

**TRULY
DARKLY
DEEPLY**

VICTORIA SELMAN



QUERCUS

Sophie—

There's so much to tell you, I don't know where to start. The kite, maybe. It's not the beginning exactly, but I suppose it's as good a place as any.

You watched it transfixed, your nose pressed up to the glass as it circled, a black shadow creeping across the lawn. Flying on the spot, you said. The way you liked to dance.

There are kites in Massachusetts, but you'd never seen one before. Or maybe you just didn't remember, you were so small when you moved to London. Certainly you never expected to see one here. They get pigeons in the capital; sparrows, the occasional robin. Birds of prey, not so much.

'What's it doing?' your mother mused. 'Lost maybe. Poor thing.'

'It's hunting,' you said.

And you were right.

The sparrow was hopping about in the fallen leaves

on the trampoline, didn't see it coming. Didn't stand a chance. The kite didn't swoop so much as drop out of the sky, snaring its victim, pulling it apart right where you practised your tuck jumps.

Your awe turned to horror, gripping you the way the kite gripped its prey.

Sated, the killer returned to the clouds, leaving behind only the sparrow's legs spat out and discarded on the muddy, leaf strewn canvas. An avian crime scene.

I think of it often. An omen for the darkness readying to descend into our lives. For the wreckage that would follow. For the incomprehensibility of it all.

You cried; nose running, choking on your tears.

'It'll be okay. There's nothing to be afraid of,' your mother told you.

She lied, Sophie. You had every reason to be afraid. And it was not all going to be okay.

ONE

You think you know this story. I think I do. But how much do any of us really know?

I'd like to think I always had a feeling. That a part of me always suspected something was amiss. Though the truth is I didn't suspect anything. Of course, there are things I look back on now which make me think, Was that a clue, a sign? But if so, it's only because of what I learned later. Back then, it wasn't a clue. It wasn't an anything.

That's the problem with hindsight. It distorts memory, superimposes warning flags where before there were none. Makes you question yourself. Turns the past into a series of whys and recriminations.

Why didn't I see what was happening? Why didn't I realise sooner?

I know the answer. It doesn't help though. If anything, it makes it worse—

No one saw. No one realised. I wasn't the only one who was fooled.

*

The letter lands on the doormat with a soft *plmp* as I'm tying my Merrells; steeling myself to take the dog out and brave the biting rain. Wishing I'd drunk a little less last night. Fighting a hangover. Same old, same old.

I pause, hunched over my shoes, laces looped around my fingers, eyes snared by the flat Manila rectangle. By the name I know it contains.

The air has gone still. I'm conscious of my breathing; of a dull ringing in my ears, the drumbeat of my heart.

BATTLEMOUTH PRISON

The words are stamped in bold red lettering across the top of the envelope the way a farmer might brand a lamb.

My stomach knots. I bite down on my tongue, taste the backwash of acid mixed with my morning coffee. Smell the alcohol-stained sweat breaking out over my skin.

He broke out too, escaped his cell just six months after his incarceration. Another of his smoke-and-mirrors tricks.

I run my thumbnail under the flap, pull out the letter. Underlined at the top:

Re: Matthew Melgren

'Matthew', even though everyone always calls him 'Matty'. Us, the press, the true crime shows. All the channels have run them.

Matty fascinates people; his apparent normalness, his charming smile. Handsome and educated. A killer who doesn't fit the stereotype. He wasn't a loner, wasn't socially awkward, held down a good job.

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He had a girlfriend too, so no markers in that direction either. There was one of those straight-to-DVD movies made recently about his relationship with my mother. The producers got some stick for using such a handsome actor. It was all over Twitter; how they were playing up Matty's golden good looks. How it was an affront to his victims.

They missed the point though, those up-in-armers. Never mind that he still has more than his fair share of female fans sending him panties and porn, playing down his attractiveness would have been the real insult to the women he killed. Revisionist history. After all, if Matty had been some socially awkward troll, he'd hardly have been able to lure his prey, to get them to trust him. I should know.

Re: Matthew Melgren

My eyes move down the page, the air thickening in my gullet. I speak to my mother as I reach the end; head pounding, mouth dry. At first, I deflect.

'I broke up with Tom,' I tell her, steeling myself for what I need to say, gathering my thoughts.

'Oh, Soph, I'm sorry. What happened? He seemed nice.'

I scoff.

'Everyone's nice at the beginning.'

The words hang between us, conjuring the same face in both our heads.

'Did he hurt you?'

I laugh – it's hollow.

'He told me I should wear skirts more.'

'Oh Soph,' she says again.

It'd sound stupid to anyone else, but I knew she'd get it, just like I'd know she'd been knocking back the pills long before the slur hit her words.

'There's something else, isn't there?'

She could always see through me too. No point covering it up, not now.

'I got a letter. From Battlemouth.'

'Matty . . .'

I hear it in her whisper. It's still there after all these years, after everything that's happened. The yearning, the questioning, the love that won't leave. Straight away I think of the pearl-handled penknife I keep in my dresser drawer, the relief that comes from exorcising the guilt. God, I really am Pavlov's bitch.

Buster, my dodgy hipped German Shepherd rescue, has Pavlovian reactions too. Whenever he hears a man shouting, an unexpected bang or thump.

He senses my mood, stumbles over nosing at my thigh. I rub his ears. *Good dog.*

'Matty's dying,' I tell my mother. Not gleeful, but not sorry either. 'Pancreatic cancer.'

'How long?'

I shrug.

'Couple of weeks? Possibly less.' I take a breath, let it out slowly. 'They say he wants to talk. To meet.'

'A confession?'

I hear the hope in her tone, the desperate need for closure. My skin prickles. I need that too. And yet . . .

Truly, Darkly, Deeply

'Maybe a confession,' I say. 'Though who knows with him?
Last I heard, he was still saying they got the wrong man.'

'Will you go?'

'I'm not sure.'

A yearning for answers. The fear of getting them.

I glance down. My hand is trembling.

In it, the letter trembles too.

TWO

'I got a letter too,' my mother says.

'From Matty?'

'No.' There's disappointment in her voice, she covers it quickly. 'From the prison chaplain. A guy called Bill.'

'Old, is he?'

'What?'

'Nothing. Sorry. Ignore me.'

Old Bill is British slang. Something as an American, she never quite picked up. Just as I never picked up the ability to sit with my discomfort.

I resort to lame jokes when I'm nervous. A defensive mechanism, according to my therapist, Janice. Another deflective tactic. I've acquired a few over the years.

Let your guard down, one of my mother's Post-it notes reads. *Let people see the real you.*

Yeah, right.

'So, what did this chaplain say? Bill.'

'That forgiveness is healing. That I'd feel happier if I could let go of my resentment. That I'm the one it's hurting.'

Truly, Darkly, Deeply

'Christ's sake.'

'Don't talk like that.'

Bet you and Chaplain Bill got on like a house on fire, I think.

'I hope you told him where he could shove his forgiveness speech.'

'I didn't write back. I kept the letter though.' I know she did. It's in the box with the photos. 'You can read it if you want.'

'I'll pass, thanks.'

'I wish the way I feel would pass.'

Her sadness evokes a responding wave of emotion in me. I wish I could hug her, tell her everything's going to be okay. But it's too late for that.

'When I think of my life with Matty, I don't know what was real. And what I just wanted to be real,' she says.

'Does it matter?'

'It does to me.'

The pause is pregnant. There's so much I want to say to that, so much I shouldn't say. I settle for the thought so often in my head.

'That last girl he killed was eight. Same age I was when we first met. Her sister, twelve, just like I was when he was arrested.'

'We don't know for sure he killed her.'

'Jury was pretty sure.'

I hear her sigh, take a sip of whatever she's drinking. Gin, I imagine. It became her morning tippie during the trial. By the afternoon she didn't care what was in her glass so long as it kept her drunk.

'Don't you ever wonder if they got it wrong?' she asks.

‘No.’

I’m lying though, of course I wonder. How could I not?

What he did, what they said he did, has haunted me for so long I can’t remember what it’s like not to feel as though I’m suffocating, not to have to remind myself to breathe.

Even now, a part of me thinks one day I’ll wake up and find it’s all been a bad dream. That my hero’s name has been cleared. That he didn’t hurt those women, slaughter a girl who still slept with a teddy.

I followed the trial every day in the papers, have read and watched everything about the case since. I’ve seen the photos, read the crime scene reports. But as long as he protests his innocence, I’ll always wonder: Did they convict the wrong man? Did I make a terrible mistake? Was my childhood a lie? Or is the lie the story I’ve told myself?

‘He wrote me, you know. After his conviction. A love letter. Poured out his soul. Beggd me to believe in him, in what we had. Told me he was embracing his spiritual side. He’d taken up meditation, he said. Was getting involved with the prison charities. Even counselling some of the inmates struggling with depression.’

You’d have lapped that up, wouldn’t you? I think. Matty turning over a new leaf, you prompting it. Proclaiming his undying love for you.

‘Bill said he asked him to read it over. That he wanted to get the words just right.’

Why dupe one person when you can dupe two?

Her tone changes, a balloon deflating.

‘I never wrote back. He must have been so upset.’

Truly, Darkly, Deeply

'Good.'

My voice has hardened, varnish on rotten wood. A façade.
The slightest poke and I turn to sawdust.

'Will you go?' she asks. 'To visit him?'

For a long time, I don't answer. She waits, pulls at her drink.
I dig my nails into the scab on my wrist, hard enough to draw
blood.

'I'm scared,' I tell her finally.

'I know,' she whispers.

But she can't. Not without understanding what I did.