

IMPROVISING CARLA

Chapter One

These days, I see Carla everywhere.

Emerging from Green Park station through the morning crowds, I catch sight of a woman just ahead of me, a tumble of auburn hair falling on narrow shoulders and that quick, jerky way of moving that she had and for a moment I think, Carla! Wait for me! Or when I'm running through the lamplit streets after work, running, always running – but not for my health like the other joggers, nothing so mundane as mere health for me after what happened on the island; I'm running for survival, running to escape the Furies that howl and shriek through my mind, only I never will escape them, not any more. And then, when I least expect it, there's the clacketty-click of high heels tapping along the pavement towards me, or a potent gust of the scent she wore, musky and sweet, or maybe an echo of that laugh last heard in a Greek taverna by the sea's edge ... and each time my chest tightens in a spasm of hope. Perhaps, I think, in spite of everything, these last months have been a kind of delirium and now I'm coming to my senses at last and the woman up ahead will turn and her face will light up with recognition. She will call out, 'Hi, Helen! I thought it was you.' And then, inevitably, disillusion follows, a sharper agony each time it happens.

That's not Carla, you idiot. How could I imagine it was her, even for a moment? Carla is dead. Just think of that fragile, fractured body lying on the empty road as the sun rose over the sea and filtered down between the olive trees. No stranger brushing up against me in a crowded London street is going to be Carla, not ever.

I know all this, yet still I see her. Still the sound of a voice so similar to hers in the room next to mine at work can make me forget what I'm doing for whole chunks of time. On bad days, London seems to have become a city of Carlas. As if, at the moment of her death, an image of her had shattered into a thousand fragments and tiny shards of Carla have lodged in a thousand women so that now her likeness is stamped on their features, the very sound and breath of her saturating their stranger-bodies.

Is this a modern kind of haunting? I struggle to banish the thought. Even the possibility of being haunted by Carla is a taste of madness.

A more prosaic explanation might be that Carla has been survived by a whole host of sisters. During our time together on the island, she never mentioned any sisters, but that doesn't mean anything because we never talked about the details of our real lives. I knew none of those mundane facts about her.

No real facts at all, except for the one huge truth that is my secret. The single truth that, even now, no one else has discovered and, pray God, they never will. Oh, they think they know, but they couldn't be more wrong. That certainty is mine alone. It is clamped to my shoulders like a succubus, the foul and rotting stench of it filling my nostrils each time I draw a breath.

Because I alone know how she died. That moment when her life ended and mine changed for ever.

BC: Before Carla.

AD: After Death.

Back there in the early morning when the air was so clear and sweet you'd think you'd stumbled on the beginning of the world – like finding Eden, the garden of lost innocence and hope. I was a different person then, and I was with her on that dawn road. And her death was not an accident, in spite of what it says on her death certificate and what everyone else believes. I should know, because I was there when it happened.

So that makes me – ?

There's no need for me to say the words: try working it out for yourself.