring at the empty hook. Oh God.

'I definitely put my car keys there before I went to bed-' I stammer, trying to smother the hysteria.

'Hey, it's alright. Calm down. I'll find them for you later.'

I pull my dressing gown tightly around me.

'I've laid up breakfast,' he says, smiling, but I stare back blankly and walk slowly into the living room.

The table is set, guest perfect. I hear Ben put the kettle on.

'Coffee?' he calls through the hatch.

I pause. I have tea, don't I?

He hears my hesitation. 'You prefer coffee now.'

'Of course. Thank you.'

Five years ago the final chapters of my life had been torn up by the sudden death of my then husband, Dave. Ben, full of charm and purpose, came into my life. We both took early retirement and moved to Devon.

Ben has thrived here. He is running societies, is popular and respected, and was recently elected chair of the parish council. It suits everybody that I stay at home.

'Here we are.' Ben comes in carrying the mugs and sits opposite me. First, he pours the granola and soya milk into our bowls.

'So, today I cancel your tickets. Is that right?' He speaks softly.

I nod. 'Lizzy is so disappointed, but I can't travel to Australia like this, can I?'

'Not on your own. I'm sorry I can't go with you, but the council can't function without me.'

'I understand.'

He munches enthusiastically on his cereal. 'The decorators are coming next week to do the kitchen.'

I cringe with shame. 'I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry. Still, it was lucky I came home early from golf.' He slurps his coffee.

'What if you hadn't? The fire could have spread, destroyed the bungalow.' My lips quiver. I stare at my untouched cereal, my hands folded tightly on my lap. 'Why would I put a pan on the stove just before leaving the house?'

'Let's not dwell on it.' He grabs an apple.

'Lizzy rang again last night,' I say quietly, not daring to look at him. 'She still thinks I should go sometime, thinks I might get better if I went out there.'

I glance up to gauge the reaction. He leans forward, captures my gaze. I remember the things Lizzy said about him and pray he can't read my thoughts. 'Your daughter may be a doctor but she is wrong about this. She hasn't seen you for a while now.'

'She remembers how much I used to do back home.'

I see the hurt in his eyes. 'This is your home now.'

'Of course,' I say quickly. 'I do miss her, though.' My hand reaches for the key shaped locket containing a picture of Lizzy. I always wear it even though Ben thinks I should put it safely away. I couldn't bear to lose it.

'We have each other now. It's all we need.' His voice is hypnotic.

I look out onto the pristine lawn. My old lawn was a mixture of moss and wild flowers. Here, Ben's lawn is immaculate. When I go out I keep carefully to the neat paved path. A seagull cries and in the distance the sea glistens with the lights of a thousand stars. I try desperately to feel joy, but fail again.

Aware Ben is watching me, I ask lightly, 'Did you enjoy the snooker last night?'

He takes a bite of his apple, and looks away.

'What have I done?' I ask, panicking.

'The recording failed.'

'But I followed your instructions. I'll show you what I did.' I stand up.

'Sit down.'

I obey. I stare down at my uneaten cereal.

He pats my hand. I blink back tears, exhausted.

'I'll sort out the money today,' he says, gently.

'Money?'

'Remember, you asked me to. You just have to sign now. I will look after everything: no more worries.'

Ben stands up, stretches, embraces the day. 'I'm off to shower.'

'Right. When I've found my keys, I'll go Sainsbury's.'

He looks at the sideboard and frowns.

'What's wrong?' I ask.

'Where's your mobile?'

I glance at the place he has cleared for me to keep my mobile and glasses. I'm sure I put it there after he phoned me from golf yesterday.

'I'll ring it from the house phone,' I say quickly.

'No, go and make a shopping list first.'

Glad to escape, I hurry into the kitchen. Turning my back to the scorched tiles, I check the fridge. I hear the radio and shower switched on in the bathroom. While I'm trying to decide what kind of milk Ben would like, I think I hear a noise in the living room. I feel uneasy, maybe because of Lizzy's words last night.

I tiptoe to the hatch, peep through, and catch my breath. Although the shower is still on, Ben is in there, dressed, opening the drawer of the sideboard. From his pocket he takes a bunch of keys, my car keys, and pushes them to the back of the drawer. I clasp my shaking hand tightly over my mouth and watch as he goes to the sofa, kneels down and rummages under the seat cushion. To my horror he

pulls out my mobile phone. He fiddles with it. I know he is switching it off. He pushes it back. I watch, mesmerised. He stands up, and the malevolent smile on his face terrifies me. I saw that smile years ago on the face of a girl as she slowly pulled the wings off a live butterfly.

I recall the words Lizzy's used last night: 'Gaslighting, narcissist, and sociopath.' They were new words to me. She had explained them, but they hadn't made sense; not then. I manage to step back from the hatch. For the first time I understand. I reach for my locket.