

**THE
GHOST
OF
GRACIE
FLYNN**

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MORRISON**



FREMANTLE PRESS

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2019 Monday, 18th February

The first person to know your father was dead was a woman. A young woman. Early twenties. Emerald eyes and a dark mass of hair.

Imagine her eyes now closed—eyelashes dark against her pale skin. She's lying on her back, her hair spread out around her head.

When she wakes, there's a gurgling sound and a briny smell coming in on the breeze. She opens her eyes and a throb of pain spreads from the back of her head to the front.

Slowly, a shape comes into focus, white in a sea of darkness.

The moon.

A mast reaches into the night sky, sails furled up tight.

The woman sits up and the throbbing intensifies—a blinding flare behind her eyes. Through the ache, she sees lights over on the shore, rising and falling with the rocking of the boat. Their reflections slip in and out of the water's skin.

Not that far away.

She pulls herself onto her knees, and that's when she sees it: a shoe. A black shoe, on someone's foot, pointing up at the sky. Fear moves through her like a slow, augmented arpeggio. Barely breathing, she studies the shape of him. He's long. His clothes are dark. On his left hand, which is pale and still, a wedding band catches the light from the shore intermittently. Like a lighthouse. A warning pulse.

She recognises him then. It's Sam. Sam Favier.

Yes, your father.

He's taken her out on *Stargazing* before, with the water stretching out dark around them, like this, restless in the moonlight.

Tentatively, she touches the cool skin of his face. His dark hair merges with the shadows. Holding her hand over his slightly open mouth, she feels for warmth but there's nothing. No sound either—just the gentle slap and surge of water against the sides of the boat.

'Wake up,' the woman says, her voice thin and fearful. She feels for a pulse. Her own is tearing along, but not Sam's. At his wrist, up under his jaw—nothing.

The lights are still there on the shore, but they have no answers. The moon is silent too. There's only panic for guidance, and the panic says *swim*. She steps up to the top of the ladder and looks down at the water—so dark and unsteady—then she jumps before she can think too hard about it: about how far she has to go and exactly how deep the water might be; about leaving Sam alone. Worse than alone. Gone.

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2019 Saturday, 12th January

It's a glorious Saturday morning: a bright sky brushed with clouds, a fresh westerly. You and your parents are at this great little café around the corner from home. A funky spot, with exposed brick walls, and devil's ivy in pots suspended from a high ceiling. Sunlight filters in through large windows, casting everything in a dreamy glow—all the diners with their sourdough toast and poached eggs; smashed avocado and bacon; muesli with yoghurt and raspberries.

Sam sits back in his chair, so full he can hardly move. He watches your mum feeding you buttered toast, and feels contentment tugging at him. Inviting him to drift into a doze, right there at the table. It's surreal. As if he's been dropped into a parallel version of his life: one moment a bachelor touring Europe to flog a new bestseller; the next, a husband and father, trying to get out of his seat so he can pay for breakfast.

‘You okay there, Sam?’ Tori says, wiping crumbs off her fingers. It still takes him by surprise sometimes, her accent—steep and swooping. Regal. ‘You look like a man brought to his knees last night.’

‘She’s two-thirds owl, this kid,’ Sam says, yawning and stretching his arms over his head. ‘Aren’t you, Isla?’ He smiles at you, then stands up and heads for the till, stooping to kiss Tori as he goes. They linger over the kiss and you grab his hair, and for a moment he’s stuck, laughing while Tori disentangles him from your sticky paw.

When he reaches the queue, he recognises the guy in front of him. His sandy hair is shorter now, and he’s lost weight since Sam saw him last, but the turtle tattoo on his neck is a dead giveaway.

‘Cohen,’ Sam says.

Cohen turns. The woman beside him does too, pulling her hair behind her ear and smiling. Expressions flit across Cohen’s face, settling into an uneasy smile.

‘Sam,’ he says. ‘Wow, long time no see.’

‘Too long, mate,’ Sam says, holding out his hand. ‘I hardly recognised you.’

‘The ravages of time,’ Cohen says, shaking it.

‘Not at all; you’re looking well.’

‘This is my wife, Jewel.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Sam,’ Jewel says, extending her hand.

Jewel is a local celebrity. A social media consultant and influencer who’s managed to build an empire out of the brand she’s turned herself into. With an army of followers, she’s attracted swarms of sponsors, meaning she probably won’t have to spend another cent on swimwear, clothes or shoes for the rest of her

life. But she's taken it further than that, using her brand to create, curate and sell a dizzying array of desirables, to the point where now she's raking it in, hand over delicate fist. Can you tell I'm not too fond of the woman? It's nothing personal really; it's just that, in my head, Cohen is still mine.

What do you care about these things, Isla? The light and the shadows of the human heart? Nothing yet, I know. But you will, one day. And that's what this story is about—the light and the shadows. I'm hoping that if I whisper it to you while you sleep, you'll absorb it somehow, even though you've no vocabulary of your own yet. Call it esoteric osmosis, if you like. If you need a name.

'We're about to order breakfast,' Cohen says, nodding an apology to the waiting cashier.

'Of course,' Sam says. 'Sorry, yes. Do what you have to do.'

'But you two should catch up some time,' Jewel says. 'Why don't you swap numbers while I order?'

'Yeah, okay,' Cohen says, perhaps reluctantly, though Sam can't be sure. He finds him difficult to read. Not like the old Cohen, who shared everything with him—all his fears and hopes. All his self-doubt, of which there was plenty.

They exchange numbers and find things to say to each other, avoiding a few possible topics along the way. They don't mention me, for example. Also, Sam avoids asking after Cohen's mum, Libby. In case the news is bad.

Jewel finishes ordering and rests her hand briefly on Cohen's forearm.

'Good to go,' she says, smiling goodbye to Sam and heading towards a table at the far end of the café.

It's agony for me to watch Cohen go after her. It should be me

with him, choosing a table, scanning the menu. It should be *us*, sharing observations about life, the universe and buddha bowls. Instead, he's spending his life with this polished little woman with her glowing tan and carefully chosen accessories. And when I say carefully chosen, I'm being diplomatic. The woman will spend hours picking out what to adorn herself with. Hours.

Sam, too, watches them go. It's amazing, he thinks, how Cohen's managed to master such a casual air over the years. No one would guess now how hard it was for him, once, to be in the world. To move through life.



Sam and Tori walk home alongside the wide band of river. Tori's hair smells sweet: floral with a hint of breastmilk. She's beside Sam, under his arm, while you sleep against his chest, snug in your carrier. This is happiness, Sam thinks. If he could, he'd bottle it. Store it at the back of the cupboard. For leaner times.

'I'm still bummed you didn't introduce me to your friend,' Tori says. 'It's been what, eight months since we got here? And the only people I've met are your mum and your grandparents.'

'You were the one who insisted on a registry wedding in London, remember? I wanted to show you off here, properly.'

'Yeah right, in all my pregnant glory.'

'Absolutely. See, Isla's nodding; she agrees with me.'

'No, she isn't. She's looking for boob.'

'Fair enough, too.'

'You know these are only temporary right? Soon as she's weaned I'll be right back down to zilch again.'

This is probably true, but what Tori usually lacks in the breast department she easily makes up for everywhere else, thanks to a combination of genetics and eight years' dancing on a West End stage.

'Fine by me,' Sam says.

'I think what you meant to say was: *not zilch, babe.*'

'Exactly what I meant to say.'

You're growing agitated, realising you've been attached to the wrong chest for the walk home.

'Nearly there,' Sam murmurs, giving you his little finger to tide you over. Fortunately, the three of you have reached the street that runs along below the front of your house, between Charles Court Reserve and a cluster of hillside mansions overlooking the Swan River. Nearly home.

'So, was it nice to see him again?' Tori asks.

Sam opens the gate at the bottom of the path up to the house; it's single-file only up the sleepers embedded in the hillside, cutting through the dense bush.

'Cohen?' he says. 'For sure. He's changed quite a lot. Physically, I mean. Used to be quite overweight.'

Sam's idea of overweight is a little misguided, if you ask me. His benchmark is every muscle clearly delineated, enough to cast a shadow. Cohen's leaner now, yes, but his body was just fine back in the day. Perfect, even.

The overgrown path from the river to your house opens out onto your backyard—a gleaming pool embedded in a long stretch of turf, dwarfed by the glass-walled house beyond.

'How long since you saw him last?' Tori asks, unlocking the sliding door and going in, dumping her bag on the kitchen

benchtop. She plumps up the cushions on the sofa to support her back while she feeds you.

‘About eighteen years.’

‘Wow. What happened?’

‘Why should something have happened? People lose touch.’

‘True, but ... it’s a long time. Anyway,’ she laughs, ‘you’d better pass me that baby before she puts her neck out. Look at her.’

Sam unclips the carrier and pulls you out, warm and wriggling. He holds your soft cheek against his own for a moment then hands you to Tori, who nods towards her bag on the benchtop.

‘Forgot to grab my water,’ she says. ‘Can you pass it to me? It’s in the bag. My phone too ... side pocket.’

‘Too easy,’ Sam says, fishing them out.

A message pings through on the phone as he carries it over, lighting up the screen. He glances at it—a reflex, but long enough to read what’s there and who it’s from.

When can I see you again?

Sam hands your mother the phone and watches her read until she makes reluctant eye contact.

‘Who’s Pete?’ he asks.

‘It’s nothing,’ Tori says, putting the phone face down on the sofa beside her.

‘Who is he?’

‘Sam ...’ Tori says wearily, leaning back into the cushions, closing her eyes.

Sam sits on the armchair facing her. He repeats the question calmly though his heart feels quick and heavy.

‘He’s my ex,’ Tori says at last. ‘He’s having a hard time letting go.’

‘Letting go? Why have I never heard of him?’

‘Have I heard of all of your exes?’

‘No.’

‘Well then ...?’

‘*When can I see you again?* I mean ...’

Tori sighs, adjusts her position.

‘*Why again?*’ Sam says. ‘Have you seen him recently?’

‘When, Sam? How? He’s in London.’

‘What else has he been saying? Can I see?’

‘Why? What difference does it make?’

‘I want to know how far back it goes. Why he thinks he still stands a chance.’

‘He doesn’t stand a chance.’

‘Clearly he thinks he does.’

‘Well, he doesn’t.’

Sam heads towards the window. Down below, the wide band of river glistens in the sunlight, skin-like and smooth though puckered in seemingly random places, like snail trails on glass. Small boats are dotted here and there, rocking gently, drifting around their anchors. Others cut through the water, white froth streaming out behind them.

‘Sam,’ Tori says, pulling you up off her breast and rubbing circles on your back. ‘Honestly, there’s nothing going on between us.’

‘I’d let you read my messages, Tori.’

‘I’d never ask to, Sam. Seriously, you have to be able to trust me or this whole marriage thing is never going to work.’

Sam watches her speak. Massages his forehead with his fingertips.

‘How long were you two together?’

‘Nine years.’

‘Nine years? That’s ... Makes us seem like an after-thought.’

‘We’re not an afterthought; we’re a balmy island after a long and harrowing journey. Pete and I were awful together, Sam. Intensely wonderful sometimes, but not enough to make up for the mostly awful.’

‘Are *we* intensely wonderful?’

‘Of course,’ Tori says, but there’s a pause first, a beat just long enough for Sam to know she’s layering something over the truth.

‘We’re not, are we? I’m just a safe harbour. Somewhere to catch your breath.’

‘What’s wrong with being safe? That’s exactly what I want.’

‘Right now it is, but what happens when the novelty wears off? Are you going to head back out there? Crank up the adrenaline?’

Tori lays you back down on the feeding pillow.

‘I’m married to you, Sam. We have Isla ...’

‘Did Pete ever ask you to marry him?’

‘Sam, I’m tired ...’

‘Did he?’

‘No, he didn’t.’

‘Would you have said yes if he had?’

‘God, Sam, I don’t know.’

‘Would you?’

‘Probably, yes. But he didn’t, okay? Thank God.’

Sam looks at the two of you on the couch, his belly churning. He shakes his head.

‘It was an awful, unstable relationship that I should never have allowed to go on as long as it did,’ Tori says. ‘But I was young,

and there was this charge between us. He made me laugh. But he could be cruel ... the things he'd say sometimes. I should have stayed away, but I kept going back. I was young and stupid.'

'When did you break up?'

'Around September, I think. A year and a half ago, nearly.'

'That's like ... a month before we met.'

'Please don't let this become a thing, Sam. He's my past, okay?'

'Not according to him, if that message is any indication.'

'But he is. According to me, he is.'

Sam scratches the stubble on his jaw. 'I'm just the rebound guy.'

'The rebound guy is the best guy,' Tori says quietly. 'Come on, Sam. What's the difference? Really?'

'The difference is everything,' Sam says, standing up and heading for the door.