

RAYNE'S SUMMER

Mystery novel set in the 1950s

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SYNOPSIS

Suddenly, she started speaking, making him jump, but he wasn't entirely sure her words were directed at him: "I'm a whore, I am. I'm a murderer. They're coming for me, you know. They're going to hang me." It was all said in a fearful rush between rasping gasps and made not a jot of sense to Rayne.

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They all went off to active service together: Vinney and his closest friends Pete and Alfie, but only Alfie came back in one piece. Vinney, Rayne's eldest brother, was killed and Pete is locked up in Peddleton Mental Hospital. What is it that binds his silence and imposes an apparently self-deceptive paralysis?

For a nine-year old boy growing up in a remote seaside town in a close-knit community and within a loving family should be easy. But two children are missing and an unexplained death is written off as accidental. What is Alfie Borne, a Korean War veteran, doing in an old unused warehouse and why is he constantly threatening Rayne? And there's something wrong with Rayne's favourite Aunt. No one will adequately explain her behaviour to him. What are they hiding from him?

As family secrets are laid bare and events in the small community spiral out of control, Rayne is forced to rapidly take on extra years and evaluate his priorities. Consequently, he is destined never to forget the summer of 1956.

CHAPTER ONE

It was a mistake. Rayne wasn't really meant to see her at this time. And the more he thought about it later, the more positive he became that it was a mistake. And poor Uncle Barney in a moment of sheer desperation took advantage of it.

It wasn't so much the rhythmic rocking to and fro or her vacant wide-eyed stare that frightened Rayne, but rather the growing feeling that she didn't appear to recognize him; a silly thought considering he saw her almost every day. Though now, come to think of it, he hadn't seen her for over a fortnight. At first she was silent. Not that she had ever been particularly chatty but this was a different sort of silence, the sort that makes you feel uncomfortable. Still, you could see she was thinking: now and again she would glance fearfully over her shoulder as if she suspected someone was about to creep up and do her harm.

She was looking a bit bedraggled. Her blouse buttons weren't fastened right. Black roots were shooting through her blonde hair which looked as if it could do with a wash. Except for her wedding ring, she was wearing none of her usual array of jewellery. He noticed especially that she wasn't wearing her habitual choker and that was certainly odd. Something on her neck caught his attention. He leaned forward for a closer look. It was obvious now why she always wore the choker. He quickly withdrew his gaze, remembering how rude it was to stare.

Suddenly she spoke, making him jump, but he wasn't entirely sure her words were directed at him: "I'm a whore, I am. I'm a murderer. They're coming for me, you know. They're going to hang me. You'll see." It was all said in a fearful rush between rasping gasps and made not a jot of sense to him.

He sat on the edge of the chair, hands gripped rigidly between bony knees. He didn't know what to say, what to do. What was he supposed to say to that? What could he say? He had no idea what she was talking about. He began to worry his bottom lip, wondering how long his uncle was going to be.

She resumed her rocking and staring. Watching her, he went cold all over.

What she had said started to nag at him. Eventually he ventured to ask, "Who's coming, Aunt Evie?" She gave no indication that she had even heard him. Then

something, he didn't know what, told him to say something nice to her. "I won't let anyone hurt you, Aunt Evie."

Suddenly, eyes popping, she jerked forward and looked him straight in the eye. "They'll hang me," she growled. Then she jutted her forefinger at him as if daring him to contradict her.

Her guttural tone made him jump slightly. It wasn't that it frightened him exactly, but the idea jumped into his mind that a stranger had stolen her body. He had never heard her use that tone of voice before. One thing he knew for certain: there wasn't a mean bone in her body. She always looked so small, stick-thin and frail, insignificant even, and always so quiet, like a defenceless butterfly hovering in the background. He couldn't believe in a million years that she had the strength to raise her hand to anyone, much less throw a heavy punch. And the notion that she would give anyone cause to hang her was – well, just plain daft. Before today he couldn't remember hearing her speak a harsh word to anyone. The bizarre situation was beginning to make him feel more than a little scared. Strange thoughts and feelings had him thinking he was asleep, dreaming. If so, it wasn't a very nice dream. He would like to wake up now, thank you very much. He knew it wasn't a dream but he couldn't get away from the weird feeling that it was all so unreal, his mind playing tricks.

She started going on about Yanks. Just as his confusion was rising to panic, he heard the back door click open. With a marked sigh he tore his eyes away from her and looked towards the doorway. All at once Evie shut up. And then he heard his uncle's footfalls on the red quarry-tiled floor. It brought a sense of relief followed by a stab of guilt, and he fought the urge to immediately escape her glassy-eyed stare.

Barney popped his head around the door, glanced first at Rayne and then at Evelyn. "Everything all right then?" But it was more a statement than a question, and he didn't wait for an answer, just nodded and disappeared.

Evelyn didn't move, didn't even acknowledge Barney's return, so Rayne got up and followed his uncle into the kitchen. Looking sombre, Barney was putting away a few provisions. It's funny how once you become aware of one strange thing, other oddities suddenly come together as well. Rayne hadn't noticed anything amiss earlier, when he had first come running in hoping to cadge a spare inner tube so he

could get his bike back on the road. He hadn't detected that his uncle wasn't his usual cheery self. The absence of that customary welcoming smile and jokey greeting just hadn't intruded on Rayne's tunnel vision. Now, though, he could see that something was seriously amiss. His uncle's face was flushed and he was frowning all the time – so obvious, once you were looking for it.

“Uncle Barney,” Rayne finally ventured, “what’s wrong with Aunt Evie?”

Barney had hold of a bag of sugar. Momentarily naked, he couldn't speak. His head dropped abruptly. His outstretched arm froze on the open cupboard door. At last, he went to put the sugar on the shelf but rested his head on his arm instead. After another tense moment he looked at Rayne, seemed about to say something, and then changed his mind, just shaking his head as he deposited the sugar.

Rayne wanted to ask him about the things Evie had said but something told him to hold his tongue.

All at once Barney quietly shut the cupboard door and then turned to give Rayne's shoulder a warm squeeze followed by a reassuring pat. But his tight-lipped smile was clearly forced. “Best get along home now. Thanks for ... I don't know what I ... You've been a real help, lad.”

“What'll I tell Dad? I mean, will you be playing tonight?”

A wry grin spread across his uncle's face. “Hardly.” He ruffled the boy's hair. “Tell your dad I said for you to sit in for me.”

“You know Mam'd never let me play poker, Uncle Barney.” Rayne looked over towards the doorway. “I don't s'ppose Aunt Evie'll be along in the morning, will she? Only, I heard Mam say they'd be bottling tomorrow.”

Barney's face clouded over and he shook his head, turning away. “Jam or marmalade?” he murmured absently.

“Jam, I think. Uncle Barney, what's –”

“Best get along now, Rayne, there's a good boy. Time's getting on and they'll be wondering where you are.”

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An excited murmur moves through the crowd on the platform as the train comes into view. The musicians get ready with their instruments, the conductor already holding his baton at the ready. As the train pulls into the station and shudders to a halt, a forced silence encircles the assembly. The porter, wearing a big grin, begins to walk the length of the train, opening the doors along the way.

When Vinney's face appears at the third door along, a great roar swells through the townspeople and the 'Welcome Home' banners are held aloft. As he steps down onto the platform, the brass band strikes up with their much practiced cheery salutation.

Everyone is here to greet the returning hero. Lizzy, like the rest of the immediate family – Vinney's siblings, grandfather and father – is wearing a look of great pride. All the extended family is crowded onto the platform too, aunts, uncles, cousins, all sporting the same beam of elation at being related to the bravest of men. Then, suddenly, a deathly hush descends on the pushing throng and stills them instantly as Vinney's body disintegrates into a bloody mess.

Lizzy let out a horrified gasp.

It's no good, that version doesn't work.

Now it's raining but not dampening anyone's spirits. Heedless of the weather, Rayne is waiting on the porch along with Grandpa, barely sheltered from the downpour.

All at once Rayne splutters the cry they have all been listening out for. Vinney is in sight, coming round the bend in the road. He's doing a slow jog and carefully avoiding the great puddles of water, still looking smart in his uniform despite the downpour. But when he sees the entire family pouring through the door, spilling out onto the garden path, and all oblivious of the driving rain, he breaks into a run.

He hurtles through the gate. But before anyone can embrace him his face contorts in an agony of rictus and his blood-soaked body explodes into myriad specks of flesh, turning the grey sky a dark, ugly red.

Lizzy silently screamed.

Nothing works. It always ends the same. It always will.

A tear began to form and she willed it to evaporate. No matter how many times she put herself through this fantasizing torture, it would always end the same. She didn't need anyone to tell her that.

Time, history, events can't be changed.

And no amount of dreaming and wishing would make it so, she told herself. But her heart felt so fragile; always this horrid thumping in her chest every time she made the mistake of dwelling on her grief. A momentary weakness enveloped her and her face crumpled. It took an almost superhuman effort to calm herself.

She crossed to the window and placed her forehead on the cool glass, trying to breathe normally. She felt trapped in these short episodes of madness. A shudder ran through her as she asked herself if there would ever come a time when they would end. She looked down the road, regret and bitterness flooding her features. The sun was shining brightly, indifferent to the icy gloom enfolding her. She willed the day's warmth to penetrate her misery, melt the icy tendrils of anguish, banish all these terrible thoughts; why was it always so difficult? Inhaling on a caught sob, she clenched her jaw, determined not to cry.

She turned and went over to the dressing table. The air was filled with the trail of Sandalwood and she breathed in deeply, taking pleasure in the memory of his smell when he was all lickety-spit clean and ready for off without a minute to waste.

She glanced towards the closed door, thinking it was about time, now. Funny, but no one ever interrupted these spells of hers. She had come to believe that it would need a fire or other such emergency before anyone dared disturb her. Everyone understood, waited patiently until the door opened again. And they never mentioned it. She was so grateful for this.

With a resonant sigh, she replaced the bottle of aftershave on the dresser. Not satisfied, she moved it back a further two inches. She looked once more at the *useless* medal, clutched so tightly in her hand that the edges were threatening to break the skin. She allowed her hand to relax and then carefully replaced the medal in its case. She laid it beside the bottle with precisely three inches of separation. With a resilient nod of satisfaction she straightened her apron and then left the room to its stillness.

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Rayne got to the railway bridge he had put all thoughts about Aunt Evie aside. He stopped and looked up the embankment at the barely visible edge of a path branching off at the top. He checked the position of the sun, trying to gauge the time. If he were to carry on up the road he would be home in another ten minutes. Then again, if he went back by way of the beach it would add at least another twenty to the journey, depending on if he messed about or not. If he had his bike he could have been home in five.

Just nine years old, Rayne was beginning to feel his independence and balk at a few of his parents' rules.

After a brief inner struggle he started up the steep embankment, the toes of his shoes scuffing the long grass flat. On reaching the top, he took a breath and started along the boulder-strewn path, dodging the bigger ones. Chunks of jagged granite gradually thinned out to smaller rocks interspersed with sharp clumps of gorse. Then the heavy terrain gave way to the odd rock, and finally to smooth pebbles as he rounded the bend.

A low, crumbly stone wall marked out the edge of Billy Dix's patch. Within the small enclosure was a tiny brick-built shelter, no better than a hovel really. The patched roof was made up of odd bits of blue slate and some asbestos sheeting, lending it an air of habitation. Its one window with a cracked pane of glass was so filthy no one could see inside, not that many wanted to. Ragged pieces of purple velvet which someone had given him many eons ago acted as curtains, and were tied at the sides with twine. They were always a cause for great amusement. The passing gangs of kids would lay bets as to the state of the interior. Did he have a bed? Was there a table to eat his dinner off? And the best one: what did he do for an outhouse? One of them had once spent ages looking for anything resembling a lavatory while the rest stood lookout, watching for Billy's return.

Billy Dix was not a native. Three months after the end of World War II he had fetched up on the beach from nowhere, and stayed there ever since.

On spotting him sitting on the wall, Rayne's feet started dragging before finally coming to a dead stop.

The real heat of the day had waned but it was still pleasantly warm with the sun only just edging towards the western horizon. Yet Billy was still wearing his heavy topcoat, which had once been a dark khaki colour. But, like everything about him, its shade had long since become obscured, the wool tattered and filthy, and the length lopsided with the hem hanging down in a frayed line. The buttons, too, had fallen by the wayside and the coat was cinched around the middle with platted string. Beneath the coat, his chest looked bare of clothes; no visible skin that Rayne could see, just a dirty clump of matted hair, matching the mess on his face which masqueraded as a beard and always seemed to be chequered with stomach-turning debris. His mass of prematurely grey-flecked hair was tied back with the same platted string.

If Rayne wanted to go on, he couldn't avoid him. The problem was that Billy Dix was at the top of Mam's list of *strange* people to avoid.

Too late! Billy had seen him.

Bracing himself, Rayne carried on, his eyes firmly fixed on the ground ahead. His standing wouldn't half go up when his pals found out he had been bold enough to brave Billy's path on his own.

"Oi! You. What you doin'? This here's moy patch. You didn't get moy permission to cross. I's speakin' to you, boy. Where d'you think you're goin'?"

Avoiding eye contact, Rayne ignored him, beginning to breathe easier once he saw the dirt spreading to patches of sand up ahead. He was almost there, now.

"Oi! I's talkin' to you. You been here afore, 'aven't you? I seed you afore. You know you catches moy buckle end, boy, if you don't get moy say-so to come by. You hear me? I's got to look out for the Angel. You hear me, boy?"

Suddenly, Billy jumped off the wall, causing Rayne's stomach to somersault and his chest to thud. The light gusts of breeze took up Billy's stench, lifting it up Rayne's nostrils and he gulped back a dry retch. He didn't dare turn around and confront him; experience had taught him this was fatal. Once you interacted with Billy, you couldn't get away. He would keep jumping in your path, breathing his foul

breath all over you, baring his rotten teeth and spouting vitriol at you. It was all right when there was a whole bunch of you to back one another up, but not when you were on your own. Rayne realized the foolishness of giving in to his whim and wished now that he had just done as he was told and taken the road.

“Oi, I’s talkin’ to you. Hey, don’t you dare go in them there caves. They’s not yours. They belongs to the Angel. D’you hear me, boy?”

Rayne reached the end of the wall which marked Billy’s patch. Hurrying, his feet finally gained shaky purchase on a narrow strip of the downward slope which led down to the beach. He gulped in large mouthfuls of air, relieved to hear Billy’s voice beginning to fade into the background as he slowly made his descent. The trick was to try and avoid the sharp rock-face on either side: it would cut your skin to ribbons if you misjudged a step.

CHAPTER THREE

From his vantage point close to the precipice Billy watched tight-lipped as Rayne embarked on the steep descent. As the boy's bobbing head disappeared over the edge Billy held his breath, digging his fingers into the damp earth, impervious to the sudden appearance of a wriggling worm. "I knows you, boy. I's got your face in moy 'ead now. The Angel be comin' soon. Don't you be takin' anythin' off that beach, boy. You hear? Them there pick-ups is all moin." But, for once, his voice was low and the words quickly eaten up by biting gusts of wind.

He grasped his tongue between a broken set of discoloured teeth that spoke of a hostile encounter. A minute or so crept by and then he chuckled lowly. Without warning, a crowd of incorporeal faces appeared, each one vying for prominence in his line of vision and blocking out his view of the beach below, distracting, disturbing, frightening even. They were all made from the same mould: emaciated faces, slack jaws and dead eyes, entirely surrounding him now, swimming around his head like a shoal of fish. No one spoke a single word, but skeletal arms were lifted, importuning his touch. He wouldn't touch them, couldn't, and willed his mind to back off. He couldn't help them, he couldn't even help himself. Wasn't he drowning, too? Billy screwed shut his eyes against the onslaught. "Be off, the lot of ye!" Small mercies: he remembered the boy. Watch him, he thought. His eyes shot open. Thankfully, the wraiths had disappeared and he crawled forward to peer over the cliff edge.

The faint snap of a twig, close in the underbrush, arrested his ears and he snapped his head around. His eyes widened as a new thought suddenly jumped into his head. *More boys?* Nostrils flaring, he snorted in outrage. With his tongue continuously flicking at dry, flaky lips, he slithered out of the gorse bush on his belly. He lurched to his feet and ran forward a few feet, then pulled up short as a disembodied head swam into focus. He immediately stamped to attention and saluted. "Sir ... Corporal William Dixon. Yes, sir ... Now? Yes, sir, right away. Thank you, sir."

Arms folded behind a straight back, Billy parted his legs and stood still and silent for several minutes – a feat in itself. A plaintive cry of a swooping gull broke his trance and a sense of déjà vu overwhelmed him, at odds with the reality of his surroundings.

He turned and began marching back towards the embankment, goose-stepping over the smaller boulders in his path and side-stepping around the larger ones. By the time he reached the door to his shack his gait had settled back to its more familiar jerky carriage and his shoulders back to their habitual hunch.

He slumped down in his only chair and stared into space, lost in the myriad of conflicting thoughts that circled his mind like a host of unseen predators. The whisperers were back, first caressing his ears before gradually growing to a collective buzz that ended up causing nothing but angry confusion.

“Silence, you pissants!”

He plucked a knife from the inside of his coat, the handle worn and darkened with age. He picked up an oily rag from the floor and began to clean the blade. The blood wasn't fresh, already dried to dark, streaky smudges that fell just short of the hilt.

His dark grey eyes roved the corners of the gloomy interior and then came to rest on the filthy panes in his one window to the world outside. Dipping his head, eyes squinting, he checked the progress of the sun, seeking to work out if it was time yet. A frustrated sigh rose from his throat, resonating with the soft swish of cloth on metal; cleaning, polishing, wiping away the last vestiges of what he saw as a good deed, which was already beginning to fade from his memory.

Flicking his eyes from side to side, as if they were bouncing off the walls, his tongue began to vibrate with the urge to employ his disjointed thoughts, only one of which he wanted to hold on to. “The Angel be comin’ soon. Bucket an’ spade to the fore. ’Oles to dig. An’ pick-ups. There’ll be pick-ups, oi’ll be bound.”

His eyes stopped roving and focused on a small box in the corner of the hut, fetching up on the bright splash of woollen neatly laid out on the top, marred only by a small brownish stain that stood out in stark contrast to its background colour of shocking-pink.

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Amelia Mullond leaned closer and placed her eye against the lens, adjusting the focus as she manoeuvred the telescope to take in the far side of the beach at Billy's end. Slowly, she swung it upwards to take in the guillemots engaged in a second round of nesting within the deep crevices that scarred the rock-face as if a giant had fallen from the heavens and drawn a clawed hand through it in an attempt to halt his plunge. When she spotted the boy negotiating the dangerous precipice she jerked upright and drew up a chair to make herself comfortable.

She sat down and then took up the telescope again, adjusting the focus once more to magnify and sharpen the distant figure's face. The corner of her mouth twitched slightly and she nodded to herself. Recognizing the same spirited youngster, who seemed to frequent the desolate shoreline more than any other beachcomber, she watched his careful descent, admiring his courage. No admonishment for his recklessness entered her mind. She wished she had just a modicum of his bravery and prowess.

He wasn't like the others, she thought. He didn't throw stones or make fun of her. Naughty boys were the bane of her life. She had taken their measure long ago and knew what to do. All she had to do if the naughty boys started on her was just stand still and give them a really stern look and they would always run away. The faces would change from time to time, but their rude behaviour never did.

This boy, though, was different. She didn't know his name. He had never spoken to her, nor she to him – she wouldn't dare – but he had never taunted her or run away from her as if she were the world's worst person. She had passed him by on the beach many times; he was always busy turning over rocks and stuff. She knew that he saw her, but he had never done anything to make her give him the look and she had never had a reason to stop.

Amelia followed his path down the dangerous incline, holding her breath when it looked at one point as if he were destined for a fatal fall as a misplaced step propelled him into an impromptu run. She watched as he swiftly checked the sudden increase in speed with no give-away expression of fear flooding his features. How fearless, she thought enviously.

An unbidden memory flashed into her mind, of a time when she had behaved in much the same way and climbed down the very same rock-face. But that was before the bad time. Since then she seemed to have lived her life in a horrible black tunnel; single-track thoughts kept in order by the daily rigid routine that Daddy, the only light in her life, had set out for her. Flicking the well-used switch in her mind that her mother had taught her to use, she banished the bad thoughts with little more than a slow blink of her eyelids; better to concentrate on the boy.

Glancing over her shoulder, she checked the time, the loud clicking of the clock a gentle reminder that her friends needed seeing to. She decided they wouldn't mind waiting just ten-minutes more. She was reluctant to give up the boy and his wanderings. There had been no activity on the beach for days now. A contented sigh whispered past her lips as she laid her eye to the glass and focused on the boy once more.