

PLAYING WITH FIRE

CHAPTER ONE

Set in England, 2005.

The envelope started it all. It could have been a simple bill, a letter, something of no importance. But Ben Carter knew what lay inside. His A – Level results.

He walked through to the kitchen, put the kettle on and sat at the table, staring at the envelope. Pools of sweat built on the tips of his fingers. He blotted them on his jeans, then made a cup of tea, adding a third spoonful of sugar. It was a stressful time, so an extra kick wouldn't hurt.

The mug was half empty and a cigarette extinguished in the ashtray before Ben took the plunge. This is it, don't be such a wuss, open it, open it, open it.

And then he had, ripping the envelope to shreds. His heart thumped against his chest as he struggled to unfold the pages. Like Fort Knox to get into. An A – Level all in itself. Finally he was in, and there it was. There was a popping sound like a coin dropped in water as he cleared his throat.

Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.

Without thinking, he reached for his phone. As it rang, he pulled out another cigarette and stared at it, then stuck it behind his ear.

'Benjamin.'

'J man, it's Ben. How you doing?'

'Not as bad as you, it seems. You want to take a couple of breaths there, mate? You know, inhale, hold a beat or two, then breath out. There you go. Good boy. I take it you got your results, then?'

'Yeah.' For some reason, Ben couldn't find the words to say what he was feeling. 'How about you?'

'For sure mate, got them about half hour ago. Made interesting reading, I can tell you. Thought my old dear was going to have a heart attack.'

'Yeah, well mine won't have the pleasure until later.' A pause. 'So,' Ben said, 'you going to tell me what you got, or what?'

'Or what, I think.' J laughed. 'Go on, you first.'

But Ben was having trouble. It didn't seem right to do it on the phone. They had been through it all together, from infant school right up to the present day. A phone conversation wouldn't cut it somehow. 'Hey, you want to come round? I'm home alone until five, so we could have a smoke or something. I'd rather tell you face to face.'

'A smoke, eh? That's the best thing you've said all day. All right mate, I'll be round in ten. Don't eat the furniture or anything, all right?'

Ben smiled. 'I won't. See you in ten.'

Ben was sitting at the table staring at the sheet in front of him, seeing his

results in black and white but not willing to believe them. He was scared to look away in case the wind blew, or a fairy danced through the window and changed the grades on the paper. A stupid thought, but he couldn't coax his brain into accepting this new knowledge.

The doorbell rang. Ben shoved the paper into his back pocket and smiled. Ten minutes exactly. When it came to a smoke, you could rely on J better than the speaking clock. Late for everything else, but smoking pot? Not a chance.

'Hey man,' J said as Ben opened the door. 'Not late, am I?'

Ben's first thought: still the same old J. But why wouldn't he be? They had received their A-Level results, not a personality transplant. But Ben knew they were on the cusp of change, for now their lives would be moving in alternate directions, depending on the grades and the competition for places at universities, and all that other stuff. It was a big headache, one that was only just beginning.

'Nope,' Ben said. 'You coming in, or what?'

'Sure,' J said. Despite the summer weather, he was dressed in a thick hooded top, sweat trickling down his sunburnt nose. Whatever time of year, Ben never saw his mate without a hooded top on. Maybe he stored his stash in the hood. You couldn't put anything past him. 'Fucking hot day, isn't it?' J said, sighing. He was wearing sunglasses, which he now pushed up onto his shaved head.

'I'm not surprised, wearing that top. You must be sweating like fuck under there.'

J wiped a hand across his brow as if to reiterate Ben's point. 'That may be true, but it's cool. I like it.' He dug through his wallet and brought out a cube of cannabis wrapped in cling film. 'You got any beers to wash this down with?'

'I have, actually,' Ben said, grinning. 'Went to the shop yesterday, just in case I needed them. For a celebration, like.'

J narrowed his eyes. 'And do you? Need them?'

'Why don't you skin up, and I'll tell you all you want to know. In the garden?'

'Why not?' J said, sliding open the patio doors.

There were a few bottles of Stella in the fridge, and by the time Ben stepped into the afternoon sun, J had a joint on the go. 'There you go mate, get your gums round that,' he said, offering a beer.

'Nice one. And you, likewise,' J said, gesturing with the joint, 'but only after you put me out of my misery. Come on, I'm dying to know.'

Ben produced the now creased envelope from his pocket. He noticed his hands were shaking. 'There you go, it's all there.'

J took off the sunglasses, shook the paper out and studied it. There was no outburst of emotion, no noticeable change in facial expression. Just another pull on the joint, and a long exhale of smoke. It must have been a good joint.

'Well,' J said at long last. 'Fuckin' A. Congratulations buddy.' He

reached across to shake Ben's hand. 'You must be pleased.'

Ben shrugged. 'Yeah, I am. Well, I think I am. It's too much to take in, to be totally honest. Half an hour ago I was tearing my hair out, but it's only a few marks on a bit of paper, isn't it?'

J passed the joint across. 'Yeah, but two B's and an A, that's well good, isn't it? An A in English, how the hell did you manage that? You spawny bastard. You must have given Mr Franks one in the storeroom cupboard to get a grade like that.'

Ben laughed. 'I don't think I'm quite his type somehow, but thanks for your insight. Tell you the truth, that's the one grade I have trouble believing. I really thought I'd fucked the exam up. The questions were bloody difficult.'

'But not *that* difficult, obviously.'

Ben giggled again. The gear was going straight to his head, making everything light and bouncy. Fuck, two B's and an A! Whatever way you looked at it, it wasn't bad. Two years of hard graft, and he had come out the other side intact.

'So,' J was saying, 'it looks like you're going to be accepted at Bristol then? Sweet.'

Most likely, Ben thought. But it wasn't that easy, was it? There was so much to do from here, sort out somewhere to live, get his stuff together, earn some summer cash, and so on. But all that faded into the background with every puff, and every sip of beer. And it could stay there, at least for a while.

'So, how did your Mum take it?'

'I haven't told her yet. She wanted to hear it from me in person. She'll be home a bit earlier this evening. And I'm going for a drink with Dad tonight, so that'll be interesting. He'll be pleased though.'

'And how is your old man?'

A tough question, that. Ben's parents had been divorced for two years, and having massive rows for years before. The catalyst for the divorce was when Mum discovered a condom in his Dad's wallet when washing his trousers. Since she had had a hysterectomy after Ben was born, there was plenty of explaining to do. Plus a lot of shouting, the occasional cup being thrown. It wasn't unusual to come down for breakfast and find tea stains running down the wallpaper, fading like all the good memories they had shared. The upshot was inevitable; Dad moved out soon after, leaving Ben with his mother. To start with, he felt a glowing ember of resentment at the infidelity. But as time passed, the anger rescinded. If he wasn't happy being married any more, then who was Ben to stand in the way? The cheating was harsh, but Ben could forgive more readily now. And he was the only father he had. Still, the atmosphere later was likely to be awkward, for they were still rebuilding their relationship.

As for his mother, the divorce sent her into a shell. A once outgoing, carefree woman became timid, unable to do anything much except chain smoke and cry a lot. Ben had tried to spend more time with her in the last few months, but he had his own life to lead. He felt selfish when going out to

parties or getting stoned with J, especially when Mum was having one of her bad days. And now he had his results, and would be venturing off to pastures new. Mum would be pleased, of that he had no doubt. What worried him would be those lonely nights, nights when she would be stuck in a house haunted by the past and with only her thoughts for company.

He thought all this, but said, 'Yeah, he's fine. You know what my Dad's like, he drifts with the tide, but that's about all.'

J leaned forward. 'And what about Amy? How's she taken it?'

A cold hand gripped Ben's heart, bringing his brain crashing back to Earth.

Amy. How was he going to tell her? After being so close for so long, within a few months they would be at opposite ends of the country, if her results went to plan. Would their relationship survive? One question he had no answer to.

'You all right?' J asked. 'You look like you've swallowed the joint, rather than smoked it.'

Ben ran a hand through his hair, trying to put everything in order. The cannabis wasn't helping, putting a thick haze around everything, making it harder to focus. *Amy.* Her smile, those eyes. And now a new picture, a crumbling face, lips drooping, tears clinging to her cheeks as the truth hit home that he was no longer going to be there 24/7. He knew this moment had been coming, but only now did any of it take on meaning, enough to stop a two-ton truck.

'God,' he muttered. 'God. How the hell am I going to tell Amy?'

J edged his chair closer. 'Hey, don't worry about it. She'll be stoked, right? She'll be able to tell all her friends what a clever stud of a boyfriend she has.'

'And then what? If she's done good, she'll be off to Nottingham in September, and I'll be fucking miles away. I don't know how she's going to take it.'

'But you must have known this could happen, I mean, we made our uni options months ago. Besides, you two are solid. The distance won't make a blind bit of difference.'

'I wish I could share your confidence. And you're right; I did know this would happen. But now it's here, you know, everything feels different. Now it's real.'

J slumped back in his chair, draining his beer. 'Ahh, you'll work it out. You always do.'

The tone in J's voice told Ben what he should have realised much earlier.

'Shit, mate! What about you? Fuck, I'm sorry, blabbering on about me. Shit.'

J managed a smile. 'Hell, don't worry about it. Three D's, right there. D for Doughnut, D for Duncie, and D for Dickhead.' His voice wavered, but held firm.

Ben shivered inside. Fuck. The guilt returned, only with much greater force. Three D's was not enough for J, who wanted to study Geology in

London. That was the trouble with exams. It gave some exaltation, others despair.

‘So,’ J said, rolling another joint. His eyes glistened. ‘That’s the trouble, isn’t it? Although most people think of me as a drugged up hippy, I worked fucking hard this year. And for what? Fucking nothing, that’s what.’

‘Well, I don’t think you’re a drugged up hippy. Just a hippy.’

A snuffle. ‘Thanks.’

‘So, what now?’

‘Fuck, I don’t know what the hell I’m going to do. This morning, I had it all planned out. Get the grades, get pissed, maybe get laid, and then get sorted. Now I’m down with all the other drop-outs.’

‘You’re anything but. How long have we been friends? Some might say too long, and they’re probably right. It’ll work itself out.’

‘Maybe. We’ll see, eh? For now, let’s forget about all this, yeah? I’ll deal with everything tomorrow.’

Ben smiled. ‘Sounds like as good a plan as any.’

Three hours, two joints and a few beers later, Ben was up in his room, looking at the clock. 4:57. Amy would have her results by now. Ben had expected a call. That morning, she had phoned him on waking, nervous but excited about the coming day. She had said, ‘This time in twelve hours, our lives will have changed.’ Yeah, but for better or worse? Getting into Bristol was something to be proud of, he knew that, but that was only the first step. And it was only a few marks after all, wasn’t it? People like J, who was the most sound person Ben knew, were looking at a future filled with uncertainty. If J had come unstuck, Ben didn’t feel right about celebrating his success. Amy’s news would also be hard to stomach, signalling changes he wasn’t ready to address. It was all one big mess, heightened by lingering paranoia brought on by one joint too many.

Ben’s mobile rang. In a daze, he scabbled around on his bed. After five rings, he spied it under a pile of clothes.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, son. How are you?’

Oh. It’s you. ‘Hi Dad, good thanks. How’s it going?’

‘Oh, not too bad thanks.’ A pause. ‘So, you going to tell me how you got on today? Your mother was frantic last time I spoke to her.’

‘Yeah, did OK, got two B’s and an A.’ No need to tell *you* face to face, Ben thought.

‘Wow, congratulations! You must be pleased. How’d your mother take it?’

‘Haven’t told her yet. She wanted to see me in person, rather than hear it over the phone. She should be home, what, in half an hour or so.’

‘Ahh, that sounds like her. So, you’ll be off to Bristol then? Looking forward to it?’

‘Um, dunno really. It hasn’t sunk in yet, what with one thing and another. When the time comes around, I’ll probably be raring to go. Lots to organise

before then, though.'

'Knowing you, you'll have it all sorted with plenty of time to spare. It's part of your meticulous nature.'

'If you say so. So, how's Andrea?'

'She's fine, thanks for asking. Still early days, but I love her a lot, and I think she feels the same.'

Not surprising. Going out with a woman young enough to be your daughter would put a smile on any man's face. 'That's good,' Ben said, trying to hide his disgust. 'We still on for that drink later?'

'Sure, wouldn't miss it for the world. Andrea's got an evening class, so it'll just be you and me. I'll swing by about eight, is that OK?'

Ben mock glanced at his watch. 'Yeah, I guess so. See you then.'

'Oh, all right. See you later.'

Ben flopped back down on the bed. Fucking Dad. He loved him, sure, but this new relationship got on his nerves. I mean, Christ, Andrea was only about five years older than he was. A primary school teacher. Being so close in age to them, she probably had loads in common with her pupils. Be able to relate to them, tell all her fascinating stories. And shagging his Dad? Enough to make the strongest man puke, it really was. Ben didn't know whether to be jealous or angry. It was most likely a bit of both.

This time, the slam of the back door aroused Ben from his thoughts. Then a cry of, 'Hello? Ben? Are you here?' Before he could get up, footsteps approached, then a sharp rap on the door. 'Ben? You in there, love?'

'Hi Mum. Yeah, I'm here.'

She stepped inside, clutching her handbag close to her chest and wearing a hopeful expression. It made Ben's spirits sink. He had seen that look hundreds of times, expecting so much. On school sports day, at the end of the track. On the day he enrolled at Scouts. Every day of importance she had been there. He was grateful, but sometimes the weight of expectation put on a lot of pressure.

She perched on the edge of the bed, eyeing the clutter with disdain. 'You ever going to clean up in here?' she asked.

'Oh, yeah, I'll get round to it at some point. Was that what you wanted to ask?'

A playful slap on the thigh. 'Of course not. We've got more important things to talk about, haven't we?'

Ben was dying to spill the news, but hung on for a few seconds, letting the moment linger. 'I don't know, have we?'

Mum frowned, wiping a strand of hair off her face. 'Well, if you're not going to tell me, then -'

'Two B's and an A. Bristol, here we come.'

The squeal of pleasure said it all. She was off her feet, hands clasped. 'Oh, Ben,' she said, giving him a hug. 'Ben, that's *wonderful!* My only child, off to university! Here, let me have a good look at you. The first of the family to get to uni.'

Ben flushed. 'OK Mum, it's not such a big deal.'

‘Not such a big deal? Come on, give your mother a chance to be proud for once. I think it’s fantastic. And you should, as well! Come to think of it, you could look a bit happier. What’s up?’

All those joints are what’s up, he thought. ‘Nothing. Haven’t had a chance to accept it yet. I keep thinking someone’s going to phone up and tell me there’s been some kind of mistake, a mix-up of papers or something. Give me a few hours, I’m sure I’m going to be as joyous about it as you are.’

She obviously hadn’t been listening. ‘We must go out for dinner, celebrate in style. Get the whole family together. I must telephone your Gran, tell her the good news. And Amy should be there too. You can even invite your father, if you want to.’

‘Steady on, Mum. I don’t want a big fuss. I’ll talk to Gran soon, and besides, I’ve already told Dad. We’re hooking up for a beer this evening, if that’s OK.’

‘Oh. I thought we could spend some time together. It feels like ages since we’ve done that.’

Ben did an internal eye-roll. This was exactly why he didn’t want the whole world to know. There was too much of a conflict of interest, everyone wanting his undivided attention. By the end of the summer he would resemble a stuffed animal, out on parade for everyone to see. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘But Dad and I kind of sorted it out a while ago. It’s only for one evening. I doubt I’ll stay that long, I want to see Amy at some point too.’

‘Oh yes, how did she do?’

‘Dunno yet. She’s probably out with her folks, and got carried away and forgot to ring me. I’m sure I’ll hear from her soon.’

‘I’m sure she’s done well.’

‘Me too.’

‘Well, at least let me cook you dinner before you go. Anything you want in particular?’

‘Not really. I’m easy like Sunday morning.’

‘OK.’ She caressed his cheek. ‘And well done again. This is the best thing that has happened to me in months. I’m so proud of you.’

Which was fine, and he knew she meant it. But September might bring a different story. Once the euphoria had worn off, and the realisation that he would be leaving had sunk in, he couldn’t see the happiness lasting. In a big house with no-one for company, things would get lonely. That wasn’t his problem, but he couldn’t help but feel concern. There were going to be tears ahead, many of them. Fuck it. It was too much to work out. He lit a cigarette and laid back on the bed.

Ben sat in the pub, nursing a pint and waiting for his old man to show. He still felt fuzzy from the joints, even Mum’s dinner hadn’t banished the haze. And now Dad was late. That was no surprise. There had been numerous occasions when, with one excuse after another, Dad had put on a no-show. No phone call, nothing. One incident sprang to mind: sitting at a campsite, buoyant after his first weekend away with the Scouts, two days of games and

campfires and staying out after dark. Ben had sat at the bottom of the dusty drive that wound deep into the forest, huge pines casting shadows as the light fell. Waiting and waiting. One by one, car headlights penetrated the gloom as gleeful kids ran to tell their tales. By seven o'clock, now half an hour late, Ben had watched the sun sinking and thought: No-one else's Dad had forgotten. Their own son, not loose change you drop down the sofa and discard. Eventually, his Scout leader had taken pity, and given Ben a lift home, let down once again, once too often. Ben had sworn then, even at eleven years old, not to let Dad hurt him like that again. Like most promises, it wasn't one he could adhere to.

'Hi son, sorry I'm late.' Mike Carter sat down heavily and unwrapped a tartan scarf from around his neck. Practically summer, and he still had the damn thing on. Ben looked him up and down. Nothing much had changed. The same face. Dark eyes that seemed to see nothing and everything all at once. A dazzling smile that Ben was supposed to have inherited, but could never see in the mirror every morning. The only signs of Dad's advancing years were a few more furrows cut into his forehead, and an ever-receding hairline.

Mike looked at Ben's empty glass. 'You want another one in there?'

'Sure. Thanks, Dad.' Dad. That word still felt uncomfortable on Ben's lips. Being a Dad was easy to say, but actions were what counted. There were a lot more credits to make up before Ben could call him Dad with any force of meaning.

'So,' Dad said, carrying over fresh pints, 'my boy finally came good. Congratulations, son. Cheers.' He took a great swig, beer spilling over his lips and down his shirt. What did Andrea see in him? Can't even drink a beer without fucking it up. 'Can't stay long,' he replied, dabbing at his stained shirt with a tissue. 'Andrea wants me to pick her up from her evening class. That's not for an hour or so though, so we've got plenty of time to catch up.'

'What is she doing this time?' Andrea was into alternative therapies. Yoga had been a phase. Then Tai chi. Ben could imagine her walking around with a dowsing stick searching for water, and actually believing in that mumbo-jumbo shit.

'Feng shui, I think. Give her a couple of weeks and I'll get in trouble for leaving the toilet seat up. Something about letting the evil spirits in. Sounds daft to me.'

Wow, for once we agree. 'Oh well, as long as she's happy.'

'I think she is. I hope so, anyway.' Another shake of the head. 'And what about you? You don't seem to be jumping through hoops. Come on, what's up?'

'That's funny. Mum said exactly the same thing.'

'We weren't married for nineteen years for nothing, you know. But, anyhow, that's another story, as they say.'

Ben didn't want to get into a frank discussion about it. He didn't know how he was feeling, and besides, having a heart-to-heart with Dad was way

out of his comfort zone. Maybe they would reach that point in the future. But not now.

‘I don’t know,’ he repeated. ‘The results are better than I could have hoped for, don’t get me wrong. And unlike some people in my class, I put the work in. That might sound arrogant, but I think I got what I deserved.’

‘I agree.’

‘But there’s so much more than that. Apart from all the stuff I’ve got to sort out between now and September, I’m worried about Mum. Leaving her on her own, and all that.’ And Amy, but there was no need to bring that up.

‘Oh, there’s no need to worry about her. I’ll be here to keep an eye on her, won’t I? And she must be chuffed to bits, I’ll bet.’

‘Yeah, she is. But that’s not the point, is it? When the time comes, she’s going to be heartbroken. She’ll deny it, but I know she will be. That’s what Mums are like.’

Dad sipped his pint. No spillage, this time. ‘Well, she’ll always be at the end of the telephone. Or e-mail. And Bristol’s not miles away. After a few weeks, you’ll be sick of the sight of her, turning up on your doorstep every five minutes. She’ll get used to it.’ He narrowed his eyes, the black pupils darting up and down. ‘And if she doesn’t, there isn’t a lot she can do about it, is there?’

For Dad, that made a fair bit of sense. Didn’t make it any easier, though.

Two pints later, Ben was walking home, hands dug in pockets, trying to ignore what Dad had said. Whatever happened, he was going to Bristol. All that hard work wasn’t going to be dismissed. Couldn’t be dismissed. He would worry about Mum, but she had to accept the fact that he was going. He tried to picture how she would look when he stood at the door ready to leave. What she would say. *Oh Ben, I’m going to miss you so much.* Or, *How am I going to get along without you?* Not meaning to, but putting on a guilt trip, making him feel shitty for deserting her. He had been there for her his whole life, putting up with those awful country and western records as she moped around the house after Dad had left, listening to her late night ramblings as she poured her heart out after a few glasses of wine, all that and more. Now it’s my turn, he thought. My turn to try and make something of my life. He would always be there for her, just not on a constant knife-edge, waiting for the next moment of weakness, dreading having to be the emotional rock yet again.

It was time to have some fun.

But, turning for home, Amy came to the forefront of his mind again. Ben stopped and leant against the lamppost at the bottom of the road. A pool of sodium light cast a mild glow across the street. Ben could see Amy standing there, as they had on countless occasions before, spending an hour or more saying goodbye. The way her hair shone, the dark blonde waves glimmering like a dragon’s tongue. Running his hands up and down her back, feeling the smoothness of her skin. Christ, it was going to be tough come September.

They had only been together for a year, but Ben had told stuff to Amy he hadn't to anybody else, and felt closer to her because of it. She was his first real girlfriend, real relationship, first lover as well. He wasn't the type for one-night stands, so had a grand total of one notch on the bedpost. But this notch was a symbol of love.

Rain began to fall, so Ben left his post and walked up the long road. Despite the drizzle, there was no cloud cover, and he found himself gazing at the sky, much as he had done as a kid, lying flat on his back in the local park with one arm tucked beneath his head. Imagining life in other galaxies, shooting across the stars in search of aliens. And the thing was, the stars seemed so close, as if you could reach up and grab them, take one and pocket it. Ben thought he could do with a star right now, to shine into the dark recesses of his mind and chase away the shadows.

A figure loomed into view as he approached his front door. Hunched over, arms wrapped around them, trying to conserve warmth. A foot scraped on the gravel drive, crunch crunch, back and forth in a monotonous drawl.

'Ben?'

The figure stepped out of the dark, but Ben already knew who it was. He knew every texture of that voice. First up, she looked so much taller than he remembered, which was stupid as it had been, what, 24 hours since he'd last seen her. But there was something defiant in her pose, hands on hips, taking control over him before a word had even been exchanged.

'Ben?' she repeated. Noticing her voice now, and that strength lost some of its potency. She sounded scared, vulnerable.

'Hey, Amy.'

She hesitated, shuffling from one foot to the other. 'So,' she said. 'You going to give me a hug?'

'Sure,' he said, and opened his arms. More hesitation, but then he felt the full force of her body, arms wrapping round his neck. And then the tears came. He could hear her heart thumping against his chest. 'Oh Ben,' she murmured, and a tiny drop spilled down her cheeks onto his collar.

They stood that way while the moon rose in the sky, neither saying anything, Ben having so *much* to say, but the words failing on his lips. From the upstairs window, an old Country and Western song drifted on the air. Willie Nelson's *Always on my Mind*. Hearing that song added to his melancholy, tugging at his heartstrings. Two women, one pressed close to him, the other probably hunched over a bottle, humming in a mournful tone, digging up painful memories and worrying over an uncertain future. Thinking about it, his Mum and Amy had a lot in common, separated only by Mr Nelson's musings.

When Amy finally removed her head from his shoulder, her eyes were red and puffy, dark make up smudged on her cheeks. Ben did what he always did, whenever he saw her; ran his fingers through her hair, enjoying its softness and smell. She smiled, a watery smile that appeared to take a lot of effort. 'You know,' she said, 'I had a whole heap of stuff that I wanted to say, but when you came round the corner, all that went out the window.'

Sorry about all that crying. It's been a weird day.'

'S'OK,' Ben mumbled. He took a step backward, suddenly wanting to put distance between them. It was getting too much.

'I spoke to your Mum,' Amy said. 'I wanted to wait and find out from you, but she kind of beat me to it. She seems happy.'

'Yeah, right. As you can tell from that wonderful accompaniment going on upstairs.'

'What? Oh, that. I guess she doesn't know how to convey it, that's all.' Her voice trailed off. 'I kind of know how she feels.'

Enough of the platitudes. Time to bite the bullet. Ben swallowed, then said, 'Are you going to Nottingham, or not?'

There was a lingering silence. Willie Nelson came off the stereo, replaced by some song about how you came through the door and took my heart all over again. 'Yes,' Amy said.

And there it was. Ben had expected some reaction, but was unprepared for the torrent that pushed at his eyelids. Yeah, you came through that door, all right. 'Congratulations,' he said, wondering where the strength in his legs had gone. 'Good grades then, I take it?'

'Two A's, one B. So I'm in.'

'You must be pleased.'

'Oh, yeah. I think so. But what about you? More importantly, what about you and me? Where the hell are we going to go from here? You're going to Bristol, me Nottingham. I don't want to lose you, Ben. I love you.'

'I know. But we knew this moment would come, didn't we? You can't put your life on hold for me. I wouldn't expect you to, and in any case, I've been thinking about uni ever since I started college, what it was going to be like, and now it's here. I'm actually going to uni! And so are you. That's something to celebrate in my book.'

Amy's voice lowered further. 'But what about us? What about the future?'

Ben stopped her with a kiss, slowly at first, then getting more into it. Throughout, he could feel her bottom lip fluttering against his, as if he was breathing life into her with every passing moment. After, he held her again. 'There's no way we can tell what's going to happen down the track. Sure, things might change. I sure as hell don't want them to, that much I do know. But to say that they won't would be a lie, wouldn't it? And I don't want to lie to you. I never want to lie to you.'

He thought that was a pretty fair speech, but it only got her crying again. 'Come on,' he said. 'Let's leave the tears behind, eh? What do you say?'

This time Amy took a step back. She rubbed her eyes on her sweater, then took his hand. Her fingers tingled with sweat. Fear, perhaps? Ben had no answer. 'You know what?' she said. 'You got yourself a deal.' Her stature grew once more, and a smile played on her lips, the same smile that had got him into this in the first place. 'Now,' she said. 'How about we go to bed?'

Ben laughed. 'Now you've definitely got yourself a deal.'

After sex, but still in the moment. Amy lay on her side, her breathing growing shallow as sleep approached. Ben glanced around the room, his for the past fourteen years. On the shelves were photographs past and present: Ben and J in a nightclub, beer bottles in hand, grinning drunkenly at the camera. With Mum and Dad on holiday in Greece, sporting healthy tans, a lifetime ago when things had been great. And many of Amy, in a bikini on a beach in Cornwall, on her eighteenth birthday, too many to mention. Two years down the line, whose faces would adorn these walls? Ben's hands crept down Amy's flank, stroking the skin, tracing every curve. She murmured and moved slightly. His eyes focused on the St Christopher chain around her neck. She had bought it in a flea market when they had been shopping in London. She swore that it had brought her good luck, and that same night they had slept together for the first time. The good luck had started there, and had grown ever since. But was it about to run out? Ben fingered the chain, surprised by its fragility. One tug of his hand, the metal would snap. Perhaps that was how fine the division was between them, that all it would take was one instant, one situation they had no control over, and all would be lost. Ben laid back down and closed his eyes. Sleep came quickly, bringing dreams of crucifixes, of stars, of the girl sharing his bed.

CHAPTER TWO

About the same time as sleep overtook Ben, Clifton Walker was watching the rain falling over the city of Bristol and daydreaming about Mrs Carmichael, a cracking bird who lived across the street. He stretched back in his chair and imagined her getting under the shower. First testing the heat with her hand. Dropping the towel from around her waist and stepping in. Purring with delight as the warmth enveloped her. Steam clouding up the mirror above the sink as she worked up a lather, hands caressing every inch of her body, taking her time over it...

‘Clifton?’

Jesus Christ. Trust Dad to go and ruin everything. Clifton opened his eyes. ‘What is it?’

‘Get me another beer, would you? I’m dying of thirst in here!’

Get it yourself, you lazy fucker, he thought. But there was no point in arguing. He stood up slowly, rearranged his trousers, his penis rapidly deflating. Cheers Dad, go and ruin a good fantasy, why don’t you? Clifton touched his face, running a finger across the gnarled area above his left eyebrow. A ritual he undertook hundreds of times a day. And always with the same result, and the same feelings that accompanied them.

‘Get a move on, for Chrissake.’

Clifton wanted to say something in retaliation, but as always, something held him back. It was easier to keep your mouth shut. Carrying a Bud up to the study, Clifton noticed the bathroom light across the road was now extinguished. Mrs Carmichael was probably tucked up in bed, or fucking her husband, only a few metres from where he now stood. It might as well have been ten miles.

‘Just put it on the table.’ Clifton’s Dad, Matthew Walker, Freelance Proof-reader and Copy Editor, workaholic and grumpy father, gestured to a cherry wood table overflowing with loose sheaves of paper, not looking up from his work. His face was awash with harsh beams of light from the folding lamp that shrouded his features in flame. His work suit had seen better days, the jacket thrown over the back of his chair in ungainly fashion, tie slung low around his neck, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow. This picture didn’t surprise Clifton. It was one he encountered most days. Often, when sleep eluded him, he would get up and sit by the window, his only accompaniment the clacking of Dad’s old-fashioned typewriter and the occasional curse echoing around the house as frustration set in. There were never more than half a dozen words that passed their lips in way of conversation. A stunted sentence, a barked order, never a word of gratitude or friendly banter.

Today had been a case in point. Clifton never slept for more than four or five hours every night, and was always up by seven in the morning. This morning he awoke at half past five, shook from his slumber by a pang of excitement that was unheard of. Results day. Dad was dozing in the study,

having passed out yet again. But Clifton didn't care, for he was off to college to get his results, his one remaining ambition to make it to West of England University. Even the stares on the bus couldn't shift his anticipation, the passing glances bouncing off like hail on a tin roof. And when he opened that envelope, and three B's stared back, his heart was fit to burst. He was in! Clifton had stared at the heavens, blessing his mother, telling her that dreams can come true, standing motionless until the sun made his scar itch.

And Dad's reaction? Clifton had returned to an empty house, which wasn't a surprise, and sat waiting for hours for his father to arrive. At ten to seven, the front door opened.

'Dad?'

No answer. Clifton could hear Dad muttering under his breath, cursing the bloody British weather, and how much work he had to do. Same complaints, only a new day to throw them at.

'Dad?' he said again, getting up from his chair and picking up the prized envelope. 'I got my results.'

He found Matthew in the kitchen, dirty dishes stacked up in the sink, but only interested in having his first beer of the evening. 'Oh yeah?' He stood up, drained half the bottle in two swallows, and took the envelope from Clifton's grasp. 'Let's have a look then, shall we?'

'Just open it,' Clifton said, all his happiness dissipating into fear. A fear that whatever marks he had, they wouldn't be good enough for his father. Would never be good enough.

As Matthew saw the results, his face contorted into a look of sheer disbelief, his jaw gaping. You could catch flies in there, Clifton thought. That's shut you up, hasn't it? A surge of power spread through his body. See? I can do it after all, no matter how much shit you give me. Abuse me all you like, and I'll prove you wrong. He wanted to get up close and shout it in his face. For now though, the sight before him was all he needed.

'Well,' Dad exclaimed, chucking the envelope at Clifton's feet. 'I take it this means UWE will accept you?'

Clifton bent to pick up the envelope, a red mist building. 'That's right. I've been accepted for English, starting on the 24th September. So there.'

'So there. Listen to you, one bit of good news and he thinks he's Einstein.' He reached for a second beer. 'Now, if you don't mind, I've got work to do.'

Clifton stood, arms folded, the rage clearing now. 'Yeah, we'll see, won't we? I've taken enough of your shit the last few years, I'm immune to anything you have to say. So fuck this, and fuck you.'

Quick as you like, Matthew sprang forward and slapped him, sending Clifton staggering back into the door. His eyes began to water. Then he was on his feet again as a hand clamped around his throat, pulling him upward. Dad was right in his face now, so close that he could see the darkness there, the fury caught in his eyes. And Clifton was scared.

'Don't you ever, EVER,' Dad shouted, emphasising his point with furious tugs on Clifton's shirt, 'talk to me like that again!' Spittle ran down his chin.

‘I’m your father, and you won’t speak to me like that!’

Clifton’s eyes were blurred from tears, and he tried to brush them away.

‘Oh,’ Dad sneered. ‘Out come the waterworks. As if a few tears will make everything all right! You’re pathetic.’

This was too much for Clifton, who hid his head in his hands, unable to look his father in the eye. ‘I’m sorry,’ he blubbered

‘Yeah, I’m sorry too. Jesus. You always do it, don’t you? Say something to make me angry.’ There was a calm acceptance in Matthew’s tone. He straightened his tie, swept a hand through his hair, all puffed up arrogance. ‘As I say, I’ve got work to do. Get yourself cleaned up, you look a mess.’ Clifton looked up now, his nose throbbing.

‘And Clifton?’ Dad said as he left the room. ‘*Congratulations*, by the way. I didn’t get a chance to say that before.’ And he left, leaving a messed up kid to wonder where it had gone so wrong.

Now, Clifton lay on his bed, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. He imagined them to be rivers leading to unknown destinations, ending at a faraway city where he lived with an unblemished face and where no one could inflict so much pain. He rolled over and looked at the clock. 1:16am. Dad was still working, and judging by the amount of times footsteps had ventured to the kitchen and back again, he had consumed a vast amount of alcohol. These times Clifton dreaded, but it was too early to even think about sleeping. With sleep came dreams. It was better to stay awake, where his own one-act play would keep him company until dawn.

Treading quietly, Clifton swung his legs off the bed and walked to the door. The handle was sweaty, and twice his fingers slipped off. The trick was, how to get to the bathroom and avoid a confrontation. One altercation was enough for today, thank you very much. And with a skinful of beer inside him, there was no telling what mood his father would be in. Likely to fly off the handle at the slightest interruption. Well, not this time.

After two attempts, Clifton prised the door open an inch. Opposite, a sliver of light persisted under the door of the study. Which meant Dad was still up. No surprise there. The bathroom was the next door down the landing, a matter of metres. But there was wooden floor to negotiate first.

A step, placing his bare foot on the boards, a cold tingling in his toes. Minimal sound, but inside his head it was a bomb going off. Another step. The study was to his left, so close he could touch the placard hanging on the wall, some stupid proofreading society Dad belonged to. The scroll inside the frame had withered around the ages as time had taken its toll; it was a pity the same couldn’t be said for its recipient.

On his third step, Clifton trod too hard, sending a spasm of creaks along the hallway. Seconds passed, maybe half a minute.

Go back to your work Dad. Just drink your beer, and don’t open that door.

For once, his prayers were answered. From the study came a sigh, a ruffle of papers. But no door flung open. All Clifton had for company was

the hammering of his heart. The next steps came easier, for now he was beyond the threshold, the bathroom within touching distance. One more step...

And he was inside. The sound of his heart was as loud as ever, but a few deep breaths, pressed flat against the door, and he was back to normal.

Ha. Fuck you, Dad! Didn't get to me that time, did you?

No sooner had that triumph passed, the old fear and sadness returned. Who else had to go through such anxiety just to take a piss? Treading on eggshells every moment of the day, doing whatever he could to avoid a row. Countless times he'd thought about standing up for himself, but what good would it do? And things hadn't always been this way. Only since Mum died had life taken a downward turn: working hours became longer, beer bottles were downed quicker than the brewery could produce them. When tragedy struck, there were many different paths that you could take. Clifton's method of dealing was to retreat inside, blocking out the world, his fire extinguishing like the last flickering of a candle. Dad had gone the other way, hiding his grief by lashing out at those closest to him. And Clifton was the only target for the pent-up hatred which surfaced after one too many.

He filled the sink and dunked his head right in, gasping as the water hit his flesh. It made him feel a little better.

After drying, Clifton studied his face in the mirror. The reflection that stared back still made him flinch. The area above his left eyebrow, stretching from the bridge of his nose, sweeping close to the eye, across his cheekbone, and down towards his mouth, was a mass of clear, shiny scar tissue. The skin had the consistency of rice pudding. It was rough to the touch, a plateau of ridges and bumps. Many times Clifton had grabbed a handful of skin and pulled it taut, watching the skin ripple. For an instant, his face almost looked normal. When he let go he would hope that some miracle had taken place, that his eye could now open without a squint, that the eyebrow was more than a few wispy hairs. He was still hoping.

But that wasn't the worst thing. There were so many memories tied up in that broken flesh. When confronted with his appearance, recollections from the past writhed beneath the surface, probing for release, constantly straining to get free. It was impossible to separate his physical appearance from the underlying circumstances which led to them, a fragmented puzzle whose pieces added up to the sight that lay before him. And behind it all was his mother Claire.

After Clifton was born, his mother had suffered a severe bout of post-natal depression. The birth had been difficult, a painful, protracted, sixteen hour labour. When her son had finally escaped from the womb, crying his heart out, Claire's first thought had not been one of joy, but revulsion. Because Clifton was a month premature, he had to be incubated immediately after delivery, so the initial connection between mother and son had been lost. When well enough to get out of bed, Claire had stood at the glass of the incubation unit, watching the rows of babies in their first few hours of life. Most looked at peace, drifting in and out of sleep, their tiny fingers pointing

up at the ceiling in awe at the new world around them. But her son had behaved differently from the start, always crying, long into the night. The nurses had assured her that everything was fine, some babies took longer to settle down than others, but Claire wasn't convinced. And his eyes, they scared her. Little jet-black pieces of coal that never rested, darting around the room, fearful. Devils eyes, she had thought, and immediately felt guilty for thinking such a thing, this was her son, her first born, so why was she feeling this way?

She had hoped that after bringing Clifton home things would get easier. Telling herself over and over: 'He *will* get better, he will give me a good night's sleep soon, every mother has been through this, they all survived, and so will I.' Matthew was overjoyed at the new arrival, fussing over him, and taking on more than his fair share of responsibility. This should have been a relief to Claire, but it only exacerbated her guilt. Everyone loved Clifton, her parents saying what a beautiful boy he was, and how lucky she was to have a healthy son. And she went along, smiling to placate them. It was only at night, her husband fast asleep beside her, that she went into the nursery and stood over his cot, willing herself to love him. Then he would awake screaming, and feelings of disgust would engulf her again. Sometimes, in her darkest moments, she believed that the thing that lay before her (thing, that was how she thought of him) belonged to someone else, a surrogate child that had no place in her home, stealing the people she loved, turning them against her. As time passed this resentment did not dissipate but grew into a monster that she had no control over, until she could barely look at her child, instead spending hours in bed, tossing and turning and neglecting the cries that shattered her existence.

Despite his increasing workload, Matthew began to see the changes in his wife. One Friday, only seventeen days after Clifton came home, he called their local GP. Claire was unable to get out of bed, so the doctor visited her at their home. He was a tall man with thinning hair and sideburns. After a long talk, he prescribed a mild case of postnatal depression. She had two options; the first was to go on anti-depressants, but he warned her that she might have to stop breastfeeding. Although she wanted the darkness to lift, she felt so guilty at neglecting her child she refused. Or, the doctor had said, with a shrug of his shoulders, you will have to 'grin and bear it'. She never forgot those words, the way she felt at having her feelings dismissed, as if her pain was nothing more than a simple toothache. She had to bite her tongue to stop herself from screaming at him that it was never going to go away, for she knew the truth. She could not grin and she could not bear it.

The next two days saw Claire's condition deteriorate further. Her bedroom became a prison she could not leave. Self-loathing was her constant companion, making her stomach turn and head throb. She longed to be able to describe her feelings, how much she hated herself for being unable to love her child in the way that she should. This hatred writhed beneath her skin, a black blood running through her veins. Hearing Matthew playing with Clifton made things worse. His laughter as father and son bonded consumed

her with jealousy that festered and took root. And this frightened her most of all, for she no longer trusted her own mind, that she was sinking under the weight of her depression.

In desperation, Matthew called the surgery again, pleading for someone to help. A different GP came out this time, and spent two hours upstairs with Claire whilst he paced the floor drinking cups of coffee and watching over Clifton. He felt powerless, unable to do anything to ease his wife's agony, and wondering how she could fail to love such a special baby. Holding Clifton in his arms made everything right, as if he had been placed on this earth for one purpose, to love and protect his son. And he couldn't understand why Claire didn't feel the same. Perhaps she was just overtired, strung out after the birth. Yes, that was probably it.

But when the GP came down, he knew that it was much worse. What was actually said, Matthew didn't know, except two words: Psychiatric hospital. That was all he could remember. There could have been tears, could have been anger, but those two words were the hammer blow to his heart. The GP insisted it was the correct procedure for now, just to let Claire have some time to rest. And Clifton would be going with her.

An hour later Claire, dressed in old jeans and a loose sweater, left the prison of her bedroom for a different type of incarceration. Her eyes were puffy and stained with tears. Matthew held her then, as grey October rain pattered on the windows, telling her how much he loved her, and that he always would, and that Clifton loved her, and always would too. She had smiled then, a watery smile little more than a grimace, but Matthew took this as a sign of hope, and clung to it whole. Then he picked up Clifton, fast asleep in his cot, and loaded up the car.

The psychiatric hospital was situated at the end of a long avenue lined by oak trees. Claire looked out of the window as a vast Victorian building approached. Heavy rain was falling, and Matthew insisted that she stay in the car while he went to find a way in. In the back, Clifton gargled and moaned, but she could not turn to face him. Instead she stared at the hospital, noticing for the first time how many windows there were, huge expanses of glass. Occasionally a light twinkled on and off, and once she thought she heard a scream, but in her troubled mind it could have been anything. An ominous thought entered her head: all these windows, and not one person looking out. It was then the realisation came that this was now her home, and she was scared. Eventually Matthew returned, accompanied by a woman who was the nursing assistant of the Mother and Baby unit. She led them across the car park, down a narrow pathway to the rear of the building, and inside.

As the door shut behind them, Claire was struck by the dreariness of the place. There was a waiting area filled with orange plastic chairs, a telephone booth in one corner, all bathed in harsh, artificial light. Two corridors led left and right. They took the right, down a long hallway carpeted in dark green, with eggshell coloured walls. A small office lay at the end of this corridor, and beyond another set of rooms, the Mother and Baby unit.

The first room they entered was the nursery. The walls were papered in a

horrible lime green with pictures of cartoon animals on them. There were two windows, one to the outside world and one to the nurses' office next door. The room was furnished with rows of cots, twelve in all, and each had chairs, a drawer for clothes, a baby bath and washbasin. It was so regimented. Claire wanted to turn and go home, but she knew that she couldn't. This was her punishment for failing to be a fit mother.

A young psychiatric nurse came to admit her, and Claire went back over the old ground of trying to express her fears and depression, but found that the words couldn't fit. The nurse was reassuring, taking reams of notes in a spiral pad, and listening to her concerns. She spoke words of comfort that rang hollow in Claire's ears. Next she was shown where she would sleep, a drab room with a surveillance window near the door, yet more gloomy wallpaper, and perfunctory furniture. Knowing that she would be separated from her baby at night only increased her self-contempt, but she knew she had nowhere else to go. And then Matthew left, giving her a brief kiss on the cheek, and she watched him walk down the corridor, head hunched down, hands buried in his pockets. Her stomach crumpled as her husband became a small blur and was gone. Her disgust at herself reached a new height, and she wanted more than anything to give up, to regain some peace in her life. As the sobs subsided a hand touched her shoulder and she was led to her room.

In those first days Claire had regular visits from a psychiatrist, and these sessions exhausted her. She saw them as an intense form of interrogation, being made to feel like a criminal. So many questions. Have you had any delusions? Unusual thoughts about Clifton or your husband, perhaps? I think anti-depressants would be wise at this juncture, of course you can still breastfeed during this time, it's quite safe. Your GP suggested otherwise, did he? Ah, well that was a mistake on his part. All this prying bounced off Claire, who only had one question of her own.

'So how long do mothers usually stay in hospital for?'

The psychiatrist plucked a hair from her skirt. 'Well,' she said, 'I would say two months was about average in this situation.' Then, seeing the shock in Claire's eyes, she added, 'Although many mothers are in for less time than that.'

Two months. It sounded like a death sentence. 'And why do you think postnatal depression happens in the first place?' Claire asked.

'To be honest, the causes are unknown for certain. It's probably a combination of factors. Giving birth is a very traumatic event, and this can cause really dramatic hormonal shifts. But you are not alone, Claire; thousands of mothers have been through this and come out the other side. There is no reason why you can't be one of them.'

But this only increased Claire's anxiety, for she did feel completely alone. Matthew visited daily, but she could feel his resentment towards her emanating in waves. She felt like a thief, stealing her son away from his home and placing him into this harsh, lonely environment. She wandered the corridors, passing the dining room where she ate with the other mothers, a room of Formica-topped tables straight out of her school days. Despite being

surrounded by women in a similar position, she felt alienated from them, fighting a personal battle with her demons. She also began to walk at night, waiting until few nurses were on duty, and then creeping through the ward and out into the grounds. The cool grass beneath her feet, the inimitable shadows engulfing her, here was a place her depression could be free. She felt at home in the twilight, and walked for nearly an hour until the fear of being discovered forced her back to the ward.

The next night, she did the same. Only this time she wandered further, her unhappiness propelling her beyond the hospital grounds. She had no destination, only wanting to be away from everything. As she walked, she felt the shackles begin to lift from her shoulders. If it were possible to keep walking forever, she would have. As it turned out, the increasing darkness unsettled her, and she became lost. Beside the hospital lay a railway line, and it was here she was found three hours later, sitting calmly next to the gleaming tracks, looking up at the moon. A nurse came running, alarmed and out of breath. 'What are you doing here?' she asked. 'Why are you walking here?'

'I wanted to go for a walk,' Claire replied, her voice fuzzy and thick. 'I wanted to be alone.'

The nurse arched her eyebrows, and despite her weariness, Claire thought she understood what this woman was thinking. She's a suicide case; she can't be left on her own. And Claire was so far down she couldn't say for sure that the nurse was wrong.

After that, she was sectioned as an active suicide risk. This meant she could never be alone, not even to go to the toilet. She could push the door to, but not shut it, and certainly not lock it. Even the seclusion of the bathroom had been snatched from her. She couldn't sleep alone, her door remaining ajar as a nurse sat on a chair, in view of her dreams. Matthew's visits became more strained, as a nurse had to accompany her at all times. She longed to tell him of her need for privacy, that she was trapped in confinement. But Matthew was beginning to look haggard, unshaven, tired, and she didn't want to be a further burden on him. So their conversations remained facile, talking of everyday things but avoiding the issues that lurked beneath the surface.

She would sit on the carpet in her room, wedged against the wall, sinking deeper into her depression. Having a nurse in constant proximity was unbearable, and she would only leave her room for meals and to use the bathroom. Occasionally she fed Clifton, and when he nuzzled against her breast love did take her over, but only for a few seconds at a time before he began to cry again, and the old feelings of disgust returned. When faced with the night and only her thoughts for company, things became so bad she turned on herself. At first she struck the wall beside her bed, only gentle strikes, but becoming faster and harder until every impact was a bruise to the knuckles. The nurse would come, pleading with her to stop, that it wasn't helping anyone to do this, least of all herself. But she didn't care; the physical pain was a relief, for it would distract her thoughts from everything else, her eyes focusing only on gratifying herself. She became devious in her endeavour,

scratching herself in hidden places, digging her fingernails up and down her arm until blood ran. Her intake of sedatives was increased, making her lethargic and dry-mouthed. But still the self-harming continued, whenever she could find a moments' solitude, any opportunity to forget for a brief period of time.

It was at this point that Claire was put onto the ECT schedule. ECT, or electroconvulsive therapy, was a procedure that involved a brief electrical stimulus being given to the brain via electrodes placed upon the temples. When told this, her stomach turned to ice, and she was reminded of the film *A Clockwork Orange*, where the main character is force fed images of violence in an attempt to rehabilitate his criminal past. And now it was happening to her, and she was more frightened than she had ever been. The doctor who advised this course of treatment assured her that it was safe, and her mood would be satisfied through the induced seizures. When Matthew was told the news he wept, unable to understand how it had come so far. But, after much coercing, he agreed to the treatment, because he could no longer see anywhere else to go.

Claire never forgot that first day. The evening before, she had to stop eating and drinking at midnight in preparation for the general anaesthetic which was to be administered the following morning. On that evening, she made an attempt to breastfeed Clifton, and for once he responded hungrily. It was like he was sucking the life out of her, and she hated him for it. All she felt as she tossed in bed that night, a crescent moon casting milky light across her room, was that life no longer fitted for her. She was an outcast; an impostor taking refuge in a stranger's body, and only a charge of electricity could chase this alter ego away.

By eight a.m., Claire's mouth was cardboard dry. Eight hours without fluid had left her parched, and the dread that filled her heart had done the rest. She sat on her bed, wearing 'loose clothing' as instructed, and waited. Finally, as the hands on the clock crawled towards nine, the message came. She walked the long corridor with two other mothers, flanked by three attendant nurses. No one said anything, not even basic pleasantries, the nurses' small talk the only sound. They walked out of the heavy ward doors, across the car park, and into a smaller building. Then through another series of corridors which ended at a set of double doors. There was one set of doors to enter, and another to exit. So the incoming patients could not see those who had just been shocked.

The waiting room was like an airport departure lounge, basic carpet and low chairs. They sat, not reading the magazines, each waiting for their name to be called. When Claire finally went through, she found herself in an operating theatre with a solitary bed in the middle, and a high, piercing bulb overhead. There were many people in attendance; anaesthetist, psychiatrist, nurses. She was told to climb onto the bed and take off her shoes. In that sunken bed, surrounded by alien faces, she felt so scared, but did not cry out. It was too much, too far. While a nurse held one hand, the anaesthetist took the other, and in one expert motion, slid a needle into the skin of her wrist,

and the last thing Claire remembered was a dull pain spreading up her arm.

She regained consciousness in another room, the two other mothers on either side of her. She had a headache, and looking around the room she could see two red circles on the forehead of each woman, where the headpiece had been placed on the temples before the shock was administered. This was their mark. They said nothing to each other. The red blemishes were their shared experience.

From then on, Claire's memory began to unravel. A doctor had warned her beforehand that a 'slight' loss of memory was a common side effect of ECT, but this was much more than that. Amnesia cut swathes through her. The sitting room where Matthew would take Clifton on his visits, playing with him while Claire sat away from them, was now a place she couldn't remember at all. Once she forgot where the toilet was, and felt humiliated having to ask a passing nurse for directions. On Matthew's visits, he would tell her how tired she looked, and how frightened, but she had only faint recollection of their conversations. All she could remember were those two red circles, like clown's cheeks, painted on after every session in the operating theatre.

As the ECT sessions continued, all fragments of the old Claire disappeared. Gone was the woman with a healthy, bouncy vitality, replaced with a grey automaton, unable to express any emotion or train of thought. Her self-harming abated, as the rage was shocked out of her. She was allowed to go out occasionally, with Matthew or a nurse acting as bodyguard, but these outings distressed her. The outside world became a hostile environment. So a vicious circle grew; unable to face life outside the walls of the hospital, but trapped in the realms of hell inside.

ECT stripped Claire of her inner self, and trying to explain this to the doctors was impossible. Any queries of the success of her treatment were brushed off. Her hatred of ECT was passed off as a product of her depression rather than, as she saw it, a prolonging cause. The lack of memory took the fight out of her, so in the end she relented and followed orders. Twice a week she was shocked, and this was to be her recovery. Occupational therapy began, which involved undertaking pointless classes in crafts and cookery. These sessions made her feel like a child, and diminished what little self-worth remained. But she was told that if she could manage these classes, that would be seen as an important step towards her return to health. So she dutifully complied.

As she entered her second month in the hospital, Claire was told that when her ECT was finished, she would be allowed home. Only slowly at first, the occasional daily visit, perhaps an overnight stay, in order to prepare for a return to ordinary life. Christmas was on the horizon, and Matthew wanted his wife and son home for the holiday period, just like any other family. Clifton was growing before his very eyes, and he didn't want to miss out on any more. He realised that this was a selfish notion, but couldn't help it. If only Claire would get better, he told himself. Then we can get back to normal.

Claire wanted to go home, but was scared to. Although anything would be better than the hospital, so much had happened since she last set foot inside that house. Going back to independence, having to be a mother to Clifton, filled her with dread. It was what was expected of her, but delusion had clouded her mind whilst incarcerated. Somewhere, beneath all the clouds of amnesia, was a festering pinprick of hope. A hope that someone would come and take her baby away and free her from the torment of having to raise him. The doctors knew none of this, for she had become adept at concealing her feelings. The ECT had helped in this regard, forming a transparent film around her thoughts, pushing any forceful emotion deep into her subconscious. And seeing Matthew's face, his joy at her impending release, she knew that she had to try, at least for him. She owed him that much.

And so it was, fifty days after being admitted, that Claire and Clifton left the hospital. Matthew was waiting for them, looking nervous but happy. It was a cold December morning, the last patches of frost lingering on the grass. Clifton gurgled from his cot, oblivious to all around him. As she walked down the steps, Matthew rushed forward, taking the cot in one hand. He kissed Claire on the cheek.

'Now, let's get home,' he said. 'Away from this place.'

Claire smiled weakly, but said nothing. She had no idea what home was any more. They drove away, back down that long avenue, the hospital building receding into the distance. Now she was on her own. As Bristol city centre approached, more and more people walked the streets. The shops had been decorated with tinsel, fake Christmas trees, baubles. Claire watched the morning shoppers deliberating over their choices of gifts, and felt indifferent to it all. It must be nice to have something so trivial to worry about as a present for a loved one. To her, the upcoming holiday would be a day like all the others. One of pain and loneliness.

And of the Christmas holiday, she remembered little. She found her home a ghostly wasteland with which she felt no familiarity. When she entered the house for the first time, she nearly collapsed on the spot, and Matthew had to help her into a chair. What frightened her was the complete lack of love for her surroundings, as if she had set foot into someone else's house rather than her own. All the memories of her early happy days with Matthew were tainted beyond repair.

There were photographs of the Christmas holiday, but when she looked at these snapshots, she could hardly recognise herself. In them, she looked drawn, washed up. Other photos showed Clifton, now four months old, lying in his cot, a stocking next to him. He had a smile on his face, and when she looked at him, her heart was fit to burst. He looked so happy, and she knew it had nothing to do with her. Seeing him like that, she wanted to love him so much. Matthew's parents had stayed for a couple of days, and she couldn't remember a word she had said to them. According to Matthew, they had treated her with kid gloves, approaching her with love, but also with caution. On hearing this news, Claire knew that it was no longer about her feelings towards her son. Now it was about her, her effect on those she held closest.

Maybe in time she would learn to love Clifton, but that might not be enough. For she could never forgive herself for not loving him from the beginning, unconditionally, the way it should be.

She had not cut her ties with the hospital completely. A plethora of psychiatric workers came to visit. A social worker came twice a week, to find out 'how she was doing.' She usually told them OK, expressing her physical exhaustion. 'And how is the boy?' the social worker would say, taking Clifton in her arms. 'He is looking well, isn't he?' And Claire would nod, pleased that although his emotional growth was being affected by her depression, he remained healthy and vibrant. She also had regular appointments with a psychiatrist, meeting him weekly in a small, pale room. They discussed at length the reasons behind her depression, but she felt he was constantly prying for a reason from her past to explain how things had turned out in the present. She found these sessions unhelpful, but continued to go, to placate Matthew if nothing else. He had not returned to work, as a proof reader for the local newspaper, and he wanted to go solo, setting up his own business. But Claire and Clifton were taking up all of his time, and although both sets of grandparents helped out, it was becoming a strain on him. He found himself drinking more than he should; opening a bottle of wine at dinner and finding the bottle empty a few hours later. He was also lonely; though he and his wife shared a bed, they were not intimate. Claire didn't want to be touched, saying that she was tired. He hated to admit it, for he loved her dearly, but he felt neglected, unwanted. He had done everything he could to help her, bent over backwards to make life as easy for her as possible. But there were no signs that her depression was lifting, despite his best efforts. He was running out of patience, and wanted a release.

So the inevitable happened. He began an affair with a woman from their local pub. It had not been his plan. One Saturday, his parents were over. Claire had retired to bed early, and he asked his mother to look after Clifton, for he wanted a walk, some fresh air. His Dad had offered to accompany him, but he said no, he wanted to be alone. The look in his eyes must have done the trick, for his Dad didn't argue. So he walked, wrestling with his thoughts, and ended up in the pub, initially for one drink. But one had made him relax, so he had another, propping up the bar, talking to nobody, staring into his glass. About nine, a woman came in and took the stool beside him, but he was half in the bag by then and didn't notice. She attempted to strike up a conversation, and at first he ignored her, but then she bought him a drink and they chatted. He enjoyed her company, being able to leave his life behind and talk of other things. Her name was Melanie, twenty-nine, and recently split up from her long-term boyfriend. What she saw in him, he didn't know. Maybe she wanted companionship, as he did. However she felt, they ended up screwing in the back seat of her car, parked in a desolate country lane. To feel another woman's kiss, her hands on his body, urging him on, was a forgotten pleasure. After, he felt strong pangs of guilt, but these faded over time. He had tried so hard with Claire, but this was a release from all his problems, and the feeling was intoxicating.

If Claire had been in a clearer state of mind, perhaps she would have noticed the signs of her husband's infidelity. Now back at work, only part time at first, Matthew was spending long hours away from home, usually going to Melanie's flat after work. The clues were there, but now Claire had to look after Clifton solo during the day, and this task was a colossal challenge for her. She rarely left the house, focusing on mundane domestic chores to keep her mind occupied while Clifton slept upstairs. Even doing the ironing was a battle, and achieving it was a major accomplishment. But still the inner turmoil continued, and she would often break down for no apparent reason, collapsing onto the sofa in floods of tears. Her home was no longer her sanctuary; it was a place to be feared.

As spring faded into summer, Claire had the occasional brighter day, where she felt ready to take a trip into town. So she would dress Clifton, strap him into the buggy, and walk the fifteen-minute journey. The first time, she could only manage half an hour of the hustle and bustle before returning home, completely wiped out. But take a few little steps, and soon you move forward. So she persevered, and gradually her trips grew longer, and whilst the depression remained, it waxed and waned, crippling her for a day or two at a time before retreating again. These trips became her goal, to be able to walk freely down the street with her son, like any other mother.

Then, an incident occurred that shook her. One afternoon, she decided against walking and took Clifton in the car. She wasn't confident driving, but the rain had been relentless all morning. She went through the usual ritual of getting Clifton ready, then strapping him into the car seat. She took a few deep breaths behind the wheel until she felt calm, and set off. The city centre was packed, and she panicked on the roundabout and took a wrong turning, ending up on Cheltenham Road, away from her destination. Cars filled every available spot on both sides of the road, and by the time she found a parking space she was over a mile outside of town. Grumbling, she got Clifton into the buggy, thankful that it had stopped raining.

Although she didn't spend much, Claire enjoyed the trip. It was nice to window shop, trying to familiarise herself with the latest fashions. She even looked at a few items for Clifton, who all the while lay happily in the buggy, mercifully quiet. By the time she returned to the car, the shadows were lengthening, falling across the windscreen. Unfortunately, the rain chose this moment to return, spitting at first, but increasing with every minute. Sod's law, she thought, and then Clifton began to cry, and a wave of rage ran through her, so much that she had to bite her lip to stop from yelling at him. She opened the rear door, and struggled to get Clifton inside. He was grizzling, and her wet hands kept slipping on his buggy straps as he wrestled in the seat. Just then, an old drunk emerged from the pub behind, cursing the weather. Then she could feel his rancid breath on her. 'Excuse me,' the man said, stumbling, 'D'you need a hand here, like?'

Claire turned round, and tried to hide her disgust. The man was dressed in a long mackintosh, stained all over, and faded jeans. He had a straggly beard and hair that hadn't seen a comb in months. His eyes had the glazed

look of an alcoholic, and his smell fouled the air. 'No, I'm fine, thank you,' she stammered, taking a step backward. Clifton's wailing continued, and the rain came down harder than ever.

'How about some money then,' he said, rubbing his nose with a grimy hand. 'For some food, y'know? A man needs to eat.'

'No, I'm sorry,' she said, fear pumping with every heartbeat. 'I can't help you.'

'But surely you must have something?' His eyes turned to Clifton, who was now really crying. 'And who's this little fella eh?' he asked, reaching down. 'He's a smasher, ain't he?'

'Get your fucking hands off him!' Her scream surprised even her, but it had the required effect. Sheer amazement came over the drunk. 'Don't you fucking touch him! I've told you twice, I don't have any money, so take the hint.'

The drunk backed off. 'OK missy, no need to shout.' His hands came up in a surrender pose, and she knew she had the upper hand. By now, people were staring. But she didn't care.

'Just keep away from my son,' she hissed. 'Keep the hell away.'

She was halfway home before she realised her hands were shaking, and had to pull over. She turned to face Clifton, who had stopped crying and dozed. 'Oh Clifton,' she said, wiping her face dry with her sleeve. 'I'll never let anyone hurt you, you know that, right? I may not be the best mother in the world, but I know that much. It's been so hard to love you, but I'm really trying.' Her own tears began to fall, and she crumpled in her seat. Five minutes she remained, as the rain ran in rivulets down the windscreen, joining her tears. It was a great release, and after she felt great relief, knowing that she was on her way back to herself. Clifton seemed to notice it too, for as she drove off, he let out a contented sigh, and was quiet all the way home.

Around this time, Claire decided to come off anti-depressants. It was a decision that she agonised over, but the incident with the drunk had galvanised her into action. She didn't want to have to rely on drugs any more, would rather face the problems head on. The drugs were helping to get through each day, but were not answering any of her questions. She felt she was ready; no longer were the periods of depression so long and so deep. So, she made a vow to take her last pill on Clifton's first birthday, which was fast approaching. Then, she would make a final attempt to seek out a therapist to help understand the causes behind her emotions. After that, if all went well, she could resume married life again, and begin to make up for lost time with her son.

But nothing turned out the way she had planned. During the summer, Matthew had continued his affair with Melanie. They met up for trysts at her flat, sometimes in his office after the day's work was over. It was strange, for they never talked about their personal lives. He knew next to nothing about her, and when they lay in her bed, he would look at her room, the paintings that adorned the walls, the Japanese scrolls hanging from the ceiling, and realise that there was a whole life for her away from him, a history unknown,

and it made him feel sad, and increased his guilt. He could see that Claire was beginning to look more her old self, and Clifton gave him as much joy as ever, but still he would not break his relationship with Melanie. When they were together, they could be who they wanted to be, and it was secure for them both. Occasionally, he would make an attempt to end it, telling her that it was wrong to be doing this, but a smile, a kiss, and he was right back where he started. He was taking a risk with his marriage, but something in him could not stop.

On Clifton's first birthday, both Claire and Matthew faced the day with a task to overcome. Claire woke first to a warm September morning. She spent a few minutes willing herself to get out of bed, for she had been thinking of this day for a long time. Matthew remained asleep, snoring lightly. He had taken the day off work especially for this, and was taking advantage of a lie-in. She stared at him for a moment, watching his chest rise and fall, and smiled. She was going to get through this, make it a day for Clifton. In her head, it was Day One of her new existence. No more drugs. In the bathroom, she showered, and drying her hair after, she flipped open the medicine cabinet and took out the now familiar bottle of pills. She shook two into her hand, filled a tumbler with water. Then, trying not to think too hard, she popped them in her mouth, drank and swallowed. The pills travelled down easily. She gazed at her reflection in the mirror, searching for an immediate change. Of course, none could be seen. Except one; she flushed the remaining tablets down the toilet, watching them spiral to a watery grave, then began to get dressed.

In the bedroom, Matthew blinked and opened his eyes. He could hear the shower running, so had a moment to himself. His mouth was dry and bitter, and a headache was forming. One too many glasses of wine at Melanie's last night. He swung his legs out of bed and stood at the window, admiring the view. The past year had been so different from his expectations. He had always said in the past that affairs were what happened to other couples, usually for similar reasons. Mostly because they had got married too young. A few years of monogamy, and then one or the other would start to feel unsettled, wishing that they had seen and done more before making the ultimate commitment. A chance to relive the youth they supposedly missed out on, a chance in the form of a betrayal, which was what infidelity was, no matter how you danced around it. He had fallen in love with Claire instantly, and knew almost straight away that he wanted to marry her, but he was content to wait, be sure that their bond was unbreakable before popping the question. And up until Clifton was born his ideal had been vindicated, and then some. But Claire's downward turn since the birth had taken him to a place he'd never known before, where he was a bit part player, permanently on the sidelines. He had tried so hard to understand what his wife had been going through, seeing her through many breakdowns, watching as the ECT tore her apart, taking a piece of him with it every session. The ordeal of her depression had made him feel useless, unable to fulfil his role as husband and father. Claire had relied on him so much, and he should have been able to

cope, but he couldn't. He was a failure, and his relationship with Melanie only reinforced his belief. Looking at their affair, Matthew saw that it was only an excuse to wallow in self-pity. Last night, their lovemaking had been shallow and uneasy, for now he couldn't place Melanie in her own compartment of his mind. Claire and Clifton were spilling over into it, and it was messing up his head. Melanie had commented, saying that he wasn't all there, and though he had denied it, it was true. And as he drove home, he thought of Clifton's birthday, and thinking of his son's smiling face, he came to a conclusion. He was going to end it with Melanie, and try his hardest to restore his relationship with Claire and Clifton.

Claire came out of the bathroom, fresh from the shower. Matthew thought she looked beautiful, and wondered how he could have cheated on her. She had so much sensuous vitality, and he supposed that in the last few months that fact hadn't been apparent. And when she smiled at him now, he loved her as much as he ever had. 'What's up with you?' she said, running a brush through her hair.

'Nothing,' he said. 'Just looking at my beautiful wife, that's all.'

Claire put the brush down. 'Well don't look too hard, or I may shatter into little pieces.'

He laughed, and kissed her on the top of the head. 'That's a risk I'm willing to take,' he whispered. 'I'm going to take a shower.' As the water cascaded over him, he was glad to have found the courage to do something right. Now all he had to do was let Melanie down gently, and things would work out fine. He found some aspirin and crunched down two. Had he been more awake, he may have noticed an empty space where a bottle of anti-depressants once stood.

Both sets of grandparents turned up an hour later, bearing gifts for Clifton, who took it all in good nature. Claire and her mother prepared lunch, and they sat down to the first family meal she could remember in a long time. She noticed that Matthew was drinking more than usual, filling his glass more often than anyone else, but he seemed in good spirits and she was glad. They talked of many things, debating the latest current affairs and celebrity gossip, low grade but simple conversation. She hoped that everyone could see that she was feeling better, but there was still a kernel of doubt within. When would the depression hit her again? For she knew it would, especially now, without the security of drugs behind her. Would she be strong enough?

After lunch, the two grandmothers offered to wash up, and Matthew had retired to the living room to chat to his father, so Claire took the opportunity to take some air. As she slid open the back door and walked through into the garden, she ran into her Dad, slyly smoking a cigarette. She cleared her throat, and he looked like a naughty schoolboy, pitching the butt into the flowerbed, his face reddening. 'Claire,' he muttered. 'I didn't hear you come out here.'

'I didn't know you'd started smoking again,' Claire said, standing beside him.

He coughed. 'Garden's looking well for this time of year. Those roses

have really come out, haven't they?'

'Dad,' she said, placing a hand on his arm. 'Don't change the subject.' He had been smoking ever since she could remember, upwards of thirty a day. Rarely in her childhood did she see him without a cigarette in his hand, even in photographs. Eventually her mother had nagged him into quitting, but obviously not hard enough.

'All right,' he conceded, 'I've started again. Not as much as before, just the odd one now and then, you know? No need to worry.'

'But you know I will. You've had one heart scare already, I don't want you to have another one.'

'I get enough of this from your mother,' Dad said, taking her hand from his arm. 'I've had a stressful few months. And if I want the occasional puff, I'll damn well have one.'

Same old Dad. Stubborn to the last. And hidden in his words, as always, was a tiny accusation that this was her fault, that the turmoil of her life had given him an excuse to take up the habit again. 'It's your funeral,' she said, hoping that would be the end of it, but Dad was only getting started.

'Look Claire, I've been smoking on and off since I was 17, and I'm pushing 70. If anything was going to happen to me, it would have done so by now, don't you think?' His voice was beginning to rise. 'Sure, I had to go into hospital that one time, but that was precautionary rather than anything else. And besides, you've got yourself and Clifton to think about, rather than me.'

She hated it when he did this. One minute preaching at her, then taking this self-deprecating stance to get some sympathy. 'OK, fair enough. I don't want to row about it.'

In defiance, Dad had already taken another cigarette out, and fired it up. Instantly, he broke out into a hacking cough, bending over double as the spasms increased. She rushed to his side, but he pushed her away. 'Just cleaning the pipes, that's all,' he said when he had recovered. But she wasn't convinced, and when back inside, drew her mother aside and voiced her concerns. Mum reassured her that everything was fine, that he had been to the doctors just last month, so there couldn't be anything wrong. But Claire knew her Dad. There was something he was hiding, she was sure of it.

Perhaps there was more she could have done, but for the next few days Claire sank a little into herself as she weaned off the anti-depressants. She spent a couple of days venturing little from the bedroom, worrying about Dad, and Matthew's drinking, which was heavy. Clifton had a few sleepless nights, and this pressed down on her. It was different to the ECT days, for now she was concerned for others, and whilst this got her down, at least she felt well enough to be able to cope with other people's problems. She had spoken to Mum on the phone, and in the background she could hear Dad having a coughing fit. When she got him on, he again told her not to worry, and continually talked about Clifton, what a wonderful boy he was. When she replaced the receiver, Claire knew that something had to be done to get Dad to have some tests. Then Clifton would cry, and sometimes the old rage would return. She wished that he wasn't such a difficult baby. At these times

a return to medication was a temptation difficult to resist, but resist she did. Breaking the back of this depression was a goal she was going to accomplish.

Meanwhile Matthew had thrown his energies into his job, spending long hours at the office. His company had recently acquired a host of extra papers to produce, which meant an increase in work. He did his best to avoid places where he might run into Melanie, drinking in different pubs, taking a different route home that didn't pass her flat. She had taken the break-up badly. The phone rang daily, but he couldn't face talking to her, so let the answer phone pick up. Most of the messages followed the same pattern, Melanie asking what she had done wrong, telling him to talk to her, come by the flat. He knew that he owed it to her to explain, so one night he did drop by, fuelled with Dutch courage. He had been insistent that it was over, and eventually she had believed him. But on his way to leave, she had thrown herself against him, and his willpower had snapped. He fucked her on the kitchen table, pounding into her with fury, and afterwards told her it was the last time, that she had to get on with her own life, and leave him to do the same. As he shut the door behind him, he felt disgusted that she had worn him down. But the sex hadn't changed anything. It was nothing more than a goodbye gesture, and it wouldn't happen again.

But Melanie would not take no for an answer. The phone calls continued at all hours. Matthew ignored every one, but knew what they would say: that she couldn't live without him, why would he not come and see her anymore? Again, he dismissed them. He thought more than once about changing his number, but he hoped that she would give up and go away. Paranoia set in. Once, whilst drawing the curtains before bed, he swore that he could see Melanie's car parked down the street. The headlights were off, but he had an inkling. There was something about that car. And when it drove away, he saw. Down one side, the bodywork had been dented. Melanie had told him two weeks earlier that a van had scraped her at a level crossing. He remembered going to see her afterwards, how shaken she had been. A tremor ran through him. Now she knew where he lived. Had she followed him anywhere else? To work, the gym? He would have to talk to her again. This stalking had to stop.

The next night, the house phone rang. Matthew woke with a start, cursing under his breath. If it was Melanie, he would tell her to fuck off, her behaviour was becoming ridiculous. Then he wondered how she had gotten hold of the house number, he was ex-directory. The paranoia returned with a vengeance. 'Hello,' he said, cradling the phone between neck and shoulder. 'If this is who I think it is...'

'Matthew,' a voice said, and all sleep drifted away from him. They sounded so upset. 'Matthew, it's Diane, it's your father-in-law, he's had a heart attack.'

A stone dropped in Matthew's belly. 'Oh my God. Is it serious?'

Diane sobbed. 'I'm at the BRI. He got up to get a glass of water, and all of a sudden there was this big crash. He looked so pale, Matthew. I warned him about those damn cigarettes, I...'

'OK Diane, I'll get Claire up and we'll be on our way. Just hang in there.'

'But Matthew, they're not telling me anything. I'm so scared. Hurry, will you. Please hurry.' When he told Claire the news, her face crumpled, and almost straightaway, her persona took on that resigned look that he had seen countless times before. He told her to get dressed, and went to get Clifton up. It was a struggle, but eventually Matthew was done, and returned to the bedroom with Clifton in his arms. Claire had sat unmoved, her eyes hollow and vacant. 'He's dead,' she was mumbling, 'dead, dead, dead...' So he had to dress her as well, and by the time they were in the car, forty-five minutes had passed.

In the dead of night, the hospital was desolate. After parking, they walked slowly to the main building. Claire was a zombie, shuffling with her head bowed. She could feel the darkness she thought she had beaten seeping around her eyelids, trying to force its way back into her brain. All she had was the smallest beam to beat back the shadows, and if the news of her father was bad, that spark would be extinguished. But somewhere in the recesses of her mind, she already knew that he was dead. It was meant to be; she had spent enough time in the emotional wilderness to have a certain intuition of when tragedy was approaching. Clifton was still sniffing, but his cries didn't even penetrate, merely a far off echo. As she reached the doors, all the memories of the ECT came flooding back, and she froze. Matthew had to coax, then push her across the threshold. He went to get directions, leaving Claire clutching her son by the hand, unable to move an inch. A passing woman stopped and stared, but Claire could not see. The clouds of depression were beginning to return.

When Claire first saw her mother, she could see that the prognosis was grim. Diane's face was ashen. 'Oh Claire,' she sobbed, throwing her arms around her daughter. Claire could feel her mother's body shaking against hers, the tears wetting her jumper, and the darkness took another stride forward. Her legs went dizzy, and she had to lean into Diane to stop from falling over. Matthew sat with Clifton, and she looked at her son, seeing into those chameleon eyes as he gurgled in his pram. And she couldn't look, for somehow she blamed him, blamed him for triggering her depression, blamed him for taking up so much of her time that she failed to notice her father's failing health. But no more than she hated herself for turning out this way.

Just then a doctor came to see them, and all she heard were his first three words: 'I'm very sorry...' Then, a succession of images: Diane crying, shouting at the doctor that there must be some mistake, her husband couldn't be dead. Matthew, head in his hands, trying to force the grief from his face. And Clifton, giggling, as if this was a time of joy. Claire sank low into a chair, reality fading into faint voices and blurred snapshots. The walls were closing in, and she didn't have the strength to resist them again. It was one death too many, and a solitary tear slid down her cheek. Matthew came and sat beside her, his arm around her shoulders, but she could not feel his touch. This one event had tipped the scales back into the realms of black, and she would never recover.

The next few days passed in a haze for both Claire and Matthew, albeit for different reasons. When they got home on that first evening after the tragedy, Claire had remained in her stupor, until she went to bed. With only her own thoughts for company, memories of her father began to overwhelm, and she screamed. Screamed for so long, and despite Matthew's best efforts, she could not be restrained. When he tried to comfort her, she pushed him away with such ferocity that he was frightened. Her cries woke Diane, and when both their efforts to calm Claire failed, they decided to call out the doctor. When he arrived, deep in the middle of the night, Claire had wandered into the garden and was pounding the soil with both fists, howling at the moon like a werewolf. The doctor tried to take her arms, but she flailed, and Matthew could see blood running from her bruised knuckles. He moved forward to help, and she spat at him, hissing. She was a different woman. There had been a transformation. All the hours of depression, the days of desperate loneliness, that had been terrible, but this was something else. Something abnormal. He wiped the drool from his face and tried again, and this time they managed to pin her down long enough to administer a sedative. Claire screamed once, twice more, then her whole body stiffened and she slumped out cold. When Matthew lifted her body, she felt lighter than air, and he wondered how she could have fought off two people. He put her to bed and sat listening to her fractured breathing. Once a semblance of peace descended, he drank a few shots of whisky in quick succession before retiring.

The day of the funeral dawned bright. When Matthew woke, his eyes were bleary and his throat hurt. Yet another hangover. Since Claire's breakdown he had been getting drunk every day. Thankfully Claire was sleeping right now. She had been prescribed sleeping pills to see her through the nights, and whilst they had worked, in waking hours she was little more than a zombie. Before bed was her worst time. As soon as the sun began to fade, she would become agitated. He would try and calm her down, but usually she pushed him back, and then the crying would start. Often the same things repeated: her father, how he haunted her dreams, and something about little red circles controlling her mind. She was starting to sound crazy, and that worried him. But after her dose of pills she would eventually rest, and that gave Matthew a couple of hours of silent drinking time. Occasionally, he thought of Melanie. He knew he shouldn't be doing it, but he was tired, and could not always fight. Weakness is a part of everybody, he thought, but this wasn't a justifiable excuse, and he knew it.

And how they were going to get through today, he had no idea. Diane was still living with them, and he found her nursing a coffee when he went downstairs. She looked like he did, the years piled onto her. He could see the tracks of her tears, but didn't know what to say to give her hope. She offered to get Clifton ready, and he gratefully accepted. He had too many plates in the air; just keeping a handle on his own problems was hard enough. He made a coffee, strong and sugary, and added a slug of whisky to the mix. Just for today. As he drank, the doorbell rang, and the first of the mourners

arrived.

Upstairs, Claire forced herself out of bed. Another bad dream. In this one, she was running through a field, wearing only a nightdress, the grass cool under her feet. Overhead, the sky crackled with thunder, although it did not rain. She seemed to be escaping something, but the field went on and on, and although she heard footsteps in pursuit, nothing ever caught up. Then, the lightning would flash, and a fork of white would break through the clouds, heading for her. She would speed up, trying to escape, but the end result was the same. A brilliant eruption, and her mind would fill with an ethereal glow, burning through her memory, and she would try to scream. But there was no sound, so she would gracefully accept the light, letting it wash over her, taking her down, down, the ground rushing up to meet her. A change, then. The light would turn grey, constricting, and now she was frightened and powerless. The ground ripped apart as she fell, and then she was falling through the earth, and the whiteness was being devoured, leaving only black. Down, down, further and further...

And then she would wake up, drenched in sweat, swathed in bedclothes. The dreams were so vivid, but that was all she could remember; it was like the ECT days all over again. Any memories that did slip through involved Dad, snapshots of her childhood that she had long forgotten. The days at the beach, or riding her bike around the garden, Dad holding the saddle so she wouldn't fall. But these memories would fade and be replaced by the lifeless body laying in a hospital bed, and the cough that she remembered from their telephone conversations. She couldn't bear to replay these events, and retreated to the dark shadows of her mind, away from prying eyes. This was when rational thought started to disappear, and she would lie in bed, oblivious to the world around her. Sometimes, a grainy figure would pass by, but whether this was a figment of her imagination, she had no idea. At some points, she would be shaken back into life to receive her medicine, and as the pills sank into her system, the dreams would return.

Only close family had been invited to the funeral, but to Matthew it felt like the whole world had turned up. The sun shone brightly. They were at a cemetery on the outskirts of the city. Rows of graves stretched into the distance. Claire stood to Matthew's left. She showed no emotion. There was no recognition in her eyes that she was even present. Only an occasional mumble, as if she was holding a private conversation with an unknown being. He looked down at Clifton in his pram, and Matthew felt a pull of grief then. Clifton had done nothing to deserve any of this; his birth should have been the completion of the union between husband and wife, a chance to start afresh. How all of this was going to affect his son, he had no idea. But everything that had come to pass, Claire's descent into depression, his alcoholism and infidelity, had stemmed from that momentous event. Clifton had no way of knowing this, was a helpless bystander as his parents' world caved in around them, but in time he would know that he was the catalyst for all that had taken place.

There were people at the ceremony, people that Claire didn't know. Her

father had obviously been admired. She felt she was an intruder on their grief. There was a brief glimmer of recollection in some faces, but most were strangers. Not that it mattered. By now, she was a stranger to herself. Although she didn't feel alone. The dreams that had haunted her nights were now seeping into her everyday thoughts, so much that she no longer knew what was real. In some respects, it no longer mattered to her. She didn't want to be a member of this world, not if it was like this. All she had wanted when growing up was a house she could call home, and her own family.

The priest concluded his speech, and the sobs became more urgent. Behind Matthew, Diane broke down, and that awful sound set off his own tears. Although he would miss his father-in-law, he was crying for himself, for Claire, for Clifton, for everything. He gathered Clifton into his arms, and threw soil down onto the coffin, hearing it clatter on the dark wood. Then Diane took her turn, and so did a few others, most of them crying too. Claire remained silent, making no gesture. Then the mourners began to drift away, back to their cars and their lives. Far off, Matthew could see two young men standing with shovels, puffing on cigarettes. Knock them down and stack them high, he thought, and felt a sudden urge for a drink. He had to be away from there. But a few family members were coming back to the house, so he had to wait. Diane offered to take Clifton, and so he went looking for Claire, who had wandered off. He found her sat under a tree by the car, rocking back and forth, her arms curled around her knees. He tried to talk to her, but she was unresponsive. Something had to be done, but it could wait until tomorrow. They had to get through today first. After much coaxing, Claire got into the car, and they went home.

Four hours later, Matthew sat in the living room, on his fifth scotch of the evening. The afternoon had passed without incident. Claire went to bed as soon as they got home, taking two sleeping pills voluntarily. Diane had helped to serve drinks and the spread of food they had prepared, and he had done the rounds, talking to strangers like they were old friends, accepting their condolences with perfunctory thanks, and trying not to drink too fast. The last of them had slipped away just after seven, and now he was alone, the house quiet. His glass was empty, and as he got up to refill it, the doorbell rang. He let it go, more interested in his next drink, but the ringing persisted. Whoever it was, he would get rid of them quickly. He was in no mood for visitors.

'Give it a fucking rest.' he murmured, opening the door. He stopped dead in his tracks.

'Hello Matthew,' Melanie said. 'Long time no see.' She smiled, leaning against the doorframe.

Matthew's heart jumped into his throat, but he tried to remain composed. 'Melanie, what do you want? I'm not up for company right now.'

'So I see,' she said, looking at the glass of scotch in his hand. Her eyes moved up his body. 'In your Sunday best, too. At least, it probably was this morning.'

'Look Melanie, did you want something, or are you here to give me

fashion tips?'

She smiled again. It was the look of a snake about to consume its prey. 'You're not returning any of my calls, so I thought I'd come by. I've missed you.'

'Now's not a good time,' he stammered, and tried to shut the door. She moved forward, her body between door and jamb. 'Come on,' she said, 'that's no way to treat an old friend. What's up, scared your wife will hear?'

Claire. In his fury, Matthew had forgotten that his wife and son were sleeping only a few yards away. He had to end this, and now. 'Melanie,' he said, putting both hands tight on her arms, 'you can't be here. I've told you before, it's over between us. Can't you get the hint? That's why I've been ignoring your calls.' His voice raised another notch. If he wasn't careful, the whole house would soon be awake. 'I don't want to see you again.'

He hoped his forceful tone would have the desired effect, but Melanie was persistent. 'Come on,' she said, 'you know you don't mean that. From what I understand, your wife can't give you what I can.' Now she was inside, pushing him up against the radiator, pressing her body close. He could feel the heat coming off her in waves, her green eyes probing. God, she was beautiful. The alcohol had led him close to the edge, and she could easily tip him over. One kiss, and he would be gone.

But not this time. This time, she wasn't going to tempt him. He got hold of her arms again, more firmly this time, and pushed her away. She stumbled, and crashed into the wall. The whole house shook. 'I'm sorry,' Matthew said. 'Sorry that it's happened like this. But you deserve better than me.' He necked the rest of his scotch. 'I'm nothing but a pathetic old drunk. And a married one, at that.' Melanie had slipped past him and into the living room, where she was pouring herself a drink.

'You bastard,' she hissed, and squeezed the glass. It shattered, shards sprinkling onto the carpet. Blood ran from her hand. 'All I was to you was a quick fuck. Your wife goes a bit schizo, you seduce the first bit of skirt that comes along. Convenient, was it? Get a girl to fall in love with you, then run off back home. You gutless coward.' She disintegrated onto the couch.

Matthew was stunned. Throughout their relationship, he had never considered that she might fall in love with him. The boundaries had been clear from the start, or so he had thought. An act of convenience, nothing more. Two lonely people sharing a few nights together. And how had she fallen for him? He was a shadow of his former self. Maybe she was saying it to change his mind, make him feel guilty. Somewhere he had got it wrong, so wrong that it would take all he had left to put things right.

He sat down beside her. 'You need to get to hospital,' he said quietly. 'That's going to need stitches.'

She scooted down the sofa, droplets of blood staining the upholstery. 'I don't need your advice, thanks. You've done more than enough.'

'Matthew?'

He turned, and on the stairs, heavy with sleep, was Claire. He bounded towards her. 'Claire honey, why don't you go back to bed? You...'

'Who's this?' Claire asked, peering over Matthew's shoulder. 'I thought everyone had gone home.' She looked up at Matthew with puzzled, needy eyes.

'They have, darling,' he said, trying to usher her towards the kitchen. Shamefully, he was hoping that she was dazed from the events of the day, and that the sleeping pill would be keeping her drowsy. 'She's the daughter of an old friend of your Dad's. Nobody really.'

Melanie jumped up, seething with rage. 'Hello Claire,' she said, extending her hand. Claire didn't shake it. 'I'm Melanie. You know, Matthew's told me so much about you.' She glanced at him then, and he saw her weighing up the consequences of what she was about to say. He thought there was a hint of sorrow there, but then it was gone. 'I'm the woman your husband's been fucking for the last few months. Pleased to meet you.'

With that, the bottom dropped out of Matthew's world. 'I'm sorry,' Claire said. 'You what?'

'You heard me,' Melanie retorted. 'Last time I saw him, we fucked on my kitchen table. I must say, you taught him well.'

Claire was not hearing this right. Her Dad had died, and here was this stranger saying these horrible things. She was clouded by confusion, but Melanie's face told the truth, and all her remaining strength disappeared. 'My Dad died,' she shouted. 'My Dad died, and now you violate my home like this? Matthew, tell her.' But he said nothing, and she knew for sure. It was the ultimate betrayal, on today of all days, and dark rage ran through her. She sprang forward, clawing at Melanie's face, spitting and writhing. 'My Dad died,' she screamed again, and threw a right square into her nose. Melanie went down, smacking her head on the corner of the sofa, and Claire leapt on her. All the depression and fear was gone, replaced by primal anger, and she let fly with all she had. Melanie cried out for help. Matthew did his best to pull his wife away, but she was relentless. And it was his fault.

Still Claire went on. She felt rough hands pulling at her, but dismissed them. The body underneath her was no longer Melanie's; it was Matthew's, Clifton's, and her father's, all of them for making her this way. She would never forgive any of them. Even when Melanie gave up struggling, she continued. There was no way back from this. She had struggled against her demons from day one. But she had found a way back. It had taken everything, but she had. And now this woman had snatched it away. Something in her mind snapped, and she rolled off, not hearing anything, totally unaware of the cries from beside her. The darkness came, and she embraced it.

Claire never returned home again. After the fight ended, she entered a comatose state. She had no recognition of any external stimuli. Matthew phoned for an ambulance, crying down the phone for help. Fifteen minutes later two paramedics turned up. Melanie had recovered somewhat, and was sitting at the kitchen table holding a blood soaked tissue against her forehead. There were bruises all over her face, and her shirt had been ripped. Her chest was covered in scratches from Claire's fingernails. She was suffering from

shock too, blubbering silently and avoiding Matthew's attempts to patch her up. He knew she would have more than superficial scars to deal with. Inadvertently, he had bruised her a lot more than Claire's attack would, destroying her confidence and belief in love, and those scars would take a lot longer to heal.

When the paramedics entered, the house looked like a bombsite, with glasses smashed, blood on the carpet, and the sofa lying on its back. Claire lay where she had fallen, and when a paramedic came to help her, she showed no sign of recognising his presence. The look of concern on the guy's face told Matthew everything, and when told of the night's events, and Claire's history of depression, he decided that she should be taken to a psychiatric unit for observation. So they had come full circle, but this time very different circumstances had put Claire in this position. Hope left Matthew then, and was replaced by more guilt than he had ever felt. From that moment on, he would have to carry the burden of knowing that it was his affair that had finally pushed his wife over the edge. A huge weight descended onto his shoulders, and had never left.

Claire entered the psychiatric ward that night, her grasp of reality broken. The tragedy of losing her father, plus Melanie's revelations, had crushed her remaining spirit. Having come through the ECT program, battled with her demons after Clifton's birth, and begun her rehabilitation, she was now beyond square one. The struggle had been too much. All the fears that had plagued her during the ECT days returned with a greater vengeance, and she sank under their pressure. Days and nights rolled into a grey void. She descended into her mind, pushing everyday existence away. Back came the dreams, although they took on a different complexion. She no longer dreamt she was falling. Now she was riding on a velvet carpet under a jet-black sky. Hands would reach up to grab at her, but she was always able to avoid their touch. Sometimes an unfamiliar voice would reverberate in her ears. It was a fierce, rasping sound, which she despised but somehow lusted for. The pitch and lustre of the voice would rise until she feared her eardrums would burst. Then it would start to cry, and she could see its owner, nagging somewhere in her memory. A baby perhaps, someone close to her. And she would try and soothe the voice, but the screams would continue, and then come to an abrupt end. She would feel frustrated then, being able to place the voice but not put a name to it. Maybe she was never asleep at all; all she knew was the dark.

As Clifton grew up, this was the memory of his mother that he remembered. The regular visits to the psych ward, although he was too young to comprehend what was going on. She never acknowledged his presence, just sat staring at the walls. Dad would hold her hand, talk to her about day-to-day things. Which wasn't much. The old house had gone, full of unhappy memories. The day they moved, a little bit of Dad was left behind in that old building. He was doing his best to recover his life, had finally gone on his own as a freelance, but money was tight, and the visits to see Mum were getting him down.

But Clifton grew, as nature dictated he would. He started school aged

five, and found that he was not like the other kids. They were full of energy and laughter, and were openly curious about the world around them. When pressed, they talked of happy family weekends at the beach or the zoo. They painted crude pictures with gusto, drew with thick crayons scenes of an idyllic home. Clifton knew none of this, and shied away from it. He was a reserved, withdrawn boy. The other children seemed to be watching him all the time, giving him glances when they thought he wasn't looking. But all the time he saw, and it made him feel a freak. Perhaps that's what he was; no one else had a Mum like his. He didn't understand why he was different, but he accepted it without hesitation. And this sense of isolation stayed with him into primary school, and left him prone to bullying. Often he would return home with bruises and ripped clothing, but he didn't cry. A part of him felt he deserved it. His mother was still in the loony bin, and when the kids at school found out about that, they blamed him, saying that he was such a weirdo, he drove his Mum crazy. He didn't know how to argue back; so let them have their fun, even when it turned to violence.

Throughout all this Matthew was trying to keep a rein on his own problems. The new business was underway, but finding new clients was proving a challenge. He found he couldn't concentrate on tasks for very long. His mind always returned to his wife. Just seeing her made his heart crumple. The ECT days were bad, but this was something else. Every visit she would be sitting in a chair by the window, or sometimes out in the grounds, accompanied by a nurse. And he would sit and tell her about Clifton and how he was growing up, about how good a son he was turning out to be. When she didn't respond, he felt like slapping her, shaking her back into life. He would tell her how sorry he was, and how he missed her. But always the same result; nothing. Sometimes after these visits he would go and get drunk, just to feel something different. One night he was drinking in a bar when Melanie walked in. She looked worn and shaken. He tried to talk to her, but she threw a drink in his face and stormed out. The nights were lonely and fuelled by dreams, and though sometimes he found someone to share his bed (without Clifton's knowledge of course) it offered no comfort. His parents rarely spoke to him. After Melanie's little bombshell got out, they were no more than civil, putting all the blame on him for Claire's downfall. And Clifton caused him concern. He knew his son was shy and quiet. Understandable, given the circumstances of his formative years. But there was more, Matthew knew it. He saw the bruises on Clifton's arms, and disbelieved the poor excuses. Something had to be done, maybe take him out of school altogether. But Matthew feared this would send his son deeper into his shell. He found it hard to bring the subject up, for sometimes, when Claire and work got too much for him, he would look at Clifton and hatred would fill his body. All Claire had been through to raise this boy, and it had destroyed her. He felt ashamed at having these thoughts, and dismissed them the instant they entered his head, but they lurked beneath the surface, and he never knew when they would break through again.

There was one place in the new house that Clifton enjoyed; the shed at the

bottom of the garden. The house itself was a simple two storey, two bedroom home, with a sliver of grass out the back, borders on both sides. It was separated from the adjoining properties by a large wooden fence, which Clifton thought was the tallest thing he'd ever seen, although it was no more than seven feet high. The shed was a rickety structure that was close to falling down. Beyond it was a thick waste of gorse bushes and brambles, and after that the road that led towards the city centre. He loved it in the summer, when the air came alive with the buzzing sound of crickets, the sun a pink ball sinking over the horizon, casting deep red light across the lawn. He could leave all his problems behind, and go in the shed, sit in a deckchair, the smell of dust and the old petrol lawnmower permeating his nostrils.

One day, when Clifton was approaching his eighth birthday, he was in the shed as usual. Summer was coming to an end, and the last few days had been very hot. He hadn't done much with his summer holiday, but he was just glad to be away from the other kids. The air was thick and oppressive, the shed unbearably warm, so he sat outside, up against the door, watching the flies circling the bushes. As he did so, he noticed a crane fly up in the guttering of the roof of the shed. It was flapping its legs a little, doing a crazy dance. It was nearing a cobweb, and Clifton could see that it was about to become trapped. He did nothing, just sat there, entranced. And sure enough, the crane fly became entangled, and with every attempt to break free, was further cocooned in the web.

Without thinking, Clifton ran into the shed. He found what he was looking for way up on a shelf, having to balance precariously on two stacked up chairs to reach. He took two grimy jam jars down, blew the dust off, and returned, hoping the crane fly had not escaped. He was in luck. Carefully, he pinched one of its legs, trying to brush off the cobwebs, and the leg came off in his fingers. This fascinated him, how fragile the insect was. Even with five legs, it was still alive. It's never going to die, he thought, and with more force this time, he grabbed at the fly, peeling the webs back, and shoved it into the jam jar. He put the lid on, and the insect pressed against the glass, seeking release.

Ha, got you now. You're all mine. Clifton grinned. Here was something, only a tiny fly, but it was at his mercy. He was the one in control, not Dad, not the bullying kids at school, him. And the power felt good. He placed the jar on the grass and ran into the kitchen. Upstairs, he could hear Dad moving about, and hoped that he wouldn't come down asking what he was doing. Too many questions. He searched through the drawers, and found a book of matches in the bottom one. Satisfied, he returned to his spot and sat down, peering into the jar at the hapless fly. It was still scrambling around, looking for a way out. Clifton took out a match and struck it. The flame seemed to envelop him, and he felt a guilty pleasure at what he was about to do. Lifting the lid, he pressed the match against the crane fly, and another leg dropped off, a wisp of smoke emanating from its tip. He quickly replaced the lid, watching with avid curiosity as the fly continued to struggle. Four legs are better than two, he thought, and giggled.

Two matches later, the fly was on the verge of death. It limped around the jar, avoiding the body parts lying everywhere. Clifton was in hysterics at this macabre scene. It looked so funny, so helpless. He lit another match. This time, he plunged the flame at the abdomen, and the fly blackened before finally going silent. The match carried on burning until a gust of wind blew it out. He sat back, a huge smile on his face. God, it was such fun! He couldn't wait to do it again.

As time passed, Clifton's little game turned into something bigger. He became obsessed with capturing creatures and killing them in a haze of fire. It mostly happened after he had visited his mother. He dreaded those visits, and would try to make up any excuse not to go. But Dad insisted, saying that it was important for Claire to have regular contact with her son. Not that it mattered. Every visit was the same. She would be found in a waiting room somewhere in a very large building. A nurse would be with her most times. Clifton liked the nurse. She was pretty, and often gave him sweets when he was good. He liked her more than he did his mother. All *she* did was sit there. Sometimes, she would do this weird thing, bringing her knees up to her chest and rocking back and forth, saying stuff he couldn't understand. And she scared him, too. On the odd occasion, a glimmer of recognition seemed to enter her eyes and she would whip her head round and stare right at him, right into him. He couldn't look at her then, and he cried. Dad would try to console him, but all Clifton wanted was to hide. When he was able to face Mum, she would be back in some faraway place, and he would wonder if he imagined it all. But he swore that on her face was a painful grin, as if she was taunting him from behind a curtain.

After such trips, Clifton would head off down to the garden as soon as he got home. There was a rack of jam jars in the shed now, stolen at regular intervals from the kitchen when Dad wasn't looking. Some of them were black and smoky, having been used on the spiders that regularly patrolled the garden borders. Some even housed the charred remains of his latest finds, trophies that gave his heart a lift. His greatest prize was catching a frog that hopped out of the bushes one evening. After five minutes of frantic chase it was trapped in a jar, where it croaked and jumped against the glass. But fire was not good enough for this catch, so after some thought, he came up with an idea. He got a straw from the kitchen, nervous excitement filling his body. The jar he had used was one of a new batch that had slits carved out of the lids, so he could drop matches in without an insect escaping. He settled down, and pushed the straw into the jar. The frog took it immediately into his mouth. Clifton took a deep breath and blew hard down the straw. The effect was immediate. The frog's eyes bulged as the air entered its body, its cheeks swelling up to ridiculous proportions. Clifton took another huge puff, and the frog exploded, a green flux erupting, splattering the inside of the jar with sticky glue. As Clifton got to his feet, his heart was thumping, his hands trembling. What a rush! As the shaking subsided, he opened the jar. Bits of frog were everywhere, one of its eyes staring up at him. He giggled. Clifton Walker, destroyer of the animals. He swung a pretend sword around his

head, striking at imaginary foes. Just you come and get me, he thought. Just you try.

This behaviour completely eluded Matthew. He was finding the visits to his wife increasingly frustrating. It was breaking his heart. The last few years had been so hard, and there was no sign of any breakthrough. Claire remained as she had all those years ago, lost inside herself. He tried to be strong for Clifton, but often, when alone, he would crack open a bottle of scotch and sit in front of the telly, not watching anything, just having some background noise to accompany his thoughts. Often he would cry, usually when drunk. His life was standing still, waiting with forlorn hope for Claire to come out of her stupor and rejoin normality. After all this time, he knew that she would probably never come round, but he grasped at the smallest crumb of hope. Drinking was the only way out. All his problems were affecting his relationship with Clifton, too. The boy was becoming more and more solitary, spending too much time on his own. It was unhealthy; he should be out playing with other kids. But for some reason, his son looked happier. He didn't come home with ripped shirts any more, so it seemed that for now the bullying had ceased, and for that Matthew was grateful.

In fact, on this Matthew was right. Clifton was no longer hurt by the taunts of his classmates. He now had something else to keep his mind occupied. He had gotten hold of a lighter that someone had dumped in the playground, and now spent his lunch breaks hanging around at the bottom of the field, searching for bugs and other nasties. When he managed to catch something, he held it between thumb and forefinger, watching it struggle. Then the lighter would come out, spark into flame, and his prey would extinguish in intense heat. He made sure to stay well away from the other kids, and especially the teachers. If they found out, his secret would be out, and he didn't want anybody to spoil the only thing in life he enjoyed. Some of the older boys still picked on him, but he found that if he ignored them, they eventually moved on to someone else. If they did continue, a well-placed glare usually did the trick. The first time that happened, Clifton realised something he never had before. They picked on him because he was different, but also because they were a little bit afraid of him. You mock what you don't understand. And he reiterated their feelings, accepting that he was different, but so what? So their only word against him was lost. Power, that was what it was all about. You either have it or you don't.

His experiments down at the shed were also growing in stature. Whilst the frog incident remained the greatest, plenty of other creatures had gone up in smoke. And Clifton found he was getting as much out of the fire part of it. When the match took hold, and the blue and gold flame lit the air, he was mesmerised. Such a powerful thing, and so easy to make. So he was moving on from piddly matches. There was a small patch of grass in a clearing behind the shed, away from the dense gorse. It was a secluded spot, far from the house. But Clifton was careful nonetheless. He started off small, burning a few sticks, battling against the gorse with his lance of fire. After finding a petrol canister in the shed, it became a lot more fun. He would douse a few

sticks with petrol, not much, barely wetting them, then fire a match into them. The whoomp sound when they caught alight, he loved its unpredictability, not knowing 100% what was going to happen. When the smoke got too much, he would chuck water on the pyre. The blackened earth was the only sign of his handiwork, but he found an old tarpaulin and covered it up with that. Dad never came down here; as far as he was concerned the place was an overgrown mess, so Clifton was confident he wouldn't find out.

So the years went by. For Claire, the passing time held no meaning. When she looked in the mirror every morning, the face staring back belonged to somebody else. There were streaks of grey in her hair, and her eyes no longer held the air of youth. Now they were windows into the darkness, black and deep. She held ritual conversations with her reflection, talking to this stranger like an old friend. More than once the lack of response led to frustration and she would smash the mirror, watching the fragments fall to the ground. When the nurse came running, asking what the hell she was doing, she had no memory of what she had done. Then she would be sedated again, and that familiar numbness would take over. She still dreamed, increasingly of her father, who was the only person she could still remember with any clarity. When Clifton and Matthew came to visit, she sometimes asked the nurse who these people were, and why they kept on coming to see her. It confused her, seeing them. The man, who apparently was her husband, was not someone she would even consider associating with. His gut was too big for a start. But the boy, the boy unsettled her. When she looked at him, a voice in her head would shriek that he was evil, and was out to kill her. When he called her Mum, she wanted to curl up in a ball until he went away. Despite this, there was something there, something in his voice that she felt she knew. So why did he frighten her so much?

Then, one night, everything changed. Heavily sedated, Claire writhed in bed, stricken with dreams. Her father was calling out to her in a soothing tone. She had heard him before, but never so clearly. The power of his voice shook her from sleep, and she rose and went to the window. The first smudges of dawn were entering the sky. She placed her hands on the windowsill and looked out into this strange world that she no longer belonged to. Suddenly, her heart leapt into her throat. Dad was walking across the lawn, striking a forceful pose that brought back a childhood memory of them striding for shelter in a sudden hailstorm, his jacket blowing in the wind as they sought respite from the weather. He turned and waved at her, beckoning with an outstretched finger. Everything went black. When she came round, Claire was out of the hospital grounds, on a road she didn't recognise. But Dad was with her, keeping her safe from harm, and she felt secure. His voice rang in her brain, and she followed.

She lost herself again. Second time round, she was standing high up, the ground far below. All the strength left her legs, and she flung herself onto the wet road, heart beating like crazy. She squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to ever open them, but Dad told her it was OK, and she counted down from ten, and opened them. She was upright. The sky was lightening all the time. She

took a couple of paces forward. Wind howled. She could hear running water. But she could not see. Then, it came. She had been here before, in happier times. Something special had taken place on this spot, but the memory was buried. Dad urged her to think, but she could not. A cold hand pressed on her neck, pushing it upward; so far that she thought her bones would snap. And now it came back.

Before her, the city of Bristol slumbered. Somewhere far away, a seagull croaked. Claire narrowed her eyes. To her left, a row of houses painted in different pastel shades adorned the hillside. Suddenly the past hit her like a freight train, and she nearly toppled over. Clifton Suspension Bridge. The memory of this place raced into vision, breaking the dark shackles that had enclosed her for so long. A summer evening. A girl, aged twenty-two, out on a date with her long-term boyfriend. Together three years, and the happiest times of her life. Candles, wine, laughter. Ending up on this bridge. The vertigo creeping up on her as they made their way out to the centre, the grip of his hand such a comfort, wanting never to let go of that hand, its soft wrinkles cushioning her skin. When they got there, he turned to her, smiling, and reached into his pocket. Before she knew what was happening, he was down on one knee. 'Will you marry me?' he said, and she dissolved with joy, screaming yes at the top of her voice, the sound echoing around the valley. 'And we will never forget where it happened,' he said after. 'Where you said yes. Clifton Suspension Bridge.'

Clifton, Clifton, Clifton. The name of their first-born. And she remembered, all that had happened since his birth, the suffering, years of torment and anguish, all for him. The emotions overcame her, and she couldn't go on. She had done all she could, and now it was time to make things right forever, to give the boy what he deserved. She grasped the rail and swung her legs up and over. The city had never looked so beautiful to her, the first patches of yellow in the east, little flourishes of light on the water. Clifton. The son she could never love. Tears pricked her eyes. She felt dizzy, but a sense of peace settled somewhere within. She was finally making a choice, one that she should have made a long time ago. And having Dad with her made it easy. She turned to him, and he smiled, his dark hair blowing in the wind. She found herself smiling back.

And as Matthew slept, a half empty bottle of whisky on his bedside cabinet, and Clifton dreamed of fire and shadows, Claire took her hands off the rail, and fell forward. Dad came too, never leaving his daughter's side. As the ground rose up to meet her, she took one last look at the bridge, fading to a tiny speck, and thought of her son.

The next morning, Clifton awoke to find Dad slumped over the kitchen table. It was a Saturday, and usually Dad was in bed nursing a hangover. Probably passed out and couldn't make it upstairs. In fact, Matthew had heard the news in the early hours, and had been unable to leave his chair. Clifton shook his father awake, and the grief on his face told the whole story. 'Clifton', he said, rubbing his eyes. 'Sit down.'

And then he heard the news. How his mother had gone missing from the

hospital, her body found at the bottom of the Clifton gorge. Dead. He expected to feel something more than he did. He had never really known her. The person he went to see every week was a stranger who was Mum only by name. He had never known unconditional love from two functioning parents, so he could not grieve for something he had no experience of. Dad was telling him how sorry he was, how hard it was going to be from now on, but the words bounced off. When the speech was over, Clifton asked if he could go outside, and left without waiting for an answer.

Matthew was in pieces. Deep down he had always believed that it might come to this, but now it had happened, and a part of him had died with her. And suicide. Surely any way out was better than that. Washed up in the gorge, her broken body open to the elements. Before he realised what was happening, he had cracked open a bottle of scotch, even though it was only nine o'clock. He took it through to the living room, pausing to check on Clifton, who was lying on the grass. I should go to him, he thought. Be the father that he deserves. But something was holding him back. Clifton's reaction to his mother's death had shocked Matthew. It was as if he had been told that an old toy was being thrown out. Complete disinterest. This shocked him, but also made him angry. His life partner had gone, the only woman he had ever truly loved, and left him with a son who didn't seem to care. Having the child was meant to have been the fruition of their married life, but Clifton's birth had been the beginning of all of this. A glowing coal of resentment nestled in Matthew's stomach. The drink would wash it all away, and so he sat in his favourite chair, crying softly, and waited for the alcohol to take hold.

For Clifton, things returned to normal quickly. He was back at school within a week, and found that people avoided him more than before. The news of Mum had spread like wildfire, and as none of the kids knew what to say, unable to comprehend what he was supposedly 'going through', they left him alone. Which was fine. Any memories he was able to conjure were unhappy ones, and he tried to think about something else. The teachers gave him leeway; allowing homework to come in later than scheduled, stuff like that. He was still whispered about in corridors, but that was nothing new. The solitude was fine, and he grew to appreciate no-one's company but his own. He avoided Dad as much as possible too, even preferring to study rather than face him. Dad's drinking was fluctuating wildly, so staying away was the safest option. When they did cross paths, Dad was frosty, cold, punishing him for the smallest of things. Clifton couldn't quite understand why he was getting told off. He put it down to grief, which seemed to be the done thing.

The funeral passed soon after. Clifton hadn't wanted to attend, but Dad had forced him. It was nice to see Grandma again, she had always been nice to him, but there was so much fighting going on. The adults thought he wouldn't notice, but hardly anyone spoke to Dad after. The dismissive glances made it obvious. Clifton hated the service, the priest saying things about a woman he never even knew. As the coffin disappeared behind the

curtain, and the tears flowed all around, Clifton noticed a stray moth fluttering in the eaves. He fingered the lighter in his pocket and smiled. He was all on his own now, and it was time to start regaining control.

But as the weeks progressed, Clifton found a hole starting to open up inside. It wasn't that he missed her exactly. More the fantasy of the stable, perfect life that he would never have. All the people he knew seemed to have it; he saw the other children at school being picked up by their mothers, able to go home and recount the day's events, safe in their comfort zone. He had never experienced that, and wondered what it was that set him apart from everyone else. Sometimes he would look at photographs of his Mum and Dad, both radiant with happiness, and it was like a before and after on those daytime makeover programmes. Before, a happy couple, then I was born, and it all goes to hell. Sometimes, when he thought about the future, a wave of depression would sink in. Having to go through life with one parent, and in his case, only half a father at that. That scared him. What would he be like in ten years' time? The way Dad was drinking, his liver would probably blow up or something. It was a strange paradox. He revelled in a life of solitude, but on occasion the loneliness would be almost overpowering.

The escapades with fire were becoming more frequent, and it came to a climax one winter's evening. Clifton had returned home, suffering from a heavy cold. Dad was upstairs in his study. They spoke less and less these days. Dad's proofreading business was up and running, and he was pleased about that, although how he managed to function with all the booze he drank was something Clifton hadn't figured out.

Matthew heard the door slam, deep in work mode. A bottle of beer stood by his desk, two thirds gone. He was desperate for a fresh one, but willed himself to finish proofing the galleys in front of him first. The kitchen drawers opened and closed. Make less fucking noise, he thought, then reprimanded himself. Take it easy on the boy. He sighed, and leant back in his chair. He knew that he was neglecting his son in favour of work. But he had to get back into it, had to do something to keep his mind off Claire. God, he missed her so much. Ten years he had waited for her to come round. Ten years with only a grain of hope to keep him going, and now that was gone. It had all been so different before Clifton was born. When she had said yes that night on the bridge, he couldn't believe it was possible to be so happy. And then she became pregnant, and they had the chance of a family. There was no way of guessing the future, no way at all, but surely it should have turned out better than this. Now he had a son, sure, but he had lost the only woman he had ever loved. And it hurt. He hated to admit it, but seeing Clifton reminded him of everything he had lost. It was becoming an obsession, how much he thought like that. He knew he shouldn't, the boy had been through a lot too, but the mind can be a powerful tool. When Clifton avoided being in the same room, did his homework on time and kept quiet, Matthew wanted to take hold of him and shake him, scream at him. Anything to get some reaction, anything but this deathly silence that pervaded their lives. Drinking only exacerbated these thoughts, and he knew he had to try and stop. But

right now, it was the only thing getting him through the day.

Downstairs, Clifton made a drink and took a couple of aspirin. He couldn't seem to shift his cold, and it was irritating. He slid the back door open and stepped out into the garden, enjoying the crispness in the air. It had rained earlier, and little droplets ran off the leaves when the wind blew. He made his way down to the shed, hearing the insects buzzing in the bushes, and entered the clearing behind the shed. The tarp lay on the ground, a brick in each corner to keep it in place. Clifton took the bricks and put them in the shed, then rolled up the tarp. The earth was still slightly charred, and smelt of petrol. Over the past months he had built up a selection of branches he had found lying around, and now he laid them in a criss-cross pattern over the ground. A silver birch tree stood close by, so he peeled off a few thick strips of bark to use as kindling. If that didn't work, there was always the petrol canister to fall back on.

However, the increasing wind made it difficult to get a fire going. Every time some of the bark caught alight, a gust would blow it out. But the end result was going to make up for the initial effort. Soon, the wind dropped in intensity, and finally the first flames were flickering in the night. He settled down to watch. There was something magical about it, the way the flames shimmered and played tricks with the shadows. The heat too, it wasn't something you messed with. But tonight he was in a restless mood, so out came the petrol can. When he unscrewed the nozzle, the fumes made him giddy, which only added to the fun. Although the risks of playing with such a flammable substance were high, he didn't much care. With his life the way it was, no one would miss him much. He was at home here, and much to his delight, a spider got too close to the heat and died in a puff of smoke. Much like me, he thought. Get too close and you may get your fingers burnt.

Carefully, he picked out a long branch from those left over and poured a little petrol onto it. Some drops got close to the fire, so he stamped them quickly. Then he held the branch at the fire's core, and it leapt into life with a loud thwump. The flames really went high, and as Clifton swirled the branch around, the night lit up. After a while the flames began to die, so he hurled the branch into the gorse bushes, wondering what his next pyrotechnic show could be. He had a good thought then. Firstly, it would mean leaving the fire unguarded for a couple of minutes. Secondly, the outcome would cause a racket, and surely bring Dad out. Which would mean a bollocking. But the thought would not go away, so he decided to risk it.

Luckily, fate was working in his favour. Dad didn't hear him as he crept up to the bathroom, and he found what he was looking for without any hassle. Back outside, the fire was still roaring nicely. And this little trick would be the crescendo. But he hesitated. This was a stupid thing he was about to do, and very dangerous. It could easily cause the fire to rage out of control, and would certainly bring Dad and the neighbours running.

But, stuff it. He was willing to risk it. He pulled a deodorant can from his pocket, and gave it a good shake, hearing it fizz. The can was about half empty, so he expected it would make a small bang, enough to light up the

sky. What a sight it would be! He threw it underhand into the flames, embers sparking up, and quickly retreated to the shed door, waiting. The fire crackled, but nothing happened. No fireworks, no loud bang, nothing. What had gone wrong?

He tiptoed forward, cursing under his breath. It had done fuck all. But he should have known. He took another step, and there was a huge blast as the deodorant can exploded. White-hot shrapnel burst forth, showering him in wave after wave of hot needles. He put his hands up to his face, and his fingers came away drenched in blood. Then he passed out.

Clifton spent weeks in hospital, having suffered third degree burns to his face. Countless operations had done their best to repair his shattered flesh, skin grafts taken from all areas of his body, and what was left was a gruesome, Frankenstein mess. When he eventually returned home, Dad had been even worse with him. And he began to miss his mother, after all this time. Just to have someone there, someone he could talk to when loneliness took hold, that was all he wanted. Looking back on his injury, he knew that back then he was a stupid kid, crying out for attention and not getting it. Perhaps his seclusion had begun then, and that he wanted to harm himself, just to have the focus on him for a change. But it was impossible to blend the lines together. All he could say was that he had simply grown up too quick, and couldn't deal with it.

Now, Clifton turned over in bed, listening for Dad. If the old man was retiring, then another night would be over. He rubbed his eyes, realising they were wet. Not unusual. But thankfully, after much tossing and turning, he finally went to sleep.

In his room, Matthew drank deeply from his glass of scotch, noticing that he had drunk nearly half the bottle. That, plus the beers in the study, added up to more than enough. Four years had gone on this way. The job was going OK, in fact he was busier now than he had ever been. Sure, it was stressful, but the rewards were worth it. But underneath was a darker, melancholic persona. He wrestled with the drink every day, telling himself that tomorrow he would give it up, get his health back on track. But some excuse would always postpone it, and usually it was the sight of Clifton. The boy made him feel sick. His fucking face. He had been so worried after the accident, sitting by Clifton's bedside for hours on end. When he thought about it, the walls of a hospital had ruled his life. He never seemed to be out of the fucking place. After all those operations, he had expected Clifton to look better. But when they talked, Clifton's strange eye flitting about, never able to rest on anything for more than a second, it made him want to smack him in the mouth. The kernel of hatred that had flickered into life after Claire's suicide had grown into something uncontrollable. Everything he had done wrong in life, all he had loved, stood before him in the form of his son. And when he had hit Clifton, there was a momentary relapse from reality, and he felt he was slaying his own demons. For a time after, he was cleansed, until the guilt and self-loathing kicked in. But that was treatable with a bottle.

And getting into uni, that was a surprise. Clifton always spent hours in his room, but Matthew never imagined he'd be doing homework. When he had heard the results, he thought how proud Claire would have been, her only child going places. That was half the trouble. Anything Clifton did would remind him of his wife, how his existence had ended up costing her life. That thought was a constant blow to the heart, and whenever he looked at Clifton, the rage and anger that tore him apart rose to the surface. He knew that something had to give. He had been going on like this for too long, trapped in a sea of turmoil, and he wanted it to end. But how? That was a question to which he had no answer.

CHAPTER THREE

The summer passed Ben by in a flash. Things were progressing towards university, but there was still much to do. He had a job in a local pub, which suited him fine. The hours were reasonable, he got most weekends free, and the staff treated him well. Often, J and some other mates would come in on a quiet evening and prop up the bar, fresh from an afternoon's smoke. He enjoyed having them there, and hoped that even though they were going their separate ways at the end of the summer, it wasn't the end of their friendship. Sometimes Amy dropped in, but she had been busy temping for a law firm, so he didn't see as much of her as he would have liked. When they did spend time together, it was great. They went on days out, to London, to shows, the cinema, art galleries. It was better than it had ever been, when his mind was grounded in the here and now. It was when he thought of the future that it went murky. Whenever he attempted to discuss it with Amy, she would change the subject or offer up evasive answers that meant nothing. Which only served to increase his doubts about their relationship. He loved her as much as always, but no longer knew if that would be enough.

Life with Mum remained the same, too. What with work, he barely saw her, sometimes only for a quick bite before his next shift or date with Amy. She was fussing over him so much it was becoming suffocating. Going on about the state of his finances, can you really afford to be going out so much, what with uni coming up? The same argument, day in, day out. They had come to some agreement. After an awkward conversation with Dad, she had told him that they would be able to pay his tuition fees, but any other costs: rent, living expenses, bills, he would have to pay himself. Which was fair enough, but would require some serious belt-tightening. For now though, he was content to enjoy the rest of the summer, and jump any monetary hurdles when they came along.

And slowly, the pieces started to come together. As the University of the West of England was his first choice, he had been sent an accommodation form early in June. His head swimming with revision and general chaos, he completed and returned the form without giving it too much attention, and life went on. Then, at the end of the month, he received a letter telling him that that he had been allocated accommodation in a house with three other students. So there it was. An image filled his head of a gloomy, stuffy house with a shoebox room and a kitchen stacked with dirty dishes. It was then it really began to sink in. Mum was the same. She smiled after reading the letter. 'Your new home, huh?' she said, and her bottom lip quivered. She smiled again, more broadly this time, but Ben saw it. The pain behind her eyes. He said nothing, just gave her a hug. It was all he could do.

In the letter was a contract to sign and a request for £100 advance rent. Cue another heated discussion about money. He hated to do it, but in the end Ben phoned Dad and asked him for a loan. Worse, Dad accepted straight

away, offering to pay more if it would help. Ben hated being in debt to his father, but could do little but accept. He needed that money.

The house that Ben had been offered was a four bedroom terraced in the Horfield area of Bristol. The university were the landlords of the property, which suited him fine. Rather than some unknown cowboy charging excessive prices for things he couldn't afford. He got a map and studied the area around the house. It looked busy, near to the city centre and only a short ride from the university. A knot of excitement formed in his stomach. The coming months were going to be different from anything that had gone before; new surroundings, a new house and all the independence that went with it, and best of all, new people to meet. He knew how Amy felt now, when she said that she couldn't wait to get there, but didn't want to leave everything behind to be forgotten. He had told her that there was no reason to forget. They had shared the most important rites of passage with each other. This was another one of those times, and it would enrich their relationship, not wreck it.

On a spare weekend, Ben and Mum travelled down to Bristol to check out the new place. She had insisted on coming with him. When they had argued about it, she had said, 'I only want to see that the house is good enough for my baby.' Treating him like a kid. It was embarrassing, but he knew she was only looking out for him. Amy had offered to come as well, but he told her that Mum would only be ranting on about how the bathroom wasn't clean, and that they must ask the landlord to check the wiring in the kitchen, etcetera, etcetera. Amy laughed and nodded. That was one thing he really loved about her. She didn't ask loads of questions. He valued his family time, and Amy was a part of that, but sometimes it was best to do it on your own.

They found the house without any trouble, situated on Gloucester Road, a main thoroughfare that led out of the city centre and snaked up a winding hill towards the campus. As he got out of the car, Ben took in the sights around him. The volume of traffic was immense, cars parked on both sides of the road, leaving motorists with little room to get up and down. Across the road, lights flashed in an Irish pub with green and white decor and a Guinness sign in the window. The rest of the shops were mainly fast food outlets, banks and specialist clothes stores. He stood there for a few seconds drinking it in, smelling grease and petrol in his nostrils, watching as a cyclist struggled up the hill, nearly running into a parked car. Mayhem, he thought. Mayhem, and I love it.

Mum was up by the front door when he found her, snooping around. There were still remnants from the previous tenants, a dustbin was full to overflowing with rubbish. Mainly beer cans. 'I do hope this isn't a sign of what's to come,' Mum said, eyeing the detritus. Then she spied the garden and was off, scuttling round the corner. He followed, and was surprised by the size of the lawn, a big patch of neatly mowed grass bordered by a less impressive jungle of weeds. A barbecue stood on a small patio area by the back door. Perfect for the summer, out here, a few beers, perhaps a joint or

two, enjoying the sun...

'Come on then,' Mum said. 'Let's see what the rest of the house has in store.' She seemed as excited as he was. He fished the keys from his pocket. Inside, they were greeted by a dusty smell. The ground floor had four rooms that he could see. In the back, leading to the garden, was a small, basic kitchen, with the usual cooker, fridge/freezer, sinks. Behind, the bathroom, with a walk in shower and terracotta tiling. The other two rooms must be bedrooms, and he pushed open a heavy fire door, having to prop it open with a chair. Inside, not much. A single bed under the window. Bookshelves on one wall. A wardrobe shoved in the corner. A desk with stains of ash and marker pen. He walked to the window, unscrewed the clasp, and shoved it open. Immediately he was hit by the noise of the traffic, the occasional shout of a passer-by, the honk of a horn. It wasn't much, barely bigger than his bedroom at home. But he felt comfortable. A few paintings up, maybe a lick of paint to liven up the eggshell coloured walls, and it would be fine.

The second floor followed the pattern of the first, two bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen, and the third floor was taken up by the living room. The sloping ceilings were at first claustrophobic, but a skylight threw afternoon sun across the room, making it bright and airy. There was a large cherry wood table in one corner. A blue and white chequered sofa sat up against one wall, and the other housed an ornamental fireplace. Mum raved about that, saying it was close to being antique. Whatever made her happy. But it all sat well with him. This was a place he could spend some time in, watching telly, maybe even studying when it was quiet. And great for parties as well, set up a sound system, it'd be awesome. He just hoped that his other housemates would be OK. He was pretty easy going, and generally didn't have much trouble getting on with people. Three others of a similar mentality, and all would be well.

So the wheels continued to turn. After the day of his results, Ben was back at work. For the next week he saw little of anyone. A daily routine consisted of getting up around ten, in at work by eleven to help open up, shift over at three, home for a bite and to organise uni stuff, then back to the pub from seven until closing. He didn't mind the lifestyle, but for his final days at home, it could have been more exciting, signing off with a flourish.

One such afternoon, Ben finished his shift and sat out in the garden, soaking up a few rays. No sooner had he sat down, the doorbell rang.

'J,' he said. 'You all right?'

J shook off his hood, ran his hand across his forehead. 'Yo,' he said. 'What you up to?'

'Nothing that can't wait,' Ben said, opening the door further.

So they sat in the sun for a bit, and Ben could tell from J's constant fidgeting that something was on his mind. So he asked him upfront.

'Well,' J said, swatting a fly that was hovering close to his nose, 'I've been manning the phones the last couple of days, trying to find somewhere that'll take me.'

'And?'

'Yeah, so I got a couple of offers. It seems not that many people are taking Geology this year, so there are a few gaps to be filled. Given my crap return from the exams though, they're not *that* keen, know what I'm saying?'

'Get on with it,' Ben said, irritated. J had a habit of building up to a grand finish. Once he had the stage, there was no stopping him.

'So, anyway, I got a couple of offers. Which is all fine and dandy, and I've been on a little road trip, checking out some places.' He smiled. 'I tell you what, if you ever get the opportunity to go out in Luton, say you've got a headache or something. Jesus, the place is a fucking shithole! The uni was all right, a few fit birds around, but to spend three years in that wastepit? Don't think so. It's been a bit like that everywhere. Some places I liked better than others, but none gave me that extra buzz, you know what I mean?'

Ben lit a cigarette. Was this ramble going to get *anywhere*?

'And then yesterday, checking on the internet, I found somewhere else with a Geology course, so I phoned them up, flirted with the bird on the other end, and it looks like that's gonna be my first choice.' He sat forward, holding the moment. 'Put it this way, you won't be getting rid of me anytime soon. UWE is where it's at.'

Ben burst out laughing, and some of his trepidation left immediately. Having J with him, the two of them together in a strange city, that was fucking awesome. He reached across and patted J on the shoulder. 'I couldn't think of anyone I'd rather have with me.'

J nodded. 'I thought you'd probably say that,' he said, and they sat there grinning at each other until it was time for work.

Amy's situation at Nottingham had progressed too. Ben was locking up the pub one night, and as he left for home he saw her waiting in the car park. She would often turn up unannounced to see him. It would probably piss most guys off, thinking that they were being checked up on or something, but he loved it. His heart still skipped a beat every time he saw her.

'Hey,' she said, coming forward to kiss him. 'How was work?'

'It was all right,' he replied. 'Some drunk caused some hassle though. He came in about ten, half cut, and ended up shouting abuse and smashing glasses. I got Tony to throw him out.'

Amy smiled. 'Sounds like some other drunk person I know.' But her widening smile told him she was kidding around.

They drove back to his. Ben was hoping Mum wasn't up, for they needed some time to chat. Thankfully, Mum was in bed. Judging by the overflowing ashtray in the living room, she was worried about something.

He made tea and they lay together on the floor, holding hands, while she told everything about her trip to Nottingham. Most of it bounced off, but the general gist was that she was moving into halls for the first year. The building was four floors high, and segregated so that the blokes had the top two floors and the girls the bottom two. 'It's going to be so exciting,' Amy exclaimed, squeezing his hand tighter. 'You should see my room though, it's tiny! You can hardly get me in there, let alone all the stuff I've got to take.'

'I know what you mean. My room in Bristol's the same.'

'Yeah, I suppose most of them are.' She rolled up onto an elbow. 'It must be weird for you, not having met any of your housemates. I met a couple of girls on my floor, my neighbours if you want to call it that. They seem nice. One of them has a cousin who lives round here, but I've forgotten his name now. Funny, isn't it? How much of a small world it is.'

She was rambling, as she always did. He found it endearing, but now closed his eyes and thought. Two floors of guys above her. Guys wanting to impress the new ladies. He could imagine them, like kids in a fucking sweet shop. And because Amy was shy, she'd put up with their flirting rather than tell them where to go. Which could give the impression that she was interested, and who knows where that would lead? And where would he be? Hundreds of miles away, stuck in a strange house with God knows whom. Probably a load of computer geeks or brilliant academics. All he knew about his housemates was that there was one other bloke, and two girls. He was going into it completely blind. Suddenly what was upon him gained in weight, pressing down. Amy seemed to be taking it all in her stride, now telling him about all the decent pubs and clubs she had seen. The excitement there was something he hadn't seen in her for a long time.

'You're really looking forward to it then?' he said, cutting her off in mid sentence.

She reddened. 'Sorry Ben, I've been going on again, haven't I? But yeah, now it's here, I can't wait. I know, after the results, I was dreading the whole thing, especially being away from you. And I will miss you terribly. But this is a part of life we'd be fools to miss out on, isn't it? You can come up and stay, see all the sights of Nottingham, and I can always get on a bus and visit you. I mean, the distance is only an issue if we make it an issue, don't you think?'

Sure. You say that now. Give it six months. She was talking with so much confidence, assured that everything was going to turn out fine. He knew he should be sharing her delight, seeing it as a window of opportunity waiting to be explored, but he couldn't. Not now. So all he did was nod. 'Absolutely. And by the way, I think I already know what the best sight in Nottingham is gonna be. Cos I'm talking to it.'

And that was enough. He leant down and kissed her, and everything went away for the next half hour. The birds crowed outside the window as they made love, tenderly at first, then giving way to a passion that had been there ever since the first time. He knew every inch of her body, every scar and dimple and freckle, and still she was the best looking girl he had ever seen. She pushed him onto his back, straddling him so hard the carpet burned against his skin. He felt dizzy, the life being sucked out of him and into her. She came in great gasps, hair swinging, the St Christopher chain jiggling wildly. Seconds later, he joined her. Later, she lay on top of him, every part of their bodies touching.

'Well,' she said. 'You're not so bad yourself, you know?'

And before he knew it, the final day was upon him. On waking, Ben felt as he had on results day. Nervous, a little apprehensive, knowing that from

here on, life was going to be very different. At breakfast Mum was fretting about, fidgeting and fussing. She had taken a half-day from work and was preparing a meal in 'his honour'. Sounds like the Last Supper, he thought. And with Dad and Andrea in attendance, it was probably going to be uncomfortable. But Amy would be there, and that was all that really mattered.

But first, his final shift at the pub. He was working eleven until three, which wasn't too bad. The lunchtime rush would shorten the time enough. Around one, he took a cigarette break and collected the empties. As he stubbed his cigarette out, there was movement at the bar. Tony had gone to change a barrel, so he was serving on his own.

'Hey man,' J said, finding a vacant stool. 'Pint of your finest.'

Ben grinned and did the honours. 'There you go mate,' he said, froth spilling onto his fingers as he put the glass down. 'And just cos it's my last shift, doesn't mean you get a freebie. Two sixty.'

J huffed, but chucked some coins onto the bar. 'You drive a hard bargain,' he said, necking three great swallows of beer. 'Ahh, that's good. Fuckin' A.'

'So, how are you? It's been a few days.'

'Yeah, I know. Been trying to sort out where I'm living in Bristol. I had a manic day down there on Wednesday, went down to scope some places out. Man, it's a rat race! We went into this little building, and the Accommodation Services give you a list with a load of landlords on it, their numbers, guide you to the phones, and you get on with it.'

'Yeah?' An old guy caught Ben's eye, seeking service. When he came back, J was saying, 'Anyway, I felt like I was a fucking charity worker or something. "Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Age Concern, give me all your money before I keel over and die." So I get going, and about the first ten calls, it's like, "No, I've got no rooms available, sorry." By about four, I'm thinking what kind of cardboard box should I be going for, y'know? But as luck would have it, a bird on the phone next to me turns and says, "Hey, this bloke's got a place free, but I need four other people. You up for it?" Just like that, I mean, I don't know the girl from a bar of soap, and she asks me that! Weird. So we roped in another girl and a couple of blokes, headed on convoy to this agency, got the keys, had a look round. It's not paradise, but at this stage, we don't really have much choice. So we head back, and two hours later, we're scooting up the motorway, contracts signed.'

'Really? That's great. So, what are these housemates like then?'

'Dunno, seem all right. One of the birds is well hot, I'm telling you. Out of ten, I'd definitely give her one.'

Ben laughed. 'When do you move in?'

J shifted in his seat. 'Well, that's the bad bit. I'm leaving in like, an hour. Got my stuff packed up and ready to go.'

So that was that. Already, it was starting. J said, 'But I couldn't leave without saying goodbye, so here I am.'

'Thanks man, I appreciate it. Bristol won't know what's hit it.'

'Too bloody right. It's all moved really fast. So yeah, I know we said

we'd have a beer later, but we'll have to do it in our new home, won't we?'

'That we will. No worries, got this family do later anyway, so you know I'll be tied up for most of the night.'

J smiled. 'Spare me the gory details, please.' He drained the last of his pint, pulled his hood up, and stood. 'So, next time I'll see you, it'll be in Bristol.'

'I guess so,' Ben said. 'See you soon then. What's your address, I might pop round tomorrow after I settle in.'

J narrowed his brow. 'You know what? I've no fucking idea. I'll text it to you later, if I remember. Take it easy.'

'You too,' Ben said, but J was already out the door. Seeing his friend walk away, a little emptiness swept into his heart. Pointless, but there it was.

The rest of the shift passed without incident. As three o'clock approached, Ben cleared the tables, loaded the dishwasher with the empties, feeling like it was going to be the last time he ever did it. But the pub would survive without him, so in that, everything would remain the same. At three, Tony came over and they shook hands, Tony promising there would always be a job there for him if he wanted it, and he left, murmurs of 'good luck' ringing in his ears. Good luck. There was an air of finality about it, all the best now, might never see you again, take care and all that. Just words, acceptable words that were good to hear, but words nonetheless.

Mum was running about like a headless chicken when he got home, organising the meal, getting everything perfect. Dad and Andrea had rarely come over as a couple, for despite Dad's failings, he knew that such a situation would be awkward. But he had put aside those worries just for Ben, for his night. All this trouble for me, and I don't deserve it. He left Mum to it, went up to his room, where bags and boxes were strewn about. He spied his ashtray amongst the clutter, lit a cigarette and climbed onto the windowsill. Many nights he had sat up here, smoking and thinking. The view was not much; the houses opposite, a set of garages down the street, and beyond, a playground and the local primary school. Symbols of a lifetime ago. He had gone to that school, it was where he first met J, and had his first crush, aged 10. He had kissed a girl on the swings under cover of darkness, wondering whether he was doing it right. He could almost smell the taste of her, Juicy Fruit chewing gum with a hint of toothpaste. Could only remember the girl's first name, Anna. Where was she now? Off to uni herself, in a steady job, steady boyfriend, maybe married with a kid? It was possible. When you stopped to reflect, time moved by so quickly, one blink and the years had passed. It was relentless. And where would *he* be in three years time? Celebrating his degree, or a bummed out failure? Either way, it was an uncertain future. He had no idea about what he wanted to do after uni. The thought of forty years of nine-to-five, day in day out, Christ, it was disheartening. But what to do instead? With English, pretty much anything. A degree would open many doors, but wouldn't narrow the options.

First, dinner. Amy would be round at half five, Dad and Andrea a bit later. Mum was expecting him to look smart, so he dug out a clean shirt and

his only decent pair of trousers, left them on the bed for later. Smoked another cigarette. Looked at a few old school photos, naming names and trying to work out where they might be now. J had been the only real friend he had managed to hang on to throughout school. He had had other friends, but their paths had only crossed for a brief moment, walking down the same track for a few months before splintering off. He wondered if it was always going to be like that. J and me, us against the world. If it was, that wasn't so bad. He could think of a lot worse guys to have around.

Amy was first to arrive. Ben was in the kitchen, enjoying the smells of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, when the doorbell rang. 'Hey,' she said, stepping into his arms for a kiss. 'How's my favourite guy on his last night of freedom?'

'Fine,' Ben said, taking her jacket and hanging it up, thinking, please don't say it like that, it's depressing. 'You look great.' Which wasn't a lie, she always did. He had an urge to rip her clothes off there and then, but put it down to simple horniness. With something so great, you wanted it as much as possible.

Amy had already gone through to the kitchen, commenting on how nice the smell was, and how thankful she was to be invited. Mum fussed around, ordering Ben to pour wine for them all, and when he caught Amy's eye, he pulled a face, making her dissolve in a fit of giggles. His love for her was at its highest then, seeing how she could feel so at ease around his Mum, be herself. God, leaving was going to be tough. They took their drinks through to the living room, and fooled around a little until Dad arrived. Amy protested at first, saying it was inappropriate, what with his Mum in the next room, but Ben pulled out the charm and it did the trick. But he forgot that Dad still had his own set of keys, and he caught them in a clinch on a sofa.

'Hey Ben,' Dad said, as if this was a natural sight for him. 'Enjoying yourself there, are you?'

Amy went crimson, but Ben shrugged it off. He had a carefree attitude going. 'Dad,' he said, giving him a hug. Andrea stood behind, looking uncomfortable. 'Andrea,' he said amicably, and gave her a peck on the cheek. 'How are you both?'

'Very well,' Dad said. 'I see your mother's cooking up a storm. I'd better go and see if she needs a hand.'

Which left the three of them, and there was a period of silence, until Ben asked Andrea about her feng shui, which broke the ice. As they talked, Ben could see what Dad saw in her. She was articulate, interesting, and level-headed. And Dad seemed happy with her, and who was he to stand in the way of that?

Dinner went surprisingly well. Ben thought Mum was going to be withdrawn, unable to say much in Andrea's direction, but once the wine and conversation flowed, it settled down into a great evening. Amy was her usual dazzling self, and Ben thought that yeah, everything was going to be OK. It was nearly midnight when Dad left, and Ben and Amy retired almost immediately to finish what they had started earlier. As she slept, he came

downstairs to fetch some water, and found Mum crying softly into a glass of wine.

'Mum,' he said, going to her. 'What is it?'

'Oh Ben,' she said, wiping her eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

'What's up?'

'Nothing. I'm just being silly. My emotions are running riot. Must be a menopause thing.'

He knew she was lying, so pushed it further. He didn't want to leave on bad terms. 'Come on, it must be something. Here I was thinking what a good night we've had, but there's something up.'

She took a large gulp of wine, lit a cigarette. 'I know,' she said in a shaky voice, 'it has been a good night. That's half the problem.' Seeing his puzzled face, she said, 'Oh, it's him. That father of yours.' She took a deep breath. 'I still love him, Ben. Seeing him tonight, happy with that girlfriend of his, it was like being knifed in the heart. Sure, I got through it fine, and I do really like Andrea...but I can't stand it, seeing them together. I mean, here's me, pushing fifty, my only child growing up so fast, and I haven't moved on. Your father, he's getting on with his life, but me, I'm treading water, and it's lonely out here.'

So there it was, finally out in the open. 'You'll find someone else,' he said, flinching at the lack of conviction in his voice. 'And even if you don't, you've always got me.'

'But I haven't, have I? Tomorrow you'll be the other side of the country, and I'll be stuck in this big old house, with all its memories. I know I'm being unfair, but I don't want you to go. I'm going to miss you so much.'

'I'm going to miss you too. But I'll always be around. A phone call away. You can come and visit. This is a new chapter in my life, but it doesn't mean I'm leaving you behind, does it?'

'I guess not,' Mum said, and returned to her drink. 'You go to bed, get some sleep. We've got a lot to do tomorrow.'

He stayed for a moment, not sure what to say, but she was back in her own shell, so he gave up and went to bed. He tossed and turned for a couple of hours, caught between excitement at what tomorrow would bring, but thick with guilt at what he was leaving behind. Sleep was a long time coming.

He managed two or three hours sleep in the end. From Mum's dishevelled look, it didn't seem she had had much either. It was a world away from the jollities of the previous evening. No one said much. Once or twice he caught Mum's eye, and a look passed between them, but she didn't say anything, and neither did he. Knowing Mum, she would pretend their conversation had never happened. Sweep it under the carpet. There wasn't a lot he could do anyway. She had known as long as he had that this day was coming. And seeing Dad with Andrea, that must be fucking hard to take. The loneliness was sapping her strength. Maybe she should broaden her horizons, join a club or something, meet new people. He reminded himself to mention it to her, drop it into conversation at an appropriate moment.

But today he had to concentrate on him, and firstly, on Amy. Her head

was bowed, staring into her teacup. He had to drop her home to get her stuff and say goodbye to her parents, and then come back for the final farewell. He gave her hand a quick squeeze, and she smiled, a watery smile, just to appease him. He thought she might cry then, but she returned to stirring her tea, making patterns with the spoon.

Mum was standing by the window smoking. He noticed her fingernails were ragged and uneven. 'I want to be on the road by midday,' she whispered, dragging on her cigarette. 'Even though it's Sunday, there's no point in taking chances with the traffic. I trust you're all packed?'

Ben murmured a reply.

'Good.' She extinguished her cigarette. 'I've got to pop out for a bit, but I'll be back by eleven thirty. So you'll have to say all your goodbyes by then.' She picked up her handbag and keys from the table. 'Goodbye Amy,' she said, leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. 'Thanks for coming, it was a pleasure. Good luck with everything, I hope university works out well for you.'

'Thanks, Mrs Carter,' Amy mumbled. Ben hoped their goodbyes would be less awkward than this one.

'And I'll see you soon love,' she said to Ben, and was gone, slamming the door behind.

'And I'd better go too,' Amy said, shooting out of her chair like a rabbit out of the traps. 'I'll be back about eleven, can I just get my stuff from upstairs?'

'Sure', he said to her back as she raced up to his room. She was back in a couple of minutes, clothes bag in one hand, mobile and keys in the other. 'I'll see you soon,' she said, gave him a quick kiss, and left. A little bewildered, Ben lit a cigarette and wondered why women were so difficult to understand.

'You should put bells on them,' he muttered, then remembered what he still had to do, and got his ass in gear.

'Hello Ben,' Andrea said, pulling her dressing gown tighter around her body. 'Bit early for you, isn't it?'

'Tell me about it,' he replied, smiling. 'Only milkmen should be up at this hour.'

'Milkmen and prospective students,' she said, returning his smile. 'Come on in.' Ben wiped his feet on the mat. 'Mike?' Andrea shouted. Her dressing gown opened slightly, exposing the top curves of her breasts. Ben stared at his feet, embarrassed. 'Ben's here! Honestly, that man is murder in the mornings! Come through, I'll put the kettle on.'

Within a couple of minutes Dad wandered in pressing a tissue against his neck. 'Shaving cut,' he explained, giving Andrea a kiss. It still made Ben uncomfortable, seeing Dad in open displays of affection. Growing up, he barely remembered him kissing Mum like that. Maybe that was part of the problem.

'Right, I'll leave you gentlemen to it,' Andrea said. 'Can't go slobbering around like this all day, can I? Be sure to say goodbye before you leave, won't

you?'

'You bet,' Ben said.

'Thanks for last night,' Dad said. 'I had a really good time, and so did Andrea. It was good to do some real family stuff again.'

Not quite family, Ben thought. He liked Andrea, but would never consider her as family. 'Don't thank me,' he said, 'it was all Mum's idea. She spent hours in the kitchen, getting it all together. You know what she's like.'

'I do. Or at least I did.'

Yeah, you did. Until you walked out on her, walked out on us both. Ben was surprised at the animosity there. It hadn't been there last night. Or had it? Maybe it was always there, sometimes buried deep, other times closer to the surface. Some of this must have slipped onto his face, because Dad said, 'I know what you're thinking. That I'm the one who left her, so why should I know what she's like now? Fact is, I'll always care about her, and in a way I still love her. You don't just forget all that the moment it ends. And in the same way, I haven't forgotten about you. I know that I wasn't the most reliable of fathers, and that I let you down too many times. Once is too many. But I tried, like I did in our marriage, and in the end, something had to change. So I left, and here we are.'

'Yes. Here we are.'

'And you can't be doing that badly, off gallivanting to uni. We're very proud of you.'

'Thanks.' He appreciated what Dad was saying. Maybe it was time to extend the olive branch. 'I guess I wasn't as forgiving as I could have been. And you seem a lot happier, so I can hardly argue with that, can I? Just don't forget about Mum, will you? After I leave, she's not going to have many people around.'

'Don't you worry about that, I'll pop round and see her from time to time. She doesn't seem very pleased to see me these days.'

'She is,' Ben said, a little too forcefully. 'Trust me, she is. Things just get on top of her, that's all.'

'Fair enough. So, you looking forward to meeting these housemates of yours then?'

And that was it, deep and meaningful over. They chatted for a bit until Ben saw the time, and made to leave. He said goodbye to Andrea, and then had an uncomfortable hug with Dad, full of hollow promises. They had never shown physical intimacy before, so why start now?

In the car, Ben sat for a while thinking, knowing he was running late but unable to get moving. Now for the hardest part of all. He closed his eyes, seeing Amy's smile, the soft touch of her fingers on his skin. It was going to be tough without her. He started the car, turned the radio on, and found a tune he liked. Driving home, he sang along, and the music took it away for the duration of the journey.

He had been home no more than five minutes when the doorbell rang. He went and drew his bedroom curtains open, and sure enough, Amy's car stood in the drive. One deep breath, two. This moment had been a long time

coming, and now it was here, his stomach was churning, fingers cool with sweat.

'Hey babe,' he said on opening the door.

'Hey,' Amy replied.

They stood for a second, trying to put their feelings into words. Ben noticed the car was jam packed with boxes, stuff even taking up room on the front seat. 'Got a lot of stuff then,' he said, nodding at the car. 'You've got enough there to sink the Titanic.'

Amy fidgeted, stared at the floor. 'Well, you know us girls, always prepared for any emergency. Listen, Ben...'

He cut in before she could finish. 'Hey, do you want to go for a quick drive somewhere? Just for ten minutes? Mum's not going to be back for another half hour, so I've got time.'

She hesitated, but eventually nodded. 'Sure. That'd be nice.'

So they got in the car, and Amy drove up to a sheltered patch of woodland near her house. They had spent a lot of time here, taking her dog for a walk by the river, not doing much, just enjoying being together. Sometimes they took a blanket and some booze and made out in a secluded spot. The risk of getting caught made it all the more fun, and brought them closer. Now the sun was bright overhead, casting dappled sunlight through the trees. They ended up sitting on a fence overlooking the river, the water silent, the sun on their backs.

'I've not got long,' Amy said when they were comfortable. 'Mum and Dad are waiting for me at home. They're following behind with the rest of my stuff. Mum's already getting teary, and I'm not even there yet. I know how she feels.'

Ben had to laugh. 'The *rest* of your stuff? That car of yours is fit to burst already!'

'What can I say?' Her eyes dropped to the floor. Ben had rehearsed this moment over in his head, working out what he was going to say, trying to second guess her responses. Now they were here, everything he had planned went out the window. He was lost for words.

So he did what he could; lifted her chin, kissed her, tender and deep, leaning into her, until she broke away and placed her head into his shoulder. He thought she was going to cry then, but everything quietened down until all he could hear was their breathing and a far off bark of a dog.

'Do you know, you have the boniest shoulder I know,' Amy said, pulling back and rubbing her cheek. 'How I've put up with it for so long, I've no idea.'

'Because you love me?'

Her face clouded briefly. 'Yup, that's right,' she murmured. 'Because I love you, Ben, even your shoulder.'

'And me for you,' he replied. 'Always.'

She smiled, took his hand. 'I think this is going to be great for us, you know? Experiencing a new life, away from here. I mean, we've lived here all our lives, so it feels good to be moving on. And by that I don't mean moving on from us. Before I met you I went from one rubbish relationship to

another, and boy, did that suck. And then you waltzed right in there and changed it all. And I won't ever forget that, no matter how far apart we are.'

'I know. I'm really going to miss you, though.'

'So you're going to have to come and see me as much as you can, aren't you? I'd hate for you to meet a bunch of terrific looking girls and forget little old me.'

'That's not going to happen,' he said firmly. 'I couldn't, even if I tried.'

She jumped off the fence, landing neatly. 'That's settled, then. You've got me, I've got you, and nothing has to change.'

He joined her on the path. 'No, I guess not.'

Walking back to the car, Ben thought that a lot had gone unsaid. He had meant every word, but wasn't sure he had articulated what he was feeling. Right then, a chasm had opened up in his body, and he was falling, not knowing whether the landing was going to be soft or hard. It made him feel sick.

At the car, she turned to face him once more. 'Right Dr Carter, I need 100 of lidocaine and 10 milligrams of sux,' she said, quoting *ER*, a programme they both loved. 'Just to keep my heart going.'

He smiled, and gave her all he had. When it was over, her cheeks were flushed. 'Boy,' she said, giggling. 'Emergency diverted. Although you'll have to come and resuscitate me soon, yeah?'

'Of course. You try and stop me.'

She kissed him again, a quick kiss that reeked of goodbye. 'Right then,' she said. 'I'm going to go now, otherwise I'll cry and ruin my makeup. Which is not a pretty sight.' She opened the car door. 'You know, this is a good place for goodbye, don't you think. You know the first time we came here, and the dog jumped in the river, got stuck in the reeds, and you went in to get it?'

'Sure,' he said, smiling at the memory. 'The water was fucking freezing.'

'We'd only been going out a couple of months, and when you rescued him, that was when I thought, hell, I'm totally in love with this guy. Plus, you looked all cute and Darcy-like striding out of the water, your hair all wet. That might have been it.'

'Maybe,' he said. 'For you, anything. True then, and true now.'

She gave him a cracking smile. 'Have a good trip,' she said. 'And call me when you get there, won't you? Just to let me know you arrived in one piece.'

'You can count on it.'

'I'll be seeing you, Ben.' She got in, waved, then made a mess of reversing out of the car park. Pulling away, she cracked the window and shouted, 'Goddamn car! Always sticks in reverse! I love you.'

'Likewise,' he shouted back, but she was already on her way, honking the horn, a puff of smoke emanating from the exhaust. He stood for a minute, listening to the trees, waiting for the lump in his throat to subside. A feather floated down then, and he reached out and let it flutter into his palm. The feather was smooth, perfect. He brushed it against his cheek, feeling the softness on his skin. Then he looked at his watch, realised Mum would be

waiting, and set off for home.

Traffic was sparse on the motorway, so Ben got to Bristol quicker than expected. The journey was punctuated with long periods of silence. He spent most of it gazing out of the window as Mum smoked furiously beside him. Motorways began to blur together. M25 into the M3, then the M4. Once they hit the outside lane, they remained at a steady eighty for miles of countryside, fields stretching out to the horizon, the occasional landmark. Clouds were beginning to form as they passed Stonehenge, its great slabs eerie on the landscape. Ben's head was full of Amy, nothing else, and he still couldn't believe he was finally underway. It seemed close to a dream, in a strange limbo, between homes, one hand clutching all that he knew, the other reaching out to grasp what was to come.

They finally hit the M32 around three, and the vast expanses of land gave way to pockets of housing, then a steady blur of rooftops and orange brick. He had seen it once before, the huge IKEA superstore on his right, roads leading in every direction. But now it felt different, more a part of him than an unfamiliar sight. The town centre was clogged with traffic, Mum cursing under her breath as they inched forward. It gave Ben a chance to drink it all in again, trying to recognise points of interest. There was the sharp blast of a horn as Mum missed her turning, a scrape of brakes as she changed lanes at an inopportune moment. Now into Stokes Croft, a more salubrious part of town. Drunks sat on a grass verge on the roadside, swigging from bottles of cider and talking in loud voices. He could see Mum shaking her head, no doubt wondering how her son would survive in such a neighbourhood. Soon they were through, closing in on the house, the sun beating through the clouds now, making the air thick and suffocating. He wanted to be out of the car, feel the breeze on his face. He peeled his back from the leather, bathed in sweat. And I've still got to unpack, he thought. Already sweating like a pig. Great.

Mum found a parking space up on a hill behind the house, and they lugged the first couple of boxes down, which were heavy and sent needles of pain shooting up Ben's arms. He struggled with the keys at the door, managing to curl one arm around the box whilst turning the key in the lock. The door swung open.

'Hello?' he shouted. 'Anyone home?' No reply. He got his bedroom door open and chucked the box on the bed, arms now numb and light. Mum followed, placing her box on the desk.

'I take it no-one's here yet?' she said, wiping her fingers on her jumper. 'Not all as organised as you. Now why doesn't that surprise me?'

On inspection, someone had been and gone. Outside a room upstairs were a guitar and boxes full of CDs and DVDs. 'Nope, no-one here,' he said when back downstairs. 'Now, let's get the rest of the stuff in, before it rains.'

Half an hour later the bedroom was littered with junk. There was no room to move.

'Right,' Mum said, 'I'd better be off. Want to get home before it's dark. You know how I hate driving at night.'

Ben nodded. 'OK. Thanks a lot for helping me out. I couldn't have got all this here without you.'

'You're welcome,' she said, drawing him into a hug. 'Now you look after yourself, won't you? I don't want you to become a stranger.'

'Course Mum, course. I'll phone regularly, Scout's honour.'

She frowned. 'Oh Ben, sometimes I wonder about you, I really do.' They were at the door now, Ben leaning against the doorframe, casual.

'You sure you don't want me to walk you to the car?' he said. 'No trouble.'

'That's all right. You've got enough on your plate with all that unpacking to do. Should keep you quiet for the rest of the day.'

'Yeah.' He came off the step, gave her a quick kiss. 'Take care of yourself, and don't worry. I'll be fine.'

'It's not you I'm worried about,' she said. 'But I'll get by, I always do.'

She strode down the steps, the gate clanging behind her. On the street, she turned and waved, then wiped her eyes. Ben stood there for a few minutes, smoking a cigarette. I'm on my own now, he thought. He pitched the butt onto the ground, stamped out the sparks, then went to attack his unpacking.

For the next hour, Ben was in his own little world. Where to start, that was the problem. The walls, as well as being a lifeless colour, were stained with remnants of Blu-Tac, which had left behind a sticky residue. He searched around in the box of kitchen utensils on the bed and found a knife with a serrated blade and a dishcloth. After dampening the cloth in warm water, he set to work on the walls. It was a tiresome job. Before starting he hooked up his stereo and speakers, and sang along whilst slaving away. As the first CD reached its conclusion, he drove a picture hook into the wall with a hammer (surprised that he had had the foresight to bring one) and up went his favourite painting, Whistler's *The Falling Rocket*. He stood and admired the colours that seemed to shimmer and dance in the fading light. The CD ended, and as he was searching for a replacement, the front door opened.

'Hello? Anyone home?' Exactly what I said, Ben thought. His nerve endings trembled slightly. The first of my housemates, and a girl at that. He didn't want to rush out and look too keen though, so he returned to scrolling through his CDs.

'Shit,' the girl cursed, 'It's gonna go.'

Sensing something was going to happen, Ben opened the door just as she came round the corner, face obscured by a huge box. It was clear she was struggling, so he prepared to take the weight. As he opened his arms, the box slipped from her grasp, but he was ready, and caught it inches before it hit the ground. It weighed a fucking ton. He stayed crouched to gain some balance, feeling the weight on his forearms and shoulders, but already with this absurd notion that he didn't want to drop the box in front of a girl. 'I got it,' he stammered, and slowly raised himself up to full height.

'Wow, thanks,' the girl said, wiping her hands on her jeans. 'Aren't you Mr Strongman?'

She smiled, and the box nearly went again. Fuck, she was gorgeous.

Long brown hair snaking down her back. Bronze skin, clearly many hours in the sun, artificial or otherwise. She was wearing a tight fitting pink top, 'Pop' emblazoned across the front, dark blue jeans and sandals. But it was the eyes, a deep green colour, big and wide. Eyes you could drown in. Whilst he regained his composure, she unlocked her door, propped it open with a chair, and turned back to him. 'I'll take it from here if you want,' she offered.

'No, it's all right,' Ben said. 'Just here?' He placed the box carefully on the bed.

She looked at him, and a slight smile lifted the corners of her mouth. 'Very kind of you,' she said, hand outstretched. 'I'm Natasha.'

'Ben,' he replied, taking her hand. Her fingers were light and smooth. 'Phew, that box was heavy.'

'I know.' She nodded. 'There's at least another five like it in the car.'

'Do you want me to give you a hand? I'm kinda used to it, after lugging all my stuff up here.'

'It's fine, thanks. Between us, we've got it covered. So,' she said, hooking a thumb over her shoulder, 'you're my new neighbour, is that right?'

'Yup,' Ben said, moving to the door. 'This is my humble abode.'

Natasha joined him, scoping out the room. Ben was a touch embarrassed by how messy it was, but let it slide. 'Pretty much like mine, I guess. Nice painting.'

'Thanks.'

'So, we're officially roomies,' she said, and laughed. 'And have you met the others yet? Another boy and a girl, isn't it?'

'Far as I know. I saw some stuff upstairs, but...'

Another loud crash as the front door slammed against the wall. 'Uh oh, here comes trouble,' Natasha said, smiling. A man came through, buried beneath four bags, which he carried two on each arm, plus two boxes in his hands. 'Through here, babe,' she said, placing a hand on his back to guide. 'Anywhere will do.'

Babe. Obviously the boyfriend, who dumped the stuff unceremoniously on the floor. He arched his back. 'God. My arms are officially dead.'

'My poor baby,' Natasha said, and kissed him. When they broke apart, she did the introductions. 'Ben, this is Tyler, my boyfriend. Tyler, Ben. He's got the room next door.'

'Nice to meet you,' Tyler said in a deep voice, shaking hands. It nearly broke every finger in Ben's body. But he could see why he had got the girl. Model like features, swept back blonde hair, fashionable goatee, rippling muscles. Every girl's wet dream. 'Can we get some grub now?' he asked Natasha. 'My stomach thinks my throat's been cut.'

'Always thinking of your gut,' Natasha said, rolling her eyes at Ben. 'But, after your sterling work, I think you deserve it. What about you Ben, do you want to join us? Check out a local eat-e-rie?'

Two's company, he thought, and shook his head. 'No, you're all right. I've got a few phone calls to make. But thanks anyway.'

She nodded. 'Fair enough. We'll catch up later on though, yeah?'

'Definitely. Have fun.'

'You too. Good luck with the unpacking.'

'Bye,' Tyler said, looking happy to be out of there. 'See you later.'

'Bye,' Ben replied, unable to avoid watching Natasha's legs as she flounced out of the door. Tyler turned at the last and caught him staring. Ben's face coloured, and he went back to his room.

By late evening, everything was taking shape. His shirts and trousers were hanging in the wardrobe, the rest in the small chest of drawers beside that. The bookcase was filled, and he had a couple of posters up to go with the painting. One, a picture of Humphrey Bogart, here's lookin' at you kid, the second an American landscape.

He had made a few calls. First to Dad, the usual shit, letting him know he had got there in one piece. He left Mum until later, and she had just walked in the door when he called her. No, the traffic was fine. No, he hadn't eaten yet, but was about to. Yes, he would call her soon, and yes, he promised. Amy was saved until last, and he didn't get much time with her. There was lots of noise in the background, and laughter, and she said it was a madhouse up there. She sounded excited and happy, so he left her to it. Already he missed her, and there were pangs of homesickness in there as well.

He had also met the other housemates. Derek was the guy with the guitar, who had come down from Birmingham and talked in that annoying accent. The other girl was Catherine, never Cat or Cath, who turned up with her parents and had since stayed in her room. Natasha and Tyler had returned about an hour ago, and went straight into her room and stayed there. Every so often he heard a giggle, then silence for a while, broken only by the hushed tones of conversation. He opened the window and sat on the sill, smoking and watching the world go by. Amy was with him, he couldn't stop thinking about her, and it had only been this morning that they had parted. A matter of hours, but it felt like years. Derek's mournful guitar wailed from upstairs, increasing Ben's melancholy. In the end he undressed, brushed his teeth, and at the early hour of eleven, turned out the light, inhaling the fragrance of the fresh sheets covering him. The darkness was unfamiliar, menacing, and it was past midnight before sleep finally overtook him.

CHAPTER FOUR

For September, it was gloriously hot. So much so, that as Clifton walked to the bus stop, sweat was pouring off him within minutes. Even at eight in the morning. The fucking bus. His car was in the garage having its MOT done, so he had to join the throng and brave public transport. He pulled a pair of sunglasses from his pocket and put them on. Under the tinted lenses, he felt a little safer. But he still had nerves, this being the first week of seminars and lectures. Nervous at meeting new people, although he knew what their reaction would be when they saw him; Like studying bacteria under a microscope. Looking at him with morbid fascination, wanting to ask about his face but too embarrassed to do so. He had seen it all before.

Don't worry love, Mum spoke in his head. I'll always be with you.

Clifton muttered a word of thanks. Since the accident and Dad's alcoholic decline, Mum had begun attacking his consciousness. At first it came in dreams, creating a picture of her that he had never seen during her life. One where she brought him up as her special son, giving him all the love and attention that he had longed for. She would take him to the park, buy him ice cream, sit and stroke his hair when he fell down and grazed his knee. After a while, images turned to words. Her voice was smooth as glass, a velvet patter in his ear. Guiding him forward with her soothing tone. Despite his horrific injuries, Clifton was still fascinated by fire. Dad had pulled the remnants of the shed down before he left hospital, but a replacement had come along easy enough. Often, in times of isolation, he took a walk down Ashley Hill, stopping at a particular spot to admire the view. Below was a row of allotments. First time, he found a path through and scrambled down the hill. Most of the plots were in use, but one was in disrepair. It had a small patch of grass, beds of soil for planting veg, and best of all, a shed. When he stepped inside, all the old familiar smells were present. He found he had no fear of the place, despite his accident. This is your home, Mum had said. For she understood him, his pain, what he had been through. She told him how alone she felt, how she loved him more now than she could when she was alive, all she wanted was for him to be happy.

And when she spoke, he relaxed. Was more confident. When down at the allotment, he could be himself, have the conversations with her that he had always wanted to. And she came up with the answers that he needed to hear. He had begun experimenting with small fires again too. At first he was reluctant, scared that another ghastly accident would befall him. The first time, she had told him that it was natural to be afraid.

When I see the flames curl into the sky, and the happiness spreads across your face, it fills my heart with joy.

But what about before?

What is done is done. Whatever makes you happy can only be a good

thing. Maybe the best of things.

But I'm scared. When that deodorant can blew up, I thought I was going to die. I had the power, and then it was lost.

That power will be yours. Once you face this fear, everything else will fall into place. Nobody will laugh at you. They will see the strength that lies within, and they will respect you.

'Respect,' he whispered. 'Respect.'

And before he knew what was happening, a small ring of sticks lay at his feet. A packet of matches stood beside them. Mum clouded his vision, making the world glaze and fade and stretch, and when he came to, the ground was alight. He stood on the edge of the flame, terrified, smoke and heat engulfing his face. 'Respect,' he said again, and stepped into the fire, sending sparks in all directions. At first he was afraid. The heat pressed against his body, attacking his shoes. But there was no pain. Nothing at all. He kicked out, showering the lawn in hot embers. A surge of energy enveloped his body. The power. He stamped out the coals, trainers beginning to smoke, his throat burning. Now I'm in control, and nothing will take it away again.

'Nothing.'

He waited for Mum to reply, but she had fallen silent.

Clifton arrived at the bus stop a few minutes early, sat and opened his record bag. So many sheets of paper. Be here at this time, registration at this time, on and on. He plucked out two sheets; one showing his timetable for the day, the second a map of the campus. He studied the map, trying to make sense of the maze of rooms that were spread over two floors and countless buildings of the university. First seminar, Modernity in 20th Century Fiction. He hadn't had the lecture yet, so was expecting the seminar to be an introduction to the course, nothing too heavy for the first day. A chance to meet his fellow students. But he had been through worse. He had control now. The only person who could get to him was Dad. That fucker knew what buttons to press. But he was getting stronger by the day. He thought of his last fire, a blaze that was unlike anything he had ever experienced. He had found a few dead insects to burn, just to top it off. The depths of the food chain. If you're beneath me, watch out, he muttered. You could be next.

The bus was running late, so Clifton indulged in another of his favourite pastimes - girl watching. And they were everywhere. One walked past him now, her compact ass swaying beneath her skirt, long hair flowing down her back. She stopped at a set of traffic lights, sucking on a lollipop, forming an 'O' with her lips.

Jesus Christ, he thought. They dress like this all the time. Teasing me, showing off their legs and tits. There should be a law against it. Then the old feelings of sadness washed over him. Something I'll never experience. His appearance didn't exactly hold well with girls. To him they were an alien species that he lusted after but could never touch. He had only kissed two girls in his entire life. One had been pre-accident. A girl had moved in down the street, and they used to play together. He didn't understand the feelings

he had towards her, Sarah, her name was. One afternoon they were sitting in a treehouse they had built, only ten feet off the ground but to them, so high. The sun was turning red, and he found himself looking at her face, following the smooth curves from her hairline, sweeping down to her little nose and cute mouth. She had caught him looking, and said, 'You know, you *can* kiss me if you want to.' So he shut his eyes and did it. Neither had any idea what they were doing. After, Sarah got embarrassed and ran inside, saying her dinner was ready. Two months later, she moved to Scotland, and he never saw her again. He was eleven years old.

The second girl had been drunk. After, when he went in for a second kiss, she laughed and told him that she had only done it for a bet, her mates had drawn straws to see who would be unlucky enough to get the freak. Her breath had tasted of Coke and vodka. Then she left, running back to her giggling friends, apparently five quid richer.

That was the sum of his sexual experience. Get close to one, and then they run away. As was the lollipop girl, swinging that ass as she went. Clifton adjusted his sunglasses as the bus pulled into view, checked his belongings, still searching for a final glimpse of that fine body. But she had gone.

Ben was running late, and as he stepped out the door, the sunlight intensified his mild hangover. Ever since he had arrived in Bristol, the freshers' week parties and student nights had been never-ending. J had a fair bit to do with it. He had taken to student life a little too well. If J wasn't out on the piss somewhere, he was smoking endless joints with his housemates, clouding their living room in a thick fog. Once, Ben had joined them and staggered home two hours later, stopping for KFC to fuel his aching hunger and thirst. Other nights, they went out, once on a cheap bender up at the campus bars, another a pub-crawl down the Gloucester Road, a drink in every establishment along the 'Golden Mile.' And it was golden, judging by the state of his vomit at the end of the evening.

All good times though, that was for sure. And he was settling down into house life too. Natasha had been out with him and J once, but she spent most of her time pining for Tyler, always texting or phoning him, talking in that weepy voice that Ben recognised as a sign of coupledness. She went home to London most weekends, or Tyler would be down, and they seemed to spend an awful lot of time in bed. And enjoying it, judging by the sounds she made. Derek was cool, but he was out jamming with his mates a lot, or stuck in his room writing songs. Catherine kept herself to herself, and was tidy to the point of obsession. Which was probably a good thing, helping to keep him in order.

Despite his hectic social life, Ben had managed to attend all his opening lectures, to his surprise actually finding some of them interesting, which was a start. Already with tons of reading, most of it stuffed into his bulging rucksack. He planned to have his last seminar, then hit the library and try to make some notes on next week's reading. Plus, he had work that evening.

More bar work, this time in The Goose, a pub around the corner. The extra money would prove invaluable, and he knew the ropes within days. But first, a day of graft to get through. He walked to the bus stop, wishing for an aspirin to dull his headache.

Clifton arrived at the campus in plenty of time. And on first impressions, he liked what he saw. The St Matthias building had, according to a wall plaque on the entrance gates, originally been a school for girls, built in the late 19th century. That traditional feel still remained. There was a large patch of lawn outside, and Clifton imagined looking up at the sky and seeing crows circling the roof, arcing in and out of the eaves. It had that Gothic feel to it. There were other, newer buildings too; Two lecture halls that weren't much bigger than Portakabins, and of course the obligatory bar. He avoided those places where he could. Drunkenness equalled loss of control, and life was tough enough without adding alcohol to the mix.

He found his seminar room without too much problem. He removed his sunglasses and fingered his scar. A few of his fellow students had arrived, and they nodded at him, most looking away when they saw his face. Fuck you, he thought. But he hadn't expected anything different. These people might think they were somehow special, better than everyone else because they were getting a higher education. But it was all an illusion. Most were probably spending Daddy's hard earned money on drinking and screwing around. Real clever. And yet they looked at him like a piece of shit under their shoe. Bigots, the lot of them.

The classroom door opened and a trail of students filed out, followed by a lecturer carrying a hefty briefcase. Clifton went in and took a seat at the back, as far away from anyone else as possible. He checked the girls for a minute, but they were nothing special, so he daydreamed of Mum, and taking a torch to this room, watching it burn with a glint in his eye.

I'm late, Ben thought. And I hate being late. The bus had reached the campus just as the seminar was about to begin, and he still had to find the room. He broke into a jog, noting the whistle in his breath, how unfit he was from booze and cigarettes. He threw open a door, and by chance, spied a map. Room F23. Up two flights of stairs, to the right, last door on the left. He took the stairs two at a time, knowing he was going to be the last one in, feeling embarrassed already.

And he was. He knocked once, opened the door, and all eyes were on him. 'Nice of you to join us,' the lecturer said, a tall, spindly man wearing horn-rimmed glasses. Mr Symonds, written on the white board behind him. 'Please, take a seat, if you can find one.'

'Sorry I'm late,' Ben mumbled. There was one seat left, right in the back, and he flopped into it, slouching low in the chair. Now you can all stop looking at me.

The seminar followed the pattern of most of his previous ones. For about twenty minutes or so, the lecturer went through the course outline. It looked

good. Some of the reading Ben was familiar with, other parts not. Judging by the amount of books on the list, his spare time was going to be taken up with an awful lot of reading. The lecturer went on to say what he expected in the seminars, how they would proceed, all that jazz. Ben switched off for a bit, having heard it all before. Amy entered his head. He hadn't heard from her for over a week. An occasional text, but whenever he tried to ring her, her phone was either switched off or went straight to the answering machine. There was a communal phone in her halls, but she hadn't given him the number. He wanted to hear her voice, tell her how much he missed her. It would be great to see her too, and he had free weekends coming up. I'll try again tonight, he thought, then changed his mind. He didn't want to act too pushy, like he was checking up on her. Which in a way was true, but he didn't want to give her that impression.

Then, the lecturer rubbed his hands and said, 'OK, you've heard enough of me rambling on, now I want to hear about you.'

Cue collective groans and mumbling.

'What I want you to do,' he continued, ignoring the protests, 'is to introduce the person sitting next to you to the rest of the class. It'll give you the opportunity to make a new friend, and we'll all get to know each other that bit better. I'll give you ten minutes.'

Terrific. More juvenile games. Ben turned to the guy next to him. 'Hi, I'm Ben,' he said.

The guy turned to him, and Ben had to swallow hard. His fucking face. It looked like melted cheese. 'I'm Clifton,' he replied, grinning a smile that made his cheek and eyebrow lurch upward. Ben wondered what the hell this kid would be into. Maybe the circus. He'd fit right in.

For most of the allotted time Ben talked about his interests. Mundane stuff, like his favourite football team and where he came from. All he got from Clifton was a bland monologue about growing up in Bristol. Very boring, and from the guy's nervous demeanour, it appeared Clifton had had little social interaction at all.

But they got through it, Clifton making him sound like the dullest guy on the planet. On his turn, he mentioned about Clifton being a local boy, but no-one was really listening. Most were checking out that superhuman scar.

'Excellent,' Mr Symonds said afterwards, looking like he had really enjoyed their speeches. 'Now, as you can see from the seminar programme, we have ten books to study over the course of the year. And there are twenty of you in this class. So, in the pairs I've just given you, I'd like you to choose a novel and prepare a presentation to the rest of the class. Actually no, I'll choose who studies what. It'll save on arguments.'

Even fucking better. Now they would have to study together. This day was turning out to be a bad one. They were given their text, and two months to prepare the presentation. Mr Symonds dismissed the class, telling them their reading for next week. Ben was second last to leave, and dying for a cigarette.

Clifton hated Ben from the start. Not just the way he looked at him, but his general air of arrogance. But he caught up with him as they left, Ben lighting a cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs. 'Hey,' Clifton said, 'about this presentation...'

'You what? Oh, that. Give us a week get myself sorted, then we'll get on it, all right? Sorry, I've gotta run, or I'll miss my bus.' He chucked the cigarette down, ground it under his shoe, and stalked off.

Don't sound too enthusiastic. Clifton thought. You couldn't get away from me fast enough, you fucking cunt. He inspected the remnants of the cigarette, a globe of ash still smoking. He imagined driving a cigarette into Ben's face. Watch the flesh melt, see the pain in his eyes. The thought made him smile.

When Ben got home that night, only Derek was up as he flopped onto the sofa. What a night it had been. His old bar job had been a walk in the park compared to this one. The highlight of the evening was watching a drunk getting kicked out by the bouncers after chucking a drink in a girl's face. Good entertainment, and the asshole had deserved all he got.

'Phew,' he said, 'I am fucking knackered.' He lit a cigarette. 'Anything happening?'

Derek looked at him as if it was the hardest question on Earth, then shook his head. 'Nothing at all.' He picked up his guitar, which lay by his chair. 'Oh, Natasha's got herself a job.'

'Yeah? Doing what?'

'Oh, I dunno. Working in the union shop or something. Very big deal. You mind if I play this?'

'Knock yourself out.' Ben was content to sit and chill for a bit. He looked at his watch, realising it was too late to try and phone Amy. Fuck it, he thought. I'll do it tomorrow. Or maybe she'll ring me. But he wasn't holding out much hope. He closed his eyes, listening as Derek strummed out a tune he recognised but couldn't place. When it finished, he said, 'That was really good. How long you been learning?'

'About four years. Man, the first time I learnt a song I liked, and got it played right, tell you what, it was better than sex. I can write my own tunes too,' and he played a melody, left hand running up and down the neck of the guitar. It was awful. 'Y'see,' Derek said, noticing Ben's grimace. 'I ain't all that, I admit it. I can feel the song in my head, but it never seems to come out right, you know what I mean?'

'Kind of.'

'I can't sing too good either. The high notes are just that, too high. But what I've got, it isn't too bad. Keeps me happy, and that's the main thing.'

So he went back to playing, and Ben sat and listened. Three songs in came a tune he recognised. As Derek began, he counted the beats, and when the note changed, started to sing. Softly at first, feeling his way into the song, but as his confidence grew, he leant back, closed his eyes, and went for it. And it was just him and the music, keeping everything else out. Derek rose

to a crescendo, Ben's voice staying with it, and it kept that way until the finish.

When Ben opened his eyes, Derek was staring at him. He turned round, and Catherine was standing in the doorway, smiling.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' Derek said. 'That was really fucking good. And I *mean* good. Where did you learn to sing like that?'

'Leave it out,' Ben stuttered, reddening. 'I was just larking about.'

'Don't give me that shit, you were great. Wasn't he, Catherine?'

Catherine nodded, looking cosy in her pyjamas. 'Definitely. I got up to go to the bathroom, heard something, so I came up to investigate. It was terrific.'

'Beginner's luck,' Ben replied.

'OK,' Derek said, 'let's test that theory. What bands are you into?' Ben told him, and they went through some songs until Derek settled on a tune he could play. 'Right, Catherine, you can be our audience. I'll attempt some backing vocals, and Ben, just do what you did before.'

Catherine perched on the edge of the table. 'OK, go for it. I'm all ears.'

Ben was nervous, but thought fuck it, why not? Humour the guy, if nothing else.

So Derek started up again, and Ben sang, especially enjoying the bits where they sang together. It felt good, like he was a part of something he didn't know he had.

'Fuck me,' Derek exclaimed after. 'You will be perfect for my band. All we need is a decent drummer, but there must be some of those around. I'll put a notice up at uni.'

Ben raised his hands. 'Hold up, what do you mean, band? I can't be in a band.'

'Why the fuck not? If you've got talent like that, it'd be criminal to waste it. Don't be such a pussy.'

'Despite Derek's bad language,' Catherine said, 'I agree. Why not give it a try?'

'There you go. If a girl says it, it must be true. And anyway, think of all those birds you can pull, they'll be putty in your hands when you sing like that.'

'I've got a girlfriend already.'

'Whatever, man. Give it some thought, yeah?'

'Sure,' Ben said.

The next day, Clifton had to go to Frenchay campus, the main wing of the university, for a seminar. Also, the cupboards were a little bare at home. Plenty of alcohol in the place, but not much food. No change there.

Don't be too hard on him, Mum said. He's doing the best he can.

Yeah, sure. And I'm a fucking Dutchman. How can you defend him? He doesn't know I exist. Hardly great father material.

I know. But he's in pain, and he doesn't know how to deal with it. He doesn't know any other way. Her voice lowered until it was almost inaudible.

He misses me. It's in his face, the shame, the desperation. Drinking is all he knows, and it's enough to blot it all out.

And me? Where do I fit in all this? I'm still his fucking son.

Loneliness can make you strong, Clifton. There are thousands of people out there who have no-one to help them, no-one who cares. But you are different to them. You are strong. There's nothing wrong with being on your own. Your Dad will come round, in time. He's trying, I can tell. And if he continues the way he is, you will end up the stronger. You will be in control.

There it was again. Control. Sometimes, when Mum was with him, he could feel the strength coursing through his veins. Like he could do anything. Stand up to Dad, show him that he couldn't push him around any more. But sometimes, without warning, this strength would dissipate, when he was at his lowest ebb. Or a bout of crippling loneliness would strike, and he would retreat to his room and hibernate until it passed. He was fluctuating wildly between these two spheres. But he knew how to negotiate the final hurdle. It was like Mum said. Loneliness can make you strong. No one had ever been there for him, no one he could call a friend. He would always be alone. Once he learnt to accept his fate, the strength would increase and he would never be at the mercy of others.

After a quick visit to the library, he entered the union shop, pulled a basket from the stack, and dug out his shopping list. The air-conditioning was a godsend after the humidity of the library. The heat, plus the number of scantily clad girls about had cut his studies short. Hard to concentrate with all that distraction.

He filled the basket, only being able to get half of what he wanted. He perused the magazines, poring over the latest actresses in their lack of clothing, then finished his shopping and approached the checkouts. There were only three tills available, and he took the quietest, a sign above it reading 'One Basket Only'. There was a tall guy wearing a reversed baseball cap in front of him, hair weaving out from underneath. Clifton perched his basket on the edge of the counter as the guy accepted his change, getting bored. Finally the bloke took his bags, grunting under the weight, and left.

'Hi,' a voice said, taking his basket, and Clifton was staring at beauty. The best-looking girl he had ever seen. If he had a fantasy of an ideal woman, this was it, right here. His mouth filled with sand. The girl was already scanning his stuff through, so he took a bag and proceeded to fill it, ticking off boxes as he went. Tits? Yup, not too big. A nice, pert size. Legs? Hard to say from here, what with her sitting down and everything, but pretty perfect. Dazzling face, sweet eyes, brunette. On the whole, irresistible.

She picked up a jar of pasta sauce, ran it through, and, not looking what she was doing, placed it on the corner of the exit shelf. The jar wobbled and fell, smashing in an eruption of glass, red sauce dribbling out in a sticky pool.

'Oh my God,' she said, hands clamped over her mouth. 'I'm so sorry. I'm such a klutz.'

'No harm done,' Clifton said as she got up and came round with a dustpan and brush. 'It's all right, I'll get it sorted. Don't worry.'

'Oh, thanks a lot.' She was looking at him for the first time, and there was no discernable reaction. 'I'm so clumsy. I've only been here two days, and I'm always dropping things.'

Clifton looked up from the floor, where he was sweeping glass into a bag. 'Well, we all make mistakes, I guess. We wouldn't be human if he didn't.'

She smiled back. 'Well, thanks. You want me to get you another jar?'

'It's OK, I'll do it. Could you bag up the rest of my stuff though? I'll be gone a couple of minutes.'

'Sure. Thanks.'

He knotted the bag, placed it in a rubbish bin, then got another jar. When he came back, his bags were packed and waiting. 'Cheers,' he said, handing her the jar. As she took it from him, their fingers brushed.

'Thanks so much,' she said, turning on that smile again. 'I must say, your mother trained you well.'

'My Mum's dead,' he blurted out, thinking shit, why did you say that?

'Oh,' she said, blushing, but not averting her eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

And right then he knew she was special. Most of the time, when faced with that bit of information, people would look away, embarrassed. Virtually everyone would say I'm sorry, but in a flat, I'm-only-saying-it-because-I'm-supposed-to way, not with any meaning. But she had emotion in her voice, like she actually cared, knew how hard it was. She treated him like a normal guy, and no girl had ever done that before.

'It's OK,' he mumbled. 'It was a long time ago.'

'Well, I think she did a great job.' She handed him the jar. 'There you go.'

Now it was his turn to blush. 'Thanks,' he stammered, gathering up his bags. 'You're not so bad yourself.'

She grinned and shook her head. 'Kind of you to say so. If you see my boss on the way out, you want to tell him that?'

'I'd be happy to,' he said, not wanting to leave, ever.

'OK then. See ya.'

'Bye,' he said, hovering for a moment, drinking all of her in. As he walked out, he knew one thing. I have to see this girl again, whatever it takes. A thought struck him as he walked to the bus stop: I don't even know her name. But I'll find out. I'll find out.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ben finally got hold of Amy one Saturday evening. He was alone. Catherine had gone home for the weekend, as she tended to. Derek was out somewhere, probably still drumming up recruits for this crazy band idea. He was like a dog with a bone. After Ben's impromptu singing session, Derek had put up a few notices advertising for a drummer, and a second guitarist. 'Just like the Beatles,' he had said, 'but with a tenth of the talent.' Couldn't argue with that. He had also brought another guitar, an electric one that made a hell of a racket. You had to admire the man's determination though. And Ben felt bad about raining on his dreams, so he went along with the plans. Nothing but a pipedream at the moment, so it was fine.

And Natasha was out with Tyler, who seemed to spend as much time in the house as Ben did. Maybe they should start charging him rent, spread the cost a little.

Ben was nervous as he sat by the phone. He lit a cigarette, trying to rehearse a conversation in his head. It had been two weeks since they last spoke, and a lot could have happened in that time. It was a new experience, this nervousness. He had always felt so comfortable with Amy that he never worried about saying what he thought, for she loved him as he was, not how she wanted him to be. But now she seemed a more distant part of his life, still everything but slipping into the background with each passing day. He wanted her to be at the forefront again, where she belonged.

He picked up the phone with sweaty hands, dialled her mobile number, and placed the receiver in the crook of his shoulder, against his cheek. My bony shoulder, he thought, and smiled. The phone rang five, six, seven times, and he was about to hang up, disappointed again, when she picked up.

'Hello?' She sounded out of breath.

'Hey babe,' he said. 'It's me.'

'Hello you,' she replied, and he hoped she was smiling, happy that it was him. 'How's it going?'

'Not so bad. How are you?'

'*Great.* Really good. It's been kind of crazy, the last few days. Sorry I haven't been in touch, I've been so busy, what with one thing or another.' There was a bang on the line, the sound of a door closing. Then, muffled noises. 'I know,' Amy said, and he realised that she wasn't talking to him. He waited, then she said, 'I'm sorry hon, now's not really a great time to talk. A few of us are planning to go out for a bite to eat and then on to the cinema. That's the great thing about being in halls, everyone's so friendly. It's been a bit of a blur to be honest. Lectures, seminars, then all the nights out, house parties...'

Ben gripped the receiver harder, noticing that his knuckles were turning white. 'So, you're having a good time then?'

'What? Oh, yeah, it's the best.' More noises, and then a deep voice said, 'You coming, or what?' Then she was back. 'Sorry Ben, that was James from

upstairs. He's always bugging me about being late. Look, can I get back to you later? I know it's been ages since we chatted, but I kinda promised the others I'd go with them. You understand?"

'Sure.' He saw James's face, probably a real looker, greasing over his girlfriend, and he wanted to punch him. Punch him hard. 'Can I see you soon? As you say, it's been a while, and I miss you. What about next weekend? You could come down, we can go out, have a few drinks. Y'know.'

Silence. Then she said, 'Sure, that'd be nice. Give me a couple of days to sort it out, and I'll let you know.'

Like she had to check her diary first. 'OK, that's great.'

'I've really got to go. Bye Ben.'

'I love you,' he said, but she had hung up. It was as if they were strangers already. She had seemed eager to experience new things, go out with her new group of friends. Full of fucking guys, no doubt. He could see her with them, charming and funny, laughing at their jokes, mixing it up with some light flirting. Leaving him behind, here in this empty house with only his thoughts for company.

With nothing better to do, he rang another number. This time, it was picked up after two rings. 'Hello?'

'Mum hi, it's me.'

'Hi love. I've been expecting a call from you. How's everything going?' She coughed, probably on a cigarette.

'I'm OK. Course is going well,' and he proceeded to tell her about his studies, the presentation in the offing, trying to inject some enthusiasm into it.

'Good, I'm glad it's working out for you.' She paused. 'I tell you what, it's not the same here without you. People keep asking after you, seeing how you are. It's a big event, you know.'

Ben rolled his eyes. 'And how are you?'

'As good as can be expected. Work keeps me busy. And your father's popped round a couple of times. I don't suppose you've spoken to him recently? No, I thought not. He's got work worries himself at the moment. Some talk of redundancies. It seems a bit more serious this time.'

Dad worked for a graphic design firm. Ben had heard him talk about cutbacks on and off for years, so nothing new there. 'I'll give him a call sometime.'

'Do. He could ring you himself, I know, but he only really makes the effort if you do first.'

Yes. That rang true. Can't let you down if you're not in contact.

Mum was saying, 'So, we're keeping our fingers crossed that it will all work out. As you know, if Dad loses his job, it'll have repercussions on your situation, won't it?' She let out a deep sigh. 'But, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. How's Amy?'

'Yeah, she's fine. Coming down to see me next weekend. She seems happy at Nottingham.'

'That's good. Well, I won't keep you. Corrie's on in a bit, and I haven't

had a chance to eat yet. Are you planning to come home soon?'

'Maybe in a few weeks. Depends on coursework, stuff like that.'

'Fair enough. Don't leave it too long, will you?'

'I won't.'

This was turning out to be a fine evening. First Amy, now financial troubles to worry about. He dialled a third number.

'Hey J.'

'Benny boy. How's it hanging?'

'Right now? Slightly to the left, I believe. What you up to?'

'The usual.'

'Excellent. Cos right now, I feel like getting very stoned. You up for it?'

'Does a bear shit in the woods? You know where I live mate, come on over. I'll have a strong one on ice, ready and waiting.'

You had to hand it to the man. Ben grinned, and went to get ready.

The gear was working very nicely. When Ben turned up, there was one reefer stubbed out in the ashtray, and J was rolling another. 'Make yourself at home,' he mumbled. 'Excuse the mess.'

Mess was right. The coffee table was full of drinks cans, half eaten bowls of cereal, a gargantuan ashtray about to overflow, cigarette papers. Above a disused fireplace there were posters of Page Three girls. The TV was on, sound muted, and a mass of wires sprouted from it, hooked up to speakers and a Playstation. 'Nice birds, aren't they?' J said. 'Jessica and Kate aren't too pleased about it, but we managed to win them over for now.'

'Bet they're not too pleased about the state of it in here, either. You opened the windows lately? Smells like something died in here.'

'Hey man, if you don't like it, find your own way out. Chill out, would you? You're making the place look untidy.'

Ben sat down, took the joint and inhaled deeply. The smoke entered his lungs and he counted to ten, holding it in. Then he blew out a long grey stream, watching the smoke linger, making patterns as it rose. 'Good stuff,' he said, feeling it straight away.

'It is indeed.'

So they proceeded to get wasted. They whacked on the Playstation, had a joint in between taking shots on Tiger Woods Golf, which Ben won in a playoff. After, they flicked between channels, had another joint, some beers to wash it down with. They thought about going to the pub, but decided against it, so ordered in Chinese, chatted about women and memories of their childhood. Good, juvenile fun, and exactly what Ben needed.

Once the food had been demolished, the quietness kicked in and they sat, each contemplating his own thoughts. Amy was on Ben's mind, but not in a harsh way. He thought about her body, that look in her eyes when she wanted sex, then James barged in, and paranoia trickled into his brain. Was there something going on? That deep voice, and what was her reply? *He's always bugging me about being late.* Something like that. Always bugging her, as if it wasn't the first time. And being late for what? Lectures? Lifts

home? Drinks in the pub? He reached for his mobile, to text her, see how her night was going, then a large head rush washed over him and he thought better of it.

'You all right?' J said, smiling. His eyes were wide and bloodshot. 'You were out of it for a while there.'

Ben sat up, trying to regain some focus. 'Yeah, I'm cool. Just thinking about Amy is all.'

'Anything the matter?'

So he told him about the phone call, trying to articulate everything but coming up short. 'I've got a horrible feeling she's going to dump me,' he said, saying it for the first time, and scared that it rang true in his head. 'She's so far away from me right now.'

'But she's coming down to see you, isn't she? That must be a good sign.'

'I guess so. Probably to tell me it's over.'

J leant back into the sofa. 'Look, I've never said this to you before, but I envy what you and Amy have got. I mean, I've had a few girlfriends, and lots of decent fucks, and I'm not complaining about any of it. But you've got something I've never had. Respect, I guess. She loves you, and that's a great thing. I've been in love with a few girls, and never got anything from any of them. As soon as I get close, they run for the hills. Despite my magnetic personality.' He grinned. 'She won't want to break up with you, I'm sure of it. And if she did, I'd lose what little faith in relationships I've got. So you tell her that, and put the fear into her. That should do the trick.'

Ben tried to swallow, but his mouth was filled with chalk. 'I'll tell her. Thanks, man. I just hope you're right.'

He was thinking about that when he finally left. It was gone one o'clock, and he felt like a tranquillised elephant. He hadn't had a marathon smoking session like that for an age. But it hit the right spots, and had taken him away from it all for a bit. Now reality started to creep back in, beginning and ending with Amy, nothing else in between. He walked down the hill and on to the busy Gloucester Road. A dart of paranoia shot into him at the sight of all these faces, so loud and raucous. Outside a kebab shop, he stopped and watched the meat spinning in the window, and realised how hungry he was. No, he thought. Wait until you get home. A bloke came out then, throwing tomato and chillies on the floor, cursing that he hadn't asked for this shit, so why stick it in a kebab? It was too surreal out here on the street. Get back, make some grub, watch a bit of telly, smoke a couple more fags, then pass out. Sounded like heaven.

It took two attempts to get the key in the lock, but at last he was in, temporarily disorientated by the darkness, banging his shin on a chest of drawers outside his door which hadn't been there earlier. Wincing, he got in his room and flopped onto the bed, waiting for his heartbeat to return to normal. Steady, deep snores came from next-door, then a slight moan. Tyler, here again.

He cooked himself a pizza, shovelled it onto a plate and decided to eat in

the living room. The house was silent, peaceful. But as he got upstairs, a thin light was coming from underneath the door. He went in and found Natasha sat on the sofa, legs curled up beneath her, a glass of white wine on the floor at her feet.

'Hey,' he said, noticing the slurring of his speech, and sat down at the other end of the sofa. He took a bite of pizza. The cheese melted in his mouth, and the taste of ham and peppers was divine.

'Hey you,' Natasha said, not taking her eyes from the screen. 'You're back late.'

Ben nodded between mouthfuls. 'Yeah, been round to see J.'

She took a sip of wine. 'No doubt smoking the night away, then.'

'I might have had a couple, yeah. What about you? I could hear Tyler's snoring from miles away.'

Natasha frowned. 'Don't get me started. We went for a few drinks in town, down Corn Street, round there? All well and good, but Tyler was knocking it back, which is unusual for him. Anyway, I was at the bar in the Slug and Lettuce and some bloke starts chatting to me. He was laying it on pretty thick, and I told him I wasn't interested. Then Tyler comes over, and the guy backs off. But that wasn't enough, oh no. Tyler makes a big fucking deal of it, starts shouting at the guy to stop trying it on with MY girlfriend, really causing a scene. It was embarrassing, everyone was looking. I had a go at him about it, and he accused me of flirting with the bloke, encouraging him. Which was total bullshit, and I told him so. He ended up getting drunk, and I had to hold him up enough to get him into a taxi and back here. Hence the snoring. It really annoys me when he gets like that. All jealous. I'd handled the situation myself, and he went wading in and messed it up. In my experience, when a guy chats me up and I'm not interested, a knockback is fine. They generally get the message. But Tyler isn't happy unless he sticks his oar in as well. Sometimes he can be so possessive.'

Ben felt a sliver of pleasure at the thought of them rowing. 'Well, most blokes do get jealous, it's just the way we are.' And with you for a girlfriend it's not surprising, he thought.

'Maybe. I could do without it, though.' She refilled her glass. 'You want some of this?'

'Sure, thanks.' He found an empty glass on the table, took some wine, had a sip. 'Cheers.' They clinked glasses, and Ben settled back to finish his pizza. 'Anything good on?'

'Not really, so I stuck a movie on. You know it?'

Ben watched for a few seconds, and got it straight away. '*Shawshank Redemption*. Great movie.'

She turned to face him now. 'Yeah? You like it?'

'Not like. I *love* it. First film that ever made me cry. I watched it what, three years ago. At first I thought I was going to hate it, cos it's quite slow to get going, but suddenly I was hooked. It's so fucking sad, especially what happens to that old guy.'

'Brooks, yeah. I was in floods at that bit too. My sister said that when

she saw it at the cinema, no one left when the end credits were rolling. Everyone just sat there, too stunned to move. I mean, usually, people's phones start going and stuff, but they all sat there in silence.'

'I can imagine.'

'Wow,' she said. 'I don't know that many people who even know the film, let alone like it. Tyler says it's boring.'

Why am I not surprised, Ben thought. Not immediate enough, he supposed. 'Well, his taste obviously isn't as good as mine then, is it?' Apart from in women. He's got that one about perfect.

'I guess not.' She grinned. 'Well, let's enjoy it then, shall we.'

So they did. There was no need for words. Sometimes he would glance over at her, fixated on the screen, a droplet of sweat across her forehead. Taking a sip of wine, stretching to get comfortable, her body rippling under her sweater. But mostly he watched and marvelled at how good the film was, even on repeated viewing. And when the credits rolled, they did sit there in silence, tears pricking Natasha's eyes, not wanting the moment to end.

At last, she stopped the DVD, but didn't get up from the couch. The wine bottle was empty at her feet. She yawned and stretched, her breasts shaking with the movement. 'God, that was good.'

'Yeah, it was.'

'But, all good things must come to an end. Hopefully Tyler will have stopped snoring by now.'

For Ben, that broke the spell. For the duration of the film, it had been about them, sharing their mutual appreciation for something they loved. Now, it was over.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's get this stuff downstairs.'

So they carried the bottle and glasses to the kitchen, promising to wash up in the morning. At the alcove between their rooms, Natasha smiled and said, 'Thanks Ben, I really enjoyed that. Nice to meet a guy who can appreciate a good movie.'

'Likewise,' he replied. She was only two feet away, and he could smell her perfume. 'Have to do it again sometime.'

She nodded. 'Absolutely. Well, goodnight.'

'Goodnight,' he said.

She smiled once more, and opened the door to her room. As he turned, she said, 'And Ben? Your flies are undone.' She burst out laughing.

He looked down, mortified. When he raised his head, she was gone, but he could still hear her giggles as he went to bed.

Earlier that evening, on the other side of the city, Matthew Walker sat in his living room, alone. A bottle of Scotch stood in front of him. He stared through the bottle, watching the amber liquid shimmer and shine when it caught the light. A glass lay beside the bottle, unused. He desperately wanted a drink. All day he had been thinking about it, imagining the first hit as it went down, aching for that burning sensation in the stomach as the whisky did its work. Today was the first in years where he had reached the

evening sober. There had been plenty of opportunities, too. He usually had a couple of beers with lunch, in between proofreading galleys. A quick nip of Scotch in the afternoon to level things off a bit. By six, he would pack up for the day and begin drinking in earnest. But not today. He was sick of alcohol, sick of the hangovers, the shakes. It was breaking him physically. And the booze brought on all his other problems. His resentment towards Clifton, for one. He would have to sort things out, that he knew, but there were so many bridges to build. But first, he had to help himself, and he didn't know if he had the willpower. From rock bottom, the surface seemed so far away.

Clifton was becoming more elusive than ever, which didn't help. On a number of occasions he would try to talk to him, nothing serious, just trying to be an interested father. But Clifton would flat out blank him. Which was no surprise. He deserved all the anger, the hurt that Clifton felt. After he had slapped him, he had become a monster. A drunken, vile monster that used violence to settle an argument. Blaming the drink was no excuse, not any more. It was all down to him.

Tonight, Clifton had come in, gone up to his room, come out a while later, and disappeared. Probably to the allotment. Matthew knew all about it, the late night forays. Once, when Clifton was asleep, he nipped down there to have a search around. It was disturbing that since his accident Clifton had sought solace in a similar place to before. He had hoped that the fire tendencies had gone, the accident warning enough. When he got down there, tramping across soil and wet grass, the moon high in the sky, all seemed normal. The shed contained that familiar smell of wood and petrol, and he had a good nosy about, on the alert for anything suspicious. But nothing untoward. A couple of lengths of rope. Some matches, which he put into his pocket. No sign of petrol cans or firelighters. Outside, he checked the lawn and flowerbeds, but could see little in the darkness. He reminded himself to bring a flashlight next time.

In fact, if he had looked a bit harder, Matthew would have been shocked by what he saw. Because Clifton had stumbled across something amazing. One night, he had built a small fire and found two carcasses of small birds lying in the wood behind the shed. They had burned up great. He stood watching their feathers blacken and shrivel, fascinated by the cooking flesh. When it was done, he stamped the fire out. He knew that Dad had discovered this place. His missing matches, for instance. So now he had to be careful. He had brought a roll of black sacks with him, and filled one with the remains of the fire, making sure the sticks and ash were cool before disposing of them. OK. But he had to keep the petrol can and his other goodies somewhere. In the house was way too dangerous. He hunted around in the shed. Everywhere was too obvious, but then he spied a loose floorboard in the corner under the shelves. Underneath was a large shelf about the size of a car boot. Perfect. The can and everything else went in there nicely, and when he replaced the board, no one would be any the wiser. Now, the grass. That was a problem. The blackened earth would take time to grow back, so for now, he had to be patient. Keep Dad away. And be more careful with the

fires. If Dad didn't catch him at it, someone else surely would, despite the isolated location. People had a habit of walking into situations that didn't concern them. He dumped the black sack into a random dustbin on his way home, and that was that.

Tonight, he bought an old rug to cover the floorboard up, and a sturdy padlock for the shed door. He realised it suggested he had something to hide, but as far as he knew, no one was aware of his plan anyway. He sat in the shed for a while, thinking about the girl from the shop and all the things he wanted to do to her. Finding out who she was would be easy. He wanted to know where she lived, what course she studied, who she hung around with. Who her boyfriend was, if she had one. Clifton fantasised about declaring his love for her, and her reciprocating those feelings, and taking him there and then on the supermarket floor. Yeah, that would be good.

Matthew was still staring at the bottle when Clifton came in, slamming the back door. His hand shivered. Just one drink. One, to stop the pain. He heard Clifton shifting about in the kitchen. Perhaps now was the time to start. As Clifton wandered through, Matthew said, 'Hey son. How are you?'

A grunt in response.

'And how's uni going?' Trying to find an angle, a way in. Softly softly.

Clifton stopped in the doorway. What was that on his hands? Looked like rust. 'And what do you care?'

Matthew was shocked by his son's anger, but not surprised. It was what he expected. 'Clifton, whatever you think of me, I'm still your father, and I still take an interest in your life.'

'The only interest you take is slapping me around when there's no more Scotch in the house. A fucking great example of a father.'

Matthew bowed his head. 'I know. And I hate myself for everything I've done to you. When I drink, I can't seem to control anything. But it's all I know.'

'So fucking what? That's your excuse, the drink made you do it. You disgust me. That day I got my results? I thought then of all days you could find some semblance of happiness for me. But no, all I got was a hiding. What the fuck Mum saw in you I'll never know.'

Matthew rose then, a red mist descending. 'Don't you mention her,' he shouted. 'You have no idea what went on between us.' He squared up to Clifton. 'And don't pretend you do.'

To his astonishment, Clifton didn't flinch. His scar throbbed. 'Oh yeah? You may have got to me before, but not now. I'm way fucking stronger than you are.' Rage seethed in his eyes, and he grabbed Matthew's arm and twisted him round, pinning him against the door.

You see?

'You see?' Clifton hissed. 'Whilst you've been drinking your life away, things have been progressing. Now, I'm the one in control.'

Matthew thought he was going to pass out as sparks of pain shot up his arm. He was suddenly terrified. What had happened to his son? You happened, a voice told him. It's all you. The pain was becoming unbearable.

'That's enough,' he bleated, trying to inject some authority into it, and failing.

'You're right,' Clifton said. 'That *is* enough.' He pulled up on Matthew's arm, then flung him into the sofa. He hit the corner with a crack and fell over. 'Go on. Go back to your drink, you sorry fuck. You ain't got nothing else.'

Matthew stared open-mouthed, his arm in agony. Now it really was over. Now, Clifton was becoming like him. The boy seemed to have stored up his years of hatred, taken all the disdain and locked it up to simmer and grow. And now it had burst over, like a cork popping from a bottle of champagne. All back on him. He had been reduced to an alcoholic wreck, who had nothing. Nothing, except one thing. He reached for the bottle of Scotch.

Upstairs, Clifton lay on his bed and smiled. He couldn't believe what had just happened. The fear in Dad's eyes, lying there helpless and scared. Of him. His own father, scared of *him!* All the times he had been on the receiving end. But now, the worm had turned. He reached over and grabbed a photo of Mum from his bedside cabinet. 'You were right Mum,' he whispered. *You will end up the stronger.* 'Yup,' he repeated, 'you were right.'

He waited for a reply, but there was none, only a faint fluttering in his head, like butterflies' wings.

CHAPTER SIX

Ben had a lot on his mind as the bus pulled up outside uni. He was tired, having been up until two in the morning reading Henry James and not enjoying it. There were eighty pages of *The Great Gatsby* still to get through for tomorrow's American Literature lecture, an essay due the following Friday that he had done no preparation for, plus this fucking presentation, which was looming on the horizon. Plus he had to work tonight. And Amy was due down in two days. A cauldron of anxiety was already building in his stomach at the thought of seeing her. They had so much to talk about, and he wanted to be on top form for the entire weekend. Not worrying about essays or work or anything else.

He smoked a hasty cigarette before the seminar, and took up his usual position at the back of the class, next to Clifton. They said a brief hello, but Clifton was in his own little world, as per usual. And he had to stand up in front of the class with the guy and chat about some book. It was ten per cent of the course allocation, so he didn't want to fuck it up. But working with Clifton, it seemed inevitable that it would end in failure.

The seminar passed without incident. The round of presentations hadn't started yet, so Mr Symonds led a discussion about Henry James and his influence on Modern Literature. Ben spoke when asked questions, on occasion surprised by his knowledge. He spent the rest of the time watching Clifton. There was something about the bloke that troubled him. His voice was all funny, for one. It kind of rose and fell and cracked all in one sentence. He was clearly conscious of his scar, his hand creeping up to rub the afflicted area regularly. But mostly it was his eyes, so brown they verged on black. Their probing, almost hypnotic intensity. There was something unsettling about them, too. He imagined Clifton was not someone you wanted to get on the wrong side of.

After the seminar, Clifton said, digging his hands into his pockets, 'So. About this presentation.'

'Yeah,' Ben replied. 'Well, I haven't had a chance to read the book fully yet. Got loads of other stuff on. But I will.'

'OK. Well, I've read it, made a few notes. On the themes and that? You want to take a look?'

Ben sighed. 'I tell you what. I'm busy today, got work and other commitments. How about you come over to mine tomorrow, say around four, cos I've got a seminar at lunchtime. I'll try and get through some more of *Shame*, and then we can have a chat about where to go from there. Sound good?'

Clifton nodded. The scar went up and down, up and down. 'Where do you live?'

Ben told him. 'You can't miss it. It's above a pub, for Chrissake.'

'Cheers. Well, see you tomorrow then.'

'Yeah,' Ben said.

Afterwards, Ben went to the library, intent on getting some of *Shame* read. But he couldn't get into it, so packed up and went home. Maybe get started on this essay. It was only lunchtime, so he hoped the house would be quiet so he could get some work done. With Amy there all weekend, today was the last he had free.

When he got home, he was putting his bag down when a voice called him from upstairs. Great. Never any fucking peace. He went into the hallway and shouted up.

'Hey man,' Derek shouted back, and then his head appeared over the top of the banisters. 'Get yourself up here for a second.'

'What for?'

'Just *do* it, will ya!'

Ben sighed, but trudged up there anyway. Any resistance was futile.

When he got upstairs, there were two blokes sitting on the sofa that Ben didn't recognise. Two guitars stood against the fireplace, and a cigarette burned in an ashtray.

'Take your time,' Derek said. 'There's some people I'd like you to meet. This is Greg, and this is Darren. Guys, this is Ben. He's our lead singer.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Greg said, not getting up from the sofa. He was wrapped in a floor length grey coat, dark hair flopping over his eyes. Darren just nodded. He looked even more of a state, with spiky ginger hair, a ring through his nose, and a green mess of tattoos on his lower arms.

'I didn't hear you right,' Ben said to Derek. 'What's this about lead singer?'

'That's you, my friend. I told you I was scouting about for some new recruits, and here they are.'

'Whoa, hold up a sec. I never said I was going to be in a band. That was all bullshit. I'm not that good.'

'Let me be the judge of that. And you are in the band, cos I've gone to a lot of trouble to find Greg and Darren. You should hear Greg on the guitar, he's awesome. Show him.'

Greg picked up one of the guitars and strummed out a rhythm. Derek was nodding, smiling. 'You see? He's a fucking wizard. Way better than me. And Darren, he's hell on the old skins. With me backing it up, and your voice, we're on our way to stardom. Plus, Darren's aunt owns this old house in Clifton where we can practise. In a grotty basement, no offence, but it's perfect. Set up in there, work out a few tunes, we'll be having our first gig in no time.'

'No way,' Ben said firmly, shaking his head. 'No way. We've got degrees to study for, or have you forgotten? I haven't got the time.'

'Stop making excuses. We're all in the same boat here. Where's your sense of ambition? All we're doing is showing some appreciation for all the songs we've loved over the years. Making them our own. You know when you hear a song and you think, fuck, that song was written about me. And the

tune sticks in your head, and you can relate to every chord, every inflection of the voice. That's what we want to create, that feeling in other people. And you can be a part of it, probably the best part, being the singer. All eyes will be on you. You can't walk away from that.'

'Yes I can,' Ben said. 'I can, and I will.' He walked out.

'Hey,' Derek shouted. 'Where you going?'

'To study. And then to work. I told you, I haven't got the time.'

Derek turned to face the others. 'Don't worry,' he said, smiling. 'He'll come round.'

My God, Clifton thought as he walked past The Prince Of Wales pub for the third time, these directions are absolutely useless. Come to the Zetland Road Junction. Up on the left hand side, number...and what number was it? 26? 36? He began walking up the road, keeping a close eye on house numbers. Above a pub, Ben had said. That much he remembered. And then, there it was. He pushed the gate open, and bounded up the stairs.

Inside, Ben was struggling with *Shame*. The book was so damn tough to get into. It was noisy too, as for once the whole house was occupied. He had the window open, and that brought in the cacophony of the traffic. He hadn't read as much as he would have liked. The pub had been extra busy last night, and he was too tired when he got home. The day's seminars had also taken their toll, and now the last thing he felt like doing was studying with Clifton. He looked at his watch. Ten minutes late. Maybe he's decided not to bother, he thought, but then the doorbell rang, two sharp chimes with a pause in between. Ben was about to get up, then Natasha shouted, 'I'll get it,' her voice coming from the kitchen, where she had been washing up for the last half hour.

Clifton stood, whistling, waiting. As he waited, he thought about the shop girl, what she was up to right now. He'd been back a couple of times to check her out, but on both occasions she wasn't there. He told himself she was on a break, or having a day off, just bad timing. But it had been ages since he'd seen her.

The door opened and she was standing in front of him. His jaw dropped open, his heart accelerating.

'Oh *hi*,' she said, smiling. 'How are you?'

He was worried that he wouldn't be able to speak, or that his voice would sound all funny when he talked. 'OK, thanks. Is Ben here?'

'Sure,' she said. 'BEN, someone here to see you.' She turned back to him. 'Well, this is a coincidence, isn't it?'

'That it is. How's the job going?'

She had a tea towel in her hand, rubbing the material with a silky finger. 'Oh, much better. Only had one breakage in the last week. And that guy shouted at me big style. He wasn't as pleasant as you.'

Clifton blushed, and she saw it and smiled. When he saw that smile, he thought he might faint. And her body was better than he had hoped for. She was wearing a white gypsy skirt that swirled around her calves. Bare feet,

nails painted silver, ring on her big toe. He noticed water on her top, running down towards her cleavage. 'Thanks. Sorry, I don't even know your name, so I can't say thank you properly.'

'I'm Natasha.'

'Clifton.'

'You two know each other?' Ben stood in the hallway, arms folded, leaning against the wall.

Natasha said, 'Oh, kind of. I had an accident at work one afternoon, and Clifton helped me out. What about you?'

Before Ben could reply, Clifton said, 'we're doing a seminar presentation together, so I've come round to study.'

'Oh. That's nice. Well, you two have fun, won't you?' She sashayed back to the kitchen, and Clifton watched her ass and legs as she moved. He glanced over at Ben, saw he was doing the same. Clifton smiled. At least the man had good taste. Not that it mattered. For it was fate, seeing her again. Something was working to bring them together. The chances of running into the same girl in two opposite parts of the city, that must be an infinitesimal probability. And he had turned up on the doorstep, just like that. And been thinking about her the exact moment she opened the door. It was gonna happen, just a bit of patience.

Patience and respect.

'Yeah,' he whispered. 'Thanks, Mum.'

'Sorry, were you talking to me?' Ben asked.

Clifton shook his head. 'No. Just thinking out loud. Come on, let's get some work done.'

And now they had spent some more time together, Ben's apprehension about Clifton was increasing. For a start, he never sat still. First, Clifton sat down on the bed, spread an unruly mess of papers and books everywhere, jabbering on about this and that. Then, he came and sat beside Ben at the desk, leaning over his shoulder whilst they tried to brainstorm a few ideas for the presentation. When Ben looked up to talk, that scar was right in his face. It seemed to have a mind of its own. When Clifton became animated, his speech quickened, and the scar jumped all over the place. And his eyes, twitching and restless.

But, to give him credit, Clifton knew his stuff. He made some good points about the themes of the book, and possible areas they would be able to discuss. Even a few questions they could provide for debate amongst the class. After an hour, they had a reasonable plan fleshed out. Maybe I'm wrong about him, Ben thought. Sure, he seems a bit socially inept, but no doubting his intelligence. It was just difficult to get past his appearance to what lies underneath. And that's probably been his problem for life. Putting up with sly comments, dirty looks, alienating voices. Must be tough.

A knock at the door, and Natasha came in. 'Hi boys, you winning?'

Ben reached for his cigarettes. 'Getting there. Wouldn't you say?'

Clifton stared for a long moment, then said, 'Yeah.' He smiled. 'This boy

ain't as dumb as he looks.'

Natasha giggled, and Clifton laughed along with her. Ben regarded them from behind a cloud of smoke. Look at him. He can't get enough of her. Practically undressing her with those eyes. Might as well have his tongue hanging out. And she knew it, though it would be hard not to. So out came the flirting, a sexy laugh, soaking it up. He thought about coming out with some witty reply. Take him down a peg or two.

'The reason I'm here,' she said, 'I'm going up to the shop. My cupboards are looking a bit threadbare. Do you want anything?'

Ben shook his head. 'Not that I can think of. Thanks anyway.'

'OK. Just thought I'd ask. You going to be around when I get back?' she asked Clifton.

'I think we're about done,' Ben said quickly. 'For today, at least.'

Clifton glared at him, but said nothing.

'Oh, fair enough. Well, it was nice meeting you again. Stop by the shop some time, say hi.'

'I will,' Clifton said.

'Bye then. See you in a bit, Ben.'

He raised his arm goodbye, watching Clifton, whose eyes followed her out the door. My God, he really fancies her, and Ben felt something in his chest. Jealousy? A bit of anger, maybe? No, that was stupid. She was with Tyler anyway. And he had Amy. So why the sudden rush of blood? He told himself he was just being irrational.

Clifton gathered his notes together and chucked them haphazardly into his folder. 'So, we going to meet up again to work this through? Might as well, just to polish it up further. I can come round again some time next week.'

No, he thought suddenly. I don't want you here. Not with Natasha around. 'We'll see. It's a bit crowded here, why not at your place? It'd be quieter, we'd get more done.'

Clifton frowned. 'Dunno about that, it's not very convenient. My old man works from home, you see.'

Good excuse. 'We'll sort something out. I'll see you at the seminar next week.'

'Cool.' They were at the door now, Ben holding it open, willing Clifton out.

'Ok then,' Ben said, 'see you later.'

'Bye.' As Clifton left, Ben watched him to the pavement. He glanced around, looking up the road, hesitated for a moment, and was gone. Ben shut the door and leant against it, his dislike for Clifton growing with each breath.

He strained to look for Natasha, but there was no sign. Clifton thought about walking up the street, seeing if he could bump into her by mistake. Fancy seeing you again! Here, let me take those bags for you. See the grimace on Ben's face when he strolled into the house, calm as you like. Probably shut the fucker up.

You're in love with her, aren't you?

Thanks, Mum. But yes. And no-one is going to stand in my way. Least of all Ben. He knew that Ben had similar feelings towards Natasha. He might not know it yet, but they were there all the same. You could tell from the way he stared at her. Completely loved up. Well, join the club. Only this club has a membership of one. Me. And he realised then that no matter what, he was going to have her. Next time he saw her, he was going to ask her out. It would take all his courage, but he was going to do it. And if she said no, he would ask again. And again. Keep smiling, being a gentleman, and eventually she would change her mind. She *had* to. He thought of what Mum had said:

Whatever makes you happy can only be a good thing. And Natasha, she made him happy. Just talking to her, made him happy. He wasn't about to let that go.

Natasha got back as Ben was getting ready for work. She stumbled in under a weight of bags, so he stopped to give her a hand.

'This is becoming a bit of a habit, isn't it?' he said as he stored cans in the cupboard next to the sink. 'Helping you out with menial tasks.'

She smiled, handing him two more cans and a large bottle of Coke. 'I'm taking advantage of your gracious nature. Plus, you're the only one here. I would ask Derek, his muscles are far superior to yours.'

'They *are* not!' Ben flexed his arm. 'Pure testosterone in there.'

Natasha patted him. 'Poor baby. Now I've gone and offended his manhood.' She laughed. 'So, Clifton gone?'

Ben nodded. 'Yeah, left about half an hour ago. You know, there's something about that guy that freaks me out.'

'Really?' She bent down and opened the door under the sink. A window of flesh appeared as her top rose up. 'Why do you say that? I like him. He's sweet. He calmed me down in the shop that time.'

'Yeah. I don't know, it feels like he's got a secret agenda with everyone. Sizing them up when he talks to them.'

'Can't say I've noticed.'

'I find that hard to believe.'

She stood up, turned to face him, hands on hips. 'Is that right? And where did you get that pearl of wisdom from?'

Ben took a step back. He was opening a can of worms here, but didn't care. 'Come on, you don't notice the way he looks at you?'

'And what way is that?'

The same way I do, he thought, but held his tongue. 'He fancies you, pure and simple. You must have worked that out.'

She coloured slightly. 'You reckon? That's not the impression I've got. And anyway, so what if he does? Not a crime, is it?'

'No. But he strikes me as being the type of guy who won't take no for an answer. That's all I'm saying.'

'Well, if you're right, and I don't think you are, I'll let him down gently. Once he knows I'm taken, he'll move on to someone else. So there's no need

to worry, is there?'

'I hope you're right,' Ben said. 'I hope you're right.'

Ben sat across from Amy, watching as she pushed food around her plate. Her hair hung in wispy strands across her face, shielding her eyes. They were sitting in a half-empty Chinese on Gloucester Road. There had been a storm, and Amy spent most of her time staring at the rain running in rivulets down the glass. Her face shimmered and glowed in the flickering light from a solitary candle. Outside, a group of girls sheltered under an umbrella, giggling as they crossed the road, heading towards town. A guy came up to meet them, and the girl holding the umbrella passed it to one of her friends and walked into his open arms. He bent to whisper in her ear, and she smiled and laughed.

A waiter walked past the table, and Ben caught his eye and ordered another beer. His fourth pint, and it was only nine o'clock. He asked Amy if she wanted anything, and she mumbled no and went back to the window.

It had been like this since he had met her the previous afternoon. At five, he had stood at the bus station, two cigarette butts at his feet and another on the go. As he took a final pull on his cigarette, the bus swung into its berth. He strained his eyes for a glimpse of her. A steady stream of passengers disembarked, taking bags from the luggage compartment, rushing to greet friends and loved ones. Still no sign, and for a horrible moment he thought she had changed her mind. His fingers were cool with sweat. Then, he saw her, next to last off the bus, and his heart rose. He waved, and she saw him and smiled, waving back. She took her case from the bus, a heavy clack ringing out as its wheels struck the tarmac, and as she got closer he noticed the change. Not so much her appearance, more how she walked, with an air of confidence and brightness.

She let go of the case and embraced him. He felt a brief resistance, then she relaxed into his arms.

'Hey,' he whispered, drew back, and went to kiss her. She moved her cheek and his lips brushed against hers, only for a moment. 'How was the journey down?'

'Oh, it was OK. Bit of a bore, some guy behind me fell asleep and his snoring! God, it was enough to wake the dead.'

He ran his eyes over her. 'You look great.'

She smiled. 'Thanks. So do you.'

It felt like an automatic response. Still, it was nice that she said it.

He took her case, and they walked to the bus stop. She took his hand readily enough, but he felt a reserve there. One of the things he enjoyed with Amy was holding hands. Their fingers seemed to interlock perfectly, all the digits touching, just the right amount of pressure. Now, her fingers barely came into contact with his.

On the bus they chatted, or rather Amy chatted. Mostly about how much fun she was having in Nottingham, all the great people she had met. Living in halls, it was such a laugh. The girl in the room next door had become one

of her best friends, and they did everything together. And there were a group of guys they had become friendly with. But all amicable, y'know? He thought about James, what his intentions were, but said nothing. She didn't ask him anything about how he was doing. They were skirting around the edges, filling conversations with meaningless anecdotes. It was what wasn't being said that bothered him.

When they got to his, he introduced her to everyone. She was polite and made small talk, and she got on well with Natasha, which was no surprise. Natasha had a spark that made her popular with everybody. Ben watched them laugh together, and found he was looking at Natasha as much as he was Amy. Then Tyler turned up, and she left them to it, Amy telling Ben how great it was that he had such nice housemates.

They went out that night for a few drinks, and Ben was trying to pluck up the courage to talk about his fears. But something always seemed to get in the way. Mostly her phone. Not an hour went by without the shrill tone of her phone interrupting him. More than once it rang, and she would excuse herself and go outside, once for nearly fifteen minutes, leaving him staring into his glass and crowding up the ashtray. When he asked who was on the phone, she would say it was this new friend of hers, Sarah or Sara or Zara or whatever the fuck it was, and he thought she was lying by how her face changed. Once, he pressed it further, trying to catch her out, and she read him and they ended up rowing about it. Which shocked him, because they very rarely argued, and when they did, it was usually about harmless things.

But it was in bed that he really noticed the difference. After the row, he had apologised, saying that he was only showing an interest, wanting to be a part of her life again. 'You are a part of my life,' she had said, and her fierce gaze had stopped him from pursuing it further. So they had drunk a bit more, then gone home. Tyler and Natasha were up, and the girls chatted over a glass of wine, while he and Tyler stuck to monosyllabic grunts. Eventually, he had yawned and pleaded tiredness, and they had retired.

In his room, Amy excused herself and went to the bathroom. She was in there for twenty minutes, and Ben sat waiting, hoping that she would want to. When she returned, and they got into bed, she had been reluctant at first, but once he got going, she responded willingly enough. Once naked, and when she was on her back, he noticed a small tattoo of a butterfly at the base of her spine.

'What's this? I didn't know you had a tattoo.'

She turned over, eyes glazed, cheeks flushed. 'What? Oh, that. Yeah, I got it done in Freshers week. Sarah and I got them done together.'

He sat back, amazed. He hated tattoos on girls. They all seemed to have them, and always in that spot at the small of the back. Like someone had scrawled on them with marker pen. All he could say was 'Oh.'

'What's the matter, don't you like it?'

'Course I do,' he lied. 'Course.' He kissed her again, not believing his girlfriend would debase her body like that. She lay back, and he resumed where he had left off. But there was little feeling from her now.

Occasionally she moaned, but mostly was as mobile as a corpse. When she came, a tiny cry escaped from her mouth, a sound of anguish more than pleasure. He turned her over and entered from behind. As he thrust, the tattoo stared up at him, the wings flapping as her back arched. As he came with a deep shudder, the butterfly seemed to take on a life of its own, as if it would disengage from her skin and fly away.

The sex hadn't brought them closer together. In the morning, he awoke to find Amy still asleep, huddled up against the wall. Her legs were hunched up to her chest, as if defending herself from an invisible force. He slipped a hand under the duvet and stroked her back, but she didn't wake up. So he left her to it, and went to have a shower.

They spent the day shopping at Cribbs Causeway. It was Amy's mother's birthday coming up, so they were present hunting. There was an awkward moment when she bought a card, and they discussed whether he should sign it or not. He had always got on well with her mother, so it shouldn't have been an issue, but somehow such small gestures were getting blown out of proportion. To make up for this gulf between them, Ben overcompensated by encouraging Amy to buy any clothes or jewellery that she wanted, no worries, I'll buy it for you. Not that he could afford it (which he couldn't, his finances were stretched to say the least), but he wanted to do something for her. She accepted his offer with minimal argument, but he could see it was just to avoid another row. This was how it had become.

Now, Ben picked at the remainder of his rice, his appetite gone. Not for beer though, and he drank three long swallows, the fizz bloating his stomach. By mistake, he let out a loud belch, and Amy gave him a look of disgust. 'God Ben, everyone must have heard you,' she said.

He apologised, then said, 'Well, given your complete lack of interest in being here, I'm surprised you even noticed. What is going on outside that's so thrilling, anyway? They don't have rain in Nottingham or something?' He drained his pint, and signalled for another. There was an uncomfortable silence as the waiter cleared their plates and brought over a fresh beer. Amy again refused a drink, and with no food to play with, she sat picking at the tablecloth.

'Don't you think you've had enough?' Amy said. 'Look at you, you're half cut, shooting your mouth off. Not exactly easy to talk to.'

'We've had plenty of opportunity to talk over this weekend. But every time I try, you avoid me. Or hide behind that phone of yours.'

Tears pricked her eyes. It made his heart crumple. He put his beer down. 'Hey,' he said in a soft voice. 'Look, I'm sorry, all right. I wanted this to be a great weekend, and it's not turning out that way. I mean, you're here, but you're not *really* here, are you? In body maybe, but not mind and spirit. I just want my girlfriend back, cos I really miss her.'

A tear crept down her cheek. It looked red under the candle's flame. Suddenly he knew what she was going to say, and it took the breath from his mouth. As she went to speak, he said, 'Not here. Let's finish up, and go home.'

Thankfully, the house was empty when they got back. Ben made coffee, then they sat upstairs. He lit a cigarette. The smoke hung blue in the air above them. Amy crossed her legs, her body tight under the material of her jeans. She sipped her coffee.

I've got to get in first, he thought. He said, 'You want to break up with me, don't you?' He thought saying it might be easier, having it out in the open, but it wasn't. His throat went tight, waiting for an answer.

Amy stared at the floor, rubbing a finger along the arm of the sofa. She was quiet for an age. Finally she faced him, her eyes wet. 'Oh God, Ben. You want the honest answer? I really don't know.'

'And what does that mean? Either you love me, or you don't. You want to be with me, or you don't. It's simple.'

She moved to take his hand, but he snatched it away. 'But it isn't that simple, is it? If you want to know whether I love you, the answer is yes. But sometimes, love isn't enough.'

'It isn't? Why, what else matters?'

'Let me try and explain. Since I've been at Nottingham things have changed for me. Before, I was just a small town girl. Went out in the same places, had the same friends. But there's so much *more* out there. I'm experiencing new things all the time, and with different people. People that in the past, I probably would have ignored. Saying that they were geeks or something. But get to know people Ben, and they're *not* like that. Not at all. And when I think back to how I was at home, with you, I feel like there was a part of me that never had the chance to blossom. We had, have, a safe, comfortable relationship. I always know where I am with you. I'm just not sure whether that's what I want any more. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

He paused, then nodded. He did understand. In a roundabout way. 'So, what does that mean for us?'

She exhaled deeply. 'That's the million dollar question, Dr Carter. I do miss you. And I think of you often. And I know that I said nothing has to change. To be honest, I thought you would be the one who would want to break up with *me*. Let's face it, you must have met loads of girls. And that's fine. I'm not going to lie to you, I've met loads of guys. Some that I am good friends with. And maybe I do want to be single again. Just to have some freedom.'

He welled up then, but blinked the tears back. Maybe she was right. Maybe they were too young for this relationship.

Seeing him falter, she took his hand, and this time he didn't resist. 'I want you to know something though.' Her face was inches from his. 'You're my first love, and always will be. I didn't have much faith in men, until I met you. And I won't forget that. Never ever.'

He managed a brief smile. 'Me neither.' But what if what they had would never be bettered? That the one person he was destined to be with, his soulmate, was sitting here? What then? He knew he would never forget her,

even if he lived to be a hundred. 'God, this is hard.'

She pulled his chin round, gave him a fierce kiss. 'This isn't the end. We haven't split up. If you like, we're just on a break. Keep ringing me. Texting me. I couldn't bear not speaking to you. And we can meet up, if we're sure we both want to. Who knows, maybe we'll decide we can't live without each other. And in ten years' time, we'll look back and laugh at how silly we were to doubt what we've got. A bit of time, a bit of space, and everything will be much clearer. I'm sure of it.'

But he wasn't sure. Breaking up would have been heartbreaking, but at least final. Now they were in no-man's land, an uncertain territory with no boundaries. But if it was all he could get right now, he'd have to take it. 'I love you,' he said, realising it was the first time he'd ever said those words properly, to her face. Wondering, how could I have left it so long? Till it's practically too late.

She put her arms round his neck, kissed him again. 'Me too,' she whispered. They stayed that way, hugging, gazing at the rain. Then, she pulled away, reached into her bag, and pulled out her mobile. She pressed a couple of buttons, then showed him the screen as the phone switched off. She stood up, held out her hand. 'No disturbances any more. Tonight, it's just you, and me.'

He took her hand.

Back at the bus stop, Ben stood on the concourse smoking a cigarette and watching the rain. That was the thing about this city; it never stopped fucking raining. The clouds were angry and full, the October sky dishwater grey. And he was tired. Which was funny, because he and Amy had been in bed until nearly midday. Not that there had been much sleeping. After switching her phone off, they had switched everything else off as well, and for twelve hours, in the confines of his room, there had been nothing else. Sometimes, they slept. But then one of them would reach out, and it would begin again. No disturbances. No thoughts of anyone else. Once, when they were relaxed, holding, getting their breath back, he wondered if it was because it was the end. This reckless abandon, a desire fuelled by need, but also tinged with goodbye. And that could be OK. He knew that for him, he would never have another night like it. Ever. Anything else would be a step down. And if it were to be the last, then it would be a memory he would always treasure. A memory that was theirs, and theirs only.

Amy came back from the news store, carrying a couple of magazines and a bottle of water. 'Got some reading material,' she said, unscrewing the cap on the bottle and taking a sip. 'Although after last night, the only thing I'll be doing on the bus will be sleeping.'

Ben grinned and pitched his fag down a nearby drain. 'I aim to please.' He opened his arms.

'And you do,' Amy said, and hugged him.

They stayed that way as the bus pulled in and all the passengers instantly rushed forward, trying to be the first one to get on and sat down. The last few

were boarding when Amy took her arms from around his back. She smiled, and there were no tears this time. She looked empty and happy.

'So, this is me,' she said, stuffing the magazines into her bag. 'Better get a move on, or they'll go without me.'

Ben nodded. 'Yup.'

He was about to say more, but Amy placed a finger against his lips. 'Don't say anything. Anything at all. Whatever it is, it will sound like goodbye. And it's not goodbye. It's only a break between innings. Or something. I dunno yet. But let's think about the good times, yeah? Like last night.' She blushed slightly. 'God. What we did, gee whizz. Much more like that, and I'll never be able to stay away. But hey, let's see how we go? Get out, embrace this little thing called life, and see where we end up. Yeah?'

He nodded again. The ticket collector was ushering Amy to hurry up. He leant forward to kiss her. 'I love you,' he said. 'Is it all right to say that?'

She giggled. 'I'll never stop anyone saying that, ever. There's not enough love going round in this world. So, I love you too. I'll text you when I get home, let you know I got back safe.' She gave him one final peck, then turned, suitcase rattling, splashing through the puddles. As she boarded, she turned and blew him a kiss. He pretended to catch it, and she laughed. He lit another cigarette as the bus reversed and pulled away. He stood there until it was finished, getting peppered by the rain, then turned and walked home.

As he walked, Ben pulled out his Discman, wanting any kind of noise to replace what was going on in his head. There was a rattle of drums as the next song began. He drew his hood tighter, wiped the rain from his face.

'And there's a heart that's breaking, down this long distance line tonight...'

As he listened, Ben felt that *his* heart was going to break. It wasn't that it was a great song, so much. But he understood it. He got it all too well.

Once home, he peeled his jacket off and threw it on the bed. Natasha came out of her room. 'Oh, hi Ben. Amy gone?'

Ben smiled. He said, 'Yeah, she's gone. In more ways than one.'

Before Natasha could reply, he bounded up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Derek and Greg were strumming a tune, and they stopped when he came in. 'Derek,' he said. 'This band thing. Just wanted to tell you, I'm in.' And without a word, left the room.

Derek and Greg looked at each other. 'Told you he'd change his mind,' Derek said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

As the bus pulled out of Bristol Coach Station, Ben settled into his seat and closed his eyes. It was a Friday afternoon, the bus no more than half full. Less than a week ago, Amy had left, back to Nottingham and her own life. Since then, a lot had happened, and now Ben was going back home, and what he would find at his destination was uncertain. Something was brewing, something that might alter the path he walked upon, and soon, he would find out.

In the interim, Ben had devoted his energies to two things; studying, and his awakening interest in the band. He had to keep his mind occupied and motivated, as he was scared that if he stopped for even a moment, Amy would come flooding in. And he couldn't deal with that right now, it was too much. He felt naïve for letting so much go unsaid whilst she was with him last weekend. Now he was insecure about his place in her life. Should he call her? Text when he wanted to? Probably. But she wanted space, and he had to respect that. No matter how tough it was.

On the Wednesday, Clifton had come over again to work on the presentation of *Shame*. The weeks were slipping by, and they now had less than a month to get it sorted. After the seminar, Ben had tried to put him off, make some excuse to get out of it, but Clifton was like a dog with a bone. I'll come round at four, he had said. And, oh, will Natasha be there? Which was the main reason for his enthusiasm. The guy was as transparent as glass. Ben wondered why it got to him so much. There was no way Natasha would go for someone like that, even if she was single. Clifton was too much, plain and simple. A part of him wanted to shout in Clifton's face, tell him he was living in a dream world if he thought he had a chance. Equally, he was quite happy to let him make a fool of himself by asking her out. What worried him was how Clifton would take the rejection. Not very well, he thought. Could send him right off the rails, and if someone like that became unstable, it spelt danger.

But, as it turned out, the afternoon went smoothly. When they got back, only Catherine was in, studying in her room. No Natasha. Clifton had asked if she was at work, and Ben thought she probably was, but instead lied and said she was out with friends. For some reason, he hadn't told Clifton about Tyler. Fuck, let him find out for himself. As long as I can be there to see the look on his face. Clifton had sulked then, but they managed to flesh out a proper schedule for the presentation. It was going to be hell. The first of the presentations had taken place that very day, and the couple who spoke were very confident, really knew their stuff, and got excellent feedback from Mr Symonds. A tough act to follow.

As luck would have it, ten minutes after Clifton had left, Ben practically having to drag him out the door, Natasha waltzed in. He heard the clump as she threw her bag and folder down on her bed. She came into his room as Ben lay on his bed, smoking and watching *Neighbours*.

‘Anything good on?’ she asked. She tapped Ben’s ankles and he swung his legs off the bed. She sat down, crossing her legs, shaking her hair like the women did in the shampoo adverts.

‘Yeah, *Neighbours*. I’m a big fan.’

She looked at him, amused. ‘I bet you are. Haven’t seen you for a few days, how’s things?’

Meaning, what’s the score between you and Amy. They hadn’t spoken much since Amy had left, but after that meeting with Natasha on the stairs, her curiosity had been aroused. ‘Yeah, I’m OK. Struggling on as always. Clifton’s just been round.’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘*And?* What’s your point?’

He smiled. ‘No point. Just saying, that’s all.’

‘Hmmm. Whatever. Tell him I said hi, next time you see him.’

‘Sure.’ Ben turned back to the screen.

‘So,’ Natasha said, ‘when’s Amy going to be down next? I must say, I really liked her. You make a great couple.’

I knew it, he thought. After the gossip. Make the small talk, then get right to the nitty-gritty. He muted the TV. ‘Yeah, I like her too. But, you probably won’t be seeing her for a while. We’re, how do you say it, taking a break from each other.’

A mixture of surprise, sadness and something else spread across Natasha’s face. Relief, perhaps? That he was, strictly speaking, no longer in a relationship? Ben told himself he was dreaming. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Ben, I’m really sorry. What happened? I thought you two seemed happy.’

So he paraphrased how they had left it, going into more detail than he intended. After, Natasha said, ‘No offence Ben, but it seems like you don’t know whether you’re coming or going. Maybe she’s giving you an excuse so she doesn’t feel guilty about seeing other guys. Like she’s asking your permission or something. To me, it sucks.’

‘If she wants to see other blokes, there’s not a lot I can do about it, is there? Besides, maybe she is right. We are only young, after all.’ He lowered his voice. ‘It hurts, you know? She’s the only girl I’ve ever loved. I can’t just give up on her.’

To his surprise, Natasha took his hand. ‘I know. Sometimes, when Tyler has one of his mad, jealous moments, I wonder what the hell I see in him. Then, he does something so sweet, and so romantic, that I can’t help but love him.’ She took her hand away. ‘In my humble opinion, you should talk to her again. Try and pin her down one way or another.’

‘You’re probably right. Hell, maybe the girl of my dreams is waiting round the corner, and in a month’s time I’ll be wondering what all the fuss was about.’

Natasha turned at the door and smiled. ‘Well, stranger things have happened. Oh yeah, I nearly forgot. My sister’s coming down next weekend for her birthday. I told her everyone would be coming out to celebrate, and that includes you. And J, if you want. The more the merrier, as far as I’m concerned.’

‘Thanks. I’ll keep it free.’

‘You do that. And Ben? If it’s any consolation, if you and Amy don’t sort it out, then it’s her loss.’

He blushed. ‘Cheers. Now get lost, you’re embarrassing me.’

She stuck her tongue out and threw a cushion at him. ‘Cheeky sod.’

They laughed together.

And his mood had improved, until yesterday evening, when the phone rang. Catherine shouted down that it was for him. He bounded up the stairs.

‘Hello?’ He was out of breath. Got to stop smoking.

‘Ben?’

It took a second to recognize the voice, and when he did Ben felt guilty at taking so long to do so. ‘Dad. Hi. How are you?’

‘Long time no chat, Ben. It’s been what, over a month?’

Ben winced. ‘I know Dad, I’m sorry. You know how it is, time gets away from you sometimes. Everything’s going well though.’

‘Good. I’m glad. Listen, I’ll cut to the chase. You doing anything this weekend?’

‘Not that I can think of.’

‘Because I think it might be an idea if you come home. Your mother and I have got a few things we need to discuss with you, and I think it would be better if we did them face to face.’

Ben’s thoughts returned to the conversation he had had with Mum. That stuff about Dad’s job. Redundancy fears. He felt cold in his belly. ‘Dad? This isn’t about your job, is it? Because Mum told me that there were possible cutbacks on the horizon. Is that what this is about?’

Dad sighed. ‘Look, when is the earliest you can get back here?’

‘Tomorrow. I’ve got a lecture in the morning, then I’m free from lunchtime onwards.’

‘Good. Get a bus in the afternoon, and I’ll pick you up from Gatwick, all right? Let me know when you’re an hour away, and I’ll come and get you.’

‘Sure, but why can’t you tell me now? Come on Dad, I know something’s wrong.’

‘Tomorrow then,’ Dad said, and hung up.

It had to be the job. Had to be. A twinge of guilt fluttered in Ben’s stomach. Since Mum had told him that Dad’s job could be in jeopardy, he had assumed she was blowing up everything into biblical proportions. That was her style. But this time... He began to think about the ramifications, if the news was bad. Without a job, the funds would dry up. His bar work, plus Mum’s wages, would not stretch even halfway towards his living costs. So then what? He couldn’t drop out, couldn’t. Although he’d only been in Bristol for a matter of weeks, it felt like a second home. It had given him the independence he craved for, and to go back to how it used to be, well, it didn’t bear thinking about.

But there was something else too, it seemed. Replaying the conversation, Ben realized how maudlin Dad had sounded on the phone. Sighing with every breath, and avoiding any attempt at a straight answer. He’d been used

to that in the past, but this time there was a depth to his father's voice that he was unused to. And he had to wait another day to find out.

Which was what he was doing now. Waiting. But at least he had music for company, thanks to Derek. Earlier, Ben had been throwing clothes into his rucksack, glancing at his watch every five seconds, knowing that he was already pushed for time if he wanted to get his bus. As he rummaged through the chest of drawers for a pair of clean socks, Derek stuck his head round the door.

'You going somewhere?'

Ben turned, black socks in hand. 'No,' he said. 'I just thought I'd rearrange my sock drawer, I'm that bored.'

'OK OK, don't get your knickers in a twist. Je-sus.'

Ben ran a hand through his hair. 'I'm sorry. I'm in a bit of a rush, that's all. Off home for the weekend.'

A mass of CDs landed on the bed. 'A bit of material for you to listen to. Your musical education starts right now.'

Ben sifted through them. 'I've hardly heard of any of this stuff.'

Derek shook his head. 'Why am I not surprised? Well, quiz up, my friend, cos we're going to be playing songs by all these bands. So practise, I dunno, in the shower or something. Get to know them inside out.'

'God Derek, you make it sound like a degree. I'm already doing one of those, in case you haven't noticed.'

Derek grinned. 'This isn't a degree. This is *far* more important than that. Whilst you're away, we'll be relocating to Darren's aunts place to do some jamming. By this time next week, you'll be joining us, ready to sing your little heart out. OK?'

Ben had to smile. Derek was a man possessed. 'OK, OK. I'll get on it, all right?'

'Excellent. Have a good weekend, won't you?'

And now, listening to the songs on his Discman, he was pleasantly surprised. He imagined Derek to have an outlandish, wacky taste in music, but this was straight up rock, and some of the vocals really hit home. There was no way he was half as good at singing, if he was halfway decent at all, but it was nice that Derek had faith in him. And he was determined to repay that faith. He didn't want to let him down.

Ben got to Gatwick later than intended. The bus got snarled up in traffic as they approached the airport, so he disembarked fifteen minutes late. Surprise surprise, no sign of Dad. He smoked a cigarette on the concourse, enjoying the taste after four hours without one, and as he took the final drag, Dad's battered Escort screeched round the corner and pulled up beside him, a cloud of smoke streaming from the exhaust. Dad jumped out, rubbing his hands together and blowing on them.

'Ben,' he said, and stuck out his hand. 'Good to see you.'

'You too,' Ben replied. The old man was looking worn out. His hair was lighter and wispier than Ben remembered, and flapped around his head when the wind blew. He was wearing a leather jacket at least a size too small for

him, dark blue jeans and Reeboks. A guy from the 70's who never realised the decade was over. He took Ben's bags and stuffed them in the boot, slamming the lid with a bang. Ben took his place in the passenger seat, running his eyes around the car, which hadn't changed. Still a banged up wreck.

They drove part of the way in silence, until Ben decided to break it.

'So, Dad, what's with the sudden urge to see me? All this clandestine whispering on the phone? Come on, out with it.'

Dad moved into the fast lane, cutting up a red Mercedes. A horn sounded, and he shook his head, muttering, before answering.

'Look, I think it would be better if we wait until we're home, so your mother can be there. You'll get all your answers then, I promise.'

He changed tack. 'So, how's Mum? I've not been in touch with her as much as I'd like. Last time she sounded OK. Maybe a bit lonely.'

Dad narrowed his eyes. 'Yeah, she said she hadn't heard from you for a while. But no, she's fine. I've been keeping an eye on her, as I promised. I'm trying to get her to give up smoking.'

Ben scoffed. 'Good luck. That's like trying to stop it raining.'

'I know, she's tough as old boots sometimes. Must be where you get it from.'

'Yeah. Something like that.'

Tired of conversation, Ben sank back into his seat. He was expecting something to be vastly different, a new shopping mall gone up on the outskirts of town, or a pub that had been renovated, some detail to be at odds with what he knew. But when it came down to it, the only factor that had definitely changed was him. It was home, and would always hold a space in his heart because of all the memories that were stored within these boundaries. Good and bad. Now though, he felt he had left it behind. Things here were quiet, peaceful, comfortable, secure. And that had been all he ever wanted. Now it seemed boring in comparison to Bristol, with no vibrancy and no excitement.

When they got home, Mum sat at the kitchen table. A half smoked cigarette lay in an ashtray in front of her. Not having much success at giving up, obviously. When he walked in, she came back from wherever her mind had been and gave him a hug. Her bones were visible through her clothes, and she was shivering.

'It's good to see you,' she said, looking him up and down. 'You're looking well.'

Wish I could say the same for you, he thought. Her eyes were tired and pale, cheekbones gaunt, hair messy and washed out. 'Thanks,' he mumbled, not sure what else to say, but then Dad came in carrying his bags.

Mum smiled. 'Look at him, anyone would think he'd been lifting weights.'

'Feels like I have,' Dad complained, massaging a shoulder. 'Could do with a cup of tea after that.'

'That's my cue,' Mum said. 'Ben, why don't you take your stuff upstairs

and I'll put the kettle on. Then we can have a chat.'

Ben nodded and went to unpack. His room was unchanged. A stale smell of smoke hung in the air, so he opened the window and spent a minute taking in the view that he knew like nobody else. Everything the same, and he felt something, but couldn't place what it was. Perhaps a feeling that he was being dragged into the past by returning here. It was too quiet, so he whacked on one of Derek's CDs. As the album progressed, he found himself singing along, almost without effort, testing the reflexes of his voice. It felt great, and he wanted to stay in the room, in the moment, safe in *his* window of time, with nothing on his mind except the music. But he had to go downstairs eventually, and curiosity was eating away at him, so he smoked a quick cigarette, washed his face, and went back down.

Mum and Dad were deep in conversation, chairs close, knees almost touching. He cleared his throat, and they came round, as guilty as two kids with their fingers caught in the penny jar. Mum put down a cup of tea, and he took his place at the table, a scene of so many conversations over the years, ranging from the simple to the serious. He had a feeling this was going to be one of the latter.

'Two sugars, just the way you like it.' He took a gulp, burning his tongue on the scalding fluid, then held the tea in his mouth until it cooled before swallowing.

'So,' he said, 'I take it the reason I'm here is because of you Dad, isn't it? Mum told me a while back that you were having job trouble. Is that true?'

Dad sat back in his chair, stared at the ceiling. Mum shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. Then Dad took a breath and said, 'Basically, yep. I've been made redundant.'

A lump of lead formed in Ben's stomach, and instantly, permutations began to fly around his mind, all of them selfish. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

Dad nodded. 'Thanks. To be honest, it's not much of a surprise. There have been whisperings around the office for ages. I guess you keep telling yourself that it won't happen, that things will pick up eventually. Not this time. But it's not like I'm the only one. I think about half my colleagues are in the same position.'

'So, what are you going to do now?'

'That's a good question. I'm pretty well qualified in the industry, I mean, I should be, considering I've been in the job nearly twenty years. But I'm not getting any younger, and it would be easy to find someone your age who could do a similar job just as well. But I'll find something, eventually.'

Ben drank some more tea. Better do it quick, he thought. Otherwise I won't be able to survive at uni on what I've got. He pushed the thought out of his mind.

'I've got some other news, too,' Dad was saying. His hands were shaking. 'I've broken up with Andrea.'

Ben's mouth dropped open. Dumped? Jesus, talk about hitting a man while he's down. A part of him, although he didn't want to admit it, was glad. Maybe there was a chance he would get back together with Mum. It

seemed near to impossible, but he clung to that thread. ‘God Dad, that sucks. What happened?’

Dad smiled. Tears formed in his eyes, but he blinked them back. ‘How could you say it? I guess she traded me in for a younger model.’ He looked at Mum, who was chewing a fingernail. ‘I think the age difference might have taken its toll, although I never thought it would. It hasn’t helped, this work stuff. I’ve been moping around a little bit, and it caused some resentment between us. Either that, or the karma wasn’t right, or it was affecting her aura. Whatever, it doesn’t really matter.’

‘So your father’s moved back in here,’ Mum said. She reached for a cigarette, avoiding Dad’s stare of disapproval. Ben was stunned. Dad moving back in was not a good idea, so he said so.

‘It’s only temporary,’ Dad said quickly. ‘Just until I find somewhere else. It’s not like I can afford it at the moment, is it?’

‘And what was I supposed to do?’ Mum added, noticing Ben’s dark look. ‘I couldn’t throw the poor man out on the street, could I?’ She lit the cigarette with a match, shook it out. The charred remains smouldered in the ashtray.

‘I guess not.’ But he knew Mum’s hidden feelings, and also knew that when Dad left, the loneliness would hit harder than ever.

‘Anyway, what this all boils down to is keeping your situation under control. Because, for now at least, our financial clout has halved.’

Dad took up the theme. ‘We’ve worked it out, and there is some money saved in various places. I’ve got a stack of shares that I can sell, and an ISA I can cash in, and one or two other bits and pieces, but until I get another job, things are going to be very tight. And I warn you now Ben, if it keeps on this way, within a few months the money is going to run out. And if it does, I’m sorry, but you might have to drop out.’

The lump of lead hardened. ‘But I can’t drop out,’ he stammered. ‘I *can’t*. I’ve only been there a couple of months, and now I might have to *leave*? No way. No fucking way.’

‘Watch your language,’ Dad snapped. ‘That’s the worse case scenario. I’m just warning you, that’s all.’

‘I’ve got my student loan, that can cover it for now, surely? Plus my job, that’ll bring in some extra cash. I’ll get by.’

They spent the next hour batting around the figures. Whichever way you looked at it, prospects weren’t brilliant. Although his student loan was a substantial amount, when you took away another nine months of rent payments, there was little left for everything else. Food, bills, transport. Even with the pub job, there would still be a major shortfall.

But when it came down to it, all of that was superficial. He just didn’t want to leave. Even though the circumstances were beyond his control, it would feel like a failure, coming back here. Admitting defeat. And he had no idea what he would do for a job. The main reason he had chosen to study English was because it left his options open. Get a chance to do something he enjoyed and worry about a job after graduation. If I get that far. He thought

about Bristol, the people he had met, and it seemed so distant, almost as if he had imagined it. Natasha popped into his head, and the thought made him smile. That crystallised his thoughts. There's no way I'm leaving. Whatever happens, I won't leave. I can't.

Dad went into the living room to watch TV, so Ben took the opportunity to quiz Mum further. 'You really think it's a good idea, Dad moving back in? I mean, after what you told me before I left, it's not going to be too good for you emotionally.'

'My feelings don't come into it. In this case, it's a question of doing what's right. Sure, it'll be hard, but I want to be there for him. He's going through a rough time. And before you ask, he's sleeping in the spare bedroom, so there's no problem.' She arched her back. 'Anyway, let's hear about you. Tell me what you've been up to.'

So he did, painting a picture of a harmonious existence, which in fact wasn't too far from the truth. She sympathised when he told her about Amy, but said not to give up just yet. He left out stuff about the band, not wanting to jinx anything. Better to wait until it was definitely going to happen.

Afterwards she said, 'Well, I can see why you don't want to leave. It sounds as if you're having a ball.'

On that, he could only agree.

The rest of the weekend passed without incident until Ben was getting ready to make the journey back to Bristol. He was full up after Mum's roast dinner, and the two glasses of wine that accompanied the meal made his head feel light. He sat in the easy chair by his bedroom window, thinking. No matter what, he thought, I will always feel safe in this room. Shut the door on the world, and keep the demons out. His mobile rang.

Amy.

'Hey,' he said. 'How are you?'

'Good. Thought I'd ring and see how *you* were doing.'

'Oh, OK. I'm at home at the moment actually, come back to see Mum and Dad. Feels strange, being back here, y'know?'

'I imagine it does.'

'So,' he said, 'what have you been up to?'

'This and that. Actually Ben, the reason I was ringing you...well, basically, I'll come out and say it, I'm starting to feel an interest for somebody else. I want you to know that, to hear it from me. We've been out as part of a group before, me and this guy, but I don't know, we've become a lot closer. Ben, you still there?'

Ben was flat on the bed. Standing suddenly seemed like a bad idea. 'I'm still here,' he whispered.

'What are you thinking?'

'Honestly? Jealousy. A little bit of anger. But mostly, fucking depressed.' His voice wavered. 'Shit, I'm sorry. I know we've talked about this before, but it still hurts.'

'God, I'm sorry. I should have done this face to face. I've ran this

conversation over in my head a million times, trying to play it right. You deserve better than this. Than me.'

'Don't say that. Please don't. Anyway, who is this guy? Not James, is it?'

'What? Oh no, please. It doesn't matter who it is.' She was crying now, and Ben had to hold the phone away from his ear. He bit on his knuckle, and his teeth left white crescents across his fingers. 'God,' she moaned, breath heavy with sobs. 'God, what have I done? Two years with you, and I end it on the phone. You must think I'm a heartless bitch.'

He nodded, but said, 'No. Of course not. In a perverse way, I'm glad you told me. After you left that weekend, I was in a bit of a state. I didn't know what to think. Even though we talked it out, there was no way of making a decision, we just had to see how it turned out. And this is how it turned out. Whoever he is, he's the luckiest guy in the world.'

She laughed and cried at the same time. 'Jesus, Ben. I swear I'll never meet anyone as understanding as you. You're one amazing guy, you know that?'

'So I've been told.'

'I want you to know one thing. Everything that I said in Bristol was true. I meant every word. I wasn't trying to fob you off, just be as honest as I could. Which wasn't much, but the best I had at the time. And I want you to know, I'll never forget that night for as long as I live. It doesn't get any better than that. It's the best memory I'll ever have.'

'Me too.'

'I'm sorry it turned out like this. And I'm especially sorry for doing it this way. I know it's cowardly, and you have every right to hate me for it, but I had to tell you now, rather than string it out.'

'I understand. So, I guess this is goodbye.'

'It's never goodbye, I hope. We'll still see each other, at home in the holidays. And we should keep in touch, if you want to. I'll always want to know what you're doing.'

'Come and see my band play,' he said. 'I'll get you tickets.'

A brief moment of silence. See, that'll teach you. Don't know *everything* about me, do you? He was surprised at the intensity of feeling, this sharp burst of pure hatred.

'I didn't know you were in a band.'

'Yeah, well, there you go. Another stupid dream, really.'

'I think it's *great*. I want front row tickets, you promise?'

And the hatred went, just like that. She never questioned, never doubted. Always believed in him, no matter what. Never scoffed at his dreams. Who's going to believe in me now? 'Sure. Look, I've gotta run, Dad's giving me a lift to the bus station soon. Not that he'll be ready on time, you know how it is.'

'Yep,' she said. 'I'll see you, Ben. Hopefully, I'll always be seeing you.'

'Bye,' he said, and hung up.

Fuck. Fuck. He ran his eyes round his room, seeing all the memories of

Amy stored within these walls, the photographs of her, the hours they had spent in this room, this bed, her head resting on the pillow, waking him up with a kiss that went on forever. The screen light went out on his mobile and he looked at it dumbly. Then it all came, everything at once, and he threw the phone at the wall. The plastic casing ripped off the back of the phone and flew under his bedside table. He buried his head in the duvet until the crying passed and his eyes stung. He was completely lost, but knew one thing for sure. This room would never feel safe again.

And telling his parents the news didn't make things any easier. It was all the usual clichéd platitudes, but he took it in good grace, staying quiet mostly, not bothering to placate or humour them, content to let it slide and hibernate with his thoughts. Only he knew the real truth, and that was enough.

So he was thankful to have the three-hour journey back to Bristol to contemplate and reflect. Sure, Amy could have done a better job of ending it. Doing it on the phone was a bit low. For now, it was tough trying to imagine a future without her, having to stop himself reaching for the phone to tell her what he had done that day, not being able to hear her laugh at one of his anodyne jokes, knowing that there was someone else who was doing the job that he no longer could. He thought about this guy, tried to picture his face, his smile, and then the image turned sour, seeing Amy kissing this guy, her arms around him, tongue pushed into his mouth. He felt sick. But deep down, he didn't hate the guy. He really was lucky, to have wooed a girl like Amy. He supposed he should have felt more anger, more rage towards her, towards them both. But he didn't. There was only emptiness. He switched on his Discman, and wondered if the band would ever take off. Because right now, he thought, it's all I have.

When he finally got home, he heard voices upstairs, mainly Derek's, and went up to join them. When he got there, the living room was jam-packed. Derek sat on the floor in a Ramones T-shirt, faded jeans and no socks. Greg was on the sofa in his trademark jacket, Darren full of tattoos in the corner. A bloke Ben didn't recognize sat next to Greg, with brown hair tumbling around his shoulders, dark skin, and black eyeliner. At the dining table sat Catherine, watching the boys with amusement, and Natasha and Tyler, empty plates in front of them, a half empty bottle of wine by Tyler's left arm.

'Ah, the wanderer returns,' Derek exclaimed, head tilted back to look at Ben. 'Good weekend?'

With no available sofa space, Ben stayed standing, feeling like he was on stage. 'Not really,' he said.

But Derek wasn't listening. 'There's someone I'd like you to meet. The final piece in the jigsaw, if you want. Ben, this is Rodrigo, our new bass player. We snapped him up after Greg and I saw him in a band in town. They were shit, and I persuaded him to give us a go.' He grinned from ear to ear.

'Nice to meet you,' Rodrigo said, shaking hands.

'And you,' Ben said, scrunching up his eyebrows.

'My Dad's Spanish,' Rodrigo replied, as if that made perfect sense.

‘Hence the name.’

A half Spanish goth, Ben thought. Well, stranger things have happened.

‘So, did you listen to that stuff I gave you?’ Derek asked. ‘You’d better, or I’ll have your guts for garters.’

‘Relax. I’ve been on a bus for nearly four hours today, so I’ve had plenty of time.’

‘Excellent. Because now we’re complete, so the real work starts here.’

He puffed up for his big speech. ‘Any chance the five of us get from here on in, it’s practice, practice, practice. Now, we can use this basement whenever we want. Rodrigo’s Dad’s pretty minted, so we’ve got hold of some amps and mics and shit. All we need now is some time to get our sound right. A few sessions will sort that out, and then we’re ready to go. I’ve got a few ideas for the location of our first gig, and I reckon sometime in the New Year, we’ll be ready. That gives us two months or so. All good, gentlemen?’

Three nods from the others, but Ben said nothing. A smirk came from the corner. Tyler, trying not to laugh into his wine. Ben felt a rush of blood. ‘All good,’ he said. Now the room had settled down. ‘You know what, Derek? What happened to me this weekend? I got home, and I find out that my Dad’s been made redundant, and I might have to quit uni. Which is fucking terrific.’ All eyes were on him now. ‘And then, just to cap it off, my girlfriend goes and dumps me. Over the fucking telephone. So now what have I got? Absolutely bugger all. This time next year, I could be talking about uni whilst taking orders for Big Mac and fries. So yeah, right now I haven’t got anything in my life except this band. So let’s fucking go for it, and see what happens. Because no one can take it away from us. And those who mock,’ looking at Tyler now, who held his gaze, ‘can go fuck themselves. This is about us, and nobody else.’ His voice trailed off, and he realised there were big tears in his eyes, expressing some emotion he couldn’t define.

No one said anything, but Derek gave the slightest of nods, an understanding passing between them. Ben returned the gesture, and turned and left the room, leaving a sea of jaws scraping the carpet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Clifton had been thinking about this day for weeks. He woke up feeling good, possibly the best he had in a long time. Now, having no fear about waking Dad, there was no more creeping about. Everything had changed.

And that's down to you. You, and nobody else.

Which it was. Since he had stood up to Dad, the old man had become a non-existent part of his life. He hardly ever saw the fucker. The house was ghostly silent. The only evidence Dad even lived there was the stack of bottles in the recycling bin, a mountain of green glass. But that was fine, and he didn't care. Dad could drink himself into an early grave if he wanted to. And when their paths did cross, all he had to do was puff up his chest, get some steel into his eyes, and Dad would shrink into the nearest corner and hide behind his drink. All the years of put-downs were behind him. The boot was on the other foot, and he had two people to thank for that. Mum, obviously, for she had stuck by him when nobody else would, given him strength when he needed it most, taught him about control and getting what you want no matter what. When he was down at the shed, in his comfort zone, she was there with him, every step of the way. With her beside me, he thought, I'm strong. So strong, nothing can touch me.

And the other, the one who consumed every waking thought and need, was Natasha. It was proven that they would be together. He went back to that first meeting, the glances that had passed between them over a smashed jar of pasta sauce. She wanted him, and was waiting for him to make a move. The fact that she was beautiful was only a side issue, the icing on the cake. It was true that he had never met a better-looking girl. Those legs, the apple green of her eyes, it fulfilled every masturbatory fantasy and then some. But it was more than that. She had treated him like a human being, showing the right amount of sympathy when hearing about Mum, paying him a compliment when he was polite or respectful. Now it was time to show his feelings, wait for her to reciprocate, and then his life would finally start.

And he wasn't nervous. This was the strange thing. He knew that Mum would be by his side, giving encouragement, breathing substance into him with every heartbeat. Natasha would see this and be able to see past the superficial and into his soul.

He checked himself over one more time, had a cursory stroll round the house. Empty. Maybe, when Natasha said yes, he could bring her back here, kick Dad out, and spend hours making up for lost time, all the years he had wasted. The thought gave him a fuzzy hollow in his stomach.

Quick glance at the watch. He knew that Natasha worked on a Monday from ten until three in the shop. Over the last few days he had shadowed her movements, walking a distance behind, seeing when she finished lectures. One stroke of genius had been to seek out her boss and find out what hours she would be working this week. He made up some story about being her

study partner, but I haven't got a way of getting in touch with her, could you tell me when she's working next? The old coot swallowed it whole. Study partners. They were going to be so much more than that.

It was a perfect day. It was great having the car back, feeling brand new, a gentle breeze blowing, windows down, autumn sun shining. Right about now, Natasha would be going for her lunch break, and more often than not she sat upstairs on the terrace, eating and smiling without a care in the world. Usually alone. The ideal spot.

And that was where he found her, chewing on a sandwich, long hair blowing out behind her. Even in a tatty work uniform, she made his heart turn over. He watched her take tiny bites, stopping to prod at her mouth with a tissue, then take a sip of water. So beautiful, so perfect, so mine.

Go on then. Make her yours.

He looked around, took in the surroundings. Behind Natasha, a couple sat holding hands across a table, staring at each other. To his left, a group of guys were huddled around a newspaper, pointing and laughing. Someone dropped a crisp packet and it fluttered past, gaining speed as the wind gathered force. The sky darkened momentarily as a cloud passed over the sun. He wanted to remember everything, drink it all in, so he could recount every detail in years to come. Every detail of the day his love was sealed. He walked over.

'Mind if I sit here?'

For a moment he thought she hadn't heard. He stared at her throat. 'What?' she murmured. 'Oh, Clifton, hi. Sorry, I was miles away. Work does that to you, gives you loads of time to think. Sure, take a seat.' She shifted over, and when he sat down, landed right on her water bottle, which crushed under the impact. It contained no more than dregs, but he still felt like an idiot. 'Shit, I'm sorry,' he stammered, wiping the back of his jeans. 'That was real dumb.'

She giggled. 'That's OK. I wasn't that thirsty anyway. Seems you're taking a leaf out of my clumsy book. Maybe I should get you a job, you'd fit in great.'

He smiled. 'Sounds like an excellent idea.' He sat back down, out of the wet patch, closer to Natasha. He could smell her scent, her bare leg inches from his. 'So, how's everything going?'

She shrugged. 'Oh, you know, reasonable. I don't seem to have enough time to stop and catch breath at the moment. What with one thing and another.'

Now. Do it now.

'Got any plans for the weekend?'

'I have, actually. My sister's coming down to see me, which will be good. I've missed her.'

'Oh. I see. Well, I was wondering, well, if you'd like to go out for a drink with me sometime.' Good delivery, hands not shaking. Now you say...

She frowned, turned to face him. He could see a tiny bead of sweat on

her top lip. ‘That depends. Are we talking a drink as friends, or a date kind of drink?’

This wasn’t what you were supposed to say, he thought. Maybe she’s playing hard to get, wants it clearer. Panicking, he said, ‘Does it matter?’

‘I don’t know. But if it’s the latter, I’m going to have to say no.’

‘No? What do you mean, no?’

‘What I said. Look, Clifton, I like you; I think you’re a sweet guy. We’re friends. But that’s all we’re going to be.’

This wasn’t happening. Soon I’m going to wake up. ‘Friends? But, but I want more than that. And I think you do too.’

For a horrible second he thought she was going to laugh, but all she did was shake her head. ‘Well, I don’t know what gave you *that* idea, but you’re wrong. Besides, I already have a boyfriend. So whatever impression you’ve got, I’m sorry, but it hasn’t come from me.’

He looked up, Dark grey lines danced in front of his eyes. ‘Boyfriend? Who?’

‘It doesn’t matter who it is. It’s irrelevant. All I can say is that it’s never going to happen for us. I’m seeing someone, and that’s all there is to it. Like I say, I’m sorry.’

‘But I’m in love with you,’ he blurted.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Natasha said. ‘You hardly even know me; certainly not well enough to say something like that. It’s good that you can say it, and maybe in your own mind, you believe that you are. But that’s all it is. A fantasy. If that sounds cruel, again, I’m sorry.’

He was speechless. How? They were meant to be, and she was saying this? She had it all wrong, I have to make her see! ‘But...’

She stood, smoothed out the creases of her skirt. ‘Look, I’ve got to get back to work. Are you going to be OK?’

He nodded once, just to get her out of there. ‘Sure.’

‘Hey, stop by the house though, won’t you? I know you and Ben have this presentation to work on.’

He stared at his feet. ‘Yeah. Perhaps.’

She gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t give you the answer you wanted.’

He sat, head in his hands. Mum was silent too, and he felt helpless. He was drowning in Natasha; everything up to that moment and beyond had been shattered. A boyfriend. Whoever that fucker was, he was going to pay. Pay for sticking a knife into him. He would make her see, make her want him. It wasn’t over. He wasn’t going to lose it now.

Ben stepped off the bus and into a puddle, splashing water up his leg. He shook his head, glanced at his watch, and realised he had time for a cigarette before hitting the library. He had another essay due, and the St Matthias library was a little threadbare for what he needed. Most of the decent literature had already been snapped up, so the main campus library was next on the agenda.

He lit up and wandered in, still unsure of where he was heading. The campus was a maze of harsh brick and depressing grey angles. He was about to stop and ask someone for directions when Natasha came round the corner, head bowed and in a hurry.

Clifton got slowly to his feet, wiped his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths, as if that action would rid his mind of Natasha. It didn't. But he wasn't going to let go that easily. Oh no. I'm going to be back, in her life always, until she sees the light. He was sure that she felt the same about him, and this was just a temporary relapse on her part. The boyfriend thing was no more than a ruse. And if it were true, in the end it wouldn't really matter. One way or another, whoever the bloke was, he was going to be out of the picture. Whatever it took. For now though, all he wanted was to get home, back to the shed, start to make plans to win Natasha. Just thinking about it made him feel a little better. He got up and began to walk.

'Natasha,' Ben said, but she didn't hear him, so he raised his voice and repeated her name. This time she looked up, saw him and walked over. A watery smile crossed her face.

'Hi Ben,' she said, tucking loose strands of hair behind her ear. 'Finally decided to join the big boys, have you?'

'Something like that. Tell you the truth, I'm kind of lost. I'm only looking for the library, it can't be *that* difficult, can it?'

She smiled. 'Well, not for *most* people. Look, I'll show you where it is. Come on.'

He picked up his bag and followed.

Clifton was trudging by, every step harder than the one before, when he caught Natasha out of the corner of his eye. Everything stopped except the hammering of his heart. He nipped behind a pillar, still stunned by her beauty even now, then remembering, and the heartbreak washed back in. But as he turned away, a familiar figure trotted to catch her up, bag swinging over one shoulder.

Ben.

He watched as Ben got beside her, saying something he couldn't make out. Whatever it was, it made her laugh.

He followed.

'Hey,' Ben said, breaking into a jog to catch up, 'don't walk so fast, you'll give me a bleeding heart attack.'

She laughed and slowed her pace. 'Maybe you should quit the weed then. Might give you some more energy.' Her voice was flat and cold.

'Listen,' he said, as they negotiated a flight of stairs, 'are you all right? You seem a little, you know, troubled.'

She stopped, leaned against a wall. 'You know what, you're quite a perceptive guy. I've just had a little chat with Clifton. He asked me out.'

Ben took a step back, wiped sweat from his forehead. ‘*Really?*’

‘Yes, really. It turns out you were right, he has taken a shine to me. It was quite sweet, in a strange, heart-on-your-sleeve type way.’

He hoped he knew the answer, but asked the question anyway. ‘And?’

She glared at him. ‘What do you think? I turned him down, of course. In case it escaped your notice, I’m with Tyler. I told Clifton that. He said he was in love with me.’

‘He said *that*? Blimey.’

‘But I told him he was being stupid, that he didn’t know me well enough to say something like that. It took the wind out of his sails.’

‘Good. Not that it upset him, but that he took it OK. I wonder about him, I really do.’

‘He’ll get over it. I don’t feel particularly pleased about it, because he looked devastated. But it’s best to be upfront about these things, otherwise they can drag on.’

He nodded, and started walking again. In love with her. A small part of him had respect for what Clifton did. The guy was an unstable weirdo, but even so. He had the courage of his convictions, which was something. But mostly he was glad that she had knocked him back. Clifton might not know it now, but in time, it would get easier. Or maybe I’m talking crap, as Amy had only been gone a day, and it was the hardest day of his life.

Natasha said, ‘So, that’s my bit of news. How are you? What with Amy and all. Must be so difficult.’

He shrugged. ‘Well, some hours are harder than others. I have to keep reminding myself that we’re not together any more. Like, I was walking past this movie poster earlier, and I said to myself, Amy’s been banging on about seeing this film for ages, we’ll have to make plans to see it. Then I realised that we’re over, and it really made me sad. But I’ll get through it.’

‘It sounds like you need something to take your mind off her for a bit. Which is why my sister’s birthday has come up at just the right time. Go out, have a few drinks, let your hair down. You are still coming, aren’t you? And J as well?’

‘Sure. And so is J, last time I spoke to him. We’re looking forward to it.’

‘That’s good. Me too.’ They arrived outside the library. ‘Well, here we are.’

He smiled. ‘Thanks for showing me. Without you, I’d have been wandering around this time tomorrow.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘It’s funny, with me and Amy, you knew exactly what the situation was, miles before I did. Considering I know her better than practically anyone. And with Clifton, it turned out that I was right about him when you were unsure. It seems we know each other pretty well. Sorry, I don’t know where I was going with that.’

‘That’s OK. I know what you mean.’ She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. ‘It’ll get better for you, trust me. As the alcoholics say, one day at a time.’

‘I guess so.’

‘Don’t work too hard, will you? I’ll see you at home.’

‘Bye,’ he said, and walked up the steps to the library, feeling the press of her lips on his skin.

A few steps behind, Clifton saw everything. And when she kissed him, hot sparks flew through his head. Ben. He’s the boyfriend. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t worked it out sooner. How he looked at her. When they laughed together. The favours she did for him. It all fell into place. She chose him, that fucking waster, over me? Although consumed with jealousy, the thought made him smile. If that’s the competition, she’ll be mine in no time. And because of the presentation, his enemy was right on his doorstep. That would make him easier to work on. Now I have something to cling to. It hardened his mind, and as he walked to the car park, the first inklings of a plan began to form.

Matthew sat in his office, which resembled a branch of the local off licence rather than a place of work. Bottles lay everywhere – on the desk, the floor, the sofa. A fresh beer was sitting by his side. He sat at the computer, trying to edit a long, complicated article for a science journal. He could barely see the screen in front of him. The alcohol abuse had gone on for days now, or was it weeks? Hard to tell, for every day was the same as the last. He dreaded waking up every morning, feeling alone and worthless. All he had to fall back on was booze and his work, and the way things were going he wouldn’t have the latter for much longer. Working as a freelance meant that there were up and down periods, and this time of year was generally slow, but that was only an excuse. Deadlines were not being met, and slowly his client base was moving elsewhere. Only a day (or was it two?) earlier a long-standing client who he considered a friend had severed their working agreement. When he asked why, Clive had said that he could no longer do business with a drunk.

Just like that.

So, wallowing in self-pity and with nowhere to turn, he had shouted a tirade of abuse, hung up, and set about proving that Clive was right. And he was still going.

He downed the remainder of the bottle and got up to take a piss. As he entered the bathroom, the front door opened and closed. Probably Clifton. Although usually, whenever Clifton came home, the door would rattle in its hinges and the windows would shake. Maybe something was up.

He finished up and returned to the study, pausing to crack open a fresh beer. He took two long swallows, shuddering as the beer nestled in his stomach. His kidneys threw out a couple of warning signs, and he knew that he was doing serious damage to his body. But hey, fuck it. That’s life. He walked to the window and looked out, expecting to see Clifton walking down the garden, past the scene of the accident that had changed both their lives, out the rickety gate and down to the allotments. At least, this was what he

hoped. Anything rather than having to make conversation, to even look the boy in the eye. He couldn't remember the last time they'd said more than the odd word to each other. Their relationship, if you could call it that, had altered on its axis since Clifton had stood up to him. Now, *he* was the one who called the shots. And I, he thought, what am I to him now? Nothing. He wanted Clifton to feel something for him, even if it was only hatred. At least acknowledge his presence. Now he acts as if I don't exist. Which was somehow worse.

Footsteps on the stairs. Matthew hurried to the study door, and made to shut it quick, but then Clifton appeared, head bowed, staring at his feet. He looked upset, and Matthew was hit by a wave of sadness. His son was worried about something, and had no-one to talk it out with. So I'll try. I've got to. Even if it ends in tears, I've got to try.

He cleared his throat. 'Clifton?'

Clifton glanced up, but said nothing. His eyes, usually so obsidian, were milky.

'Are you all right?'

'Fuck off,' Clifton snapped, and walked through to his bedroom. This time the door did slam.

Matthew steadied himself, having to lean against the doorframe to regain his balance. That booze must have gone to my head, he thought. I can hardly see straight.

He waited a minute, then knocked on Clifton's door. Without waiting for permission, he entered. Clifton lay on the bed facing away from him, legs curled up. He made no sound.

'Clifton, are you sure you're OK? You look a little pale.'

Clifton rolled over. 'I *told* you to fuck off. Take the hint, will you?'

Matthew moved closer to the bed. 'I'd appreciate it if you didn't swear so much. It's not necessary.'

A snort came from Clifton's mouth. It made Matthew wince. Especially seeing that throbbing scar jerk about like a sail in the wind. 'You are unbelievable Dad, you know that? Do you know how many times you've sworn at me over the years? Using that gutter mouth? Hell, it's probably the only fucking thing you've taught me over the years. Oh, and how to fight like a man. But you'd know about that, wouldn't you? Considering what happened last time you tried to rumble with me.'

All fair enough. Matthew knew he had no leg to stand on. All bad habits Clifton had learnt had come from him, so he had to take sole responsibility. 'I know. I know how awfully I've treated you. But I can promise you, it'll never happen again.'

'And the only reason you're saying that is because you know it won't work any more. Face it, you haven't got any hold over me, so out comes the sensitive act, trying to make up for all those lost years. But you can't. As far as I'm concerned, I don't even have a father. So any problems I do have, I'll work them out myself. Like I've always done. Now, for the third time, *fuck off.*' He clapped a hand to his mouth. 'Oh shit, I swore again,' he said.

‘How careless of me.’ And he laughed his hyena chuckle again.

Matthew got up and left the room without a word. It was hopeless. There was no way he could reach him now. *I don't even have a father.* Which meant that he had no purpose left. A worthless job that barely covered the bills. No friends. A family that didn't speak to him. A wife he loved, gone. And the product of that love, a son he had been unable to accept, a son whose current state of apathy and hatred was down to *his* influence. He returned to the study, pulled the curtains, took a clean bottle of Scotch from the drinks cabinet, and waited for oblivion.

In his room, Clifton stared at the ceiling and tried to think of anything but Natasha. And he found that there was one person who took his mind off her, and that was Ben. The boyfriend. He thought back to that first time he was studying at Ben's, when she came to the door, in the middle of washing up. That droplet of water running towards the river of her breasts... But more than that, how Ben's eyes had followed her into the kitchen. Maybe they hadn't been going out at that point, but all the signs were there. The furtive glances, chance smiles, and that kiss outside the library. His mind raced forward, pushing the scenario on, until Natasha was naked, Ben's body underneath her, crying out his name over and over...

Fuck, he thought. This is driving me fucking crazy. Suddenly the room felt oppressive, the walls closing in. Only one place to be, so he went down to the shed.

For late October, it was still warm out. No need for gloves and scarves yet, and that suited Clifton fine. He hated the drawn out darkness and grey skies of winter, the shifting shadows that crept out from every corner. Right now the sun was sinking, a hazy orange ball that tinged the grass with blood. He thought of Ben again, that holier-than-thou attitude that he wore like a second skin. What does Natasha see in him? For a moment his hatred transferred to her, sickened that she could make such a terrible choice for boyfriend. But girls did that every day. Every day, leaving blokes like him on the sidelines.

Before entering the shed, he inspected the grass on the allotment. All the patches charred from the last fire had grown back, leaving no clue behind. That was the great thing about grass, no matter how much you tried to destroy it, it always came back the stronger.

Sounds like someone else I know.

He could hear Mum laughing, and he joined in. Don't you fucking forget it, Ben. And then he remembered that in two days, it was Wednesday, and Wednesday meant their weekly study session. He thought about how it would pan out. Firstly, he didn't want to go back to Ben's place. Natasha would be there. He couldn't face her, not yet. He would give her a few days to regret her mistake, begin to miss him, and then he would ask her out again. Now was the time to work on Ben, try to poison his mind against Natasha. How to do that? He didn't know right now, but that was why he had come down to the shed, it was his sanctuary, his place to think. So, it left one choice, and that was to come and study back here. Which wouldn't be a

problem. Dad was no worry, he would stay in his wretched study and waste away. Do a bit of work, then give Ben a grilling on a few burning issues. Burning issues. I like that. He stepped into the shed, and the claustrophobic feeling that he felt in his room disappeared. He pulled back the rug, found the loose floorboard, lifted it off and retrieved the petrol can and matches. Now for some fun.

Half an hour later, after an excursion into the woods, Clifton had a nice little funeral planned. Although it was nearing dusk, he had managed to find an old rusty chair that had been dumped in some bushes. On the way back, he had stumbled across a carcass of a fox, its body gutted, blood and entrails scattered around the corpse. The body was hairy and tough to touch, so he picked it up by the tail and dragged it behind him, the chair tucked under his other arm. On the edge of the forest, away from the shed and prying eyes, he doused the body in petrol, set it alight and watched it burn. At first the fur wouldn't catch, but after exhausting half the box of matches, the fox burst into flame. He closed his eyes and inhaled the smell, a coppery odour that filled his nostrils. That could be you, Ben. Submerged in a fiery coffin, flames eating your insides.

It was dark when it was over, and he dumped the remains of the fox back in the forest, replaced the can and matches, and strolled home. His clothes and hair stank of smoke, but that was fine. It was a smell he had grown to love. His spirits had been lifted, and he was ready.

Roll on Wednesday.

'All right, all right, that's enough.' Derek plonked his guitar down in disgust, shaking his head.

'What was wrong with that?' Ben asked, his temper rising. Five times they'd been through this song, and every take he had given it everything.

'Honestly? All of it. Your voice, it's, I dunno, lacking that oomph. There's no passion there.'

'Fucking hell Derek, I'm doing my best. Perhaps you're being a bit of a perfectionist. I mean, it's not like we're The Beatles or anything, is it?'

Darren came out from behind the drums, shirt rolled back to his upper arms, tattoos on full show. 'Let's have a quick break,' he said. 'I'm dying for a fag, and my aunt won't let me smoke down here. Not very rock'n'roll, but there you go. Anyone coming?'

Greg murmured his agreement, and they walked out, footsteps receding as they climbed up to the street. Ben went to follow, but Derek grabbed his arm. 'Hold on a sec.'

Rodrigo said, 'I think I'll go and join them,' and scurried out. Ben turned to face Derek.

'Hey man, I'm trying, all right?' He looked around the room they stood in. It was a shithole, and that was being kind. The walls were a horrible yellow colour, and the only good thing about them was that they kept the sound in. A huge drum kit stood at the back of the room, wedged in the

corner. Then, from the left, came Derek (rhythm guitar), Greg in the middle, the lead and about the only guy with a modicum of talent, then Rodrigo and his bass. Out front was Ben, alone with his mic stand as the thrashing noise that was their 'sound' screamed out from behind him. Being in the basement, it was cold, too. Ben breathed on his hands, trying to rub some warmth back into them.

Derek sighed. 'I know you are. You've got to try and get a bit more into your singing, that's all.'

'Well, maybe I'm not cut out for this. I did try to warn you.'

Derek smiled. 'That defeatist talk has no place here. Look, I know you've got other stuff on your mind. I'm sorry about your girlfriend and everything, but this is the perfect place to let off some steam and *forget* about all that. I don't know about you, but in here, the outside world means nothing. In here, it's all about us. Sure, we're never going to be great. But that doesn't really matter. It's something to believe in, despite the shit that life can throw at us.' He went and retrieved his battered acoustic, which was resting against one of the amps. 'Right. Drag up a stool.'

There was no point arguing when Derek was in this mood, so Ben did as he was told.

Derek strummed a few chords, a green pick held between his teeth. 'Right. I'm going to play this tune, and you're going to sing. It's one we've practised before, so you should know it inside out.'

Ben reached for the microphone, but Derek held up a hand. 'Forget the mic. We'll do this simply, me and you. Try and think of something that'll raise the tempo a bit. Whatever it is, focus on that, and most of the problems will iron themselves out.'

Ben nodded. 'Fine.' As Derek finished tuning, he let his mind wander. It searched around for a bit, but came to rest on Amy, as he knew it would. What was she doing now? On a Tuesday night, when he was stuck down here. Out with her boyfriend, probably. He pictured her face, her body in the throes of orgasm, and a wash of anger surged through him. Never going to be mine, not anymore. The song started up, and he suddenly had no idea of the lyrics, just an image in his head of his girl, his ex, whatever she was now. Here we go then. This one's for you.

The verse began, and the words came out as if he'd known them all his life. As it happened, the lyrics fitted with his state of mind. A tune of rejection and lost love, and now he wasn't singing the song, he *was* the song, walking the same streets, drinking from the same bottle, tearing up over the same girl. His voice took on a deeper, harsher complexion than it ever had, at some points spitting the words in harsh barbs, other times softly mournful and contemplative. As the song came to a close, Derek's guitar became more urgent, and he went with him, hanging on by his shirttails, until he was about to break. Then, with a final sharp note, Derek closed it off and Ben sat, breathless and a little scared.

A smattering of applause came from behind him, and he spun round to find the other three standing there, big smiles on their faces. He had never

seen Greg smile before.

‘Well,’ Darren said. ‘I think we’re back in business, don’t you?’

Derek clapped Ben on the shoulder. ‘You see? God, I should be on *X-Factor*. Agent to the stars, helping humble young singers realise their full potential.’

‘Thanks,’ Ben said, embarrassed and thrilled in equal measure. ‘Thanks a lot.’

‘Hey, no need. There’s a great singer in you, just needs a bit of coaxing to get him out. And whatever you were thinking about, I want to meet her. Come on guys, let’s get back into it.’

Ben smiled. I can do it, he thought. Oh, yes, I can.

Clifton arrived at the seminar nice and early, and sat in his usual seat. He settled into his chair and thought about Natasha, what she was doing now. Probably with Ben, and it made him feel sick, just thinking about it. But that little tryst wouldn’t be going on for long.

Last night, he had gone down to the shed under cover of darkness. On his way out, he had gone through the kitchen drawers and taken a few items. One, a large steak knife, the blade serrated and sharp. Two, a longer carving knife. He ran a finger across the blade, enjoying the smoothness. It felt good in his hand, and he made a few scything swipes. The sound sent shivers through his body, the whistle as the knife carved the air. He loosened his belt and slipped the knives underneath. Dad wouldn’t miss them, and if he did, he could find an excuse.

He restocked his supply of matches, then went out. The moon was high and cast the grass and trees in a milky glow. The houses that flanked the allotment were quiet, the odd bedroom light shining, the occasional flicker of a curtain being drawn. He edged to the woods, careful to be as quiet as possible, and whilst walking, tripped over what was left of the fox. It was now an unrecognisable mess of scorched flesh and blood. Let’s test these babies out, he thought, and dragged the body into the open air. He held one knife in each hand, the steel flashing in the moonlight. He looked at the body, trying to memorise every hair, every piece of flesh and bone and sinew before him. Every detail to be stored and remembered. He held both arms high above his head, closed his eyes, and Ben came to mind. His fingers tightened around the knives, and with a cry, he started in on the corpse.

Five minutes later he sat back, shaking. The scene that greeted him was one of sheer butchery. Flesh and hair was scattered in a huge arc around him. Bits of grey viscera lay like worms amongst the grass. Something else, a pinkish, oozy substance, dripped and slithered. After a second, he realised it was brain matter, and his stomach churned and tipped over. Then he inspected his arms, and saw some of the stuff caked on his fingers, and all of a sudden his throat was hot and he bent and vomited. When done, he kicked the remains of the fox into the bushes. The liquid stuff he couldn’t face, so he went back home, found a large water container, filled it up. He splashed some water on his face as an afterthought, then returned to the scene. Half

the container later, most traces of the foxes internal organs had been erased. In the shed, he placed the knives and matches under the floorboards. The last thing to do was to get rid of his clothes. His t-shirt and jeans were stained with blood, so he stripped to the waist, set the T-shirt on fire, and when it was black, threw it in the corner of the shed beside the rug. He kept his trousers on, checked he hadn't forgotten anything, and left. Back in the kitchen, he shucked off his jeans and buried them at the back of the laundry closet underneath a pile of other clothes. Tomorrow, he would get them in the washing machine, but that would do for now.

He went to bed and dreamed. Of what, he couldn't remember. He slept for ten hours, and woke as if it had been ten years.

In the morning, as he showered, Clifton could feel the effects of his exertions. His diaphragm ached from the puking. The muscles in his shoulders and upper arms were stiff and sore. He took extra care to scrape all the caked blood from under his fingernails. Towelling off, he inspected his face in the mirror. Usually, seeing the scars up close made him shudder. But not today. Today he felt good. Confident. And ready.

Because now, nothing can touch you.

The room was filling up now, and Ben walked in a step ahead of Mr Symonds, who was wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. To Clifton, Ben looked exhausted. No doubt up all night fucking the living daylight out of Natasha. That would make anyone tired.

'Hey,' Ben said as he flopped into his seat. 'Just in time.'

Clifton nodded. 'Had a late one, did you?'

'Something like that.'

I bet you fucking did. He was about to reply, but Mr Symonds went into a long spiel about the forthcoming exam at the end of term. Then the latest presentation began, and like all the others, it was good. Afterwards, Clifton tried to make conversation with Ben, but he was unresponsive. The kernel of jealousy that had formed in Clifton's stomach was growing. He thought of last night and the state of the fox when he had finished with it. Don't underestimate me, Ben. Because something similar could easily happen to you.

Outside, Ben went through his usual lighting up ritual. 'So,' he said, 'I take it you want to study at mine later?'

Clifton thought about it for a second. He wanted to see Natasha again. Just to look at her. Listen to her voice. But it was too soon, and he didn't want to pressure her by hanging around. Let her dwell on things for a while before he moved on her. It wasn't like she was far away. He had her in his mind, his heart, and she would always be there. Which, for now, was enough. Also, he wanted to keep Ben away from her. She could go without her precious boyfriend for a while.

'Actually, I thought we could go back to mine this time. You know, I'm always round at yours, and I don't want to impose. If that's all right with you. I've got my car, so we don't have to get the bus.'

Was that a smile? As Ben threw his cigarette down, the corners of his

mouth lifted ever so slightly, and the blood pumped hot in Clifton's veins. Don't mock me, you cunt.

'Sure,' Ben said.

I don't want to impose. Yeah right. You're avoiding Natasha. Not that Ben blamed him, for he would do the same thing. He knew the pain of rejection, but that was a part of relationships. If you don't run the risk of getting turned down, you're never going to get anywhere. Perhaps Clifton had never asked a girl out before. It must be difficult, having to pluck up the courage when the odds are so stacked against you. But he had done it, and whilst the result hadn't gone as planned, at least he had tried. Sometimes, that's all you can do.

Clifton drove through the suburbs of Bristol towards the city centre. As they edged closer, the trees and gardens made way for the car parks and the shopping centre, huge monoliths that symbolised the change to the urban landscape. Clifton was silent, and Ben noticed his dark eyes flitting about, unable to keep still. He wondered what was going on behind them, what he was feeling. He had a pretty good guess, but wanted to find out for sure, and before he knew it, he was talking.

'Hey, Clifton. I'm sorry to hear about what happened with Natasha. She, uh, mentioned it when I last saw her.'

Clifton's head flew round, eyes and face seething. Red patches mixed in with the white of his scar tissue. 'Yeah? And what the fuck do you care?'

Ben raised his hands. 'Whatever. It just seemed like it was bothering you, that's all. Mate, I think it was fair play that you even asked her. I mean, at least now you know. And it's not your fault that she's got a boyfriend. Looking like she does, it's hardly surprising.'

White spots appeared behind Clifton's eyes. 'And you would know, wouldn't you?'

Ben shifted in his seat. What the fuck was *wrong* with this guy? 'Not really. I've only met him a couple of times. I don't know anything about him. Apart from the fact he looks like he should be in adverts for deodorant. If you know what I mean.'

You're lying, Clifton thought. But then he wasn't so sure. The way Ben had said it, with no expression in his voice, merely stating a fact. 'And who is this guy?'

'As I say, I don't know much. His name's Tyler, he works up in London doing God-knows-what, Natasha's been with him for ages, he's built like a brick shithouse, yada yada yada. Very big deal.'

So it wasn't him. Clifton couldn't believe it. Then he thought of something else. If what Ben had said was true, then there were three of them in this equation. For whatever Ben said, Clifton knew he wanted her. You could tell from his natural dislike of this Tyler. They had that in common at least. Now, the plan changed. He reckoned that with a little manipulation, between them they could fuck Tyler over. If he wasn't in the vicinity all that much, at weekends maybe, then there was a chance they could break them up.

And when that happened, it would be between the two of them, and there would only be one winner. ‘I take it you don’t like the guy that much? Bit of a dick, is he?’

This time, Ben was surprised. Clifton smiled. ‘Honestly?’ Ben replied. ‘Not much. He seems like the jealous type. She could do better, that’s for sure.’

Like you, you mean. And he knew it, then. Before, it was a hunch, but not now. Ben was after her for himself, and all that stood in his way, an obstacle for both of them, was Tyler. That man had better watch out. He felt confident now that she would be his. Ben was no problem. Sure, he lived with the girl, saw her frequently, but if he hated Tyler that much, it would be sure to cause resentment between them. Maybe not now, but in the future. And that would lead her to wonder about her relationship, whether she would be better off with someone else entirely, someone new. And that is where I come in.

Ben was deep in thought as they approached Clifton’s house. The conversation had taken an unexpected turn. For most of it, he had felt the force of Clifton’s pain on him, especially when he was talking about Tyler. But something else, something he had skirted around and never been able to admit. That maybe, just maybe, he liked Natasha more than as a friend. His mind wandered back to her, then to Amy, who only weeks ago had been all he wanted, and he found he was struggling for an emotion to fit. But Natasha, she was alive, exciting, unpredictable. He didn’t want to be lusting after a girl so soon after Amy, especially a girl so close and so unavailable. But it was harder to resist it, and knowing Clifton was interested made it harder, for now he felt in competition, that Clifton was intruding on his private desires. Soon, something was going to give.

Clifton usually enjoyed silences, and this one was no exception. Their little chat had really put the cat among the pigeons. Somehow, it made it more exciting that there were now three men fighting for Natasha’s affections. Tyler had the upper hand, sure. He *was* the boyfriend. But Clifton never had it easy. Every day threw up a struggle, a challenge to overcome, and he was still here fighting. Being alone would depress most people, and break a few of them. But he didn’t care about anything any more, anything that existed at least. His only companion in this world was Mum, and she had done more for him dead than anybody had ever done alive. Everyone else could rot in hell. Except Natasha. She had only been in his life for a short time but already gave him belief, something to strive for and cling on to. She’s my only hope, he thought. Without her, there’s nothing to fill the gap. And that, he decided, is what gives me the edge.

Finally they reached the house, and Ben’s first impressions weren’t great. The small patch of grass that passed for a lawn was thick and overgrown. A green dustbin stood by the front door, already full. Black sacks of rubbish were propped up against the bin. A ginger cat jumped over an adjoining wall and purred around Ben’s legs. He reached down to stroke it.

‘Fucking thing,’ Clifton muttered as the cat nuzzled its face into Ben’s palm. ‘That bloody animal is always sniffing around here, looking for food.’ He bent down to push the cat away.

‘It’s OK,’ Ben said, scratching the cat’s ears. ‘I like cats. It’s that element of mystery.’

‘Whatever. Go on, shoo!’ And he pushed his foot at the cat’s flank. It hissed and scurried back over the wall. ‘Yeah, good riddance. Fucking vermin.’

Inside, Clifton dumped his bag and wandered through to the kitchen. He remembered his jeans, still stuffed in the laundry closet, and vowed to get them washed as soon as Ben left. He opened a cupboard and got down a glass.

‘You want a drink or anything?’

‘Oh, no, thanks,’ Ben replied. He stood in the doorway, living room off to his right. He glanced around the kitchen. Pretty normal, everything you’d expect. He expected a state of squalor, because he couldn’t imagine Clifton being the tidy type. Probably got a houseproud mother.

‘Might as well work upstairs.’ Clifton slung his bag over one arm, glass of water in the other. ‘I think I left some notes in here, I’ll just go and get them.’

As Ben waited, he checked out the living room. Even though it was only mid-afternoon, the curtains were drawn. And all that adorned the walls were photographs, rows and rows of them. Most of them of the same woman. Sometimes alone, sometimes in a couple. He picked one up from the mantelpiece over the TV. The woman had long blonde hair, sunglasses, and a summer dress on. Her smile made the picture, showing all her teeth, in a relaxed pose, not smiling for the camera, but naturally, as if she’d been told a hilarious joke. She looked nothing like Clifton, but then again, Clifton didn’t look like anybody. Except maybe the Elephant Man.

‘Let’s go,’ Clifton said, appearing as Ben replaced the photo. He followed Clifton upstairs, noticing on his way out a half empty bourbon bottle propped up against the couch.

As they went past the study, the door opened and Matthew came out.

‘Oh, terrific,’ Clifton said, and tried to speed up, but Dad blocked his path.

‘Hi Clifton,’ Dad said. ‘How was your day?’

Clifton said nothing.

Matthew turned to Ben. ‘As usual, Clifton seems to have forgotten his manners. I’m Matthew.’

‘Ben. Nice to meet you.’ He eyed Clifton’s Dad up and down. His hair was mussed up and in dire need of a trim. Still had its colour though, a dark brown, bordering on black. On closer observation, Ben could see that the man enjoyed a drink or two. His cheeks were crimson, prominent veins across his face. His gut was threatening to burst the buttons on his shirt. Lastly, there was an underlying smell of booze emanating from him. No doubt whose the bourbon bottle was.

‘Through here,’ Clifton said, motioning to Ben, totally ignoring his Dad.

‘We’ve got work to do.’

‘OK.’ He nodded at Matthew, said goodbye and followed Clifton.

‘Sorry about that.’ Clifton said when the door shut behind them.

‘About what?’ Ben asked, running his eyes around the room. It was spotless.

‘You know, *him*. That worthless piece of shit.’

Ben was taken aback by the ferocity in Clifton’s voice. ‘Your Dad? He seems all right.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Clifton sneered, ‘appearances can be deceptive. He’s nothing but a washed up alcy. But I guess you probably got that from the state of him. Best to forget about him. I have, and it’s the best decision I ever made.’

Ben could see why Clifton was so hard to read, and had some difficulty socially. If he had that much resentment towards his father, it was bound to spill over into the rest of his life. Which made him more nervous, because he could easily become the object of that hatred. Living with Natasha and all. Perhaps it’s better if I leave, he thought. Get out now. But he didn’t want to be another one to walk out on Clifton, as he had the feeling it had been a regular part of the guy’s life. Sure, he was a bit of a fruitcake and certainly had his problems, but even so. He walked to the window and stared out. The view was breathtaking. After the long garden ended, the road behind looped down and onto the city. Behind, a large series of allotments adjacent to a small wood, and beyond that, rows of houses that stretched to the horizon. Now, with the sun on its last legs for the day, soft autumnal light painted an idyllic picture, bathing everything in a warm, yellow tinge.

‘Nice view,’ he said.

‘Yeah, it is, isn’t it? Best part of this crummy old house if you ask me.’

So they worked for a bit, Clifton at his desk, Ben on the bed. Every so often the study door opened and closed, and Clifton’s shoulders tensed. Sometimes he would put down his pen and stare at the wall, eyebrows furrowing, his scar moving in tandem. Ben wondered what was going on in that head, and every option he came up with made him feel uneasy. Most probably it was Natasha, for he could tell his infatuation with her was close to obsession. Or maybe it was Tyler, a possible avenue to relieve some pent-up emotion. He wondered, when it came down to it, how different they really were. Natasha was an important part in *his* life, too. In what capacity, he was still working out.

They thrashed out the remains of the presentation, and when Ben next checked his watch, he realised he was going to be late for work. ‘I’ve gotta be off now,’ he said, gathering up his belongings. ‘My shift starts in just over an hour.’

‘Where do you work?’ Clifton asked.

‘In The Goose on Gloucester Road. You know it?’

‘Not really. Pubs aren’t my thing.’

As Ben got his stuff together, he saw another photograph of the woman from downstairs, and his intrigue got the better of him. ‘This your Mum?’ he

asked, pointing at the photo. 'Whoever she is, she's pretty popular in this house!'

'*And?* So what of it? Yes, it's my Mum.'

'OK, take it easy. I was just asking.'

But Clifton wasn't listening. Well, that was weird. Ask about his Mum, and he tenses up like a bloke in a prison shower. Maybe they don't get on. 'Look, I'm in a bit of a hurry, so I'll see myself out. No need to get up. I'll see you soon.'

'Don't worry, I wasn't going to,' Clifton replied, smiling a grinning rictus that reminded Ben of an insane clown. 'See you later. Oh, and say hi to Natasha for me.'

'Sure,' Ben said, and got the hell out of there. He was approaching the front door when he heard a noise from the kitchen. Startled, he turned as Matthew wandered out, a beer bottle clamped in one hand.

'So,' Matthew said, 'the studying go well?'

'It went OK, thanks.' Apart from the fact your son's got a few screws loose, it was dandy.

'That's good. Clifton could do with a few friends, he's become a bit of a loner these days.' Matthew stared off somewhere. 'Not surprising, considering what happened with his Mum and everything.'

Ben nodded, not understanding what he was talking about. 'Yeah. Must have been hard.'

'It's something you never get over, I guess. Suicide. People think that it's a coward's way out, but I don't believe that. Sometimes, I think it might be the bravest decision somebody could make. But Clifton took it bad. And I have been the most abysmal father. Anyway, I hope you can get some sense out of him, because I sure can't.'

Ben was reeling from all this. Suddenly he felt trapped. In this strange house, talking to a guy he didn't know from Adam who was spilling out all these secrets. 'Sorry, I've got to go. I'll miss my bus.'

'Eh? Oh, yes, of course. It was nice meeting you. Stop by any time.'

Suicide. He couldn't fucking believe it. But it explained a lot. Firstly, the pictures all over the house. Both Clifton and his Dad seemed suffocated by memories. And I bet, he thought, that Clifton has never got over her properly. The way he fell for Natasha so fast. Not surprising if he's had no social interaction with women over the years. So when he sees one he likes, wham, he's emotionally attached to her straight away. Like telling her he was in love with her, when they'd spoken, what? Twice, three times? He thought about Clifton's relationship with his Dad, or lack of one. Clifton had openly admitted that Matthew was an alcoholic. Which could be true, judging by his appearance and that bourbon bottle. Plus the beer. And they didn't seem to talk much, either. Probably the odd snapped word here and there. Keeping the important stuff bottled up inside, hidden from each other. Must be a maddening environment to be in. And that scar too, how did that happen? There was so much swimming beneath the surface.

And, thinking about it more, he could see that Clifton was completely alone. With his Mum dead, all he had was himself. Ben couldn't consider them friends, more like strangers pushed together by academia. He didn't like the guy much, but now felt it was worth making a bit more of an effort. But knowing his feelings for Natasha made it more difficult. Could cause conflict, and no matter what, Ben didn't want to fall out with her. No way.

He was still thinking about this when he got home. As he walked to his room, Natasha called out, 'Hi, Ben.'

He came into her room. She was sitting at her desk, books strewn everywhere. Her hair shone russet under the light of her reading lamp. 'You all right?'

She yawned. 'Oh, you know. Struggling along. I'm *trying* to get some work out the way before my sister gets here. Not much seems to be happening, though.'

'I've just got back from Clifton's,' he said. 'We're still working on this presentation, and, um, he didn't want to come round here this week. So I went to his. He says hi.'

Natasha grimaced slightly. 'Was he all right? Not too upset or anything?'

'Honestly? Damned if I know. There's a lot going on behind the scenes in that family, and I can't quite put it together. I met his old man, and he seems one step away from cirrhosis. Clifton hates him. He called him a worthless piece of shit.'

'That's pretty tough.'

'Yeah, and did you know his Mum committed suicide?'

A hand went to her mouth. 'Oh my God, that's awful!'

'I know. His Dad told me. He was half out of it, but that's what he said. I don't know any of the details though.'

'Who cares? God, I feel really sorry for the guy now. Maybe I was a bit harsh with him.'

Ben shook his head. 'I don't think so. Sure, he's still getting over it, but he will. I feel sorry for him too, but we can't tread on eggshells around him all the time, can we?' He neglected to mention about Tyler. Somehow, it wouldn't score him too many Brownie points. 'Anyhow, I've got work, so I'll leave you to it.'

'OK. Have fun.'

'I'm sure I won't,' he said.

Clifton stayed away from the allotment that night. He needed to think, so got an early night and was now laying under the covers, running things through in his mind. It was all about information, he thought. Now I know where she lives, where Ben works, which will come in handy, and best of all, about Tyler. Now it was time to sit back and wait for his moment. Keep a watchful eye on Natasha, find out more about her. What she likes doing, her movements, her dreams. With Tyler and Ben on the scene, it was going to be difficult. But if it came down to it, he could put the pair of them out of

action. Play them off against each other. Work on this whole jealousy thing. Make Natasha think that Ben's after her, and that will sour their relationship for a start. That still left Tyler, but if he was jealous of her chatting to other blokes, it would be easy to blow that out of proportion. Which would piss her off so much, she would get sick of it and give him the boot, leaving the path open. Easy, when you thought about it.

CHAPTER NINE

‘So, when did you say the others were going to be back? Because I’m *really* starting to get a taste for it now. We *need* to be in the pub.’

Ben skewered some pasta with his fork. ‘I’ve *told* you already. As far as I know, Natasha and Tyler picked up her sister from the station, what, an hour ago now. They’re going for a meal, then coming back here, then we’re going out. Comprende?’

J took a long swig of beer. ‘Fuck me, that’s good! Get us another one, will ya?’

Ben reached into the box of Bud by his bed and produced another bottle. He put his bowl of pasta on the floor, twisted off the cap, and passed the bottle to J, who drained a third of it in one go. ‘You want to be careful there mate,’ Ben warned. ‘Don’t want to peak too soon.’

‘Relax, will you? Unlike you, I know my limits.’ He ate some pasta. ‘Besides, we’ve got some grub to soak it up, and I drank some milk before I came out, like a good little soldier. I’ll be fine.’ He checked his watch. ‘Anyway, if that lot don’t come back soon, we’ll have to go up The Goose and have a couple. Get them to meet us in there.’

‘I’m sure they won’t be long.’

The door opened and they braced themselves, but it was only Derek, who burst into the room. ‘Hey man, guess what?’

‘Look at you!’ J said. ‘You going to a funeral or something?’

Ben smiled. Derek was dressed in black from head to foot. Creased black shirt, black jeans, scuffed black boots. ‘What do you mean? This is one stylish get up.’

‘Looks a bit *Spinal Tap* to me.’

‘Well, there are worse looks.’ He turned to Ben. ‘As I was *trying* to say. What are you doing on the 13th December?’

Ben counted on his fingers. ‘Umm, how about nothing?’

‘Good. Because, my friend, that’s the date of our first gig. I’ve been running around all day trying to sort it out.’

Ben’s stomach folded in. ‘Whaddya mean, 13th December! That’s like, not even a month away!’

‘I know. It’s good, isn’t it?’

‘No, it isn’t good. There’s no way we’ll be ready by then. No fucking way.’

‘*Course* we will. We’ll have at least ten practice sessions before then, and if we haven’t got it by then, we never will. Call it our baptism of fire.’

‘And where are we playing?’

‘At a bar in town. I forget the name of it, but Rodrigo’s Dad knows somebody, who knows somebody else, you get my drift. We were down there this afternoon, and it’s the fucking perfect venue. Intimate, but big enough to get a decent crowd in.’

‘That’s great,’ J exclaimed. ‘So, in what, six months, I’m going to have

to pay to talk to you guys, that right?’

‘You’d better believe it,’ Derek said. ‘Let’s have a beer to celebrate.’

As Ben handed over a beer, thinking about emigrating on the 12th, Catherine came in. ‘So,’ she said, ‘the gig’s on then, is it? That’s great news.’

J wolf whistled. ‘Woo hoo, look at you, girl. Be still my beating heart.’

Catherine blushed. ‘Oh, you think I look all right then?’

‘I do,’ J said. ‘What do you reckon, boys?’

Ben nodded. She was understated in blue and black, figure hugging trousers and light blue top. Her hair was up, which Ben hadn’t seen before, and it really suited her. ‘I agree. You look very nice.’

‘Yeah,’ Derek said, a smile forming, ‘good enough to be one of our groupies. What do you say?’

Ben and J burst out laughing, and Catherine blushed harder. She slapped Derek on the arm, but was laughing as well. ‘Somehow, I don’t think so. You’re a little rough around the edges for me.’

‘Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it, baby.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘If you two are going to be like this for the next month, God help us all.’

‘Don’t worry,’ J said, smiling. ‘I’ll look after you.’

She didn’t return the smile. ‘I’ve got to finish getting ready, but someone let me know when the others get back?’

‘Man,’ J said after she had gone. ‘That girl wants me so bad, and she doesn’t even know it.’

Ben choked on his pasta. ‘Mate, I think that gear’s killing your brain cells.’ He drank some beer. ‘Either that, or you’ve had too much to drink already.’

‘Yeah, yeah. You wait and see.’

Derek left then, off to tell all and sundry about the upcoming gig, and Ben and J finished eating and sat watching *Eastenders*. Ben was thinking about the night ahead. After a hard week, he thought, it’s time to let my hair down. No more thinking about Amy, or Clifton, or this fucking gig. Just a few beers, have a laugh, and see where the wind takes us.

The end credits were rolling when the door opened again, accompanied by giggling. Ben and J looked at each other. ‘This must be them,’ he said, and stood up. Then Natasha came stumbling into the room, still laughing. ‘*Ben*,’ she shouted, and threw her arms round his neck. ‘How *are* you?’

He took a step back. ‘Doing better than you, it seems. How much have you had?’

She struck a pose, flashing her eyelashes at him. ‘I’ve only had a *couple*. We got some wine with our food.’ She saw J sitting on the bed. ‘And Jason as well. How’s things, bad boy?’

‘You know, not bad.’ But he wasn’t really with it, his eyes were all over her. Not that Ben could blame him. Tonight, Natasha was wearing a scoop necked red top that pushed her breasts up and out, a short black skirt that accentuated every curve, and knee high boots. Four or five bangles shook on

her wrist as she talked. They weren't the only things that shook.

'That's grand. All dressed up and ready to go, the pair of you. Excellent. First, you *have* to meet the birthday girl. NAT!'

And at the door was the spitting image of Natasha. Dressed in a similar outfit, this time with heels instead of boots, and the skirt to her knees and slashed up one side, exposing creamy flesh. A little fuller in the hips, slightly taller, but otherwise the same. Especially the eyes, which were as mesmerising as her sister's.

'Hi,' she said, coming forward to stand beside Natasha.

'This,' Natasha said, sweeping her arm in an exaggerated arc, 'is Ben. My fellow housemate and upcoming rock star! And this is J, Ben's mate.' They murmured greetings. 'Guys, this is my sister Nat-Nat.'

'Don't call me that,' she said. 'Nice meeting you both. I'm Natalie. That other name is just Natasha's way of being funny. Unsuccessfully, I might add.'

'Yeah? And what do you call her?' J asked. 'Nat-Nat the 2nd?'

Natalie cleared her throat. 'Usually? A bitch.' And they dissolved into fits of giggles.

'Many happy returns,' he said to Natalie after they had calmed down. 'Had a good day so far?'

'Great, thanks. The meal was lovely, and free, which made it all the better. It's been nice.'

Tyler stomped through from the hall. 'Natasha,' he said, 'isn't it about time we were going?'

The atmosphere seemed to drop a notch. Natasha stood up, a little unsteadily. 'Shit. I guess it is.'

Tyler nodded to Ben and J, arms folded across his substantial chest. 'You all right?'

'All good.'

Natasha said, 'Babe, I thought we could start in The Goose, seeing as Ben works there. He said we'd be able to get free drinks if we asked nicely.'

'I did *not*. When did I say that?'

Natasha winked at him. 'Only joking. Some girls from my course are coming down, and we're meeting them in there. That OK?'

'Sure,' Ben said.

'Can we get a move on then?' Tyler pleaded. 'I hate standing around doing nothing.'

'OK, OK. Boys, be ready to go in ten. Come on Nat-Nat, I'll introduce you to the rest of the house.'

'See you in a bit,' Natalie said, getting up. She smiled at Ben and followed Natasha and Tyler out.

'Jesus,' J said. 'I think I've died and gone to heaven. I tell you what mate, we are in for a hell of a night.'

Which turned out to be true.

By the time they got to The Goose, the place was beginning to fill up.

Time had ticked on. Waiting for the girls had turned five minutes into nearly thirty, and as they were leaving, a few spots of rain fell. Which meant foraging for umbrellas and raincoats, cutting into their drinking time even more. But their preparations didn't go amiss, for when they finally got underway the rain had hardened to a steady drizzle.

Ben, J and Derek got in first, and began pushing their way towards the bar. The crowds were three deep, and Ben was glad that he wasn't working tonight. They waited until Ben spotted a gap behind a bloke carrying a tray of drinks that threatened to topple, and manoeuvred past, resting both arms on the bar to mark his territory. Derek and J slotted in beside him.

'Christ, it's busy in here tonight,' Derek said. He brushed a few drops of water from his collar.

Ben was trying to attract the barman's attention. Not someone he knew, which didn't help. The barman was working up the bar from one end, and his colleague was doing the same from the other. Standing in the centre of the bar, they would have a long wait.

J was searching around the pub. 'Hey, where did the others go? We were a bit ahead of them, so I didn't see where they went.'

'They're over there,' Ben said, and J followed his arm. 'On the table in the corner.'

'Where? Oh there, I see. Christ almighty, *more* birds. Look at them all! We're going to be outnumbered what, three to one! That's my kind of odds.'

It was true. Natasha was introducing Natalie to the table, which consisted of nubile young girls dressed in not very much. There were a couple of blokes there, most likely the boyfriends, but it was mostly women. Natasha said something to Tyler, kissed him, and then he walked over to the bar, away from Ben. The crowds seemed to part before him, and he was ordering drinks before Ben had time to blink. 'Fucking hell,' he said. 'How did Tyler manage to get served so quick? We've been waiting here far longer than he has.'

They watched him in action, stern faced and gesturing a lot. A girl nestled in next to him, he whispered to her, and she turned away in a fit of giggles. 'Well, you can see how he does it,' Derek observed. 'That bird's eating out of the palm of his hand.'

'Yeah,' J sighed. 'Just because he's good looking, the girls fall at his feet like he's fucking Casanova.'

'That's the way of the world, my friend. It's funny, women these days bang on about how it's what's on the *inside* that counts, that personality is what matters, all that. But it's people like him who get laid all the time, and we...well, we, in fact, don't.'

'Ahh, but tonight's going to change all that. Some of those girls are going to be gagging for it, mark my words.'

Derek scoffed. 'Yeah, and what'll happen? We'll end up in some crappy club playing shitty chart music that everyone hates, having to talk about stuff that we have no interest in whatsoever, drinking overpriced booze for the privilege, and all for what? So the good-looking girls will be going home

with guys like Tyler. I can't fucking wait.'

Ben handed Derek a pint. 'Here you go, misery guts. Get that down you. And listen, if it gets that bad, we can always invite the girls back to the house and you can wow them with your musical genius. I mean, that's a foolproof method for you, isn't it?'

Derek smiled. 'Now you're talking.'

They fought their way to the table. Natasha and co already had drinks in hand.

'Come on girls, shift up a bit!' Natasha said, and everyone squeezed together like battery hens. J clambered in first, next to a girl who was all legs and not much else, then Derek, and Ben perched on the edge. He sipped his pint.

After introductions had been made, and the formalities over, Natasha said, 'I was just telling everyone about my housemates, the rock stars. They're dead impressed.'

'It must be *so* exciting,' a girl said, whose name was Kim or Kate or something like that. She was wearing about ten layers of makeup that only a chisel could prise off. 'And what do you do?' she asked Ben.

'He's the lead singer.' Derek jumped in, arms waving. 'And I'm one of the guitarists. Kind of like Jimi Hendrix stroke Noel Gallagher stroke Keith Richards, if you know what I mean.'

The girl frowned. 'Who the hell is Jimi Hendrix?'

Some people laughed, mostly the men. Derek's mouth opened, like a goldfish. Then he shut it again. The girl's boyfriend caught Derek's eye, shrugged and went back to his drink.

Another girl joined in, this one a friend who Natasha worked with. Ben couldn't remember her name. 'And what do you sing?' she asked.

He shifted in his seat. 'Uhh, you know, stuff. Like, songs and that. Rock, indie sort of thing. Come to our gig, if you want. Find out for yourself.'

'Good lad,' Derek said. 'Get the recruitment drive going.'

'Rock? Really? No offence, but you don't look like a grungy rock star. More like you should be in a boy band or something.'

J cracked up, which made Ben blush. 'Mate, I think she's got you figured out.'

'What?' she said, glaring at J. 'What's wrong with that?'

'Don't worry about it,' Ben said. 'I'll take it as a compliment.'

Catherine spoke up from the corner. 'I've heard them, and they're really good. Ben's got a great voice. I'll be there with bells on.'

Natasha and Natalie both smiled identical grins. 'Me too,' Natasha said.

The table talk splintered into separate conversations. Tyler, sitting across from Ben, took a sip from his drink and said, 'So, Ben, I hear that you might be leaving uni soon? Natasha told me about it. Must be pretty tough.'

And what fucking business is that of yours, Ben thought, but held his tongue. 'Did she?' he replied, and the sharpness of his tone caught Natasha's attention.

‘I’m sorry Ben,’ she said, avoiding his gaze. ‘Sometimes my mouth runs away with me.’

‘That’s OK. It’s no secret. Yeah, my old man’s lost his job, so the funds are starting to dry up. Get through to Christmas, and I’ll assess it then. At the moment, I’m trying not to think about it.’

‘So with that, and your bird leaving you, you’re not having the best time of it, are you?’

‘Tyler,’ Natasha said. ‘Jesus, show a bit of understanding, will you?’

‘What? I’m only saying. What’s the point of pretending? Not going to make the problem go away, is it?’

‘Don’t mind me,’ Ben muttered, and got up to go to the toilet, anywhere to be alone for a couple of seconds. In the bog, he stood at the sink and splashed water on his face. I’m going to get really drunk, he thought. Just to escape for a while.

He passed Natalie on his way out. ‘God,’ she said, hooking a thumb over a shoulder. ‘Sometimes Tyler really puts his feet in it. Once, I was with my ex-boyfriend, and we were going through a bad patch. His Dad had just been diagnosed with cancer, and it was harsh, for both of us. I don’t want to sound mean, but it was hard for me to deal with. Anyway, Tyler and Natasha come into the pub, and Tyler starts going on about this programme he saw which reckoned that there was a link between a poor quality of life and the risk of getting cancer. As if the reason Mark’s Dad got sick was because he ate the wrong foods or something. Which couldn’t have been further from the truth. His Dad was the epitome of good health, he ran marathons and stuff. But Tyler went into this big diatribe about it, and you could’ve cut the atmosphere with a knife.’

‘I can quite believe it.’

‘He doesn’t do it deliberately. He’s not very tactful, that’s all. He doesn’t mean anything by it.’

‘To be honest, I don’t really give a shit what he thinks.’

She laid a hand on his arm. ‘Fair enough,’ she said, and smiled. He looked at her, and something passed between them. ‘Gotta go,’ she said. ‘I’m dying for a wee.’ She gave his arm a gentle squeeze and left, and Ben made for the bar.

Outside, Clifton stood in the pouring rain and pulled his hood tighter around his head. It was useless. The rain got everywhere. His hair was plastered tight to his scalp, and he had to wipe water from his face with increasing regularity. He inched closer to the glass, watching. From out here, the pub seemed a whole different world. The warm light coming from inside. The cheerful nature of those enjoying a drink. Totally different to the harsh realities of the street. Light and dark. On the outside, looking in. This was Clifton’s universe.

He watched Natasha, and the minutes flew. It was the way the light seemed attracted to her. When she talked, everyone was entranced. They put down their glasses, taking in her every word, concentrating fully. And she

held the stage like a pro. Now, she said something, and some people laughed, and she turned to her right and kissed a guy, and Clifton's hands clenched in his pockets.

So this was Tyler. This was what he was up against. Certainly, in looks, Tyler had him whipped. But then, so did most people. He watched as Tyler's hand rested on her thigh as she talked, every so often stroking up and down, up and down. He was definitely a good looker. And, here was Ben. He watched him down nearly half a pint in one go, and was reminded of Dad. The seediness of it all, how lives come to revolve around alcohol. It always gets you in the end. He felt sick.

But it was useful, this, to watch his rivals in action. It was a fact-finding mission, and the facts were these: One. He now knew who this Tyler was. Two. Looking now, he saw Ben studying Tyler as he talked, Ben's eyes flitting between Tyler and Natasha. The hatred was coming off him in waves, all aimed in Tyler's direction. Excellent. Definitely something to work on. Three. Natasha was more beautiful than he ever imagined. And four, he thought, thinking of Tyler: You're with my girl. He tapped a fingernail against the glass. I see you, he whispered. I see you.

He stood for a while longer, watching a scene that he had never known. The forced hilarity. Putting up with people that you clearly have no time for. Getting Natasha away from all this bullshit would set her free. Deep down, he knew that he worked outside the conventions that everyone else seemed to live by. Going out in a large group of people, drinking and having fun? Sounded like hell. And he was going to rescue her from it. Holding that thought, Clifton tightened his hood further and made off into the night.

When they moved on from The Goose, the rain had lessened to a light drizzle. Hitting the cold air, Ben realised he was on his way. The wind buffeted his face, and sent the alcohol to his head, and he leant back against the window of the pub, sheltering under an awning, trying to get some life back into his lungs.

'Right, let's get some taxis!' Natasha yelled, and without looking, turned and ran across the road, heading for the taxi rank further down the street. A car slowed to accommodate her, and as it passed, the driver leant on his horn. Natasha turned and waved at the headlights. When there was a break in traffic, Natalie and Tyler followed, sidestepping the puddles in their pursuit of Natasha. Everyone else stayed put.

Derek stood beside Ben. 'So, you having a good night?'

Ben straightened up. 'Shit mate, I've just had a thought. And an important one at that. The band...'

Derek smiled. 'Yeah, what about it?'

'On top of everything else, we don't have a name yet. We gotta have a name.'

'I was wondering when you were going to ask me that. But never fear, because the rest of us have been knocking around a few ideas, and we've come up with something.' He leaned in closer. 'If I tell you, you've got to

keep it to yourself. Not even J can know. You promise?’

‘Yeah yeah, course. Scout’s honour. Come on, out with it.’

Derek lingered for a moment, enjoying the build up. ‘Soul Circus,’ he said.

Ben ran the name around, trying to get a feel for it. At last he nodded and said, ‘Yeah, I like it. Where did you get that from?’

‘A book I read. As soon as I saw it, I jumped at the title. It’s perfect, you know. Kind of simple when you first hear it, but with a little bit of depth. And it’s a terrific book, too. I’ll lend it to you.’

Soul Circus. Ben remembered the circus that used to come to his home town every year, always in the same week. Mum would never let him ride the Big Wheel on his own, saying it was too dangerous. Then, when he was thirteen, J had joined them as they strolled around the fair. They played on the arcade machines and ate toffee apples. Mum and Dad were with them, walking hand in hand as he and J took in the excitement. And after everything was done, they stood at the foot of the Big Wheel. Ben had a teenager’s fear of heights and, standing there, was a little scared. But he wanted to ride. To see the world from high in the sky. He looked at Mum, who nodded her acceptance. So he and J clambered into a car. Ben’s hands were clammy on the steel bar. Then, before he could blink, the wheel moved and his stomach was left on terra firma. And the world seemed to open up. As they ascended, the bright lights of the rides sharpened and lit up the sky. People screamed on the Waltzer and the dodgems. J let out a laugh that turned into a mild wail, and soon they were laughing and screaming with every rotation of the wheel. After a couple of minutes they stopped right at the top, the car rocking back and forth.

‘Hell,’ J said, ‘you can almost reach up and touch the stars.’

Ben looked up, felt his stomach go again, and put his head straight down. He could see Mum and Dad far below, and she waved. He raised a hand in return, and then took his other hand off the bar. The car wobbled, then began to move. Ben raised his arms up, and kept them there until the ride stopped. When they got off, the ground seemed to be pointing downhill for a few seconds, and he was unsteady on his feet.

‘Yup,’ he said to Derek. ‘I like it a lot.’

A taxi pulled up at the kerb, spraying water onto the pavement. The back window rolled down, and Natasha stuck her head out. ‘Your carriage awaits,’ she said, giggling. ‘We can get another person in here, and there’s another two just behind us.’

Catherine opened the door and scrambled in next to Natasha. ‘Where are you *going*?’ Ben said, exasperated.

Natasha leant on the window frame. ‘To the Waterfront, check out a few of the bars down there. Not that we can sit outside or anything, but it’ll be nice. See you in ten.’

The taxi pulled away, motored up the street, then indicated right and was gone. Seconds after, a second cab pulled up, then a third. Derek, J and Ben got in the first. ‘To the Waterfront, my friend,’ J shouted. ‘Tally ho!’

‘OK, OK.’ Natasha leant against the bar and faced the circle. ‘Everyone ready?’

Various nods and mutters of discontent.

‘Right – three, two, one, go!’

Ben licked the salt from his wrist, tilted his head back and gunned the tequila. He gasped as the alcohol fired into his chest. He slammed the glass down on the bar and stuffed the slice of lemon into his mouth. It filled with acidic sharpness, numbing the burning sensations.

‘Holy shit,’ J gasped. ‘Paint strimmer tastes better than this stuff.’ He took a mouthful of air, then chased it with a swig of beer.

Ben laughed and lit a cigarette. For now, the taste of tobacco was heaven compared to the tequila. He turned and looked out the window. Crowds of people streamed past in all manner of clothes – some dressed up, some in fancy dress, a lot of hen parties out celebrating. There was a nightclub at the end of this row of pubs, and most were heading in that direction. The Waterfront complex was right on the banks of the river, which was currently still, the lights forming ripples on the water. A few boats were moored up alongside, all uninhabited. The river was an oasis of calm amidst the frivolity.

They were in a typical wine bar, a far cry from the spit and sawdust pubs that Ben frequented back home. The lighting was minimal and soft, creating a sense of ambience, which, to Ben, basically meant not being able to see people properly. The seating was mainly leather-backed booths or low sofas, with the tables only a foot or so off the ground. The bar was all steel and chrome and housed expensive liquors and spirits with unpronounceable names. The minimalist feel was continued by a series of paintings which looked to Ben like a load of paint chucked randomly across a canvas but was probably the latest ‘in’ thing amongst the art critics. It was a shame that the clientele failed to live up to this image, most of them being students more interested in getting drunk than enjoying a power lunch.

The drunkenness was starting to take him over. And he was glad about that. It had been what, three beers at home, two in the Goose, a second pint here, plus the tequila. The rough edges were starting to wear away. But he knew that melancholy wouldn’t be far off. He found that there was a fine line between being a happy drunk and one full of self-loathing and misery. This was his first real session since Amy left, and once the beers really hit home, she would occupy his mind. It was just a matter of when. He stared at the ceiling and screwed his eyes tight, trying to shut the noise out. Natasha was giggling at something, and her infectious laughter spread to the rest of the girls, and soon they were braying like hyenas, and the sound was like fingers scraping down a blackboard. He shuddered and took a long swallow of beer.

‘Right, who’s up for another one?’ Natasha asked, holding up her tequila glass. ‘Anyone game?’

‘I am,’ J said without hesitation.

‘Me too,’ Tyler said.

A couple of the other girls nodded in affirmation and, not wanting to be left behind, their boyfriends agreed.

‘And what about you, Ben-ja-min?’ Natasha asked.

‘No, thanks. I think I’ll sit this one out. I’ll leave you to it.’ He went and sat down on a low leather couch, his back to the water, not caring if anyone came over and sat with him. I knew this would happen, he thought. Come out and have a few drinks, and she’s within me once more. Well, Amy, it’s nice to have you back. Make yourself at home. What’s mine is yours. And being around Natasha didn’t help. Watching her fawn over that prick of a boyfriend. He realised that Clifton had said it for him, helped to rationalise it in his mind. Bit of a dick, is he? You said it, Clifton. You said it.

‘Mind if I sit here?’

Ben glanced round. ‘Be my guest, Nat-Nat.’

‘Oh God, not you as well. I’m going to have to get down the deed poll office first thing Monday morning.’ She sank down next to him.

‘They have an *office*?’

‘Buggered if I know. They should though, don’t you think? Form an orderly queue, and go out with a whole new identity. Sounds good to me.’

‘Yeah.’ He returned to his beer.

‘So, Natasha’s getting the party going, as she always does, and you are sitting over here all moody. Come on, what gives?’

‘Nothing. A man can’t be sociable *all* the time. I just wanted some alone time, that’s all.’

She didn’t get the hint, then surprised him by saying, ‘Let me guess. That ex-girlfriend of yours has suddenly swum back into view, and now you’re on that whole ‘poor me’ syndrome, pouring your broken heart out to all and sundry. Getting warm?’

‘Something like that. I take it Natasha has told you all about it.’

She frowned. ‘Yeah, I’m sorry. Tell me to shut up anytime soon. But you know how sisters talk. Forget it, it’s none of my business.’

‘It’s OK. I don’t expect everyone to pretend it hasn’t happened. But hey, I’ll get over it.’

‘So, what stage are you at now? Do you hate her, don’t care about her, or is it that I-can’t-live-without-her phase?’

‘Probably the latter. Which shocks me a bit, because I was all right the first few days. It’s only really starting to hit me now.’

‘Oh, the worst kind. I don’t need to say I’ve been there, because it’s a horrible cliché and I hate them with a passion, but you know what I mean.’

‘Sure.’

She took a sip of her bottle. ‘It’s about butterflies, you know.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘Butterflies. You know how long butterflies live? In general?’

Ben smiled. ‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Me, neither. But I know it’s not very long. Anyway, once, on a nice summers day, I finished work a little early, and because I’m boring and didn’t have anything better to do, I went and sat by the lake near where we live. It’s

nice down there, really peaceful. So, I'm sitting there, and this butterfly flutters down and lands right next to me. It was beautiful, you know, a deep red colour. It opened its wings and there were these little white circles spread across them. And I'm watching it, and it just sits there. Doesn't bat an eyelid, although butterflies don't have eyelids, do they? And I thought, this butterfly is going to be dead in a few days, and here it is, in all its splendour, enjoying life and showing off what it's got. Without a care in the world, but happy to be there. Who knows, it may have just broken up with Mr butterfly, and is flying around nursing its broken heart, but it knows that it hasn't got that long left, so it's making the most of every moment. It stayed there for a bit, flapping those wings, then flew off to pastures new, and I got up and went home.'

'And? What's your point?'

She shrugged. 'Buggered if I know. But it's a good story, don't you think?'

Natasha waved at them from the bar, gesturing towards the door. 'Looks like we're on the move. You coming?'

Ben finished his beer. 'Just got to visit the little boy's room. I'll meet you out front.'

'Going *again*? Blimey, you must be a diabetic or something.'

He smiled and left, thinking about butterflies. Then he remembered the tattoo on Amy's spine, and was gone again.

Two hours later, and Ben was a whole lot drunker. Now, the group had shrunk a little. On leaving the pub, Natasha's uni friends had cried off, pleading tiredness. Ben noticed that all the girls had boyfriends, and knew that the tiredness was an excuse to go home and fuck the night away. He and Amy used to say the same thing. So he and the rest of his housemates remained, plus Natalie, Tyler and J. Currently they were in a pub/club on the Waterfront, full of fortysomethings trying to pretend they were twenty years younger. The music was as Derek had feared, chart crap and cheesy 70s and 80s rubbish. Yet the place was packed. The bar stood at the centre of the room, and served the usual suspects plus a whole load of cocktails with fanciful names at exorbitant prices. The girls drank cocktails. Tyler was drinking vodka and Red Bull, and Ben, J and Derek stuck to beer. They were sitting in back, at the far end, away from the shoebox dancefloor. His only company was Derek, and they sat sipping pints and putting the world to rights.

'I fucking told you,' Derek was saying. 'Can you believe the amount of people up there dancing? To this rubbish! Fucking automatons.'

Ben stuck his cigarette in the groove of the ashtray. A trail of blue smoke headed for the ceiling. 'Derek, you're repeating yourself, my man. You sound like a broken record.'

'This is what I *mean*. If it's this fucking easy to get a load of students and middle aged blokes and their mid-life crises going, it should be a cinch for us. And we'll be playing good music, too. With like, guitars in it and

everything.'

'But everyone here is drunk, or getting that way. You could put on the Birdie song and fill the floor.'

Derek raised an eyebrow. 'God, you're right. What a sobering thought. I need another beer. You want one?'

'Sure. Cheers.'

When Derek was at the bar, Tyler came over. 'Heeeey,' he said, flopping down and throwing an arm round Ben's shoulders. 'How goes it?'

'It goes.' Tyler's breath stank of Red Bull.

'Not dancing, then?'

'Not right now. I'm happy to watch.'

'I bet you are. So, how's it all going, living with Natasha and everything? She can be a little, what, headstrong at times.'

'It's fine.'

'So, you like her, then?'

Ben grimaced. Any answer I give here is going to be the wrong one. And Tyler knew it, judging by the smile on his face. 'Sure. She's a great girl.'

'And what do you like about her?'

Ben leant forward, trying to be heard over the din of the music. 'Look, what does it matter what I think?'

Tyler spread his arms. 'Hey, I'm curious, that's all.'

'Well, she's got a good sense of humour, she's kind, a little bit unpredictable at times, but that's OK. Resourceful, a nice drunk rather than a miserable one like me, lots of character, a unique personality...'. He trailed off, thankful that Tyler couldn't see him blushing in the murky light.

'I agree. Very perceptive of you. And what about her looks? Think she's a good looker?'

'She's not really my type,' Ben lied. 'If I'm honest.'

Tyler glared at him. 'So, you think she's rough then, do you? Is that what you're saying?'

'No,' Ben stammered, 'that isn't what I'm saying. I haven't really given it much thought. I'm only recently single, so I'm not that interested in other girls at the moment.'

'Ah yes, the beloved ex. Poor Ben, dropped from a great height by the woman he loves.'

'You got a problem with that?' Ben hissed, suddenly fuming.

Derek slammed beers down on the table. 'Fuck, the prices in here. Enough to send me bankrupt.'

Tyler grinned at Ben, showing all his teeth. From the dancefloor, Natasha beckoned him forward with a finger. 'Ahh, duty calls. Good talking to you, Ben.'

'What was all that about?' Derek asked.

'Oh, it's him,' he spat, gesturing towards Tyler as he strutted onto the dancefloor like a peacock. 'He always manages to wind me up.'

'Personally,' Derek said, 'I think he's a fucking idiot.'

'Really? God, I'm glad I'm not the only one. Cos, you know, if Natasha

found out about it, we'd be accused of being...'

'...Yeah, jealous, I know. Same old fucking story. It's the classic example, isn't it? Of a fit bird who is also a decent girl, and her choice of bloke is shoddy to say the least, but no-one can ever *say* anything, as you run the risk of being jealous. Fuck it, man, she can work it out for herself.'

'Still pisses me off, though.'

'Well Ben, when it comes to men, the decent blokes, like you and me, get left on the sidelines, and the wankers get all the girls. That's how it works. For now, at least. But give it a few years, and they'll finally get their heads sorted out and realise that we ain't boring, that's there's more to us than meets the eye. And they'll come running.'

Ben thought about this, then said, 'And if they don't?'

Derek put his pint down and frowned. 'If they don't, then we'll be wheeling around a nursing home in our eighties, not being able to take a piss without assistance, dribbling into our food until we die, alone and with no-one around who cares.'

Ben had no reply.

As they sat pondering, the cheesy 80s music that had been the backdrop for the last half hour was replaced by modern dance hits, and the table became full again. J flopped down beside Ben. 'Hey man,' he slurred, and put his arm around Ben's shoulders. First Tyler, now you. Must be my bony shoulder. He dismissed that thought quickly.

'Nice bit of dancing there, mate,' he replied, grinning. 'Put John Travolta to shame, I reckon.'

'Piss off.' J leant forward, swaying slightly. 'I tell you what,' he said, pointing at Catherine, 'that girl is one sexy lady once she gets going. You should have seen her go!' She caught his eye, and J made a gun with thumb and forefinger, pointed it at her, fired and blew the smoke off his finger. She rolled her eyes and smiled.

'Very smooth,' Ben said. 'No offence mate, but I didn't think she was interested in you. That was my impression, but I could be wrong.'

J laughed, his eyes wide. 'You're probably right. No harm in trying though, is there? I'm going for another drink.'

That'll be one too many, Ben thought, but J was already gone. There was no stopping him in this mood. Natasha took his place.

'How's a boy doing?' she asked, crossing her legs. Her skirt rode up a couple of inches. 'I haven't seen you up there yet.'

'No. Guess I haven't heard the right song.'

'Or,' she said, scraping hair from her forehead, 'it could be that you're being *boring*. And on Nat-Nat's 21st, boredom is not permitted. It's a rule of the house.'

Ben saw Tyler watching them. 'Well, maybe I'm not too good at following orders.' He got out a cigarette and lit it.

'*Fine*. Christ, I was only trying to cheer you up a bit. Next time, I won't bother.'

'Suits me.'

A new song came on, and Natalie insisted on dancing, so they all got up to go. Even Derek. ‘Might as well,’ he said, shrugging. ‘I figure if I make an effort for ten minutes the girls will leave me alone for the rest of the night.’

Ben nodded as J downed a glass of God-knows what and made for Catherine. He stumbled into a table as he walked, drawing glances from a group of blokes at one end of the bar. An accident waiting to happen. So Ben was left alone, and he was fine with that. And sick of being treated like an injured puppy all the time. If I want to be on my own, I can. If I want to sit here and be miserable, it’s up to me. He pulled out his phone, and scrolled through the contacts to Amy’s name. Don’t do this, a part of his mind said. Don’t do it. But the other, drunken part won through, and he wrote a quick text, writing as if it were his deathbed speech. Then, he sank the rest of his pint, took a sip of his fresh one, and leant back.

‘Hey, you coming to dance, or what?’

He opened his eyes and was surprised to find Catherine standing in front of him. ‘Hey,’ he said.

‘I know you don’t want to,’ she said, ‘and you don’t need to be a rocket scientist to work out why. But I need you, if only to keep J in order. I like him, but not *that* much. Pretty please? For me.’

He smiled. It might be fun, watching J make a fool of himself. ‘You’ve twisted my arm.’ He got up, and as he walked past Catherine, bent and kissed her on the forehead. ‘You’re all right, you know that?’

She put her arm through his. ‘Why, thank you. You’re not so bad yourself.’

The night was entering its final throes, and as a consequence the dancefloor was packed. Natasha and the others had commandeered an area tucked up against the DJ booth. When Ben and Catherine joined them, Natalie gave him a thumbs-up, J did more or less the same, only drunker, and Derek came over and stood beside him. ‘Thank God for that,’ he shouted over the thumping bass.

Ben smiled and nodded. From here, the music didn’t sound *that* bad. He looked around. Most of the people dancing were men, and most were old.. Directly behind Natasha were a group of blokes a few years older than Ben, and every so often one would leer in her direction, inching a step closer. He watched Tyler, whose eyes were out on stalks. Hell, let them come, he thought. Let them come, and watch the sparks fly.

Natalie and Catherine danced with them, and he felt like a fish flopping on dry land, as both were terrific dancers. Especially Natalie. She rolled with the music, getting her whole body into it, and he was transfixed. And given the stares from other members of the club, he wasn’t alone.

J barged through, interrupting the circle. ‘Heey,’ he slurred, throwing an arm round Catherine’s waist. ‘How you doing, gorgeous?’ He fell into her, and his hand slid down to her bottom.

Cool as you like, she lifted his hand and placed it by his side. ‘Keep your hands to yourself,’ she said calmly.

Ben stepped over. ‘Come on man, you’d better come and sit down for a bit, eh? Take the weight off.’

J staggered and knocked Natalie, who pushed him back. ‘Jesus, Ben, sort him out, will you?’

J laughed. ‘Wow, I have the *whole* attention of the crowd! Must be my magnetic personality.’

‘That’d be right,’ Ben said, holding J round the waist, trying to push him off the dancefloor. Derek helped, taking J’s free arm and slinging it round his shoulder. J’s head lurched forward and came to rest on his collarbone.

Behind them, a glass smashed, and a girl screamed. Ben turned back to see Tyler squaring off with one of the guys dancing by Natasha. By the look on his face, Tyler was angry. Very angry.

‘Shit, Del, can you take J for a sec? It looks like things are going to kick off.’

J fell into Derek’s arms, slobbering over his shirt. On the dancefloor, a throng of bodies surrounded Tyler. ‘Fuck,’ Derek shouted. ‘Seems somebody’s in trouble. Good fucking riddance.’

Ben sprinted for the floor, to be met by Natalie and Catherine. ‘Stay with Derek,’ he shouted. ‘What the fuck happened, anyway?’

‘I don’t know,’ Natalie said, her face full of concern.

He nodded. Now, the dark stares had escalated into pushing and shoving, and the bouncers were closing in. At that moment Tyler swung at the nearest guy, who hit the floor with a slam. The crowd erupted. A second guy punched Tyler in the ribs, and he bent forward, gasping. A foot connected with his shin, and he fell to his knees. From somewhere, Ben could hear Natasha crying.

‘Hey!’ the DJ shouted, shutting the music off. ‘Cut it out, the lot of you!’

Ben rushed in, grabbed the guy by the shoulders, and threw him off. A fist caught him under the armpit, and he staggered forward. As he turned, two hands grabbed a load of his shirt and pinned his arms behind him. He stared up into the face of a man mountain, swathed in black, microphone in one ear, a walkie-talkie attached to his belt. The scene was awash with bouncers, all over them like flies round a honeypot.

‘That fucker,’ Tyler screamed, trying to wrestle from a bouncer’s grasp. ‘I’ll kill you! I’ll fucking kill you!’

One of the guys broke free and lunged for Tyler. ‘Yeah?’ he shouted. ‘Try it, and I’ll break your fucking neck!’

More chaos, as Tyler tried to throw another punch, but he was wrestled to the ground, a bouncer knelt on his back, knee pressing hard.

‘Hey man, let go of me!’ Ben hissed at the bouncer holding him. ‘I was trying to break it up, got smacked for the privilege.’ He felt sick and dizzy.

‘Whatever,’ the bouncer replied. ‘You’re out of here.’ He frogmarched Ben to the exit. As they walked, he took in the scene. Tyler was on his feet now, screaming profanities at anyone who cared to listen. His fight friends were being escorted to the other end of the bar. Natasha stood crying onto Natalie’s shoulder, sobbing and gesturing at Tyler, who didn’t seem to care.

What a mess.

The bouncer threw him out onto the street, and he smacked into a pillar, smashing his elbow. He keeled over as the shock and night air hit him, suddenly short of breath. He patted his shirt pocket and found his crumpled cigarettes, shook one out and lit it. The smoke parched his lungs.

The club doors burst open and Tyler flew out. He was hobbling, a red patch was already forming over his right eye.

Natasha followed, crying and wailing. She got to Tyler and threw raging punches into his chest. 'I can't fucking believe you!' she screamed. 'You fucking prick! What on earth do you think you were doing? It's Nat's birthday, and you go and ruin it!'

'ME! What about you, flirting with that bloke! He was all over you, and you just stood there, taking it. Right next to me, your *actual* boyfriend, who was standing there like a spare part. You made me look a fool.'

Natalie got between them. 'Hey, calm down, the pair of you. Nat, you're upset. Let's go home and go to bed. Leave all this till the morning.'

By now the others had joined them, trying to pretend they were elsewhere. Except J, who was giggling like a baby.

'The fact is,' Natasha shouted, 'you don't fucking trust me, do you? As a matter of fact, I *told* that guy I was with you, and he was fine about it. He said, 'well, the man's a lucky guy.' And that was that. Until you waded in and got us all thrown out!' Big tears were flowing down her cheeks.

Ben stepped in. 'Come on, man. Natalie's right. Let's get out of here.'

Tyler snarled at Ben. 'And *you* know what? Fuck you. Fuck the lot of you.' And he stormed off.

Ben threw his cigarette down in disgust.

'I'm going after him,' Natasha blubbered, and started to run.

'That's not a good idea,' Natalie said. 'He's in a right state.'

'Well, that's tough. I'm sorry he's stuffed up your night, but I'm not going to leave him. I'll see you at home.' She ran off up the path.

'Fucking terrific,' Derek said.

'I saw most of it,' Natalie said, folding her arms across her breasts. 'Tyler just went off on one.'

'No surprises there,' Derek replied. 'No offence Natalie, cos she's your sister and everything, but Tyler is an arrogant, jumped-up prick. And I, for one, hate him.'

She looked at Ben, then to Catherine. No-one said anything.

'Woah,' J mumbled. 'Did I miss anything, or what?'

Derek and Ben got J between them and with a struggle, got him to his feet and walking. 'I want to walk with Catherine,' he shouted. 'I *love* Catherine.'

'Not today mate,' Ben said. 'Tonight, it's just the three of us.'

Catherine said nothing, but she looked resigned. Eventually, they got to the taxi rank by the cathedral. They plonked J down, and he sat, head between his knees.

'Right, we've got to get J home,' Ben said.

'Should he stay at ours?' Catherine said. 'He's in no fit state to go home.'

‘No,’ J cried. ‘I want to go to bed.’

‘It’s OK,’ Ben said, kneeling beside J. ‘I’ll get him back. Besides, if he stays at ours, he’s likely to throw up all over my floor, and I only hoovered in there yesterday.’

Catherine smiled. ‘Whatever you think.’

‘Tell you what,’ Derek said. ‘I’ll go back with Catherine, and you can take J home. What about you, Natalie? You want to come back with us, or go with Ben?’

She looked at Ben. ‘I’ll keep Ben company,’ she said. ‘Make sure this one gets home in one piece.’

‘Fair enough.’ A taxi pulled up. Catherine gave Ben and Natalie a hug. ‘Remind me never to go out on a night with you again.’ She smiled. ‘Get home safe, won’t you?’

Derek gave them a nod. ‘See you in a bit.’

A minute or two later, Natalie flagged a cab down. She got in the front, and Ben wrestled J into the back. He got in beside him, trying to keep him upright. The taxi driver tapped a sign next to the meter. ‘If he throws up in here, it’s a fifty quid fine, straight out. So be warned.’

‘He’ll be OK,’ Ben said. ‘Just had one too many, that’s all.’

At J’s, Natalie paid the driver while Ben got J out. They stood on the drive. ‘So, how are we going to do this?’ she said.

Ben felt in J’s pockets and extracted a set of keys. As he wrestled with the lock, the door opened and a girl stood there in her dressing gown. ‘You realise what fucking time it is?’

‘Got a present for you,’ Ben said, smiling.

‘Oh great,’ she said. ‘What’s he done this time?’

‘The usual.’ J was falling about the doorway.

‘Let’s get him upstairs.’

So they hauled him in, and spent an age manoeuvring him up the stairs to his room. Once there, the girl went to bed and Ben switched the light on. J clambered on to the bed.

‘You going to get undressed?’ Ben said, but J was already half out. He removed J’s shoes, pulled the duvet out from underneath him and threw it over his body. ‘Sweet dreams, my friend.’

‘Tell Catherine I love her,’ J murmured, voice heavy with sleep.

‘I’ll do that,’ Ben said, and by the time he shut the door, J was snoring.

‘So, how is he?’ Natalie said as they began walking. ‘I imagine he’s going to have a hell of a hangover in the morning.’

Ben lit a cigarette. ‘Yeah, probably. Hey, I’m sorry about all this. Can’t have been the way you thought your 21st would turn out.’

‘What, J you mean? Hell, someone has to get drunk on a birthday. Usually the recipient of said birthday, but there you go.’

Ben pulled a sliver of tobacco from his tongue. ‘I wasn’t talking about J.’

Natalie narrowed her eyes. ‘Oh, Tyler. Well, I’d like to say it was the first time, but that would be a lie. It’s Natasha I feel sorry for.’

They were entering the bottom of Gloucester Road. A group of girls piled

out of a taxi and staggered off into the night, laughing and joking. Ben inhaled some smoke. ‘So, why does she put up with him? I mean, that scene wasn’t exactly pretty, was it?’

‘To be honest with you Ben, I’ve asked myself that question many times. Because she loves him, I guess. He’s the only guy she’s ever been with for any length of time, and she wants it to work, so she’s willing to put up with it.’

‘But she shouldn’t have to. If it pisses her off that much, she should dump him.’

‘Maybe. When he doesn’t drink, he’s the sweetest guy. Considerate, thoughtful. Every girl’s dream. It’s only after a few drinks that the green eyed monster rears its ugly head. Although having said that, tonight was the worst I’ve seen it. He could have overstepped the mark for good this time.’

They arrived at the steps up to the house. Ben held the gate open to let Natalie through, and that look passed between them again. It should have made him feel happy or excited, but only put a snaky feeling at the pit of his stomach. He followed her up, and thought, well, maybe I should. Forget about Amy, at least for tonight. He fished in his pocket for his keys, found them and held them out to Natalie.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

He smiled. ‘What day is it today, Natalie?’

‘Technically, it’s not my 21st anymore, but I guess that’s what you mean.’

He nodded. ‘So, here you go then. The keys to the door on your special day.’

She burst out laughing. ‘You are such an idiot.’

‘Come on, get us in, it’s freezing out here.’

When they were inside, Natasha came out of the bathroom, wearing loose pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt. Her face was puffy and red from crying.

‘Hey Nat,’ Natalie said. Natasha made to reply, but then the tears started and she fled to her bedroom.

Natalie turned to Ben. ‘I’ll go and see how she is. She’ll talk to me, eventually. It’ll take all my sisterly charm, and alcohol kind of dulls the senses in that area. Still.’ She went to Natasha’s door and knocked. A muffled sound came from inside. Natalie opened the door and went in.

‘See you upstairs,’ Ben said to an empty hallway, and went up to see what was happening.

Derek sat on the sofa, a bottle of beer at his feet, when Ben walked in. ‘Hey,’ Derek said, and passed him a bottle. ‘A little nightcap.’ Ben twisted off the cap and had a sip. It was good.

‘So, you got home all right?’

‘Obviously, considering I’m sitting here. What about you?’

‘Well, we woke up one of J’s housemates trying to get him inside. I don’t think she was too pleased. But I got him to bed. Where’s Catherine?’

‘In bed. I think the night took a lot out of her. She’s not used to such raucousness. Plus, I think J got on her nerves after a while.’

Ben groaned. ‘I know. Sometimes he’s a bloody liability. I’ll get him to

apologise to her in the morning.’ He sat back. ‘Just saw Natasha downstairs. She seems upset.’

‘Too right. When we got back, her and Tyler were having a slanging match in her room. Going at it hammer and tongs. We left them to it.’

‘Probably a good idea. Natalie’s in with her at the moment, having one of those girly chats. Can’t do any harm, I suppose.’

‘No. Fucking women, eh? The bane of our existence.’

‘Yeah.’ He thought about that text to Amy. Yet another problem to face in the morning. ‘Getting shot of Tyler would be the best thing for her, but somehow I don’t think that would be the most appropriate piece of advice.’

‘Indeed. Well, she’ll see the error of her ways. We can hope.’

They were silent for a while, sipping their drinks. Derek switched the telly on, just for some background noise, and they listened to the night quieten down. Then Natalie came in.

‘Got any beers to spare?’ she asked, and Derek handed her one. She sat down next to Ben. ‘Natasha says sorry to you both. For everything. I told her it wasn’t her fault, but she’s not in a listening mood right now.’

‘Is Tyler with her?’ Ben asked.

‘Yeah. Fast asleep. But it didn’t help, him being right there. She was worried he was going to wake up and hear what we were saying.’

‘So, how’s it looking? With them, I mean.’

‘Fuck knows. I’m sure they’ll sort it out. For the next few weeks, Tyler will be the perfect boyfriend, mark my words. You’ll be able to eat dinner off his shirt. Everything will be rosy, until he does it again. Which he probably will. It’s the same old cycle, month in, month out. You could set your watch by them.’

‘I’d rather go by the speaking clock,’ Ben said. No one laughed.

‘So, Derek, whilst we’re here, how about a bit of music? I’m not going to be around for this gig of yours. Work commitments, before you ask. So, how about a sneak preview?’

‘Don’t,’ Ben said firmly. ‘I’ve had loads to drink. There’s no way I’ll be able to sing.’

‘Come on,’ she said, ‘don’t be such a spoilsport. Call it your birthday present to me.’

‘Looks like we’re not going to win this one,’ Derek said. ‘Anyhow, loads of the great musicians were alcoholics.’

‘But I’m not a great musician.’

‘You’re not? Oh well. I’ll just get my guitar.’

‘Be warned,’ Ben said when Derek was downstairs, ‘we’re not that good. Especially me.’

‘You killjoy.’ She slapped his arm. ‘I bet you’re great. I can be your first audience.’

‘Here we are,’ Derek said, shambling through, guitar in hand. ‘Now, what do you want to play?’

‘How about that one we’re going to be doing acoustically? You know the one I mean.’

‘I do.’ He tuned up. ‘It’s a bit of a long one, though. You reckon you can stand the pace?’

‘I can if you can.’ He was looking forward to wowing Natalie, surprising her. He focused on a spot on the far wall and tried to put everything out of his mind. ‘OK. I’m ready.’

And for the next five minutes, the world disintegrated and left him alone with the music. He remembered what Derek had told him about getting power into his voice, but now it seemed to come naturally. His voice wavered a couple of times, but as Derek finished, some strength came back and they ended with a flurry. He sat back, breathless.

Natalie was looking at them both with a strange smile on her face. ‘Wow. That was brilliant. I’m honoured to be in your presence.’

Derek smiled. ‘All right, behave. It’s a shame you’re going to miss the gig.’

‘I *know*. Maybe I’ll pull a sickie.’

‘Well, I’ll leave you on a high note. That playing has just about finished me off.’ He leant down and kissed Natalie on the cheek. ‘Good to meet you. Hope you change your mind about the gig, we need all the support we can get.’ He shook Ben’s hand, smiling as if he knew something Ben didn’t. ‘Later, man. Band practice on Sunday? Because I think I’ll need tomorrow to recover.’

‘Sure,’ Ben said. ‘Thanks for helping out with J tonight.’

‘No worries. He can buy me a beer next time.’ He strode out, cradling his guitar like a baby.

‘Well, you’re certainly full of surprises,’ Natalie said, taking a pull of her beer. They were sitting close now, Ben at one end of the couch, Natalie in the middle, her face framed in soft light from the upright lamp next to the dining table, beer bottle flashing green as she lifted it to her mouth. ‘Who’d have thought a spindly kid like you would have such a sandpapery voice.’ She laughed.

‘Thanks. You’re too kind.’

‘Seriously, you were great. I’ve become your biggest fan.’

‘Please! We’re not that good. It’s only a bit of fun, really, not...’

She put the bottle down. ‘I wasn’t talking about the band,’ she said, and leant over and kissed him, the gentlest of kisses, barely grazing her lips against his. He pulled back, their faces inches apart, staring into her eyes, so green and sparkling, and he moved in, kissing her now, stronger, suddenly wanting this, something new, something unexpected, and her tongue touched his, probing, running over his teeth before plunging further, her hand caressing his cheek, nails digging into his neck. He put his hand on her leg, smoothing the material of her skirt, then moved it higher, fingers finding her skin, nearly at her thigh now. She moaned and moved to accommodate him, and her leg came up, across his, the curve of her thigh pressing close, his hand going higher. They broke apart, but neither was done yet, and she swung her legs up and over, straddling him, face above him, hair swaying in front of his eyes. She pushed her hair off her face, tucking it behind her ears,

and started again, the kisses increasing in intensity. His hands moved up behind her shirt, feeling the coolness of her back, tickling the flesh. He found her bra and unhooked it in one go, thanking God for giving him dexterity at the right time, and she took one of his hands, guiding him to a certain spot, and then his hand was full of her breast, her nipple erect as he ran his thumb over it. She writhed and moaned into his mouth, and he pulled her shirt up, her breasts now exposed, and shut his eyes and kissed her there, taking the nipple into his mouth, and she jerked around more, muttering his name, her skirt so high now she may as well not be wearing it, and he continued to lick and kiss, thinking, these are bigger than Amy's, and he tried to dismiss the thought, but couldn't, now feeling like he was cheating on Amy, which was stupid because they were single now, she was probably shagging right this second, and that thought pierced his heart, and he moved back, Natalie taking this as her turn, and her hands moved to his belt, starting to unbuckle it, but it felt wrong, and now he didn't want this, knew he couldn't, so he took her hands and pushed them away, gently, not wanting to hurt her feelings, but she persisted, so he repeated the gesture, resisting again, and this time she got the message, but moved back to kissing him, so he turned his head aside and said 'Natalie,' and she buried her head into his neck, taking the flesh between her teeth and biting hard, and the shock shook him out of this dream world, back into reality, and he repeated her name, louder this time, and the force in his voice must have got through because she got off him, pulling her shirt down, bra redundant on the sofa, smoothing her skirt down over her thighs, taking long, deep breaths, one, two, three, coming back from wherever they'd been, the hopes of that moment long gone, now back in this room, this life, with all their problems and fears and ex-girlfriends and guilt and despair, all of it too much for them now, maybe always too much, and he did up his belt, trying to work some oxygen into his system, the sorrow and lust a burning cocktail in his head, wanting to be anywhere but here, but knowing he couldn't just up and leave, so he shook a cigarette out the pack, lit it and watched the smoke linger between them.

'Whoo,' she said, her breath fractured and panting. 'I mean, holy cow.'

He looked at her, fiddling with the buttons on her shirt, her hair all over the place, the split in her skirt revealing where his hands had just been, and he thought, how did I say no? A girl like her, wanting me, and I said no. Even though he knew he had done the right thing, he would always have regret.

'You know what?' he said. 'You are one incredible girl, you know that?'

She reached over, and he thought she was going to try and kiss him again, but she plucked the cigarette from his hand and sat back, crossed her legs, blowing smoke in a shimmering silver stream, the classic femme fatale. 'I know,' she said. 'But, in this case, obviously not incredible enough.'

He bowed his head. 'I'm sorry.'

'There's no need. Can I be honest with you? As soon as I walked in the door and saw you, I thought, I like this guy. I mean, I was curious beforehand, because Natasha's forever telling me what a great bloke you are, and how lucky she is to have such a quality housemate, and how she wanted

me to meet you. And I thought, he sounds interesting. And she told me about you and Amy, but don't blame her, we tell each other everything, and then you looked so tortured, so vulnerable, I wanted to take your mind off everything. Off *her*. Just take your mind somewhere else for a while. I mean, I wasn't planning on whisking you up the aisle or anything, all I wanted was to take that sadness off your face. But it didn't work, and I know that sounds calculated, but believe me, that makes you even more special than I realised. So don't be sorry. You're doing fine.'

Suddenly it was difficult to swallow. 'Well, maybe in time...'

She stubbed out the cigarette. 'Maybe. I like you, Ben. I think that's pretty clear. You need to decide what *you* want. I'm willing to wait, because I think you're worth it, but I won't wait forever.' She stood up. 'Right, now that little sermon's over, I'm ready for bed.'

There were some dregs of beer left, so Ben drank them. It tasted horrible. 'Where are you sleeping, anyway?'

'On a put-you-up in Natasha's room. Yuk. I'm not looking forward to waking up there in the morning. But, never mind.'

'You can sleep in my room if you want.'

She arched an eyebrow. 'Somehow, I don't think that's a great idea.'

He shook his head. 'No, perhaps not.'

'Well, goodnight then. Thanks for a, uh, insightful evening.' She leant over and kissed him on the forehead. 'Get some thinking done, won't you? I know I will be. After that, I don't think I'll be doing much sleeping, anyhow.'

'I will. And thanks.'

'What for?'

'You know.'

She went to say something, but nodded and smiled. 'Goodnight.'

As she made to leave, he thought of something and said, 'Natalie?'

She poked her head round the door. 'Yeah?'

He pointed at the bra, stuffed down the side of a sofa cushion. 'Aren't you, um, forgetting something?'

'Oh yeah. Can't go without that.' She snatched the bra and stuffed it in her bag. 'Unless you want to keep it for a souvenir?'

He laughed. 'No thanks. I've got more than my fair share.'

'I'm sure you have. Not. See you tomorrow.'

He stayed and smoked another cigarette, trying to sort it all through. But it was impossible, so he stumbled downstairs and fell into bed.

CHAPTER TEN

Opening his eyes, Ben felt like someone was standing on his head, the heel of their boot pressing against his skull. He rolled over and looked at the clock. Half-ten. He ran his tongue round his mouth. It tasted like a sooty chimney. On the floor lay a discarded cigarette pack, his clothes in a ramshackle pile by the door, and his phone on the desk.

My phone.

Phone...

And then it came flooding back, and he jumped up in bed, regretting the movement straightaway, stars flooding his vision. The fight, the drunken text message, the kiss, more than a kiss...

My God. It was too much for his battered mind to even comprehend. He gingerly got out of bed and got his phone, pausing to rattle the cigarette pack, finding two cigarettes left. He extracted one and lit it. The smoke made his stomach turn over. He got back into bed, pulled the covers up, and checked the phone. So far, no new texts. A good sign. He wondered whether Amy had read it, whether it had even gone through. What he'd even said. Somehow, the message had been deleted as soon as it had gone. Or maybe he'd deleted it himself. He strained for the memory, trying to piece it together, but it wouldn't come, only a vague recollection.

But other memories were stronger. The fight, for one, and that was a part of the night he had no feelings of guilt over, and found no reason to change his point of view. Which was: Tyler is a fucking idiot. Nothing else to be said.

And the kiss. Now it seemed as if that whole escapade had happened to somebody else, a soul twin, perhaps. He tried to remember the kiss, what it had been like, for Natalie was the first since Amy. She hadn't complained, right? So I must have done *something* right. But it had gone too far. A minute or two more, and they would have fucked there and then on the sofa. He was grateful that whatever part of his subconscious he hadn't drowned in alcohol had done enough to stop it.

You need to decide what you want.

Those words came to him as clear as distilled water. And what do you want, Ben? Natalie? Amy? Natasha, even? Or a combination of the three? Or maybe all of them at once? He lingered on that thought for a moment. Hell, that would be nirvana itself. But that was fantasy, and the reality, Ben, is that you are one confused kid. He thought of Natalie, how she had looked at him, and he knew she felt something. Physical attraction, certainly. Despite not getting there, he had enjoyed every moment on the sofa. Getting seduced by an older woman didn't happen every day. And she respected him. Maybe. Or maybe she was just feeling a little horny, the booze lessening her inhibitions. He could believe that, but her words afterwards suggested otherwise. Unless it was a ruse, an attempt to save face?

His feelings for Natasha were complicated, too. First up, he hated Tyler. But maybe a little too much. Hated him for going out with a girl who deserved better. Then Clifton popped into his head, and, knowing Clifton's attentions towards Natasha were more than friendly sent a ripple of jealousy through him.

And behind it all, the substance beneath the superficiality, was Amy. He couldn't think of her in any rational sense any more. She had her own life now, a new fella, a world far from his. But he still belonged to her. Couldn't face a life without her. Which would explain the text, and his rejection of Natalie.

The phone rang.

A cold finger tickled the base of his spine. Not Amy. I can't talk to her now. He held one hand over the display screen, crossed the fingers of his other hand, and closed his eyes. 'Hello?'

A pause. Nausea rushed over him in a sharp wave. 'Hey man,' a voice said.

Ben fell back on the bed, head striking the pillow. 'J, I don't know if I've told you this before, but I love you. How you doing?'

'Like death warmed up. You sound a bit weird. What's up?'

'Nothing. So, did you have a good time last night?'

'Don't talk to me about it, please. I don't remember very much. And how the hell did we get back here? I woke up fully clothed, slobbering onto my pillow. Then I threw up everywhere.'

'Spare me the details. If you must know, I put you to bed. We were staggering around outside, making a racket, then the door opens and one of your housemates is standing there.'

'God. Who was it?'

'The blonde one.'

'Great. She'll be in a right fucking mood with me. Shit, it's time to emigrate.'

'Oh, and I don't think you'll be on Catherine's Christmas card list, either. Considering the amount of times you tried it on with her.'

'God, it gets worse. Tell her I'm sorry when you see her.'

'You can tell her yourself. She's not pissed off too much, you were just a bit, persistent I guess is the word.'

'Shit. Go on, any more? Did I, I don't know, beat up any chavs or chat with some cops?'

Ben laughed. 'No, the only person I recall doing any punching was Tyler.'

'That I do remember. What a fucking cock.'

'Gets my vote.'

'Any other gossip?'

'I can think of a little.'

'So, what are you up to? I don't think I'm going to be able to move all day. You want to come over and be miserable together? Then you can tell me all there is to know, and we can hide from the world for the day.'

‘That sounds like an excellent idea. Give us time for a shower, and I’ll be right over.’

‘Bring some comfort food. And movies. See you later.’

But first, how to get out without being spotted. He didn’t want to face Natalie or Natasha today. Not yet. He leant against the wall, and there were no sounds coming from next door. Probably out shopping or something. He opened the door an inch, saw no one, and scampered for the bathroom.

The shower cleared his head, and he was on his way back to his room, towel round his waist, when the front door opened. If this is Natalie, I may as well die right now.

‘Hiya. Wow, you look very dashing this morning! Nice towel.’

He sighed. ‘Catherine. How are you?’

‘Good. Woke up with no hangover, so I went out. What about you?’

‘Surviving, just about. I’m off to J’s, actually. He says sorry about last night.’

‘That’s OK. In a way, it was kind of sweet. Very annoying, but sweet. Don’t tell him I said so, will you?’

‘Cross my heart and hope to die. I’d better, you know, get some clothes on.’

‘Oh, I’ve seen worse.’ She grinned. ‘By the way, nice lovebite.’

Fuck. In the sanctuary of his room, he inspected his neck in the mirror. There was a blood bruise right on his jugular, with tiny crescents of white flesh around the edges. Natalie’s teeth. There for all the world to see. He blushed and shook his head. He was ready in fifteen minutes, dressing in a polo neck to cover the bite, and out the door just as Natalie, Natasha and Tyler stepped off the bus and saw him, head bowed, walking briskly towards the newsagents and video shop.

And they weren’t the only ones who saw him. Outside the Prom Café, Clifton Walker sat nursing a glass of lemonade. He was dressed in a fleecelined parka and woolly hat, and still the cold was seeping through. Fucking weather. The cold made his scar throb. As Ben walked by, he shrank into his seat, pulling the hat down further. Thankfully, Ben chose that moment to cross the road, nipping between the traffic, and was gone without looking back. A man on a mission. Clifton wondered where he was off to in such a hurry.

He took a sip of lemonade, and when he returned his gaze to the street his heart lept into his mouth, for *she* was walking towards him, no more than a hundred yards away. The guy to her left was obviously Tyler, but it seemed to Clifton that something had happened, because there was no physical contact between them, and Natasha was in conversation with some other girl he didn’t recognise. Whoever it was, she was a stunner. No match for my girl, he thought, but then, who is? As they drew closer he pulled his table back slightly, so from the angle they were approaching at, he was out of sight. He waited.

When they got to the gate, Natalie said, ‘Hey, that looks like Ben up there! Just crossing the road.’

Natasha followed her arm. 'So it is. Probably going to the shop or something.'

'Yeah.'

'Look Nat, he'll be back later on. You'll have a chance to chat to him then. Give him some time to think about stuff.'

Natalie sighed. 'I guess so. God, I shouldn't have done that last night. I've scared the poor guy off.'

'Yeah, well. What's done is done. That's the trouble with men, they never know what they want. And even when they've got what they want, they act like a prat to make themselves known. Speaking from experience.'

'Jesus,' Tyler hissed. 'How many times do I have to apologise for last night?'

'Who said I was talking about you? But now you mention it, a couple hundred more times should about do it.'

Tyler gritted his teeth. 'OK, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. That good enough?'

'Only a hundred and ninety seven to go. Oh, and talking of shops, could you run up to the newsagents for me? There's a couple of magazines I want to get, and I thought you might want to go for me.'

A sigh. 'Sure. Natalie, you want anything?'

'No thanks. If you see Ben, say hi.'

'No you won't,' Natasha warned. 'Just leave him to it. Nat, he'll come back when he's ready. Just be patient.'

'What does it matter to you, anyway? I was only being polite.'

'Come on, let's go inside. It's too cold to be arguing out here.'

A clang as the gate swung open and back. Then Tyler slinked past, hands in pockets, and that was when Clifton saw the shiner. A big bruise on his right eye. Well, well, well. This was getting interesting.

Ben had all the ingredients for a hangover cure fest. Firstly, the food: anything that needed minimal cooking time, and could be eaten without cutlery. So he had pizzas, Doritos, Pringles, dip. Lemonade and orange juice, to replenish Vitamin C levels. He was in the magazine aisle when a familiar shape loomed over him.

'Hey.'

'Tyler.' He looked at Tyler's face, that awful bruise over his eye, and smiled inwardly. Serves you fucking right. He noticed Tyler was carrying two women's magazines in one hand – *Cosmopolitan* and *Company*. 'Bit of light reading?'

Tyler frowned. 'Oh, these are for Natasha.'

Ben nodded. 'Ahh, someone's in the doghouse, I take it? Getting you to run her errands, is she?'

'Well, a man's got to do... Oh yeah, Natalie was asking after you. Seems you've got that girl's fire lit.'

Ben's face fell. 'Oh.'

'Mind you,' Tyler said, leaning in close. 'Not that I blame you. She's got

a great piece of ass on her.'

'I'm sure Natasha would be charmed to know that.'

'Well, she's none of your business, is she? You concentrate on whatever the hell it is that you're doing, and I'll do the same. I don't need you sticking your oar in where Natasha's concerned, you got that?'

'Whatever. She'll work you out soon enough, anyway.'

With his free arm, Tyler grabbed Ben's arm right where he had been manhandled last night and squeezed hard. White stars danced before Ben's eyes. 'I'm sorry? Didn't quite hear that right. What? I see, you're going to stay the fuck away from Natasha. Sensible idea.' He released his grip, and Ben had to lean against a shelf for support.

'It's going to be pretty difficult, considering we live together,' Ben hissed. 'Maybe you'll have to put up with it.'

'Things can change, Benny boy. From what I understand, your dead end parents can't even support you. So come Christmas, it could be bye bye Ben. And I won't be sorry to see you go. Now, I'd better get back. The missus is waiting.'

As Tyler walked off, Ben shouted, 'Tyler?' He turned around. 'Mention my parents again, and you'll have a black eye ten times worse than the one you're sporting already, you got that?'

Tyler sneered. 'Yeah. I'm sure. You wouldn't last five minutes. Although, I'm sure that's pretty common for you.' He laughed, paid up and left, leaving Ben to work some life back into his arm.

Clifton drained the last of his lemonade and got up to leave, slipping on a pair of gloves as he did so. 'See you soon, my love,' he whispered. 'See you soon.'

Just then he saw Tyler striding towards him, and an idea popped into his head. Time to set the cat among the pigeons. He sat back down again and watched as Tyler approached. When he was close Clifton shouted, 'Tyler!'

Tyler looked behind him. Clifton repeated his name again, and got a closer glimpse of the black eye. What a rocket that must have been! Some trouble in paradise. The thought gave him extra confidence.

'Who the fuck are you?' Tyler said, standing high over Clifton's table. 'Christ, look at you! Mate, you've got some chewing gum stuck to your face.' He snickered.

'Compared to your face, I'll stick with what I've got,' Clifton spat back, anger surging through him. 'Now sit the fuck down.'

'Listen, I don't know you from a bar of soap, so quit giving me the orders, all right? Have a nice day.'

'It's about Natasha,' Clifton said quickly, and Tyler stopped dead.

'What do you mean? If you're fucking me about...'

'Would I do such a thing? Come on, have a chat with me. Five minutes, tops.'

Tyler stood for a moment, then grabbed a chair from an adjacent table, flipped it round and straddled it, his arms folded. 'All right, out with it. How

the fuck do you know Natasha?’

Clifton realised that he had put himself on the spot here. But it was too late now. He adjusted his hat and said, ‘She’s a friend from uni. That’s all.’

Tyler raised his eyebrows. ‘Yeah, I’m sure. One of those friends who’d like to be really close to her, I bet. And how do you know me, more to the point?’

Clifton thought for a second. ‘I saw you together in the pub, so I asked Ben about it. As in Ben, her housemate. We’re in the same seminar group.’

‘Ahh, Ben. Whatever happens to her always seems to involve him. He’s sniffing around all the time, the bastard.’

Here was the angle. ‘Well, there’s an obvious reason for that, isn’t there?’

Tyler frowned. ‘Because he’s after her himself.’

‘Exactly.’

Tyler shook his head. ‘No, that’s not right. Sure, he might like her, but he can’t be that interested. He pulled her sister last night.’

Her sister? Clifton took a leap. ‘And? Was he drunk?’

‘I imagine so. Most of us were.’

‘There you go then. He probably thought that because he couldn’t have her, he’d go for the next best thing.’

‘Hmmm. You could be right. He did turn her down. OK, so maybe. But why are you so interested?’

‘Hey. If someone was after my girlfriend, I’d want to know about it. He talks about her all the time. In fact, he never shuts up about it. And he’s so crude, you know? Saying that he’d really like to give her one, all that. Pretty graphic stuff. Plus, he doesn’t think much of you, either. Something involving the word ‘wanker’.’

Red lines sprung up on Tyler’s forehead. ‘Feeling’s mutual, believe me. I think Ben and I should have a little chat.’

Clifton smiled. ‘Might be a good idea. If you warn him off, that’ll be the end of it. Compared to you, he’s got no chance, has he?’

Tyler stood up. ‘Too fucking right.’

‘But, hey, I wouldn’t mention this to Natasha. No point in rocking the boat, is there? In my opinion, of course.’

‘Yeah, that’s true. All right, thanks. Maybe there is something going on. Cheers for letting me know.’

‘No problem. Natasha’s a friend, you know? She doesn’t need all this shit.’

‘I agree. From now on, he’s out of the picture. I’ve gotta go. See you.’ He went to leave, then stopped and said, ‘Hey, I don’t even know your name.’

‘It’s John.’

‘Ta, John. See you around.’

When he had gone, Clifton laughed, praising himself for his ingenuity. The door was opening up.

You did well, love. Really well.

Yes Mum, he thought. Yes I did.

It was dark when Ben crept home from J's. He was sincerely hoping that everyone was in bed when he got back. The last thing he wanted was the third degree from Natasha, or Tyler, making grim recollections about the events of yesterday. Seeing Natalie wasn't high up on the list, either. Sleep was all he craved.

He belched, his stomach churning, and he regretted drinking so much lemonade at J's. Despite the late hour, his hangover was still in its final throes, no matter how much liquid he poured into it.

He stepped inside and hurried for his bedroom, nearly running the last steps. Natasha's bedroom door opened.

'Hello, stranger.' Natalie hovered in the doorway. Her eyes were baggy and dark. 'Where have you been all day?'

Ben shifted from one foot to the other. 'Oh, you know. Around. At J's, mostly.'

She nodded. There was an awkward silence. 'So, how *are* you?'

'Hungover. And tired. I think J was worse, though. What about you?'

'Oh. Pretty much the same. We went out this morning, planning on a big shopping and lunch fest, but it got to this afternoon and none of us could be bothered any more. I've been asleep since we got back.'

'Right.' Another silence.

Natalie sighed and chewed on a fingernail. 'You know, this is exactly what I didn't want to happen. Last night, we got on so well, and now, we can barely say two words to each other.'

Ben stared between his feet. 'I know.'

She moved closer. 'Listen, Ben...' Her hand came up towards his face. And his phone rang.

The noise startled them both, and split the tension in half. He shrugged and reached into his pocket, answered the call. 'Hello?'

'Hey you. It's me.'

Fuck. 'Hang on a sec.' He took the phone from his ear. 'Sorry Natalie, I've really got to take this.'

She blushed, and finally nodded. 'Sure. Whatever.'

'I'm sorry,' he repeated, and brushed past her, opening the door and stepping into the cool night. He took a cigarette out, lit it, took a deep breath, and said into the phone, 'Hey. Sorry about that.'

'I can call back tomorrow if it's more convenient. I know it's a, uh, unusual hour.'

'Don't be silly. I've always got time for you, Amy.'

'Thanks. I just wanted to get in touch and say thank you for the message last night. You still shake me up, even now.'

'You're welcome. Sorry about that, I was kinda drunk.'

'Yeah, I gathered. For what it's worth, I feel the same.'

'Amy, can I be honest? I can't really remember what I said. It wasn't anything bad, was it?'

She laughed, and the sound tipped his heart over. 'No, you dummy. On

the contrary. Basically that you missed me, and that you hoped I was happy in what I'm doing. Along those lines.'

He grimaced and gripped the phone tighter. 'And do you? Miss me?'

'Of course I do. Every day. Sometimes, I'm watching telly or listening to the radio, and a song or advert will come on and it reminds me of you so much. I will start singing along, and Robert will look at me like I've sprouted wings.'

'Robert?'

'You know...but I don't want to talk about him. He's not important here.'

'How's it going with him?'

She took a breath. 'I don't know. I enjoy being with him, and we get on great...most of the time. But you and I, we have a history, and it's difficult to let that go.'

'So don't,' he pleaded. 'Don't.'

'Ben, please. Don't be like that.'

'I'm sorry,' he said, backing down, thinking, how many times do I have to apologise? And for what?

'Look,' Amy was saying, 'we haven't got long until Christmas, and we'll both be at home then. If I'm honest, I don't know what will happen between Robert and I. It's difficult. I'm not being very fair to him. But I have to give it a go, you know? Just to see. It's not an experiment, I wanted this, and I know that, but I can't seem to get rid of you. In my head. And I know we'll see each other in the holidays...' Her voice trailed away.

'What about the gig? You still going to come? It's on the 13th December.'

'The 13th? Oh Ben, I can't. It's Robert's birthday that week. Talk about bad timing.'

'Come on, it's going to be great.'

'I'm sure it will be. But you know I can't. I'll speak to you before then though? Won't I?'

'Sure.'

'I have to wish you good luck. And promise to take lots of photos, and try and video it for me. I'd love to see it.'

It's not the same, he thought. But it never will be. 'OK, well, I'll speak to you soon. I'm outside, and it's freezing out here.'

'OK. You take care. It was good to talk to you.'

'You too. Bye.'

He broke the connection and was hit by a wave of loneliness he'd never experienced. Everyone doing their own thing, and here I am. Smoking forlorn cigarettes, avoiding people, and knowing that soon, it could all run out. He sat and smoked another, listening to the screams and shouts from the street below, not caring if he fell asleep right now, frozen to this spot, this moment, forever.

Back inside, there was no sign of Natalie. He wondered if she had heard every word of his conversation, then decided he didn't care. It was too much,

all of it. He went into the kitchen and got a glass of water, the cool liquid perfect for his dehydrated body.

He turned to go to bed and Tyler stood in the doorway, arms folded. The bruise still hadn't gone down, if anything it was worse than before. Good.

'Just the man I was looking for,' Tyler said. 'I had a very interesting conversation earlier about you. Illuminating, it was.'

'How nice,' Ben said, and tried to push past. Tyler held firm, blocking the doorway. 'Look,' Ben said, 'I'm tired, and I can't be bothered to stand here and listen to you. So say your bit, and leave me alone.'

'Touchy touchy. Now, as I was saying, I had a chat about you this afternoon. And someone had some things to say. So I'll say them to you. First up, if you've got a problem with me, say it to my fucking face. Rather than going around slagging me off behind my back. And secondly, stop sleazing around Natasha. She's with me, so get over it. Any thoughts you might have of worming your way in, forget them. Just because I'm not here seven days a week, doesn't mean I haven't got my eyes open. I've heard all that dirty stuff you've been saying about her, too. There's a filthy mind between your ears, isn't there?'

Ben shook his head. 'You're way off the mark. Paranoid, that's your problem. Hence the reason you start on anyone who even glances in her direction. I don't know who you've been "chatting" with, but they're filling your head with stories.'

'Some guy called John, if you must know.'

'John? I don't know anyone called John.'

'Yeah, right. With a face messed up like that, you wouldn't forget him.' Messed up face? And then it hit. Ben laughed.

Tyler stepped forward. 'What's so fucking funny?'

'John, eh? Don't tell me, he had a white scarred patch, kind of around here?'

'That's the one.'

'Huh. A reliable source if ever there was one. For your information, *Tyler*, that guy isn't even called John. His name's Clifton. And whatever he told you, I'd chuck it out with the rubbish. *He's* the one who's after Natasha. He asked her out a few weeks ago. She said no, but he seems to have trouble accepting the fact.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Fine. One way to find out, ask Natasha. She'll tell you. So, I think you'd better get your facts straight before coming out with the insults. And on that note, goodnight.' This time Tyler let him go. That's shut you up, Ben thought, and he went to bed with a smile on his face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Late morning sun was streaming through the shutters when Ben woke up. His mouth was dry, so he groped around on the floor for his glass of water, drinking it down greedily. Yuck. Warm.

He rolled out of bed and glanced at the clock. 10.47. He had slept for nearly ten hours. And what of it? That's what Sundays are for. He showered and dressed, still keeping an eye out for Natalie or Tyler or whoever else, but no one appeared. Back in his room, he checked his watch. Band practise this afternoon, he thought, so that gives me a couple of hours to do some reading for uni.

He found the appropriate text and made to clear some stuff off his desk. As he was moving a ring binder to the floor, a small slip of paper fell to the carpet. He picked it up. It was a page from his spiral notebook, folded in half with his name printed on the front. Inside was a brief note.

'Ben.

I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to say goodbye, at least not properly. It wasn't intentional, because I was going early anyway, but a part of me chickened out, I admit it. I wanted you to know that I understand you've got a lot of stuff to sort through, and it's best if you do that alone. What happened on Friday meant something to me, it wasn't a drunken pass. I hope you believe that. Anyhow, I've left my number, and if you want to get in touch, it'd be great to hear from you.

Take care,
Natalie

xxx

PS. When you see Natasha, tell her I hate her.'

Ben read the note twice, smiling when he read the PS. It was exactly what he would imagine her saying. He added her number to his phone, and went to screw the note up and chuck it in the bin, but something stopped him. So he refolded it, opened a drawer, and stuffed it under a pile of black socks.

He tried to return to his reading, but the words seemed to be written in Arabic. His mind was wandering, not focusing on anything in particular. It all seemed an impenetrable, complicated mess. And not just the girls, everything. There was no certainty to the future. Within a month, it could all be over. It was a thought that filled him with dread.

There was a knock at the door, and before he could answer, Natasha strode in, her face flushed and rosy. She raised a hand and sat down on the bed, trying to force some air into her lungs.

'What's up with you?' he asked, lighting a cigarette. 'Been running a marathon?'

She shook her head. 'No...no...for some reason, I decided to run up the steps, and look at me, I'm pooped! Time to get down the gym, I think.'

Ben smiled. 'Well, maybe I'll join you.' He held up the cigarette. 'If I ever give up the cancer sticks.'

She fanned her brow with a loose sheet of paper. ‘Ahh, that’s better.’ She brought her legs up and sat cross-legged. ‘I’ve just seen Nat-Nat and Tyler off. I mean, not together. We gave her a lift to the bus station, then Tyler and I had an early lunch.’

Ben blew smoke at the ceiling. ‘So, things are back to normal between you two then? After Friday, I mean.’

‘Pretty much. He’s been as good as gold since then. I know he doesn’t mean it, when he gets like that. But I’ve made it clear, no more. If it happens again, we’re finished.’

Ben held his tongue. If only you knew. All the stuff he’s said about me, the trouble he’s caused. But you can work it out for yourself.

‘Anyway,’ Natasha said, ‘Natalie says goodbye. We looked in on you, and you were so sweet, all curled up like a baby, we didn’t have the heart to wake you.’ She laughed. ‘I can’t believe you still suck your thumb.’

‘I do *not*,’ he protested, face burning.

She laughed some more. ‘Relax Ben, I’m joking. God, you’re so gullible.’

‘Natalie left me a note,’ Ben said. ‘She says to tell you she hates you.’

‘And I hate her,’ Natasha replied. ‘I *love* to hate her. One of our little jokes,’ she added, seeing Ben’s puzzled expression. ‘Talking of her, she’s pretty pissed off with you, Ben. You know...’

Ben stubbed out the cigarette and cracked the bones in his fingers. ‘Yeah,’ he said quietly. ‘I know.’

‘She’s been hurt quite a bit in the past by blokes. Speaking as her sister, I *know* it’s a big deal when she goes for somebody. She doesn’t do it on a whim, it’s not in her nature.’

‘So, she must really like me.’

Natasha nodded. ‘I think so. I told her she had excellent taste. It runs in the family, can’t you tell?’

Ben smiled. Then thought, no offence, but her taste is *way* better than yours. The smile widened, then dropped off. ‘You know, I’m not sure I’m ready. I mean, Amy’s still somewhere in my life, and my head’s a bit messed up. I’m not sure if I want to be with anyone yet. Too much hassle, you women.’

‘Apart from me, of course,’ she said, smiling.

‘Apart from you. When it comes to girls, you’re indefinable.’

‘I’ll take that as a compliment.’ She got up. ‘But talk to her, when you’ve got it sorted. Don’t leave her hanging out to dry, or we’ll both be on your backs. And when the Harrison girls get going, you wanna run for the hills. You got that, mister?’

He nodded, hand up to his forehead in a mock salute. ‘Loud and clear cap’n.’

She smiled. ‘Got band practice later?’

‘Yeah, in a bit. When Derek gets his ass into gear.’

‘I can’t wait. I’ve been dying to hear you lot. It’s the highlight of my Christmas build-up.’

Oh well, he thought as she left. At least we have *one* fan.

The next few days passed in a flurry, which suited Ben fine. Not having to stop and think was a blessing. It was band practise every day now. Although he was nervous about the upcoming gig, somehow it didn't seem to matter. When he was singing, everything else faded away, and his mind was free from worry. No need to think about anything but getting through the song, pushing himself as far as he could, exploring the boundaries of what they could do. It made Derek happy, it was all he fucking talked about. And Derek's infectiousness spread like a rash through the rest of the group, until they walked and breathed it, practising long into the evenings.

When he wasn't with the band, Ben kept to himself. He had arranged some extra shifts at the Goose, so now was now working on his days off, only returning home for meals and sleep. On the odd occasion he did have some spare time, it was taken up with studying. He had two pieces of coursework to finish by the end of term and, of course, the dreaded presentation. But on Wednesday, he had a reprieve.

In the seminar, Ben sat through the latest presentation, aware that in a week's time it would be their turn. Clifton sat next to him, fidgeting as usual. They had hardly spoken two words to each other. How little you know, Ben thought. I understand your game. Trying to cause a little friction between me and Tyler and Natasha. Playing us off against each other. Try and drive her away from us, and into your arms. Well, it won't work. He made up his mind then to have it out with Clifton after the seminar. Nip this in the bud before things get out of hand.

The presentation came to a close, and after muted applause, there was a round of questions. Ben was thankful he had scribbled a few notes, and when his turn came, he had something. Before him, Clifton mumbled some incoherent babble, but somehow got away with it.

As the seminar neared completion, Mr Symonds addressed the class. 'Before you go, a quick word about our schedule. Now, next week, we are due to have... Ben and Clifton, working on *Shame*, is that correct?'

They nodded and murmured.

'Well, as I'm sure you're all aware, you have an essay due in the last week of term. So, I thought it might be better if we spend next week working on preparation for your essays. Although I'm sure you've already got them finished, right?'

A titter from the class.

'No, I thought not. So this means, Ben and Clifton, I'm pushing your presentation back a week, to the last week of term. On the 18th of December. I realise this isn't ideal, but *Shame* isn't on our syllabus until next term, so we can have a nice light introduction to the book, then go home for Christmas, and come back to it fresh next term.'

If I'm back next term, Ben thought.

'Are you both happy with that?'

'Sure,' Ben said. 'It'll be a nice Christmas present for everyone.'

A few laughs. Clifton stared at the floor. 'I'm sure it will,' Mr Symonds replied. The bell rang. 'OK, thanks everyone, another excellent presentation, let's hope yours keeps the standard up, yes? See you all next week.'

There was a rumble as the class filed out. Clifton was in a hurry, scooping up his bag and half running for the door, but Ben kept him in his sights, and as Clifton made for the car park, Ben called his name and hurried to catch up.

Clifton was drawing circles in the dust with his foot. 'Hey,' Ben said. His throat was sore from running. 'Bit of a bonus about the presentation, isn't it?' he said, trying to keep it light.

'I guess. I'd rather get it over and done with, to be honest.'

'You looking forward to Christmas?'

'Not really. I imagine Dad will get drunk for the what, first time in about a day.' He started drawing the circles again. 'Ben, I'm sure you didn't stop by to swap festive tales. You want something?'

'OK, fine. What I *want*, is to know exactly what you've been saying to Tyler. Because the other night, he was giving me the once-over, and most of what he said was complete bullshit. And I know that it came from you.'

Clifton slackened his mouth into an innocent pose. 'I never said anything to him.'

'Fuck off. What, telling him your name was John? Sounds really truthful. He doesn't even know you, so why would he make that up?'

'Because he's a manipulative liar, maybe? Come on, Ben. You hate each other, and he thinks you're after Natasha. All I said was that I was friends with you, and he started going off on one, saying how you sleazed around her all the time. He's really got a bee in his bonnet about it.'

Ben groaned. 'For fuck's sake, I haven't got an interest in Natasha! How many times do I have to keep saying it?'

Clifton shrugged. 'Tell him that, not me. He's the one with the problem. Now, I've got to go. We'll leave the presentation stuff for now. We can iron out any details next week.'

'Whatever. You know what, sometimes I wish I'd never met that girl. More trouble than she's worth.'

'I'll see you,' Clifton said, and walked off, smiling.

'Natasha!'

She stood in the doorway of the campus shop, trying to locate the voice. Turning her head left and right. Then, puzzled, she eased the door closed and set off in the direction of the bar, arms folded across her chest, bag resting against her hip.

Clifton hurried. 'Hey, Natasha, wait up!'

She slowed her pace. 'Hi, Clifton,' she said, strolling now. 'What's up?'

He watched the bag bounce, up and down, up and down. 'Oh, you know. Struggling along. How was your weekend?'

'Eventful, I suppose is the word.'

'Yeah, Ben told me. Sounds like a wild night out.'

‘Oh, so you know all about Tyler then, I suppose?’

Tyler? ‘Yeah,’ he lied. ‘Ben did mention it.’

Her pace slowed further. ‘Well, Ben’s got a big mouth. Sure, Tyler has his jealous moments, but that’s the way he is’

What is she talking about, he wondered. No matter. It was a way in.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘I’ve always wondered why blokes get jealous. I mean, I can understand it, especially when their girlfriends are as good looking as you and all, but it’s self destructive. Nothing good ever comes from it.’

She stopped then, and he nearly walked into her. Her eyes were boring into him, and he thought he might melt under her gaze. ‘Maybe I should organise a meeting for you and Tyler.’ She smiled. ‘You can tell him what you just said. Maybe it’ll knock some sense into him.’

‘Well, I meant every word.’

She squeezed his hand. The touch sent shock waves through his body. ‘Thanks, Clifton. Lots more to you than meets the eye, isn’t there?’

He blushed, trying to think of when a girl had made him feel like this. A simple answer. Never. ‘I’m sure Tyler regrets it, anyway. He should do. I think Ben was probably making it out to be more than it was. He does like to talk.’

She lowered her head. ‘Well, Ben and Tyler don’t exactly see eye to eye. Ben’s a great guy and everything, but he seems to have a vendetta against him.’

‘I’m sure he’s looking out for you.’

She ran a hand through her hair. ‘Perhaps. It’s complicated. I wish life with men was simpler, you know? Without all this mess.’

Time to go for broke. ‘Well, it could be. Look, Natasha, can I be honest? It seems to me that you deserve a whole lot better than what you’re getting. All this angst. It doesn’t seem to be making you very happy. With me, it would be. I’d treat you right. Better than Tyler. Better than anyone.’

She grimaced, turned her head away. ‘God, Clifton. You have to go and spoil it, don’t you? We’re *friends*, that’s all. I’ve told you that before. Sure, I may be having a few problems right now, but so what? Everybody does. Me and you, it’s never going to happen. I’m sorry, but that’s the way it is. I’ve gotta go.’

‘Ben’s in love with you,’ he stammered, and that stopped her dead.

‘Totally and utterly. That’s why he hates Tyler, and spends time bad mouthing him to me. Because he wants you, and he’ll do anything.’

‘No. You’re wrong, and I don’t appreciate you trying to stir things up. Ben’s more interested in my sister than me. I’m with Tyler, and Ben is, well, just Ben.’ But a flash passed across her face, and he knew that she was lying. Knew that somewhere, she believed that he was telling the truth.

‘Whatever. One day, sometime soon, you’ll work it out. You’ll see that Tyler is a fucking blowout, and Ben is a lying prick, and I’ll be waiting. You’ll see that I’m the one who has it right. But that’s fine. I’ll wait for you. Always.’

‘You know what? From now on, stay the fuck away from me. You can’t go around trying to destroy people. Leave Ben alone, too. Sure, you might have this presentation thingy, but otherwise, stay out of it. Now leave me alone.’

She strode off, and his blood was pumping. He clenched his fists. *Stay the fuck away from me.*

No, Natasha, I’m sorry. That’s not going to be possible.

‘BEN? BEN?’ Natasha stormed into his room, threw her bag down, and collapsed onto the bed.

‘Make yourself at home,’ he said.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck! Guess who I just ran into?’

‘I dunno. David Beckham. Who?’

‘Clifton. The guy’s a complete mental case. He tried it on with me again. I can’t believe it. I *told* him once already.’

‘I did warn you. I had the pleasure of a chat with him earlier, too.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Did you know that he’s been hanging around Tyler? He was spouting all this stuff that I had supposedly said to him.’

She was genuinely surprised. ‘Tyler? When?’

‘I don’t know. Over the weekend some time, I think.’

‘And?’

Ben shrugged. ‘Again, I don’t know. Apparently I was slagging Tyler off to all and sundry, which isn’t true, and that I’d been, and I quote, “sleazing” around you. At least, that’s how Tyler related it to me.’

‘You’ve been chatting with Tyler? About me?’ Her face darkened. ‘Fucking hell, Ben, what is all this? All I hear is what you said to Clifton, or him to Tyler, or you to Tyler. Why can’t anybody speak to *me*?’

Ben reached for his cigarettes. ‘Forget about it. It’s Clifton sticking his grubby fingers into other people’s business. I did try to warn you.’

‘Oh yeah?’ she said, voice thick with sarcasm. ‘Well, Clifton’s latest theory is that you’re in love with me, so you’re trying to poison Tyler against me. Brilliant, isn’t it?’

‘Tyler can do that all by himself.’ He regretted the words as soon as they came out.

Natasha stood up, hands planted on hips. ‘And now you start. What the fuck is your problem?’

Ben was angry now, and he stood up too. ‘What the fuck is yours? I’m only going on what I know of Tyler.’ He counted on his fingers. ‘One. He gets in jealous rages, ruins everyone’s night out. Two, he bullies people. I could tell you how he threatened me in the shop the other day, and again on Saturday night after everyone was in bed. I could tell you that, but obviously you won’t believe me, because for some reason you think the sun shines out of his backside. As for me being after you myself, well, I don’t need to justify that with an answer. All you’ve got to back that up is Clifton’s word, which is about as useful as an umbrella in a hurricane. *He’s* the one who has

made it pretty clear he wants you. And suddenly you believe everything he says. What's more likely is that he's the one who's jealous, so he's stirring up trouble. Probably why you are so quick to side with him. Jealousy must turn you on.'

She burst into tears. 'FUCK YOU!' she screamed, tears cascading down her cheeks, a trickle of snot running from her nostril. Then a fresh set of sobs took over, and she ran out of the room. Seconds later, her door crashed on its hinges.

Ben sat back down. Real good, Ben. Real smooth. He thought about Clifton, and Tyler, and how he had got dragged into this mess. Exactly what Clifton wants. To drive a wedge between us all, cause so much hatred that Natasha will get sick of the lot of us. Well, good luck to him. It wasn't going to work. Ben was tired of it. Every day seemed to bring a new problem, and behind it was Clifton. He would have to be on his guard, or things were going to spiral out of control.

The time was nine o'clock, which meant two things to Matthew Walker. First – that soon another day would be over. Second, that he was drunk. He poured the remainder of his glass of scotch down his throat, added ice to his glass, poured scotch over the top, the amber liquid oozing like oil over the cubes, and took another mouthful. He looked at the clock again. What day was it? Tuesday? Wednesday? What *week* was it, for that matter? It would soon be Christmas, that he could remember. The one day of the year where getting blitzed out of your mind was compulsory, even expected. It would go well with the other three hundred and sixty four.

He took another gulp, remembering he didn't have anything to do. Certainly not work. The last time he had done a fruitful day's graft had been – well, when had it been? The days all blurred into one. All he could gauge them by was the line in the bottle of scotch. Today it was about a third full. Which was, more or less, a normal day.

A headache was approaching, its soft haze penetrating the base of his skull. He downed his drink, immediately poured another, and thought about nipping to the off licence to stock up. Then realised that he couldn't afford it, and a thin tremor of panic ran through him. Where was the money going to come from? Most of his customers, especially the loyal ones, had given up on him weeks ago. The last job, an essay for a scientific journal, had been littered with errors. Grammatical faults. Simple spelling mistakes. Someone had phoned a day later, admonishing him for the poor standard of work, and he had a vague recollection of talking to the dialling tone, the caller long gone. Since then, the phone had remained silent. Clothes went unwashed, and he scratched his face now, surprised to find hair sprouting from his cheeks and chin. One step away from the gutter, he thought. Soon, even the winos in the street will be looking down on you.

He thought of Claire, the pre-Clifton Claire that he turned to for comfort. What *she* would say to him. How she would encourage him to get help, that he shouldn't be drinking his life away. But she was gone now, and with her

went hope. Hope that things could get better. He wasn't sure it was possible, anyway. All he wanted to drown in a sea of scotch, pile as much of it into his body as possible, go to sleep and never wake up. And that would be that.

He reached for the bottle again.

Clifton sat in the shed, blood drying on his fingers, streak of red across his forehead. Tonight's catch – a large rat that had scurried into his path, and quick as you like, he stamped it dead. A pleasing crunch as its neck broke. After, he had carried the corpse to the shed, dismembered the body, and thrown the remains into the woods. It was surprising, he thought, how much blood there was. For such a tiny creature.

And for a human...

For a human. He picked up the stained knife from the dusty floor. It felt good, holding it. Powerful. He ran a finger down the blade, and a small droplet of blood appeared, trickling down into his palm. He watched the trail, and then leant forward and licked his hand dry. It tasted coppery, unusual. But not unpleasant. His stomach was steady, now used to the stench of death.

Nearly ready. His mind turned, as it always did, to Natasha. She still hadn't come around. After all he had said. About Tyler, and Ben. Can't anyone see it, he thought. Am I the only one? That was the trouble, not just with her, with them all. Walking around blind, pretending that they know everything, sages to some fucking higher truth, looking down on those they considered worthless. Like me. The ones with the power to change, the honesty, able to accept life for what it is, the survival of the fittest, kill or be killed, take what you want when you want it.

But she would see. And soon. He was prepared to wait, but not forever. He had spent his whole life waiting for that void to be filled, and she was his saviour. And if she can't see it, I'll make her see. He held the knife over his head, with two hands, before plunging it in between two floorboards, right up to the hilt.

I'll make you see, Natasha. Reject me again, and I'll make you see who I really am. And when that happens, not Ben, not Tyler, no one will be able to stand in my way.

It was dark when Ben reached home. His throat ached, but in a nice way. He had been practising all afternoon, and the effort of singing had taken its toll. But it was starting to come together. There was only a week to go. Seven days until they stood in front of an audience and showed what they had. It was going to go one of two ways – either they'd blow the house down, or go out with a whimper.

Ben dug his hands deeper into his pockets. From the bite in the air, there was going to be a frost later. He scampered up the steps to find J at the front door, talking to somebody. Whoever it was, they were laughing.

'Hey man,' J said as Ben got there. 'Long time no see.'

Ben held up a hand while he caught his breath. 'Ahh...God...'

'Someone needs to give up smoking,' J observed.

‘You can talk.’ Ben straightened up, and burst out laughing. ‘Nice hat, mate.’

J was wearing a black Russian style hat with a hammer and sickle pin badge on the front. It sat high on his head, adding two extra inches in height. ‘Hey, the winter is upon us, and I’m getting prepared to hibernate. Catherine said she’d join me.’

‘I said nothing of the sort,’ she said, popping out from behind the door. ‘Ben, I’m glad you’re here. You can put this up. Old motor mouth here hasn’t quite got enough to do the job. Story of his life, I’m told.’ She giggled.

‘Little lady, you’re going to be sorry you said that.’ But he was laughing too.

Catherine handed Ben a wreath of holly. ‘Careful, you don’t want to prick yourself.’

‘Story of *your* life,’ J said, laughing, and Ben cracked up. Catherine glared at J, but a smile played around her lips.

‘Whereabouts?’ Ben asked.

‘Just above the door. I was thinking, here we are in December, and *somebody* has to be in the Christmas spirit. Natasha’s been in a mood all week, you and Derek are out practising all the time, so I guess it’s left to me. That’s it, just there. Perfect.’

The wreath rested on the top of the doorframe. They stepped out to have a better look.

‘I like it,’ J said. ‘Adds a bit of colour to the place, anyway.’

‘Thank you,’ Catherine said, and smiled at J. Get a room, Ben thought.

‘So Ben, you coming for a pint or what? It’s been a while.’

‘Sure. Give us a chance to catch up.’

‘You coming, Catherine? Be the glamour girl, out with two of her biggest fans?’

She blushed. ‘No thanks. A night of hearing you two talk about football and women. I’d rather chew iron filings.’

‘The only girl I’ll be talking about is you,’ J replied.

She blushed further. ‘Stop saying stuff like that. It embarrasses me.’

‘Just telling it like it is. Let’s go then, Ben.’

‘Hang on, let me get my wallet. Unless you’re going to buy all night.’

J scoffed. ‘As if.’

Just then Natasha appeared, and Catherine took the opportunity to escape upstairs.

‘Hey J. Ben. Can we have a quick word?’

Ben and J exchanged glances. ‘Well, I’m off out...’

‘It won’t take a minute.’

‘I’ll be waiting,’ J said, and Ben followed Natasha into her room. The only light came from her bedside lamp. She perched on the edge of the bed, he stood as close to the doorway as he could.

‘So, how are you?’ he asked.

‘Confused. And pissed off. I asked Tyler about Clifton, and he admitted

that he spoke to him. Now what was said, between the three of you, at whatever time, I don't care. What Clifton thinks of me, I don't care. And what you think of me, I don't care. You can like me, love me, hate me, whatever. Nothing's changed, as far as I'm concerned. As I keep saying, Tyler and I are together, and that's all that matters. You can have your little theories, whisper about him behind our backs, fine. If I were you, I'd spend a bit of time thinking about Natalie rather than my problems. From what she tells me, you're being a bit...umm, distant is the word. Don't fuck her around, Ben. I won't let you. You might think that you can cut and run, but you can't.'

'You finished?'

She looked around for a moment. 'Right, yeah. Tyler will be here soon, so I'd better get myself sorted.'

'Good. I'll see you later then.'

'Ben, I...'

'You know what? Let's not.'

'Fucking hell,' J said, sipping his beer. 'Sounds pretty arrogant of her to me.'

They were in the Hobgoblin, only a stone's throw from the house. J had wanted to go to the Goose, but Ben declined. He spent too much time in that place anyway. They were seated at the bar. Ben was drinking Guinness. J had lager.

'I know,' Ben said, wiping froth from his mouth. 'Now she's got up on her high horse, I think she enjoys the view.'

J swivelled on his stool so he was facing Ben. 'The best thing you can do, is keep right out of it. From what you've told me about this Clifton guy, he seems to be the one causing all the trouble. If she keeps knocking him back, he'll get the message eventually.'

'But he hasn't, has he? He won't leave her alone. He's been hanging around outside the house and everything. I'm worried he's going to do something stupid.'

'Like what? Anyway, you've got enough to deal with. You spoken to Natalie yet?'

Ben shook his head. 'What's the point? I can't give her what she wants. Not yet. I've only been single for a bit, and I don't want to give her false hope. I'm still getting used to the idea.'

'You should talk to her though, man. The amount of times I've been interested in a bird and she ignores all my calls, God, I could start a course in it. "How to pull girls who never stay beyond a night". But you should. Just tell her what's going on in your head.'

'That's the trouble, I don't know, do I?'

'Look. Natalie likes you. You, in some fashion, like her too. So what's stopping you?'

Ben thought for a moment. 'Amy, for one.'

'I *knew* you'd say that. You and Amy are over, man. She's got someone

else. What's to stop you doing the same?'

'But her and this Robert guy, they're not happy. I can tell.'

'And? That's got nothing to do with you. She's got you jumping through hoops for her. Fuck that. Even though you're miles apart, she's still got a massive hold over you. It's holding you back.'

'All bow down to the gospel of truth.'

'Hey, just saying it like I see it. That's all.'

Ben sighed, took a pull of the black stuff. 'Natasha, as well. Our relationship is not exactly smooth running at the moment.'

'Natasha. Somehow, it always comes back to her. So what if you start going out with her sister. She'll have to get used to it, won't she?'

'But it'll always be an issue, won't it? They're really close. And I don't think I could handle cosy foursomes with her and Tyler. One look at that prick and I'm ready to punch someone.'

J took a long drink, lit a cigarette. 'No arguments there. But what about what *you* want? All you're doing is running around trying to please other people, and it's making you miserable. No harm in looking after number one, my friend.'

Much what Natalie said, Ben thought. The trouble is, what *do* I want? He lingered on the girls in his mind. Amy, well, she is the first, the only. Every girl will be compared to her, and whatever happens, she'll always be a part of me. Natalie had come into his life at a vulnerable time and breathed fresh air right through. He pictured them together, in a relationship. It made his stomach flutter. And lastly, Natasha. One minute, I hate her guts. But she was under his skin, like a virus infecting his blood, getting to the heart of him and shaking it all up. She was unpredictable, volatile, and headstrong. Natalie should be the one. But now she seemed more stable, older and less exciting, more mature. And what J had said about Amy had a ring of truth to it. She *is* keeping me hanging. He sighed.

'Hell,' he said. 'At times like this, I wonder whether it's a good thing if I don't come back next year. Save me a lot of heartache.'

'Don't say that. Because I, for one, will miss you.'

Ben grinned. 'Well, I'm sure Catherine will keep you company.'

J rolled his eyes. 'Don't get me started. I wasn't lying, you know. I really do like her.'

'And she likes you. I guarantee it. Give it a go at the gig, see what happens.'

'Huh. With your musical talent, she'll have tinnitus after five minutes. Your old man had any news on the job front yet?'

'No. I haven't actually spoken to them for a while. I guess I don't want to hear any bad news. Especially now he's back home. It must be hard on Mum.'

'That's your mission for the weekend then. Speak to Natalie, and phone your parents. Then you can go into next week with less doubt in your mind, can't you? At least you'll *know*.'

'I guess you're right.'

J smiled. 'Mate, I'm always right. That's what makes me so infuriating.'

Here goes mission one, Ben thought as he picked up the phone. It was Saturday afternoon, and he was due to work at five. The morning had been taken over by band stuff. Six days to go.

The phone rang for an age, and he was about to hang up when Mum picked up and said a breathless, 'Hello?'

'Hi, Mum.'

'Ben. Hold on a sec, love.' He could hear cupboard doors slamming in the background. Then a harsh bark which could only be Dad, and she was back. 'Sorry about that. We've just got home from Sainsbury's.'

Just like old times. Saturday afternoon equals the weekly shop. 'I can always call back later,' he said.

'No, don't be silly. It's good to hear your voice.'

'You too. How's things? With Dad's job and stuff.'

'Nothing new to tell, unfortunately. We had an argument in the supermarket about baked beans.'

'You what?'

'Well, your father likes Heinz, and I suggested that perhaps we should go for the supermarket variety, because it's cheaper. And *he* said that you can't shirk on quality of baked beans. I mean, honestly. We caused a right scene.'

'Mum, has it really got that bad? You're arguing about twenty pee. God, if it's come to that, maybe I'm better off giving up and coming home.'

'No,' she said firmly. 'Absolutely not. Every little helps, doesn't it?'

'That's Tesco's,' he mumbled.

'What?'

'Nothing. So, there's still no news on the job front?'

'No. He can tell you all about it, but there's nothing biting at the moment. He's had a couple of interviews, but between you and me, I think he's a bit rusty. I've taken on some extra shifts myself, so we're doing all we can. How are you for money at the moment?'

'Surviving.'

There was a sharp flick, and he knew she had just lit a cigarette. 'I know, I should give up,' she said, reading his mind. 'He's always on at me. But I'm rationing myself, no more than five a day. I'm thinking about going on the patches, but they're almost as expensive as the real thing. Here, speak to your Dad.'

'Hey, son.'

'Dad. Sorry you haven't found anything yet. Must be tough.'

'Yeah, it is. Due to a drop in advertising revenue nationwide, apparently. Everyone seems to be hedging their bets, so it's going to take some time. Which we don't have a lot of. It's got worse, Ben. That I can say. We've got enough to get through this term, and possibly the next, but after that, unless I get a much better job than I had, that might be that. I'm sorry.'

'Maybe you should give up that Heinz.'

'What? Oh, yeah. She does blow up over the silliest things. But I'm

grateful for her taking me in.'

'So what do I do, then?'

'Enjoy the rest of term, and get home safe for Christmas. You've got this band thing coming up, haven't you?'

'On Friday.'

'We'd love to be there, both of us, but right now we can't. It's terrible, all I ever seem to do is let you down.'

Ben twisted the phone cord around his finger. 'Hey, it's not your fault. I understand.'

'I can just imagine you, up there strutting your stuff. Go down a storm, I reckon.'

'Please. I very much doubt it.'

'Don't knock yourself. Sorry, Mum's gesturing to speak to you again. And I think the Hammers are on the radio in a bit. It'll be Chinese water torture, but I wouldn't expect anything less.'

'Me neither. Come on you Irons.'

'That's the way. If I don't speak to you before, best of luck on Friday. We'll be with you in spirit.'

'You too. With the job hunting, I mean.'

'Thanks. Here's Mum.'

A rustle. 'So, you nervous about Friday?'

'Yeah, a bit.'

'You'll be fine, I'm sure. And what about school work?'

'No worries so far. I've got a couple of essays and a presentation due soon, but I'm on top of it. The grades this year don't count towards the final mark, so I've just got to pass.'

'You should still do your best. Keep working hard.'

'I will.'

'And how's Jason? I saw his mother the other day.'

'He's fine. We went for a beer last night. Only a couple, before you say anything.'

'That's OK, I trust you.'

'And how's it been with Dad?'

She lowered her voice. 'Difficult. He's hard to reach at this point in time. But we're talking more, and we've been out a few times, just the two of us. He's still in the spare room, if you know what I mean.'

'Mum. Too much information.'

'Oh. Sorry. How's things with Amy, since...?'

'OK. We speak to each other occasionally. She's seeing someone else now.'

'That's a shame. I should concentrate on being you for now. Everything else will work itself out.'

'Let's hope so. I've got work later, so that will earn a couple more dollars.'

'That's good. I'll let you go now, then. I've got this shopping to unpack. Ring me before Friday, so I can wish you good luck. My son hitting the big

time.'

'It's not quite like that. But thanks. Take care of yourself.'

'You too. Bye, love.'

He hung up and found Derek loitering with intent. 'That's two more off the guest list,' Ben said. 'My parents aren't coming to the gig.'

'Mine neither. Must be a generational thing.'

Ben nodded. 'The way it's going, it'll be our first and last performance.'

Derek shrugged. 'Better make it a good one then, hadn't we?'

After that, mission two could wait. No need to get greedy. So he went to work. It was a busy night, and the hours flew by. He envisaged phoning Natalie when he got back, but then nerves and tiredness took over, and he bottled out and went to bed. Sunday morning was strangely quiet; since her sermon on Friday, Natasha had been elusive. Derek had given the band the day off, in full preacher mode in the final days before the gig, and he had no idea where Catherine was.

So he hit the books for the morning, running through the presentation over and over. It seemed watertight. Whether it would last the full hour was anyone's guess, but it wasn't the biggest item on his agenda. The gig was what it was all about. That, and a certain phone call.

On impulse, he reached for his mobile, scrolled to Natalie's name, and dialled. It rang for a second or two.

'Hi Natalie, it's Ben.'

A cough. 'Sorry, Ben who?'

His stomach took a nosedive. 'You know, Ben, Natasha's housemate...'

She giggled. 'Relax Ben, I'm kidding.'

He laughed, the tension dribbling out of him. 'Thanks. Thanks a lot. Make it real easy, why don't you?'

She laughed again. It was a laugh he could get used to. 'Life is never easy, Ben. Where's the fun in that?'

'I suppose.'

'So, you all ready for the big gig on Friday? The first step on the road to stardom and all that?'

'Wow, you remembered. And scarily, you sound just like my Mum. She's got this idea that we're going to be the next U2 or something.'

'That's nice. It's good that she's supportive.'

'Yeah, it is. Her and my Dad aren't coming, though. What with their money troubles, it's a bit too far to make the journey. It's funny, loads of people are expressing their support, but none of them are going to be there. We'll be playing to one man and his dog at this rate.'

'Like me, you mean.'

Shit. 'No, I'm sorry, that wasn't what I meant...'

'God, you need to loosen up! I was joking, again. And I wish I *could* be there. I really do. I imagine you'll look very dashing up there, wowing the crowd.'

He blushed. 'All right.'

More laughter. ‘And he can’t take a compliment either. Seriously though, I know Natasha will be there for definite. She’s really looking forward to it.’

‘Is she? To be honest, our paths haven’t crossed all that much recently.’

‘I *know*. She said. She seems a bit upset, especially what you said about Tyler.’

Ben ran a hand through his hair. ‘Well, it was pissing me off. There’s this guy, Clifton, who’s got a real thing for Natasha. And she keeps telling him she’s not interested, but he hangs around. I kind of know him, cos we’re working on a project together, and he says stuff to her about me, and stuff to Tyler, as well. I’ve seen him outside the house, watching the place. It creeps me out.’

‘It bothers her, too. She doesn’t know how to handle it, which is unusual for her. She’s usually so assertive with people.’

‘Yeah. I can see that. But as for what I said, it’s been building up for a while. The way she defends Tyler all the time. And I made some crack about her being attracted to jealousy, or something like that, and you know the rest.’

Natalie sighed. ‘Yup, that I do. Between you and me, I pretty much agree with you. It’s not what she needs, a guy like that. But, the decision’s up to her. What can I say? Love makes you do the wacky.’

Ben smiled. ‘Where did you get that from? Daytime TV?’

She laughed. ‘Somewhere or other. Makes sense to me, mind.’

‘She had a go at me about you, too. Said I was quote, “fucking you around.” Sorry if I have. I’m still working things out.’

‘Ben, it’s not a problem. Just because Natasha says something, doesn’t make it true. We may be sisters, but we’re not cut from the same cloth. I’m older than her, so that makes me wiser, right?’

‘Age before beauty and all that.’ He burst out laughing.

‘Oy, watch it! Age equals maturity and experience, I’ll have you know. You young pups have got no idea.’

‘So, what happens now?’

‘I’ve no idea. What do you want to happen?’

He thought for a moment, trying to formulate the words. ‘Right. I know people say this all the time, but this is a difficult point in life for me. I mean, you know most of it. About Amy. That situation’s not clearing up. She’s all over the shop emotionally. And I might not be back next year, so I can’t exactly make decisions of any lasting note. Plus, Natasha and I aren’t the best of friends right now, so that could be a problem...’

‘Ben, you’re babbling. You’re right, I *do* know. Either you or Natasha have told me. And I appreciate you’re not having the greatest time at the moment. But it’s all excuses. All I need to know, is what you think about me.’

‘OK. Well, I think that you’re beautiful. And that you’re funny. I like that we can have a laugh, and it doesn’t feel uncomfortable, that we can take the mick out of each other. It feels nice and relaxed. I really enjoyed spending time with you when you were here, you interest me. I mean, that

butterfly thing was borderline genius.’

She laughed. ‘Thank you. I’m flattered. So, it seems there’s a mutual attraction there, and a general likeness.’

‘I’d like to hope so.’

She took a deep breath. ‘So, what I think we should do is meet up again, preferably without Natasha or anyone else being around. Trouble is, I’m snowed under with work until Christmas, hence my non-appearance on Friday. Ugg. And then it’s holidays, and all that stuff. But by then, hopefully Natasha will be back on track with Tyler, and you will have made up, and things will be a whole lot smoother.’

‘Yeah. We can hope.’

‘So we’re talking the New Year. God. That’s a ways off.’

‘Not really. The time will fly by. Listen, when is Natasha going home for Christmas?’

‘I don’t know. Probably the last Wednesday or Thursday of term.’

‘Well, I’m not going until the Saturday. So why don’t you come down then? It’ll be quiet, and we can go out and do stuff. It’ll be cool.’

‘I don’t know if I can. I’m so busy right now. It’s not that I don’t want to, but it’s a bit soon. Let me see what I can do. I might be able to rearrange some things. I’ll get back to you before Friday, I want to speak to you before then anyway. Is that fair?’

‘Perfect.’

‘OK. It was good talking to you, Ben. Thanks for ringing.’

‘You too. Speak to you soon.’

‘Bye.’

And it had been good. Really good. He thought about her face, her hair brushing his as they kissed. It made him smile. Nothing wrong with giving it a go. He lit a cigarette and went back to the books.

At six, Ben was making a cup of tea. He was happy with the way the afternoon had panned out. Got plenty of work done, for one. And two, made some progress with Natalie. *J had* been right. There was less doubt now. The path was becoming clearer.

He was depositing the tea bag in the bin when Natasha and Tyler came in. She raised a hand in greeting before disappearing into her room. Tyler took up his usual position, lounging in the doorway. He held a set of keys in his right hand and flipped them around his fingers.

‘Ben.’

‘Tyler.’ He stirred his tea, took a sip. ‘How’s tricks?’

‘Good. Natasha and I have been away for the weekend. Went down to Cheddar Gorge. It’s beautiful country down there.’

Ben nodded. ‘So I’ve heard.’

A twist of the keys. He grinned and said, ‘You were right, you know. About that guy Clifton. Natasha told me. I guess I was wrong.’

Ben blew on his tea. ‘Yeah, you were. No harm done though.’

‘And if I see him again, I’ll put him straight. He’s obviously a few cans

short of a six pack, that kid.'

'Like I said. He's had a few problems, mind you. But even so.'

'So I guess I owe you an apology.'

'No worries.'

Tyler scratched his chin, which was showing a day's worth of dark stubble. 'Yeah. You might as well know that Natasha and me are sorted, and I don't want to fuck it up again. So I'm concentrating on her. And she is on me. What we don't need is distractions, you get me? All this bullshit that's been sprayed around isn't helping. I'm partly to blame, and so are you. And Clifton. I reckon it's best if you keep out the way and let us get on with it. Sure, be her friend. But anything to do with our relationship is our business, no one else's. And that's how it's going to be.'

'I couldn't agree with you more.'

'And you can tell Clifton the same thing, when you see him.'

'Will do.'

'So we're sorted then?'

'Yup.'

'OK. I'd best be off, got a long drive to get home. But I'll see you Friday. This is one gig I'd *hate* to miss.'

I'm sure, Ben thought, watching the grin spread across Tyler's face. 'I'll see you then.'

'For sure.' He shouted, 'Natasha. I've gotta make a move, babe.'

She waltzed past Ben into Tyler's arms. There were a lot of squelching noises as they kissed. 'You got everything?' she said, arms locked behind his neck.

'I have. Thanks for a great weekend.'

Ben opened his door and went inside. His tea slopped over the edge of the mug, scalding his wrist. He mopped up with a tissue. When that was done, he turned and found Natasha behind him.

'Hey, thanks for sorting things out with Tyler. I appreciate it. And I'm sorry for yelling at you the other day.'

'Forget about it.'

She brushed at her jeans, leaning forward. Her top opened, and Ben got a good look at the bare skin there. He closed his eyes.

'You spoken to Nat yet?' she asked, straightening up.

'Earlier on, yeah.'

'And?'

'Oh, I'm sure she can tell you herself.'

'She will. As long as it's good news.'

'Only one way to find out, isn't there?'

'Why the big secret? Come on, you can tell me.'

He spread his arms. 'No secret. As Tyler said to me not ten minutes ago, our relationship is our business and no one else's. Sorry to disappoint you.'

'*Fine*. I was only asking.'

'Well, what's sauce for the goose...'

But she was gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Ben woke on Friday morning feeling sick. Butterflies, he thought, and Natalie came into his head. Then, a fleeting moment later, Amy, and her tattoo. But it was more than butterflies. It felt like full-grown moths were jumping around in his stomach.

He got out of bed and slid the shutters open. The sky was a grey sheet of concrete. He shoved the window open and took in some deep breaths, the cool breeze causing the hairs on his chest to stand up. Even though he had been awake for less than ten minutes, he lit a cigarette, hoping the smoke would settle him down. Today was the day. Tonight, they were playing, and that was that. No matter how good they were, how unprepared he felt. The show must go on.

He breathed smoke out the window and hummed a harmony from a song on their set list. The humming grew into soft singing, not really letting his voice reach full potential, just training it up. It sounded OK.

After Sunday, he had expected the week to drag, time slowing down as the day of reckoning approached. But it hadn't turned out like that. He'd been with the band Sunday, Monday and Wednesday nights, going through frantic renditions of the songs, starting and stopping as each member fucked up one after the other, sometimes only playing two or three songs with any strength and tightness. The nerves were affecting them, knowing that they were close. Even Derek was feeling it. And Rodrigo, who had plenty of experience of live performance. But this was different for Ben, because it was his first gig, and being the frontman, if he couldn't crack it, everything else would fall apart.

Still no word from anyone, either. Amy, Natalie and his parents were all due to be sending good luck messages at some point. But as yet, no one had. Any moral support would be welcome.

First though, he had to hand in an essay on *The Great Gatsby* for his American Literature module. Working on it had taken up any spare time in the last few nights, and he knew it wasn't as good as it should be. There were too many distractions. But it didn't really matter. It could be, he thought, the last essay I ever write.

He showered and dressed, and as he was leaving, Derek appeared.

'Hey Ben, wait up a sec.' He scampered down the stairs, almost tripping over his black jeans. He wore a black AC/DC T-shirt and a 'Born to be Wild' belt buckle. His hair shot straight up.

'Just got out of bed, Derek?'

'No, I've been up for hours. Didn't sleep too well.' He gestured at Ben's book bag. 'Off somewhere?'

'Yeah, to hand this essay in. Then I've got a seminar until one. But relax, I'll be back by half two at the latest.'

'Good. The others should be here by then. Plan is, congregate here, then

Rodrigo's Dad is going to swing by with the van around four, we pile in there, go and pick up the gear, then on to the gig. We'll be there nice and early, get set up, and then I'm going to have a very large vodka and watch the place fill up. What about you? You calm and collected, or about to shit a brick?'

'I'm tending towards the latter. I think I'll be joining you for that vodka.'

Derek smiled and sat down on the step, steepling his fingers. 'It's good that you're nervous. I'd be more worried if you weren't. But it's going to go OK. We know these songs inside out. It's not going to disappear once we get up there. And remember, both Greg and Rodrigo have been in bands before, so they're old pros at this. If we start to flounder, they'll carry us through.'

'Thanks, mate. I feel a whole lot better.'

'Don't worry. If it gets too bad, do some collective visualisation. You know, imagining everyone naked, that kind of thing.'

Ben laughed. 'No, thanks. J's going to be there, and the sight of him naked is enough to put you off your dinner. That reminds me, he said he'd come and help us set up. Shall I get him round about four?'

'Wow, our very own roadie. Definitely, the more help, the better. Catherine and Natasha are coming, too. Plus Tyler, as far as I know. So there'll be four people there at any rate.'

'Cool. Right, I'd better shoot. See you soon.'

Derek gave a thumbs-up. 'And Ben? Don't get hit by a bus on your way home, will you? Cos I for one will never forgive you.'

'I'll try,' Ben said.

By the time Ben got to campus, it was raining. He pulled his hood up and made for the study hall. His mind wandered to the essay in his bag. Probably wet through by now. The ink smudging, making a mess. But fuck it. Not a lot he could do about it now.

He got inside, grateful for the burst of heat from the radiators lining the walls of the room. And the essay wasn't too bad. Slightly bedraggled, the pages curling up at the corners, but passable. At least *something* was going right today.

And then Clifton was standing in front of him, smiling. He resembled the Joker after he fell into the vat of acid in the first *Batman* movie. Ben thought, harsh as it sounded in his mind, that if he was in his last days as a university student, one person he wouldn't miss would be Clifton.

'Hi,' Clifton said. 'Handing your essay in?'

Ben held up the document. 'Looks like it, doesn't it?'

The smile widened. 'Me too. I mean, well, I just have. Other than the presentation, that's it for me for this term.'

Acting like we're great buddies, Ben thought. Despite all the lies, the crap that comes out of your mouth. He didn't say anything. It was a waste of time. Devoting energies to Clifton's fantasies was more than Ben could deal with. 'Good for you. Well, I won't keep you. I've got some stuff to do, so

I'll see you next week?'

Clifton snapped his fingers. 'Ahh yes, the big gig. I must say, I really can't wait for this. No offence, but I can't imagine you being in a rock band. I don't know, you lack a bit of gravitas, shall I say.'

The gorge rose in Ben's throat. Every word Clifton said twisted something free inside. 'How did you find out about that?'

'There are posters up all around uni. It's not exactly a big secret.'

Derek. Spreading the gospel of Soul Circus. 'I didn't know.'

'Well, now you do. I'm going to be in the front row, watching your every move. You and Natasha.'

Ben took a step closer, near enough to smell the mint flavour of Clifton's breath. 'Somehow,' he whispered, staring into the whirlpools of Clifton's eyes, 'I don't think she'll be very pleased to see you. And nor will Tyler. But hey, it's your funeral.'

Clifton didn't flinch or step back. 'Nothing wrong with giving a friend some moral support, is there?'

Ben shook his head. 'Do what you want. It makes no difference to me.'

'Then I'll see you tonight, won't I?' He pushed past, barging Ben with his shoulder. 'And if I don't get a chance,' he said on the way out, 'good luck.'

All Ben saw as Clifton stepped into the rain was that smile plastered across his face.

The skies had cleared when Ben got home. His two-thirty prediction had been a little out; it was now nearly three. Still no texts or calls. He was beginning to think the band would be playing to the walls.

The house was empty except for Derek, who looked as if he had been dragged through a hedge backwards. He sat on the sofa, fidgeting, when Ben walked in.

'Ah, good,' Derek exclaimed, crossing his legs at the ankles, then changing his mind and standing up, his hair reaching towards the sky like antennae. 'At least *someone* is here. Jesus Christ, it's past three. Where the fuck are the others?'

Ben sat down, lit a cigarette. 'Del, I thought you said they weren't going to be here until four.'

'No, that was Rodrigo and his Dad, with the *van*.' Derek was pacing up and down. 'I've tried to get hold of Greg and Darren, and no answer.' He stopped to gnaw on a fingernail, and Ben thought if he wasn't careful, he might take his whole hand with it.

Ben blew a large smoke ring, then a smaller one, watching the circles mingle and fade. 'Would you sit down? You're not helping my nerves, or your own.'

Derek sat at the dining table, leaning forward. 'God, I'm a wreck! And I thought you'd be the one to crack.'

The doorbell rang. 'I'll get it,' Ben said. 'Have a cigarette or something, calm down. This is probably them now.'

But it was only Natasha, windswept, her cheeks puffing. 'I don't fucking believe this,' she said, bouncing past. 'Tyler isn't fucking coming tonight. To the gig, I mean.'

Ben took a final drag on his cigarette. 'Why not?' he said.

'Something to do with work. He can't make it down until tomorrow.' She planted her hands on her hips and thrust her chin forward. 'I can't fucking believe him. He *knew* tonight was important to me.'

'Oh. That's a shame.'

She cocked her head. 'Well, to make up for it, I'm going to get the girls together and we'll hit the town. I'm not sitting around moping because *he* can't be bothered to show up. We'll be your groupies.'

Ben smiled. 'The more the merrier,' he said.

Natasha headed for her room, pressing buttons on her phone. 'Let me know when you're going,' she shouted. 'So I can wave you off.'

As he went to shut the door, J came bounding up clutching a plastic bag. 'Hey, look what I've got you! Wait till you see this.'

Ben shut the door, took the bag from J. He pulled it open. Inside was a brown trilby hat with a white felt band. 'My God,' he said. 'Where the hell did you get this?'

'Oh, around. Look at it man, it's sharper than a tray of needles.'

'But it's a bit, you know, 50's, isn't it?'

'And? Come on, try it on.'

So he did, and stood in front of the mirror in his room. 'Smooth,' J exclaimed, smiling. 'It suits you.'

'You know what? I actually quite like it.'

J stood beside him. 'There you go,' he said, pulling the brim downward on one side, nearly covering Ben's right eye. 'You'll look great in that tonight. They'll certainly see you coming, that's for sure.'

'Thanks, mate. How much do I owe you?'

J waved his hand. 'Oh, don't worry about it. Pay me back when you're a superstar.'

'Cheers.'

'Well,' J said. 'Couldn't have you going on stage dressed like an arse, could we?'

Eventually, Greg and Darren did show up. It was ten to four, and Derek was about ready to take chunks out of the sofa.

'Fuck,' Derek shouted as the pair trailed in. 'Where the hell have you been?'

Greg shrugged. His hair, flopping around his eyes, was unmovable. 'What do you mean?'

'You were *supposed* to be here an hour ago,' Derek said, up and on the move again.

'We're here now, so stop moaning,' Darren said, taking a seat beside Ben. 'Besides, Rodrigo isn't here yet, so what's the worry? He's bringing the van, and that's all we need.'

Derek nodded, and for the next fifteen minutes they sat, nobody saying much. J was trying to lighten the mood, telling a few jokes, but the response was minimal. Finally, as Ben extinguished yet another cigarette, the doorbell rang once more. When Ben got downstairs, the door was open and Natasha was chatting to Rodrigo. He was dressed all in black, including his hair, which had been dyed the colour of obsidian. Black eyeliner and lipstick. Dark skin and flowing locks.

‘Hello Ben,’ Rodrigo said, smiling, revealing perfect teeth. ‘Are you ready to uh, rock ‘n’ roll?’

‘Ready as I’ll ever be,’ Ben replied, and shouted to the others. ‘How about you?’

‘I’m good, my friend. And if a woman of such beauty is going to be our audience, I’m privileged to be a part of it.’

Natasha giggled, laying a hand on Rodrigo’s arm. ‘Please. He’s such a charmer, isn’t he?’

Ben rolled his eyes. Rodrigo smiled. There was a rumble of feet as Derek scampered down, followed by the others.

‘Hey Rodrigo, you got the van, everything set?’

‘Derek, all is fine. Father is parked just around the corner. And we’d better move, as he is on a double yellow, you understand?’

‘Cool. Let’s go, chaps.’

‘Hang on a sec, I’ve forgotten something.’ Ben went to his room and picked up the hat. He emptied his book bag and stuffed it in, careful not to crease the felt too much. He shouted to J to get a move on.

‘OK,’ he said to Natasha. ‘See you later, then. We’re on about half eight, so don’t be late.’

‘That rhymes,’ she said, and gave him a hug, her body pressing tight to his. ‘I’m meeting the girls at eight, so we’ll have a quick drink and be straight down.’

Rodrigo was still standing by the door. He reached forward, took Natasha’s hand and kissed it. ‘Until we meet again, my darling.’

She giggled.

‘See you in a bit,’ Ben said, and shouted for J again. This time he did appear. ‘Where have you been?’

‘Oh, just having a chat with Catherine. Making sure she’s going to be there later. Which she is.’ He winked.

‘Yeah, she’s coming down with us,’ Natasha said.

‘OK, let’s go,’ Ben said. ‘Derek will kill us if we don’t get a move on.’

‘See you, boys,’ Natasha said, and waved.

The gig was four hours away.

At five thirty, Ben was wedged in the back of Rodrigo’s van between an amp and Darren’s drum kit as they bumped and rolled through Bristol. Greg sat opposite, Derek next to him, J getting personal with a mic stand further up. In the front, Rodrigo and his Dad were talking rapidly in Spanish, raucous laughter erupting in sporadic bursts.

As they rounded a corner, the amp close to toppling onto Ben's head, his phone rang.

'Hello?'

'Hi love.'

'Mum, hi.' He could barely hear her. 'How are you?'

'Good. Where are you, Ben? You sound like you're in a washing machine.'

'Close enough. We're transporting our stuff down to the venue for the gig. It's a bit noisy in the back here.'

'So I can tell. Well, I wanted to wish you good luck. Are you nervous?'

'Yes. But we'll be right, I think.'

'Oh, and Ben? Your Dad's got himself a couple of job interviews! It won't be until the New Year, because of Christmas and everything, but it's good news, isn't it? I'm keeping everything crossed.'

'That's great! Tell him I said well done.'

'And he said to tell you to make sure you play something by The Rolling Stones. He reckons 'Wild Horses' would go down a storm, in his exact words. Frankly, I haven't the foggiest.'

Ben smiled. 'Tell him I'll see what I can do.'

'Honestly, sometimes I have no idea what the pair of you are talking about.'

'It's a generation thing, Mum. Don't worry about it.'

'The cheek of it. Best of luck tonight, we'll be thinking of you.'

'Thanks.'

'Love you, Ben. Bye.'

'My Dad says we should play 'Wild Horses' by the Stones,' Ben shouted. 'What do you think?'

'Boring,' Greg said, his mouth moving a fraction.

Derek rolled his eyes.

The gig was less than three hours away.

At five minutes to six, the van pulled up outside the club. Rodrigo and his Dad jumped out. Derek flung open the sliding door and got out with them.

'Wait here,' he said. 'We'll go in and see if we can find somewhere to park.'

As Derek slid the door shut, Ben caught a fleeting glimpse of the club. There were already people lining the bar, the after works crowd beginning their weekend. The bar was tiny, with enough room to stand five customers at most. Beyond was a small dining area pressed into the far corner. To compensate, the wall facing the stage had two windows cut out of it, which reminded Ben of the hatch between kitchen and dining room at home. There were tables by the window looking out into the street, candles in their centre, throwing out shimmering torches of orange that made snake patterns on the glass. A waiter moved around the bar serving food and taking orders before returning to the kitchen, situated through a swing door to the right of the bar.

At a rough guess, there were nearly fifty customers already, and that number was only going to rise. Ben craned his neck, and there it was. The stage. A simple raised platform no more than twenty feet wide and deep. With all their equipment, there would barely be room to stand.

‘Not much, is it?’ J said, and Ben couldn’t argue. Not much, but all they had.

The next few minutes passed in silence, then Derek and the others rejoined them. ‘Right,’ Derek said. ‘We’re parking round the back. Apparently there’s an entrance where we can get our stuff in, and check this out, we’ve got our own dressing room! It looks like my toilet at home, but hey, we’ve all got to start somewhere.’

He knocked twice on the amp he was perched on, and the van lurched forward, then took a right down a narrow alleyway. They piled out and Derek led them to a door that Ben would have walked past ninety-nine times out of a hundred. They were greeted by a thick set man with dark hair and a thin-lipped smile, dressed in white and rubbing his hands on a tea towel. A conversation ensued in rapid Spanish, and they were led down a dank corridor into their dressing room. If you could call it that. And Derek had been right. It *did* look like a toilet. The walls were a pastel green, now stained yellow from nicotine. At the back of the room *was* a toilet, its door rusty, a hole where the lock should have been. Otherwise, the room was empty save for a monstrosity of a table scarred with ash burns and rings from a thousand bottles. Ben took a breath and blew out, watching with a combination of horror and fascination as the carbon dioxide mingled with the thick dust in the air, creating a fog that lingered in a suffocating blanket. He began to feel claustrophobic.

There was silence as each person took stock of their surroundings, trying to register what the fuck they were doing there. Then Derek slapped his hands together. ‘Welcome to paradise,’ he said, smiling. ‘Now, let’s get our stuff in, and then I can have some much needed Dutch courage.’

I’m going to need more than that, Ben thought, but hurried out to help before the dust sent him to an early grave.

Ben and Darren were struggling with the last amp, trying to manoeuvre down the corridor without bashing into the wall. Ben’s fingers were numb from exertion, and the muscles in his upper arms were crying out. His body ached.

In front, Derek was trying to direct them through to the dressing room. There they would assemble the kit before taking it on the final leg of the journey, down another corridor and to the stage. He had already been out there to sample the view. It was terrifying.

‘OK,’ Derek ordered, ‘Darren, just turn to your left a bit, and back up slowly.’

Darren did so and ran straight into the door. ‘Fuck,’ he shouted, the veins in his neck straining, ‘I thought you said left!’

‘I *did*. It’s not my fault you weren’t looking where you were going.’

Darren shot him an icy glare, his face turning as red as his hair. 'I think you'd better keep quiet, Derek. Or you'll be going on with a broken arm.'

'All right, children, calm down,' Ben said. 'Just come back this way, then try again.'

As he took a step back, his phone rang.

'I'll get it,' J shouted from behind him. He sprang forward and took Ben's phone from his back pocket. 'Hello? Ben Carter Love Machine at your service.'

Ben groaned. 'J, fucking hell.'

'Ames, hi!' J looked at Ben and puckered his lips. 'I'm *good*, thanks. Long time no speak. How are you? Still breaking men's hearts from a thousand paces?' He snorted. 'Hey, I'm only joking. Ben? Yeah, he's here, but he's got his hands full at the moment.'

Wanting this over with, Ben pushed Darren forward and they stumbled into the dressing room. Darren lost his balance and dropped the amp, which hit the floor with a loud crash.

'Careful,' Derek said, trying to hide a smile. 'That amp's expensive.' Behind him, Rodrigo and Greg were in stitches.

'What was that?' Darren rasped, glaring at Ben. 'You could have killed me.' He brushed the dust from his jeans. 'And stop fucking laughing, would you?'

Greg and Rodrigo shut up. Ben shrugged. 'We got it in here, didn't we?'

'Well if I can't drum a note later, I know who to blame.'

Ben left them to it. J was saying, 'Oh, I know. Tell me about it. Ahh, here he comes. Good to speak to you, Amy. You too. Take care.'

He passed the phone to Ben, who shook his head and gestured. 'Hiya,' he said. He suddenly felt the need for a cigarette, so lit up and went out into the alleyway. He stood next to a drain and noticed a used condom wedged in the grate.

'So here he is,' Amy said. 'The big rock star! All ready to go?'

'Something like that. We're getting set up now. Everyone's about ready to kill each other.'

'Well, J seemed, I dunno, excited. Calling me a heartbreaker indeed. You don't think that's true, do you?'

He took a long drag on his cigarette. 'Hmm, how about no comment. Is that fair?'

'I guess so. You know, I really wish I could be there tonight. It's such a massive event for you, and I can't believe I'm not sharing it with you. Because I feel like I *should* be.'

'In fairness Amy, that's not my fault. You broke up with me, remember? All I'm doing is getting on with stuff. In this case, probably something ridiculous that I'm going to regret tomorrow, but even so.'

She sighed. 'Jeez. You're right, I know.'

'How's it all going with you?'

'Busy. Had Robert's birthday yesterday, which was OK. Lots of coursework to do. The usual.'

Ben nodded, pitched his cigarette away. It bounced into the drain, sending up a shower of sparks. He found he didn't have much else to say. 'When are you going home?'

'Umm, not sure yet. Probably next Friday. I want to get back and see everyone. I miss them. Go out down our local, all that stuff. Much as I love it here, there's something about home that will always draw me back.'

'I know. I'm the same. I don't think I'll be back until Saturday. Mum's coming to pick me up. But I'm sure we'll run into each other, because the pub is letting me work for the holidays. So, you'll know where to find me.'

'That's not going to be good enough. I want to make plans to see you. Catch up. The way things are going, I might well be single by then.'

All of a sudden, Ben felt a hot surge in his brain. 'Look Amy, you can't keep saying stuff like that, it's out of order. I'm sure it's fucking Robert off, and it's not too great for me, either. And if you do split up with him, what makes you think I'll come running back into your arms as if nothing happened? I'm not a puppet you can manipulate whenever you feel like it.'

Her voice lowered and took on some extra weight. 'Jesus Christ,' she said. 'I guess that's told me, hasn't it?'

Ben gritted his teeth. 'Look, I'm sorry if that sounded harsh. I'll call you when I get back. Right now, I've got more important things to worry about.'

'Fine. Good luck tonight.'

'Sure. J's got his camera, I'll get loads of pictures.'

'Don't put yourself out on my account.'

'Ames, if I upset you, I apologise. Put it down to nerves.'

A fading laugh. 'OK. You'll be in my thoughts all evening, that much I do know.'

'And I guess everything else can wait until I get home.'

'What's got into you, Ben? I mean, what has? You sound so, *different*.'

'You did, Amy. Always you. I'll see you.'

He hung up and went back inside.

The gig was ninety minutes away.

At seven forty-five, Ben was beside Derek and J at the bar, trying to get the attention of the bartender. The crowd had thinned a little, the after work people going home or on to greater things. All the tables were filled, and the waiter was having his work cut out. As was the barman, who had ignored Ben for the past five minutes.

Finally he got some service, and bought Derek a vodka. By the look of him, he needed it. His face had paled to a waxy residue, and sweat was running in rivulets down his forehead and in a dark patch under both arms. As the drinks arrived Derek took his, stared at it for a second, then grimaced and threw it back. Ben sipped his, then thought fuck it, and did the same. The strength of it made him gasp.

'Feeling better, Del?' Ben asked as he replaced his glass on the bar.

Derek shook his head. 'No,' he moaned, clutching his belly. 'If anything, I feel *worse*. I mean, look at it. Just look at it.'

They swivelled to face the stage. At the back sat Darren's drum kit, pressed into a corner. To the left was Rodrigo's position, his bass guitar stood upright in its holder, gleaming in the white spotlights that framed the stage. Next to him would be Derek, then Greg on the right. And out in front, the mic stand. The rest of the space was taken up with amps and a mass of wires slithering this way and that. Ben gulped.

'What's the matter?' J said. 'It's the perfect setup. I mean, I'm only going to be a stone's throw away from you guys. More intimate.'

'Oh God,' Derek said. 'I think I'm going to be sick.' He rushed off to the toilet.

'My,' Ben said. 'I hope he doesn't pass out in there. Otherwise we are well and truly fucked.'

'And what about you? You seem calmer than I expected.'

'Yeah, I guess I am. I'm kind of looking forward to it. What's the worst that can happen? We're shit. And? At least we gave it a go. If I'm not coming back next year, then no-one round here will ever see me again. So I'm safe. As long as you and Natasha and Catherine are here, then I'll have some friendly faces to sing to. If anyone else likes what they hear, then that's a bonus.'

'Which we will be. Natasha and the others will be here. It's going to be fucking great, I tell you.'

Ben's phone rang just as Rodrigo and Greg came over. 'Here, I've got to take this.' He threw a tenner on the bar. 'Get a couple more in if you want. Then we can get ready.' He stepped outside, the cold wind a blast to the senses, and answered. 'Hello?'

'Hey, hot stuff.'

Ben grinned. 'Sorry, I think you must have got the wrong number.'

'Oh *really*? My apologies. I was after some guy called Jason? He's a friend of this bloke I met a couple of weeks ago. Can't think of his name at the moment...Ahh, Ben, is that it? You know, I can't seem to remember.'

He laughed. 'Hey, Natalie. Thanks for ringing.'

'No problem. Must be getting close now, are we?'

'Yeah. We're on in less than an hour. So while you're watching *Eastenders*, we'll be creating some noise pollution down here.'

'Well, if you sing anything like you did when I was there, you'll be on *Top of the Pops* in no time.'

'Thanks for the boost of confidence. We're going to need it.'

They chatted for a while, and Ben felt his nerves drift off. As they did when talking to her. Not like Amy, who left him on edge all the time. Or Natasha, who was challenging and stubborn and wouldn't give in for anybody.

'By the way,' she said, 'I've got some news. Good or bad, I'll leave it to you to decide. But I've done some juggling, and I can come down on Friday. We can have a Christmassy night out. I've spoken to Natasha, and she said Tyler was finishing up early, probably in penance for not showing up today, and coming to get her on Monday. She seemed a bit funny when I told her I

might be coming to see you. Not sure what that was all about. Ben? You still there?’

‘Sure. That’s great, Natalie. We’ll have an awesome time. And don’t worry about Natasha. You know, I really wish you were here.’

‘Me too. But Natasha will have to do the talking for both of us. Just think of her as me, I don’t know.’

‘You know what? Talking to you, I’ve lost all my nerves.’

‘I’m glad. Well, you must be on very soon. Go get ‘em, tiger.’

He smiled. ‘I will. Looking forward to Friday.’

‘Me too. I’ll confirm it with you Tuesday or Wednesday, but it’s almost definitely on.’

‘OK.’

‘And get Natasha to take lots of pictures and send them to me.’

‘I will. Thanks very much. I’m ready for this now. You’re a great calming influence.’

‘Oh, come on. It’s nothing to do with me. But thanks for the sentiment. Text me later, let me know how it goes. I’ll be dying to find out.’

‘Will do. Take care.’

‘You too. Keep the butterfly flying.’

The gig was thirty-five minutes away.

When Ben got back inside, the band had disappeared. He headed for the dressing room, and found the others huddled in a circle. Rodrigo was holding a bottle.

‘Ahh, here he is,’ Rodrigo exclaimed, and held up the bottle. ‘We’re having a drink. The condemned man should have one last guilty pleasure.’

Darren held out some glasses. Ben took one. ‘Where’s Del?’

Greg hooked a thumb over his shoulder. ‘Still in the toilet. He came out for all of ten seconds, then ran back in there as fast as his legs could carry him.’

At that moment, the toilet door swung open and Derek stumbled out, wiping his mouth with a tissue. If anything, his face had taken on a greener tinge. ‘Derek, you all right?’ Ben asked. ‘We’re nearly ready to go on.’

Derek shook his head. ‘I’m not doing it,’ he whispered.

Ben’s stomach took a tumble. ‘What do you *mean*, you’re not going on?! You’ve got to! We can’t do this without you.’

‘I know. And I’m sorry. But I *can’t*. I’m bad enough as it is. One foot out there and I’ll throw up again, I know it. And I don’t want to ruin it for you guys. You’re going to have to do it without me.’

‘Give us that bottle,’ Darren ordered. He splashed a couple of fingers into his glass, drained it in one movement, coughed. ‘God, Rodrigo, what is that stuff?’

‘The finest tequila, all the way from Mexico. My father is a connoisseur of fine liquors.’

‘He needs a new vocation. Jesus, Derek, you can’t let us down now. This band was *your* idea, your baby. You can’t get off the ride before it’s even

begun.'

Ben took Derek aside. 'What was all that stuff you said to me before? That big speech about living out our dreams, putting across all our love and respect for great music. I *know* you meant it, and it's what swayed me to join up in the first place.' He tapped lightly on Derek's skull. 'Come on in there, fuck off and bring the old Derek back, because we really need him.'

In the club, Ben could hear Rodrigo's Dad doing a sound check. Derek looked up at him with watery eyes. 'I'm sorry,' he repeated. 'But I can't.'

Ben walked away in disgust. At the 11th hour, it was all going to pieces. 'I'm going to get changed,' he said, grabbing his bag. 'We've got ten minutes to get our set list sorted, because without Del, it's all fucked up.'

He did a super quick change in the toilet, and stepped out. All eyes stared at him.

'God,' Darren exclaimed. 'You look like a turd.'

Ben laughed. He did a twirl. 'What? You don't like the hat?'

'Hey, whatever turns you on.' He threw a sheet of paper at Ben. 'That's the new list. Learn it, because we've got five minutes to get it sorted. I'm going to change myself.'

So, at eight twenty-seven, they stood, ready. Rodrigo filled their glasses. Ben's stomach was ice. Now it was *really* happening. He looked at Derek, slumped over the table, and realised that it was going to be OK. Didn't know how, but it was. There was a confidence coming from somewhere and it was tangible there, in that room. Darren was buzzing, dressed in a Lakers vest and jeans. Greg, broody and morose in trademark grey jacket. And Rodrigo, a cross between Marilyn Manson and a Spanish bullfighter. They clinked glasses and drank, the booze lubricating their bodies, sending fire burning to all parts.

'Derek, now or never. Say no now, and we go on without you. And that acoustic set we had planned goes into the realms of history.'

Still nothing.

'Fine. Sod ya.'

Rodrigo's Dad poked his head round the door. 'Right guys. I'll go out and introduce, and then it's over to you. You boys put on a good show, because my ass is on the line over this. Don't let me down.'

'Come on!' Darren shouted, and raised his palms to Ben's. They slapped hands, whooping and patting each other on the back. 'Let's go and kick up a storm.'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An hour earlier, Clifton stepped from the shower and dripped through to his bedroom. He dried his hair, then stood in front of the mirror and inspected his naked body. Nothing to write home about, but it didn't matter. Tonight was all that counted. Seeing Ben on stage, pretending that he was some kind of rock legend, singing like a strangled cat, making a fool of himself. Hell, if there was a better method of turning Natasha off him, Clifton couldn't think of one. Despite all this stuff about being interested in her sister, whoever *she* is, he knew that Natasha was all Ben thought about. Because it was the same with him.

And tonight was going to conclude the situation, however it turned out. It didn't matter if Tyler was there, if she had hundreds of guys round her, vying for her attention. There was nothing left to lose, and that gave Clifton the edge. He rehearsed it again in his head.

I've been in love with you since the first moment I saw you. And you can have as many excuses as you want, but we've got something. Sure, you may have rejected me once, twice even. But I'm not going to go away. Not until you say yes.

OK, maybe not the last bit. That would be coming on a little strong. But perhaps that was the way to do it, let her know how serious he was, that he would give up everything to be with her. Could Tyler or Ben say that? Make that kind of commitment? No, they couldn't. And she would see.

The other side of him spoke through. What if she still says no? He didn't want to address it, even *think* about it. But deep down, the answer was there. He would make her see. Make them all see that he wasn't the soft touch they took him for, that he could rise above the shit he'd taken his whole life, become someone who would be remembered rather than ridiculed. The time had come for action. He walked to the window and looked out down the hill, the allotments shrouded in darkness now. He squeezed his hands together, fingernails digging deep into his palms. If she says no, God help them. God help them all. He began to get dressed.

Downstairs, Matthew was making a cup of coffee. He had lost count of the amount of cups he had drunk today. Must be close to twenty, he thought. A river of caffeine running through my veins. But at least it's not alcohol.

As the kettle boiled, he checked his watch and was shocked to find it was not even eight o'clock. Still over four hours to go to get through this day. And if he made it, it would be his first without a drink for...? Well, must be months, maybe even years. He wondered how the hell anybody could last without it. The endless monotony and repetition of daily life. Get up, go to work, come home, have dinner, go to bed. The same old shit every day. Nothing to help you relax, help you forget, not even for a moment. And if he did make it, then what? No one was going to award any prizes for that. One day might turn into two, then three, and more. But what would it prove?

What would it change? The same old problems would remain. A worthless job that gave no satisfaction, not any more. This afternoon he had actually been able to see the words on the page with full clarity. Usually, he would be half in the bag by then. But again, so what? Doing the job wasn't a problem, never had been. He was good at it, and when sober, focused and able to concentrate. But seeing a barrage of documents, essays, thousands upon millions of words, an ocean of them in his head, day in day out, without a drink to take the edge off? Impossible. He was sure that in the past he *had* been able to do it. But then he had had Claire, and she had been his reason. Without her, there was a void to fill. And without drink, he was lost.

Clifton bounded down the stairs as Matthew added coffee granules and sugar to his mug, filled it to the top and took a sip.

'Off out?' he said tentatively as Clifton slipped on his shoes.

Clifton sneered. 'Nothing gets past you, does it? *Yes*, I'm going out. To a gig, if you must know.'

'Fine. Anyone we know?'

'Oh, that guy Ben, the one who came round that time.' He laughed. 'For some reason, he's got it into his head to be in a band. So I thought I'd go check them out.'

Matthew nodded. 'I'm glad you're making some friends.'

'Huh. Typical you. You haven't got a clue. Ben isn't my friend, he's a loser. The only reason I'm going is that it'll be good for a laugh, and that his housemate will be there. She is worth putting up with any crap music for.'

She? Not a girlfriend, surely? 'Well, have a good time. Don't be back too late.'

Clifton narrowed his eyes. 'Whatever. You'll probably have passed out by then. Come to think of it, I can't see a whisky bottle on the table. Changed brands, have you?'

Matthew shook his head. 'Actually, I'm trying to cut down. The booze, I mean.'

Clifton threw back his head and roared with laughter. The sound sent shivers up Matthew's spine. 'You! Give up drinking! God, that's the best line I've heard all year. Classic. You know what? Forgive me if I don't hold out much hope.' His laughter carried him out of the kitchen, and seconds later, out the front door.

Matthew sat back down. He wanted a drink more than ever. Just to forget that sound, that braying laughter. His own son, mocking him. He closed his eyes as the room fell in around him. But he would not drink. Not this time.

It was eight thirty on the dot as Clifton parked on a double yellow somewhere in the slums. Perfect timing. He checked the location of the venue again. Across the street, turn right, club about two hundred yards up on the left hand side. Easy. He ran a hand over his shirt, smoothing out the creases, then did the same with his trousers. All good. He stopped at the traffic lights, and a group of girls sidled up beside him, their arms interlocked,

giggling. He took a moment to look them over. Nothing but cheap slags in short skirts and low cut tops. Where was the elegance, the sophistication? They caught him staring, and the girl closest gave him the finger. He smiled. Dressed like that, they would probably end up getting raped or something. Much worse than a simple vulgar gesture. And it would be no-one's fault but their own.

He found the club without too many problems, and from the outside, it looked perfect for someone like Ben. A shithole, basically. The windows were greasy, the paint on the door chipped and peeling. There was no music playing. Obviously running a little late. He opened the door to a rush of warm air, and found the place only half full. And no Natasha. But there was plenty of time yet. As he stood at the bar waiting for a lemonade, a fat guy came onto the stage.

A tap on the microphone, then another.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' the voice said over the hubbub. 'Now for tonight's main attraction... would you please put your hands together and welcome... Soul Circus!'

And to muted applause, out they came. Darren was first, twirling his drumsticks, followed by Greg, who strode confidently to his position, slinging the guitar over his shoulder, strumming a couple of chords. Rodrigo was next, and someone wolf whistled as he entered. He took an exaggerated bow and went through the same ritual as Greg. Ben stood out of view and took a deep breath, trying to settle the tequila down. His legs didn't want to work, but eventually he got them working and tottered onto the stage. So many people! No matter how much they had practised, this was unreal. He saw J at the front, standing alone, and tipped his hat in his direction. J responded with a thumbs up before continuing to clap. Ben tried not to think about what was going to happen. Just go with the flow.

'Hi,' he said into the mic. There was a screech of feedback. Someone laughed, and Ben's stomach twisted another notch. 'We're Soul Circus, and this is our first gig, so if we're shit, take pity on us. Thanks for coming out tonight.'

It was unbearably hot. The lights seemed too bright, too sharp, a threat rather than a comfort. Faces blurred into one. Ben closed his eyes and cleared his throat. He turned to face Darren, who nodded, tapped his drumsticks together four times. Right on cue, Greg and Rodrigo started to play. He gripped the microphone, faced the crowd, and began to sing.

*'...Turning into something, drifting off to always
Gotta pull myself back in
Holding back the questions
We bruise with all rejections
Gotta pull myself back in...'*

Ben stepped back from the microphone as the chorus approached. From

what he could see, no-one was dancing. Or singing. Or doing much of anything.

*'...Suffer the breaks
You know I still remember it
It keeps burning away
I know that you make take a while
To come back around...'*

The second verse passed without mishap, not a foot wrong so far. Ben had no idea how good they sounded, how good *he* sounded. Now it was coming up, the chorus about to finish, over to Greg now, his first solo, something to get the crowd moving.

And he blitzed it. Ben completed the lyric as the guitar thundered into life. He turned to face Greg, who was hunched down, totally concentrating, hair flopping over his eyes as he did his stuff. Before Ben knew it, he was back at the mic, ready to fly now. The rest of the song passed in a flash, and with a heavy burst, Darren hammering on the drums, they ended with a flourish.

More muted applause. Most people were happy to tuck into their food or chat rather than show their appreciation. Fuck them, Ben thought. There was a pocket of rapturous noise coming from the front of the audience. He looked and it was J, clapping and cheering wildly. Ben smiled, took off his hat. 'Thanks,' he said. 'At least we have one fan. J, the cheque's in the post. Don't spend it all at once.'

A few people tittered. Ben and Greg exchanged glances. Greg nodded and smiled. As Ben turned back to introduce the next song, a large group of girls pushed through to stand beside J. 'Go, Ben!' one of them shouted, and he knew that voice. His heart lifted.

As the first song came to a close, Clifton was standing at the far corner of the bar. He wished he had brought some earplugs. The noise was enough to give anyone nightmares. And Ben, up on stage strutting around like a chicken. No worse than the rest of them, though. The guy with the dark hair and make up, where did they find him? They were nothing more than a bunch of losers masquerading as a band.

At that moment, the door swung open and a group of girls came in, chatting and laughing. Many heads turned to watch, men sizing up their prospects. Well, they were welcome to it. He took a cube of ice into his mouth and crunched, its coolness setting his teeth on edge. When he glanced up, there she was. Right at the back, just walking through now, wearing a short coat. He swallowed the rest of the ice and replaced the glass on the bar.

As the second song began, Ben's voice becoming even screechier, Clifton pushed through the bodies towards Natasha. Some people were nodding their heads in time with the music, and he even heard someone singing along. What was wrong with these people? Natasha was in a long line close to the

stage, and she seemed to be enjoying herself, moving a little with the beat, pausing now and then to take a drink or whisper to somebody. The coat had gone, and she was wearing a tight black top and trousers slung low on her hips. As he approached, she bent forward slightly and he got a glimpse of her black thong, a tantalising shimmer of fabric that came and went quicker than he could blink. He stood two rows back, watching her, biding his time, as Ben continued to prance about the stage. Finally, the song was over. He moved and tapped her on the shoulder.

‘Oh, it’s you,’ she muttered. ‘What do you want?’

Clifton smiled. ‘Enjoying the gig?’

She nodded. ‘Definitely. They’re really good.’

Ever the faithful friend, Clifton thought. He looked around. ‘No Tyler tonight?’

Her eyes wandered past his, and he turned to see a couple of the ‘friends’ giving him the once over. Or, giving his scar the once over. ‘No,’ Natasha was saying. ‘Something came up, he couldn’t make it.’

He smiled. ‘Well, that’s a shame. Looks like I’ll have to keep you company, doesn’t it?’

‘Not bloody likely. We’re going round in circles, you and I. I want you to leave me alone. Or if you can’t do that, fuck off.’

He reached forward and grabbed her arm. ‘Don’t say that to me,’ he hissed. ‘Or you might come to regret it. You get me?’

A guy came over. ‘You OK, Natasha?’

She pushed him off. ‘I’m fine.’ Her eyes met his, full of disgust. And what was worse, pity. Don’t do that, he thought. Don’t look at me like all the rest do. ‘What the fuck do you want?’ he asked the newcomer. ‘After her yourself, are you?’

‘It’s all right J,’ Natasha said, holding him back. ‘Clifton, just leave, will you. You’re making a fool of yourself.’

‘Yeah, get lost,’ a girl squeaked, and it tipped the scales. He whirled round and grabbed her by the throat.

‘Don’t talk to me like that, you fucking bitch!’ She whimpered beneath him, and he got a rush of adrenaline. Look at you. Helpless. He tightened his grip, watching her cheeks redden, eyes bulging in their sockets. There were shouts, and then he was being pushed back, the girl leaning over now, breath heaving.

Up in his face, J shouted, ‘That was uncalled for, mate. Hitting a girl like that.’ Before Clifton could react, his arm was wrenched behind his back, tons of pressure being applied as his fist was lifted higher. There was a blast of cold air, and he was on the pavement. He lay there for a moment and from the club, he could hear the whine of feedback. He struggled to his knees and made to get back inside, but J was still there, watching, waiting. Fuck it. Fuck that shitty band and those shitty people. He turned and made for home.

On stage, Ben noticed Clifton approach Natasha, and watched in horror as the scene played out. The fucking idiot. Why couldn’t he just leave it alone?

But any pity he felt drained away when Clifton attacked the girl. He was glad to see J coming to the rescue. Good for him.

Greg sidled up and said, 'We going to finish this gig or what?'

'Shit.' With the kerfuffle, he'd completely forgotten where they were.

But Greg got it moving, a wail of feedback as the song began. As Ben reached for the mic, he saw J frogmarch Clifton to the door. But no time to think of that now.

*'I walk a lonely road
The only one that I have ever known...'*

Clifton ran to the car, wanting to be far from here, far from everywhere. He ran straight across the street without looking. Someone shouted at him, but on he went. All he could think about was the pity on Natasha's face, judging him. It hurt more than he thought possible. He got inside the car and slammed the door shut. The tears flowed freely, and he rested his forehead on the steering wheel, waiting for his body to stop shaking.

*'Don't know where it goes
But it's home to me and I walk alone...'*

Slowly, the tears faded and rage took its place. All along he had thought that she would change her mind. That he hadn't found the right angle. That sooner or later all the shit from Tyler and Ben would become too much. And I have been there for you, he thought. Talked sense when no-one else would, been polite and kind whenever we've met. And you treat me this way. The anger reached its zenith, and he punched the passenger window with venom. Jagged darts of pain shot up his arm, dancing into his shoulder and beyond. He cried out, clutching his fingers. The pain continued, but now he was harnessing it, letting the waves wash over him. Eventually the agony subsided and he inspected his fingers. Already there was swelling, some blood, and a raised area of purple across the knuckles. That was for you, Natasha. To prove to you how I feel. He twisted the key in the ignition, reversed without checking his mirrors, and screeched off.

*'My shadow's the only one that walks beside me
My shallow heart's the only thing that's beating
Sometimes I wish someone out there will find me
'Til then I walk alone...'*

Fuck, it hurt. He could hardly grip the steering wheel. But he crunched the gears and sped on, running red lights and shooting over roundabouts. If anyone got in his path, more fool them. The night swept past in a blur. He suddenly had a crazy notion that he could keep driving forever. Leave Bristol behind and keep on going. Out of this city, away from Ben, from *her*. Cos who was going to miss him? Dad would need a week to realise what day it

was. And by then, he thought, I could be far away. Where, didn't really matter. Anywhere but here.

But something wouldn't let go. Sure, running would be safe. But it was cowardly, and worse, it was admitting defeat, letting *them* know that they had won. It had always been like that, all he had known. This time, he would not stand down.

You can show them. Show them that you won't lie down.

And to do that, there was only one thing left to do. Nearing the house now, he bypassed it and drove down to the shed.

After four songs, Ben felt that nothing could go wrong. It had been a little rusty to start with, but now they were in full flow. As the fourth song shuddered to a halt, more people were on their feet. Some were clapping. Not a blazing reception, but at least they weren't leaving. He thanked them, and suddenly had a thought. The acoustic set. Which was due to take place right now. And no Derek...

He took off his hat and wiped his forehead. His gaze moved forward, over the crowd, and rested upon Natasha. She smiled.

'Ben!' He turned and saw Derek gesturing at him from the shadows. 'Ben, I'm ready to go, come on!'

'You sure?' he asked.

'Definitely. How could I miss out on this? Come on, introduce me!'

Ben addressed the crowd. 'Right, we're going to do a couple of acoustic numbers, and to do that, please welcome Derek.'

Polite applause as Derek shambled onstage. He plonked his guitar down, then ran off and came back with two barstools. The crowd were becoming restless with the delay. Greg and Rodrigo left for a break. Darren pulled out a tambourine from behind the drum kit and sat, ready.

'Right, let's go!' Derek exclaimed, not realising that he was half speaking into the mic. Ben thought he might be drunk. Still, he was here. He sat on the stool, lowered the mic. It was how it all began, he thought. Me and Derek, all those weeks ago. Now look at us.

'This one's called 'Let Her Cry,' he said, and hoped that Derek would start off strong.

*'She sits alone by a lamppost
Trying to find the thought that's escaped her mind
She says there's the one I love the most
And time's not far behind
She never lets me in
Only tells me where she's been
When she's had too much to drink
I said that I don't care
I just run my hands, through her dark hair
And I, pray to God, you gotta, help me fly away...'*

It was good. Whatever had happened to Derek in the interim, it worked. It was like how it sounded up in the living room, only expanded. He thought of Natalie then, and her reaction when they had played this song for her. It made his voice feel unstoppable. At that moment, his eyes met Natasha's and there was an emotion there he had never seen, she was transfixed, swaying slightly to the music, a notion that should have looked stupid but somehow wasn't, and he remembered something Natalie had said. *Just think of her as me, I don't know.* It could almost be.

After the first verse and chorus, Derek had his first big solo, but he ripped through it like a man possessed. As he did so, Ben saw J move close to Catherine and whisper in her ear. She smiled and inched closer to him, and J resumed singing along.

*'Last night I tried to leave
Cried so much I could not believe
She was the same girl
I fell in love with long ago
She went in the back to get high
I sat down on my couch and cried, yeah
Please help me, won't you hold my hand and
Let her cry...'*

And they were hanging on every word. He locked stares with Natasha again, and found he couldn't hold it. It was like she was swallowing him up whole, and enjoying it. But he forgot as the song concluded, Derek finishing it up perfectly, Darren rounding it off with a rattle of the tambourine. Everyone cheered. Derek turned to Ben and stretched his arm out. They touched fists, and Ben had to laugh.

Before he could draw breath, Derek was away again. Ben readjusted himself on the stool. J was nodding his head vigorously. Ben tapped the beat on his thigh and began to sing.

*'She says it's cold outside and she hands me my raincoat
She's always worried about things like that
She says it's all gonna end and it might as well be my fault
And she only sleeps when it's raining
And she screams and her voice is straining...'*

Every word was resonating, and the infection was spreading. Derek hit the backing vocals in the chorus and hammered the solo down, and they reached the final section buoyant.

*'Yeah, and she says baby
Its 3am I must be lonely
And she says baby*

Well I can't help but be scared of it all sometimes...'

They played one more with just the three of them. After, Ben addressed the crowd as Greg and Rodrigo returned and took up their positions.

'Thanks a lot,' he said. 'This is going to be our last song.' Plenty of booing, most of it from J. 'And,' he continued, an idea forming, 'we're going to dedicate it to our three favourite people, J, Catherine and Natasha. Hi guys.' He waved, and everyone turned to stare. J beamed back. Catherine stared at the floor. Natasha drank up the adulation, her eyes never leaving Ben's. 'Thanks for your support, it means a lot.' He moved the stool to the side. Derek had swapped guitars, and they were as five, how it should be for the finale. 'This one's called 'Stay Young.'

He moved back as Greg led them off, the sound much stronger with the extra guitar. Some of the crowd were jumping, and Ben joined in. Fuck it, why not?

'One way out is all you're ever gonna get from...'

Ben could hardly contain himself, and his exultation was spreading. There was a feeling in the room unlike any he had known. The audience were jostling each other, especially at the front, moshing with a fierce intensity. Greg and Derek were getting into it too, squaring up as they battered out the chords. And the noise was incredible, oily and gritty and loud. As he sang, Ben saw J joining in with more fervour than anyone, swinging his arms and clattering into Catherine. He stopped, reached down in the melee and stroked her hand. Their fingers interlocked. Ben smiled.

*'Hey, stay young, and invincible
Cos we know just what we are
And come what may, we're unstoppable
Cos we know just what we are
Know just what we are...'*

'COME ON!' Ben shouted, and moved to the front of the stage as the solo began. He stared out into the crowd, jumping along in time, arms aloft, probably looking foolish, but beyond caring. Over to the other side, and J was behind Catherine now, arms wrapped around her. It gave him a surge, and he finished the song in a haze, Darren dragging it out with a medley of drums to accompany Greg's screeching guitar, Rodrigo and Derek tying it up, building to a massive crescendo that peaked before ending, throwing the room into silence.

'Thanks a lot, goodnight!'

The cheering began, again starting from J, and there were shouts for an encore. From backstage, Rodrigo's Dad gestured at Ben, who waved and walked off. To an avalanche of sound, he stepped into the corridor.

'So,' he said, wiping sweat from his forehead, heart hammering against

his ribs, ‘what did you think?’ He was enveloped in a bear hug. ‘That good, huh?’

Rodrigo’s Dad clapped his hands together. ‘You boys have made my night! For that, you can do one more song. Or this crowd are going to be buying for blood. Now get out there and make me some more money!’

Ben went out to more applause. The band joined him in the centre of the stage.

‘Fucking hell,’ Derek shouted, grinning madly. ‘They love us!’

‘All right,’ Ben replied, ‘calm down. We can do one more song. What’s it to be?’

‘I think we should do this one,’ Derek said, and told them.

All eyes turned to Greg. ‘Well,’ Ben said. ‘Can you do it?’

Greg narrowed his eyes, and there wasn’t a drop of sweat visible. ‘Of course I can do it.’

And without any introduction, they were straight in. And Greg was right. He *could* play it.

*‘We don’t live in the same world
We don’t live in the same world
I’d like to step into your world
If you step into my world
I don’t want to spend the rest of my days
Running around, chasing your shadow...’*

They hit the chorus, ran through the next verse.

*‘We don’t live in the same world
We don’t live in the same world
Take a step into my world
Take a step into my world...’*

Ben stepped back, his time over. Greg began the solo, and Ben watched him in awe. Greg inched forward, totally entranced in playing, an incredible force of sound. Ben faced him, arms outstretched, and Greg caught his eye and smiled. For two minutes he stood, never wanting to move. Darren kept up perfectly, and abruptly, Greg ended in a hurricane of feedback, closing with a huge jump in the air.

‘Cheers, and once again, goodnight!’

Ben did a theatrical bow, and Darren came forward, threw a drumstick into the crowd. It arced high and was caught by someone at the back. Ben blew a kiss in the direction of J and Natasha, and strode off.

‘HELL YEAH!!’ Derek shouted when they were in the dressing room. ‘HELL YEAH!!’ He ran forward and hugged Ben, and Rodrigo and Darren joined them. They all laughed and cheered.

‘Drinks up,’ a voice said, and Rodrigo’s Dad came in carrying a crate of beer. ‘After that, you deserve it.’

‘Thanks papa,’ Rodrigo said. He fell into a conversation with his Dad in Spanish, and it involved a lot of hand slapping and smiles. Ben took two beers and went over to Greg, who was sitting by the window.

‘Here,’ Ben said, sitting down beside him. ‘You OK?’

Greg took a sip of beer. ‘Sure. I always get a little wiped out straight after a gig.’

Ben drank. ‘I’m not surprised. That was incredible, you know? *I* didn’t want it to end, so God knows how it must have gone down to everyone.’

‘I should think so!’ Greg smiled. ‘Mate, it *was* good, wasn’t it?’

Ben nodded. ‘Better than I could have hoped.’

‘I’ll drink to that.’

Ben took a breath. ‘Christ. We’ve got to have some more of this. Did you see them all out there? They fucking drank it up!’

Greg grinned. ‘Careful mate, I think you’re overloading on adrenalin. Can tell you’re a first timer.’

Ben was about to reply when a loud voice boomed from the corridor. He smiled.

‘Hey, let me in man, I gotta see the next Bono! Ahh, there he is,’ and Ben found himself smothered in J’s embrace. ‘Fuck man, that was the bomb! Especially that encore. And you, serenading everyone with that voice of yours, even Catherine was impressed...’

‘J, you’re rabbiting. But thanks. I’m glad you enjoyed it.’

J laughed. ‘Let me buy the great man a drink. Fuck it, I’ll get you all one. You game?’

Nods of acknowledgement from the band. ‘Look J, I’ll see you out front in a bit, OK?’

‘Sure, sure. Catherine’s waiting for me, anyhow.’ He pointed a finger at Ben and pulled the trigger. ‘I *knew* I’d wear her down eventually.’

‘Must have been the music.’ Ben smiled as J bounded back to the bar. As he left, Natasha hovered in the doorway.

‘Hey,’ she said.

‘Hey.’ He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. ‘So...’

She nodded. ‘Yup, you were great. I didn’t believe it until I heard it, but you were. *Especially* you.’

He noticed that her eyes were everywhere but on his face. ‘Thanks. It turned out all right in the end. Guess all that hard work paid off.’

She nodded again, clutching her handbag in front of her.

‘You going to have a drink with us? Toast the victory, as it were?’

A small shake of the head. ‘The girls and I are heading off. We uh, kind of planned a bit of a pub crawl, and they’re eager to move on.’

He felt a stab of disappointment. ‘Fair enough. Well, have a good one.’

This time the full force of her green eyes were on him. ‘But I’ll see you at home, yeah?’

‘Maybe. Depends how eager these lot are for a few beers.’

‘Suit yourself. Have a good night.’

After she left, Derek sidled over. ‘That was weird,’ Ben said.

‘That’s women for you. Come on, let’s go and have that drink. I feel we deserve it.’

Matthew couldn’t sleep. It was too fucking early, for one. And two, Clifton still wasn’t home. He rolled over and looked at the clock. 11:37pm. By now, how much would have gone down the hatch? Probably a bottle, maybe more. Sleep would be easy after that. He thought of the liquor in the cabinet downstairs, within touching distance. It would be best to tip it all down the sink, but it was a safety net, something to fall back on. His mouth was dry, tasting the first drop. The warm fluidity as it hit the back of the throat. It was an overpowering sensation.

He wandered downstairs and made a coffee. Where the hell was Clifton? Was this a regular occurrence, staying out till God knows when? He couldn’t remember, and the thought filled him with shame. The drinks cabinet called out once more.

At that moment, the back door slammed open and Clifton walked in. Straightaway Matthew was on edge. His hair for a start, unkempt and sticking up in sharp clumps. But it was more his eyes, the wildness in them.

‘What the fuck are you still doing up?’ Clifton asked. There were leaves and bits of grass adhered to his trousers.

‘Just getting a drink. I could say the same to you.’

‘Well, you could. But I wouldn’t tell you. Have to say, I’m surprised you’re not comatose by now. You usually are.’

‘I told you. I’m laying off the drink for a while. You can choose to believe it, or not. I don’t care. How was your night?’

‘A fucking waste of time. The beginning at least. But I’m not going to let them win, that’s for sure. You can count on that.’

Let them win? What was he on about? ‘Looks like you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards.’

Clifton brushed the debris from his clothes. ‘Well, you know what they say. Like father like son.’ He laughed at his own joke. ‘Much as I’d *love* to stand here chatting, I’m tired.’ He took a step forward, feigning a punch at Matthew’s head. ‘God, look at you flinch. Let’s face it, with or without the booze, you’re nothing. Remember that.’

As Clifton left the room, Matthew raised his head, his body still shaking. How can he do this to me? Make me feel so worthless? As Clifton turned to head upstairs, Matthew noticed a dark stain running down the leg of Clifton’s jeans. A stain that looked like blood.

Blood.

His mind ran into overdrive. What had Clifton been up to? Coming home with grass and stuff on his clothes, clearly not been where he said he had. He tried to put the last few months together in his head. The late nights. Something was awry. He took a mouthful of coffee, cursing as it spilt down his T-shirt. Easy enough to change. He took the T-shirt off and opened the laundry cupboard, chucked the T-shirt in. His eyes caught on something else, an old rag stuffed right at the back. He picked it up, realising that they were

in fact an old pair of Clifton's jeans. Typical. But as he unfolded them, he saw bloodstains on both legs, and spread around the crutch.

He recoiled in horror, dropping the jeans as if they were contaminated. There was something rotten going on. All that blood, coming from somewhere. Could it be self-inflicted? No. It didn't fit right. So, where? All those days of drinking, something sinister had been happening right here, in this house. He thought about confronting Clifton, knew he would have to. But right now, there was only one thing on his mind. He threw the jeans back and almost ran to the living room. Got a glass, and found his old friend. As he raised the first drink to his lips, he looked at the clock. Two minutes past midnight. So he had made one day. In a sense, that was all you had. And if he could make one day, he could do it again. But not today.

He took a drink.

By God, they were eager. All the pressure and stress, the weeks building up to the gig, evaporated with every drink. The relief was palpable, present on every face, with every joke, in every conversation, so close you could reach out and touch it, and with it came the urge to run riot, not thinking any further ahead than whose round, pass me a cigarette, where shall we go next. It was a night that could only have existed under those circumstances, with the right people, those who understood what they had done, how far they had come, and the possibility of more to follow.

So they drank. At first, the mood was hungry, wanting to keep the adrenalin rush going, toasting each other, toasting the *world* if they had to. Then, as the pace slowed, they became more reflective, trying to analyse all that had happened and how they were feeling now, to place their achievement in some kind of context. No conclusions were reached, and each member felt content with that, happy to take their own memories, knowing that was what really mattered, holding on to something that would always be theirs, the five of them, Soul Circus.

People came and went, coming into the group for a drink or two, then moving on. So many faces, both male and female. Congratulatory kisses or shakes of the hand. Many dark corners, huddling around a table, buried under a sea of pint and shot glasses, cigarettes burning, smoke forming a blue cloud above them, the flash of a camera, smiling, light flashing from the optics as another round was poured. On the street, hailing a cab, piling in, all squashed up like sardines, singing and shouting out the windows at random strangers. In a queue, stumbling, the scent of perfume suddenly all around. A shake of the head, words being spoken but not registering, then a hand guiding, and the comfort of a wall, spinning and spinning. Back inside now, on a dancefloor, and his head suddenly colder, feeling something missing, and a girl swirling in front of him, hat tipped low on her head, an ice blue eye visible below the rim. And walking, alone, sobering up, the cold air wiping a hand through his brain and kicking the fog away, sweeping him back into the here and now, only steps from home, somehow exhausted but still wanting something more, anything to keep the night going.

Inside, Ben staggered into the darkness, swinging his bedroom door open, switching on the lamp, the harsh light blowing more cobwebs away. He tried to piece together the events of the night. They had gone drinking in lots of bars, each one seemingly identical to the last, and he was unable to separate them. Being turned away from a club, Derek having to hold him up. And what had happened to the others? J, and Catherine, and Greg and Darren, where had they gone?

He shuffled to the kitchen and downed a glass of water, feeling a little better. He unbuttoned his shirt and loosened the buckle on his trousers. Much better. His bladder suddenly ached, so he left his glass on the table and went for a piss, probably the nicest of his life, feeling the alcohol drain out of him. He sat on the toilet seat afterwards and rubbed his face, then filled the sink and dunked his head right in, the sharp coldness of the water doing a great job. As he dried off, there was a rattle as the front door swung open. He retrieved his glass and went out into the hallway.

Natasha was there, her arm around the waist of a girl Ben didn't recognise. Whoever it was, she was more the worse for wear than he. Her head was lolling forward, skirt riding high on her thighs. She moaned, and Natasha glanced up and ran appraising eyes over Ben.

'*Hey, you,*' she said, slurring her words slightly. 'I'm so glad you're here. Give us a hand with this one, will you?'

He took hold of an arm and together, they got the girl upstairs and plonked her down on the stairs by the phone.

'Jesus,' he said, 'how much has she had?'

Natasha smiled. 'About as much as me.' She giggled. 'Some people just can't handle their drink. You look pretty wasted yourself.'

He realised his shirt was still hanging open. 'Yeah, I've had a few. Where the hell have you been? It's like, really late.'

The girl murmured, 'Nats...Nats, I wanna go home...Let me go home...'

'I'll call her a taxi.' She picked up the phone, spoke for a few seconds. 'Be about half an hour, apparently. Which sucks. I s'pose it'll give us time to sober her up a bit.'

Ben got a glass of water and tried to get her to drink. At first, she pushed him away, but he persisted and eventually got it down her. She rubbed her eyes.

Natasha knelt in front of her. 'Kate? Kate? Come on, babe, there's a taxi on the way. You OK?'

'Where am I?' Kate slurred.

'At my house. It's fine, everything's cool.'

She stood up suddenly. 'I need the loo...Show me the loo.'

'OK, I'll take you.' She got Kate standing and they swayed into the bathroom. A moment later, retching sounds began.

Ben reached for his glass and downed it. He was starting to feel hungover, but strangely, wide awake. Kate's bag sat in front of him, and without thinking, he rummaged through it and found a crumpled pack of Silk Cut. He fired one up.

Natasha came out of the bathroom. ‘She’ll be fine,’ she said, rubbing her fingers on a towel. ‘Getting it out of her system.’ She smiled, a wicked gleam in her eye. ‘That’s a good look for you. Very debonair, all that chest hair on view.’

Ben pulled his shirt tight. ‘Shurrup, will you.’

Kate moaned again.

‘I think I’ll go and check on that taxi,’ Ben said.

Fifteen minutes later, the taxi arrived. Ben went upstairs as Natasha and Kate came out of the bathroom. Kate looked a little better.

‘Cab’s here,’ he said, and gave Kate her bag. ‘I had a cigarette, hope you don’t mind.’

She squinted at him. ‘Oh Ben, hi. What are you doing here?’

Natasha grimaced. ‘I think maybe I’d better see her home. It’s only round the corner, so I won’t be long.’

Ben followed them downstairs. ‘I’ll go, if you want. You don’t want to be wandering around at this time of night.’

She smiled. ‘Thanks Ben, but I’ll be fine. Tell you want, put the kettle on, cos I’ll be dying for a coffee when I get back. Then I can tell you how wonderful the gig was. I’ve been thinking about it all night.’

A tremor ran up Ben’s spine. ‘If you’re sure.’

‘I’ll be back soon,’ she said as they manhandled Kate out the door.

Ben did as he was told, thinking that he should be in bed. His mind wandered, hoping that Natasha was OK, that she would get back safely. Natalie appeared in his head, and he realised he had forgotten to text her. Too late now. Have to do it in the morning. He thought about the gig, and how long ago it seemed now. You were fucking good, he whispered. *We all* were. How surprised people were, seeing him up there. Natasha, especially. That gaze, penetrating and constant. And Clifton, the scene he had caused. The prick he had looked tonight when J threw him out. All because of her. Ben could understand it, in a perverse way. She was the type of girl you would walk over hot coals for.

He made two coffees and took a sip of his. The caffeine hit straightaway, his lethargy dissipating. He was carrying them through when Natasha whirled back in.

‘Right on cue,’ he said.

Her cheeks were flushed from the cold. ‘Thanks,’ she said, eyeing him over the top of her mug. ‘Let’s sit upstairs for a bit. We can swap stories.’

He let her go first, trying to avoid watching her buttocks as she walked up the stairs.

In the living room, she sat on the sofa, and he took the armchair. She curled her legs up under her, and he had a flashback to Natalie sitting in that exact spot. ‘What happened to the shirt?’ she asked.

He frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you’ve done it up. I *much* preferred how it was before.’ She laughed.

‘Stop picking on me. So, tell me about your night.’

So she did. It wasn't the most exciting story, but Ben enjoyed watching her talk. She was funny and perceptive. Often she would place her mug by the sofa and play out little scenes, getting the accents right, using her body to act out different parts. He found himself noticing her quirks, how she fiddled with her necklace while she talked, twisting the metal around her finger. Other things: how, in a certain light, her eyes lightened till they were almost blue. The creases around her mouth when she burst into laughter. When she stretched, a sliver of flesh appeared, showing off her navel. He imagined rolling his tongue around her belly button, her hands guiding his head to the right areas, arching her back to allow him more freedom...

Fuck. Ben, you've got to go to bed.

'It's funny,' Natasha was saying, 'I often have a great night whenever Tyler's not around. I can't believe him, you know.'

Ben shook his head, trying to remove the desire. 'Well, it's his loss, right? I'm glad you had a good time.'

'There's one good reason for that, and you're obviously shy about it on account of letting *me* go on all night, so I'll say it for you. I thought you lot were terrific tonight. I really did. I mean, it's not quite my music taste, but it didn't matter. It was a great performance.'

He stared at the floor. 'Thanks.'

'And you were unbelievable. Everyone, especially Natalie, has been raving about your voice since forever. But I wanted to wait and find out on the night. Boy, was it worth it. Especially that last song.'

'That was Greg, mainly. He stole the show on that one.'

He shook her head. 'Not at all. I dunno, you looked so passionate up there. And so confident. The girls were having trouble keeping their tongues in their mouths.'

'I'm sure.'

'It's *true*. I swear to God. You're quite the sex symbol.'

He gulped, his stomach churning. His fingers were cool and clammy.

'What's wrong with saying that?' she asked. 'Just being honest.'

He stood up. 'Thanks. Um, I think it's about my bedtime.'

A smile lifted the corners of her mouth. 'Something I said?'

'Not at all. I'm about dead on my feet, that's all. Plus, still a bit drunk.'

'Fair enough. Let's go then.'

Downstairs, he put the mugs in the sink. As he turned, Natasha was stood behind him.

'You know,' she said, 'I think it's the hat. It really suits you. Can I try it on?'

He gave her the hat. She pulled it too far down her head. 'Look,' he said, moving closer, 'it's better like this.' He pulled the brow up, tilted a corner down. His heart beat faster. 'There, that's it. Perfect.'

She did a twirl, got tangled up, and fell into him. He slid an arm round her waist. They locked eyes, his hand feeling the warmth of her skin. She smiled, ran her tongue over her lips, their faces inches apart. 'Ben,' she whispered, and moved her face closer.

He stepped back. 'It looks great on you.' Got to get out, he thought. Or I won't be able to help myself.

The smile remained. She threw the hat to him and rearranged her hair. He watched her hands tucking loose strands behind her ears. It had to stop now. 'Well, goodnight. See you in the morning, or later on. You know what I mean.'

'I do.'

He thought that she was going to stand before him, say something. But she didn't, just kept that all-knowing look, and he brushed against her on the way to his room.

Inside, he collapsed against the door. Jesus Christ. What the fuck was happening? He tried to call up a rational voice, but it had been buried under alcohol and euphoria. She was there, in the next room, so close, only a thin shred of wall separating them. All sorts of things rushed through his head. Natalie passed in a flash, and he knew that she would have missed his text, wondering how it had gone, waiting for him to get in touch. She seemed so far away at this moment, outside of this bubble, and the thought of her didn't interrupt his ardour. It was only one night, an opportunity he would never have again, never could believe he would be contemplating. But it was still wrong, all the problems it would create. The trouble it would cause. If Tyler found out. And how could she be thinking about it, knowing Natalie likes me? He listened for her door, willing it to open and shut. It didn't.

He opened his door.

And there she stood. Smiling. 'I knew you'd come,' she said.

He stepped towards her.

They kissed, moving their heads a little, and then the passion and urgency increased as their tongues touched. He swung her round and they slammed against his door, her hands roaming up his back, fingernails raking his skin. He pushed the handle down and they stumbled into the bedroom. Now he was against the door, and she ripped the buttons on his shirt in her haste. He ran fingers through her hair then pulled her up and they staggered into the table. He lifted her up onto the surface, scattering books onto the floor. She raised her arms and he pulled her top away and free. It wasn't tender anymore, the want and need they had stored up spilling over. He reached around to unhook her bra, couldn't find the grip. Rip it, she moaned. Rip it now. So he did, and her breasts were exposed, nipples pink and erect, and he took one into his mouth. She moaned again and leant back. He moved from one to another, and then slithered a trail lower, now fulfilling the fantasy, kissing and sucking her navel. He stood back, threw his hat on the bed, and she nudged forward on the table, gripping his belt, pulling him in. As they kissed, her hands unbuckled his belt and pulled his zipper down. They broke apart, and he tugged off his trousers and boxers and went to her again. She slid off the table now, crouched and took him in her mouth, sucking and coaxing. After a minute, he was ready to explode, and pulled back slightly, popping free. She stood, and this time was ready for him, so he pulled at her trousers, tugging them down, hands running over her buttocks then moving

round to the front.

‘In,’ she whispered, and he inserted a finger, then two, and she whimpered and buried her head in his neck, the moaning increasing in intensity as his fingers worked. As she neared the brink, he removed them and pulled at her leg, bringing it up around his waist, his penis nudging her belly. The other leg came up, and he carried her weight fully now, throwing her back onto the table, lifting up a leg onto his shoulder, the other hand ripping her thong off. He kissed her ankle, moving up slowly, up to her thigh, pubic hair tickling his cheek, and then buried his tongue inside her. She writhed and pushed against him, hooking him, pulling him in. Her body began to shake as orgasm approached, and suddenly a spasm shook her and she cried out, her legs nearly breaking his neck.

‘Fuck me,’ she cried. ‘God, you’ve *got* to.’ He ripped his wallet from his trousers, sought a condom. ‘Here, let me,’ she said, voice thick with desire, and unwrapped it, guiding him with her hand, rolling the condom onto him with delicate fingers. ‘Now. Right now.’ He spread her legs, drew her forward, eager, wanting, and she accepted him effortlessly, legs circling his lower back as he thrust, not believing what was happening, unable to believe, and he saw her frantic eyes, hair swinging wildly, breasts rosy, and it sent him over the edge, filling the condom in three huge bursts, his voice rising to a cry, and they were gasping for breath, sweating, clinging to each other, exhausted, her arms round his neck, it finally over, impossible, but it had happened, and he hung on for dear life, not wanting the moment to end.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ben dreamt, his mind in turmoil. Images came and went. First, Amy walked towards him down a vast corridor. Bulbs hung in long flexes of cord from the ceiling, swaying back and forth. When the bulbs swung, patterns flickered on the grainy walls in a flurry of yellow and white. But despite the gloom, Amy could be seen clearly, shrouded in a green halo. As she grew closer, he threw a hand across his face. The colour was so bright. He closed his eyes and saw luminous patches seared onto his retina. When he opened them, she stood before him, the halo shimmering and wrapping him in its cloak.

‘This is you and me,’ she whispered. ‘Part of the same skin.’ She spread her arms, and he could hardly see her now, the flash of her aura more powerful than a thousand cameras. Her mouth opened and stretched wider. Suddenly he was submerged, her teeth scraping over his forehead. Her mouth continued to gape, and his whole head was lost, the bulbs shining brighter now, with intense ferocity. He was in darkness, the green a pinprick far behind, and she swallowed him whole, and he was swimming in an oily, viscous pool. Every stroke was an exertion, like wading through treacle. A hand stroked his leg, and he screamed, then a black mirage leapt out of the water.

‘Hello Ben,’ it said, and he realised it was Natalie. All he could see were the whites of her eyes, the rest of her body black, liquid oozing down over her skin. She grabbed his head and pushed him under. All was dark. He struggled, the water about to enter his lungs, unable to cry out, either be quiet or drown, and the hands continued to press down, and he had to take a breath, and did so, scum filling up his insides. He was released and rose to the surface, floating face up, the world slipping away. Above him, the Natalie figure rose into the air, sailing above this sea of poison, and a pair of brilliant white wings erupted from her back. She smiled and flapped them, and all the oil and shit flew from her body straight at Ben. He opened his mouth to scream and was hit with a barrage, the sticky fluid choking him, and he was fucking scared, so scared, and closed his eyes and prayed for oblivion.

Somehow, he survived, and Natasha was standing next to him, holding his hand. They were naked. He bent to kiss her hand, and suddenly the skin began to flake, falling like crumbs to the floor. Bone was exposed. He turned to her in fear, but none showed on her face. She leaned forward and kissed him, both arms tight around his neck, the hands skeletal. Inexplicably, he was hard, and he lay her down in a thicket of grass, the sky thundering overhead, the first droplets of rain splashing onto his back. She held him tighter as they made love, and on the point of climax, he pulled back and stared at her face, and it crumpled under the impact, the skin breaking up, and now she was no more than a skeleton, but joined to him forever, her legs wrapped around his back, his penis still within her. The rain continued to fall, soaking him, the grass cold and moist, and thunder clapped, and she

threw back her head and laughed, a witch's cackle that caused the sky to shake, and he was trapped under a barrage of rain and thunder, and there was a great boom that burst his eardrums, blood running from his ears, and she opened her mouth to receive the first drops...

He sat up in bed, a hand clapped around his mouth. And it hit him like a freight train. The hangover, like he was about to die. The dreams...so fucking vivid. He wondered what the hell was happening to him.

A murmur from his left.

Natasha.

She was asleep; one hand curled around his pillow like it was her favourite childhood toy. Her dark hair fanned out over the sheets like the roots of a tree. The duvet had slipped down and her back was exposed. It rose slightly with each breath.

The guilt and sorrow came all at once.

My God. What have I done?

And he could remember everything.

I knew that you'd come.

And he had, in a haze of lust and ecstasy. He looked around the room. Books and clothes littered the floor. Her ruined bra in pride of place atop his trousers. A souvenir, he thought, and it reminded him of Natalie, of her bra on the sofa, and the horror increased tenfold. Now all the other repercussions rushed in. Everything had changed for Natasha, and for their relationship. No longer just housemates. A line had been crossed, and they would have to deal with it. And Tyler. He couldn't find out. He thought of what would happen if she went back to him. Having to see them together all the time, knowing that she couldn't be really happy, not if her infidelity was anything to go by. But what did it matter? It was a one-night stand, a temporary aberration. It couldn't be anything more. She would go back to her life, him to his. But what about Natalie? If she found out? Betrayed by her own sister. And by me, more to the point. The thought was crushing. The consequences seemed infinite, all of them with the potential to destroy lives.

There was a knock at the door.

His heart froze.

Natasha flicked an eye open, big and green and full of worry.

'Who is it?' he shouted, noticing the catch in his voice.

'Catherine. Just wondered if I could borrow a book. Can I come in?'

Natasha was up on her knees, holding the duvet round her. 'Just a sec,' he said to Catherine. 'Wait there. I've got to put some clothes on.'

'What if she comes in?' Natasha hissed, her eyes wild.

Ben searched around frantically. 'In the cupboard,' he replied, tugging on his trousers.

'I can't get in the cupboard,' she cried, half on, half off the bed. 'I *can't*.'

'Course you fucking can,' he said. 'Hang on, Cath!' He half pushed Natasha toward the cupboard, and she took the hint, scrabbling across the room.

He opened the door. Catherine was smiling. 'How are you?'

He shut the door behind him. ‘Not so bad. A tad hungover.’

‘I’m not surprised. You were really hitting it hard.’

‘I wasn’t the only one. We all were.’

‘Not quite like you, though. Getting thrown out of a club, indeed.’

‘Look, did you want a book, or just to criticise my drinking habits?’

‘Fair enough. You got a thesaurus I can borrow?’

He groaned. ‘Catherine, it’s what, eleven on a Saturday morning, and you want to work?’

‘Good a time as any.’

He smiled. ‘Actually, what about you? Getting friendly with J, if I can recall.’

She blushed, hid behind her hair. ‘I wouldn’t quite say friendly.’

‘Hey, don’t knock it. You could do a lot worse.’

‘Just get me the thesaurus, would you?’

‘Sure. Room’s a bit of a tip, so you don’t need to come in.’

He found the thesaurus hidden under his boxers. He hoped there were no incriminating stains on it.

‘There you go. By the way, where did you go last night? Back to J’s for a night of passion?’

She slapped his arm. ‘If you must know, we left you lot in that last place and he walked me home. Very gentlemanly. He asked me on a date.’

‘Good for him. What about Derek and the others?’

‘Derek pulled and went back to hers. The others were still with you. What, can’t you remember?’

‘Only vaguely,’ he admitted, thinking, if I’d been more in control, none of this would have happened.

‘Naughty naughty. Well, thanks for this. I’ll return it later.’

‘No hurry.’

He shut the door and leant against it, waiting for his heart to slow down. God, that was bad. And it’s only going to get worse.

He locked the door, crossed the room and opened the cupboard. Natasha peered up at him, swathed in the duvet, crouching behind the rail of hangers. He pulled them aside.

‘God, that was close,’ she said. He expected her to be furious, but there was a hint of playfulness on her face, excitement at avoiding being sprung. It surprised him. He helped her up, no space between them now. She reached past him and pulled the door shut behind them, plunging the space into darkness. It smelt of old clothes.

‘We’re in the cupboard,’ he said.

She grinned. ‘So we are.’

She slipped the duvet off her shoulders. He knew he had to leave, but was spellbound. He could feel her breath on his skin.

‘Natasha...’ he mumbled.

She put a finger to his lips, then reached down and unzipped his fly.

‘It seems somebody’s pleased to see me.’

He looked down. ‘Please don’t,’ he pleaded. Knowing what was going to

happen. Knowing it was crazy.

Her fingers started to work. 'Tell me to stop, and I will.'

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He closed his eyes.

When they were done, she clung to him once more, every inch of their skin touching, as if for a moment they had become one. They remained that way for what seemed like forever, until finally she unwrapped herself from him, and the spell was broken.

'God,' she murmured as she stepped from the cupboard. 'That was... well, I don't know what that was.'

Ben said nothing. The guilt was returning, and it made him sick.

Natasha began dressing. 'Don't think this bra is functional anymore,' she whispered. 'For the dustbin, I think.' As she pulled her top on, Ben thought of Amy and their last night together, how he had said that everything else would be a step down. Now, he wasn't so sure.

She stood in front of him, fully dressed. 'I'm so tired,' she said. 'I could sleep forever.'

'Me too,' he replied, throwing on a T-shirt. He tried to smile, but got no reaction. 'So...what now?'

Her reaction was cool, calm. Prepared. 'What do you mean, what now?'

'What I said. What happens between us now?'

She frowned, and walked towards the door. 'Nothing,' she said, her back to him.

'What do you mean, nothing?'

'Exactly what I said. In case you've forgotten, I already *have* a boyfriend.'

The red mist descended. 'What the fuck is that supposed to mean? What, a boyfriend that you cheat on whenever you feel like it? Real good relationship, that.'

'Keep your voice down,' she hissed. 'Or do you want Catherine to hear us?'

'I don't give a shit what she hears. You're in denial. What, ten minutes ago we were shagging, and now you want to walk out the door like nothing's happened? You're kidding. Because it *has* happened, and from what I recall, you were the one who instigated it. Practically threw yourself at me.'

She whirled round, a flurry of hair, cheeks reddening, a vein standing out on her forehead. 'That's bullshit. It's simple. Tyler let me down, I was upset about it, got drunk, and there you were. We both had fun, and everyone's happy. Now things can go back to normal.'

'Normal, eh? Unless Tyler finds out.'

'He's not going to find out, is he? *I'm* not going to tell him. And if he does, I'm sure Natalie might be interested, you know, spread the word around.'

'You bitch. She's your fucking sister. You'd upset her like that? Just take what you want, and fuck the consequences?'

'Sure, I'm sorry for Nat. That's the main regret I have. I feel terrible about it. Anyway, you're a fine one to talk. You didn't exactly play hard to

get last night.'

Ben shook his head in disgust. 'So you're running back to that fucking prick. Nicely done, Natasha.'

She sighed. 'You haven't got a clue. What did you think, Ben? That I was going to drop everything and come running into your arms? If you did, that's pretty naïve.'

He shook his head. 'I can't believe what I'm hearing.'

She lowered her voice a notch. 'Look, Ben, I'm sorry, all right? I thought it was obvious. I'm not going to lie, I am attracted to you. Last night, we gave in to that. And it was great. *Really* great. No disputing that. But that's all it can be. Now I've got you out of my system, and that's the end of it.'

'And now we're supposed to go back to being housemates? Having cosy chats in the hallway? Taking out the rubbish together? Me, in here, listening to you fuck Tyler all night long? Knowing that once, that was me? Sorry, twice.'

She shrugged, twisting the key in the lock. 'Don't worry, Ben. If things don't work out for you, you might not be coming back next term, anyway. So we may never see each other again after this week. In a couple of years, I'll be nothing more than a nice memory, no regrets, a night to remember, which is fine. You'll be happy...and so will I.'

'And what happens if I get together with Natalie? You'll be seeing a lot more of me then, won't you?'

She stopped in her tracks. 'Honestly, Ben, you can't like her that much, otherwise this wouldn't have happened. She's clearly not right for you.'

Something clicked in his head. 'That's what this is about! Last night, before the gig, Natalie said you sounded weird when you last spoke to her. Weird? I'd call it jealous. I'm right, aren't I? You wanted to have me for yourself, so did everything you could to turn her away from me.'

'That's ridiculous. If that were true, why is Tyler going to be here this time on Monday?'

'OK, maybe. But you couldn't stand big sis getting in first, so you had to have first bite of the cherry, didn't you? Test the merchandise. Because it'd be a little too close for comfort, her going out with me. You couldn't fucking stand it. You know, maybe I will go out with her, just to hear her tell you what a great guy I am.'

'No. Whatever happens, you're fucked. If Tyler finds out, so does Nat, you're fucked. And if you tell him, I'll kill you. Make your life a living hell. I won't let you ruin it. As for you and Nat, I don't think so. You couldn't stand the guilt. Walking around on eggshells, worried that it might let slip, especially if I'm around. Dream on.'

The door crashed behind her.

Ben ran to the door, opened it to an empty hall. Catherine popped her head round the corner. 'What was all that about? It didn't get above the stereo, but sounded pretty loud.'

'It's nothing,' he rasped, and slammed the door.

He knew that Natasha's jibes had struck home. That *bitch*. It would be

impossible now, being around her. Seeing her with Tyler all the time. Maybe it was best to jack it all in, go home and never return. If it was going to be like this, it would be a relief. What annoyed the most, was how could he do it to Nat? Sure, they weren't going out, hadn't declared undying love for each other, but she was in his heart somewhere, and could have been so much more. But Natasha. She was the drug. He thought of the sex, how explosive it had been, the desire they had felt. Now, it was all denial. Make-believing her own pretty story. And he hated her for it. But he couldn't tell Tyler, although the temptation was intoxicating. The look on his face would be worth a beating. But it wouldn't change anything. Now he was alone. No chance with Natalie, not now. Natasha, back with Tyler. And Amy, with her new bloke. All bridges burned and ties cut.

He ran a hand through his hair, and the hangover kicked in. He rushed to the bathroom and threw up, his insides burning. As he wiped his mouth, a thought struck him: Now I've got *you* out of my system. He had to sleep, but wanted to be out of the house for a bit. So he showered, shaved and changed, put on his jacket, and went to buy some cigarettes.

'You did *what*?' J's mouth dropped open.

Ben lit a cigarette. 'What are you doing, catching flies? You heard me.'

J sat up straight, and the tiredness went out of his face. 'You're fucking kidding me.'

'Nope. And now, everything's fucked.'

'I can't believe it. You were wasted when I left the club last night. There's no *way* you'd have been able to get it up.'

So Ben told him, not leaving much out. He was hoping it would sound better out loud. It didn't.

The cigarette was long extinguished when he finished. J sat back and let out a low whistle. 'My God. You've got yourself into a pickle, haven't you? Don't get me wrong, I wouldn't have resisted, but you've always had more of a brain than me. When it comes to women, that is.'

'I did have,' Ben said. 'And the thing is, I really like Natalie, she's an awesome girl. The kind of person I could have seen myself with. But Natasha's something else. Something I can't even begin to describe.' He sighed. 'But that's all by the by, really. I guess I'll have to tell Natalie I'm not interested. Make up some crap excuse, before it goes any further.'

'And then Natasha will have proved her point.'

'Sure. But she could be right, anyway. I couldn't face seeing her all the time, if anything did happen. It'd be too hard.'

'Sounds like that's your problem,' J said, and burst out laughing. Ben smiled, but couldn't find any more. When he was done, J said, 'So, what about Tyler?'

'Just have to grin and bear it, I guess. I tell you what though, I'd love to fucking tell him. But I'll always have it up here. What it was like.'

'And, what was it like? The sex, I mean.'

'Terrifying. Absolutely terrifying.'

J was about to reply, but Ben's phone rang. 'Yeah?'

'So, you're back in the land of the living?'

He grimaced. Natalie. 'Hey, yeah...sorry, I was going to text you last night, but we kind of had a few and lost track of time.'

'You're forgiven. So, how was the gig? Don't leave me in suspenders.'

He smiled. You're too good for me, he thought. For a wretched weakling like me. 'Really good. I would say we were a success. Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves.'

'Great. Did you play that song you and Derek did for me?'

'We did. Not quite as well as we did then, but yeah, it was good.'

'I'm so pleased. As must you be. I've been trying to get hold of Natasha, to see what she thought, but her phone's switched off. You wouldn't know where she is, would you?'

Recovering from a night with me. 'No, sorry. I think she had a late one too, so she's probably asleep. I'll let her know you called.'

'Would you? Thanks, you're a sweetheart. Hope you got lots of evidence to show me on Thursday. A blow-by-blow account, that's what I'm expecting.'

'I'm sure I'll be able to come up with something.'

Silence. Then she said, 'Umm, Ben, are you all right? You sound, I don't know...'

'Sure, Nat. Just tired and hungover.' *And knackered from banging your sister all night. There is that.* 'I could probably do with some sleep myself.'

She took a breath. 'But you still want me to come down and see you?'

Now, Ben. Now's the time to tell her. While it's still possible. He looked at J, who frowned. 'Course I do. I'm looking forward to meeting up.' He could see J shaking his head.

'Excellent. Natasha's coming back before then, isn't she? I mean, that's what she said.'

'Dunno. You'll have to ask her. Look Nat, I've gotta run. Let me know when you want to get here.'

'Oh, OK, fine.'

'Bye.' And he hung up before she could reply.

J slow hand clapped, drawing it out. 'Nice one, Ben. You really told her, didn't you?'

It was early evening when Ben returned home, dead on his feet. A cup of tea, and then bed. He wondered whether Natasha would be in.

Is this how it's going to be? On my toes all the time, creeping about, trying to avoid her?

Probably. Yes, it probably would. And now, he had failed to put a halt to Natalie's visit. He cursed his cowardice, and again the thought of leaving uni crossed his mind. It would be easier for everyone. Just get out and leave it all behind.

The house was deathly quiet. There were no signs of life coming from Natasha's room. No doubt sleeping it off. He made tea and strolled upstairs.

Light instrumental music was coming from Derek's room. Ben leant against the doorframe and cleared his throat.

Derek was scrabbling about under his bed. He stuck his head out, saw Ben and smiled. 'Hey, the wanderer returns. And you look like shit, if I may say so.'

'Thanks, Del. You say the kindest things.'

'I'm surprised you're still up, considering the state you were in last night. If you can remember, that is.'

'Honestly? I don't recall that much. I wasn't too bad though, was I?'

Derek shook his head. 'Not at all. You were off your tits, sure. But you weren't the only one. Greg told me he passed out in a bush on the way home, woke up an hour later with some old woman throwing a bucket of water in his face. He nearly had a heart attack.'

Ben smiled. 'I heard you got lucky last night.'

'Yeah. It was in that last club we were in. Some bird who had been at the gig. I tell you, we should have got into this lark a whole lot sooner. I barely had to say anything and she was up for it. And it was *well* good.' He grinned and pulled a cardboard box from under the bed. 'Ah, I was looking for that,' he muttered.

'Sounds like the start of a beautiful friendship,' Ben said, sipping on his tea.

'You what? Oh, no, man. A one-night stand is plenty for me. More trouble than they're worth, women.'

How true, Ben thought. 'I guess so.'

'And this way, nobody gets hurt, and we don't need to pretend we like each other. We both got what we wanted, and I can not buy her a Christmas present and have no guilty feelings whatsoever.'

So simple. 'What are you up to, Del?'

Derek went to his shelves and began throwing books into the box. 'Packing up, mate. I'm back home for Crimbo tomorrow.'

'Oh right. I'll leave you to it, then.'

Derek threw a couple of paperbacks in. 'Ben, hold up. I just wanted to say how fucking awesome the gig was, man. I know we said it over and over last night, but I'm sober now. It meant everything to me, and I'll remember that buzz the rest of my life. Which is a cheesy thing to say, but it's true. And I want to thank you for being a part of it.'

Ben smiled, and for some reason, his throat went tight. 'You're welcome, Del. And thank *you* for pushing me into it.'

'That's because I know what's best for you,' Derek said, smiling. 'Merry Christmas.'

They hugged briefly. 'You too. Have a good one.'

As Ben left, Derek shouted, 'Oh, I nearly forgot. Rodrigo's old man loved us so much, he wants to do another gig in the new year. What do you think about that?'

'We'll see.'

'I *knew* you'd say that, man,' Derek said, and continued to throw books

around the room.

Downstairs, Ben noticed a thin wedge of light under Natasha's door. Without thinking, he rapped on the door and opened it without waiting for a response.

She was in bed reading a book. Calm as you like, she turned the corner of the page over and put the book down.

'Mind if I come in?' Ben said, and sat on the corner of the bed.

'Make yourself at home,' Natasha replied wearily. 'But if you're here for another slanging match, forget it. I've said all I need to.' She sat up, and the duvet fell an inch. She quickly replaced it.

'No need to be shy. It's nothing I haven't seen before.'

She sighed. 'Was there a *point* to you being here? Or are you just looking for a sly perv?'

'Don't flatter yourself. You know, it's a real shame. Yesterday, we were the best of friends. Now look at us.'

'Well, we shouldn't have let our emotions get the better of us. But I'm glad you can see it.'

'Fine. We'll play this your way. I don't think it'll work, but we'll do it.'

'You know, thinking about it, Clifton was totally right about you. He said you were interested in me, and at first I didn't believe it. But somewhere along the line, I started to feel something. And I kept telling myself it wasn't true, even when you and Nat got close. But it just kept spilling over.'

'Talking of Nat, I spoke to her today, and she's still coming to see me on Thursday.'

'You what? You can't.'

'Yes I can. And I am. As you said, we go back to our own lives. No-one finds out.'

'But...you just *can't*. It's not right, and you know it.'

'I don't think you're in a position to judge really, are you? If you keep to what you said, she'll never find out. I'm willing to give it a go. I guess if you have that much of a problem with it, then tell her about us. She'll probably never speak to either of us again. And Tyler will drop you like a hot potato. So yeah, go ahead. If that sounds like the ideal scenario.'

She opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again.

'That's what I thought,' he said, getting up. 'Also, it might be best if you switch your phone on, 'cos Nat's been trying to call you. Looks a bit suss otherwise, wouldn't you say?'

A nod.

'Good. I'm glad we understand each other. Goodnight.'

He felt a little better. Some sort of resolution had been reached. But it was still a long time before he succumbed to sleep.

Clifton rummaged around in the garage, looking for the final item he needed. Nothing but junk in the drawers, so now he was searching some old boxes wedged beside the washing machine. Full of crap, mostly. He pulled out another box, blew the dust off, watching the motes spiral into the air.

Nearly time, now.

Since Friday night, Clifton had spent Saturday and most of today preparing. The set-up was beginning to come together. Which meant that soon, *they* would discover what he was really about. He arched his back, the bones cracking. His fingers ached. They hadn't got much better. But it wasn't going to be a hindrance. He made a fist with the injured hand. Not great, but not too bad. Good enough, anyway.

Natasha flashed through his head, and he wondered what she was doing right now. Working? No, not on a Sunday. Tomorrow was her late shift at the shop. He imagined she was doing something with Tyler, some boring relationship shit that she didn't have any interest in. Or maybe studying. Most likely, she was sitting around with Ben and all the other wankers, the centre of attention, flirting and joking, like they all did, until you showed an interest. Then it came to nothing, and they expected you to just accept it and move on.

But you're not going to accept it, are you?

Too right. You never did, Mum. And neither will I.

Returning to the box, he spied what he was looking for. Smiling, he ran through a mental checklist. Was that everything? He double checked, counting on his fingers. Yes, it was. He switched the light off and went through to the kitchen.

And was surprised by Dad sitting at the table. This time of the afternoon, he was usually sleeping it off. He remembered Dad saying he was cutting out the drink. Maybe it was true, and he was hit by a blast of hope that maybe it could happen, maybe he could salvage something of a father from the wreckage. But, hidden under the crook of his arm was a familiar sight, a bourbon bottle. All the old rage returned.

'I see the vow of abstinence didn't last long, then?'

Matthew frowned, then dropped his head to the bottle. 'Oh, that. I've only had one so far today. Which might be one too many, but it's better than usual.'

Yeah, terrific, Clifton thought. A medal for you. 'Sure. Give it time though, eh Dad? You'll be back to your old self before you know it.'

Matthew narrowed his eyes. 'What are you doing with that?'

'This. Oh, nothing. Just a little uni project I'm working on.'

'Really. It wouldn't have anything to do with those jeans sitting in the laundry cupboard, would it?'

Clifton was startled. 'What jeans?'

Matthew pushed back his chair and stood up. 'You know the ones I mean. You might think that all I see is the bottom of a glass, but it isn't true. So, you going to tell me, or what?'

Fuck. A lie, and quickly. He looked at the floor. 'Oh, I know. It's probably to do with this. He held his bruised hand up. 'I got it caught in the car door on Thursday. Bled like a stuck pig all over my jeans. I put them in for washing, then forgot about them. End of story.'

'Why didn't you go to the hospital?'

‘It’s not that bad. Looks worse than it is. Why the sudden concern, anyway? Having an attack of conscience?’

‘Don’t change the subject. And when you came in Friday, you had blood on you then.’

‘Yeah, someone knocked against me in the pub when I was at the gig. The cut got opened up again, and bled a little. That’s all.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

He laughed. ‘Well, *there’s* a surprise! Well I don’t believe it when you say you’re giving up booze. So I guess we’re equal.’

He stalked off before Dad could reply. But it was a close run thing. There was still something between Dad’s ears. No matter.

You’ll just have to bring things forward, won’t you?

Exactly what I was thinking. He thought ahead, when the best time would be. In an instant, it fell into place. The perfect scenario. Not without risk, but the time for playing safe was long gone. He smiled.

Tomorrow, then.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Monday: 8:42am

Ben shook himself out of bed. Friday's exploits had still not dissipated. The drinking and lack of sleep had taken their toll. He got a glass of water and stood at the sink. Outside, the grass was sprinkled with frost, the sky a sharp blue. It was going to be a beautiful day.

And now it was approaching Christmas. The thought depressed him. Going back home would be OK. But this could be his final few days, and as term was winding down, one by one students packed up and left. It was happening already. Derek, gone. Catherine due off tomorrow. Slipping away without any fuss, and he might never see them again. He would miss them, how they had been thrown together by chance, strangers who ended up sharing a house, having to make the best of what had been a whirlwind of change for them. But it had turned out all right, and with the band, something more than that. Something like hope.

Except Natasha, of course, but Ben didn't want to think about her. The rest of the weekend had passed without incident. Ben spent most of it hiding out in his room, reading or sorting out what he would be taking home when Mum arrived on Friday. Every so often Natasha's door would open and close, and he realised he had been holding his breath. And tonight, Tyler would be arriving, and he didn't know how to handle it. Tomorrow, she would be off too, leaving him alone in the house, miserable, to think about everything that had gone wrong.

And then Nat would arrive, bubbly and laughing and making his heart ripple, and he would feel deep sorrow and regret, knowing what he knew, but more importantly, what she didn't. He knew he should tell her it couldn't happen. But he liked her, no bullshit. He wanted company from a girl who actually enjoyed him, accepted him for who he was. Nat was the only one. Also, by breaking it off, Natasha would feel like she had won. She would hold all the aces then, and would have lost nothing. She was right that telling Tyler wasn't an option. Ben simply couldn't do it. By splitting with Nat, he would have lost something, and by staying with Tyler, Natasha would get off scot free. Deep down, he didn't want that to happen. It didn't seem fair.

There was movement on the stairs and Catherine appeared, clutching a folder against her chest, a blond lock of hair sweeping over one eye. For a split second, she reminded Ben of Amy, how she used to look in the mornings, fresh-faced and ready to attack with world with gusto.

'Morning,' she said. 'You're up early.'

He shrugged. 'Yeah.'

She yawned. 'I can't believe this is my last day of term. It's gone so quick.'

'That it has.'

Her eyes lowered from his face. 'Have you, err, spoken to J recently?'

He smiled. ‘Not since yesterday. He hasn’t been able to shut up about your date tonight, if that’s what’s bothering you. He’s really looking forward to it.’

Her whole face brightened. ‘Yeah? Me too. It’s funny, when I first met him, I thought he was an arrogant shithead, and now I think about him lots. It’s quite a surprise.’

‘I’m glad. It’ll be great. He’s one of the good guys. Don’t worry about it. He’ll treat you like a queen.’

She nodded and her smile blossomed. ‘Well, I’ll see you later. Got a lot to do at uni before I can think about anything else.’

The way she looked then, happy and full of expectation, made him want to cry. That was how it should be. And he longed to go back to it, back to an honest and easy relationship based on mutual attraction and the hope it brought. He wondered who that old Ben was, and where he had gone. ‘Have a good day,’ he whispered, and she smiled and left, and he was alone again.

10:23am

Despite the cold, bright wedges of sunlight streamed through the windows of the shed and bathed the floorboards in a hazy yellow. The air was thick with dust, its particles dancing, filling every corner. Outside, there was occasional rustling as the wind swept among the trees. A bird flew overhead and cried.

Clifton sat in a chair in the centre of the room, the left side of his body glowing orange from the sun. The rays flickered on his face, turning the scar tissue on his cheek a flaming red. He held the knife in his hands, the point of the blade resting in his palm.

Nearly time, now.

He removed the rug and tore up the floorboard, just to check all was in order. The masking tape he had found in the garage sat on top of the other paraphernalia. First, a length of rope. A box of matches. Petrol can, about three quarters full, which would be plenty. At the bottom, an old black sweatshirt and a pair of black tracksuit bottoms. A black beanie hat and matching gloves. His work gear.

All prepared.

Actually, not quite. Dad was still proving a worry. That encounter over the jeans had driven a kernel of doubt into Clifton’s mind. Only a little one, but it was enough for concern. He felt he had covered his tracks with ease, but still, no need to take unnecessary risks. What I’ll do, he decided, is lock the place up after I’m done, tell Dad where I’m going, and if he wants to snoop about, he won’t find anything except a locked door. And if that arouses suspicion, then so be it.

He ran through the timetable once more.

Finish up here, which should take another half hour or so.

Get into uni by one-ish, just as Natasha takes her lunch break. Tell her how I feel, again. And if that didn’t work, move to Plan B. Plan B would definitely make her change her mind.

He picked up the masking tape and got to work.

11:06am

Matthew had one thing on his mind as he shuffled downstairs. The blood on Clifton's trousers, and the shift in his eyes when trying to find an excuse. There was way too much blood to be passed off as a simple cut. Many possibilities had raged through his head, most wild, implausible horror stories. My son, the axe murderer. Stupid, but there wasn't any explanation he could come up with that held water. Two days of putting it off, trying to find the courage to search for an answer that he didn't want to confront. He knew the answer would probably be found at the allotment. The amount of time Clifton spent there. He remembered his last search, and how it had led to nothing. But something was going on. When Clifton next left the house, he was going to find out.

Down at the shed, Clifton stepped out into the sunshine and turned to admire his handiwork. Everything was in order. The allotment was quiet for this time in the morning. Over the months he had spent down here, Clifton had only ever seen the occasional man walking their dog through the woods. Once, whilst gutting his latest kill, a guy had come out of the forest, his terrier barking wildly, and scared the crap out of him. But that was a rare occurrence. Mostly, he was alone down here. Which was how he liked it.

He set off for home, enjoying the sun on his face. Now, it didn't matter what Natasha was going to say; She could tell him to fuck off, whatever. Because he didn't have anything left to lose. It was strange, how it had worked out. Before meeting her, he had nothing. No friends, no father, no prospects. The only person he had ever loved was in the ground rotting. But then *she* had come along and given his life a purpose. To love her, make her happy, nurture and respect and romance her. Not get all jealous on a night out, like Tyler, or be a boring, arrogant bastard, like Ben and that fucking mate of his. Now, the objective was to keep in her line of view, let her know he wasn't going anywhere, that it was OK to be scared, that he believed in her, believed in *them*, once she got over her denial, everything would turn out fine.

He reached the back gate and walked through, coming to the spot where the old shed once stood. He thought back to when he had first sought refuge in its walls, how it had given him something to focus on. The nights after seeing Mum, when he would retreat to the shed and cry a little, then turn his attention to other things. The frog, its body disintegrating as he blew the life out of it. Good times. He looked down at the grass that had never grown back properly after the accident, and he knelt and picked a few blades, running his thumb up and down the stalks. The memory came back with great force, seeing himself standing over the fire, then feeling the blood on his face as the can exploded. Everything had changed after that moment. For it had sealed off the life he knew before, the visits to Mum, the bullying, trying to seek a place in the world. After, he had become stronger. The scars didn't fit in, and he was shunned by society. Which meant doing it alone,

with only Mum's voice for guidance, always keeping him in control, giving him the power, not anyone else. And he wasn't about to let Natasha steal it from him. Because that would go against all that he believed in.

He got to the house and ran upstairs. He showered, put some decent clothes on, did his hair, and threw a few books in his bag to take back to the library before meeting Natasha. As he walked downstairs, a shadow blocked his path and Dad stood before him, his huge belly offering no escape route.

'What the fuck are you doing?' he rasped.

Matthew smiled. 'Just wanted a quick word, that's all.'

'Get out the way! I'll be late.' To Clifton's surprise, Dad stood aside.

'Fine, you can go,' Dad said, folding his arms across his chest. 'Just to say though, I don't believe that little story you came up with the other night. See, I've been doing some thinking, and nothing quite adds up. All those times you've come in late from God knows where, or going out at absurd hours of the night...'

'How would you know? You're usually passed out by then.'

Matthew sighed. 'Look, how many times do we have to go over the same ground? I'm trying to stop, and yes, I haven't made much progress, but I'm *trying*. But I'm more worried about you.'

Clifton snorted back laughter. 'You? Worried about *me*? That'll be a first. Besides, there's no need.'

'That blood didn't come from your hand, Clifton. I know it didn't. What I want to know is, what's going on. If you don't tell me, I can't help you.'

What was this? Dad, offering me an olive branch? Clifton felt a pinch in his stomach. But why? Why, after all this time? It must be a ruse. With Dad, there was always an ulterior motive.

'There's nothing going on, I *told* you. So that's the end of it.'

Matthew stared at him for a long time, then finally nodded. 'OK, fine. Don't say I didn't ask.'

Clifton thought about replying, but the words were caught in his throat. He picked up his bag and went out.

12:03pm

Ben ran through his notes for the presentation, searching for any glaring holes in the argument. Every other piece of coursework or exam was over. Just Wednesday to go, and he was home free. It meant spending an afternoon with Clifton again, however.

He made his umpteenth cup of tea, more out of boredom than anything else. The house was too fucking still, without anyone else in it. So he decided to go up to uni and work in the library for a bit. At least it would be away from staring at *these* walls.

He was heading for the door, book bag slung over one arm, unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth, when the phone rang. Shall I answer it? Yes, no? He thought about ignoring it, then changed his mind and bounded up the stairs, dropping the cigarette as he went.

'Hello?' he panted into the receiver.

‘Hi? Who’s this?’

‘Ben.’

‘Ahh, Benjamin. It’s Tyler. How’s the musical superstar doing?’

‘Y’know, I expected Natasha to be going on about how good you lot were the other night, but I could hardly get a word out of her. Huh, maybe she thought you were shit, but didn’t want to badmouth you in front of me.’ He laughed. ‘Not that it would have made much difference.’

‘Maybe it’s because she was pissed off with you for not turning up, rather than to do with us. Just a thought.’

‘Whatever. So, it was OK then? Pretend I care.’

‘Brilliant, actually.’ *Especially fucking your girlfriend. That was the highlight of the evening.*

‘That’s nice. Is Natasha there? I’ve been trying her mobile, but I can’t get through.’

‘Nope. She’s at work.’ Thinking, shouldn’t you already know this?

‘Shit, that’s right. Because I’m going to be a bit late. She asked me to pick her up at five from the campus, but I’ve got a meeting until half two...’

Ben sighed. ‘Well, I’m just going up to uni now. I’ll pass on a message if you want.’

There was a pause. ‘No, it’s OK. I’ll keep trying her mobile. Otherwise, I’ll have to put my foot down on the motorway.’

And he hung up.

Ben stared at the phone for a second, then hung up himself.

12:17pm

Matthew walked to the bottom of the garden, wrapped in a thick coat, wearing brown gloves and a brown baseball cap. He had waited half an hour after Clifton had gone, then bitten the bullet and come down here. The midday sun was weak and offered little warmth as he reached the gate and stared out across the road to the allotments. Even now, the view still took his breath away. On summer evenings, early in their marriage, he and Claire would take a stroll, down past the old shed, out of the gate, hand in hand, not saying anything, not needing to talk, knowing that they were happy, the curl of her fingers through his telling the whole story. Sometimes they would walk until it was near dark, then have to retrace their steps, often getting hopelessly lost and having to hail passing cars for directions. And would laugh at their own ineptitude, giggling all the way home, tired but together, exhausted but still finding the energy to make love before falling asleep. Thinking now, how it was a different Matthew in those days, a Matthew unaffected by the travails of life, looking into the future with a touching core of innocence.

Not any more.

He crossed the road and started down the hill. The pavement was narrow, and when a car sped past, an icy blast of wind bit deep. He looked at the patchwork of houses spreading out beneath him, some dusted with fairy lights that twinkled in the gloom, one carrying a giant inflatable snowman that

tottered in the breeze, as if waving at passing pedestrians. Matthew had made no Christmas preparations whatsoever. So far, he had received no cards. And there were only nine days to go.

He entered the allotment now, breaking into a jog as the hill steepened before levelling out. As he walked on, the noise of the traffic died. The remaining plots of land were an unruly mess, the ground soggy under his feet, and he wished he had worn Wellington boots. Why Clifton enjoyed it here, God only knew. It was a shithole. Their allotment was situated at the far end of the clearing, a good few metres beyond the others. When they had bought the house, the shed and surrounding area had come as part of the package. Not being green-fingered, neither he nor Claire had ever used it, and in truth, had forgotten about it as time went on. Behind the shed lay the woods, a thick blanket of trees stabbing towards the sky. As he approached the shed, a dog barked somewhere in the distance.

First, he tried the door. The wood around the lock was rotting, and a huge steel padlock had been fitted over the handle, looping through the catch. He shook the lock, trying to lever the door open, but it held firm. Strange. As he took a step back, he noticed that the two windows of the shed had been blacked out with masking tape, making it impossible to see inside. Even stranger. Whatever was inside, he wasn't meant to see it. He walked around the perimeter, trying to find something to explain all this. Behind the shed was a small patch of earth, five feet square, which had been recently disturbed, the soil churned up rather than flat. He bent down and scabbled around with both hands.

He touched something.

Something fleshy.

More urgent now, he tore at the ground, gobbets of soil flying. An outline began to form, and he sped up, working so hard his arms ached, until they were covered to the elbow with soil.

And then he saw.

It was the body of an animal. All the fur had been ripped from the corpse, leaving a grey bag of flesh littered with knife wounds, cut so deep the animal's head had nearly been severed. He could see maggots crawling over it, and the gorge rose in his throat as one slithered into the creature's empty eye socket. He fell back, landing with a wet thump onto the moist ground, his heart thumping in his chest.

My son did this. This butchery.

For that was the only description. Mindless violence against a defenceless animal. And he knew then, sprawled on the floor as the maggots continued to feast, that something was seriously wrong.

12:56pm

Ben was thinking about his conversation with Tyler as he stepped off the bus. Fuck, the temptation to tell him had been strong. Wipe that smart little smirk off his face. The more he spoke to Tyler, the less he could understand why Natasha had anything to do with the bloke. The jealousy everyone knew

about. But it wasn't just that; it was the snide comments, the harsh digs when she wasn't around to hear him. To her, the sun shone out of his fucking arse.

Not that he wanted to change that, particularly. Not that you *could*. It was as Natalie had said – love makes you do the wacky. He doubted Natasha could explain it, even if she tried.

As he reached the library, Ben realised that he had walked through the entire campus and not seen a single person. Usually lunchtime was packed, students sitting out on the terraces or in the bar, but an eerie silence pervaded the place. He stopped on the steps outside the library, looking for signs of life. Inside, no lights were on except an overhanging lamp at the reception desk and further back, the odd glimmer coming from one of the study carrels. As he peered through the glass, the door opened and a guy came out.

'If you want anything,' he said, hooking a thumb over his shoulder, 'they're shutting at two. It being Christmas and all.'

'Thanks,' Ben said. He decided to have a cigarette before going in, reached for the pack, and realised he was all out. First things first, he thought, and headed for the shop to replenish.

Clifton parked in the almost empty car park and crunched across the gravel, icy darts of wind peppering his face and body. Right on time. Natasha should be going to lunch any minute. He pulled his jacket tighter around his neck and walked on.

As Ben pulled open the door to the shop, he ran headlong into Natasha.

'Hi,' she said, standing in the doorway like a spare part. 'After you.'

He let the door swing shut. 'Off on lunch?'

She nodded. 'It's pretty dead today. I don't see why they can't let us go early, it's not like we're busy. But no, stuck here until five. Anyway, I'll see you.'

'Tyler rang for you,' Ben said, and she stopped and looked back, hair cascading over her shoulders. He smiled.

She frowned, stared at the floor. 'You what?'

'I'll tell you in a minute. Just let me get some ciggies first. Unless you want to keep avoiding me.'

She gulped. 'OK,' she said wearily. 'Meet me in the bar. Downstairs, it's too cold to be sitting outside today. But if you're going to give me more shit, forget it. I can't...'

'I'll be good as gold, I promise. In a bit, yeah?'

No sign of her upstairs. But this is where she *always* sat. Not like there isn't any room, as only half the tables were taken, if that. He thought of the first time he had asked her out, all those weeks ago. How beautiful she had looked, even in her work gear. And he knew he could never give it up. Never. He headed for the shop. As he walked round the corner, the shop approaching on his right, the door opened and Ben strode out, ripping the seal on a pack of cigarettes, sticking one into his mouth. Clifton ducked down,

not wanting to be seen. But Ben was oblivious, one hand cupped around a lighter as he struggled to get the flame going. Done, he blew out a stream of smoke and took off.

Clifton followed.

He found her sitting at a table by the window, head down, forking lasagne into her mouth. He slid into the chair opposite. After a period of silence, she put her fork down, wiped her mouth with a napkin.

‘Do you mind putting that cigarette out? I’m *trying* to eat.’

Cheeky bitch, he thought, but complied and stubbed it out. He let her eat, watching as she chewed furiously, eyes never leaving the plate, concentrating wholly on the task in hand. Finally, she took a last mouthful and pushed the plate away. He thought about lighting another cigarette, but decided against it.

‘So, what did Tyler have to say? And no lies, Ben, I’m not in the mood.’

Ben leant back in his chair. ‘Not much, apart from the usual. Having a go at me, like he always does. Oh, and that he’s going to be late down this evening. Something about a meeting. Probably won’t get here until half five, six.’

She shook her head. ‘Terrific. I’m finishing at five. What am I supposed to do, hang around here for an hour waiting for him to pick me up?’

He shrugged. ‘Well, just come home, wait for him there.’

‘But then I’ll miss him, won’t I? I can’t ring him back, I’ve got no credit. Otherwise he’ll be hanging around for me, and I won’t be there.’

He smiled. ‘Well, it’s a quandary, I must admit. It’s not like he’s a punctual guy, is he?’

She narrowed her eyes. ‘Don’t start.’

He held up his hands in mock surrender. ‘Hey, I’m not doing anything. Don’t be so paranoid.’

Try downstairs. He ran to the flight of stairs, took them two at a time, flinging the door open, seeing her, to his right, moving into view, then another figure, male, Ben, sitting opposite...

‘Don’t fucking call me paranoid! Always with the sly little digs, aren’t you Ben?’

‘Hey, all I’m doing is stating a fact. No offence meant.’

She picked up her fork and drew a pattern across the plate, the sound akin to nails scraping down a blackboard. ‘Well, thanks for letting me know. You can leave now.’

Ben made no effort to get up. ‘Such kind words,’ he said. ‘Still, it’s more than you’ve said to me in the last two days, so I guess that’s progress. Just think, we might move on to a *proper* conversation sometime soon. Or would you prefer it if we fucked?’

She was up in a flash, knocking the tray to the ground with a metallic bang, heads turning to watch. Her face was a deep red, veins standing out on

her forehead, just like after, in his room, the sweat still drying on their bodies as their breaths returned to normal, coming down from the high they had shared. ‘I fucking hate you,’ she hissed. Tears sprang into her eyes, but she held firm. ‘I’ll tell you now, sleeping with you was the worst mistake of my life. You got under my skin, but not any more. And you know what? I hope you don’t fucking come back next term. If you do, you won’t see me for dead. I’d rather live on the street than share a house with you.’ She grabbed her bag from the table. ‘Now leave me alone.’ She pushed the table into him and stormed off, and in the midst of her rage, failed to notice a young man loitering in the doorway as she went up the stairs and back to work.

Clifton didn’t know how he got back to the car in one piece. So it had been true. All along. Ben had fucked her. All the lies they had told him. Denying it, when it was true. Ben saying no, I’m not interested in her, not in *that* way, I’m only her housemate, her friend. And then screwing around, laughing at him, treating him like a fool, how gullible he was, not being able to work it out. *That Clifton, he fell for it again, ho ho, yes, I did see his face, ha ha, kiss me, Ben, kiss me...*

He slammed the door shut and curled up in the driver’s seat, wanting the skies to darken, so he wouldn’t have to see, wanting the heavens to go quiet, so he wouldn’t have to hear, wanting to rip his heart out, so he wouldn’t have to feel like this, having her invading every sense, every second of every day, and then the tears came, a waterfall splashing over his cheeks, an avalanche of sorrow and betrayal at the lies, and still they fell, until his throat burned and ached, and then other thoughts stepped forward, the anger, the pain at being treated like shit again, always, and now a new word sprang up, a solution, the only option available to rectify this hurt, to get something back.

Revenge.

He sat up. Swung the mirror down. Wiped the tears away. And waited for five o’clock.

2.05pm

Ben exited the library and made his way across the campus to the bus stop. The wind had picked up, and a couple of threatening thunderclouds were spilling into the sky.

He couldn’t stop relaying the conversation over in his head. What she had said. *I’d rather live on the street than share a house with you.* How had it ended up like this? He knew that most of it was down to him, at least this time. Goading her about their night together, that was a real stupid move. But somehow, he couldn’t help it. How blasé she was about the whole thing. Wanting to forget it. Whenever she talked to him now, there was a thinly veiled jibe in every sentence. Letting him know that he wasn’t all that, that she was happy with Tyler, thank you very much, and he’s a much nicer guy than you, and always will be. Which didn’t make any fucking sense, and that was what grated. If Tyler were a decent bloke, than she wouldn’t have cheated on him in the first place. If he were a decent bloke, she wouldn’t

have spent the last few months getting pissed off at his stupid jealous rages and general tardiness. He wondered if they would ever be able to go back to how it was before, and knew the answer was no. And then, coming head on, was an overwhelming feeling to get back to the house and pack up now. Get a bus this evening, be back at home with Mum and Dad by midnight. Tell Natalie that something came up and he couldn't see her. Hide out for a few days, away from it all, then have a quiet family Christmas. And if Dad got this job, and he was coming back, find somewhere else to live. Maybe bunk down with J for a bit. And hopefully, leave Natasha and all her shit far behind.

He walked past the shop and averted his gaze from the window, not even wanting to catch her eye. At the bus stop, he had a five-minute wait for the next departure. And then he remembered the presentation on Wednesday. Which meant sticking around for two more days at least. The temptation to bunk it was overwhelming, especially having to put up with Clifton for another afternoon, but he just wasn't built that way. Besides, they'd been waiting for weeks to do the damn thing. Might as well stick it out.

The bus pulled up, virtually empty, and he waited for the doors to swing open. Thinking about it, it was probably best to give Clifton a quick buzz later and check that everything was in order for Wednesday. Which was another headache he could do without.

3:57pm

'OK, that's it.' The manager came around from behind the counter. 'This is ridiculous. We've had one customer in the past hour, and they only wanted cigarettes. We might as well shut up and get home early.' He walked to the door and swung the sign round to 'Closed.' 'If anyone comes in, tell them we're shut. Make sure you're tilled up, and then you can go. Merry Christmas.'

At two minutes past four, Natasha and two of her colleagues walked down the slope towards the car park. Clifton was half asleep in the car, but as soon as he picked up the colour of those uniforms, he was wide-awake. The first patches of darkness were invading the horizon as he peered into the gloom, trying to spot Natasha. And there she was, no mistake about it. He could pick her out from two miles away. The car was parked in the bottom left corner of the car park under a street lamp that slanted orange light through the windscreen. Quietly, he nudged the door open and got out of the car, taking up a position against the bonnet, watching. He saw a blonde bit of stuff leaning against her car, gesticulating wildly. Whatever she was saying, her companions laughed. The life and soul of the party. Natasha stood a little apart, hands folded across her breasts, tapping a heel on the gravel, her hair blowing behind her. She shook her head at something, and the other girls drifted off. One car left in a hail of dust and smoke, then another. When the fog cleared, Natasha remained. Alone. She shook her head again, walking towards the bus stop. Clifton hesitated, and then followed, keeping ample distance between them. He watched the globes of her arse as she walked, pert

and tight against the material of her skirt. How could she fuck that freak Ben, after all that bullshit about not being interested in him. Going behind her boyfriend's back. Clearly a girl not thinking straight. But that was going to change. And I, he thought, am the man to do it.

Natasha reached the bus stop and studied the timetable, running a finger down the rows of times and destinations. Clifton ducked behind a parked car and watched her from behind the wheel arch. Whilst hidden, he scanned the car park. Apart from his car and the one he was behind now, only three other cars filled the lot. One in the far left corner, closest to the exit and the adjoining roundabout that head towards the city centre. Another a couple of rows back. The third symmetrically opposite his. Which meant there were no vehicles within fifty metres of his, maybe more. Best of all, there was nobody around.

Natasha punched the timetable in frustration and cursed, loud enough for Clifton to hear. No more buses, then. Running a limited service at this time of year, didn't you know that? She started to walk back up towards the campus. This is your moment, Clifton. Do it now. He got off his knees.

'Natasha, hey, wait up.'

She turned towards the voice, couldn't place it. It was nearly dark now. 'Who's that?'

He walked closer. 'It's me. Clifton. Having problems getting home?'

She edged away from him. 'Get lost, would you? I don't have time for this.'

Too busy opening your legs to all who ask, that's probably why. 'Look, I'm sorry about Friday, if that's what you're referring to. I went too far, and I apologise.'

Her face softened slightly, but she continued to walk backwards. 'Like you always do. You're always hanging around. It's making me feel uncomfortable.'

'Hey, I said I'm sorry. What more do you want? No more problems, I swear. I was just coming out of uni, saw you waiting for the bus, thought I'd offer you a lift. That's all. But if you have other plans, that's fine...'

'I'm supposed to be getting picked up at half past five.'

'Half five? That's ages away! And in this freezing weather? You're brave. Make sense to get a lift, get home into the warm. You can always phone whoever it is and tell them to meet you there. I mean, that's what I would do.'

'Mmmm...I guess so. You're right, it is cold out here.'

'My car's parked right over there,' he said, pointing.

She weighed it up, then smiled. 'OK, thanks. But no funny business, you hear?'

He crossed himself. 'And hope to die,' he said.

They started across the car park. Clifton walked on Natasha's right. As they approached the car, he moved round the front to the driver's side. He checked the car park once more. Nobody waiting at the bus stop. The other three cars still in their spaces. He craned his neck, scanning the entrances to

the campus buildings. They were completely alone. He pulled open the door and clambered into the driver's seat. As he did so, he reached down and pulled the lever to adjust his seat. As the seat moved along the rail, he reached down and felt underneath, his fingers brushing an item laying flat on the upholstery. Careful not to be seen, he placed the item in the inside pocket of his jacket.

Natasha tapped on the passenger side window. A thought came to him. He moved back over and got out of the car. 'Sorry,' he said, smiling. 'The lock's broken on that door. I've been meaning to get it fixed for ages. You'll have to get in this side and shuffle over.'

She rolled her eyes and started round the car. Clifton took a step back. Behind the street lamp was a steep bank and a row of pines that separated the car park from the road. He could hear cars rushing past, the sound reverberating in his head. Halfway round the car now, saying something that he couldn't hear, a lock of hair falling across one eye, tucking it back with her hand, so beautiful, always. Now at the door, swinging it open further for easier access. So close now that he could see a thin line of scalp where she parted her hair, a pale river of meandering skin. She bent forward to get in.

He leapt forward and hooked an arm around her neck, the crook of his arm tight to her windpipe. She choked and opened her mouth to scream, but his other hand was already there, clamped over, quashing her cries, hot breath on his palm. She jerked and writhed, arms flailing. God, she was strong. A boot crashed into his shin, and darts of pain shot up his leg. 'Shut the fuck up, bitch,' he hissed, but she kept trying to work free, and his hand was wrenched away from her mouth, and she cried out, a deafening wail drowned out by the traffic shooting by, but still she resisted as he tried to drag her to the ground, so he reached into his inside pocket, grabbing metal, and pinned her down, and the weapon rose high over his head and swung down in a vicious arc, crashing into her temple, and then everything faded, and there was a loud thump as she crumpled to the ground, dust forming a thick shroud around them. He hit her again. Finally there was no sound, and he realised his eyes had been closed the whole time, his arm a dead weight as the weapon clattered, kicking up more dust.

He opened his eyes.

Natasha lay curled up against the right rear tyre, her head lolling to one side, leaning into her right shoulder. She sat like a marionette, her arms drooping by her side, legs spread-eagled. The dress of her uniform had risen over her knees, exposing the torn material of her black tights. A shoe had gone from her left foot and lay under the car, its heel broken. Her handbag had scattered its contents over the gravel – mobile phone, keys, tissues, lip-gloss, a bottle of nail varnish remover smashed, leaking liquid that trickled slowly amongst the blood.

The blood.

So much blood.

He stumbled back, kicking the spanner, sending it tumbling into the bank.

Her blood.

And it was now forming a pool, seeping into the grey of her uniform. Her head was a ruin of blood and matted hair. His blows had opened up a deep gash over her left eyebrow that was gushing blood with frightening speed. Above, there was a visible dent where he had first connected with the spanner. He bent down, his hands shaking, and gingerly lifted the hair around her ear, prodding at the flesh there. Soft and fragile, almost as if his fingers could break through to her brain. When he removed his hand, the ends of his fingers were dripping red. He held them up to his face and realised it was almost dark, the sky losing the last of its light. Only the street lamp beat back the shadows, which gave him cover.

But still. Time to work. He knelt down again and checked her pulse, fingers pressed to her neck. A slow pulse, but a pulse all the same. The blood had slowed, but had made a real mess of the gravel. On his feet, mind working quickly now, he opened the boot and pulled out a jerry can of water, dumping it on the floor beside her. Next, the masking tape. A roll remained in the shed, but he had brought one along just in case. Back at the body now, he knelt with his legs either side of hers, his hands on her knees. The flesh felt good, as good as he knew it would. He moved his hands higher, her dress riding up, squeezing the flesh of her inner thighs. His breath became ragged, hands more urgent, at the summit of her tights...

She trembled, and his heart skipped. He stood up, looking around, still on his own. In a quick movement, he grabbed her under the arms and hoisted her up into a fireman's lift. Their shadows were silhouetted in the slanting light of the lamp. He attempted to put her in the boot, but as he swung her down, her head hit the bodywork.

Fuck. Just go in, you bitch. Won't even do as you're fucking told when you're unconscious. He repositioned and tried again, this time with a hand on her head for guidance. Better. She went in crouched up in the foetal position, head facing towards the driver, legs curled up under her. Her breath rose and fell, rose and fell. With the tape, he turned her over and placed four thick strips across her mouth. Wouldn't want her to wake up and start screaming, would we? For security, he brought her hands behind her back and taped them as well, then her feet. Before shutting the boot, he leant over and kissed her on the cheek, the other hand squeezing her left breast, thumbing the nipple.

Don't worry, my love.

He turned his attention to the rest of the scene. He splashed water from the jerry can over the patches of blood on the gravel, careful not to let any splash onto his clothes. He discarded the smashed glass into the trees. The rest of the items strewn about he kept, throwing the handbag onto the passenger seat. He looked at the bloodstains again. The spanner, carefully wiped clean, went back under the seat. He inspected his efforts. No way of concealing all that blood. All the water had done was thin the blood out, and probably spread it around even more. Still, no matter. Let them come. Let them all come. Without her, I'm nothing anyway. So bring it on.

Job done, he got in the car and sped off, hands solid on the wheel with no

trace of trembling. He switched on the radio and sang along.

You did well there, Clifton. Very well.

I did, didn't I? He turned the radio up. Next stop, home.

4:43pm

Ben sat on his bed, restless. Cabin fever was settling in. And that boredom was bringing on too much thinking time. He walked through the house, up and down the stairs, in and out of the now empty rooms, settling on a memory when it came, realising that most of them were tinged with regret or guilt. Now, he thought about getting drunk. Go and prop up the bar, talk to no-one, fall into an evening of self-pity and wallow right in it. Leave Natasha and Tyler to it. Let J have a terrific night out, hear all about it in the morning. He guessed, in a moment of brutal honesty, that he had got what he deserved. Nothing.

But first, to phone Clifton. He had put it off as long as possible. He scrolled through his address book, fingers lingering on Amy's number, then Natalie's, before resting on Clifton's. He took a breath, hoping to keep the call as brief as he could, then rung. The phone rang five, six, eight times. Ten, twelve. After sixteen rings, Ben hung up.

No problem there. Probably out doing something weird, hassling women or talking bullshit to anyone who would listen. Well, at least I've made the effort, he thought. So my conscience is clear. His mind returned to the thought of going out on the piss. Nothing to do tomorrow, so he could afford a bad hangover. Just to get out and avoid everyone sounded good. He headed for the shower.

5:01pm

Try as he might, Matthew was unable to get the image out of his head. The decimated corpse, the festering maggots. He poured another drink, tipped it back in one. It was having no effect. Still the grotesque vision remained. And where the hell was Clifton? Surely he should be back by now. Past five in the last week of term, with uni practically closed for the Christmas break...He dreaded even thinking about it. There was so much about Clifton of which he knew nothing. They had been living like strangers for months, and lo and behold, Clifton had turned into one. Whatever it was that stalked the recesses of Clifton's mind, it was something dark. He knew that when Clifton got home, he would have to confront him. Properly this time, using every ounce of strength and courage. It would be a hard task, for the bridges of trust between them had been extinguished long ago. But, he thought, I have to try. One final effort. He waited and drank.

Clifton pulled up outside the house and shut the engine off. No sign of that fucking cat, he thought, and smiled. The mood I'm in, probably a good thing. He sat for a moment, enjoying the tranquillity of his breathing. Apart from the rustle of the wind and the occasional car, it was silent. No sounds coming from the boot. He checked his watch. She should be coming round

sometime soon.

He pondered his options. He had to get Natasha down to the shed without being seen. Which meant getting through the house and garden, past the gate and over the road, down the hill and into the allotments. With a fucking body. He laughed at the craziness of it. Oh hi, yes, I'm fine, what am I carrying? Oh, it's only a body. A body? I know, difficult to get one this time of year...

Exactly. Fucking daft. The best course of action would be to drive down to the bottom of the hill, park illegally on the road and get her to the shed from there. It was pitch black now, with few stars to brighten the sky, so that worked in his favour. But how to get there without being seen, that was the problem.

Then an idea sprang to mind. Get a wheelbarrow or something, dump her in that, wrap the body in dustbin liners, cover it with an old rug, then if anyone sees, they'll suspect nothing. Good enough. There was only one fly in the ointment that he could see. He needed to get inside to stock up. Inside, where Dad would be. Likely to be drunk, but even so. No need to take an unnecessary risk. He reached under the seat for the spanner, wiped the metal on his shirt, and shoved it under the waistband of his jeans.

'See you, babe,' he said as he got out of the car. 'Don't go anywhere, will you?' He was laughing to himself as he stepped inside.

Matthew looked up as the door opened, noticing his heartbeat quicken slightly as Clifton strode towards him.

'Hey Dad,' Clifton said, bounding towards the stairs. 'Just passing through, OK?'

And he was off before Matthew could reply. Something was out of place, though. Clifton was never this polite.

Upstairs, Clifton rolled up the rug from his room and leant it against the jamb. Perfect. Next, the bin liners. That and the wheelbarrow should be in the garage. But doing that without facing innumerable questions from Dad was going to be a problem. Best to get in there and have a chat with him first. Be nice, then he'll suspect nothing.

He entered the kitchen and leant against the granite work surface. Casual as you like. 'Hey, how's it going?'

'Fine. What are you up to?'

Straight in with the questions, the nosy bastard. Best to play innocent. 'Nothing. As I say, I'm only here for a minute. Got to pop out for a bit. You know how it is.'

Matthew narrowed his eyes. 'Anywhere in particular?'

'What's with the third degree? Just out is all. I imagine you'll be drunk by the time I get back, so why does it matter?'

Matthew said nothing. Then he pushed his chair back, the legs scraping the tiled floor. Stood up. Moving closer to Clifton, taking little steps, cutting off the distance between them. 'Going down to the shed, perhaps?'

Clifton felt his fingers tingle with sweat. He knew. Somehow, he knew.

‘No, why do you say that?’ But his voice was betraying him, losing its edge.

Two feet apart now, whisky on his breath, seeing the flecks of stubble on Dad’s chin. ‘I know what’s been going on down there, Clifton. Whilst you were out, I went for a little walk. Get some fresh air. And do you know what I found? Behind the shed there, buried in the earth?’

Clifton reached behind him for the spanner.

‘What the fuck is going on, Clifton? All I want is to...’

The spanner came out and hit Matthew on the back of the leg, striking the fleshy part behind the knee. He grunted and fell forward into Clifton, his weight enormous. Clifton hit him again in the small of the back, the spanner connecting with bone, and the strength left Matthew’s legs and he slid down, a bellow escaping from his lips, really loud in this confined space. This had to be over, and quick. Clifton pushed him to the floor, face down, and knelt on his back, exerting all the pressure he could. Matthew squirmed and tried to kick out. Clifton reached forward and grabbed a clump of Matthew’s hair, brought his head up with a savage jerk and slammed it down into the tiles with a sickening thud. A thin dribble of blood spread over the tiles, and still Dad tried to cry out, so Clifton slammed his head down again, and the life went out of him. They had moved across the floor towards the back door, next to the laundry cupboard. Clifton dragged the body forward, not quite unconscious but close to being so, and opened the closet door. He sat Matthew up, his face wet with blood, and pushed him into the dark corner of the cupboard. He let the body go and Matthew fell to one side and lay still.

Twice in one day. Not bad.

Now he had a lot to do. Thinking quickly, Clifton shut the closet door and ran to the car. He came back inside with the masking tape, and did a similar job to the one on Natasha, taping arms and feet, a long strip over the mouth, his hands moving freely. Satisfied, he pulled the door shut and locked it behind him. Bye, Dad. Then he reversed the car out into the road, did a three-point turn and came back into the drive so the boot was facing the garage. He found the wheelbarrow under a workbench in the far corner, and put it on the back seat. The bin bags were in a drawer. He took a deep breath and opened the boot. Natasha hadn’t moved. He placed a line of bags on the garage floor, a shiny black carpet for his princess, then put both hands under her body and placed her on the bags. She didn’t make a sound. He tucked her legs up towards her arse, moved her neck forward so it rested on her chest, then wrapped her up in the bags, doing a hasty and average job, but adequate under the circumstances. The roll of masking tape was nearly gone when he had finished. He placed her back in the boot, some of the material of the bags ripping under her weight. No matter. It was enough. Lastly, he ran back inside and got the rug, laying it over her body. The disguise would pass, no problem. As he got back in the car, he heard a phone ring from the depths of her bag. He got the phone, stared at the incoming call. Tyler. He grinned, and for a moment felt like answering, telling him what had happened to his girlfriend, if you want her, come and get her. No. Maybe later. He still had to get her to the shed. He pulled out of the drive, and as he did so, noticed the

cat from next-door sitting on the wall, eyes a sickly yellow in the glare of the headlights. He sounded the horn and the cat did a startled leap. Clifton grinned and went on.

5:27pm

Ben was adjusting his hat in the mirror when the doorbell rang. He pulled the peak lower on his head and went to answer it.

‘Hey, how’s a boy doing?’ J said, and wandered through.

Ben fanned a hand in front of his face. ‘Phew, you fucking stink! How much aftershave have you got on?’

J reddened. ‘Only a dash. Why, do you think it’s too much?’

Ben smiled. ‘Not at all, mate. Take a seat.’

J sat at the desk, Ben on the bed. ‘So, how are you? Been shagging any more of your housemates, or have you given yourself the day off?’

‘Very funny,’ Ben said, pulling a face. ‘If you must know, Natasha and I had a big row earlier on, and we’re not talking. I’m off to get drunk as soon as possible. Catherine’s not back yet, by the way. She’s still up at uni.’

‘I know she is. I thought I’d come and see you first, before the big date.’

‘What’s your plans for this evening? Ply her with alcohol and try it on?’

J stuck his tongue out. ‘Not at all. Bit of dinner, a couple of drinks. I’m going to be the perfect gentleman. Anyway, I’d better make a good impression, ‘cos with your track record, you’ll be in her knickers before the week’s out.’

‘Ha bloody ha. Am I going to have to put up with us forever?’

‘Well, if you make your bed...’

There was a rattle of keys in the door. Seconds later, Catherine popped her head round the door. ‘Hi Ben,’ she said, and then noticed J. ‘Oh, hi,’ she mumbled. ‘You’re early.’

‘I am. And how are you today?’

‘Good, thanks.’

‘Looking forward to going out with me?’

She blushed. ‘Sure. I’m going to need some time to get ready though, are you all right to wait?’

‘Sure. Go and get beautiful. Shouldn’t be too difficult.’

She went a deep crimson colour. ‘OK. I won’t be long.’ She made to leave, then turned and said, ‘You look nice,’ before scuttling off upstairs.

J smiled at Ben. ‘You’ve got to love her, haven’t you?’

5:44pm

Natasha flicked her eyes open.

Adjusted to the gloom.

Opened her mouth to scream.

And realised that she couldn’t. Arms and legs trapped. Mouth sealed, straining against the tape that shut off her voice. Movement restricted. Testing one arm, then the other. Both bound tight, cutting into her wrists, firm enough to cut off the circulation to her hands. Same with her legs,

lashed by her ankles to... what? Opening her eyes wider. Moving her head up, seeing a dim light bulb swinging from the ceiling. The glare burning her eyes, then realising the left side of her head was throbbing, sparks of pain shooting through. Hair twisted and matted, stuck to her face. Looking down, seeing she was barefoot, skin cold and hard on the wooden floor. Her work dress was shucked up above her knees, her tights removed, feeling the chill now. Panic swept in, and she wrestled frantically against her ties, seeing that she was in a chair, and with all her efforts, its legs moved no more than an inch, and she fell back into the seat, exhausted.

Then a figure materialised in the gloom, swimming into focus, dressed all in black, holding a knife in one hand, smiling. A black baseball cap hid his face, but there was something familiar about it, the leer, as if he was imagining her naked, undressing her with his gaze. She shrank back, scared, and a new thought hit her. I'm wet. Her body was soaked in something, and she sniffed, trying to place the smell, and couldn't. Whatever it was, it made her feel woozy. Bile rose in her throat and she swallowed it down, its heat burning her, and as the face came closer, she knew who it was, she would recognise that face anywhere, so distinctive, and her heart hammered in her chest, get away from me, get away...

'So, sleeping beauty awakes,' Clifton said. 'You'll have to excuse the mess. I haven't had a chance to tidy up.'

He returned to his chair, only feet from hers, and sat down. The rug lay between them. In the end, getting her down here had been a piece of piss. As he suspected, nobody was around when he parked in the lay-by next to the allotment. Getting her into the wheelbarrow had been a struggle, and the bin liners had ripped further from the exertion, but the rug had disguised that. Pushing her down the hill, she had nearly fallen out a couple of times, the wheelbarrow tipping to one side or the other as he negotiated the slope, but they had got here in one piece. A few minutes to set up, and here they were. Me and my love, together at last.

He watched her flailing in the chair, her eyes bulging, sweat dripping off her forehead, mixing in with the blood and petrol that covered her body. Just a precaution, that one. Can't let her think she can escape *that* easily. It was incredible, watching her move. Like a frenzied tribal dance, her body cavorting and writhing, the flesh of her breasts pushing against the material of her dress, hips wiggling with every movement. A joy to behold. Not that it would do any good, for she was powerless.

'Look,' he said, turning the knife over in his hands. 'It's up to you, but if I were in your position, I'd stop trying to fight. If I wanted you to get free, you'd be out the door by now. Maybe later, I will. But not yet. So just relax, would you?'

Something must have registered, for she stopped and flopped forward. Even with the gag on, he could hear her breathing, ragged and deep. He smiled.

'That's better. Calm down. It's not as if I'm going to hurt you. I'm in love with you, remember? It's just so difficult to talk to you these days.'

You're always hanging about with that fucking boyfriend of yours, or that prick Ben. But more of him in a minute.' He stood and paced the floor, the boards creaking with every step. 'Let me show you around. This is my humble abode. Welcome. As you can see, it's not much, but I call it home.' He touched the light bulb, causing it to swing, throwing violent shadows across the walls. 'The lighting in here isn't great, I agree. I'd call it ambient, but each to their own.' He stopped by the window. 'View isn't brilliant, either. But I thought you wouldn't care very much for it, so I blacked them out. Always thinking of you, you see? Not that you'd notice. Anyway. It's also a bit wet in here, especially around where you're sitting. Again, my apologies. I had a little accident with a petrol can, and some of it got splashed on you.' With this news, she started to panic again. He crossed to her and knelt down, placing a hand either side of her, holding the chair down. She was close enough to kiss. 'But I wouldn't worry. It's not like I smoke or anything, so you should be fine. Having said that, I have a box of matches in my pocket, and I have been known for the odd bout of clumsiness. Better hope it's one of my good days.' He reached out and stroked her hair, and Natasha flinched, a moan escaping through the gag. 'Look at you,' he whispered. 'Even like this, you're still so beautiful. Get rid of the blood, clean you up a bit, you'll be right as rain. Then we can start our lives together, the way it has to be.' He returned to his chair. 'Now, Natasha,' he said. 'I think it's time we had a chat. Because I'm a nice guy, I'm willing to remove the gag for a bit, otherwise I'll be talking to myself, won't I? But if you scream, I might be forced to replace it. And it'll piss me off, if you do. And when I get angry, you know where I'm going with this? Good. So, what do you say?'

She began to cry, the tears running over the gag, dripping from her chin. Finally, she nodded.

'Excellent,' he said. He moved to her, took one edge of the tape, and ripped it off in one quick movement.

She screamed.

'Fucking BITCH,' he shouted, and pulled the tape back across.

6:11pm

'God, how long does it take to get ready?' J took a pull on his beer and leaned back. 'By the time Catherine gets down here, I'll be half cut.'

'Just relax, would you?' Ben replied. 'And stop fidgeting, you're making me nervous.'

J picked up his beer bottle and began peeling the label off. Soon, a mass of white confetti littered the table.

The doorbell rang.

'Fucking *hell*,' Tyler said, barging past Ben into the hallway. 'Where the fuck is she?' His face was red, and flecks of spit lay at the corners of his mouth.

'Nice to see you too,' Ben said.

'Yeah, but where the fuck is she?'

‘By she, I assume you mean Natasha.’

Tyler sneered. ‘No, the cat’s fucking mother. Of course I mean Natasha. I was supposed to pick her up at half five, like I told you. Half an hour I waited, and no sign. So I go up the shop, and surprise surprise, it’s closed. Shut up early, according to the note on the door. I mean, I’ve tried her mobile loads of times, and it keeps going to her fucking answerphone. So where is she?’

‘You’ve asked me that three times,’ Ben said. ‘I don’t know where she is. I haven’t seen her since this morning. Maybe she went out for a drink with her workmates or something.’

‘She’d better fucking not have. I hate waiting around, so if she has, she’ll have me to deal with.’

Listen to yourself, would you? Ben thought. *No-one* talks like that. He shrugged. ‘I guess you’ll have to keep on trying, won’t you? She’ll answer eventually.’

Tyler snorted with indignation.

6:19pm

This time, she went on for a good five minutes. Enough to wake the dead, Clifton thought, and laughed. Plenty to choose from round here.

Eventually, she was quiet. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘Let’s try again.’ He knelt in front of her. ‘And for God’s sake, no screaming. Or...’ He held up the knife, letting the words trail off. She nodded, jerking her head up and down. Now you’re scared, he thought. He let the knife run over her, the steel pressing first to her forehead, leaving a white trail over her skin, then moving down, sweeping past her neck. He scraped the point over her shirt, picking at the buttons, then with a pop, scattering them across the floor. He used the knife to push the sides of the shirt open, revealing her bra. She gurgled and thrashed, trying to kick out at him.

‘SSShhh,’ he muttered, placing a finger against her lips, only the tape separating their skin. ‘It’s all right.’ The knife returned to her breast, nudging the cup down. More forcefully now, he grabbed at the bra strap and cut it, and her breast tumbled free. His breath caught in his throat. The point of the knife flicked at her nipple, and she started resisting again, so he stood up, his trousers jutting out, showing his arousal, and got a handful of her hair. ‘Stop it,’ he hissed, and she looked up at him with mournful eyes, please-let-me-go, please. He ignored her and knelt back down. Her nipple was erect. ‘You see,’ he said. ‘You’re loving it.’ He ripped the other strap, both breasts free now, and in a state of frenzy, a little cut appeared under her left nipple, and blood sprang forth. She bounced up and down, doing anything to get away from him, and the movement made the blood run further, her breasts swinging in the soft light, until he clamped both hands on her thighs, stopping her, and leant forward and closed his mouth around the nipple, licking the blood clean, and a hot flush raged through his body.

She writhed and moaned, trying desperately to push his hands away, but all it did was tighten her bonds further, the tape almost gouging her skin. The

chair bounced backward as she fought, and her breast came out of his mouth with a syrupy, squelching sound.

‘OK OK, we’re going to have to sort this out,’ Clifton said, wiping his mouth. ‘God, you taste divine. But somehow, you don’t seem to be all that willing to co-operate. And I find that a little bit insulting, Natasha.’ He stood close again, still hard, right in her face. ‘I mean, you were quite willing to drop your knickers for Ben, weren’t you?’

She stopped and stared up at him. Got you now, he thought. He stroked her forehead. ‘Yes, I know. I can’t quite believe it, either. I wouldn’t have thought he was your type. Obviously you weren’t thinking straight.’

She whimpered.

A phone rang.

Clifton walked to his chair and picked up her handbag, which was resting beside it. He reached inside and flipped open her mobile. ‘Ahh, Tyler. Again! That must be three times in the last half an hour! A persistent guy, I’ll give him that. That’s something we have in common. So, what do you think? Shall I answer and pass on the good news? Because I bet you haven’t told him, have you? You and Ben’s dirty little secret.’ She shook her head violently, strands of hair whipping her face. ‘No? Well, he keeps on, doesn’t he? Sooner or later we’ll have to speak to him, won’t we?’ He threw the mobile onto the rug. ‘Give him some more time to stew, I think. Now, let’s try again.’ He walked over, grabbed the tape covering her mouth. ‘Scream, and I’ll cut you.’

He removed the tape.

And she was quiet.

‘Still no fucking answer. Jesus.’

Tyler was pacing the floor outside Ben’s room, the floorboards creaking as he trod over the same square of carpet, up and down, up and down. ‘You can’t think of anywhere else that she can be?’

‘No, I can’t,’ Ben replied. He was beginning to sound like a broken record. ‘Look, I’m going to have to leave you to it. I’m desperate for a drink.’

‘Whatever.’

J came out from Ben’s room. ‘God,’ he muttered. ‘Will she *ever* be ready?’

As if on cue, heels clicked on the stairs and a trail of perfume invaded the hallway. ‘I’m *sorry*,’ she said, and stepped into view.

Ben smiled, and he heard J catch his breath. Even Tyler stopped pacing and gave her the once-over. J reached for Ben’s hand and placed it on his heart. ‘Just checking,’ he whispered. ‘It is still beating, right?’

‘Loud and clear, mate. Loud and clear.’

Catherine hid behind her hair and blushed. ‘I look OK, then?’

‘Better than OK,’ J said. ‘I’d go with stunning. Wouldn’t you say, Ben?’

‘That I would.’

Catherine flicked at her hair, blonde and dazzling in the light. She had a

touch of make up on her face, and her eyes shone cornflower blue. She was wearing a turquoise top, the first three buttons undone, revealing a hint of the swell of her breasts. A black knee-length skirt showed off her legs, and black heels gave her an extra two inches in height. She carried a small shoulder bag that rested on her right hip, and a long, cream coloured jacket completed the outfit. Ben was amazed at how *different* she looked from the Catherine he saw everyday.

She was still blushing, but managed to say thank you in a low voice. J smiled. 'Shall we go, then?'

She nodded, and he held out his arm. She put her hand on his elbow. 'I'll see you later,' she said over her shoulder, grinning.

J got the door and held it open, arm outstretched. Catherine waltzed out, her jacket blowing behind her.

'Don't wait up,' J said, and winked at Ben.

'Have a good time.'

When Clifton removed the gag, Natasha bent forward, coughing and spluttering. 'Water,' she whispered. 'Give me some water.'

He reached down and lifted up the rug. Under the loose floorboard he found a grimy mug. 'A little bit dusty,' he said, blowing cobwebs from around the rim, 'but it'll do.' A container of water stood on the shelf. He filled it and stood before her. She tilted her head back, no argument, and drank the water down greedily, shuddering with every mouthful. Droplets splashed onto her ruined shirt, some spreading onto her skin, dripping down her breasts.

When he took the cup away, she leant forward and spat water onto his t-shirt. 'You fucking bastard,' she hissed, eyes wild as the water dripped to the floor.

He smiled, watching her squirm. 'Now, now. No need to be like that.' He pulled the box of matches from his pocket, took one out and placed it between his teeth. 'We wouldn't want to have any accidents, so I'd keep it shut if I were you.'

He returned to his seat, sat down and ran appraising eyes over her again. The oncoming night had lowered the temperature a degree or two, and her exposed front had goosebumps puckering the flesh. Hair lay in messy strands across her face, some patches plastered to her skin, others unkempt. A large bruise lay on her temple, turning purple under the soft light. Her eyes were red from crying, dark mascara in glutinous blobs on her eyelashes and cheeks. Hands and feet still firmly secure. My girl, in all her glory.

'You can't keep me here,' she whispered. 'Someone will come.' She glanced around nervously, unable to keep still. 'Tyler will be waiting for me, and he'll *come*.'

'Keep telling yourself that, and it might happen. Besides, I think it would be nice to get him here. We can have a nice cosy chat. You can explain to him why you fucked Ben the other night. I'm sure he'd be interested to find out.'

She whimpered, head lolling onto her chest. ‘Is that what this is all about?’

He stood up and swung the light bulb, which rocked back and forth. ‘In a way, yes. I mean, I was right about him, wasn’t I? From the beginning. I said to you that he wanted you for himself, and oh no, you didn’t believe me, just thought I was stirring up trouble. So it was something of a shock to go into uni today and overhear a certain conversation in the bar. Makes a man feel, well, cheated. Lied to. I’ve been lied to my whole life, so I guess I should be used to it. But even so.’

‘Look, I’m sorry...’

He stopped her with a wave of his hand. ‘And I thought, what *is* it about these guys? I mean, Ben, just *look* at him. The arrogant shit. Why did you do it, Natasha? Did he get you drunk and try it on? After all the crap he spouted about not being interested, wanting your sister instead? It was a lie, wasn’t it? Just to put another notch on his bedpost. I’m surprised you got sucked in. It certainly couldn’t have been his singing ability. As for Tyler, well. He’s the biggest prick on this planet. On that, Ben and I agree. The man doesn’t have any redeeming features at all. Maybe he’s got a big dick or something, I don’t know. It’s a real shame. There’s a beautiful girl in you, just waiting to blossom. And only I can see it.’

‘How do you know all this?’

‘Because I watch, Natasha. Watch, and listen. I love you, don’t I? Ever since I saw you in the shop that time. That’s the real you, the sweet girl who has a kind word for everyone, who treated me like a person rather than an object of ridicule. Which no-one has ever done. How could I not love you? It’s as set in stone as night following day. And I’m the one who can bring it out of you. All the good stuff, rather than the dirty side those two get from you. We’re perfect, you and I. And that’s why you’re here. Because I had to tell you that. Properly, this time. So you can do the right thing and be with me.’

She shook her head. ‘That’s never going to happen. Forgive me, but a guy who beats me up is hardly going to be ideal boyfriend material, is he?’

‘That was just a means to an end. To prove how serious I am.’

‘You’re a fucking psycho. What happened, Clifton? Because somewhere along the line, a couple of screws fell loose. Love? You don’t love me. The word is an alien concept. Tyler may have his faults, but he wouldn’t do this. Hold me *prisoner*. When he gets hold of you, he’ll beat the shit out of you. And I’ll be standing on the sidelines, cheering him on.’

He walked to her, lifted her chin up and made to kiss her. Her lips were unresponsive, but then opened slightly and he drove his tongue in. There was a sharp pain, and he shouted and withdrew. Blood ran from his tongue. ‘So, she likes it rough, huh? I should have guessed. Just like all the fucking whores.’ He reached down and tweaked her nipple. ‘You know what? I want him to come. And whatever happens, happens. I have no life left, anyway. Not without you.’ He rolled the match around his fingers. ‘We’ll have a little barbecue, warm this place up a bit. You might be the main

course, if you're lucky. Maybe we'll both die. But who cares? We'll be together in death, if not in life. Like Romeo and Juliet.'

'You're crazy.'

Her phone rang. Clifton picked it up. 'Guess who?' He replaced the gag, stroked his chin and smiled. 'Time to say hello, don't you think?' He pressed answer and held the phone to his ear. 'Hello?'

'Hello? Who the fuck is this?'

I stood at the doorway, hand on the doorknob. Ben watched from outside his bedroom.

'Come on Tyler, you can do better than that. Just call me, I don't know, an old friend. Yes.'

Tyler's face darkened. 'Where the fuck is Natasha? If...'

'Ahh, Natasha.' There was a moment of silence. 'Sorry, she can't come to the phone at the moment. She's um, otherwise engaged. Tied up, you might say.' He cackled.

'What do you mean? What have you done with her?'

'So many questions. You want to calm down a bit. Take the weight off. She's fine. Just got somewhat waylaid is all. I'm taking good care of her, don't you worry.'

'Who is this?'

'I *told* you, an old friend. Someone you know very well. But if in doubt, ask Ben. He's a pal of mine, too. And of Natasha's, as you know. A very close friend of hers.'

'You what? What...'

'I'll be seeing you, Tyler. Don't be long, will you? Or the party may get started without you.'

'What? What have...?' But there was an empty line. Tyler hung up and threw the phone across the hall.

'What the hell's going on?' Ben asked. 'You look like death warmed up.'

'Someone's got Natasha.'

Ben's stomach crumpled. 'What do you mean, got her?'

'What I *said*. And it's someone who knows me. Called me by name. A voice I recognise, but can't quite place.' Tyler pointed at Ben. 'And he knows you. Mentioned you explicitly.'

The bottom collapsed out of Ben's stomach.

'You know who it is, don't you?' Tyler was up in Ben's face, staring at him. 'Who this fucker is who stole my girl.'

'Clifton,' he whispered.

'Who the fuck is he?'

'You know. The guy with the scarred face.'

Tyler's mouth dropped open. 'Oh my God. Shit, it was him. I *knew* I'd heard that voice before. Well, something's going on with him and Natasha. We need to find her.'

Catherine popped her head back round the door. 'Everything OK?'

'No,' Tyler shouted. 'It's not. Where the fuck could she be?'

‘I know where he lives,’ Ben said. ‘He might not be there, but it’s somewhere to start.’

Tyler barged past J and Catherine. ‘Let’s go. My car’s around the corner. When I catch the fucker, I’ll wring his neck.’

Ben followed. At the door, J stopped him. ‘I’m coming too.’

Ben shook his head. ‘Don’t be silly. You’ve got a date to go on. Can’t upset the lady.’

‘What’s happening?’ Catherine asked.

‘This guy, he’s got Natasha.’

‘What do you mean, got her?’

‘You know, taken her. He’s a fucking headcase who’s got an obsession with her. He’s dangerous, and we’re going to sort it out.’

She nodded, turned to J. ‘You should go. It sounds important. We can go out any old time.’

Ben smiled. What a girl.

Without thinking, J took Catherine in his arms and gave her a long kiss.

‘Wow,’ she said after. ‘That more than makes up for it.’

‘Hurry the fuck up,’ Tyler shouted.

And they were out the door, Catherine watching them go.

6:56pm

‘I don’t believe that,’ Clifton muttered after he had hung up. ‘Tyler didn’t even realise who it was. What a dumb shit.’ He shrugged. ‘Still, I’m sure he’ll work it out eventually.’ He pulled the tape from her mouth, sighed and sat down. ‘So, how are you feeling?’

Natasha shifted in the seat. ‘Clifton, I’m *tired*. Please let me go. These bonds are killing my arms.’

‘Sorry, no can do. I’d like to, but I’m not sure that you wouldn’t try and leave. And now I’ve got you, I’m not going to let you go. Ever.’

‘So what *are* you going to do? Keep me locked up in here forever? Whatever you do, you’re not going to change my mind. I’m sorry if you thought things would happen between us, but I’ve been honest with you from the start. I’m with Tyler, and nothing is going to change that.’

‘Apart from fucking Ben behind his back. You lied to me about that.’

‘I *didn’t* lie. My relationship with Ben, well, it’s complicated. I can’t understand it myself. Sleeping with him was the wrong thing to do, I know that. But it’s happened, and I know if Tyler finds out I’m probably going to be for the high jump. But people do things they regret every day. They might not mean to, but it happens. Anyway, that’s got nothing to do with you. I could be screwing half of Bristol, and it’d be no business of yours. I don’t love you, Clifton. Pure and simple.’

Clifton gritted his teeth. ‘You know, I might understand it, if you were going out with someone half decent. Tyler’s a fucking loser! What do you see in him?’

She sighed, face gleaming with sweat. ‘You don’t know him like I do. No-one does. You, and to a certain extent Ben, may think you do, but you

don't. What we have, it's special. I can't see myself with anyone else. That's the thing about love. You can't understand it, you just know when it's right.'

'I agree. It's how I feel about you.'

'Oh, fuck off. Jesus. Not that it matters. When it's over, you'll be facing prison, or worse. So you may as well let me go.'

Clifton stood, brandishing the knife. 'You're right. There is no way out for me. But as I said, without you I'd rather be dead. It's not like I've got anyone else out there who cares, is it?'

Natasha stared at him. 'But you could have done. I could have been your friend. But you ruined all that. So you get what you deserve.'

Tears sprang into his eyes. 'I guess I do, don't I? Well, let's wait. I want to see how it ends.'

He crossed to Natasha and pulled the tape back across. 'You'll have to excuse me,' he said. 'Got some preparations to make.' He crossed the floor and picked up the petrol can.

7:07pm

'Take a left here,' Ben shouted.

Tyler gunned the engine, accelerated in front of a green Mini, then turned the steering wheel hard to the left. There was a screech of brakes as the Mini did an emergency stop followed by a series of parps on the horn. They approached a set of traffic lights that were turning red, and Tyler tore through them, narrowly missing a pedestrian about to cross, and swerved to the left. In the back, J slid across the seat, pressed up hard against the back right window.

'Fucking idiot!' Tyler shouted at the pedestrian. 'Watch what you're doing!'

'Can you slow down?' Ben shouted. 'I'll miss the fucking turning.'

'I'll slow down when we get Natasha back,' Tyler hissed, negotiating a roundabout at forty miles per hour. 'Now where?'

'Straight on, then right at the next lights.'

'I should have stayed at home,' J muttered from the back.

They sped on, Ben unable to comprehend what was happening, let alone keep his eyes on the road. Clifton with Natasha. He should have seen it coming. For weeks, fucking months he had warned her about him, and she had laughed it off, saying she would handle it. Now this.

'Down here,' he barked, and Tyler veered hard to the right, headlamps beaming. 'It's up here, on the left. That's it!'

'Give me some fucking warning,' Tyler spat, and turned into the drive at such speed that he had to brake violently and came to rest inches from the garage.

J took a couple of deep breaths. 'Fuck,' he said. 'I'm going to need some life insurance at this rate.'

Tyler was already out, banging on the front door, the glass shaking under his fists. They stood there, bathed in darkness. Ben stepped to the side and

peered into the living room, hands cupped to the glass. ‘No sign of anyone. There aren’t any lights on.’

‘Round the back,’ Tyler ordered, and jogged past them. Ben muttered to himself and followed him down a narrow alleyway, nearly breaking his neck on a dustbin, sending the lid clattering to the ground. He cursed and stopped short, causing J to run into the back of him. ‘Fuck,’ J said. ‘Well, if anyone *is* home, they’ll be awake by now, won’t they?’

When they reached the back door Tyler’s face glowed in murky light. ‘Look,’ he said, pointing. ‘The light’s on.’ He rapped the glass. ‘Hello?’

Ben surveyed the scene. The kitchen table was empty except for a bottle of Scotch and an empty tumbler. His Dad having a few drinks, he thought. Which, from what he knew, sounded normal. He noticed one of the chairs overturned in the corner, and his eyes followed, then past, and...

A cold hand gripped his heart. ‘Oh my God,’ he murmured. ‘Down there.’

There was a thin ribbon of blood splattered on the tiles, harsh and bright on the cream floor. It ran for a metre or so, then stopped.

‘Right, that’s it,’ Tyler shouted, and ran an elbow into the glass. Nothing.

‘Don’t be an idiot,’ J hissed. ‘That’s double glazing! You’ll disturb half the fucking neighbourhood.’

‘Sod that,’ Tyler said, and headed out into the garden, feet squelching.

‘This’ll do,’ and he produced a brick, drew his arm back, and launched it at the glass. Ben and J ducked as it shattered, sending shards out into the garden. Tyler sprang forward, covering his hand with the sleeve of his jacket, and scraped the excess glass off the frame. He reached inside and turned the handle, and they were in.

‘Natasha,’ Tyler shouted. ‘NATASHA!’

Ben heard something. ‘Shush, would you?’ Tyler kept on shouting. ‘Shut *up*,’ he said, and Tyler went quiet. There was a low sound coming from somewhere, a moan.

‘In here,’ J said, and went to the laundry cupboard, rattling the door. ‘It’s locked,’ he said, but Tyler sorted that, aiming a flying kick at the lock, which disintegrated under the impact. The door flew inward, striking something soft.

‘There’s someone in here,’ Ben exclaimed, and together the three of them got the figure upright and out into the light.

‘It’s Clifton’s Dad,’ Ben said, and pulled the tape from his mouth. Matthew leant forward, coughing.

‘Look at his fucking face,’ Tyler said, swallowing, eyes wide with fear.

‘Are you OK?’ J bent down, lifted Matthew’s head. There was a deep cut over one eyebrow, and an egg shaped ball on the back of his head, near the crown.

‘My head,’ Matthew moaned. ‘Christ, my head.’ He began sobbing, drooping forward, saliva running from his mouth.

Tyler knelt down in front of Matthew and shook him hard. Matthew opened a weary eye, blood dripping onto his trousers. ‘Where’s Clifton?’ he

shouted, shaking him hard. 'Where the fuck is your son?'

Ben pulled Tyler back. 'Take it easy,' he said. 'You'll do him more injury, shaking him like that.'

'The shed,' Matthew whispered. 'He must be at the shed.'

'What fucking shed?' Tyler said, blazing with fury. 'What the fuck are you talking about?'

'Down there,' Matthew croaked, flopping his hand in the direction of the garden.

Tyler was up and out the door, flying.

Ben looked at J. 'Stay with him,' he said. 'Call an ambulance, and the police. If he looks like he's going to pass out, give him some of that booze. I know he's a bit of a fan.'

J nodded, trying to pull Matthew into a sitting position. After a struggle he gave up and flipped open his mobile. 'Well, what are you waiting for? Go! And be careful.'

'I tried,' Matthew was moaning. 'I tried...'

'You, too,' Ben said, and ran out into the night.

7:28pm

'There,' Clifton said, and stepped back to admire his handiwork.

He set down the petrol can. The smell in the confined area of the shed was overwhelming. So much so that before starting work he had pulled a bandanna from his pocket and wrapped it round his face and mouth. It was a look he approved of. Like a Mexican bandit or something.

As his eyes locked onto Natasha, he could see she wasn't enjoying it so much. Oh well, he thought. You pay your money and take your choice. He grinned. The petrol fumes were permeating his nostrils despite the bandanna, and he was feeling sick and light-headed. And if you're feeling crook, Clifton old son, think about your poor gal.

Never mind. She'll get over it. Right now, she had other things to worry about. Her constant movement had become irritating, so he had taken a length of rope from under the floorboards. When he approached her, she had tried to get away again, so he held the knife against her throat. It had stopped then. The fucking whining, the begging. The only way out was to accept him, love him like he knew she did. Otherwise, that was it. He had looped the rope around her body, crossing over underneath her breasts, the friction on her skin leaving burn marks. Then gone around the back legs of the chair twice, each time pulling the rope as taut as possible. Under the window were two small hooks, one either side of the sill. He tied the rope around them and double knotted it, pinning Natasha and the chair to the wall, the back of the chair wedged perfectly beneath the sill. Now she was trapped, unable to move the chair.

Trapped, and all mine.

With that taken care of, he had emptied the remainder of the petrol can over the floor. The rug and the door got most of the brunt. Wouldn't want that fucker Tyler being too eager to play the hero. If he ever got here.

He walked over to Natasha, who was silent, her eyes closed. He watched her eyelids in fascination as they fluttered. Are you scared, baby? Because you should be. He stroked her hair, feeling no resistance, the blood on her forehead drying now. He moved his hands down until they rested on her thighs, her legs trembling from his touch. Then slipped them under her dress, pulling the material up, his hands travelling hungrily. Still no sign of life. So he went higher, and his fingers scraped against the sheer material of her panties, hooking around the waistband, then coming into contact with hair, warm and sweaty. He shuddered, becoming hard again, the petrol fumes firing into his head, intoxication he had never experienced. This was what it was all about, *this* is how it should be. He leant to whisper in her ear.

‘Now we’re getting somewhere,’ he said.

7:34pm

‘Tyler,’ Ben hissed. ‘Tyler, wait up!’

It was so fucking dark, Ben was unable to see more than five metres ahead of him. He could hear the sounds of traffic, but they were his only guide. The garden was thick with shrubs that confiscated most of the natural light coming from the neighbouring houses, and with every step, the light faded, giving way to blackness. More than once he stumbled into a bush, scraping his hands and legs, scratching his palms. But still he went on, trying to move as quickly as possible, desperate to get to Natasha. On this point, he and Tyler were in complete harmony.

He realised suddenly that he was out in the open, breathing fresher air, no longer confined by foliage, and then his legs hit something hard and he fell forward, the traffic *much* louder, whistling past his face, and he realised he was lying on hard concrete. Hands came up under his waist, lifting him to his feet.

‘Down there,’ Tyler hissed, and pointed.

Ben realised they were standing on the street. He looked behind him, and saw they had passed through a tiny gate that separated the garden from the road. Bushes and trees formed a giant overhang that provided a thick obstruction.

He wiped a hand over his face and saw that his palm had been cut on a bramble, opening a small mouth of blood. He winced. ‘Where?’ he asked. ‘I can’t see for shit.’

Tyler pulled at him and they ran across the road without checking for traffic. A horn sounded. Beneath them, stretching out down the hill, was a huge expanse of land swathed in darkness. They could make out nothing down there, no houses, and more importantly, no sheds. The only light came from the street lamps that lined the road, shining in little pools. There were a few houses that Ben could see far away in the distance, lit up as the night came alive. This was an undisturbed place in the middle of a bustling city, quiet, somewhere people could come to get away from the everyday rush. To relax. Or to escape.

‘Come on,’ Tyler shouted, and leapt over the small wall that separated

land from road, running off down a sharp slope, falling off Ben's radar in seconds. He took a deep breath and followed, and now he was running too, his legs feeling like they would betray him at any second. It was somehow exhilarating, a mixture of adrenalin and blind faith keeping him on his feet, the cold wind rushing in his ears, blood pumping through his veins, only Tyler's cries to follow. The slope levelled out and still he ran, footsteps on moist grass, almost stumbling as he got used to this new terrain, his knees aching, until he realised Tyler had stopped running and was bent over, catching his breath. Ben slowed to a walk and joined him.

'Jesus,' he gasped, his head light. 'Where the fuck are we?'

'I think it's some allotments,' Tyler panted. 'For the fucking city gardeners or whatever.'

Ben nodded, remembering the view from Clifton's bedroom window. 'Yeah, that makes sense. But there must be loads of sheds down here. He could be anywhere.'

'Better search them quick then, hadn't we?'

Clifton was rampant now, his hands probing further, pushing his fingers into her. She was fully awake now, her eyes snapping open when he first entered, coming back from where she had been. She tried to cry out, straining furiously against the tape, hot tears streaming down her face. Then, when she realised her prison had been strengthened by the ropes, a look of resignation crossed over, and she slumped back in the chair, defeated. Fuck, this was good. Feeling her warmth around his fingers. She was loving it, the dirty bitch. He thought about all the times he had fantasised about her, about a moment like this, having her completely, catering for his every whim. He threw back his head and laughed.

Everywhere he turned, Ben found nothing except the dark. Tyler was off on his own, every so often shouting Natasha's name and cursing when there was no reply. But they *had* to be close. He saw a building loom into his vision and ran towards it, stumbling over the undulating ground. Somewhere beyond there was a rustling sound, probably a fox hunting for scraps of food. He tried to find any morsel of a clue to lead them to Natasha. Finally his groping hands found a door, and he tugged on the handle. Locked. He swore, the rustling closer now, as if whatever it was stood right beside him, breathing the same air, searching for the same quarry. He turned and ran back in the direction he thought he had come from, not knowing which was the right way, and smacked straight into Tyler, sending them both crashing.

'God, we'll never find her,' Tyler shouted, his voice cracking, and he screamed her name again, and Ben joined in, their cries punching into the night.

Clifton halted, hearing something outside, a voice. 'Nearly here,' he whispered, and withdrew his fingers, sliding out of her with a pop. He licked them, feeling her on his tongue. 'You taste great,' he said, smiling down at

her, looking at her bare thighs. 'I'll be back for more,' he said, and crossed to the door, sliding the bolt across, sealing them inside. He reached into his trousers and fingered his erection, which felt monstrous. My gift to you, Natasha. A symbol of my love. As he moved back to her, he pulled his trousers down, freeing his penis. He stood in front of her and lifted her head up, placing the knife to her throat again. Her eyes were inches from his dick, and she moaned. He ran his free hand up and down his shaft, shuddering, it feeling so good, so right. She continued to moan.

They had come to the end of the allotment now, only the woods in front of them, the trees forming sinister black shapes that seemed to breathe, whistling with the wind. Tyler was frantic, still screaming her name, and every cry ate Ben's insides up a little more, knowing that they could be too late, that she could already be dead or raped. It was on their lips and in their minds, but remained unspoken.

'Natasha!' Tyler shouted again, full of despair, hands clawing at the sky, willing her to give them a clue. Ben turned his head away, Tyler's cries ripping through him. And then he saw something, a flicker in the air. Could it be? No, it was gone. Came and went in the blinking of an eye. But he was sure.

'Tyler,' he shouted. 'TYLER!'

Tyler turned and even in the dark, Ben could see streaks of tears sliding down his cheeks, glowing white under the light of the moon.

'Mate,' he said. 'I think I saw something. Over there.'

And Tyler was off, running where Ben had pointed, and Ben sprinted after him, heading towards the woods, heart hammering, and suddenly there was a new smell in the air, a pungent odour of petrol, and he knew they had found her. He found Tyler up ahead, and there was a shed, tucked away in the far reaches of the allotment, isolated from all the others.

'God,' Tyler moaned, pulling his sleeve over his mouth. 'What is that smell?'

Ben repeated the gesture and circled the shed, looking for an entrance. He noticed the windows and looked up to peer in, only to find them blacked out. But some light managed to creep through, and then a shadow passed across the window, and he knew someone was in there. He ran around to the front, and Tyler got there at the same time, both of them knowing she was inside, and the door was there, and they hammered on it, the wood splintering Ben's already cut palm, and still it held fast.

'Natasha,' Tyler shouted, and ran at the door, shoulder charging it. There was strong resistance, and Tyler crumpled to the floor, groaning and clutching his shoulder. The smell was worse now, sending waves of nausea through Ben's stomach as he took a breath, knelt down and ran at the door himself.

'Here he comes,' Clifton cried, his hand moving in a frenzy, feeling the blood pumping to his cock. 'Here he comes,' he shouted, nearing the brink,

and then an almighty shudder ran through his body as he ejaculated. Thick sperm erupted in a huge gush, splashing onto Natasha's face as he cried out, more and more of it flowing, sperm running over her gag and chin, dripping onto her shirt, trickling between her breasts in a sticky flux as she moaned, writhing, coughing, crying all at once. He grinned as the sensations tore at him, raking through his body and squeezing out every drop of pleasure, and he whispered 'I love you,' calling her name, binding them together, the sperm congealing on her skin.

The door slammed on its hinges, and he smiled. Now we'll see. Judgement day had arrived.

He stuffed his penis back into his trousers, pulled them up. He trailed the tip of the knife through the pool of sperm on her breasts. 'Thank you,' he whispered in her ear. 'Thank you for being mine.' The door rattled again, and he could hear the lock weaken under the pressure. It wouldn't last long. He moved behind Natasha, stepping over the ropes, and held the knife to her neck, the tip sharp against her jugular. His other hand checked his pockets. Nothing missing. He was ready.

As the door shook again, the lock splintering under the impact, he bent over and kissed Natasha's forehead, his mouth lingering over the bruise on her temple. 'I love you,' he repeated, then pulled the bandanna over his mouth, stood tall, the knife still pressed to her skin, and waited.

'Bring it on,' he said.

'Try again,' Tyler shouted from the floor. He lay there, staring up at Ben, clutching his right arm. 'God, I can't take much more of this. NATASHA!'

Ben couldn't take much more, either. His arm ached, the tendons in his shoulder singing with pain. And the smell...was getting worse. Closer, more oppressive. But they were getting there. The door was shaking every time he charged it, and surely it wouldn't be too long, and then they would be inside, and this nightmare would end. You hope, Ben. You hope.

He summoned up his remaining reserves of strength. Come on. Do it now, or it'll never fucking happen. He raised his head to the sky, face bathed in moonlight, and snarled, the petrol fumes making his head crazy, fuck you Clifton, you fucking lowlife piece of shit, and he felt like a bull about to confront the matador, and he lowered his head, took a step back, as Tyler was getting to his feet, and started to run, five feet from the door, four, and raised his leg kung-fu style, sole of his shoe square at the lock, and all of a sudden shock waves ran up his leg and he was falling forward somehow, groping for something to hold onto, but there wasn't anything, and he realised the door had blasted inward from the force of his kick, and the smell was even worse, and he got a glimpse of a chair, someone's legs strapped to the legs, which didn't make sense, and then his face hit solid wood, taking the wind from his sails, and wet liquid spilled over his face, prickly on his skin.

He heard running footsteps behind him as Tyler burst inside. His eyes were so blurred he could barely see, and lifting his head from the ground required superhuman effort. But he did, blinking myopically as the room

came swimming into view, and when it did, he realised he was looking at madness.

Madness in the shape of Clifton Walker, who was standing by the far wall, dressed head to toe in black. Black baseball cap pulled down over his eyes. Black and white bandanna covering his nose and mouth. Black sweatshirt and trousers. Ben blinked and his eyes moved to see a knife in Clifton's right hand, the steel flashing in the dull light, and it was pressed against something, his arm locked around someone's neck, and he blinked again, and there she was, something that looked like Natasha but couldn't be, a grotesque parody of the girl he knew. Tied to a chair, her face a ruin of blood and bruising, cuts over her eyes, hair matted to her skull, and then he saw her shirt open, breasts exposed, blood sluicing from her nipple. He opened his mouth and was hit by a blast of fumes, and sticky vomit erupted from his mouth, splattering the already soaking floor. Then his eyes settled on the milky splashes on her legs and chest, knowing what it was, Clifton's seed all over her. More vomit tried to come forth and he swallowed it down, trying to force the horrors from his mind, seeing Clifton's hands all over her, and he experienced an anger he had never known before. I'll kill you, he thought. Fucking carve you up and leave it for the birds. Get hold of that cock of yours and make sure you'll never be able to use it again. These thoughts didn't scare him, but then Clifton let out a cackle of glee, and Ben was frightened then, for it was a scream of someone with nothing left, a mind devoid of reason, the soundtrack of the irrational.

'NATASHA,' Tyler shouted, and Ben tried to make out what was happening, but couldn't see, dammit, his body betraying him when he needed it most. He heard Clifton say something, but Tyler carried on running, and there was a scream that could only have come from one person. Tyler stopped dead. Ben managed to push himself up to a sitting position, pain everywhere, up his legs, the right side of his face burning, and tried to stand but it was a movement too far and he crumpled back down with a cry, skidding in the wet.

'Now look what you made me do,' Clifton said, tutting. Ben stared at Natasha, and now another trail of blood joined the others, this one spurting from a thick gash near to her neck. She cried and shook and fought, muffled sounds coming from behind the gag, and he wanted to hold her, anything to take that pain away. Anything.

'I think for now,' Clifton said, 'it'd be best if you two stay exactly where you are. Otherwise we might have another accident. As you can see, we've had a few of those already.'

Tyler was crying. 'You're dead,' he shouted through his tears, and Ben knew he had seen the evidence too. 'You fucking madman!' He swallowed, then retched. 'You've fucked her,' he said, not really to Clifton, saying it rather than believing, unable to believe. 'Look what you've done to her.' He wiped his eyes and took a step closer to Clifton.

'Uh uh.' Clifton waggled a finger. 'No closer. As you can see, Tyler, this whole place is ready to burn at any second.' He jiggled his pockets, the

matches scratching around. You see? he thought. Surprised you there, haven't I? 'And unfortunately, most of the petrol seems to have got on Natasha, here. Sorry about that. So if you don't play this my way, we could be seeing our own version of the human torch. Who knows, you may get a supporting role. If you're lucky.' He grinned.

'Let her go,' Ben said.

Clifton turned to face him. 'Ahh, Ben. You know, it's good to see you. I wasn't anticipating you joining us, but the more the merrier, as they say. In fact, it'll make it so much more fun. Shame you got messed up getting here. Looks like your leg is going to be out of action for a while.'

Tyler tried to run at Clifton again, and calm as you like, he hacked off a portion of Natasha's earlobe. Blood spurted from the wound and she howled, sobbing madly. Her body was now coated in red. As she cried out, Tyler screamed and cursed.

'You never learn, do you Tyler?' Clifton shouted. 'I *told* you what would happen, and you ignored me. So this little cut,' and he bent and kissed the top of Natasha's ear, 'is down to you.'

'LET HER GO,' Tyler shouted. 'You fucking bastard!'

'And now with the insults. What is it with this guy, Natasha? I'm still not seeing it.'

'Get away from her, cocksucker. Your dirty little cock is never going to touch her again.'

Clifton mock frowned, staring down at the puddle of sperm on her chest and legs. 'Oh, you mean that? Well, I did warn you. I said I might get the party started without you. So that makes it your fault as well. Lack of organisation.'

Natasha was still crying, and Clifton knew this was his moment. The moment he had been waiting for. He smiled and felt a surge through his chest, fingers tingling in anticipation. 'It's funny. Me and you Tyler, we've actually got a fair bit in common. I hate to say it, you being a complete fuckwit and all, but we do. Both in love with this one, for a start. I can't fault your taste in women, I must say.'

'You and me are nothing alike,' Tyler spat. 'You crazy son-of-a-bitch.'

'Whereas you're just a bitch. But anyway, as I was saying. You and me. And then I thought, old Ben here, cripple in the corner, he's pretty much like us too.' He looked down at the offending patches of semen. 'I mean, I've got my mark on Natasha. And you, you've got yours.' He placed a hand on Natasha's shoulder and she tensed. Are you ready for this? 'And,' he said, not a tremor in his voice, 'so has Ben. Natasha's been a bit of a naughty girl, I'm afraid to say. She's been taking it from Ben, and from what I hear, has been enjoying herself rather too much. Orgasms from here to Oregon, so I've heard.'

Tyler's mouth dropped open. 'You're lying,' he said, and stared at Natasha, trying to will the answer from her, but she avoided his gaze, still crying, head fixed on the floor.

It couldn't be. It couldn't and now Tyler was piecing it together, and Ben

felt a pincer of fear and self-loathing slamming into his chest. How had Clifton found out? He tried to shuffle backwards, suddenly wanting to be out of here, to save my own skin, crawl into a hole and hide forever. I'll serve my penance, he thought. My God, I will.

Matthew poured himself another scotch and threw it down. 'Where the fuck are they?' he muttered, for what seemed like the tenth time in as many minutes.

J was pacing the floor, looking at his watch and the garden with equal fervour. I should be on a date, he thought. And I'm standing here with this old freak while my mate is out there doing God-knows-what. He shook his head. 'They'll be here soon,' he said.

Matthew touched his head, now bandaged and free of blood. 'They'd better be.' He made another drink.

'Should you be knocking it back so much?' J asked. 'By the time the ambulance gets here, you'll be no good to anyone.'

In the distance, Matthew heard the faint sound of sirens. 'That's the idea,' he said, and gunned the drink.

The sirens grew louder. 'Fuck it,' J said, and reached for the bottle. 'If you can't beat them, join them.'

And they sat, nursing a drink and their own thoughts as the emergency services drew closer.

'You're lying,' Tyler repeated.

Clifton sniggered. 'Oh, if only I were. Truth hurts, doesn't it Tyler? All this time, behind your back.'

Tyler stepped over Ben and crouched down. Ben felt himself shrink under his gaze. Tyler's face was bathed in sweat and tear streaks, the dark stubble on his chin glowing orange in the dusky light. He smiled, and Ben's stomach tightened further.

'God,' Tyler whispered, 'this smell!' He wrinkled his nostrils. 'It's getting to me. I swear to God I can't think straight.' He shook his head like a dog drying itself after a rain shower. 'Tell me it's not true, Ben. Tell me it's not true.'

Ben met his gaze, held it as long as he could. I can't do that. As much as I would turn back the clock, I can't. He turned his face.

Tyler punched him full in the jaw. His head snapped to the side, pain running up into his mouth in a flood, and he spat blood to the floor in a long stream. Then a searing bolt of agony down below as Tyler kicked him in the ribs, all the wind leaving his body, and he doubled up, hugging his chest, trying to breathe but only taking in that horrible petrol taste, trying to puke but unable to get his throat to work, white spots dancing across his vision.

'I KNEW it,' Tyler roared, standing over Ben. 'All the fucking time, I doubted you. How did you do it, Ben? Seduce her with one of your crappy songs? Ply her with booze and take advantage? You've been after her for weeks. You fucking cunt. I ought to leave you in here to rot. You're no

better than scum.'

Clifton laughed. 'You *see*, Natasha? He's more interested in settling scores than he is about you. It always comes out in the end, doesn't it?'

'Shut the fuck up,' Tyler shouted, and faced Natasha, who was whimpering into the gag. 'How could you, babe? With *him*? You told me nothing was going on! And I *believed* you. *Trusted* you. It's funny. You've always had a go at me about being jealous. Telling me off when a guy looks at you twice. But I was right to be worried, wasn't I? You've always had a problem with me taking it too far. And all the time you were the one who couldn't be trusted.'

She began to cry, thick tears rolling down her cheeks.

'Look,' Clifton said, stroking Natasha's hair. 'Now you're upsetting her.'

'And as for you,' Tyler screamed. 'You're the lowest of us all. And the police are on their way, Clifton. So give it up. Whatever happens, you're going to lose.'

'No. Actually, it'll be you. I'm the only one who loves Natasha. Unconditionally. What I feel for her, it's perfect. Not tainted, like you and Ben. Squabbling over her. Fighting. Trying to get one up on each other. But not me. And she knows it. When this is all over, she'll see it. And you'll be nothing more than a distant memory.'

The room fell silent for a split second, and Ben thought he could hear shouts, distant but coming closer, and he knew that soon it would be finished. Now, Clifton, you have nowhere to run.

'That's the cops,' Tyler said, picking up on Ben's thoughts. 'Can you hear them, Clifton? Now let her go. It's the end of the line for you.' He edged towards Natasha.

As Tyler came forward, Clifton pulled out the matches and lit one, the flame sparking with a hiss. 'And what if I let go? Your Natasha, up in smoke. I don't want to do it, but if I can't have her, I'm certainly not giving her to you.'

Tyler stopped. The match burned out. Clifton took a bunch from the box and lit them. 'I'll take that chance,' he whispered. 'If I have to.'

'Fine,' Clifton said, and dropped the matches.

The petrol went up instantly, and a sheet of flame sprang up in front of Natasha. Clifton laughed hysterically, and Ben had to shield his eyes from the glare. God, the heat! He tried to pull himself to his knees. Now the flame came into contact with Natasha's chair, fire curling around the chair legs, and now her feet were smoking, in fact the whole room was beginning to fill with smoke. Ben coughed and screamed.

Tyler made his move.

He covered a hand over his mouth and ran at Clifton, who had backed away. Both went down with a crash, and at the same time there was a loud bang as more petrol ignited, the building awash with fire now. Ben got to his feet, not knowing how, running on empty, and was faced with a wall of flame. He was coughing his guts up. Natasha was in a frenzy, jerking around in the chair, her muffled cries audible over the crescendo, and Ben shuffled

forward, the heat impossible, trying to reach her but not knowing how, so scared, the flames rising to the roof, and a scream came from the corner, from Tyler, bloodcurdling rage, got to get there, get her out of this madness, but the flames were pushing him back, pushing him back...

‘Over there...’ J shouted, and pointed at the shed, the orange flames shooting out the door. Two policeman flanked him, and together they ran down the hill, one of the cops talking urgently into his radio, and as they neared the shed the windows blew out, shards of white hot shrapnel and masking tape sailing into the sky, and J ducked, nearing the door now, the policemen telling him to stay back, they would deal with this, but there was no time for that, there were friends inside, and on he ran...

Clifton stabbed with the knife as Tyler sprawled on top of him, and got lucky, striking his left shoulder, burying the blade up to the hilt, scraping the collarbone. Tyler screamed and rolled off, and Clifton sought his advantage, pummelling through the thick smoke, not knowing if he connected but hitting something, and then hot heat sparked through his brain as he took one in the temple, and the shouts were in his head now, the police were really here, all this for me, and he punched Tyler again and stood up, the flames right on him now, trapping him in the corner...

Ben was showered in glass when the windows blew, and shrapnel flicked at his cheeks, adding to the wounds in his knee and ribs. The flames were all around him now, and his hair and eyebrows suddenly caught alight. He screamed and slapped them out, burning his fingers, but managed to beat the fire away. Got to get Natasha. If nothing else, save her.

He ducked, and putting all the pressure on his good leg, sprang forward, keeping low, and rugby tackled the chair, which crashed to one side, ripping the rope from one side of the wall but not the other, Natasha falling with a heavy crash. He couldn't see any of her body through the smoke, and hacked up another retching cough, his lungs full to bursting. There was another crash and more shouts, Clifton screaming now, and then he was there too, fumbling around for Natasha, wanting to save her from the prison *he* had created.

‘Fuck you,’ Ben shouted, and as Clifton crawled towards him, stupid bandanna still pulled down over his mouth, he shut his eyes and threw a punch right into Clifton's face, feeling the nose shatter from the blow, coming alive at the thought. Clifton disappeared in the flame.

‘Now for you,’ he croaked, and reached through the smoke for her, arms shielding her from the flame, and he found her leg bonds and ripped them off, his fingers burning hot, and there was another crash, flames escaping out the window, smoke in his eyes, and somehow he found her mouth and tore the gag away, and by some miracle she coughed and spluttered and held him tight, as he tore her arm shackles free, and she was out of the chair now, spreadeagled on the floor.

‘Where are they?’ J screamed as the policemen looked at each other and,

taking instinct over protocol, entered the fray. J watched aghast, interminable seconds passing by, until a body appeared in the doorway, carried by one of the cops, and J's heart sank when he saw it was Tyler, unconscious, blood pouring from his shoulder, burns on his face, a harlequin of soot and grime.

'Get the ambulance down here quick,' the cop shouted into the radio.
'What about Ben?' J cried. 'What about Ben?'

Ben couldn't move. His legs had given up on him and were lying limply across Natasha's. They were surrounded by fire that was eating at them. Natasha cried out as a finger of flame spat over her arm, and Ben threw himself on top of her, desperate to smother it, and his back caught fire and he screamed as he felt the flesh melting, black lines crossing his vision, and then growing bigger, opening wide, inviting him in, and he was grateful for it. A pair of hands appeared, and he reached for them, anything to hold onto, but he couldn't stretch far enough and they were gone, and the blackness grew and grew until he closed his eyes and let it swallow him whole, rolling over until he was flat on his back, and the darkness took hold.

This wasn't how it was supposed to be. Clifton cowered in the corner, faced by an intimidating wall of flame that blocked his path. There had never been anything like this. *My magnum opus*. And all for my girl. He wondered if she was safe, and wasn't even sure if it mattered any more. Of them all, *I* was the only one who was honest. Who told it like it was. Who had it right all along. He coughed, his eyes watering, not caring if it was from smoke or tears, his nose in agony from Ben's punch. He pulled his legs up to his chest as the fire encroached. He could have stood, tried to fight his way through, but found that he didn't want to. Not any more. Natasha had gone, had never really been anything but gone. But, he mused, it might not have been about that. It had been about making a stand. Letting them know that he wasn't someone they could walk all over, that he could be in control. He still had the power.

And it's a power you'll always have.

The flames kept on coming, and it was so hot now, his trousers beginning to burn. Yes, Mum. A power I'll always have. And now, we can share it together.

As the fire spread over him, he hoped she would be waiting.

Clifton Walker closed his eyes.

The shed exploded at 8:26pm, just as J had given up all hope of seeing his friend alive again. An ambulance had pulled up as Natasha had emerged, crying in a policeman's arms, the sound making J's throat go tight. Now a swarm of paramedics plagued the scene like ants, and the fire brigade were here too, and people were everywhere, and still no Ben, and J didn't want to face the fact that his friend might be dead, and he shouted to anyone who would listen that he was still inside, and then, impossibly, as the first jets of water streamed from the fire engines into the hole that remained of the shed, a

figure emerged, blinking into the night, dressed in yellow, a mask covering his face, and Ben was there, not moving or saying anything, and J was in tears as he ran to his friend, small and delicate, face black with soot, an arid, rancid smell rising from his body, but alive, alive, and as the last vestiges of the shed boomed high into the sky, he wept for Ben, for Natasha, for them all, as the emergency services kept on working the scene.

EPILOGUE

Ben opened his eyes to a wedge of light streaming through a window, warm on his face. He had just come out of a dream. He found he had many dreams, but could remember none of them with any clarity. Only that he had woken up sweating, with a cool hand of fear gripping his heart, and had been unable to sleep again, watching and thinking until the dawn.

This was what life was like now.

He sat up in bed, pulling the pillows down, wincing when they hit his bandaged back. That would never be the same again, either. After skin grafts, he would have a back lumped together from other parts of his body. Perhaps, Clifton, he thought, you and I were not so different after all.

‘Just five minutes,’ a voice said, and Ben took a moment to take in his surroundings. The hospital bed. He was still not used to it. Since the fire he had been in and out of delirium, not knowing where he was, seeing faces he couldn’t recognise, having doctors inspecting him, speaking to each other in hushed tones, and then he would be off, sailing on a sea of drugs again.

The curtain that separated his bedroom opened, and Mum and Dad came rushing in.

‘Oh, Ben,’ she said, leaning to kiss his forehead, tears starting already. She sat down and gripped his hand. Dad took the seat beside her.

‘How are you feeling, son?’ Dad asked.

Ben tried to speak, and all that came out was a low croak. He tried to move his leg and pain shot through his body. Even talking hurt. ‘What day is it?’

‘The 21st,’ Mum said, and he did a double take. He’d been out of it for nearly a week.

‘The doctors were *so* worried about you,’ she said. ‘We’ve been pacing the floors for days, waiting for you to come round properly. My poor baby.’

‘What the hell happened, son?’ Dad asked. ‘Sounds like all hell broke loose.’

It came rushing back in a flood, and Ben couldn’t speak. ‘Yeah, I guess it did.’

‘When we got here, you were in surgery. You’ve done your cruciate ligament on your knee, skin grafts on your back, stitches...’

Ben picked up a small mirror from the bedside cabinet. His face was a ruin of smudged bruises and scars. ‘Not pretty,’ he observed, but wasn’t as shocked as he expected. ‘What about the others?’

‘That’s typical you,’ Mum said, squeezing his hand. ‘Always thinking of everyone else. Well,’ and she shifted in her seat. Dad took her free hand. ‘That boy, Clifton. I’m sorry. He didn’t make it. When the shed exploded... well, he didn’t have a chance.’

Ben nodded. He felt no sorrow, but no joy either.

‘As for the girl, Natasha is it? Treatment for smoke inhalation, plus they kept her in to treat that head wound, but she was released a few days ago.’

And the other lad, he was in for a while, treated for shock and minor burns, and that injury to his shoulder, but he's OK too. It seems you came out of it worse off.'

He nodded again, and looked at their hands, Dad stroking Mum's palm. She noticed his gaze. 'Oh, Ben. What with everything...since you've been here, your father and I have been so worried. It's brought us closer together. So, we've decided to give it another go.'

Ben forced a smile. 'That's great.'

Dad cleared his throat. 'I know it's a long road back. I've got a lot to do to make it up to her, to you both. I know I haven't been there. But from now, we're going to help you get better, Ben. However long it takes. And in the future, who knows? Right now, the only focus is on you. Forget about next term. Convalesce, and then we'll talk about you going back next year. I'll have a job by then.'

So that was that. Everyone's mind already made up. 'What about Christmas?'

'Oh, don't worry about that,' Mum said. 'We'll postpone it until you're better.'

'Sure.' He moved his leg, gritting his teeth with the pain, and wanted to be alone, suddenly. People had lost their shine.

Mum took the hint and stood up. 'We'll leave you to sleep now. Get your rest. We'll be right outside if you need us. And when you're ready, you've got lots of people waiting to see you. Given us all quite a scare, you have.'

She kissed his hand, then Dad shook it, and they were gone. At the curtain she turned and smiled. He tried to go back to sleep, only falling to rest when the crying eventually stopped.

Next time he awoke, a young nurse stood over him, adjusting his bandages, refilling his water container. 'Sleeping beauty awakes,' she said, and smiled.

He nodded, and she filled a cup of water and passed it to him. The icy liquid chilled his throat. 'You feeling better?' she asked.

'A little.'

'Up for visitors? They're champing at the bit to see you. Mr Popular, you are.'

He shrugged. 'Whatever.'

'Only for half an hour or so,' she warned. 'You're still not a hundred percent.'

'No problem.'

He sat and waited, nervous as to who it might be, and then the curtain opened and his heart leapt as Natasha walked in, treading gingerly, and sat down. Her face was as bad as his, the bruise on her temple still massive, her ear bandaged, making her look faintly ridiculous.

'Hi, Ben.'

He had much to say, but couldn't find the words. 'Hi.'

‘How you doing?’

‘Oh, you know. Getting there. Won’t be running any marathons any time soon, though.’

She nodded, not able to look him in the eyes. ‘I was so worried. After they got me out of there, all I could think about was you, still trapped. You saved my life, Ben. That’s something I’ll never forget.’

‘Don’t mention it. Anything to save you from Clifton.’

She nodded. ‘I guess I got him all wrong, didn’t I?’

‘Well, you weren’t the only one. I never thought he’d go that far.’

They sat in silence, only one question in Ben’s head, and it went round a hundred times. Finally, he asked it.

‘How’s Tyler?’

Now she did look him in the eye. ‘OK. His shoulder’s still pretty messed up. He’s waiting outside.’

‘Didn’t want to face me, eh?’

She lowered her eyes and shook her head. ‘Not really, no. You know, after...well, *that*. He’s really hurt, Ben. And I don’t mean physically. He feels angry. And betrayed.’

Ben nodded. ‘Fair enough. I don’t feel proud about the whole thing, you know.’

‘Me either. But I don’t know what’s going to happen now. He’s the only guy I’ve really ever loved. And I still do, despite everything. What happened between me and you.... I can’t define it. It’s strong, I know that. But to be honest, most of the time I can’t stand you.’

‘Don’t hold back. Just say what you feel.’

She arched an eyebrow. ‘I’m sorry. My mouth runs away with me sometimes. But I think you know what I mean.’

He nodded.

‘So, my plan is to get away from everything for a while. Bristol seems a bit tainted to me now. Too many memories, and I can’t even begin to sort through them all. I need some time away, alone, so I can sort my head out. Tyler does too. Thank God for long holidays. But I should be back next term.’

‘Uh huh. Don’t think I will be. According to Dad, I need to “convalesce”. We’ll see, I guess.’

‘I guess we will. But I’ll see you, Ben.’ She smiled, and kissed him on the corner of his mouth. It hurt. ‘You take care, yeah?’

‘And you.’

‘Nat wants to see you,’ she said. ‘She’s outside. She *knows*, Ben. I’ve told her everything. No more lies. I think Clifton said that once.’

‘Only lucid thing that ever came out of his crazy mouth.’

But she was gone. He took a sip of water and when he looked back Natalie stood by the bed, clutching her handbag. She caught his eye and smiled, more beautiful than he remembered. ‘Hey Nat,’ he whispered.

She took a seat, but left his hand untouched. ‘You know, if you didn’t want to go on a date with me, all you had to do was say.’

He laughed, which turned into a cough. She passed him the cup of water. He drank deeply. 'I don't know what to say, Nat.'

'Me neither. I guess you're not the same Ben I thought you were.'

'Nat...'

'No, it's OK. Natasha's always been the best in our family. Always got what she wanted. Ever since we were kids. I should have known this would turn out the same.'

Ben stared at the wall. 'I can't explain what happened.'

'Then don't,' she said, her voice hardening. 'Just don't. You should be concentrating on getting better.'

He reached for her hand, but she moved them, folding them into her lap. 'Don't,' she repeated. 'I can't do this. Every time I see Natasha, I think of her with you. We're barely talking. How's that ever going to fade? Knowing that you went with her first? The fact is, it won't. And I can't pretend it will. Maybe in time, but I can't see it.'

'What about when I get better? A coffee or something. Dinner. Just to chat, catch up.'

'Maybe. But I can't make any promises. Not any more.'

'As long as it's not anything flame grilled,' he said.

But she didn't laugh.

After she had gone, a bout of tiredness came over him, and he fell into a long sleep. He woke at night, gasping for water, and switched the bedside lamp on.

'Hello, Ben.'

'Oh my God, Ames! You scared the shit out of me.'

She hugged him, the force of her making his body ache. Which was nothing compared to his heart.

'You and me both,' she said, brushing hair from her face. She looked different, somehow. Older. More tired.

'God. I can't believe it's you. How have you been?'

'A wreck. As soon your Mum told me what happened, I've been a mess. What on earth have you been doing?'

'Causing mayhem, it seems.'

'It's been in all the papers. J reckons you're a celebrity.'

'J, how is he?'

'Good. He finally got his date, he wanted you to know. Said it went, how did he put it, like a shed on fire.'

Ben smiled. 'Good for him.'

'That band of yours have been here, too. Eyeing up the nurses. Especially that Spanish guy, where did you dig him up from?'

Ben was grinning now. 'Rodrigo. Our bass player. The guy's a legend.'

'Hmm. He tried to work his magic on me. I told him I was taken.'

He nodded.

'But not by Robert, not any more. I couldn't be with him, not with you lying here like this. I was wrong, Ben. Wrong to break up with you. You're

the only guy for me, and I was stupid to even think otherwise. I love you.'

He knew he could reply the same, but it would be too easy. The union they had once had been broken, and nothing would mend it again. Too much had happened since. So he just smiled.

'Oh, and Derek said they'd postpone the next gig, until you're back on your feet. Give you time to get your voice back.'

'How decent of him.'

'Ben, talk to me. Tell me how you feel. Is there a chance for us? I know I've been rotten to you, but I was confused. I'm not anymore.'

He sighed. 'Honestly Ames? I don't think we can. I never stopped loving you, at least I don't think I did. But you dumped me, and I learned to live with it, and coming in here asking me to forget all that's happened, it's a bit unfair. I've moved on.'

'Moved on to a hospital bed.'

'Well, I never have been one for bright decisions. But I can't think about anything other than getting better, can I? At least, that's what everyone keeps telling me.'

A tear formed in the corner of her eye. 'You're right. As usual.' She got up to leave. 'I don't deserve you, that's what it is.'

'I never said that, did I?'

'Maybe not,' she said, wiping under her eyes. 'Maybe not.' And she turned and walked out, and Ben had the horrible feeling she was walking out of his life forever.

He lay back and waited for sleep to come, an interminable itching in his back. He thought of the fire, and of Tyler's face, and of Clifton in that bandanna, and Natasha, and found he couldn't make sense of any of it. There was a tapping at the glass, and a butterfly hovered in the pool of light from the lamp, a stunning blend of green and gold, and he wondered how long it had left, shining up the world with its beauty, and the sound of its flapping wings reverberated round his head.

He found the place without too much difficulty. As he parked the car and crossed the road, he wondered what the hell he was doing here. The cold wind sent tears into his eyes, and he drew the scarf tighter around his neck. He was used to tears, now. They came without warning, at all times of the day. In the supermarket buying groceries. At the hairdressers, sobbing into a basin as his hair was washed. Even whilst asleep. This was his punishment.

And today, he had undertaken the final hurdle. A certain peace had descended, knowing that finally he could rest. Live without fear. For his whole life, he had gone from one day to the next relying on anything to get him through. Blaming other people for his demise. Avoiding the reality even though it was staring him in the face. He was lonely, depressed, unable to think more than one day ahead. But at least, he thought, I'm alive.

He opened the door and descended a narrow flight of steps, having to bend down to avoid scraping the ceiling. The room was badly lit, and all he could make out was a group of figures sitting on a circle of chairs. He

crossed to a table behind them and poured a cup of coffee. I still can't get used to the taste, he thought. But I'm going to have to.

He took a vacant chair and sipped his coffee. Then a man with a deep rumbling voice began to speak. He was saying words, but none were puncturing his consciousness. He let his mind wander, thinking of his wife and son, hoping they were more at peace in death than he was in life. For he had failed them, spent years failing them with every step he took. He hoped, wherever they were, they could forgive him. That was all he lived for, and only in death, would he find the answer.

The man continued to talk, and he thought about the day he proposed to his wife, up on the bridge, having brought the ring earlier that day, hands shaking as the jeweller wrapped it for him. Checking his pockets a hundred times through dinner. Then her voice when she said the word he had been waiting for. He was crying now, the man's voice a far off rumble, and he thought of his son, and how much he had loved him when he first laid eyes upon his tender, sleeping frame. He wondered when he had felt anything like that since. The tears continued to flow, and he looked up to find that the man had stopped speaking, and everyone's eyes were on him, and a woman was smiling, urging him with her eyes to speak, and he couldn't, but knew he had to, so he cleared his throat, forcing the sobs back down, and opened his mouth to say the words he had been denying for years. It was a long road back, but this would be the first step.

'My name's Matthew,' he said. 'And I'm an alcoholic.'