

## GEMSTONES

Notes from the Author – Please Read

For my fiancé Gareth. Thank you for everything you do, every day, every hour. And for putting up with my insatiable appetite for writing this novel. For my Dad, Stephen, my Mum, Jillian, future Mother-In-Law Jean, and of course, My Gemstones, Sophie-leigh, Warren and Esme-Rose, and my Golden Nugget.

I said just yesterday, this Novel was supposed to be about 5 gemstones, in the words of Butcher for anyone who has watched “The boys”, this was supposed to be “the spice girls”. Due to unforeseen circumstances, there are now just three, which kind of makes it more like the Sugababes.

To the teachers of the world, you guys are the future. You teach our kids, day in, day out, about what happens when you decide to learn, decide to live without hate, decide that the most important thing in the world is good family and friends. My sister is a teaching assistant, and the holidays are great but it's not all peachy. It takes work to grab the attention of kids. Don't ignore them, don't sit there on your phone all day when all they really

want to do is play a fun game. You guys are responsible for the future generations.

A huge thank you to everyone who has been supportive in this venture, from my Father's partner Theresa, to my Mum's partner, Peter, and all those who visit the local Pubs in Oldham, those who know me and understand my passion for the written word.

To the people of the country that work hard all day. 40 hours a week doesn't always cut it when more than half of what you earn goes on your rent every month. I understand this, but this isn't a political book, even with the passion everyone seems to have now about the so-called state of the United Kingdom. I work my 40 hours answering the phone for a bank. Speaking to 80 customers a day, all up and down the country and I'm *telling* you, 99% of the people are like myself. We just want to provide for our families. It doesn't matter if you are rich, poor, something in-between. Whether you are left-wing or right-wing, we simply endeavour to have the easiest life possible. Health and happiness for all our family and friends.

If I could give any advice to the readers of this book, then it is this: Respect the past, Protect the present, look

toward the future. We can't always define what will happen, or even prevent the eventuality of certain things, but when I hear another news story about yet another terrible incident or occurrence, I must remind myself that fortunately I do live in a country that defends my rights to free speech. At least for now that is. I have a right to stand up and say I'm getting angry, a right to publish this Novel, and I really hope anyone reading understands that this is aimed at everyone. Citizens of Britain, this is for all. In fact, to those not even in this country. For anyone with relatives in another country, all over the world.

As I said previously, this is in no way a political book, but please remember to have your say. It is within your right, within your power to make the changes required now, to save our future. Please take the time to reflect on what a privilege it is, to live in a time where we can be (or do, to an extent) whatever we choose to. My Grandfather, like many of yours, fought bravely so we can do that. Take the time to acknowledge and appreciate that the next time you're eating a delicious meal, three times a day in fact.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy reading. Please know that although this is (partly) based on a Pub that once sat on the end of Acre Lane, technically located on Derker

Street in Oldham, Greater Manchester, this is a fictional piece of work. I have altered some names, but other characters I have asked permission to use. "For legal reasons" as they say, this is a work of fiction, any names I have used, I ensured to gain their explicit consent before writing. It is in no way a true portrayal of anyone, but some characters are based off real people. Those people all know who they are and are fine with it. The pub in question was named The Alexandra Pub (known locally as The Alex) and I have many specific memories of the place and the people who frequented it. Growing up in a council estate, I wanted to just highlight that we all had very good and sometimes very bad times, and you will either want to remember it, or forget it. It was all down to who was in there that day/night. From the day drinkers to the party-fuelled night owls. The bonfire nights, the poker games, playing pool or darts, the duke box blasting out songs of the 90's. I'm sure you can relate no matter where you live. Laughing away like there was no tomorrow. The people are what make life living, and I assure you, I was quite lucky really. I had a happy home in general and for a few months when I was about 13, actually lived above the pub. I remember it was September 2001 specifically due to the twin towers. Nobody else will understand quite like all those who remember Derker in the 90's. I've chosen this time for

the story to take place simply because it resonates so strongly with me. It was my childhood, my adolescence, and my early adulthood.

My partner once asked me to tell him a story about my time at school, I attended Counthill Secondary School, which I know some of you will remember. For some reason, it wasn't about my best friends of the time, Danielle, Roxanne, Carly, Jenna and Stacey. It was a time I was asked to write a 7-page story over Easter weekend. I was in a high "set" in year 7 and wanted to go up to set one (from set two) in English. I wrote that story over the space of a few hours, it flew onto the pages like I can't really explain, anyone with a passion for anything will understand. I walked in on that Monday and was so excited to hand in my homework it's almost embarrassing to admit. My teacher at the time didn't care, didn't even read it if you can believe. I didn't have the confidence to make a complaint at the time. Besides, which 12-year-old wants to be the one complaining that the teacher didn't grade their homework? I'd never told a soul until then to be honest. It was a time of "children should be seen and not heard" nonsense. Just felt the disappointment that I never got any recognition or even slightly praised. No pat on the back or an enthusiastic well done. It was a different time though, so I told Gareth about the story, and it made him laugh. I

remember he said “that’s quite a genius idea”, it was like Gogglebox before it was ever created. A washing machine that ate socks to stay alive and observed one family over Easter Sunday dinner. It highlighted how when we don’t always see the full picture, our minds run riot with “what-ifs?” or “how?” or “why?”. Sometimes we fill in those gaps with an over-active imagination, the washing machine observing everyone would make assumptions and it was down to the reader to figure it out. To fit the pieces that were the facts (what had actually been said and done), with the assumptions of the other “blind spot” moments that never came to be told, what we could only think-up or assume had happened and therefore every readers perspective was different. This Novel is in-part my 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt at that, I do want kids to be able to read it too. It is also therefore set in a standard-sized kitchen, basically everyone can visualise this, so it is quite a simple story really.

In Oldham Sixth Form I didn't really excel, I think I found it difficult to navigate and enjoy it given that none of my friends were there with me. I got in purely because I was expected to do well, a B in Maths, eventually a B in English and the rest were average C’s and D’s, but it was enough to get into Sixth Form. Little did I know at the time, I have recently been diagnosed with adjustment disorder. I basically don't respond well to change

sometimes. If I leave a job, if something major (or even not that major) changes in my life, I struggle with it. Might explain why I didn't do as well as I could have in college in hindsight. It explains why I became anxious about everything when I had a sudden change of job. I panicked and I know even my cousins were concerned, but I do understand now. I needed the stability that I was used to. My friends and family can now understand this. It finally all makes sense.

In honour of those that are no longer with us, I write this with a smile on my face. Someone up there has been kind to me; I've never been happier than I am in my 30's. Hopefully my 40s will be even better as I will be a married woman finally. Never thought it would actually happen; I was too much into my Romance novels and action/adventure films. From Roald Dahl to my Harry Potter days, from Buffy and Angel to my Supernatural days. From Friends to The Big Bang Theory, you get my point. Stuck in a world of fantasy rather than enjoying life in the moment. My favourite actor, Jensen Ackles, I want so much to tell him " Thank you" I know I will likely never meet him, but if I do, thank you Jensen. You taught me the importance of love, friendship and family. Gareth taught me that too, and that's why I want to say "I do" to him. He woke me up in a way. I will always be grateful. Thank you all.

Lastly, I will maybe be 39 by the time I get this published. If enough people are interested in reading this, I can maybe get enough to finally take Soph to New Orleans, Warren to wherever he would like, Japan maybe? Esme to Disneyland in Florida. That is the true dream. That and my Wedding. At 38, I now realise that my Dad would have been similar age in 1999, he would be 39. So many have told me how his 40<sup>th</sup> was one of the best days of their life. I still to this day don't know what happened or where they even went, but I can imagine it was exceptionally good fun. It is strange to think that my chosen partner, my Gaz, would have grown up watching films like Back to the Future, which oddly is the same for my parents. In 1985, my sister would be waiting to arrive, the snooker black-ball final had happened, and my cousins Jordan and Danny were expected a few months later. Gareth would have been born, but only 3 at the time, but it did give them a ground to work on when they first met. Mum and Dad in their early 20's, or late teens, it was before Dirty Dancing was on every radio station, before Oasis came along, before Pulp, James and lots of other great musicians. The Beatles were old by then but still respected. Pink Floyd had been around 20 years as well and Queen were ruling the world on the stage at Band Aid Live at Webley in July, and football was at its peak.

I truly hope you all enjoy this trip down memory lane. If you do enjoy it, please head over to my website, [Gemstonesbooks.com](http://Gemstonesbooks.com) after and do something for me. There is a letter, a password protected letter, to everyone. To those I love, and to those I hate. You will need to guess the password, but I think most of you will know them. If you don't, reach out and I will oblige. Some would think it's a bit weird writing letters in today's tech-savvy world, but I find it quite therapeutic. Please let me know your thoughts and send a quick email to me. I look forward to your feedback.

## **PROLOGUE**

### **2026**

On Earth, in a small town in the North of England, there was a home. A very ordinary and standard size house. Not the most expensive, but not in the least was this home an unpleasant one. It is where the story of love, family and friendship comes alive.

Witnessed first-hand what became of three gemstones when they all came together and solved a 27-year-old murder in less than a day. Not by scrolling their devices (and I say devices, but we all know what I'm referring to – their phones!) Gone are the days where a household

would be thrilled to own a robot vacuum. This is what happened...

### **1999 – The Alex Pub**

From the moment Connor arrived at the pub, the entrance gave him two choices, left door or right door? I'd say 90% of regulars preferred to walk in via the left door. It was standard protocol. From the left entrance, the first thing you will notice, is the smell. It wasn't massively unpleasant, but mainly the faint scent of stale ash, maybe vaguely, lingering around the entrance, as was the norm in those days. The smell of beer and ales, the (sometimes) splashes of top shelf drinks. The cleaner was only capable of so much, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been. Smoking was still allowed in pubs, so everyone could be greeted with that usual cloud of smoke, which once you are used to, stops irritating your

eyes. In a strange way, Connor appreciated the familiarity of it.

From the small entrance room was a fruit machine near the opposite wall, just to the right. There was a corner with padded cushions, where a small TV (square back then, no flat screens) was sat in the corner on the shelf above. Mostly the Manchester City fans sat here, but anyone was welcome. As he continued on, passed the right-side of the bar, you would be within three or four strides to reach the juke box hung up on the wall that opened up to the pool room. Surrounded by benches on every side of the pool table, there was a perfect angle for any match to be viewed from. Turning right again was the main room where again, more fruit machines and another TV just above. Manchester United fans sat here, it was always tense on Derby Day, too much passion for the game, but it is in fairness a very British tradition. Man United had just won the Treble last month, and all fans were cheering or booing in here depending which room you were sat in.

It was the year 1999, June to be precise, and although the summer hadn't been too kind so far, the rain pouring down for most of it, the later part of the month of June was beautifully sunny. England was green again, just about. A lot of good times ahead it seemed. A party was

being held for Jimmy's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on Saturday, and everyone was happy enough. Connor could smell the Barbeques from several houses on Acre Lane by this time. The Caribbean BBQ Jerk chicken that Amoy would bring in, the Curries, the Cheeseburgers and the hot-dogs. It was the best time of year.

Looking up after hearing the sound of laughter, it was Uncle Abert on the TV saying, "who's there?"

"Knock, Knock" came the reply. Everyone in the Alex pub started laughing in unison. And by the time the barmaid noticed him, a few minutes later, "...and knock knock, knocked-him-out" said good ol' Del Boy.

"Alright Connor" said Jenny from behind the bar.

"Yeah, not bad" he said with his thick Irish accent. "Sort us a pint of Guinness when ya ready love"

"No worries, I've just changed the barrel so give me a min" said Jenny.

Sat on the end of the square bar, in the middle of the pub, a large, grumpy looking bloke took another sip of his John Smith's while reading the Oldham Chronicle Newspaper, the sports section. Connor didn't bother saying anything to him. After getting his pint, he took a

seat and enjoyed the rest of the episode of Only Fools above the fruit machine.

Tonight was also the big Semi-final of the poker tournament. A lot of cash was at stake, and this meant tensions were rising. Everyone wanted that £1000 prize. That was serious dough in the 90's.

He quickly turned to look up at the TV, could hear the Only Fools and Horses soundtrack and couldn't help but hum along to it.

“Stick a pony in me pocket...” came the first line. It must have been a re-run as they became millionaires a few Christmas's ago. An hour later and the next episode was starting by the time he sat down after requesting his third pint, the Class of 62', a great episode. Connor was just relieved to not have to listen to any more S Club 7 – There's only so many times you can hear a pop song before you get annoyed with it, and he had to listen to it on the radio practically all the way home on this fine Thursday evening. At 24 years old, the blonde haired, Northern Irishman was simply too old to appreciate that kind of music. Britney Spears' “Hit me baby (one more time)” never stopped. Christina, Eminem, Westlife, what a time it was for pop music.

Pubs like this were a sort of solitude. They offered working class guys and gals like him to enjoy a cold, refreshing pint after a long day's work. A bricklayer and labourer by day, it was hard work, but he did have one little trick up his sleeve. His Grandma over in Belfast taught him as a kid that you don't have to be a genius in order to work people. Manipulate anyone for a better hand, it was simple really. She told him you can't trust anyone and he lived by that phrase. One thing he did understand, is that no matter where in the country his job took him, there was always someone, somewhere willing to chat about Only Fools. Whether it was the Scottish Highlands, to Anglesey in Wales, from Cornwall to Liverpool, it didn't matter. As much as we were divided by the football, we all came together when it mattered, I suppose. But for now, Connor very much enjoyed the game of getting people to trust him, and that's all that counts.

Connor really hoped he came at least second at tonight's poker. All he needed was this £500 for 2<sup>nd</sup> prize, so if he won 1<sup>st</sup> place, he'd be sorted.

"I don't care; I'm not missing Buffy!" shouted some young 11-year-old girl from the door that leads to the room above the pub. Connor couldn't see who it was

from his vantage point, but obviously some relation to Sharon, the landlady. He recognised the voice.

*Kids!... There was a time when you wouldn't see a soul under the age of 18 in a pub! Hell! There was a time they wouldn't even serve women! And now I sound like Granny!*

Do you feel sorry for them? Should we? Are they the future? *Who cares...* life could be worse than sitting in a pub drinking a cold pint of Guinness, thought Connor.

Tonight was the night. Everything would change, and someone was going to be very happy. Connor simply hoped and prayed that nobody knew he was planning to cheat his way to the top. Card games were his speciality, and the locals in Oldham had no idea just how good he was at this sort of con.

## **2026 – The Kitchen**

The clock hung above the breakfast bar, it was in the spring, a wonderful and joyful time of year when we all start to get neighbours suddenly remembering they are part of a community. From all over the country, people were smiling and laughing away, enjoying this time.

Good times...

It was 1pm, on Friday, which meant Mrs Windom was doing the weekly “big-shop” on the laptop and casually humming to the radio. Sipping her coffee, strong with a little milk and no sugar, casually sat at the dining table. Amazing how one can sit there and call it “doing the house chores” in a sense. I mean seriously, we used to have to pay for a taxi or walk to the nearest supermarket and do it all properly. Standing in line while everyone before you got more and more impatient. Anyway, that's when “the device” rang, the youngest of her nieces had now gotten a smartphone and was now asking to come round this evening, I guess that means it's the Easter Holidays. Mrs Windom had to say yes. Friday usually meant The Sapphire would be staying with Grandad and his partner at their house, but now and then a change of scenery was in order. A movie and popcorn night was on the cards.

Little did anyone know, a lot was going to happen tomorrow...

## **Part One**

### **Chapter One**

It was Saturday, and nobody had work or school to think about until tomorrow.

“I’ve had enough, I’m not sure what the answer is, can you just tell me? Please?” said the Sapphire. A game of

find the present, the 8-year-old was almost certainly looking confused.

“It’s ok, I can always tell you another clue,” said Mrs Windom. A smile spread slowly over the young girl's face “Ok, so the clue is “*what do we use to cook food with?*” As the kitchen was only a square, medium sized place, it wasn’t going to be long before she discovered it in middle shelf of the oven.

The hunt was on, and this was clue number 5 out of 6. The piece of paper in the cold oven was folded and when Sapphire opened it, it read “I spin, I’m loud, and I turn whites into pink if the wrong person loads me”

“The washing machine!” she pointed excitedly and ran to open its drawer across the small room. The reveal, “the present is behind the sofa” read the note.

As she hurried to the living room, leaving a blurry trail of strawberry blonde hair with pink streaks running through those long lengths, Mrs Windom looked again at her hand-held screen. A WhatsApp message appeared, but it was unclear as to what the message said, but it didn’t seem like good news. The frown and worry on Mrs W’s face told a thousand stories, she was never very good at Poker on her card game nights. Something wasn’t right here.

## **Chapter Two**

The time on the large, oversized clock above the breakfast bar showed 5pm now.

Mr Windom, a large, tall, burly sort of bloke, had been back home from work 30 minutes or so, stood at the kitchen counter, he stopped what he was reading on his phone and opened the fridge. Not a large American-style fancy fridge, but it had character. It had pictures all

held up with magnets and then the bin collection times in the middle. He suddenly slammed the fridge door shut, clearly annoyed. Fridays were bin collection day, so anyone with half a brain cell could tell what just happened. He had forgotten it was paper bin week and needed to put that out on Thursday night, but had forgot.

“Just making a brew, do you want one?” Mr Windom shouted, as the kettle finished boiling.

“No thanks, I've got a glass of red here,” said Mrs Windon from the living room “I'm just looking again at that photo from '99”

The Sapphire was now back in the kitchen. Staring at the screen in front of her, again. She isn't a bad kid. She's funny, and always has a smile, and wasn't a brat. That's a win.

As time went by that day, a lot happened from the perspective of the kitchen. Mrs Windom had been cooking like she feeding a small army for the night. Shepherd's pie, Lasagne, chicken pesto and pasta bake, BBQ Jerk chicken strips, salad and some extra cheese on top. What is it about Northerners and their extra cheese? And gravy? The dishes didn't make sense together. Too much of a different taste for everyone.

However, they did make sense when you met the kids known only as Gemstones.

The oldest and first-born Gem was known as Queen Ruby. 21 years old nearly and stunningly beautiful. Think Julia Roberts-in-the-90's kind of pretty. Rubes was coming round with her brother later, the Lasagne must have been for her.

The middle kid, the Emerald, a 15-year-old Gem, clearly going to be there for the BBQ Jerk chicken. He was of that age where computers were everything. Whether social chats over the PC with a gaming headset on, or voice messages, or basically anything you can do with wi-fi these days. He was a very chilled, very kind young lad, 15 going on 16 and was the younger brother to the Ruby and big brother to the Sapphire. The youngest girl, already there from staying over the night before, was currently sat playing a game, or was it technically called "scrolling"?, on her iPhone. Not that interested in the present (a magazine) that was her reward for solving the clues.

All three Gemstones were planning to be here in this kitchen at some point, but for now, Mrs Windom had finished preparing the food, while the youngest sat watching some YouTube videos.

From further back, outside in the garden, you could hear the next-door neighbour, Jean, who had the grandkids round. The big dog, Willow, was barking but stopped as soon as she shouted “get in here” to it.

“Okay, we are going to leave shortly, don’t worry, you’ll be staying here, but your brother and sister are coming round too. It’s really, really important that once we leave, you open this case here” and pulled out a kind of small suitcase, or briefcase? It was a sort of in-between one that required 3 digits to open it. Mrs Windon laid the case down on the kitchen table.

“Ok, but what’s inside it”

“You’ll know soon enough, you don't have to be a genius to work out the code”

### **Chapter Three**

“Bye guys, have fun and be good. Enjoy the food and please throw the plates in the sink when you’ve finished” There wasn’t a dishwasher in the small kitchen, so it would help if they immediately rinsed their plates.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure we clean up before you get back,” said Queen Ruby. “Where is it you are going anyway?” she enquired.

“Just a weekend break in The Lake District”

“Ohh, very nice” said Ruby whilst eating the slice of Lasagne at the kitchen table. Garlic bread untouched, to her uncles dismay.

Mrs Windom rolled the weekend suitcase out of the kitchen and waved bye.

“Have a good time,” said The Emerald.

And suddenly it was just the three of them, with the mysterious case on the table. Once they had finished eating, Ruby said “alright, let’s see what this is all about then. Emerald, get off your phone. You too Sapphire! Sooner we do this, whatever *this* is, the sooner we can go. Its Saturday, and I have plans.”

“Yeah ok, boss” said Emerald, wishing he was the oldest of the three sometimes.

She grabbed the case by the handle and said, “so first things first, we need to know the combination”

“Try our Birthdays,” said Emerald.

“Thought that, but we have 5, 4 and 17 which is 4 digits, this is three”

“Hmmm, why not try 7 as the third then, makes sense to us”

“I’ll try” as she entered the numbers 5,4,7 “no, it doesn’t work.

“Okay, how about in age order then, try 5, 7 and then 4”

“Bingo! well done you little genius” she laughed to her little Brother.

“What’s inside it?” he asked, while trying to take a sneak-peak inside.

Ruby pulled out one thing at a time. First, an old Nokia 3210 phone. It was so old looking, but not technically a “Brick” phone. None of them knew that was the name for the phone. It wasn’t like a Samsung; it had small numbers on it. It had a grey-coloured screen above the numbers and some other buttons on it.

Then a photo album she did recognise. It belonged to someone in the family, but who knows, might come in handy.

Then a letter, hidden inside an envelope with the name “THE KILLER” written on it.

“I think this might have something to do with whatever happened that night in 1999. Grandad told me about it years ago, and maybe we can finally know what happened”

“Any suggestions as to how we start then?”

Another clue, a copy of The Oldham Evening Chronicle, dated June 1999, was also pulled out of the case.

Next was a watch. It was a very basic, kids watch. Not a Mickey mouse sort of kids watch, but it may as well have been. It looked awful, I don't think anyone would be seen wearing it nowadays.

Finally, a time capsule from the time, a sort of “open at the end” tube, with the words “Do not open until 2026” scratched into it. It required a key to open it up too.

It took several minutes before they decided if they all worked together, seperately at first, but then together, they could figure this out much quicker.

“I will start by calling Grandad. I'll see what he remembers. Although I know him too well and he will say “I don't remember what I ate for tea yesterday” ‘.

“Good idea though, you never know. Why don't you call him and I'll speak to Mum in the living room. She would

have only been about my age now, maybe younger back then, but she might remember.

“Do you want to call your Dad?” The Ruby said to her sister Sapphire. “I think he will be better at explaining how we can get this old phone up and working, so that’s your job”

“Look here, we’ve also got some paper and pens here to make our notes on” handing over the green marker pen to Emerald, the Blue one to Sapphire, and she kept the red one for herself.

“When you are finished with Grandad, phone Grandma, see if her memory is any better” Emerald said as he took the pen and paper left for them. “We will meet back in the kitchen in about 15 minutes”

As the time was now after 5pm, it was the perfect moment to start this mystery. After good food and a few drinks each, they were focused and ready to get stuck in and solving it.

## **Chapter Four**

“Hey, Grandad. Do you remember anything about June 1999?” The Ruby said, sat in the now-empty kitchen, on the table, where food was still laid out.

“Do I bloody hell as like!. I don’t remember anything, you’re having a Giraffe, as your grandma would say... Not a scooby darlin, sorry” Grandad’s very distinct, very Northern accent in his usual voice came from the phone speaker. At nearly 66, he wasn’t going to be much help to be honest, but they had to try at least, thought Ruby.

“Didn't think so, there’s a newspaper dated Friday 25<sup>th</sup> of June if that helps jog your brain. I’ve had a quick glance over, and some dude called Connor was stabbed the night before”

“You mean the poker night murder? Yeah, that’s all I know to be honest sweet, it was never solved. That, or nobody has gone to the cops and said that’s what happened. I could never understand why, he was just another of the regulars really, didn't bother or kick off with anyone so it never made sense why someone will want to kill him, why are you asking?” he asked, just as The Emerald burst out laughing from the other room.

“I assume it has finally been solved but we have all these clues, and don’t understand a lot of it and how to go about it, we could do with some help, who am I best speaking to? We weren’t even born in 99, how can we figure it out without help from people we know. Emerald is in the living room on call to Mum, but again, we’ve only just started”

“I see, well yeah, I can’t help much but I can tell you that June 1999 was a big month in Oldham. There was the United Fans still boasting about the Treble win, things were changing and phones were becoming more accessible, no more waiting by the landline for a call, kids then were just interested in texting and playing a game called Snake”

“Yeah that’s understandable, so before we could watch videos and things on our phones, before we could look up the answer to anything, or ask AI to end an argument.”

“Haha, exactly right darling. For better or worse, it was a time of new beginnings, and we all still enjoyed a pub crawl. Back then Oldham Town at night was full of people. Dancing, laughing, drinking, it wasn’t perfect, but we all woke up with a lot more hangovers back then I’ll put it that way.”

“I’m just about old enough to know that back in 1999, music was all about pop. TV was either the British classics like Only Fools, or the American ones. The Buffy and the Smallville days, according to S that is”

The Ruby looked around and noticed the time capsule again, the only way to open it was to find out who held the key.

“Any idea who has a key? It might be someone you were friends with? I don't think S will make it that complex for us. Any idea at all? Think back to just before you turned 40, who was there?”

“It was Jimmy’s 50<sup>th</sup> around then, it would have been great if the Murder hadn’t happened on that Thursday night and ruined it.”

“Right, do you think you can ask him for me? I think you are the key if I'm honest, so think back and call some old friends up.”

“No worries, will do. I’ll just give him a couple of rings now, might be a while till he calls back, he’s no good with smartphones. Hell, I’m barely any good with them.” Grandad laughed as he said the words.

“No rush, we might be here a while, so let's at least start reading these clues. A part of me is tempted to just open the letter written by the Killer, but instinct is telling me we need to solve it first, and ask the why later”

“Wise girl, I agree. Sometimes it is better to let the past just stay in the past. But I assume it will be for you to decide when you know what happened. Keep me posted and let me know how you get on. Its Bank Holiday weekend so I'm in Salisbury at the minute”

“Oh yeah, I forgot it was May, have a good time then and I’ll see you when you’re back next week”

## **Chapter Five**

The Emerald was still laughing, his Mum had basically just told him of the time she turned 13, when her only present was an old brick mobile. On holiday at the time, they were all catching a ferry to somewhere and everyone got seasick. All those pale faces throwing up over the side of the ship. For a sea-faring Nation, it was embarrassing really. Heavy drinkers couldn’t cope with that up and down motion, turning their stomachs until it all came belching up. The wind then blowing it back in everyone's faces, making it *extra* memorable for all the wrong reasons.

“That’s nasty. How bad is that on your thirteenth birthday, Mum?” said Emerald.

“It was, but I was also lucky, having a mobile was seriously cool in those days and not everyone was so lucky. We played Snake, if you know, you know. Texts would cost the earth to send, I think like 30p a message and you were limited to only several characters. If you do figure out the phone clue, the messages will be short and maybe a bit unclear. In order to type the full word of

“Hello” we had to press the number 4 button twice, the number 3 button twice etc...”

“So basically, a very, very slow way of saying what you want?” he asked.

“Yeah, painfully slow. Expensive and awkward, we eventually learned that typing “Alr8” instead of “alright” got the message across. Your best bet is asking Dave for that one.”

“Yeah, Sapphire is upstairs now facetimeing him. We should solve it anyway, but this room is pretty cool, big TV with backlights, fancy Hue Phillips lights, PS5 and a VR2 headset, I’m tempted to just read the Killers letter and sod the rest of it” he joked.

“No it might be fun” said his Mum. “Well, as fun a solving a murder can be anyway. See how you get on in the next hour at least. Part of me wishes I was there with you!”

“Yeah, fair enough. Speak to you later then.”

“Bye for now then. Be good for your sisters”

“Bye”

## **Chapter Six**

The Sapphire was in the reading room, no technology is usually allowed in here, but it was important she could see her Dad.

“How do we switch it on?” Sapphire asked.

“Press and hold the red end-the-call button” came Dave through the speaker.

“Ok, but I think it might need charging first. Did these phones have good batteries then?”

“It depends, just try it and see if it switches on”

Sapphire held down the red button for a moment, nothing happened at first but then came the logo of Nokia.

“Ok, so to get to the menu once it loads up, unlock it by pressing the centre button, then the star button”

“I’ll write that down and tell my brother, he’ll know how to do that” as she eagerly grabbed her marker pen, a blue, thick coloured pen which was easy to use. “So, centre button and then start button, got it”

“No no. *Star* button” said Dave.

She could see Dave looking down at his own phone, “How do you remember this Dad?”

"I don't babe, but I can ask AI how we did it, perks of the 2020's, use it to your advantage" came the wise words of her Dad.

"It is easier when you have all the answers in the palm of your hand isn't it?" asked Sapphire.

"Yeah, but we should also remember to learn these things, even if it you don't always need to know, or don't even want to know. It's good that you can take time off your phone and enjoy a challenge like this together. I like that," said Dave. "I'll bet none of you even knew it was called a Nokia, did you? Never mind the 32-10 bit"

"No" laughed Sapphire. The sound of the old Nokia switching on was funny, it reminded her of something from her past, but she couldn't remember what it was. Maybe something when she was in the pub one time? Where *had* she heard it?

"So how do we find the messages?"

"Easy, just open the menu, select messages, scroll to the message's app, then choose Inbox to then view conversations. Your sister will be able to do all that, ask her, or your brother"

"That's weird! Could people not spell in those days?" asked Sapphire.

“What do you mean?”

“It's all written in some sort of code. I can't understand any of it”

“No, that's just fast text, we had to do that then that's all. This is 27 years ago and even I was only a kid myself”

“So, when someone says, “U r d-e-d” they mean “you are dead?”

“Pretty much, yeah, it's not hard once you learn fast text. It cost a lot of money in those days. Not same as it is now. Who said that anyway? Is there a name showing?” he asked.

“No, it just says a number, but I don't know any names yet. We should be able to find something though, maybe a, what do you call it? That thing you put in before it will work? Where did that go?”

“I think you mean the SIM card. You'll figure it out, you're smart. Make a note of the number and then cross-reference it with some other clue to find out who sent that. It will make sense soon enough”

“Okay. Any other tips for us? I think my bruv wants to play his games rather than do all this”

“I suppose, best advice I have for you is remember you have a lot of people you can call. Lots of people know your family in Derker, they will all have something to add to the story.” said Dave “Have a good day darling”

“Thank you, I will try at least.”

## **Chapter Seven**

15 minutes had passed, so Ruby decided to shout them all back in.

“Sapphire! Emerald!” shouted Queen Ruby. “Come back in here and let's see what we've got... and exactly how long this is going to take us” she muttered to herself.

The sound of small footsteps coming down the stairs meant Sapphire heard her. The Emerald was already sat there in less that 10 seconds, he obviously wanted to speed up the mystery too.

“How did you get on then?” she asked Emerald.

“Not too bad, I do think we need to start with the phone, but what are the facts so far?”

Ruby pulled out the pen, a red marker that helped make notes needed. “Not sure why we don't just use our

phones, just use AI to ask what we need, or the notepads app on there, they should do all the work” she said.

“Maybe, but first thing I have noted is that back then it cost a lot of money to make calls and texts. 30p for a quick message! Really? I wonder why.”

“Hmm, it is what it is, so what else?” said Ruby as she glanced down the notepad. “First thing I noted is the name Jimmy, it was his 50<sup>th</sup> around the time, according to Granddad his party was ruined over what had happened on the Thursday night.”

“Yeah, Mum mentioned the Poker game that was on. I took the decision to ring Grandma after her, I don’t think anyone is going to tell us the answer though, not anyone that will outright-know-the-answer anyway”

“What else?” asked Ruby.

“I had the feeling that you and Granddad was probably having a long chat, you’re too chatty, especially when you’re on the phone to him, so decided to phone Grandma while I waited instead. She did mention that she thinks Jacqui was in the poker game, not sure if that matters but it might be how we get more details. Jordan was a witness to the game, but too young at the time to

play in the tournament, well, too young for the money that went to the winner anyway.”

“Do you think he may have cheated somehow? This Connor dude?”

“Would explain why someone wanted him dead.” said Emerald. “But it does seem a bit excessive for a grand!”

“I’ve managed to get the phone on at least,” said Sapphire as she sat on the opposite side of the dining table. “It’s all gibber-Jabber (ish)’ though” I don’t get what they mean.”

“Let’s have a look” Ruby said taking the phone off her.

“Yeah, I know what you mean, bloody hell, what an awful way of expressing what you mean” she exclaimed, scrolling through the messages.

“We need to find out who this number belonged to, but without a SIM card, we won’t know.”

“Maybe that’s in the time capsule, how do we open it?” said Emerald.

“We need a key, obvs”

“Do you think the key to open it is hidden in one of the clues?” said Emerald.

“Yeah, I expect so. Grandad will call us back soon, I’m sure. I’ll bet anything he is my first clue.” Ruby said with confidence.

## **Chapter Eight**

“Is that the time?! We’ve been at this an hour now. Did you find anything from the photo album?” asked Ruby to Emerald.

“No, just old pictures of people. Not spotted anything yet” he said.

“Just look out for anything that says 1999,” said Ruby.  
“It’s in there I’m sure of it”.

He was essentially halfway through the album by now so it would likely take longer. Maybe a hidden picture in the back? Thought the Emerald.

“We could do with having some sort of time stamp. We know the date is Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> June 1999, but what else? Did you spot anything relating to an Irish dude in there? Anything at all? Any pints of Guinness’s?”

“What did Guinness look like then?” he said

“Same as today. Black liquid with a white layer on the top” she explained.

“Hold up, hang about, I saw that a second ago...” as he flipped back a few pages.

The photo showed a guy at the fruit machine, clearly a pint of Guinness rested on the shelf next to him. This was in the background, but the TV to the right, up in the corner, clearly showed a man, middle aged and blonde-haired, he was smiling in his chair, with a computer in front of him.

“What show is that?” asked Emerald.

“I’ll ask AI now” said Ruby as she took a picture on her phone and circled the TV. AI’s overview of the show was impressive, within seconds, Ruby could now read all there was to know.

“It is a TV presenter by the name of Chris Tarrant, so definitely a show called Who wants to be a millionaire? I believe that guy who does top gear now presents it. The one who has his own farm down South. Remember the time Grandad made us watch it?”

“I have an idea!” said Sapphire. “Let’s see if the key to that thing (pointing at the time capsule) is in here.”

Holding up the Newspaper article she excitedly asked  
“Have either of you read it yet?”

“Pass it here. I will be quicker than you babes” Ruby said  
gently, quickly scanning the pages again.

“It basically just says that instead of someone winning  
the £1000 prize, there was some altercation that  
happened near the men’s toilets in the Alexandra Pub,  
sometimes known as the Derker Hotel, I thought  
everyone just said The Alex. An argument was heard by  
several people that night, but it never made sense as all  
the suspects had alibis. There’s also a TV guide here on  
one of the back pages. So, we now know that at 8pm  
that evening, he was in fact alive a well, drinking away  
near the fruit machine. Emerald, write down the time,  
between 8 and 9pm”

“Wait, do we at least have any names of any of the  
suspects yet?” asked Emerald.

“Let’s just put together a timeline for that night, I’ll me  
make a quick note here. Sapphire, help me clear this  
table, we are going to need more room, I think.”

