PROLOGUE

When I was five, my Uncle Reed gave me a notebook with butterflies on the cover.

Write to me, he said. *Even if it doesn't make sense.*

So, I did. In looping, scratchy child's handwriting. *To Uncle Reed. I went to school today. I can count to ten now.* I never called him by his first name; no one did – even the adults called him Reed.

I was seven when he died of a heart attack at home. At that point, I stopped writing to Uncle Reed. I stopped writing in my journals completely

But ten years later, when I killed *him*, I turned back to my notebooks.

I couldn't tell Uncle Reed what I had done.

I told my Reader instead.

Chapter 1

When I arrived back from my walk, the air was thick with smoke. Our neighbours were gathered in the street, gawking as if it was entertainment specially for them. A few were filming with their phones, like they wanted to capture the moment for ever, come back to it later and relive the crackling flames, the heat, the sense of hopelessness hanging in the air.

I knew which house they were all staring at, but a part of me hoped that maybe I had it wrong; that this was just a coincidence. I wished the horror on another family, so that way I could just be another neighbour observing the spectacle. And then I would go back to my own home, and I would lie in bed and worry about the smoke potentially damaging the flowers in the front garden. Maybe I would wonder whether someone might organize a little collection

for the people who had lost everything in the fire. If someone else sorted it, I would certainly donate a few bits – not that I had much to donate, of course, but it would be the neighbourly thing to do.

There would be no half-hearted collection for us, though.

Not for the Eyres.

I pushed to the front of the crowd – there had to be at least twenty people, possibly more. Mostly strangers, people whose lives crossed over with mine simply because we lived on the same quiet road, but whom I'd only ever had a few glimpses of. They were behind a DO NOT CROSS rope, their faces lit up by the flashing red and blue of the fire engines.

The firefighters had the hoses going, spraying the flames, but it didn't really seem to be doing much.

Too late. We were all too late.

The silence was punctuated by a low keening, and it took me a moment to register the noise was coming from my mother, standing a few feet from me, her eyes locked on the house. She was in a shapeless grey jumper and jeans, her brown hair hanging limply round her face as she wailed. On Tuesdays she went out to her book club like clockwork. She had always been a woman of very few words – same as me, I guess. I had always preferred reading and drawing to talking.

But it meant I couldn't imagine her actually participating in any sort of lively debate about whatever book her club had been reading. In fact, I never got the impression she even *liked* going to book club – but it was part of her routine, and my mother adored structure. She *loved* the status quo.

I debated letting her know I was here, but what could I actually do for her? Not much.

My father wasn't with her.

The fact registered like ice poured down my back. My mother's wailing increased in pitch as one of the firefighters came over to her, shaking his head, and even though he hadn't said anything, I could tell what he meant.

Dad had been inside the house, and he hadn't made it out.

He was dead.

And I felt … absolutely nothing.

The smoke thickened, choking the air, and it couldn't be healthy for any of us to be standing so close to the flames. My mother fell to her knees and I rushed forward, because at the very least I could help her to her feet. But her eyes widened when she saw me, and for a second it was like I was a ghost. My own plain face stared back at me – people have always said we looked more like sisters than mother and daughter. Mum had me young at twenty-two – there

was a fifteen-year age gap between her and my dad. He'd sometimes made comments about being basically double her age, but also spoke about how mature she was. I often wondered how true that was, since most of the time it felt like *I* was the one looking after her.

"What did you do?" Mum said, her voice a whisper.