

She's Mine

Paradise can be deadly . . .



CLAIRE S LEWIS

I scan the water, then the beach for any sign of a child, any sign of a body, any sign at all.

The flags call to mind the news I caught on local TV early this morning when leaving the hotel. Investigators are still waiting for the verdict of marine experts on whether rips on the lilo were caused by a shark attack. The newsreel referred to a recent attack by a rogue Caribbean reef shark on a tourist participating in an eco-dive in shallow waters off the reef. Local dive companies were blamed for provoking aggressive behaviour in the sharks by attracting them with lumps of meat.

I keep walking.

Scenes from the movie *Jaws* crowd into my head, overlaid with my last image of Katie splashing about on the yellow lilo...

But I'm letting my imagination get carried away. After all, the beach was crowded. Surely someone would have seen the lilo drifting out to sea? Why didn't someone raise the alarm...? Now that I think about it calmly, I find it hard to believe that not one of those fat, rubbernecking tourists sitting on that beach would have noticed a little girl being swept out to sea on a bright yellow lilo. There's something that doesn't quite stack up.

Beyond the viewpoint, the hiking trail runs close to the rough tarmac road leading from the main road to the hotel. There's very little traffic today as local beaches are closed and day-trippers have diverted to the beaches in the north of the island. An occasional van servicing the hotel thunders past as I hike the trail towards the marina. A police patrol car glides by slowly, then a second police car, about ten minutes later. Part of the search operation, I guess. Otherwise the road is empty and uncannily quiet. The sound of my trainers scrunching on loose stones and dry grasses fills the air along with the incessant drilling of cicadas.

I carry on hiking for another forty minutes or so when my reverie is broken by a clatter in the distance, the rattle of wheels bumping over rutted tarmac. The engine noise gets steadily louder as a vehicle approaches along the winding road. The noise is unnerving, yet somehow familiar. It sounds like a Jeep. Could it be Damien driving back to the hotel at last? Does he know about Katie? What on earth am I going to say to him? I shrink at the thought of having to break the news. Saying the unbearable words 'Katie's lost, she disappeared on the beach, we think she drowned,' will make it all the more real, more hopeless.

I stop uncertainly in my tracks. My mind is groping at something, that disturbing feeling of waking from a half-forgotten dream and struggling to remember some dark and threatening scene. My sense of foreboding grows. And it's not the black dog of guilt (yes, for all my bravado, I can't help but blame myself) that's been howling at me since yesterday.

Like a hunted animal, I sense danger. I quicken my pace, break into a jog. Now I'm sprinting down the track. The gorse rips against my arms but there's nowhere to hide, nowhere to run to.

As it rounds the bend, I immediately recognise the brassy orange jeep Damien rented at the airport.

An idea takes shape, a sudden creeping fear.

Oh my God... it's him, of course... it's Damien.

He's taken Katie. It seems so obvious now. It all fits. The image of the stick-figure hangman drawn in red lipstick, flashes before my eyes – both a death threat and a clue. The red letters 'D' 'I' and 'E', separated by dashes: spaces for missing letters? Like the children's game? Fill in the blanks and you get 'Damien.'

I've been such an idiot!

I should have told the police about his obsessive interest in Katie, and the trips to the park, and the time I caught him going through Christina's private papers in her desk, and the killer cocktail, and his lie about meeting us in the play area, and his mysterious absence from the hotel since yesterday afternoon. And the yellow lilo... yellow, like in Jaws... his sick idea of a joke?

'Oh shit!' I say out loud, as he spins to a squealing halt alongside me on the road.

He leans out of the window, leering, his head cocked to one side.

'Scarlett! Fancy meeting you here!'

He's unshaven, with wild eyes, and I smell alcohol on his breath. His white shirt is creased and stained. He looks as if he has slept in his clothes. As he lunges out, I take a step back from the Jeep and look quickly up and down the empty trail.

I'm on my own.

'Hop in, gorgeous. I'll give you a ride.'

Now I am truly scared.

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Photograph One

18 October 1997: Oriel College, Oxford

Forgive me, you're not in this photograph but it seems like a good place to start – the end of your first week as an undergraduate in Oxford. I'm sure you'd remember the occasion. I kept the invite. The Oriel College Boat Club Freshers'97 Welcome Bop. You missed a great party, a party with a difference.

This was taken just after we arrived. We're standing a little awkwardly in St Mary's Quad posing for a group photograph in front of a black-and-white timber-framed building called, fittingly enough, 'The Dolls' House.'

What a stunning collection of extremely pretty, female undergraduates (and me, the imposter, but just as beautiful as the rest), all dolled up to the nines, a hand-picked selection from the intake of female freshers, outnumbering the male undergraduates in the photograph by about three to one.

The male undergraduates are also pleasing on the eye (all bar one, their puny cox) – eight tall, strapping second-year undergraduates with arrogant eyes and confident smiles, all wearing matching ivory boating blazers with navy blue piping and cuff rings bearing the three-ostrich-feather emblem on the left breast of the Oriel College Men's First Eight.

Look, there's James, holding out a champagne glass to that curvaceous brunette in the emerald-green cocktail dress. And over here, in the right-hand corner, it's me in your daringly low-cut, scarlet silk evening gown, clinking glasses with the president of the Boat Club. Do you remember him? Hamish Clarke, James' best friend.

We're all looking so very charming, restrained and civilised here. But believe me, by the end of the evening it was carnage.

We were so free in those days – before the tyranny of the Internet and the endless scrutiny of social media. I don't want to boast, but let's just say, the Monica Lewinski treatment was all the rage at the time.

We were so enthusiastic and so eager to please.

We gave those eight, presumptuous young gods (and their diminutive cox), more than their fair share – beyond their wildest imaginings!

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It was coming to the end of Freshers' Week and Lara was enjoying her freedom and beginning to feel less strange in her new college surroundings. She was more than a little put out by the sudden arrival of Gabrielle, who was training in London as a fashion photographer and had driven up unannounced to Oxford, to ambush her for the weekend.

'What are you doing here?' said Lara in dismay as she opened the door.

'Why should you have all the fun?' laughed Gabrielle as she kissed her on the cheek. 'I want you to introduce me to some good-looking guys – and they've got to be rich and eligible too.'

Just when I thought I had got away from her, thought Lara. Here she comes again, barging her way into my life...

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When Lara had gone down for breakfast on the Friday morning of Freshers' Week, she had found an invitation sticking out of her pigeonhole.

The rowers of the Oriel College Men's First Eight cordially invite you to Champagne and Dancing at the Oriel College Freshers '97 Welcome Bop this Saturday 18 October from 8 'til early. Venue: MacGregor Room, Third Quad, Oriel College. Dress: Sexy but smart. No plus ones.

Gabrielle spotted the invitation on Lara's desk the minute she barged through the doorway just before dinner on the Friday evening.

'Wow! This looks just the thing,' she said.

Lara groaned.

'There's no way I'm going to that. No one else seems to have been invited from my college and I don't know anyone at Oriel.'

'Oh, don't be such a bore,' said Gabrielle. 'Live dangerously for once in your life!'

'Anyway, I'm partied out,' said Lara 'I've been out 'til the early hours every night this week. I'm shattered.'

Gabrielle took the invitation and put it in the back pocket of her jeans.

'Well, if you're not going, I will. It sounds intriguing. I'm going to enjoy myself. There are bound to be some fit and lusty hunks among the rowers.'

She put on Lara's new lipstick and tried out a few poses in the mirror above Lara's desk.

'And, if you don't know anyone there, then no-one's even going to notice if I turn up instead. I'll just introduce myself as you.'

Gabrielle went through Lara's clothes.

'You must have something I can wear? Surely you didn't just bring T-shirts and jeans.'

Lara watched her, seething silently.

'I've worn most of my dresses already this week. We've had so many freshers' events. They're in the wash.'

‘How about this one?’ said Gabrielle, pulling a hanger out of the wardrobe and ripping the plastic cover away from a red silk evening gown. This would do. I’m sure it would suit me. What do you think?’

Lara yanked the dress away from her.

‘I’ve never even worn that yet,’ she said. ‘You know very well it was my going away present. I’m saving it for the college Christmas Ball.’

But Gabrielle wasn’t even listening. She was pulling off her jeans.

‘Zip me up, please,’ she said looking at herself in the mirror. She seemed very pleased with what she saw. She turned and looked over her shoulder to admire the back view.

‘Yes, this is perfect. Thank you so much, darling.’ She clapped her hands. ‘I’m so excited. I can’t wait!’

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‘You missed an amazing party,’ said Gabrielle as the girls sat down for brunch in Queen’s Lane Coffee House on the Sunday morning. The champagne had flowed, the setting was magical and what the Oriel men lacked in conversational skills, they made up for in stamina. Lara winced as Gabrielle boasted loudly of her conquests. She had defied the odds, and by the end of the night, in her own words, ‘I got off with the three most attractive guys in the Eight – the number three, the number seven and the stroke.’

‘I know you’re an incurable flirt and a sex maniac,’ said Lara ‘but did you have to do it in my name?’

Lara was hacked off. She’d woken that morning to find Gabrielle sprawled naked on her sofa. Her red silk dress was in a heap on the floor covered in grass stains and ripped at the back where Gabrielle had put a stiletto heel through the hem.

‘Don’t be such a prude,’ said Gabrielle. ‘I was just beating them at their own game.’

Gabrielle spread butter thickly on the toast and took a large bite.

‘I found out the big mystery. The cox cracked after his fourth glass of champagne - he couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Just listen to this, it’s brilliant...’

And so Gabrielle recounted the explanation for the mysterious invitation that had appeared in Lara’s pigeonhole. The cox had boasted that it was traditional for the rowers in the Men’s First Eight at Oriel College (one of the last remaining all-male bastions in Oxford) to mark their rite of passage to the heady status of Second Years (after their triumphs in Eights’ Week and the rigours of sexual abstinence in the long vac), by ‘welcoming’ the new intake of female freshers to the university. This year’s heroic campaign had been devised by the current president of the Boat Club (whose rowing position was number three – the powerhouse in the boat) and ‘the adorable Stroke’, over eight pints and six games of darts in the Oriel beer cellar. Their plan required each of the rowers in the Men’s First Eight (plus the cox), to divide up the thirty-eight or so Oxford colleges between themselves, cycle round to the Porters’ Lodge of each, pick out the most attractive female fresher from the undergraduate headshots posted on its college noticeboard, and leave an invitation to their party in her pigeonhole.