

ROCK
PAPER
KILLERS



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ALEXIA MASON

SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

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Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-3985-0878-1

eBook ISBN 978-1-3985-0879-8

eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-0880-4

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Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY





To the incomparable Rachel Denwood









NOTE :

Every summer, thousands of Irish teenagers go to the Gaeltacht – the regions where Irish is still spoken as the first language, and where colleges offer intensive courses to secondary school students in preparation for their final exams. While most Irish people learn Irish at school, few speak it or use it on a regular basis.







Rinne mé é
Rinne tú é
Rinne sé/sí é
Rinne sibh é
Rinneamar é
Rinne siad é

I did it
You did it
He/She did it
You (pl.) did it
We did it
They did it









PROLOGUE

We stood
at the top of the
rock watching her fall
then we walked back down
with the truth we would tell if
anyone asked us what happened
up there because friends are in safe
hands with friends and we really were
we lied so it was an accident and that night
even though we reached the base of the rock
the truth was our descent had started weeks ago










PART ONE - ROCK





Amber stood in the darkened kitchen waiting for the water in the clear glass kettle to boil, absently clutching the handle of the cafetière. She became aware of the tightness of her grip, released it, and let out a long, relieved breath. It was six a.m. and she was free. Any time her mother was sleeping, she was free. The rolling forecast of doom was switched off.

Amber's gaze moved to the calendar on the side of the fridge, freshly turned to August, the first three weeks boxed off in red marker with *Gaeltacht!* written across it. It wasn't there a week ago. It was a sudden reaction to an email sent by the school telling parents that Mr McQuaid, the Irish teacher, wouldn't be coming back in September. In Amber's case – her final year. The year she would sit the Leaving Cert, which decided what university she would go to. Within days, she and four of her friends were late-



breaking additions to an intensive Irish language course in Galway that the ninety other students had probably been signed up to for years. The only difference was those other ninety would be staying with Irish-speaking host families nearby, and Amber and her friends – Rupert, Kelly, Lockie and LB – would be staying on campus, in ‘luxury accommodation’ according to LB’s dad who made it all happen. (He was a musician, a rock star, he knew the owner – and he was going to do everything he could to give his daughter her best chance.)




Amber reached up to open the cupboard door, and an image flashed through her mind of the kettle coming to a violent boil under her arm, melting her skin.





‘Stop.’ 

She said it out loud. Sometimes, she had to. Like she was talking to someone else, which she kind of was. Amber loved her mother, but not her mother’s fears. They were like ticks she flicked off herself and onto Amber. They burrowed into her brain. Amber pulled open the drawer and the blade of a kitchen knife shone.

‘Stop. Oh my God.’ Amber grabbed a spoon and closed the drawer. She walked back to the kettle and stared at the water bubbling wildly as it boiled. She loved water, loved its flowing freedom. She dreamed about soaring over waterfalls, breaking the churning surface, plunging into



a quiet, contained darkness that felt like home. Or deep under the sea, moving like an eel, coiling and uncoiling around everything she thought was beautiful, through the broken portholes and cleaved metal of shipwrecks. Even shipwrecks can be beautiful. Rupert got it. Rupert let things breathe and be. Amber's mother needed things to make sense through her eyes and would never think to adjust her vision. Instead, she tried to adjust all the parts of Amber she didn't understand, as if one day everything would click into place.



Amber carried her mug up to the bedroom and went to the shelf where she kept her tarot and oracle card decks. She put the mug down, chose two oracle card decks, paused, then added a third. She scanned her shelf of crystals, picking whichever ones called to her and slipping them into a purple velvet drawstring bag. She turned to her desk where a selenite sphere, white and opaque, was mounted on a wooden stand. It was a heavy and cold handful that always warmed her heart – it was like holding the moon. She picked it up, wrapped it carefully in a sweatshirt, and tucked it into the middle of her rucksack. She was about to tie it closed when she remembered who else would be coming to Irish college. She picked up an ebony bracelet – silver clasp, shining beads of black obsidian.

For protection against negative energies.



Rupert Gore-Graves ducked in front of the mirror at the top of the stairs and, using gel and a wide-toothed comb, worked his thick, glossy, rich-red hair into a thoughtful arrangement of definable ridges in keeping with his look.

‘Who are we today?’ he knew Amber would ask when they met later.

‘American Psycho,’ he would answer, and she would see that – the slicked-back hair, the clean shave, the clenched jaw, the perfect white teeth and shirt, red braces, and, well, shorts because it was summer. Preppie, tailored and navy. And brown loafers. Then they would kiss on each cheek – proper kisses, lips on skin, not like Kelly’s kisses that were literally air. But like the air of a silent secret she was breathing into you as her mouth swept past your ear.

Rupert went into his bedroom and looked with pride at his suitcase, open on the bed: clothing and footwear impeccably arranged. English language books – poetry and ghosts – in Irish language covers, wedged so neatly around them that only a savage would examine and confiscate them.

Rupert’s father was waiting for him at the gate at the end of the very long laneway that led from their manor house to the road, his grey hair neatly combed, the sleeves of his flannel shirt rolled up to the elbows, the white hair

on his arms lifting in the warm breeze.

'It will be unimaginable without you,' he said as Rupert approached.

'Everything is imaginable,' said Rupert. He gave his father a broad smile. His father's matched it.

'I love those sweeping, buoyant thoughts of yours, Rupe. The house will be terribly empty without them.'

'You know it's forbidden to lay any psychological burdens on your child,' said Rupert. 'Particularly when you're the banisher.'

'Good Lord – the banisher! Does that make you the banshee?'

'That's appalling,' said Rupert.

'If I spoke the language, I'd keep you here and teach you myself. You know that.'

'It's only three weeks,' said Rupert. 'And I do know that.' His brown eyes shone with love.

'It's not the nicest of languages, Irish, is it?' said his father. 'Quite harsh. Lots of "icks" and "ocks" and "chucks" and "coos" and . . . farmyard sounds, really.'

'Don't let the neighbours hear you,' said Rupert. 'As an English gentleman farmer landowner—'

'Charmer of local beauty,' said his father. He flipped open his battered leather wallet and Rupert saw the faded image of his mother, captured a year before she died. She

was only twenty-six. ‘Scandalous decades younger than me,’ his father used to joke.

He rubbed his thumb across the photo.

‘The Irish girl who stole my heart,’ he said. ‘And gave it back to me, bigger.’ He nodded at Rupert.

‘Oh my God, Dad – adorable.’

His father handed him two fifty-euro notes. Rupert handed one back. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ He blew a kiss at his mother’s photo. ‘I never knew your fluency, nor will I. But I will toil in its honour.’ He looked at his dad. ‘And yours too, I hope you know.’

His father smiled. ‘My kind boy, always concerned about feelings he wouldn’t dream of hurting.’ He nodded. ‘Right, well – your chariot awaits.’

A horn beeped, and Rupert looked to where their elderly neighbour, Páidí, was getting out of his battered red, mud-splattered car, beaming at them both, reaching out a hand for Rupert’s suitcase.

‘Not at all,’ said Rupert, about to walk around to the boot.

‘Let him,’ said his father, quietly. Rupert did. His father was always gentle in his redirects. He had told him that there was dignity for Páidí in earning the ‘few bob’ he paid him for the errands and odd jobs he did on the estate.

‘Right,’ said his father. ‘Time to . . .’

They both nodded.

‘You’ll be able to speak to Páidí in his native tongue by the time you get back.’

‘Manage your expectations,’ said Rupert, as he settled into the front seat and arranged his long legs in the passenger footwell, using his loafers to gently work a hole in a layer of miscellaneous plastic soft drinks bottles.

He took one last look out of the window at his father.

Englishman Leaning On Farm Gate. Summer. Kildare.

Rupert liked to caption scenes as if they were paintings. Mostly in his head. Sometimes out loud. He waved goodbye to his father, who was wiping away a tear. Rupert’s heart surged. He wanted to jump back out and give him another hug, but Páidí was reversing like the maniac he was, and sentiment would never slow him. Rupert braced himself for half an hour of listening to Páidí talk GAA on the drive to the train station.

To Rupert, the Gaelic Athletic Association was great, hurling was great, Gaelic football was great. Great unknowns.

‘I’m more a G-A-Y fan, myself,’ Rupert wanted to say. Except he wasn’t sure that that was the truth, either. That he was *a fan*. There was feeling gay, and then there were the feelings about the feelings. You’re meant to love and accept who you are these days. But Rupert loved how his father loved him more. What if it stopped? He had never

heard his father say anything homophobic. Not once. But, still . . . what if it stopped?

Lotus 'LB' Behan ran her hand down the side of her black stallion, Guinness. Tears welled in her eyes.

'Ooh,' said LB. 'Bit emosh, Guinn.'

She tipped her head back and sent the tears down the sides of her rosy cheeks.

Her father came up behind her.

'Lotus Behan,' he said, putting an arm around her shoulder. LB patted his hand, turned around, and smiled. 'Hey,' she said gently. 'You look tired.'

'Me? I always look tired.' He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. 'Gonna miss you, LB,' he said.

'Gonna miss you too,' said LB.

LB was used to missing him, but this was different – she was the one leaving him behind. At home. In Dublin. And even though she hadn't expected him to be there – the family were meant to be on their annual vacation in the south of France – she felt like she was missing out on having him around the house. When he could cook her awful breakfasts but entertain her away from really noticing. But she didn't say anything because she didn't want to guilt him, and she didn't want to seem ungrateful.

'Thank you for arranging all this,' said LB.

Her dad laughed. 'I did something right with you,' he said. 'The idea of me thanking the old man for a trip to the Gaeltacht . . .' He patted LB's head. 'Mind you, if it had been a five-star experience . . .'

LB laughed.

'Though the place is only half done,' said her dad. 'Does that make it a two-point-five?'

LB groaned. 'Whatever it's like, I promise you I'll nail the H1.'

'Are they giving you exams? In the summer?'

'Yes!' said LB. 'That's why it's so insane!'

'OK – do me one favour,' said her dad, 'and don't tell your mom I asked – she thinks I don't listen to her. H1 – is that the same as an A? How many points is that?'

'Dad!' said LB, faux-frustrated. 'Forget about As. H1 is ninety to a hundred per cent. And that gets you a hundred points. H2—'

Her dad gave her the 'wrap it up' signal. 'You're going to lose your old man. You know I subcontract all the numbers stuff to Ash. Mind you, she's got a bit of a blind spot when it comes to Kelly.'

LB laughed.

'Daughters,' said her dad, shaking his head. He winked. 'OK . . . go on . . .'

'OK – all you need to know,' said LB, 'is that I have to

get all H1s if I want to do veterinary science in UCD. It's six hundred points.'

'And – tell me again – what's wrong with being an off-the-rails celebrity offspring?' said her dad. 'OK – one more question. What's the H about?'

'Dad! Same as it was for you, Mom said. Higher! And there's O for Ordinary.'

'Now you're talking,' said her dad. He held a hand to his chest. 'To the Ordinary man—'

'Who conquered the world,' said LB.

Her dad smiled, pulled her into a hug, and kissed the top of her blonde head.

'Listen, why don't I give you a lift?' he said, stepping back.

'To Galway?'

'Yeah,' said her dad. 'Why not? Fire up the chopper, land you on the grounds in style.'

LB's eyes widened with horror.

Her dad laughed. 'Fine. I'll drive you there. Like the Ordinary man I am.'

Marcus 'Lockie' Loughnane, lightly tanned, frowny, full-mouthed, was stretched across the back seat of the Kildare to Galway bus, rubbing his belly under his rugby shirt, scrolling through his phone. It started to ring. *Private Number*. He hesitated, then answered. He sat up

and listened, then sat up straighter again.

‘Sorry – what?’ said Lockie, leaning forward, chest out like a bull ready to charge. ‘With all due respect, Mr—’

The caller was shouting over him so loud people were glancing back.

Lockie angled his body away, and spoke as quietly as he could. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, but—’

He was shouted down again, and listened, open-mouthed, hand on his head, clutching a fistful of hair.

‘With all due respect, Mr Hogan—’

The shouting went on, but Lockie talked over him. ‘I did not send any photos.’ He paused. ‘It can’t be my face.’ He listened. ‘I don’t know!’ He paused. ‘No, I have a lot of respect. It’s just I’m on a bus. I’m going to the Gaeltacht. So . . . so I won’t be around anyway.’

The bus hit a bump hard, and as the phone jerked a little away from Lockie’s ear, he hung up.

The phone rang again – this time *Dad* was flashing on it. Lockie rolled his eyes, picked up and listened.

‘It was a private number!’ said Lockie. ‘How was I supposed to know?’ He paused, listened again. Anger swept across his face. ‘Well, I don’t care what your solicitor buddy says!’ His father was shouting over him. ‘I know that!’ hissed Lockie. ‘I wouldn’t want to see that either if I was him. But it wasn’t me.’ He listened again.

“Stay out of trouble” – I’m not five . . . What? . . . Dad, I’ve no interest in other girls. I love Clare! And she loves me. Yeah: love! You know – that feeling *you* get when you open your wallet? And what your solicitor buddy feels when that fat fee drops into his account?’

His father was bellowing down the phone. Lockie stared up at the ceiling. ‘No. THANK you, thank you. Thank you *so* much. I really, really, REALLY appreciate it. Money well spent. I LOVE IRISH.’

Kelly Warner sat on her bed beside her half-packed suitcase, holding a pile of clothes on her lap.

‘For God’s sake, Kelly,’ said her mother, ‘it’s three weeks. Suck it up! What is so hard? You’ve been doing Irish since you were four years old! I told you – I’m not doing another year of this. Whingeing and moaning and “write me a note”. Take some responsibility! And it’s not like you’re slumming it. I don’t know if you realise how ungrateful you sound.’

She grabbed the pile of clothes from Kelly and pressed it hard into the suitcase. ‘Why am I even doing this?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Kelly. But she did know. It was because her mother never thought she could do anything right. Every time her mother walked into a room, Kelly felt watched, waiting in the dead-air pause before the

judgement came, that flash on her mother's face that said, 'WRONG, KELLY! And you need to know it.' What was the point in doing anything if her mother was around to take over?

'You're a brat!' said her mom, coming out of the en suite holding matching bottles of shampoo and conditioner. 'Sorry, but you're in a thirty-grand-a-year private school, living in— Just *look* at this house that I kill myself for! But nothing is good enough.' She held up the bottles. 'Are you taking these?'

'No!' said Kelly. 'I've already packed my toiletries.' She pointed to a cherry-red carry-on bag by the door.

'Are you joking me?' said her mother. She sprung for it, and Kelly sprung after her.

'Mom – don't!' She tried to grab it, as her mother tried to swing it away.

'Leave it!' said Kelly. 'It's heavy.'

'Yeah, because you've emptied the bathroom into it!' said her mom, laying it down on the ground. She clicked it open, and looked up at Kelly. 'Would you get a grip? You're going to *school* – hate to break it to you. Where do you think you'll get the time to –' she plucked out a white LED face mask – 'reduce your fine lines and wrinkles?'

'Mom, stop!' said Kelly.

'Fine! Take it!' said her mom. 'I'm sure you and the girls

will get a kick out of it. But you're taking *one* suitcase – that's it! So make it work.'

Kelly flopped back on the bed and groaned through gritted teeth. Her mother got to her feet, came up to the bed and stood over her, hands on her hips. 'So, to sum it up: you're getting a lift with Antsy to the other side of the country, far away from your awful mother, so you can spend three weeks with your mates.'

'To speak Irish,' said Kelly.

Her mother raised her fists and mimicked Kelly's groan.

'And he's not "Antsy" to me,' said Kelly. 'He's just LB's dad.'

Her mother stabbed a finger in Kelly's face. 'And your mother's boss! Don't you ever forget that. Because I worry about what might happen, Kelly, if you don't respect what that man has provided for us. None of this, none of your charmed life would *be* if it wasn't for him and it wasn't for me.'

'Nice poem,' said Kelly. She looked up at her mother, eyes sparkling with defiance.

Her mom tilted her head, paused, then opened her arms and burst out laughing. 'Come here, baba. Mama's going to miss you so much.'

Their hug was a brief connect, like two moths twisting away from each other, bound for separate flames.