

The End

Blaxon Hall
Friday 21st June

Flames light the night sky, glowing through every window on the east side of the historical hall, slithering across the upper floors toward the west wing and turret room. Lia's room.

Fear grips my chest. Lia! Is she safe?

'Where's Lia?' I turn on Naomi, shouting to be heard above the roar of the flames, panic and fire engines.

Naomi Serrano stares at me, wild-eyed and silent.

I grab her arms and shake. 'Naomi. Focus. Is everyone out?'

It's a question I shouldn't have to ask. But I don't trust Naomi Serrano. Not now.

'I've... I've ch...checked everyone,' Naomi whispers, her voice hoarse. 'Twice.'

'Where's Lia? Tell me she's safe.'

'Safe? Well... I...'

For God's sake! Behind the drawn curtains of the turret room a light glows. A shadow appears. A scream pierces the night. Lia!

Ignoring the shouts to stop and the dense smoke filling the foyer, I sprint across the lawn. Lia needs me. Time is running out. The flames may not have reached her, but there is the threat of smoke inhalation... The fabrics, paint and varnish could release noxious gasses... There's no time to wait for the firemen to erect a ladder to her window. And if they reach the window before I get to her, there's no certainty Lia will let a stranger touch her.

I'm coming, Lia. Hold on.

I yank my t-shirt over my nose and mouth and race for the stairs. A cloying miasma of smoke stings my eyes and makes my breathing rasp, but after almost a week of tramping up and down these stairs, days going to and from Lia's room, I can find my way sightless. I might need to. The pervasive smoke is like wearing a blindfold of needles.

By the time I reach the landing and turn right for Lia's room, I'm coughing hard, my vision blurred. Screams ring in my ears, but I can't tell if they are echoes of before or happening now, and the heat at my back signals flames aren't far behind.

The smoke thins as I near Lia's door. It's closed. Good. Hopefully she's remembered to shove a towel hard against the gap.

Another scream. I'm not imagining them. Lia is in the grip of panic.

'Lia! I'm com—' Smoke curls into my throat and swallows my words.

Another scream, this one cut short. Cut off? Is someone with her? Is that why she didn't leave her room when the alarm sounded?

How did I not see this coming? Everything has been leading to this.

'Lia!'

Digging deep, I run faster, blinking away fear-driven tears. Fear can come later, when Lia is safe.

No screams. Not a sound from behind that thick oak door.

Silence is more terrifying than her screams.

I turn the handle and shove open the door. A rumpled bed. Empty. I've seen Lia curled up on the bed so often that for one splinter of time I picture her there: dark hair framing her cheeks, knees pulled up, thin arms wrapped around her doll. A girl on the verge of womanhood. A girl who never speaks. I push away the vision and step inside.

Lia isn't alone.

A man has one muscular forearm clamped across her chest, a hand covering her mouth. They have their backs to the window. Lia's gaze locks on mine. She struggles to get free, but the man grips tighter. Pain joins the fear in her dark eyes.

After a wordless nod of reassurance, I turn my gaze on the man.

I know him! Christ. How could I miss such an obvious link?

Because you were too busy looking elsewhere.

None of that matters now. I need Lia safe. And for that, Lia needs to trust me.

A dense, acrid cloud fills the hallway. Soon we'll have no options left. Shit. *Shit*. What do I do? I force the panic down into my stomach. Think. Think! Shutting the bedroom door would keep the smoke at bay a little longer, but it will also cut off any retreat. Our only other option—the window—is blocked by the man holding Lia. He isn't tall, but he's muscular and determined. Worse, he's a man with nothing to lose. There's no time for cleverness or negotiation. We need to get out of here, fast.

'Let her go.' My voice comes out raspy and hoarse.

'I take her, and all your problems disappear.' He wipes his sweaty face with his free forearm. He's holding a knife. A knife! It's more dangerous than I imagined.

A ladder appears at the window. 'You have more to worry about than me.'

'How so?'

'In about two minutes that will be your only way out.' I nod at the antique glass pane behind him.

Uncertainty loosens his grip. Lia struggles. He repositions his arm, locking her shoulders against his chest bringing the knife close to her face. I have to do something. Now.

'Do you think Dimitri cares if you live or die?' I ask.

He frowns. 'What's he got to do with anything?'

If not Dimitri, then who is behind this? I glance over my shoulder at the black smoke billowing along the hallway. If we don't move soon, no one is getting out.

The window shatters. He jerks around, dragging Lia with him. A sharp cry. Oh God, has he cut her? Lia struggles free and throws herself into my arms. He turns, raises his knife, his face a snarl. Blood drips from a crescent wound on his forearm.

A gloved hand reaches through the window and grabs his shoulder. ‘Steady on, mate. Let’s get you out of here.’

There’s no time to wait for the fireman to tackle him. No time to wait for rescue. And the heavily-suited and masked fireman might further terrify Lia.

I snatch up her delicate hand and pull her toward the door. She refuses to move. For a girl little more than bones and silence, Lia can sure dig in her heels.

‘Lia, honey, we have to go.’

She points at her bed, at the doll discarded on the floor.

Christ! We don’t have time to go back for a doll. Channeled by the narrow walls, smoke and ash coil like a snake ready to strike. Flames won’t be far behind. Even if I could coax Lia through the window and down the ladder, we can’t get to it. It’s blocked by a man too stupid to know he’s lost. And soon the fireman will need to decide between his own life and that of a madman who refuses to be rescued.

‘Cover your nose and mouth, like this.’

I show Lia what to do with her shirt. She nods and follows my instructions. Motioning her to stay, I leap back into the room, grab the doll, tucking it into the waistband of my jeans, and then drag Lia along the hallway toward the encroaching smoke. Despite my impromptu mask, my eyes sting and my mouth fills with the taste of ash.

Lia slows, whimpers. I understand her fear, but if we don’t move, we are not going to make it. The stairs might already be smoldering. And if they aren’t yet gone, I’m going to have to dig even deeper to find the courage to drag Lia down into the smoke-filled foyer. For all I know we might be running headlong into an inferno.

God, please help us get out alive. Don’t let us die here. Don’t abandon Lia.

I wrap my arm around her narrow shoulders. ‘Trust me, Lia. Please, trust me.’

We must keep moving. We’ve no other option.

Please don’t let us die.

‘Lia!’ A male voice bellows from somewhere below. ‘Where are you?’

Thank God. Oh, thank God!

‘Here.’ My yell comes out weak. Smoke invades my throat, but I force the words out. ‘I’ve... I’ve got... her.’

A hellish angel in breathing apparatus appears through the ash-filled smog, a second apparatus dangling from his hand. Lia tenses, a bowstring ready to snap.

He removes his mask. Smiles as he blinks watering eyes. ‘It’s okay, sweetheart.’

Lia relaxes. I push her forward. There’s no time to process my surprise at her response to a stranger. ‘Go with him, Lia.’

He puts the second mask over Lia’s face, his touch gentle, then hands me his own apparatus. ‘Take it.’

I snatch it from his hands and fill my lungs. Once then twice. The sweet oxygen is like a hit of amphetamine. I’m still sucking air when he grabs my hand and hauls us toward the flame-licked stairs. The hungry crackle and pop almost drowns out the frenzy outside. The stained

glass at the top of the stairs explodes. The roof in the west wing crashes through the landing. Lia screams. Freezes.

The doll. It always soothes her. I tug it from my waistband and press it into her arms. She stops screaming but still won't move. Shit! There's only one choice.

After one last, long, sweet breath, I hand back the breathing apparatus. 'Go. Take her.'

A shake of his head. 'I'm not leaving you.'

Through the smoke and the mixture of tears and sweat, I can barely see, but know he's serious. Any hesitation lessens all our chances of survival. 'Carry her. I'll follow.'

A razor-sharp nod. 'Keep hold of my jacket.'

He pulls on the apparatus, gently strokes Lia's hair then lifts her over his shoulder. I clasp his thick fireman's jacket with one hand and grab the bannister with the other. It's already smoldering, too hot to grip, but in our dash down the burning steps I'm afraid of tripping. The flames are at my back, so close my shirt is hot against my skin.

We are halfway down the stairs when Lia drops her doll. Her cries are stifled by her mask, but she struggles so hard I'm afraid he'll drop her. I release my grip on his jacket, squat and feel around for the doll.

'Leave it.' His muffled voice is barely audible above the roar of the fire. He's two steps below me, smoke billowing around his barely discernable shape. 'Come. Now!'

My fingers find the fabric of the dolls dress. I snatch it up. 'Go. Go!'

The fire is eating its way through the foyer. Flames leap through the dark haze of smoke and ash. I glance over my shoulder. Bright, flickering flames curl along the stair treads and railing. The intense heat leaves my skin feeling raw. Every shallow breath drags in fumes, smoke, suffocating heat. It's difficult to breathe, hard to fight off the dizziness, impossible to make my limbs obey my brain.

Keep moving forward. Keep going. You can do it.

No longer able to see, hearing only the fire raging towards me, feeling its heat, I reach for him but find only air. Oh god. This is it. This is how it ends.

Don't let me die here. Come back for me. Please, come back for me.

And then I feel rough fabric, a firm body. He's back. My avenging angel.

Where's Lia? Is she safe? I long to ask, but can't speak, can barely breathe, and my thoughts evaporate into the pluming smoke. His hand touches mine. I realise I still have the doll. Lia's doll.

Lia is the key to all this. I must tell him. Now. Before it's too late.

He pulls me forward, urging me to move, but I stumble. My foot punches through the smoldering stair tread. I look up into his masked face and know the truth.

It's already too late.

And then the stairs collapse and I'm falling, falling fast, until there is nothing but a deep, black oblivion.

PART 1

BODY OF EVIDENCE

Bryant

Blaxon Hall
Saturday June 22nd

Detective Inspector Jaqueline Bryant flashed her credentials for the third time in the space of as many minutes. DS Driscoll, the detective in charge of the scene, gave it half a glance and sniffed.

‘A bit off your patch, aren’t you?’ He looked her over before directing his attention to Forrester looming behind her. ‘What brings you down here?’

Bryant ignored her instinct to snap. ‘We have reason to believe your fire is linked to an ongoing investigation.’

Driscoll’s flat eyes, beer belly and wide legged stance spoke volumes. ‘Is that right?’

Bryant didn’t bother to answer. Words were one thing she didn’t waste. She’d tangled with his type before and, frankly, she was sick of the bullshit. She was here to do a job. And do it she would. It would just go a whole lot easier once he got past his small-minded preference for male colleagues. Over his shoulder were the burnt-out remains of Blaxon Hall. The elegant Georgian building that had, until approximately twenty-three hundred hours on June 21st, housed twenty-four permanent residents and assisted in the rehabilitation of several dozen brain trauma cases. Now it was a gutted and blackened ruin. The roof was completely gone. All the windows in the upper floor and most on the ground floor were missing. Blackened limestone sills and scorched brick swallowed the sunshine. Though the flames had long been extinguished, ash still drifted in the breeze and the acrid smell of burnt timber filled the air.

She nodded at the building. ‘How much was saved?’

Driscoll observed her a moment longer and then with a sigh turned to face the ruin. ‘What was left of the roof caved in under the weight of all that water. Floors are gone, along with most of everything inside. Turret room to your right was the last to go.’

Must have been some blaze. ‘How far are you in the gathering of evidence?’

He shot her a sideways look and for a moment she expected another pointless bout of chest beating. ‘Safety inspector declared it safe around mid-morning. Fire investigators have done about as much as they can. Forensic boys and girls are in there now.’

‘Deliberate?’ Forrester asked.

‘Accelerant was used. Started in the laundry, looks like. Waiting on confirmation of the fuel source. Why? You got information that could help us?’

She flashed a brittle smile. Making nice wasn't her priority, but blokes like Driscoll needed to feel special. 'Maybe. You found a body, yeah?'

Driscoll nodded. 'Dead center of the fire seat, no pun intended. Blind Freddy could tell you he's your arsonist.'

Bryant was inclined to agree, but assumptions never made for good investigations and those who peddled them were more likely to narrow their focus too soon. 'He?'

Driscoll grinned. 'Arson's one of the few places you women haven't infiltrated.'

Tosser. She'd keep her mind open to possibilities. 'Only the one deceased?'

'Bound to be more.' Driscoll said it with a certainty that grated on her nerves, but she managed to keep that irritation to herself. Just about. 'Fire investigator took it upon himself to grab the names and addresses of the survivors. Got three of my team going through it again now. Can't be too careful, can you?' He looked at her with a wry glint. 'Don't like others doing my job.'

Well, that was one attitude she could respect.

Bryant looked at the shell of the once-elegant Hall. Three or four years ago there had been some controversy about the elegant mansion becoming a brain injury rehabilitation center. More recently, and probably more pertinent to recent events, was the local anger over a large swathe of the grounds being developed for affordable housing. There'd been a threat aimed at the Hall, but the evidence had been thin, at best. And the developer, who also owned the Hall and was responsible for it becoming one of the better rehab facilities outside of London, had assured them the Hall was well protected. She should have known better than to leave it at that. The developer was Tyrone Garner. And she'd since learned he had a history with the man at the center of her investigation—Dimitri Poitrowski.

The din of voices drew her attention to the media crowd lined up behind the outer cordon. They were calling out to anyone within earshot and woe betide anyone who looked their way. Microphones were pushed into the faces of unwary bystanders. Judging by the soot-smeared uniforms, some were Blaxon Hall staffers.

'Might want one of your PCs to keep the staff away from the press, Driscoll.'

Driscoll muttered something into his phone and Bryant perused the crowd. Charlotte Ashe would be here somewhere. So would Tyrone Garner. Neither of them was answering their flippin phone.

'Right, time to get back to it,' Driscoll snapped. 'Unless you want to waste a bit more time telling me how to do my job.'

Tempting, but with Driscoll that would be a waste of breath. 'How many unaccounted?'

'Three. One recovered. Too crispy for ID at this stage.'

Three. Christ. 'You got names of the missing?'

'Of course.'

When he didn't speak, she raised an eyebrow. 'Gonna share?'

'When you explain how they could be related to your active investigation.'

Jesus. She didn't have time for this. Bryant looked away for fear he'd read in her face what she really thought of him. Compassion and pity she could hide—she could play cold and heartless until the cows came home—but she'd never learned to mask her irritation. Until her recent promotion to Detective Inspector she'd never had to worry what her colleagues or the

general public thought of her. Now, according to her DCI, she had to be “*sensitive to others’ needs*”—just so they’d do their damn job. And that just pissed her off. Clearly this overlarge yapping dog at her side wouldn’t play along until she tossed him a bone.

‘We think your recovered body is a suspect in an ongoing investigation into organised crime,’ she said.

‘Organised crime?’ His eyebrows shot up. ‘Out here?’

Bryant gave a non-committal tilt of her head then turned her attention to the white marquee with its enclosed sides and protection detail. ‘Doctor Clauson with the body?’

‘Body’s in the Holding Audit Area, yes. As per protocol.’

Obviously it was as per flippin protocol. She’d yet to find a crime scene that didn’t follow the prescribed rules; arses would be kicked if she did. Victim identification, admissible forensic evidence, convictions—they all relied on following the correct procedures.

Another brittle smile for Driscoll. ‘Right. Well, let’s see what you’ve recovered.’

Forrester fell into step beside her as she strode toward the white marquee that formed the HAA and protected the contents from prying eyes. ‘You can wipe that smile off your face, Johnny boy.’

‘Way to go with the charm offensive, Boss.’

‘Charm all the way, me.’ She flashed him a proper smile. ‘And don’t call me Boss.’

‘What do you prefer—darling?’

She shot him a look and found him grinning. ‘Pillock. Go make yourself useful. Find Tyrone Garner. See what he’s got to say for himself. Six months ago he assured us this place was a safe haven.’ She waved her hand at the blackened husk and brushed aside the knowledge that she hadn’t taken the threat seriously. ‘Now look at it.’

Forrester nodded and headed for the group corralled on the lawn. Bryant strode toward the tent, ready to flash her credentials yet again. They’d set up the HAA well inside the inner cordon. Two police officers guarded the tent from the prying eyes of the news teams lined up along the outer perimeter while another kept a log of who entered and left. Inside was the reason Peta Clauson, the attending Home Office pathologist, had called her personally.

The young police woman keeping log greeted her. ‘Ma’am?’

Bryant flashed her credentials glad Forrester was no longer at her side. She hated Ma’am more than Boss. The constable noted down her details and checked her watch before recording the time then pulled aside the flap. Bryant took a moment to prepare herself for the onslaught and put aside the question that had been circling her thoughts since she got the call.

Why the hell wasn’t Charlotte Ashe answering her phone?