

# THE PACT

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*Also by Amy Heydenrych*

Shame on You

# THE PACT

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ZAFFRE

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*For Rhys*



*It was supposed to be a prank, a stupid mistake that evaporated the next day. She never meant for her to die. Truth be told, she didn't know exactly what she wanted. She hated herself while she did it and regretted it the second it was done. But later, beneath her begging and protestations, one fact remained: while she never meant for her to die, she did want to hurt her, just a little.*





# Chapter 1

What actually happened on the night Nicole died was vague as a rumor, caught through snippets of conversation behind closed doors. By the time the neighbors had guessed at what was really going on, it was too late.

Who could blame them? It didn't sound like death at first. A door creaked open. Her musical laugh suggested it was simply a friend stopping by. Nicole was well liked in the building, and always the first to offer a smile. Of course she would have friends over all the time! There were vague sounds – footsteps, clinking cutlery, the low hum of music through speakers. Nothing to cause alarm.

The apartments were packed like sardines, so the neighbors did what they always do. They turned the television up, they spoke a little louder, they put on music of their own. It was the usual competing cacophony that never got too loud or lasted after midnight.

But that night was different. The music got louder – the children in the building were unable to sleep. This was out of character for Nicole and inappropriate for a weeknight. The neighbors below her debated amongst themselves whether it was time to go upstairs and say something.

Every sentence of her conversation was shouted, the laughter raucous. Some heard the high-pitched shriek of

a woman, others the low growl of a man. The neighbors tried not to focus on it, not to let each word aggravate them further, but it was all they could think about. They should call someone, report it, it was far too loud.

Suddenly, the laughter turned hysterical. It was out-of-control, hooting, belly-aching laughter, the kind that rips the breath out of your lungs.

A voice. *'What the hell?'* Then, a dull thud, like the sound of a bowling ball dropping to the ground. Something had shifted. It sounded strange, but not strange enough to investigate. The noise came to an abrupt end and all was silent. Palpable relief flooded the building. Soon, the neighbors forgot their irritation and the strange end to the evening, and drifted off to sleep, while the killer stepped out and paced past their doorways, while Nicole's blood spread like a halo around her, while she gasped her last breath.

## Chapter 2

### *Isla, the morning after the murder*

‘You know what is at the heart of so many suburban murders? Politeness,’ says Isla. She wrestles with her old Ford’s dodgy steering to parallel-park it in front of an apartment building that seems too stylish to be a murder scene. It’s one of those newly gentrified areas in San Francisco where every pedestrian looks ready to be snapped for a street style editorial. Isla barely misses the exposed shins of a hipster in rolled-up distressed denims and a thick, curly beard.

‘Why do you say that?’ says her best friend, Lizzie, on the other end of the phone. In the background she can hear the now-familiar sounds of early evening in London, the roar of motorcycles, the hooting of a bus, the buzz of commuters’ voices. They haven’t lived in the same city for years, but they speak on the phone every day when the time difference allows.

Lizzie is a graphic designer, worlds apart from Isla’s extreme career choice.

‘Well,’ Isla says, leafing through her notebook while balancing the handset against her ear, ‘in these cases bystanders always say the same thing.

*‘Murders just don’t happen in this part of town.’*

*‘We’re a very peaceful the neighborhood.’*

*‘None of us saw this coming. The killer was an upstanding member of the community!’*

‘Sure.’ Sarcasm burns fresh on her tongue.

Lizzie laughs down the line. ‘You really are a ray of sunshine when you’ve just woken up.’

‘I’m serious!’

If pressed for long enough, each the neighbor can recall *something*. The night the abusive husband took it too far and the argument ended with smashing glass. The tall, burly men who kept lurking outside the door of the smartly dressed businessman in 12A who was rumored to have a gambling habit. Or maybe just a bad feeling that can’t be shrugged off.

Isla fiddles with the buttons on the elevator, trying to recall the message that communicated which floor the crime scene is on. ‘Listen, I better go. Good luck with your presentation today!’

‘Good luck with your murder . . .’

Without the crutch of distraction, a deeper anxiety crawls under Isla’s skin. The alert she received about today’s case made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. *A thirty-one-year-old woman* – the exact same age as her – *has been found brutally murdered, potentially by someone she knew*. The clipped police statement noted no signs of forced entry and the neighbors have insisted they didn’t hear anything other than loud music, animated conversation and laughing. It brings back a memory of her own, a liquor-stumbling, stale-cigarette-kissed scene that she

quickly pushes to the back of her mind. She's safe now, right here, on the other side of the police tape. As a reporter, she has the control to shape the story and take the power back. Yet the past is never too far away. This morning, it is on the other side of that door.

Isla flashes a media access card and steps into the apartment. Technically, she shouldn't be allowed near the crime scene until all the evidence has been collected, but in her time on this beat she has earned the trust of this division, especially Simon, the lead inspector on the case. Usually he allows her to slip in, undetected.

It's been ten years since Simon, then a rookie cop, called Isla and convinced her to reopen her sexual assault case. Nine years and six months since she looked into her ex-boyfriend's jeering face as they led him away in handcuffs at the end of a grueling trial. That moment still twists in her gut like a knife, the pain never dulls, no matter how many years pass. In many ways, she feels like the same vulnerable young woman she was all those years ago.

Simon, however, has been fortified by time – his limbs have thickened, and his stance strengthened. His dark hair is now shaved close to his head and today he's shrouded in a forensic suit. Anyone would think he would have shed his idealism and repressed his tenderness by now. But every time Isla approaches him at a crime scene, she is sure she sees the gentleness flash across his eyes, fleeting as a shadow.

She smiles at Simon briefly. The familiarity of him anchors her in the face of a new investigation. The body is in the bathroom – this is evident from the cluster of forensic suits outside – but there is also a *feeling* a place gets when something terrible happens. It's the leaden smell of blood, the chaos and mess that hint at the moments before, but it is also something spiritual. No matter how many crime scenes Isla visits, it still chills her to the bone.

She steers clear of the bathroom. To see the body first is too dehumanising for the person inside. For many media accounts of a murder, it is about the gore. All empathy is stripped away before the story has even begun. She is more interested in the story behind the story, in who the person was before.

The apartment is small but decorated in a sleek, minimalist Scandinavian style. Every object appears purposeful and of a high quality. Easy, self-assured wealth. Isla takes note of the recycling bins in the kitchen and the thriving potted herb garden on the windowsill. Nicole Whittington was a woman who had her shit together.

Smaller details in the living room spark Isla's interest. There is a half-eaten bowl of roasted vegetable pasta on the coffee table, a romantic comedy on pause and a *Vogue* magazine on the couch, still in its plastic wrapping. A woman after my own heart, she thinks; a woman who was planning an evening alone. A few books stand out on the shelf: Marie Kondo's *Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*, Roxane Gay's *Difficult Women*, a frayed copy of Albert

Camus' *L'etranger* and an English—Japanese dictionary. In addition to the team spilling out the bathroom, she notices two people from forensics scanning the living room with a blue light. A picture starts sketching itself in Isla's mind.

She grits her teeth and pushes past the furniture and forensics to the bathroom in the corner of the apartment. The scene of the murder.

Simon steps in front of her.

'Sorry, Isla, this area is off limits. The forensics team is in the thick of gathering evidence.'

'Good morning to you, too, Simon.'

She's seen this look before – cases like these are hard on the police, as well as reporters like her. They're the kind that push you up close to the face of evil, and give you no option to look away. They set off a trauma that beats beneath your skin, long after the case is closed, the story is filed and the body is taken away.

Simon won't look her in the eye. 'The victim was battered to death with a bronze sculpture, and then propped up in the shower, like a doll.'

His gaze flits towards the bathroom door. Isla knows that Simon always struggles with cases where women are hurt. A few times, they have sat together in a coffee shop, Simon repeating the details of a case over and over, looping round the violence, processing it all. She always wonders, out of all the careers he could have followed, why he chose to be a cop? He turns back towards the scene, knocking over a perfectly nurtured orchid in the process. Clumps of

soil scatter into the cream shag carpet. In the bulk of the forensic suit, his limbs have a mind of their own. Simon's clumsiness, in contrast to the seriousness of the crime scene, makes her want to lean forward and hug him.

'You need anything?' Isla reaches into her canvas messenger bag. She rummages amidst the plasters, headache pills, lip balm, hand sanitizer and pens.

'No thanks, unless you have a mini bottle of vodka in there and a pack of cigarettes. Listen, I'm going to need you to get out of here, right now. I'll send you the summary of the case when we're done.'

'But –'

'Now, Isla! Let's try and follow procedure for once!'

'Fine . . . sorry,' she says, heat creeping up her cheeks.

His eyes soften. 'It's nothing personal, OK? I promise we'll chat as soon as I'm done. Take care of yourself.'

It's a long walk to the door and an even longer wait for the elevator to reach the seventh floor. Isla can't help but feel a little disgraced, as if every official person buzzing about the scene knows that she is not meant to be there. She has stood at the frontlines alongside Simon reporting on gang violence, bank robberies and more. What about this case has made him wall it off so coldly?

Best to just go back to the newsroom, where she can forget this morning and the dread it has stirred within her.

She lurches the car into gear, eyes fiery with shame at the empty notebook on the passenger seat. Dammit! What a waste of a few hours. She'll have to come back and



interview Nicole Whittington's neighbors later. Just as she accelerates, a young woman with thick brown hair pulled into a messy ponytail, and a pale, haunted face darts in front of the car.

'Jesus! Watch where you're going! You could have got yourself killed!' She wrestles with the gearstick of her car, and pushes her sunglasses on roughly, her eyes following the lycra-clad figure as she sprints away.

She chugs across town, battling the traffic and the endless, steep uphill that make her clutch burn ominously. Her sunglasses are too smudged to see clearly – chocolate, she presumes. She turns on the radio, but cannot settle. The entire morning feels off, from the murder and Simon's reaction, to the strange expression of the woman who almost collided with her car.

There is no story without a beginning, no murder without a moment that incites it. Yet no woman asks for this, not ever. Something deeply unjust happened last night, the urgent question is, what?

## Chapter 3

### *Freya, three months before the murder*

Freya takes a deep breath before ringing the buzzer.

‘Play it cool,’ she whispers to herself, ‘this is only the biggest day of your life.’

She makes idle conversation with the security guard as she signs the register.

‘You look happy,’ he says, mirroring her wide smile.

‘It’s a big day for me,’ she says, ‘Possibly my biggest day yet.’

‘Well, good luck! I’m sure you’ll be amazing.’

She bounces from foot to foot in the lobby, waiting for the elevator to arrive. How many times had she dreamed of this moment? She worked hard, she tried her best, but never would she have believed that it would pay off one day. Who would expect that Freya, a foster child with a knack for computers, would end up working at the hottest tech company in San Francisco?

Freya remembers standing outside the Atypical offices one freezing January night, wrapped up in a thick coat and warming her hands on a takeaway coffee. She had been working punishing hours completing her Masters

in software engineering while waitressing at an old Italian trattoria to pay for her final year of studies.

That night had been tougher than usual – mean-spirited customers, meager tips and an assignment that was far from done – so she had taken a detour past the modernized heritage building that housed Atypical’s offices. It was the kind of startup that breathed life into the ideas that the rest of the world would be talking about in five years’ time. In the three years since they launched, they had grown like a wildfire, and captured the imagination of Silicon Valley.

Back when Atypical was still working out of a garage, Elon Musk tried to buy the business, but the enigmatic founder and CEO, Julian Cox, flatly refused. Star computer science graduates from all the Ivy League colleges tried all manner of stunts to get hired, but the rumor on campus was that you had to be invited, usually after doing some time at one of the established tech giants. Freya spotted the lucky few who worked at Atypical sometimes, on the subway or at Whole Foods in the brief flash of a company hoodie bearing the now-familiar triangle logo. Yet she didn’t actually *know* anybody who had ever succeeded in getting hired to work there. That night, she was so ragged from being overworked, so humiliated by the way customers had treated her in the restaurant, it felt like she would never amount to anything, let alone end up there. Looking back, there was beauty in her brokenness. She had put everything on the line to reshape herself into someone new.

It seemed impossible, but there was a fire that burned in her, even then. All she needed was one moment of grace, one foot in the door, and she would work the hardest of all. Sure, she had graduated with Summa Cum Laude, but when it came down to it, her real power was that she wanted it more than anybody else.

Now, a whirlwind year later, her heart pounds with excitement as the heavy copper door of the elevator slides open and she steps inside the offices. Her whole life has led up to this.

She sneaks a quick glance at her reflection in the mirror – minimal makeup, hair in a loose chignon and a slick of red lipstick to finish the look off – and runs her hands over the luxe finishings. Every detail thrills her. The past doesn't matter anymore. From this moment forward, she can become the person she was always meant to be. Maybe one day she may even reach the mythical status of Julian Cox.

Her fingers fumble for her notebook, where she has written some key facts to remember. Part genius, part Adonis, Julian is the newly crowned future of tech, a clean-cut savant who does not indulge in substances or inappropriate Twitter rants. In some ways, he is more famous than Atypical itself. He speaks ten languages fluently; he studied yoga with a guru in the Himalayas; he writes both forwards and backwards and was assumed deaf until his first year of school, simply because he was thinking so deeply. He is deliberately humble, and lived with his parents until his business got on its feet. Although

Atypical is not yet listed on the stock exchange and has no obligation to share information publicly, Julian still publishes the salaries of all his staff to promote equal pay.

The technology that has caused such a stir is a low-cost device that will bring free Wi-Fi to rural villages in Kenya and Tanzania. Through a combination of smart technology and GPS, Julian and his team at Atypical will introduce cheap medical technology that delivers much-needed supplies to those who do not have access to them. While the business is yet to break even, the hope and idealism keeps the investment pouring in. Freya can recite the ins and outs of the technology. She has read every article on it. And, although she's got the job already, she still has a fierce desire to prove herself.

As Julian approaches Freya, her breath catches in her throat. He is dressed in a simple gray T-shirt that exposes a sleeve of intricate tattoos. His dark, wavy hair falls just short of his shoulders. There is a mischievous glint in his eye, as if they are already complicit in something wonderful together. On a lesser man, the expression would pass off as sleazy, but on Julian it is simply warm.

'Freya! Welcome to the tribe.'

The word tribe conjures up trance concerts in the desert, and Shamans administering mind-opening psychedelic drugs inside hemp-woven teepees. While Julian is heading up one of Forbes' 'Top 10 multi-million-dollar businesses under five years old', there is something in his manner that suggests he'd be up for that as well.

‘Right, let’s take you on the grand tour!’ The first thing that strikes Freya is how *easy* the office feels. An arrestingly beautiful woman with a natural afro and a septum piercing furrows her brow in concentration as she runs complex code on the screen before her. Identical twins are curled up on a sofa in the corner, having a heated discussion. A woman in a glamorous hijab and hoop earrings speaks animatedly into her phone. Every person radiates a sense of importance, a sense of being at home and stretching out confidently into the world. Just looking at them makes Freya stand a little taller.

There is a meditation room, yoga classes at lunchtime, a juicing station, fresh herbs growing off living walls, the latest MacBooks that only launched a few weeks before, and a room where you can draw on all the walls and floors. It is more of a paradise than an office.

While these perks are exciting, they aren’t the reason Freya is here. She wants to be part of the boldest projects in data science and this is the place to do it. There are no rules, no limits and infinite opportunities for Freya to create amazing, life-changing work. Today, tech CEOs are our Greek gods, possessed with magical powers, their companies are where they practice their magic. She gets to use technology to elevate the lives of those less fortunate and make a real difference. She will be imbued with the power to work miracles. Her whole life is a miracle, an example of how the care of others can turn things around, so nothing could matter to her more.

Julian gestures to a desk that bears a charming, handwritten 'Welcome Freya' sign. There is a Mac in a box still sheathed in plastic, and a few gifts – a mug with a quote by Ayn Rand, Freya's favorite author; a packet of chamomile tea; and several slabs of Lindt white chocolate. These gifts are not random – they all happen to be her favorite things.

'Do you like it?' he asks, and she is flattered by how he searches her face for approval. 'We did our research to find out the things you love.' Freya smiles. These days, looking up a person online is alluded to so casually, so confidently. It has been stripped of shame and repackaged as the highest compliment. She expected this, long before she got the call. Which is why any picture of her doing anything she shouldn't have has been sanitized.

'It's perfect, thank you.' She pauses for a second, adds, 'I really appreciate it, so much.' Hopefully he can see how much she means it.

The day is a whirlwind of introductions. Freya smiles until her face is about to crack.

Later, when the copper doors of the elevator close behind her and she emerges, blinking onto the city streets, she feels different. Like stepping into a movie, she is suddenly animated. The moment shines with importance, as she teeters on the brink of her future.

She runs through the conversations she had during the day and suddenly feels a little embarrassed at how keen she was. There were moments she thinks she said the wrong thing, where she came across as too excited, too awkward,

too much. She walks home a little faster to outrun the feeling, instead focusing on the good. It's just growing pains, nothing more. This is a big step! She is living the dream, it's no wonder she feels a bit paranoid it will all be ripped away. But there is something else too, something that quickens her pulse and dries her mouth. Because while it was the perfect day in so many ways, after the joy there is a bitter aftertaste that lingers. The acrid, inexplicable taste of fear.



## Chapter 4

### *Freya, the morning after the murder*

The overwhelming sense of joy last night has settled into an uncomfortable jittery feeling that tugs at Freya. She throws on her Nike running gear and ties up the laces on her trainers.

Kate shakes her head, 'No matter how many years I have known you, I've never been able to understand how you can run on a hangover.'

'It's totally logical – you sweat out the toxins, and then the night before is forgotten,' she says.

Freya jiggles the key in the lock to let herself out the apartment. It's a muggy, humid day. The kind where fights break out for no reason. As she turns to go, Kate grabs her arm with surprising force. 'Be careful out there, OK?'

'Of course. I always am.'

As her steps fall into rhythm, she cannot escape her thoughts the way she usually does. She paces down streets she doesn't usually use, as if by running faster she will outrun her worries. She did something stupid last night. She played a juvenile, petty prank in the heat of the moment, and this morning she fears the consequences.

Her wandering takes her a few blocks away from Atypical, to Market Street, the location of the chic apartment blocks she could only aspire to live in. Maybe one day, when she

earns enough to no longer have to share a house with Kate, Jasmin and Hattie. She chuckles. Who is she kidding – she will always want to live with them.

Sirens wail oppressively close to her, and she stops in her tracks as they speed past and park outside the building. Her mind goes somewhere else for a second, then she stops herself. No. Don't be stupid. It was only a prank. It couldn't have caused . . .

A message on her phone. A welcome distraction.

*Hey, says an unknown number, I'm so glad you said hi. I think you're cute too.*

It's innocuous enough, but this morning the message hits too close to home. It reminds her of the prank last night, and the grave mistake she has made. She wants it to be over, lost in the drunken memories of the night before, sweated out in this morning's run, but this message suggests she is wrong.

She can't think about this, not with the roar of sirens and the hiss of buses in traffic. She turns and almost collides with an old Ford, driven by a woman with scruffy auburn bangs.

'Jesus! Watch where you're going! You could have got yourself killed!' The woman shouts. Freya's heart is hammering in her chest, the adrenaline surges through her body.

She runs all the way back home, darting through the traffic, pushing past pedestrians, breath pounding in her chest, not once breaking her pace, never looking back. Her phone in her pocket, a functional object turned suddenly sinister.

## Chapter 5

### *Freya, five years before*

Three a.m. The worst time of the morning. What one foster mother called ‘the darkest hour of the soul’. Freya stretches in the cramped confines of her second-hand car. Her neck is so stiff, she can barely breathe and it feels like someone is hammering a large nail in the small of her back.

Everyone talks about saving for college, but nobody mentions the hidden costs, like textbooks, food and having a place to stay. Nobody remembers that the people sitting next to you in class will have the latest tech and wear \$100 frayed denims with the attitude that they somehow deserve it, that they earned these privileges themselves. College is filled with people whose parents have money. Freya tries to push the resentment down and focus on the work, but some days are harder than others, especially when she can’t even get a full night’s sleep.

Quick footsteps, a knock on the window. ‘Hey there, hey!’

Shit. Freya always tries to park far enough out of sight to not draw attention to herself, but close enough to campus security to be safe, but she must have slipped up tonight. She’d only got back to her car around midnight, after working in the computer labs, and probably wasn’t

as clear-headed as usual. She's not sure what would be worse – mockery or getting into some sort of trouble. Are you allowed to still study if, technically, you don't really have a place to live?

She pushes her hair out of her face and rubs the sleep out of her eyes before winding the window down. It's a manual window, not electric, and the process of opening it is awkwardly protracted. She stares into the bright, hazy eyes of Kate Jones, the only other girl in her computer science class.

'I thought it was you!' Kate laughs. 'You also had a rough night?'

'Uh . . . yeah.'

'I was supposed to go out for one drink after my assignment. But, you know how it goes. Suddenly wine turns into shots and shots into tequila and the next thing you're making out with a barman from Russia called Vlad who says he's here to get a modeling job.'

Freya is exhausted, but she musters up the energy to nod knowingly. Truth is, she hasn't had a relationship before. Romance is both something she has pushed aside in favor of her studies, and something she obsesses over. How would it feel to truly belong in another's arms. She resolves to keep talking until she wears Kate out. Perhaps then her secret will remain undetected.

Kate continues, 'Honestly, how did you find the assignment? I felt like I was reading Hebrew for most of it, I couldn't understand a thing! I think that's why I ended up

going drinking afterwards, I felt like such a fool. If I fail another semester, my parents are going to kill me!’

Freya begins to respond, but then she sees Kate’s gaze extend behind her, to the clump of clothes on the backseat. Her face twists in that all-familiar awkward grimace that someone makes when they are faced with poverty.

She speaks slowly, carefully. ‘You live in your car?’

‘Yes.’

She thinks for a moment.

‘Isn’t it cold?’

‘Sometimes.’ Freya can’t believe that she hasn’t made some excuse and driven off.

Kate simply keeps standing there, mouth agape. ‘But you’re the smartest person in our class!’

‘Smart people can also be poor, Kate.’

She looks mortified. ‘Fuck, sorry, I didn’t mean it that way. I’m just shocked, that’s all. Here I am with my own apartment and a monthly allowance from my parents, and I’m barely scraping by. You’re amazing!’

‘I’m not looking for pity, or awe for that matter.’

‘I know, I know, maybe a cup of coffee and some early morning waffles will do? I’m starving. My treat.’

The connection is instant, like long-lost sisters. Breakfast turns into an impromptu study session, which turns into lunch, which turns into a friendship that leads to a deal. Freya can move into Kate’s apartment, wear her clothes and eat her food on one condition. She has to help Kate pass college.