

TRAPPED IN A
LIFE THAT ISN'T
HER OWN

**COME
A LITTLE
CLOSER**
Rachel Abbott

COME A
LITTLE
CLOSER

RACHEL ABBOTT

Prologue

I don't know myself any more. My life is unrecognisable – severed into two distinct periods: before – when I could feel the wind on my skin, watch the sky turn from blue to black, hear the birds singing in the morning, smell the earth, damp with rain; and after – the life I am in now, where I cannot tell if it is night or day and the only sound I hear is the slap, slap of bare feet on a linoleum floor.

I sit on my narrow bed, staring at the bare wall opposite, wondering how I came to be here. But I can find no answers. All I know for certain is that they are coming. They come every night.

I didn't understand how easy it could be to lose a life. To lose myself. But now I am not me any more. I'm someone else. Someone I don't recognise.

My name is Judith. And I killed a man.

1

Four weeks earlier

‘Night, everyone,’ Sharon shouted over her shoulder.

‘You going already, Shaz?’ she heard. She didn’t know which of her friends it was, and she didn’t respond. With her back to them all she raised her hand in the air and waved as she reached the exit. She didn’t want them to see her face – to see the guilt in her eyes and the hot flush of her cheeks.

Sharon was looking forward to being married to Jez – he was the best – but somehow the pressure of it all, the *finality*, maybe even the predictability, had got to her, and she had persuaded her friends to meet at the club in town. Jez had gone out too, staying with his brother for the night, so there was no one to rush home to.

She had expected to be dancing until dawn with her friends, but when Sharon went to get a drink there was a good-looking bloke she had never seen before leaning against the bar, watching her, and there was no denying that the attention felt good. Usually she would have told him to get lost, but tonight everything seemed different. The music was loud, the beat making her body throb, and the flashing multicoloured lights made the most mundane seem extraordinary. Maybe it was the thought of doing something that she knew was wrong, but she had felt a pulse of excitement as the man’s hand rested on her lower back, hidden from view, and then slowly started to move south.

When she turned to face him he had such hot eyes, asking her an unspoken question. It got a bit heavy – and public – as he moved his head towards hers, his hand behind her neck. But instead of kissing her, he whispered in her ear that they should get away from prying eyes, drive somewhere they could be alone, and a thrill shivered up and down her spine. Sharon agreed, suggesting a local beauty spot – Pennington Flash. There would be no one there at this time of night, and if they went separately nobody need ever know.

There had been weather warnings all day about significant snow overnight followed by a period of sub-zero temperatures. But it hadn’t started yet, so Sharon wasn’t worried as she fumbled around in her bag for her car keys. She had intended to have only a couple of drinks – that was why she had taken the car. Maybe she had gone over a bit, but it would be fine. She felt okay.

On the third attempt Sharon got her key into the ignition, starting the car with a roar, her foot too hard on the accelerator.

I’ll drive slowly, she thought.

Sharon had been on family outings to the Flash throughout her childhood and knew the way backwards, so almost as if on autopilot she managed to negotiate the streets until finally turning off the main road towards the entrance. The first car park would be closed by now, but the main one by the lake didn't have a gate, and that's where they had agreed to meet.

The inky darkness of the car park gave Sharon goosebumps, and she took one hand from the steering wheel to rub her other arm briskly. The place was deserted, and if there was a moon it was hidden behind clouds heavy with the promised snow. The bloke hadn't arrived, but he had said he would give it five minutes after she left so no one would suspect. It only occurred to her briefly that she didn't know his name. It wasn't a relationship she was interested in, though, so it hardly mattered.

Driving to the far end of the car park where overhanging trees increased the blackness of the night, she turned her car to face the entrance. She wanted to make sure she would see him before he saw her.

She opened her window a fraction. The night was silent. She closed her eyes and tried to block out images of Jez's smiling face.

A sound – a rattling noise – startled her. *What was that?* She switched on her headlights briefly and let out a long breath of relief. The wind had caught a discarded Coke can and was rolling it across the tarmac. She turned her lights off again, but the icy blast of air on her face and the pump of adrenaline seemed to have knocked some sense into her. What the hell was she doing? This was madness. She needed to go, to get out of there.

She reached for the ignition key, but it was too late. There was a new sound – a car engine.

Shit. It's him.

What if she told him it had been a stupid idea? But what if he didn't take it well? What if he raped her? She'd heard stories of girls being forced when they realised too late that they had made a mistake. She had to get away before he saw her.

Thanking God that her crappy car had a broken interior light, she quietly opened the door and slithered out, sliding the key into the lock with shaking fingers and turning it quickly. Bending double, Sharon scurried along the path by the edge of the still, black water, out of sight of the approaching car, and crouched behind a low shrub.

It wasn't until the car turned into the car park that she realised its headlights weren't on. *Why would he do that?*

The car circled the tarmac as if the driver was looking for someone, and she knew it could only be her. But then she looked again. The guy had told her to look out for his silver Golf. This car was dark, possibly even black, and much bigger than a Golf. It was someone else.

It didn't matter who it was. She realised how vulnerable she was – a young woman alone in the early hours of the morning in the middle of nowhere. *What an idiot.* She had to stay hidden.

The car pulled to a stop directly in front of her old Toyota, and someone got out. She couldn't make out much because the person was on the far side. Then she saw the beam from a torch. He was approaching her car, the beam searching its interior.

Oh God. Was this some kind of a set-up? Had the man in the club lured her to a deserted location for someone else – maybe more than one?

When he realises the car's empty, he's going to come hunting for me.

The man tried the door – thank God she'd locked it – and flashed the light around a bit more. He went back to the front of the car and shone the torch on the number plate. He was noting down her number! *Why would he do that?*

He walked away from the car and she thought he was leaving, but then he stepped onto the path, shining the torch first away from her and then the other way – towards her.

Sharon crouched as low as she could, dipping her head so her white face wouldn't show in the beam of light, praying her black coat would keep her hidden. She slipped off her high-heeled shoes and hid them under the bush in case she had to make a run for it.

She heard the crunch of his feet on the gravel.

He was coming.

2

As I wake up, I wonder for a moment where I am. I didn't think I would sleep – my internal clock is totally confused by travelling so far east – but maybe it is relief at all I have left behind.

I nearly didn't come, and had Ian had his way I would still be at home tending to his every need.

I'm here because of my grandfather, who for over seventy years had wanted to return to a place that was close to his heart – Burma, or Myanmar as it is now known – where he was stationed during the war. He never made it, but he bought me a ticket and asked me to promise to make the trip for him – to be his eyes and ears.

Pops died before my trip began, so he was never going to hear about the places I'm visiting, but in those last days as I sat by his sickbed he still begged me to go.

'Take a break, love,' he said, his voice breathy and faint. 'Get away from here and give yourself some space to think about your future – the kind of life you deserve. I only want you to be happy, you know that. And I don't think you are.'

It was as if he was shining a bright light on my life, especially on my relationship with Ian.

When Pops died I tried to hide my tears from Ian, but he saw me crying and told me to get over myself and move on. 'He was an old man, for God's sake. At least you don't have to take that ridiculous trip now,' he said, folding his arms as if to signify the matter was settled.

I felt a pulse of dread. I knew what was coming. 'What do you mean?' I said, hating myself for the quiver in my voice.

'You're not going all that way on your own. You don't have to now.'

He had always hated the thought of me taking the trip. It was, and always had been, a ticket for one.

Ian tried everything to sway me – from refusing to acknowledge my presence by ignoring every word I said, to blaming me for his inability to get a job. I was making him miserable, dragging him down. He wanted me to cash in the ticket so he could have a share of the refund.

'You only ever think of yourself,' he repeated over and over again.

I came close to giving in, as I had done so many times before, but I thought of Pops and how much he had wanted me to go. So I refused to be swayed by Ian's accusations that I was self-centred, thoughtless, inconsiderate; his threats to somehow hijack the holiday; his almost deranged bouts of anger as he paced the living room.

The arguments left me weak, exposed and increasingly aware of the number of times I had backed down during the year that Ian and I have been together, feeling I was the one in the wrong, the one who didn't understand how difficult I made life for the two of us. This time it was different. I saw Pops' face, his eyes telling me to be brave, to stand up for myself, to break the pattern.

I waited until the day before I was due to leave. I had been practising my lines for days, but I still stumbled over the words as I told Ian it was over between us. I wanted him to move out of my house while I was away. As I spoke I felt a shiver of fear. I couldn't meet his eyes, scared of what I would see there, and by the time I boarded the plane I felt battered and bruised by all that had happened.

I didn't realise how vulnerable I was. Maybe that was my mistake.

*

I need to forget Ian and focus on how lucky I am to be here.

I've never stayed in such a luxurious hotel, and while there is a huge temptation to burrow back under the crisp white sheets, I need to get up and face the day. I'm half excited, half anxious. Travelling alone is a first for me, and I'm in a strange country with different customs, smells, sounds. And my confidence levels aren't where they should be right now.

In spite of the constant whisper of anxiety that haunts me, I can't wait to look out of my bedroom window and see the sights that we missed last night by arriving after dark. The streets of Yangon outside the hotel are crowded, chaotic and colourful. Street vendors have set up their stalls with bright parasols to protect their wares from the sun, and the driver of every bus, car and scooter seems to feel the need to sound his horn.

It feels odd to be somewhere so hot after leaving a Manchester landscape covered in thick snow. I had worried that the flight would be cancelled and I would have to return home, tail between my legs. Wouldn't Ian have enjoyed that? But the journey had gone like clockwork, although there had been a strange and slightly uncomfortable moment when we arrived.

We had all crowded into the lobby for our keys, anxious to get to our rooms after the long flight. I was tired, needed a shower and wasn't feeling very chatty, so I stood, head bent, staring blindly at my suitcase, listening for my name to be called. I could feel a pair of eyes watching me, burning a hole in my skin – and I lifted my head. Over by the reception desk a man was looking at me. He was on his own, and as my eyes met his I expected his attention to shift – to move on – but he didn't flinch and showed no embarrassment, continuing to stare straight into my eyes as if asking me a question. Was he single? As I am possibly the only unattached woman under sixty on the trip, did he think I might be a likely bet? I should have looked away, but I raised my eyebrows and tipped my head to one side to show that I wasn't impressed. Then my name was called, and I took my key and escaped to my room.

That was last night, and now it is a whole new day with so much to look forward to. Soon we will join the chaos below and make our way by coach to where we will board the boat and begin the journey up the Irrawaddy River.

For a second I wish I was half of a couple. Having another person by my side would be so much more comfortable than having to eat, sleep and travel alone. Then I imagine that the other half is Ian and I shudder. I can hear his voice in my head, moaning about the coach journey, telling me what to wear, mocking our fellow travellers behind their backs and expecting me to laugh with him.

I thought I needed him once. But I don't need him now.

*

As I board the coach I dive into the first available empty seat. Everyone is smiling and nodding at me. I can hear a lot of American accents as they shout their hellos with that relentless enthusiasm peculiar to their culture, and they all seem to know each other already. *Of course*. There was the traditional 'meet and greet' cocktail party last night, and it seems I was the only one who didn't go.

I turn my attention to the view out of the window, to the teeming mass of people going about their daily lives, both men and women wearing the colourful long skirts that I read in my travel guide are called *longyi*. As we slowly weave our way through the traffic and leave the city, passing roadside stalls showing off their goods – spices, fruit, vegetables – I notice that everyone is smiling. I wonder about their lives, and how different they might be from my own.

My thoughts are interrupted as someone plonks himself down in the seat beside me. I turn, smiling, before realising it's the man from the lobby last night.

'Hi, I'm Paul,' he says. It's a friendly greeting, but his eyes are blank, expressionless, and I feel he's weighing me up in some way that I don't understand.

I can't deal with him right now. What does he want? Is he going to hit on me? If so it's going to be very embarrassing, so I give him an apologetic smile and close my eyes, explaining that the jet lag is getting to me. He stays for a while, then I feel movement and realise he has gone to sit with more amiable people.

Now that I'm alone, I can open my eyes and start enjoying the view again. I pull out my phone to take a few photographs, grateful that I won't get a mobile signal while I'm in Myanmar unless I buy a local SIM card. And I have no intention of doing that. I feel safe, protected from Ian's rancour.

My phone's been off since I boarded the plane in Manchester, and as I turn it on I'm horrified to see that I have messages. They must have come through before I left, but the airport was noisy and I didn't check before switching it off. They've been sitting there, waiting to be discovered, ready to spew their malice when I am least expecting it.

There are at least ten texts, and I know who they are all from. I glance at the first one and I don't want to look at any more. The language is foul and I almost gasp at the vitriol. My eyes flood with tears. I realise I've been a fool, but I met Ian when I was at a low point in my life. Pops was ill, my dad was refusing to speak to me, and I was about to move to a new city where I knew no one.

Now it seems Ian is hell-bent on destroying me.

3

The two women sat at either end of a small pine table, both staring at the bowls of soup in front of them. As if by some unspoken command, they picked up their spoons at the same time and slowly started to scoop the dark brown liquid into their mouths.

A single low-wattage bulb dangled above them, creating a pool of light in the centre of the table, leaving the rest of the room in shadow. The only sound was the clink of metal spoons on earthenware bowls.

For a few moments neither of them spoke.

‘She’s gone, then,’ the younger of the two finally said, pushing her straggly hair behind her ears. The other one grunted in agreement and carried on eating. ‘She was ready, I think.’

Another grunt was all she got by way of response. The woman opposite was next in line. She had been there the longest, and was preparing herself for the day when she would leave, when her time and her usefulness were done.

‘At least we get a break now,’ the young woman said, trying once more to start a conversation.

There was no answer, but slowly the other woman lifted hollow eyes to look at her.

‘I’m ready to go,’ she said finally. ‘I don’t want to wait any longer.’

They rarely spoke. At times they weren’t allowed to, but when they were down here, alone, they could – if they wanted to. Usually they were too tired, too lethargic, and there was always so much to do.

The young woman felt as if every bone in her body had turned to jelly. It was hard to find the strength to get through the day, and she had to force herself to get out of bed each morning.

In spite of the listlessness that she seemed unable to shake, she still sometimes tried to fight against what was happening to her. But as she kept being told, she was safe here. She was fed, warm and only had to do the tasks she was set each day to pay for her keep. The alternative was far, far worse.

But then there was the other question. How long could it last? How long before she went the way of the woman who had left two, or was it three, days earlier? That one had barely spoken a word to either of them for weeks, and had seemed relieved when her moment of release came.

‘I think someone else must be coming to join us,’ the older woman said, her voice flat, expressionless.

‘Do you?’

‘It’s always the same. One out, one in.’

Somewhere in the back of the younger woman's mind, that didn't make sense. But she couldn't quite figure out why it felt wrong. It was too complicated, and it didn't matter really. It didn't change anything.

Finally they both pushed back their chairs and walked to the sink, deep in the shadows of the kitchen. It didn't matter that they could barely see there. They knew their way around in the dark. It was the same, night and day. Without another word, one rinsed the dishes, the other dried and put them away.

The young woman didn't want to go to bed, even though she was exhausted. Sometimes the dreams came: vivid, gaudy images that frightened her with the stories they told. Other times the sensations assaulted her when she was awake – leaving her feeling out of control, disconnected from her body. But the hours of sleep were the worst. The dreams were so clear – so graphic and colourful – and when she woke it was hard to convince herself that nothing she had experienced was real.

Maybe the dreams were better than the memories, which seemed hazy, fuzzy, as if she couldn't quite grasp them. Mostly she didn't want to because they just served to remind her of everything she had lost.

Her thoughts started to fall away before they had concluded – she couldn't keep hold of them. Her head was swimming, and if she didn't go to bed soon she would drift off, standing in the corner of the kitchen.

The other woman stood motionless by the sink, staring at nothing, the tea towel in her hand.

'I'm going to bed,' the young woman said softly, touching the other woman on the arm. 'Goodnight, Judith.'

There was no response.

4

The only word I can think of to describe my cabin on board the riverboat is sumptuous. The rich-coloured cushions and dark wooden furniture add to the sense that I'm now inhabiting a different world – and I'm glad of it. I walk out onto the small balcony and breathe in the humid air, thick with the musty smell of the river as we head upstream, listening to the strange sounds of a foreign country: the shouts of children playing in the muddy brown water and the chanting of Buddhists as we pass spectacular temples apparently situated in the middle of nowhere.

I can already feel the tension ebbing slightly, the tightness in my chest and shortness of breath slackening. I move back inside, closing the sliding glass door to keep the mosquitoes at bay, and sit down to apply some make-up before dinner. I look at my pale face in the mirror, the dark circles under my eyes, and rest my chin in upturned palms, wondering how best to add some colour to my cheeks.

My laptop is charging on the dressing table in front of me, and I am about to move it out of the way when it pings to tell me there's an email. The Wi-Fi signal is intermittent, as it depends where we are on the river, so clearly we're in a good position right now.

I glance at the screen and my heart plummets. The email is from Ian. I don't know whether to open it or not, and I am furious that my hand shakes as I reach forward to touch the trackpad.

He's failed to get a response to his texts – I deleted them all, and couldn't have answered even if I had wanted to – so now he is resorting to email.

The subject line might seem innocuous to anybody else – 'I will be waiting when you come home' – but it chills me. I don't want to open the email, but if I don't its malevolent presence will haunt me.

The tone has changed. He's no longer ranting about what a bitch I am. He knows, I'm sure, that while his insults may shock they are easy to deflect.

I know I've been angry with you, but I've decided I'm prepared to forgive you. It has taken a lot of soul-searching on my part, but I understand you were upset. Deep down, you know you need me – and what will you do if I go? Remember how difficult it was for us to find each other. Do you really want to be alone for the rest of your life? I don't think so.

He even suggests I try to get an early flight back, and I realise he's not going to give up. Why would he? I could kid myself that he loves me, but I know that is not the reason. He was living in a horrible little bedsit with a bathroom shared by about ten other people when we met, and now he lives in a decent house and has me to wait on him hand and foot. He's not

going to walk away from that life in a hurry, especially as until now I have always given in to his demands. For him it is – or has been – a stress-free existence.

I have been an idiot, and it is a hard thing to admit to myself. Ian and I met online. I know lots of people have forged successful relationships over the Internet, but when you meet someone through a dating site all you know about them is what they choose to tell you. They can say anything they like, and with no friends or colleagues in common to tell you anything different, you believe every word. At least, I did.

Will I ever be rid of him?

After a few minutes I take some deep breaths, and with renewed determination I jump up from the chair. I can't let him ruin this holiday, and dinner started ten minutes ago.

Locking the cabin door behind me, I make my way along the wood-panelled corridor and push open the door to the dining room, hoping I can slip quietly into a seat. The sound of excited chatter hits me, and long before I reach the small empty table I have spotted in a corner I realise I am not going to be able to escape so easily.

A loud, jarring American voice hails me: 'Hey, young lady! Don't sit on your own. Come and join us – we have a spare place. Harry, move round here and give the girl a seat.'

I look towards the strident voice and see a plump woman with yellow-blond backcombed hair and perfect make-up sitting at a table for eight. She is waving her arms at me, and Harry, a balding man in his mid-fifties with a florid face, dutifully jumps up and goes to the spare chair on the other side of the table. Short of being downright rude, I have no option but to take a seat. I smile tentatively at everyone as they introduce themselves.

The questions start to fly. 'Where are you from?' 'Have you been on a trip like this before?' 'What brings you to Burma?'

I answer to the best of my ability, until the woman who told Harry to move asks, 'Are you travelling alone?'

'Yes,' is all I can muster. I get a sympathetic smile from an older lady with beautiful long silver hair who is sitting further along the table.

I relax a bit as the attention moves away from me, but as I turn to thank the waiter for the plate of food he has placed in front of me I catch the eye of a man sitting alone at a table on the other side of the dining room.

It's him again. Paul. He has clearly escaped the waving arms of the American woman, whose name I now know to be Donna. It's definitely him. His eyes are small, sharp, perched over a hooked nose. He has the look of an eagle and seems to be weighing me up again. He neither smiles nor averts his eyes when I return his gaze. Just like last night.

I lift my chin and turn back to the table.

Donna is in full flow, requiring no input from anyone else, and this gives me time to study her and my fellow diners. Down the table to my right sit an older couple, probably in their early seventies. She is the one who smiled kindly at me earlier, and is called Thea, but I have no idea what her husband's name is because she always calls him 'dear' or refers to him as 'the doctor'.

‘The doctor and I have been to some beautiful places in the past few years, haven’t we, dear? I think Vietnam was our favourite.’

The doctor, a striking man with the unusual combination of black eyebrows, white beard and an almost bald skull, merely looks up and nods. His brows point down towards his nose as if in a permanent scowl, and he seems content to leave his wife to do all the talking.

Strangely, I am grateful to Donna for asking me to join them. Chatting with them over dinner has forced me to think about something other than Ian and the situation I’m going to have to face when I return home. The thought never entirely leaves me, though. It has settled like a heavy stone in a dark corner of my mind.

5

As DCI Tom Douglas walked down the long corridor back to his office from a particularly tedious meeting, he smiled at the message on his phone. Louisa was cooking dinner that night and wanted to know what he fancied eating. He was so engrossed in her message that he didn't realise for a moment that Becky Robinson was approaching. He glanced up at the sound of footsteps and immediately flattened himself against the wall, arms outstretched to either side of him, palms and fingers splayed against the grey partition.

'Ha, bloody ha,' Becky said. 'I'm not *that* big.'

Tom grinned, and they both moved towards his office door at the same time, Tom standing back to let her through.

'What are you so chipper about, anyway?' she asked as he pulled out a chair for her. 'And stop treating me as if I'm made of glass, will you please.'

'I'm feeling quite good about life, that's all.' Tom walked round the back of his desk and indicated the facing chair to Becky. 'Sit.'

'No time, I'm afraid. We've got a body out at Pennington Flash Country Park. Suspicious death.'

Tom raised his eyebrows. 'Okay, what do we know?'

'Not much. A woman, probably around thirty. Found inside one of the birdwatching hides by some poor guy out to do a bit of twitching. The local DI says he doesn't want to cloud our judgement by giving his take on things, so was reluctant to say much.'

Tom picked up his keys from the desk. 'Right. Let's go and find Keith. He can come with me.'

Becky put her hands on her hips and glared at Tom. 'Why are you taking DS Sims? Why am I not coming?' Tom's eyes travelled to her middle. 'Oh for God's sake, Tom. I'm seven months pregnant. I'm not incapacitated.'

'Yes, but it's bloody freezing out there and treacherous underfoot. Why risk it?'

'If I lived in some remote part of the world I would probably be out in the fields working until the baby pops out. I'm *fine*. Stop mollycoddling me.'

Tom looked at Becky's face, her mouth tense and her eyes firing shots at him. He knew he'd been overprotective of her since she nearly died diving into a river to save someone, but that was a while ago now and he had to get over it.

'Okay, on your head be it.'

'Thank you, boss,' she said, her tone sarcastic.

Tom might be her boss, but he was well aware that she knew more about him than most people, and in the years they had worked together they had become close. She behaved impeccably when other members of the team were around, but that didn't stop her from speaking her mind when they were alone. He didn't know how he was going to manage without her when she went on maternity leave.

'Shall we take the newbie with us, do you think, for a bit of experience?' Becky asked. 'Just as an observer.'

'Good idea. Let her know, will you, and I'll meet you in the car park. We can brief her on what to expect as we go. What's her name again?'

'Lynsey. She's mad keen, bright as a button, and terrified of you.'

'Excellent. Let's hope she stays that way. It would be nice to have some respect round here.'

Becky snorted and made her way out of the door. 'See you downstairs in five minutes.'

*

The local police had given concise instructions on how to get to the Flash, and as Tom pulled into the snow-covered car park a young officer walked towards them, his arms flying out sideways as his legs nearly went from under him. It was treacherous out there.

'What is a flash, anyway?' Becky asked, staring at the expanse of water ahead of them.

Tom was about to answer when Lynsey's quiet voice came from behind: 'There's more than one here, although the one you can see is the biggest. I believe the lakes, or flashes, were formed as a result of mining subsidence.'

Tom saw Becky smile. He could see how much she liked this girl.

'Thanks for that, Lynsey. I'm glad one of us knows,' Tom said.

'Sorry, sir, I'm not being a smart-arse. I looked it up on my phone while you were talking to Inspector Robinson.'

'Don't apologise; it shows initiative,' Becky said. 'Come on, let's go and see what we've got.'

Tom looked around at the view. Such an attractive place, and undoubtedly popular. Apparently it had been cut off by the heavy snow for days, and only the most intrepid of folk were likely to venture here today, even though the access road had now been cleared. The weather was wicked with a fierce wind blowing the snow around in little flurries, and it was with some reluctance that Tom stepped out of the warm car.

The young police officer, walking more carefully now, approached them.

'Sir, it's a bit of a walk to the hide. It doesn't overlook the main lake, so we need to take the path from the end of the car park and then turn off to the right, down a bit of a hill. It's not too good underfoot,' he said, staring pointedly at Becky's middle.

Tom almost smiled as he heard a tut of irritation.

Becky took Lynsey's arm. 'We'll hold each other up. Okay?'

'Is this the closest car park to the hide?' Tom asked.

‘Yes, it’s the one used most by visitors. We’ve laid an approach path nearer to the hide, sir, so if you would just follow me...’

Tom stood back to allow the women to go first, turning up his collar against the biting wind. From the car park they walked along a wide track, but within a few metres the constable veered off to the right where the path was sealed off with crime-scene tape. Becky gave their names to the officer at the head of the approach path, and they stopped to don protective suits.

‘It doesn’t look like there’s much space in there,’ Becky said. ‘Maybe you should go first, boss, and we’ll follow if there’s room.’

Tom nodded and started to make his way along the narrow path, bordered on both sides by a wooden fence, his feet crunching on the icy snow underfoot. It appeared the hide had no door, and as he got closer the bulky figure of Jumoke Osoba filled the entrance, a wide white smile splitting his black face. This was one figure that Tom was always relieved to see at a crime scene.

‘Morning, Jumbo,’ Tom said. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here, but I’m delighted you are.’

‘It’s not usually my patch, that’s true. I’m covering for Saul Newton, but glad to help. The first officers on the scene assumed it was an overdose or death from exposure. But I’m not sure that’s the right call. That’s why I’m pleased to see you and Becky.’

Tom nodded. Jumbo was an excellent crime-scene manager – the best – and if he thought something was up, Tom believed him. He also knew Jumbo wouldn’t divulge his suspicions until Tom had formed his own opinion. Signalling Becky and Lynsey to follow, Tom moved into the confined space.

He stopped and took in the scene. Daylight spilled into the hide through a wide viewing window, but the floor was in deep shadow. In spite of that, he could clearly see the body of a young woman at the far end, sitting on the ground propped up against the wooden slats of the hide wall, her face peaceful, her eyes closed. A bitterly cold wind was blowing through the unglazed opening, and Tom crouched down on a level with the woman’s face. She looked to be in her early thirties, small and slim, and her clothes – while not stylish for someone of her age – didn’t look either old or tatty. She certainly didn’t have the appearance of someone living rough who might have taken shelter in the hide from the icy weather.

No matter how many dead bodies he saw, Tom always felt a stab of sorrow that a life had ended, especially when the deceased was so young, and he paused for a moment before pulling a torch from his pocket to flick its beam over the woman. There was no sign of trauma – no blood that he could see – and her hands were placed neatly in her lap with no obvious signs of a struggle. It looked to all the world as if she had wandered in, sat down, closed her eyes and died. There was only one point arguing against that: she wasn’t wearing any shoes.

Her feet were stretched out in front of her, and Tom could see that the soles were dirty but the tops weren’t. It didn’t look as if she habitually walked outdoors without shoes; the skin appeared too soft for that. She had no bag and was wearing nothing more than a long

cardigan over a pair of jeans a couple of sizes too large. Tom wondered if maybe she had lost weight recently – maybe been ill – or whether the clothes belonged to someone else.

What had happened to this poor woman?

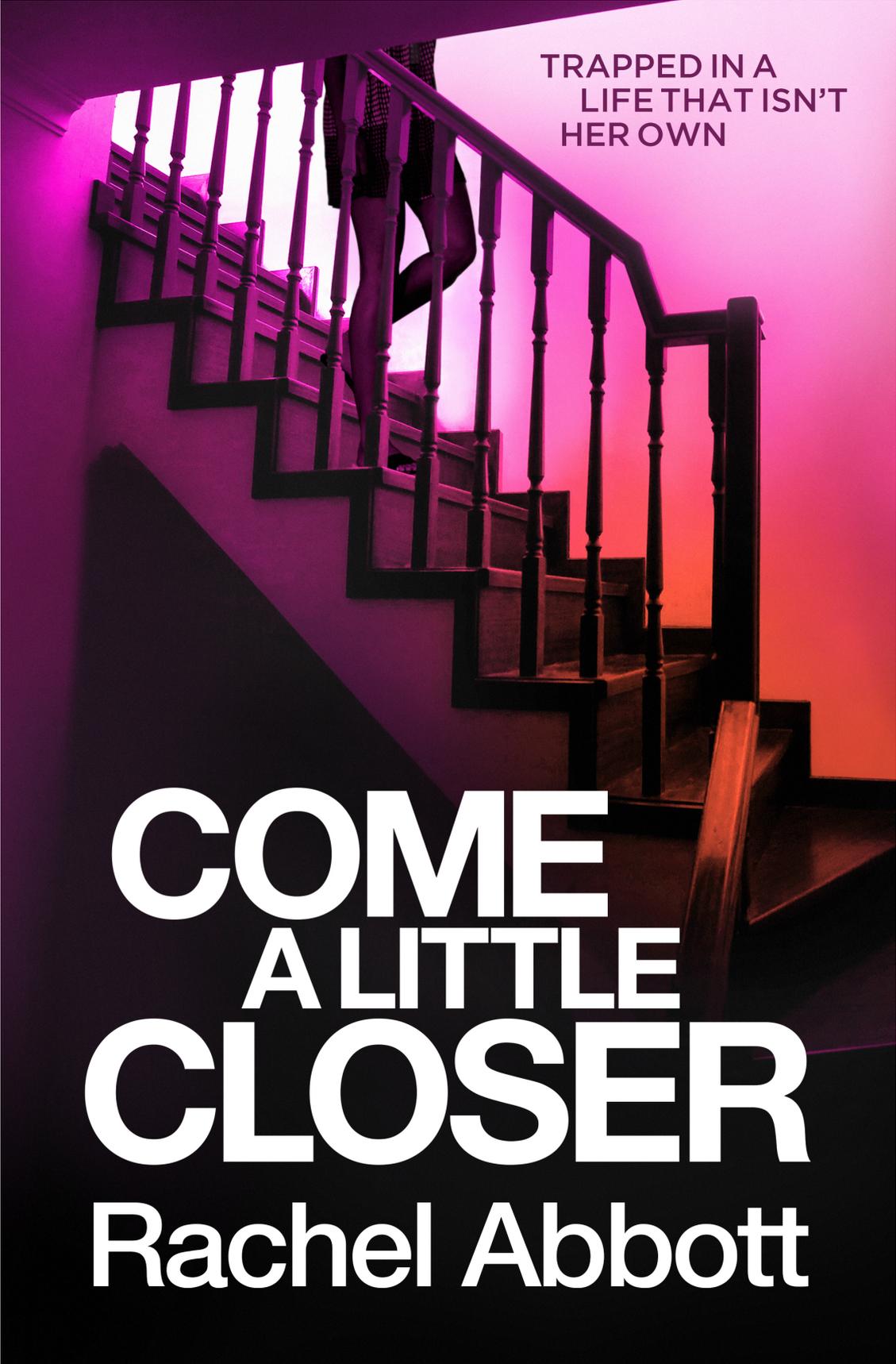
‘Boss,’ Becky said, interrupting his thoughts. ‘Do you need me to call the Home Office pathologist? I could have a word with the man who found her too?’

‘Yes please, that would be good.’ Tom turned his attention back to the dead woman.

Jumbo was right. There was something wrong here, something that didn’t tally.

Want to know what happens next?

[Click here](#)



TRAPPED IN A
LIFE THAT ISN'T
HER OWN

**COME
A LITTLE
CLOSER**
Rachel Abbott

PRAISE FOR RACHEL ABBOTT'S BOOKS

"Clever, creepy and compelling."

Sharon Bolton, author of *The Craftsman*

"*Come a Little Closer* is a brilliant crime read. Rachel Abbott is already one of the Queens of Crime, but this dark tale of manipulation, danger and lies adds to her reputation for outstanding storytelling."

Kate Rhodes, author of *Hell Bay*

"In *Come a Little Closer*, Abbott's usual high calibre plotting provides everything the reader needs in a gripping thriller. Satisfying investigation from the ever-lovely Tom Douglas, and a killer twist that makes this one her best yet."

Louise Voss, co author of *From the Cradle*

"The tangled web Rachel Abbott weaves is both intriguing and horrifying and I found myself living this story. I was totally gripped by it."

Kath Middleton, author and blogger

"What a cracker of a book! Spellbinding. Breathtaking. The pace just builds and builds to the climax giving you a really uneasy feeling in your bones. And that ending! OMG! What a shocker!"

Kim Nash, Kim the Bookworm blog

"No-one blends a psychological thriller with a police procedural like this woman and although I'm emotionally exhausted every time I finish one of her books I am equally hungry for more.

Captivating! Sinister! Twisty! "

Angela Marsons, author of *Silent Scream*

"Rachel Abbott ... has been named the most popular self-published Kindle author in the UK by Amazon."

The Guardian

"Rachel Abbott will keep you guessing long into the night, and just as soon as you've figured it out...think again!"

Suspense Magazine

[Buy Come A Little Closer on Amazon now](#)