

APPETITE

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RedDoor

Published by RedDoor
www.reddoorpublishing.com

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ISBN 978-1-910453-47-6

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

Cover designer: Clare Connie Shepherd
www.clareconnieshepherd.com

Typesetting: WatchWord Editorial Services
www.watchwordeditorial.co.uk

Printed and bound by Nørhaven, Denmark

For Marc

Chapter One

Monday 7th January

David

Looking down, resting awkwardly against a lamp post, David kept out of sight of the school for a little longer. He always did this. And he always spent the time hoping, after each blink, that his eyes would open to find the buildings blown up or the pavement underneath him bathed in a strange, pale light before it fell away, his body being sucked up into a spaceship full of friendly, intelligent (female) aliens. But the bomb never fell, the UFO never came. With appalling consistency, it always got to 8.45, the bell always began to ring and he always had to walk over the road and through the gates.

Even while he had been enjoying the coloured lights and comforts of the recent Christmas holidays, this had been on the edge of his mind, causing the same lingering sense of unease as a receding nightmare. When he wasn't imagining the destruction of the school or the convenient abduction of himself, he was watching. Watching grey trousers and grey jackets against grey concrete. A parade of uniform and uniformity marching steadily towards black gates holding black bags. And there, with blazers stretched across their backs, bunching up under the armpits and pulled taut across

the hips, were the fat kids. Winter coats hung open loosely. They rarely fitted properly anyway, but after Christmas? Well, you could just forget about buttons then. They were, as always, bringing up the rear, looking only at the ground as they lumbered towards the looming metal gates, some of them quickly finishing chocolate bars and bags of crisps as they walked, the actual cause of and the imagined cure for their misery scrunched up and tossed on to the pavement before they entered the playground.

I hate fat kids, thought David. Everyone hates fat kids. Or pities them. Which is even worse.

Watching them as they went through the school gates was like watching a grinding-machine at work. Hard cogs relentlessly turning, breaking things down, chewing them up. Once he stepped inside he was trapped: as far from home and its comforts as he would ever be.

Today, he thought, should be a good day. Today, I am feeling unusually angry. These days, the days when he felt this rage, were the easy ones. It was the sad days he found the hardest to bear. Days when the sadness was there when he woke up in the morning and followed him until nightfall like a weary shadow. The sadness was viscous, a tar pool that pulled at him, wanting to drag him under.

But today he was angry, and the edge that gave him made what lay ahead seem more tolerable.

The bell rang.

Crossing the invisible line that traced across the tarmac, he felt his back go rigid.

‘Hey, fat fuck!’

‘Who ate all the mince pies? Pretty bloody obvious from here...’

‘I didn’t think it was possible for you to get fatter, but Jesus...’

And it wasn’t just the older kids. The younger ones taunted him too. Taunted and laughed.

Automatically and unconsciously, David's shoulders hunched and his head went down. It was an attempt, no matter how futile, to minimise the space he filled. The rage, though it formed a hard carapace around his mind, was as ineffectual at protecting him from the verbal assault course he was enduring as the rounding of his shoulders was at disguising a simple fact. The simple fact that, of all the fat kids, he, David, was the fattest.

Three years ago, when David had started at the Rivenoak Academy, the existing group of fat kids had tried to welcome him into their ample arms. It hadn't taken long for their warmth to be frozen by his expansive cold shoulder. But it had taken David a while to figure out why they were so surprised that he hadn't wanted to join them. Surely, he had thought, on that first day, surely they understand how much I hate myself? How I can't bear to be around those who remind me of what I am?

But, after a few weeks, he had realised that they were even less self-aware than the other kids at this lower-end secondary school, and so he did a rare thing, and copied them by actively ignoring the fat ones.

Not that the other kids were worth giving the time of day to, either. Obsessed with themselves (and their selfies), the Diet Coke Crew were the same hard, shiny girls who had ignored him in the last year of prep school, and the Uncool remained as oblivious to their low status as they were aware of the latest tech developments. There were the BJ Boys, those already porn-addicted lads who hassled every girl within a three-mile radius for a blow job, and there were the Too Cool for School kids, those who were already tuned into the alleged appeal of adult life, just about hanging on until they could drop out.

There were various other sub-cliques, built around the standard riffs of emo and tech – and then there was David-and-James. The fattest and skinniest kids at the school, they

had been at the same prep school, a small co-ed in a nearby village. The f-word formed the latter part of both of their secondary school monikers. As James had observed in that first term: ‘The names don’t demonstrate much in the way of imagination, but they are evidence of at least average observational skills.’

‘And,’ David had added, a rare smile on his face, ‘unlike the interchangeable plastic girls and nerdy boys, at least we never get mistaken for one another!’

This first morning, with form time over, David hung back. This was something else he always did. As the other pupils left the science room that served as their form classroom this year, David glanced at his watch and, once everyone else had filed out, he went down the pale corridor and ducked into the nearby toilets. Stepping sideways into the cubicle like a crab, he unzipped the front pocket of his bag. Taking out the chocolate bar, he opened it: three big bites and it was gone. Perched awkwardly on the seat, he stared at the back of the toilet door, eyes glazed over as his mouth was filled with smooth chocolate and caramel. The toffee glued his tongue to the top of his mouth. Using the tip of it, he cleaned the thick sweet paste out of his teeth and gums. Then, he pulled a half-empty bottle of Coke out of his bag. Swigging back the lukewarm sugary liquid, he swirled it round his mouth like mouthwash, the acid and the bubbles helping to rinse away the chocolate. Then, with a sigh and lots of effort, he got up and manoeuvred awkwardly back out of the cubicle, leaving the toilets and going to join his first class of the day.

The history lesson was well under way.

‘Nice of you to join us, Mr Wallace...!’

Sitting down, he pulled his books out and tried to tune in to what the teacher was saying, but he was really only focusing on one thing: break-time.

It was the in-between places that were dangerous. The corridors as well as the toilets between classes. This was one of the reasons why David always avoided them, even if it meant being late. These unsupervised spaces and times were when David felt most vulnerable. Here, he could be insulted, jostled, jeered at or even, sometimes, just plain ignored. But, given his size, ignoring him was a very conscious and strangely aggressive act. David had found it was mostly the girls who did that.

Like an elephant approaching a watering hole, on edge and anxious but driven by hunger and thirst, David walked along the corridor towards the dinner hall as quickly as he could: head down, eyes scanning from side to side, warily alert, shoulders hunched, trying not to be noticed.

And, just as an elephant must experience relief when it sees a giraffe drinking at the edge of the lake, long neck stretched out, knees bent – another animal also taking a risk, leaving itself vulnerable – so did David when he saw James waiting for him outside the double doors. Nodding at each other by way of a greeting, they walked side by side into the already noisy hall.

‘I’m starving,’ James said, glancing back at his friend before he turned to scrutinise the school dinner counter.

David nodded in reply. One of the unspoken rules of being fat was that you never expressed any enthusiasm for food or eating.

The brushed aluminium gleamed dully under the hotplate lights. They were among the first in the queue today, so the food still looked appealing, having not yet begun to congeal beneath the heat.

David pushed his tray along the counter, and then, using the little steel shovel, he filled half of his plate with fat yellow chips. Chips: the cornerstone of almost every pupil’s meal. He smiled a little as James chattered away about the day’s options. This running commentary was one of the things that David loved about his friend. There was also the small fact that,

having known David since he was five, James was the only kid at the school who gave him the time of day.

‘I see we have pizza on offer today, our tasty Monday staple, as well as the ever-popular pasta bake with tuna. Good for those who want a side helping of dead dolphin on their conscience along with their luncheon. I think the broccoli looks great today, but – oh, sorry, Mrs Bevan...’ James glanced up and gave the freckled lunchtime assistant his broadest of broad grins ‘...I think someone really has overdone the carrots today!’ Reaching over, he picked one up delicately between his thumb and forefinger and added, ‘Look! This one’s as limp as my friend’s d—’

‘All right, mate!’ David interrupted, stifling a laugh. ‘Get a move on, Taylor, you’re holding up the line.’

They went through the payment till and then sat down opposite each other at the bank of tables closest to the wall at the back of the dining hall. The room was busy, the chatter and laughter of teens rising up to the greasy grey plastic tiles on the ceiling. The corner David and James had chosen was beneath a flickering fluorescent light, on the periphery of the lunch room as they were on the periphery of school life itself.

David hunkered over his plate, elbows resting on the table. The red plastic chair felt flimsy beneath him. Every day he had to try to eat without relaxing enough to let his full weight sink into the chair. Its base always sank with a comedy squeak as he sat down and, while James always ignored it, it was another reason for choosing a seat in the corner.

Alternating a forkful of the pasta bake (he always chose that as the portions were bigger – they made you go back for extra pizza and he hated having to do that) with a forkful of chips, David ate quickly, as he always did. The watery tomato sauce laced with flakes of tinny-tasting tuna had little flavour, but the processed food, assuaging something other than hunger, did not need to be savoured.

Between mouthfuls, he asked James, 'Ready for double science later?'

'Yeah,' James replied. 'Want to take a look at the work sheets?'

'Sure.' David shrugged, eyes averted, feeling both relieved and awkward. 'I can check that over for you...' Glancing up, he gave his friend a grateful smile and James grinned back.

They finished the rest of their meal in silence. The room was getting noisier now as other pupils came in to eat. Or, to not eat. For some of the girls (and more than a few of the boys), how long they could go without consuming anything other than Diet Coke was a competitive sport. James looked around idly and waited while David cleared his plate and then rapidly ate the first of two small pots of muddy brown chocolate mousse, each with a token swirl of bright white ersatz cream on top.

Another unspoken rule was that, to give him plenty of time, James always let David move first. He looked on neutrally as his friend used the table to steady himself and then swayed up to his full height.

Their goal at lunchtimes was always to get out of the dinner hall without incident: to leave the watering hole unscathed.

David walked towards the double doors, shoulders down and eyes on the floor as he went past the other tables. And, just as monkeys would quiet their chatter as an elephant lumbered by, so the buzz of conversation inevitably ceased as the boys passed. Those kids who didn't usually see David around school stared at him, their eyes wide.

The open doors were visible. The empty corridor stretched out ahead like a linoleum savannah. There was one more table to get past.

David felt something hit his back. Then something else. Cold, greasy chips began to shower against the back of his grey jumper, making a damp, soft thud as they hit the floor.

'Fucking fat fuck,' hissed one of the boys.

David turned to look. The boys themselves were averagely lean, averagely fit.

‘You still hungry, you fat fucker?’

‘Here! Have another chip!’

David could feel James pulling at his arm but something had rooted him to the spot. It wasn’t fear but fascination: fascination with how angry he and his size made them.

‘Leave us alone, eh, guys? Come *on*, David...’ James spoke quietly, still tugging on his friend’s arm.

There was a teacher nearby. With the pinched features of all women in their late forties who worked a little too hard to stay slim, she was looking on with an expression of sour amusement but also not looking or, at least, not seeing – a skill acquired from years of judging rather than asking. Her arms were tightly folded across her flat chest, hips jutting to the side in a trim, dove-grey A-line skirt as she stood propped against the wall. She didn’t move and her face made her thoughts very clear: the fat boy deserves that.

The whole table were hurling chips at David now, laughing and cat-calling. One of the boys stood up. He stared hard at James, who was still trying to pull David away.

‘Fuck off, skinny fuck. Let the fat fucker speak for himself.’

David was tall but this boy was taller. He poked David in the chest. Holding David’s eyes, he glanced down and then, looking back up, he made a big show of grinding the chips into the floor with the dirty sole of his scuffed shoes.

Holding the boy’s glare, David could see the hatred in his eyes. Behind the hatred was fear and anger. Fear of the fat, anger at David for being fat, for being there, for being there and for being fat. That fear was like a shy child that ran behind its mother’s legs at the sight of a stranger. Peeping and cowering, it believed itself to be hidden but was completely visible.

David bent down awkwardly. Picking a handful of gritty squashed chips off the floor, he stood up and looked straight into the eyes of the boy opposite him. Opening his lips wide,

he put the dirty, cold food in his mouth. Shock rippled over the boy's face, a wave of disgust and terror. The laughter stopped. David chewed, slowly and deliberately, all the while holding the other boy's gaze.

Then, as he turned and walked away, he thought, You might hate me but, believe me, I will always hate myself more.

Naomi

Looking up, one hand shielding her eyes from the low early-morning sun, Naomi pointed with her index finger and sketched an outline over the tree.

'I want it cut back and I want it cut back hard,' she said. 'The birds, the noise, the mess. I can't stand it. I know it will take a while and, with the work that's needed round the back, I'm expecting you to be here for at least a week, but *this...*' she gestured at the tree again, a dismissive and impatient flick of her fingers '*...this* is the priority.'

Naomi's tone was the same clipped, no-nonsense one that she used to get James, and Scott, up and out of the house every morning. The lack of eye contact was also deliberate. Eye contact meant connection and connection meant conversation. There was no time for such niceties in her morning routine, especially when that routine was already being interrupted by this appointment. There was also the small fact of her embarrassment: she didn't know this man's name. He had been recommended by someone at work and, busy, she had just saved him in her phone as Tree Man.

Lowering her hand, Naomi turned, looking properly at Tree Man for the first time.

He was not looking at her. Instead he was staring at the tree with an unusual degree of intensity.

What Naomi on the other hand was staring at was his thick forearms. His broad shoulders and tanned skin made it

obvious that he worked outside for a living, and the morning light was catching the blond hairs on his arms. She noticed the way his wrists narrowed as they met long-fingered hands.

There was a cough and, vaguely aware of a voice saying, ‘Mrs Taylor? Mrs Taylor?’ Naomi snapped back to the present. And back to herself. Or, rather, back to the self that didn’t stare at the muscular forearms of men ten (fifteen, her mind jeered) years younger than herself.

Making a big show of looking at her watch, Naomi squeezed her hands together, a frown deepening the lines that ran across her forehead.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘I need to go. You said you can fit me in soon? Fine. Just make sure it’s all done as I’ve outlined.’

Smiling at Naomi, Tree Man said, ‘Have a good morning. In a few weeks’ time, you’ll barely recognise her.’

Then, looking back up at the tree, he reached out his hand, and placed it gently on the gnarled trunk. Naomi raised her eyebrows, surprised by the tenderness in the gesture. When was the last time someone had touched her like that? Dismissing the thought, and with one last glance at Tree Man (who, with his sandy hair, warm blue eyes and *those* arms would now be known in her mind as *Sexy* Tree Man), she climbed into her black Land Rover and pulled out of the gravel drive.

The 7.57. The seat by the window. The third carriage from the front. The same people in the same places wearing the same expressions. Monday mornings were always the quietest: a stunned silence seemed to be the only appropriate response to the fact that it was the start of the working week. This was further exacerbated by the fact that it was the first full week back after the Christmas break. The media proclaimed the most miserable day of the year to be in mid-January but, judging by the expressions around her, it might as well have been today.

Naomi had placed her laptop bag in the overhead rack and now sat, phone out, scrolling through her emails, getting prepared for the day ahead. Tapping open her planner, she saw the note about the Tree Man coming at 6.45am. A flush flared on her cheeks and there was a tingling between her legs as the image of his arms and hands filled her mind briefly and intensely. Crossing them, she thought how ridiculous she must have appeared, gazing at him like a schoolgirl.

Staring harder still at her diary, she tried to will the image away. It didn't work.

She knew what the day held without even seeing the details: meetings, more meetings and yet more meetings. Maybe one of them would be productive. A one-out-of-three strike-rate seemed to be the best she could hope for at VitSip. Early attempts to energise the lumbering decision-making process had proven fruitless. Ha! she thought sourly. A bit like our new drinks range...

Scanning over the details of the mid-morning production meeting, she saw the name J. Winters on the attendance list and her mouth tilted into a more optimistic curve: his was a name she had become aware of while at her previous company. Bold and demanding, Jonathan Winters, VitSip's managing director, had been responsible for VitSip's last drinks launch. That launch had seen her old company's market share plummet by an unprecedented five per cent and was also one of the reasons why she was now here and not there. Swiping the diary screen away, she went on to her favourite finance site and began to scan the headlines.

This is what one is meant to do on the way to the office, she told herself: absorb the latest stock market information. Not daydream about Sexy Tree Men...

As the journey progressed and people began to feel the benefits of their station-bought lattes, a few conversations began. Someone mentioned a TV programme that Naomi had also seen and really enjoyed. She half turned round to say something

but, suddenly wary of interrupting, she went back to her silent phone. She never had been very good at making friends.

Staring at the headlines, Naomi was as oblivious as the train itself to the sparse beauty of the countryside as they progressed from the rural outskirts of Rivenoak to the industrial estates lining the flat, grey river which cut across this edge of the county. Travelling out to an anonymous building at the rougher end of East Kent had initially felt like a backward step for Naomi. She missed the bustle of the City, the sharp suits and even sharper elbows at the ticket gates, but even she had to admit that being under half an hour away from home rather than well over an hour was a bonus. What she found harder to admit, and what she was only just realising a few months in, was how much she missed the social side of her previous job. With no local bars or restaurants, with most people driving, there was no excuse for a quick drink after work or an impromptu night out.

Although she was at least fifteen years older than the average person who had attended those evenings, she had always felt that she could hold her own with the younger members of staff, prided herself on it in fact, but then there had been that time... Her mind resisted the memory. When the offer of a sideways move to another, expanding company in a less glamorous locale but much closer to home had come up, Naomi had been relieved to have the excuse to move on.

Standing and ready to disembark before the train had even pulled into the station, Naomi pressed the button impatiently as she always did and then walked quickly across the platform, her heels clicking smartly on the concrete. She loved that sound. Brisk, efficient, it set the tone for her whole day.

Crossing the road without looking, she walked through the glass double doors into VitSip HQ.

Waiting in the small staff kitchen for the kettle to boil, Naomi loaded her cup with a heaped teaspoon of coffee and, after

a tentative sniff at the top of the carton, added a dash of skimmed milk. There was a coffee machine in her office but she liked to come in here. Any manager worth their salt knew that the best gossip always came out in the kitchen. It didn't do to seem too distanced from the more junior members, to seem too aloof. After nearly fifteen years as a manager, Naomi knew the value of being seen rinsing out your own coffee cup.

She also knew the value of getting in early enough to avoid most of them before they got in. The sales teams would be hungover and grumpy and some of the managers would be too. One too many glasses of red wine with Sunday lunch was as big a cause of the Monday blues as too many lagers or bottles of WKD on a Saturday night.

Back in her office, she attached the laptop to her monitor and keyboard and sipped her coffee while the machine started up. Leaning back on her chair, she stretched her legs out a little, widening her toes out against the hard, shiny leather of her shoes. Opening up the technical documents she needed to review before her first meeting, she got to work.

An hour or so passed before she got up to refill her mug. Animated chatter filled the corridor now as people were arriving and settling into the working week.

Settling in slowly, thought Naomi. Ever so slowly.

Hiding her impatience at the sight of a queue for the kettle, Naomi gave a cheery smile and stood, by the wall, waiting. After a few polite greetings, the few people there began chatting among themselves. Naomi did her best to not look as excluded as she felt.

Sitting back down at her desk with a sigh and glancing at her watch, she knew that she should make best use of the half-hour before her first meeting by preparing for the next one but, having done an hour's work already, she just didn't feel like it. From behind the glass windows of her office she watched people as they walked past in groups of twos and threes, chattering, sharing their experiences of the weekend.

Just as she was about to force herself to open up the files she needed, a light voice called her name from the doorway. 'Naomi! Hi. How was your weekend?' Naomi looked up. It was Carla, the marketing assistant who had also joined VitSip just before the end of the previous year.

'Hello there!'

'Can I come in?'

Naomi felt the guilt of knowing she should be working tug at her, but not as hard as the need for chatter and distraction. 'Sure! Come on in!' She moved over to the pair of small sofas that filled the far corner of her office, near the sideboard with the coffee machine. 'I'll turn this thing on,' she said, going over to the coffee machine and pulling a few of the metallic-topped capsules out of the tray. 'The trick,' she continued, as Carla took a seat on the pale blue sofa, 'is to always carry a file about with you. That way you always look as if you're on your way to something or to someone *about* something. Even a piece of paper is enough... You just need something in your hand!'

Carla laughed and sat back. 'Oh, God, this sofa is so comfy. How do you not just curl up on here and go to sleep?'

All of a sudden the younger woman yawned. Her brown eyes widened with embarrassment as she tried to cover her mouth with her hand.

'Tired?' said Naomi, bringing two coffees over.

'Yeah, a bit,' said Carla, as she yawned again.

Naomi looked at her. She looks a bit pale, her skin a bit dull, she thought. The girl's eyes sparkled as she chattered, though. Before you hit thirty, Naomi thought, hangovers can still be got away with. Just.

'Well, you know, it was meant to be just the one! The Bloody Marys at this bar near us are ace but then we had another and then we stayed for lunch and before we knew it we were at the late-opening pub and dancing till midnight. Seemed like a good idea at the time! We have this plan, you know, to avoid the January blues by pretending it's still

Christmas until at least March. You should have seen Mike this morning, though. He looks so much rougher than me.'

'I remember you both dancing at the New Year thing!' Naomi said, sitting down. 'And why not? You've got to make the most of it. Now everyone's married and had kids we never get to go dancing any more. Most of the fortieth parties we've been to over the last few years have been pretty sedate. Everyone organises daytime things to accommodate the kids, or they get so excited about being out that they're plastered by 8.30 and in bed by 10!'

Carla laughed again. That was the other thing that Naomi liked about the younger woman: she was always laughing. That's something else, she thought, that I seem to do much less now. When *was* the last time she had really laughed?

'Oh, and it was just so funny... One of our friends is planning her thirtieth. She wants to make cocktail ice lollies and Mike got a bit carried away with creating a marketing campaign for what he called "sticky boozy popsicles". He is hilarious sometimes.'

Carla ran her hand through her dark brown hair and finished her coffee. Putting the mug on to the low coffee table, she said, 'We're both looking forward to that pub lunch in a few weeks, too. Thanks so much for inviting us!'

'Oh, well, it won't be anywhere near as much fun as dancing till the early hours but it should still be good... We go every month. I love the food and, even more, I love not to cook!'

'We both enjoy a roast dinner. Open fires, red wine – sounds great to me!'

Carla's enthusiasm had been the thing that had come across most during the induction programme they had shared and it was that, as well as the younger woman's open nature, that had led Naomi to get to know her a little. Also, it was just so refreshing to talk to someone who didn't have a family yet. She and her husband Mike had only been married for a year or two

and, while Carla had talked in the past about their plans to start a family, she was still very much more into the latest box-sets and music than pushchairs and school catchment areas.

The younger woman was still chattering on about her weekend, but Naomi glanced at her watch

‘Sorry,’ she said, standing up. ‘I’m going to have to go to this meeting now.’

‘Cool, OK. Maybe catch you later? We could have lunch or coffee...’

‘Sure,’ Naomi said, smiling at the girl’s relaxed tone. ‘I’d like that. Oh, and if you need the details about that pub lunch again let me know, otherwise we’ll see you there. The table will be booked under my name.’

Matthew

Matthew knew he was in trouble the moment he walked into the staff room and saw all the zombies. His friends, Solange and Jim, were nowhere to be seen. Instead, everywhere he looked, there were the Undead.

‘Is it really the first day back already?’ said one, from deep within a faded armchair.

‘I know...’ groaned another.

‘Uggghh,’ came from across the room.

The silence in between the groans was resigned and resistant, the air thick with the collective sighs of people who had long ago lost their hunger for anything other than sweet tea and biscuits. Matthew had taken several deep breaths as he had approached the staff room and now he exhaled: determined to be cheerful, to set the right tone for the first day back, he called out, ‘Morning!’ with all the energy he could muster.

His cheeriness startled the zombies. Some of them turned to look at him, eyes hollow and angry, confused. What was all this noise for? Why was he so *happy*?

Matthew went to check the noticeboard. Picking his way over the outstretched legs and slumped chair-bound bodies, he asked one, 'How were the holidays for you? And your family?'

'Terrible...' the zombie muttered back. 'Spent the whole of Christmas on the M11 with the kids trying to kill each other in the back. Bloody kids. You think the ones here are hard work – try going home to them too. Bloody nightmare.'

'I thought Christmas was more fun with kids?' asked Matthew, undaunted.

'Ha!' the zombie exhaled sourly. 'Not a bit of it. They argue over what they got, or want something they didn't get. Ungrateful little shits, the pair of them. Rest of the family's no better, mind...'

The zombie stared back down into his tea-filled mug. Others nearby roused themselves to nod in agreement.

'Well, I went travelling in Brazil...' Matthew said. 'For a few weeks. The children there don't even really get presents at Christmas. It's just all about family and being together. I spent the whole of Christmas Day eating this incredible meal, everyone just talking and sharing. One of the best days of my life, actually.'

'Gggnnngggh,' said the zombie, staring up at Matthew with dead eyes.

'I went to Brazil once,' piped up an older, female zombie.

'Oh, where did you go? Did you get to visit any of the food markets? What did you think?' said Matthew, hoping to spark some conversation and going over to where she was propped up against the sideboard by the kettle, staring into the steam as if the mist contained a message about the meaning of this Monday morning.

'Hated it,' she intoned back, dully. 'Smelly, awful place. Got sick. Never went back.'

'Oh,' said Matthew, stepping back slightly, feeling his spirits finally drop. He glanced around with a sense of rising panic. Surely he wasn't being sucked back into the mire of

teaching misery after a mere – he glanced at the clock – seven minutes? His heart sank, heavy as his bags full of books.

The bell went. The zombies groaned again, a low murmur of misery. They began to shift and shuffle towards the door.

Keeping well back, Matthew watched them and then, once they had left, he followed.

Walking across the playground, he shifted the bags on his shoulder and, seeing the groups of girls ahead of him, braced himself. Very early on in his career, Matthew had realised that the only thing more difficult than being a science teacher at a secondary school was being a science teacher at a secondary school who looked as though he might once have been in a boy band. With his thick, wavy dark hair and blue eyes, Matthew had the kind of clear-skinned, square-jawed and symmetrical face that seemed specially designed to appeal to teenage girls. Recently reaching and then passing thirty had only seemed to make it worse.

He ran the gamut of lisped and drawled ‘Morning, sir’s and full-vowelled ‘How are you, sir?’s and ‘How was your holiday, sir?’s with a carefully cultivated air of uninterest that he never pulled off quite as effortlessly as he hoped he would.

As the calls, laughter and chatter continued across the playground, Matthew, despite his good mood, braced himself. Even on bright-sunshine, blue-sky Monday mornings such as this one, there were dark journeys being undertaken by men and boys all over the world, and Matthew was just beginning his own.

At the end of the school day, Matthew sat clutching the edges of his desk, like a man thrown overboard clinging to a piece of driftwood in a dark sea. He had been buffeted all day. The deadening complaining of his colleagues and the post-Christmas hysteria of some of the kids, as well as the even more alarming sour sullenness of the rest, who, having got all

they could possibly want, still wanted more, had taken its toll already. And this was just the first day back, he thought, trying not to give in to the panic.

His phone buzzed. A message from Solange. *Let's go!* Typical French use of the imperative, thought Matthew, smiling a little. Only the trainee teachers worked late on the first day back. For everyone else – well, for the holy trinity that was him, Sol and Jim – there was a very particular ritual for this particular day: the pub.

He felt a twinge of anxiety. He had always thought that he would enjoy talking about his Brazil trip when he returned, had imagined the conversations and the fascinated reactions as he told his family and friends about what he had experienced. But his mother had responded to the photos with a muted, 'Very nice, dear. Did I tell you that the week we always wanted at the timeshare in Greece has finally become free?' and, given the response he had received this morning in the staff room, maybe it was best kept to himself after all. Like a masterpiece stored in the vaults by a billionaire businessman, the memories seemed to be diminished through sharing, and were best enjoyed alone.

Opening his desk drawer, he carefully lifted something out: *Brazil.*

Coming in last week to drop off paperwork, he had brought the brochure with him, placing it gently on top of all the desk-drawer detritus.

Using the tips of his fingers, he looked through it for a few moments. Stuffed full with leaflets and cards from bars and shops as well as his own notes and scribbles, the brochure had served as the written journal of the trip. Now it was his touchstone. Sure, the photos had gone on to Facebook and Instagram, but this pack, the pack that he had carried around with him the whole time, was the most poignant physical reminder of the trip.

She had given it to him. It was what had sparked that first conversation, a simple conversation that had resulted in a truly

life-changing trip. Life-changing even though she hadn't taken it with him. Matthew closed his eyes, the sour memory of the day he had just lived through now replaced with a memory of an even sourer one.

'You'll never do it.'

Lucy had said that. Standing in the hallway of his little flat, her arms folded and her eyes narrowed. 'Now I'm leaving, you'll *never* go. That's just you all over: all talk and no action.'

'I will, you'll see,' he had replied, arms folded too, trying to look determined even though his lower abdomen felt strangely watery, having just liquefied at the prospect of a solo backpacking trip around Brazil.

'I won't see,' she had spat out, turning to the door. 'I've changed my status already and I've unfriended you. I don't *want* to know anything else about your pointless little life. It's over.'

You'll never do it.

She had tossed the gauntlet down on the worn blue carpet of his hallway as she left, the door slamming angrily behind her. The same worn blue carpet where they had frequently enjoyed equally angry sex in the six months they had been dating. She had always seemed quite angry with him. Matthew had never understood why, but it did mean that the sex had been great. Her resentful passion for him had been matched only by her passion for change, for doing something different. He had heard from a friend that she was in Africa now, working hard to help educate girls there. She had thought his job teaching Kent kids was pointless.

But perhaps, he thought, something she said had had an impact after all. When she left, he had gone ahead, sorted out every aspect of the trip alone – alone except for the echo of those four words. Not that he had told anyone about that. The fear, the intense anxiety about taking the trip alone...he had hardly been able to admit that to himself, let alone anyone else.

Staring at the page open in front of him now, he looked at his neat, spidery notes all around the margins. He loved

the internet, but there had been something satisfying about jotting things down in his own handwriting. Here, in the pages detailing local food specialities, he had written the Brazilian words for his favourite types of local beer and food. Bringing his nose to the page, he felt that if he inhaled hard enough he could still smell the *baião-de-dois*, the *tacacá*. Closing his eyes, he could almost taste the way in which every fresh ingredient, spice and herb worked in perfect harmony to create something that was so simple and yet so vibrant.

Having been able to take additional leave in the quieter month of December, as part of his credits for having done five years at the school, he had been able to stay in Brazil for nearly a month. It had almost been long enough. He suspected that if he had stayed longer he would never have come back. Not only was it beautiful, it was just so *alive*. Everything and everyone had seemed so vital and vivid there, unlike here with the grey skies and grey paths and grey faces. He had been inspired, had been shown how life could be traditional yet modern, relaxed yet productive, positive without being irritating.

He flicked over: the next page showed the lush green of the yet untamed forests that formed so much of that country. On here, among the wildness, he had written down the name and address of the girl he had met there.

Andrea. Andrea, who had taken him out on to the river. He didn't need to close his eyes to summon that image: the image of her, of that fateful afternoon, was for ever branded on his mind. She had shown him how big food companies were tainting the lives of the disadvantaged there. How the food and drink manufacturers took fizzy drinks and snack food on boats out to the poorest districts; how they paid people to peddle the specially designed small, cheaper portions of high-sugar, high-fat snacks in the most desperate parts of the cities and towns. He had helped her. He had leafleted, picketed, got involved...had felt fired up with passion and energy. But now, now that he was back, change began to seem less possible. The

mountain of preparatory coursework he'd been sure he would feel refreshed enough to tackle upon his return had nearly killed him in the few days since he had been back, and still wasn't finished. And now, on the first day, he could already see how easy it would be to get sucked back into that stultifying routine of long, deadening days followed by nights in the pub to numb it all.

How to say no, he wondered. How to say I've changed. How to say I want more than this. And, how to admit I have no idea how to go about it...

It sounded so absurd but that was what he hungered for: to feel as if he was *actually* making a difference. He had thought, long ago, that teaching might do it, but now, several years in, that idealism had faded.

'Matthew!' called a voice from the doorway. 'Come on!'

It was Solange. Slender arms folded, just as Lucy's had been when she had left, but with an oval face, framed with long dark hair, that was relaxed and smiling warmly. Hastily he put the brochure back in the drawer.

'What was that?' asked Solange.

'Oh, nothing,' said Matthew, still seated. 'Nothing...' After all the talking and shouting he had had to do throughout the day, he didn't feel like talking about anything right now, let alone the trip. Being here, where everything already felt hard, rather than there, where anything had seemed possible, just made him feel incredibly sad. 'Actually,' he said, glancing across at her from his desk and then looking back down, 'I really need to catch up. I'm so behind already. Do you mind if I leave it tonight?'

Solange uncrossed her arms and looked at him, brow creasing, and concern in her large, light brown eyes. 'Are you OK?'

'Yeah, honestly I am. I just, you know, I still feel a bit jet-lagged...'

His words tailed off. He had always been a bad liar.

‘*Pas grave,*’ she said, slipping into her native tongue. ‘Friday?’

‘Yes, definitely.’

‘*D’accord. A bientôt!*’

He had never lied to Solange before, but he hoped she would understand.

She left, closing the door behind her, and as soon as it clicked shut he took the brochure back out of the drawer and went back to where he once had been.

Naomi

It was 6.30. That hissing sound could only be the kettle going on for a post-commute herbal tea.

6.31: a grunted, ‘Hello,’ from the kitchen table followed by the regulation two minutes of reluctant chat with James about his school day and the evening’s homework.

‘What is it today?’ Naomi asked, beginning to take things out of the fridge for supper.

‘French and maths.’

‘Ah. Your favourites! *Très bien! Tu aimes...*’ She hesitated.

‘*Mes devoirs, maman. Or tes devoirs* if you’re saying it to me...’ James replied quietly.

As Naomi poked about in the fridge, she couldn’t see James as he mouthed: *I really should dig out those French CDs your dad got me for the car...*

‘I really should dig out those French CDs your dad got me for the car,’ said Naomi as she closed the fridge door.

‘Uh-huh.’

Naomi turned and smiled at James, who was now looking down at his books. She knew she was lucky that James just got on with his homework. And luckier still that he seemed to enjoy it. She gave herself credit, however, for the fact that she had never allowed him to watch television after school even

when he was small, so he had never developed the habit that so many of his friends had of slumping in front of a screen for hours before then having to tackle the work. The routines she had always followed had helped him, she believed.

Naomi began to chop the onion and then diced the red pepper and tore the spinach. The chicken breast was next, on a special board for raw meat.

Ingredients prepared, Naomi looked in the cupboard and pulled out a jar of curry sauce and two pouches of pre-cooked rice. This mixture of convenience and fresh was her solution to the challenge of cooking every day. If someone were to tell her how much salt and sugar was in that jar she would have been appalled, but it was an expensive brand and had the words Low Fat emblazoned on it. She tended not to think about it much further than that.

6.45. Dinner was half ready so the next thing now was to go and get changed before, at 7, going back downstairs to finish her tea and then pour a glass of something a bit more exciting. First she needed to text Scott quickly to see exactly what time he would be back from work. His position as associate director at an architecture recruitment consultancy had always meant long hours, but usually they were flexible ones. Having settled down to a calmer routine for a while, his working hours had increased again in the last six months as business had begun to improve. More business meant more interviews and more clients, but also that more consultants were needed. Scott was having to get involved with the day-to-day task of interviewing on behalf of clients as well as co-ordinating a recruitment drive for the company itself. He had reassured her that it was only a temporary return to longer hours – a promise she hoped he would keep this time.

Text sent, Naomi went upstairs to get changed out of her clothes and into a pair of leggings and a comfortable jumper. It always felt good to get out of her work things. The fitted

skirts and tailored blouses were necessary but restricting. And she liked the way her legs looked in leggings – being tall, she had always been happy to show them off. Frowning at her face in the mirror, she tried and failed to dismiss the next thought: Especially with the way your face is going...

Pulling her skin back, she tried to erase the lines from around her mouth and eyes. She raised her eyebrows to smooth out her forehead a little. Scott had got so angry, last year, when she had talked about Botox that she hadn't dared to mention it again, but at least once a week she stared at herself and fantasised about her face being plumped out, the lines and years smoothed away.

With a sigh, she moved away from the full-length mirror and walked along the cool corridor to her study. The computer was already on so she quickly opened up her emails. Nothing new. Clicking on her junk mail folder, she saw there were a few messages from the social network that she had joined a year or so ago. With a glance at the clock, she opened up a browser and logged in. It took three goes before she got her password right. How long had it been since she had looked at this?

Scrolling down the page, there were endless photos, links, videos. God, she thought, who has time to look at all this stuff?

Frowning at the unfamiliar screen, she clicked on the red flags in the corner. *You have two Connect requests*, the message said. One was from a woman at the school who she had got chatting to at Christmas, and one was from a Mike Burnham.

Burnham? she thought. Mike Burnham? Who is that?

Oh, she realised. Mike. Carla's Mike. Of course.

She clicked on *Accept* for both of them and then went back to scrolling through the feed, vaguely curious but also not at all surprised at how little she had missed, despite having not been on here for nearly six months.

There was a beep.

Slightly startled, Naomi looked around for her phone, but it wasn't that. A little box had popped up on the screen.

Hey Naomi, it read, welcome to my friends list!

It was Mike.

Smiling, she tapped back, *Hi there – thanks! How are you?*

Very well, thank you. You?

Yes, she replied, *very well. Busy as usual!*

Ah, the reply came back. We're looking forward to seeing you on Sunday...

Yes, she said. *Me too!*

Bye for now ☺

Smiling to herself but unsure of how to add a smiley face, she just typed *Bye!* and then logged off.

Back downstairs, she saw that she had had a text back from Scott. He'd be home in half an hour. Glancing up at the clock, she said, 'Dinner's at 7.45, James. Please make sure the table is clear by then.'

6.57. Three minutes ahead of schedule but close enough, she thought, and, pouring her glass of cold white wine, she went to watch the news.

After thirty minutes of twenty-year-old sex scandals, soaring house prices and the bad weather that was coming soon, she went back into the kitchen. She clicked the gas on underneath the wok, ready to cook Monday night's wok-fried curry and rice.

James was tapping away on his phone.

'If you're done, can you clear it all away now, please?' Naomi asked.

'Uh-huh.'

Still staring at his phone, James began to pile all the books up and push them over on to the far side of the pine table.

'Away, I said, not just piled up in the corner! You know how much I hate that... Come on...'

Naomi tried not to sound exasperated but she was hungry now and getting irritable. Picking up a piece of half-cooked

red pepper, she popped it back in the pan and added the sauce. As it sputtered, she popped pouches of white rice into the microwave and set the table.

James lifted his elbows as she set the places around him.

Sighing again, Naomi put glasses and the water jug on to the table.

‘Can I have Coke, Mum? Please...’

‘Oh, OK. But just one glass before your dad gets back...’

James leapt up and poured himself a pint of Coke. Naomi went to say something about the size of his glass but bit her tongue.

The front door clicked as Scott came in and, doing a ‘Drink up!’ gesture to James, Naomi threw the spinach into the curry and stirred.

‘Hello!’ said Scott cheerfully as he came into the room. ‘Something smells good!’

Naomi was tearing open scalding hot pouches of rice and, without looking up, said, ‘It’s ready! Sit down!’

She had always taken great pride in the fact that they shared their evening meal. Never missed the opportunity to mention it and always mentally added it to the *doing OK* column whenever she felt doubtful about her parenting skills. The articles she read online went on so much about the benefits of eating together as a family, and she had that box well and truly ticked.

James and Scott sat down in the same places they had sat for the thirteen and a half years since James had been weaned in his yellow plastic high chair. Naomi placed the warmed plates full of food on to the table and then sat down too.

James started to add salt.

Naomi said what she always said: ‘James! Taste it first, please!’

Scott said what he always said: ‘Looks great.’

Naomi asked what she always asked: ‘Good day?’

Scott replied what he always replied: ‘Not bad.’

Scott asked James what he always asked: ‘How was school?’

James replied the way he always replied: ‘Not bad.’

They all smiled at each other, as they always did at that.

Then they carried on eating.

As soon as the meal was over, James said, ‘May I get down?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Pushing his chair back, James grabbed his phone off the side and went upstairs. Homework done, meal eaten, that would be the last they saw of him until the morning.

Scott got up too. ‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘I still have work to do.’

‘Oh, OK...’

Naomi began to clear away the plates and glasses. With the kitchen tidy, but not wanting to go and sit on her own in the living room, she went back upstairs. Sitting there at the computer, sipping a honey-sweetened mint tea, she logged back in to the social site she had visited earlier. Such a curious thing, she thought, the way people announced so much of what they were doing; announced every passing thought in their heads. Very few of her own friends were on here and, even if they were, they weren’t that active. She knew a lot of people with older kids went on the site to keep an eye on what they were up to; she also knew that the kids made sure whatever they were getting up to was happening elsewhere. Though they were probably not up to much. Despite all the media hysteria about teens and sexting and porn, the teen years didn’t seem that different now from when she had been a girl. Boys talking about sex and not really having it and girls pretending to talk about something else and also not really having it. Even so, none of this stopped Naomi from being relieved that James, at fourteen, was still more interested in computer games than girls.

Opening up another browser, she read some news pieces and then sat staring into space. Why was she sitting here? She should go back downstairs, but with Scott working and James in his room she didn’t really feel like it.

‘I must find a new book to read,’ she said out loud to herself, and, tapping into Amazon, she began to scroll through the list of the latest bestsellers, adding a few to the online shopping basket. Something caught her eye: the other tab was flashing. *Mike has messaged you.*

Smiling, she clicked on it and saw the message. *Hello again. What are you up to?*

Book shopping! she typed back, glad to be able to say that, rather than have to admit she had been reading celebrity gossip.

Interesting. What are you reading?

Well, I’ve just finished one, so nothing right now... I need to think about what I want to read next.

I wish I had the time to read.

Well, she teased, spend less time online!

Hey!

She suddenly felt anxious: maybe he hadn’t realised she was joking? Hastily she typed back, *I was only joking!*

Ha! It’s OK! I am easily distracted. YouTube is a strange and powerful force.

I never look at that! she replied.

Oh, it’s great – I’ll send you a couple of links. Lure you to the dark side ;)

Haha – you can try!

Sounds tempting...

There was a pause. She raised her eyebrows. Was he flirting with her or was she imagining it?

Right. The lovely Carla is calling, he typed.

Carla. Of course.

Bye for now xx

Night.

And, after a pause, she added a few ‘x’s. Logging off, she went downstairs.

Chapter Two

Thursday 10th to Tuesday 15th January

David

It was a chilly mid-January Thursday morning. David's room was still dark but warm and stuffy. The central heating had clunked on at 5.30am. Before he had moved out, Gary had always preferred the house to be the same temperature as his bed before he got out of it, and Kerri didn't know how to reset the boiler.

As usual, David's head ached. In fact, all of him ached. His head, his back, his legs, even his skin. Every day started with this all-over ache. Every day started with feeling tired, with this exhausting battle to leave the bed, leave the room. But if he left it too late he would have to catch the bus and that was a fate worse than death so, heaving himself up, he got out of bed and began to get dressed.

As he tied his black school tie in the smeared glass of the bathroom mirror, his eyes met his reflection for what would be the first and last time that day. There was a frown creasing his forehead, a visible sign of the ache behind his flat brown eyes, and this deepened further as he pulled his right cheek to reveal a fresh crop of spots around the corner of his mouth. Knocking the white heads from off their rounded tops, he pulled at his

left cheek. He didn't need to shave yet but the skin around his jaw was beginning to darken as the hair follicles beneath the skin thickened. His body and face seemed alien to him. Changing all the time; he could not seem to get a fixed hold of himself. Running the thin black plastic comb through his hair, he went to brush his teeth, eyes now averted from the mirror.

Walking down the stairs, he tried to ignore not only the ache behind his eyes but also the nagging pains in his knees and lower back. At least, he thought, I know what old age feels like. Another reason to be pleased I'll probably never get there...

Jessica and Emily were dressed already and looked smart, as they always did, in their white shirts with neatly knotted red and grey striped ties and the grey pinafore and red cardigans of the spring term. They were watching TV and eating bowls of cereal. The TV was as loud as the bright cereal packaging and David watched as advertisements interrupted the stream of music videos that Jess was glued to. Fruit-based chew strips, Easter egg promotions and half-and-half bread all featured. Feeling vaguely nauseous, watching adverts was the closest David could get to food before he was at school. The queasiness and the headache would be gone once the second or third Coke had kicked in.

There was a muffled click from the kitchen as the kettle went on again. David looked down at the floor. Maybe he could leave before she came out? That was always preferable. He got up. 'See you later, Jess, Em, I'm going now.'

'Bye!' said Emily, brightly.

She smiled up at him, and, letting the innocence of her gaze rest on him, for a moment he felt light. He could see that she loved him despite his size – but how long would that last? Jess was already more physically wary, more reluctant to touch him or be near him. David dreaded the moment when that began to happen with Emily too.

Heaving his black school bag up on to his shoulder with effort, he left the house.

At complete odds with the damp grey of his mood, the morning that David stepped out into was crisp and bright. He could see his breath puffing out in pale clouds as he laboured down the road. At least the early start meant he could take his time. Even on better days – of which, he reminded himself, this was not one – he only had one speed and that was slow.

The other benefit of leaving early was that he could risk the corner shop. It was safe at this time of the day. By 8am, when others would be there, it would be too dangerous to risk a visit.

As he entered, there was a hollow ring from the bell above the door. David kept his eyes down and walked straight over to the double fridges at the back of the brightly lit store. Sliding back the plastic door, he pulled out two bottles of Coke (two was always a more cost-effective choice than one) and then walked down the aisle past the multicoloured tins and packets to the racks of confectionery on the right near the till.

The shop was empty and, gazing at the rows of sweets and chocolates, David felt a pleasant sense of anticipation. The colours and shapes were all so familiar and appealing, it was like greeting a room full of old friends. But what to choose? Smarties were for kids and anyway, the mini ones were crap: the ratio of chocolate to sugar-coating was all off. And what was with the colours? The natural ones looked so dull and faded; it was as if someone had licked them before they had gone in the tube. KitKats and Flakes could only be eaten sitting down. Wispas were, for him, an after-school treat. A Snickers bar was a popular option but only when his mum wasn't around: how many times did anyone need to hear that they used to be called something else? He took a Snickers duo and then scanned across and up and down the shelves. Starbursts were too fiddly; the individual wrappers made them only suitable for concentrated eating in bed or in front of the TV. Mars was too much like a Snickers but without the nuts: what was the point

of that? Aero was a possibility but did he want mint, orange, chocolate or limited edition coconut? He grabbed the mint one. He could afford one more: which one? Which one?

The bell rang dully in the background and David felt a lurch in his stomach as he heard the chatter of boys coming into the shop.

‘Only three of you in the shop at one time!’ Standing at the counter, the tall, grey-haired man looked up from his newspaper and waved a hand towards the four lads. ‘Two of you’ll have to wait outside!’

One of the boys looked over to where David stood, still staring at the chocolate display. ‘Maybe we should all get out?’ he called out, his fair hair falling into his eyes. ‘He takes up enough space for three of us!’ They all laughed, the sound broken and choppy as their voices went from low to high register.

‘Two of you out,’ the man repeated, neutrally. He wasn’t about to shame one of his best customers.

David quickly grabbed a large bag of peanut M&Ms and then shuffled over to pay. Keeping his eyes down, he handed over a ten-pound note and, taking his change, walked out. To his relief the boys passed him without further comment, though the last of them gave him a shove as he walked by. That, David could handle. Sticks and stones...bollocks, he thought to himself. He would rather be nudged, shoved, pushed and punched over verbally abused any day of the week. At least bruises faded and vanished.

Lifting the flap of his bag, he shoved the M&Ms in there for later and, as he walked to the bus stop, he unpeeled the shiny brown and cream wrapper of the Snickers. Holding one in one hand, he bit into the rippled chocolate coating of the other, closing his eyes briefly as the smooth caramel, savoury nuts and creamy nougat filled his mouth. He took another bite, faster this time, and then another until it was done. Then he ate the second one.

Balling up the wrapper, he put that in his pocket and then pulled the triangular points of the Aero wrapper apart and ate the bubbly bar in four quick bites.

Still walking, he opened the bottle of Coke, and took a few big, sweet swigs and sighed to himself. What was it about Coke, when it was ice-cold, that meant you could never just have one or two sips? He drank back the caramel-coloured liquid; it fizzed and bubbled in the curved bottle, the bright sun catching the plastic and the promise of his headache fading away feeling almost as good as if it were already gone. As the sugar and caffeine began to do their work, David finally felt able to lift his head and look around. Another twenty minutes and he would be in school, the routine and rituals of the day would take over, but for now, here in the cold sunshine, cold drink in hand, lips sticky with sweetness, his time was his own.

Now that it was Thursday, the week was almost over. Looking forward to Friday was something that always began on Wednesday, especially when this weekend he was going to be seeing Gary. It was two and a half years now since his dad had left, and the time that elapsed between visits had got longer and longer. David had not seen him since before Christmas now (Gary had said he wanted to spend Christmas Day with what he called his 'new' family, by which David knew he meant his 'not disappointing' family) and he felt as anxious as he was excited at the prospect of seeing him again.

That anxiety lurched in his stomach. Hoping to make it go away, he quickly finished the Coke he was holding, and then reached into his bag and pulled out the other bottle.

'Break-time is the best,' said James as he bit into the doughnut he had in his right hand whilst gesticulating at David with the Twix he held in the other. Sugar spraying out of his mouth, he continued, 'I love doughnuts more than life itself.'

David grinned back. They were sitting on a hard patch of ground towards the back of the sports field. It was cold but it was bright, and they were alone here; the other kids preferred to chase-fight in the playground or huddle in corners gossiping around piles of discarded school bags.

David stared out across the empty playing field. The washed-out winter grass brought back memories of the mud and discomfort of the weekly rugby and football lessons. Suddenly, there was a noise. It was a light and cheerful tinkling, like fairy bells or Christmas. It was the sound of girls.

And not just any girls, but girls they actually liked.

Both boys looked down at the ground.

'Hey,' said Christianne, looking at James and David through a sheet of long reddish-blond hair.

'Hey,' echoed the other three girls. If the Three Graces of ancient myth had, instead of beauty, charm and creativity, represented acne, awkwardness and anxiety, then this was what they would have looked like. And yet, if they had just known it, they were all beautiful.

'Hey,' replied David and James in unison, still looking down. Acting together around girls was always easier than acting alone. David felt a nervous twist in his stomach and brushed at his mouth to get rid of any crumbs or smudges of chocolate.

'Didn't see you at swimming last week...' said Christianne to James.

'Nah, Mum was away and couldn't pick me up. I'll be there next week.'

'We can always pick you up, you know. We're right near you. Mum's cool with stuff like that. Not much else, but anything sporty, you know...anything that falls under the heading of *good for my only daughter*...'

The Graces giggled.

David sat up as stiffly as his soft body allowed. He thought about getting up, his legs were prickling with pins and needles,

but, if he stood, his bulk would be even more evident. Self-conscious, he fidgeted, trying to pull himself in as much as he could while still appearing friendly. It wasn't really working. The girls continued to talk to James who, with his open face and easy manners, had always been approachable. He stood up now and, cursing him silently, David followed suit. While James had got up in one fluid motion, using his knees to rise effortlessly from the ground, David had to use his hands and arms as leverage. He heaved and swayed, the burning sensation from the pins and needles increasing as he placed his full weight on to his calves. It caused him to stagger slightly to the right as he finally pulled himself upright.

The Graces tried not to giggle again, and failed. Christianne was mature enough to look away, but not quite mature enough to not glance back after a beat.

'What are you doing for half-term? We're going skiing again,' she said, rolling her eyes as if this were the least funnest thing ever. 'It's like the least funnest thing ever. Mum gets pissed every night and then complains about having to get up at crazy o'clock. I'm always stuck in like some nerdy ski school with nerdy French kids who are all like six but can still ski better than me. It's *so* annoying.'

'Yeah, I hate skiing, too,' said James. 'We go every other year 'cos Mum can't stand it but my dad loves it – I love that they think they're doing you a favour taking *you* skiing when it's *their* hobby!'

'Yeah, right,' said Christianne.

'Yeah, right,' echoed the Three Graces.

David remained mute. There was nothing he could contribute to this conversation. Why couldn't James talk about films or books? Or lunch? He stared at the ground, kicking the damp mud with his shoe, occasionally glancing sideways at Christianne.

They continued to complain about their parents for a few more minutes and David continued to kick the ground.

Everyone knew his parents were divorced and, while he was hardly alone in that, he still felt the pain of it every day. Like the aches and sores in his body, the misery of their separation never really went away; and, like those aches and sores, he never talked about it.

Catching his eye, Christianne smiled and said, 'You all right, David? Your sisters are the same age as my little brother, aren't they? They doing the eleven-plus this year?'

'Next year,' he muttered at the ground. He tried to force his eyes up to meet hers.

'Yeah, Mum's already *soooo* stressed out at the idea of me doing my mocks and him doing his 11-plus stuff. She gets so wound up!'

The bell rang. Relieved now that he was already up and on his feet, David was also pleased when he noticed James hang back and keep pace with him rather than keep up with the trotting of Christianne and the Graces as they half-skipped, half-ran back to the main building. Trying to keep his voice casual, David said, 'I didn't know Christianne was in the swim club?'

'Yeah...' James shrugged.

David had never done communal swimming at school. His mum had addressed that well before he started. He had always been grateful to her for that intervention. As he watched the lithe, retreating figures of the girls, he felt an uncomfortable stiffening in his trousers as he thought about what those white shoulders and that red hair would look like coming up out of a limpid pool of blue-green water.

Trying to shake away the image, David involuntarily twitched his head from side to side, like trying to clear the screen of his childhood Etch-a-Sketch. He thought about how much he hated maths, the double period he had now, then he remembered that it would be lunch afterwards and it was hot dog day. He replaced the thought of quadratic equations with an image of hot dogs and mustard and onions and instantly

felt better. Anything was tolerable if, afterwards, there was a frankfurter to be had.

The noise of the girls' squabbling and Kerri's shouting filled the hallway and rolled up the stairs, the aural equivalent of the fog that pursued him every afternoon and just as suffocating. Rolling over heavily, David stared at the screen and turned the volume on the TV up very loud. He didn't feel like going down just yet. Even barely a week into term, he was beginning to feel worn down, his mood lowered by the day-to-day grind of the bullying.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, he recalled. None of those sayings makes sense any more. Who needs the wisdom of old wives when we've got Wikipedia?

And it was rubbish anyway. Anyone who had seen the stats on teen suicides over the last few years could tell you that. Unlike bruises that could heal, and scars that would silver, the words stayed with you, ever ready to cut. They were never dulled by repetition; they only ever got sharper, more wounding. And his anger was like a whetstone: it honed the words that others used, honed them before he wielded them against himself. *Fat fuck. Worthless fat fuck. Fucking useless fat lazy fuck. Fucking useless lazy fucking waste of space fat fuck.* The voice in his head was no more creative than the kids at school, but he could never get away from it.

Shifting his bulky torso awkwardly, he reached his hand to the drawer again, pulling out one of the dozens of chocolate bars he kept in there. Without even bothering to look at what it was, he unwrapped the bar and ate it, feeling the tension in his neck release slightly as the sweetness masked the bitter taste of bile at the back of his throat.

Having flicked over to one of the many film channels, he was enjoying the start of some random nineties action film with Arnold Schwarzenegger in it. Random nineties action movies

with Arnold Schwarzenegger in them were among his favourites.

‘David!’ Kerri’s voice carried up the stairs. ‘Dinner, David!’

He got up slowly and went downstairs.

The word *dinner* had always been used loosely, and this was especially the case since his dad had left. Walking into the living room, David smelt the meal before he saw it. The spicy aroma of fried chicken hung on the air, a calorific cloud. It smelt like Friday but it was still only Thursday. His mouth watered and he wondered why they were having this tonight. But, seeing the red and white boxes of crunchy chicken pieces, spiced burgers and onion rings, he suddenly didn’t care. The chips were pale and limp as always but the onion rings and popcorn bites...well, they were worth fighting his sisters for.

Staring hard at Kerri’s back as she walked into the kitchen, he felt the blackness from the day roil inside him. It was his favourite meal. Why had she bought his favourite? What was going on?

He sat down heavily on the sofa, waiting for her to come back in. The room was warm. It was dark outside but the curtains were still open.

‘I’ll shut these,’ said Kerri, moving to the window. ‘And then we can watch something... Shall we let David pick tonight, girls?’

‘Sure thing!’ said Emily brightly.

‘Awwww,’ moaned Jess.

Lying on the floor, mere inches away from the screen, she was watching it with wide eyes, little pointed chin perched on laced-together fingers. She passed David the remote and stuck her tongue out at him. He scowled back. He wasn’t in the mood for her and her tween posturing tonight.

David continued to watch Kerri out of the corner of narrowed eyes. Having shut the curtains, she was now passing round drinks.

‘So, David can choose and then we can eat! I thought you might enjoy this tonight. *And* I got your favourite for dessert. A Viennetta! I thought: let’s go retro!’

David’s scowl hardened. Kerri only chattered like this when she was nervous. He looked again at the table. All the extra food. His own choice of movie. His preferred pudding. Why would she be trying so hard to make him happy?

He felt a pulse of anxiety beat through him. Despite the heat in the room, his whole body went cold.

‘He can’t make it, can he?’

The beat of silence was audible even over the noise of the television.

‘No,’ Kerri replied, unable to meet his eyes. ‘I’m so sorry, David. He texted this morning. Said he has to go away for work.’

There was another pause.

‘I’m really sorry. I know how much you were looking forward to it.’

‘That’s the second time he’s done that to David,’ piped up Jess. ‘Spanner!’

‘Jess!’ Kerri said sharply. ‘You know I won’t have you talk about your dad like that. Enough!’

David stared at the floor, face burning with a sharp mixture of shame, anxiety and disappointment, as well as that deep misery that only comes when someone confirms something that you suspected would happen all along. Not that suspecting it made it any easier to bear when it did eventually come to pass.

‘So, I got your favourite things in. And I thought, over the weekend, we could have a movie marathon... Hot dogs, wedges, popcorn, treats! We can snuggle up, watch DVDs, play games...’

‘Sure,’ David muttered and, reaching out for a burger, he popped open the box and began to eat.

They watched and ate in silence. David chewed his way mechanically through three burgers. He ate the onion rings

and the little deep-fried balls of crispy chicken. He drank his way right through the two-litre bottle of Coke that Kerri had placed by his side. As the film progressed, and after the girls had been sent up to bed, David glanced up and noticed that Kerri hadn't yet cleared the table of the things they had eaten. Despite feeling nauseous, he picked up the paper packet of chips and took a few out. They were stone-cold: granular and bland. The taste brought back what had happened the other lunchtime. He was used to the taunts but that had been something else. Feeling the knot of anger tighten beneath the sick feeling deep in the hard-soft folds of his belly, his fists and jaw involuntarily clenched. He sucked it up all day long at school and it was only at night or in the evenings, once the girls had gone to bed, that he could feel the anger heating up inside him, barely contained and waiting to explode like a chip pan about to catch alight.

Kerri came in with a mug of tea and a packet of biscuits. She sat down heavily in the armchair. David looked at the rolls of fat under her chin as she sat back and stared tiredly at the TV screen. Without even looking down, she peeled open the shiny dark-brown packet and took two chocolate digestives out of the top.

She's the one who never cooked, thought David. She's the one who was always busy, always working, always out doing something more important than preparing fresh food for us to eat. She's the one who brought takeaways home. She's the one who filled the fridge with fizzy drinks and sweets.

She's the one who let Dad leave.

'Do you want one?' Kerri asked casually, placing the pack on the table. 'I'll take them back into the kitchen in a minute; don't want to eat all of them...' She trailed off and looked up, a rare moment of eye contact with her firstborn.

And, with that, David's anger set alight.

'No, I bet you don't,' he hissed back, voice hot and spitting. 'Does it make you feel *better* to have someone even fatter than

you to look at? Do you think I want to eat any more of the crap you buy? Do you think I want to look and feel like an enormous pile of shit every day? It's *your* fault I'm like this – it's your fault and I hate you. I hate you. I fucking *hate* you!

'David!'

Trying to ignore the dampening effect that his lack of speed was having on the impact of what he had just said, he lumbered up and off the sofa. Kerri was staring at him now, eyes wide and mouth open, stunned. And this – the fact that she looked so shocked, so fucking *surprised* – just made him angrier still. How could she not know? How could she not know how much it hurt?

He turned his back on her and stomped up the stairs. The fact that his knees ached, his back hurt and he felt sick just made him feel angrier. By the time he got to his room he could no longer contain it. Punching the pillows, he hit them over and over again, the feathers yielding, his stomach wobbling, his breathing shallow with the effort. He lay down heavily on the bed.

I'm even too fat to be angry, he thought.

The tears came next. As they ran down his face, hot and salty, he could feel them leaving sludgy tracks over his swollen cheeks.

There was a tapping on the door. He saw Kerri's feet underneath it: patches of black against the strip of light coming through from the small hallway.

'GO AWAY,' he shouted.

The feet remained.

Minutes passed. There was another tap. 'David... Please...'

David turned the volume on the television up.

There was another tap.

He turned the volume up even higher.

The feet moved on.

Suddenly feeling even sadder, David pulled open the bedside drawer and grabbed a large, creamy-brown bag of

Revels. Handful by handful, he ate them all, and then he stared at the television until he fell asleep.

Lying in bed the following morning, David still felt angry, but there was also a sense of embarrassment, of anxiety about having to go downstairs and see Kerri. His emotions had been served up scalding hot, and now, cold and congealed, it all seemed less important. He wondered why he had yelled. Well, he knew exactly why – he had been angry – but he was often angry and he usually managed to hide it. It was just that sometimes pretending not to care was too much. Sometimes it had to be released, squeezed out like the pus from a spot; and now he felt lighter – not really better, but a little lighter. He hoped that what would happen now was what always happened: she would act as if nothing had been said, and he would do the same. That pattern of behaviour was fairly reliable. Which was more than could be said for his dad.

David sighed and then got up. If he left it too late he would have to catch the bus, and that would definitely not make him feel better.

Washed and dressed, he went downstairs. As he approached the bottom of the stairs, he stopped, wobbling slightly but hesitating. ‘Jeez,’ he muttered. Even with the inches of MDF in between him and the shouting, it was ear-achingly loud.

‘It’s mine! You CAN’T have it!’ Emily was yelling.

‘It is NOT yours! I got it out of my drawer! It’s mine!’

Bracing himself, David went into the living room, wincing at the noise as he opened the door.

Kerri came in from the kitchen. She looked tired; her face was red and, with wet hair and her dressing gown still on, she was clearly also running late.

‘Are you still fighting over that hair clip?’ she cried out, exasperated. ‘I asked you to sort it out between yourselves!’

‘But it’s mine!’ said Emily.

‘It is not! It’s my one!’

‘You both have one! Where is yours?’ Kerri asked, looking at Jess.

‘That one is mine,’ the girl persisted, arms crossed, face scowling.

‘If Jess said she found it in her drawer then it must be hers,’ Kerri said to Emily.

‘No, she TOOK it from me and hid it there!’ Emily said, face pale and voice shaky.

‘No, I didn’t!’ retorted Jess.

David knew that Jess was lying. David knew that Kerri knew that Jess was lying. He also knew that she would never confront her about it. The lying had started when Dad had left and so that had been left too.

‘I thought you got a load of likes the last time you wore your hair in braids,’ David commented mildly as he sat down on the sofa.

The reference to likes and braids stopped Jess in her tracks. ‘What?’ She was still scowling, but she had at least stopped yelling.

‘Yeah,’ he said, looking down at his phone and talking casually, as if he had not even noticed the noise. ‘Yeah, the braids. You definitely got a load of likes when you braided your hair. Why not let Em help you do it?’

David knew Emily was always eager to help, and he also knew that Jess was equally eager to be given an out when she was lying.

‘Emily?’ Kerri prompted, quietly and kindly.

‘OK...’

The girls sat down. Jess passed Emily the hairbrush.

‘Jess?’ prompted David.

She scowled again but then looked down and muttered, ‘Sorry, Em...’

‘S’OK!’ the other girl said brightly. The brushing began and the absence of squabbling was, for that moment, glorious.

David glanced at Kerri. She was smiling at him. Her face was less red but she still looked tired. But, thought David, she always looked tired. They all did.

Silently she mouthed, *Thank you.*

Kerri went upstairs and, when she came back down fifteen minutes later, she looked visibly more relaxed. Jess was now helping Emily with her hair.

‘Nearly time to go, girls,’ Kerri said. She smiled at David again. He said goodbye as they left, and then turned the TV off. The silence was blissful. It had felt good to help. It had felt good to be out of himself for a moment, to be helping to make Kerri feel better.

Breathing in and out, he glanced at his phone: nearly time to go to school. And, with that, the good feeling was gone.

Naomi

It was now the end of what normally felt like the longest week of the year, but Naomi could hardly believe it was Friday already. Sitting in the living room, she was trying to look as if she was listening to what Scott was saying about his week.

‘So, we still haven’t found any decent consultants to interview. We’re having to use the consultants of our own consultants to get candidates even worth seeing! And then there was this whole latest thing with Jeff – ’

Oh, God, thought Naomi. Jeff. Hearing Scott talk about that guy drives me mad.

There was always one person in an office who did nothing, but whom no one could ever seem to get rid of, and, at Scott’s work, that person was called Jeff. Naomi had been listening to tales of the man’s ineptitude for what felt like a lifetime.

‘Oh,’ she said, cutting into the flow of conversation, ‘do you want to order food? I’ll go and tell James it won’t be long.’

‘Sure, OK,’ said Scott. ‘Indian?’

‘Indian. Just get the usual.’ she said. ‘Or double-check with James. I’ll get him to come down.’

Naomi went up the stairs. She tapped on James’s door as she went by. ‘James!’

‘Uhghhhghh,’ came a sound through the door. This was teenage for *yes, you may enter*.

Naomi opened and peered round the door. James was lying face-down on the bed holding his phone.

‘Hey there, can you go down and tell Dad what you want from the Indian?’

‘Can’t I just text him?’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘You know we don’t do that,’ she said, smiling. ‘Go and speak to him. I’m just going to check my messages from work and I’ll be down in a bit.’

‘Sure,’ said James, getting up.

‘Thanks.’

Naomi went down the hallway to the study. Being up here was a convenient excuse to quickly check the computer. A quick glance at her emails so that she hadn’t told a lie, and then she opened the web browser. She couldn’t help but hope Mike was around. They had been chatting online all week but this was the first time she had started a conversation herself. She felt strangely nervous. And strangely excited.

Hi there. Happy Friday! she typed.

Hey you, came the reply.

She grinned at the screen. *How are you?* she typed.

It’s Friday! I’m amazing!

Naomi laughed. *Of course! Me too :)*

She smiled at the screen again and wondered if he was doing the same.

What are you up to tonight? she asked.

I’m out, he said. *Need to get back to it really.*

Oh, she thought, strangely disappointed.

Chat next week though? I need you to recommend me some more books.

Oh, yes, of course. Have fun! she added.

And she went back downstairs, wishing she could go out too, the night in she had been looking forward to all week suddenly seeming very dull indeed.

Matthew

As he walked down the road towards the supermarket, the familiarity of the route, and the fact that he was spending part of his weekend doing something so mundane, made Matthew feel both relaxed – it was an easy chore and it was also more fun than marking – but also uneasy – it was the middle of January and he had still done nothing different since his return from Brazil.

Matthew had initially revelled in his return home. Appreciating afresh the ability to read road signs and understand the chatter around him, he had also enjoyed no longer having to be quite so paranoid about people brushing up against him to try to steal his wallet. He had loved the fact that the air was cool and fresh rather than humid and steamy, and he'd liked the way his phone behaved itself and picked up messages instantly. He had felt glad and very grateful for the clean, modern and efficient way that life here seemed to run, compared to Brazil with its inconsistencies, quirky timetables, and strangely over-effusive people. He liked being left alone, ignored and unimpeded as he went about his day-to-day business. He had felt all of this and felt it keenly. But now, mere weeks later, what had seemed comforting because of its familiarity was now stultifying. The air was clear and crisp today but he felt as though he was suffocating, the environment invisibly filled with something that made it hard to breathe.

He had decided that getting something practical done would give him some focus. And now, having slept slightly later than planned, he had got up and gone out. If he could

just get these little jobs out of the way first, then he could get on with the important stuff that he wanted to do.

Walking into the huge store, it was the smell he noticed first. Or rather, the *absence* of smell. Pausing by the double doors, he stopped to sniff the air. People weaved around him, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Continuing to sniff around, like a trained dog doing its best to seek out a dangerous substance, he stepped forward.

The fruit and vegetables were in front of him. Piled high in their blue plastic crates, he could see red, yellow, green and orange peppers in two different varieties (romano and bell). He could see bananas that offered every degree of shade between unripe pale green to black-speckled yellow. He could see at least seven different varieties of apples, polished and spherical, piled high even though the British apple season had finished months ago. There were three types of pear, skins pale brown and speckle-free, as well as mounds of plastic bags full of green, white and black grapes. He could *see* them; he just couldn't *smell* them. It was like looking at a display in a wax museum: everything eerily perfect, but fake.

Walking around the aisles, he noticed there were tomatoes in every size, from swollen slicing varieties to vine-ripened, organic, miniature plums. They were all red, smooth and clear like the perfect skin on the flushed cheeks of a small child. He could see brown onions, red onions and uniformly dark green, straight and exactly-thirty-centimetres-long cucumbers, plucked from their hydropods of water and then vacuum-sealed in a tight sheath of plastic. They lay regimentally alongside avocados as hard as bullets. Avocados that had been pulled from glass-covered bushes in sterile soil and were now expected to ripen as beautifully at home in the chilled, sterile environment of a domestic fridge as they would in the natural sun and showers of their native earth. He could see starfruit, dragon fruit, sharon fruit. Fruit that the supermarket encouraged you to buy, he remembered Lucy telling him, for

recipes that looked good in their magazines. And also because, he remembered reading, they helped make your fruit bowl look more exotic. So not actually for eating, then, he thought, his mind turning as sour as most of the fruits themselves.

Taking all this in, he picked one of the avocados up. Its knobbly skin looked flawless, a deep olive green, and its perfect regulation shape meant that it fitted neatly in the palm of Matthew's hand. He gave it a gentle squeeze but there was nothing, not even a hint of what should have been moist, creamy flesh within. Lifting it up to his nose, he breathed in and all he caught was the scent of whatever aggressive bleach had been used to clean either the fruit before it came to rest here in his hand, or was used to keep the vegetable aisle sanitary. Placing the fruit back to rest among its fellows in the plastic-lined crate, he looked around him again: the sheer abundance was overwhelming, but it aroused nothing. The air, the experience of it all, was antiseptic.

His mind went back to the market in Manaus.

There the smell had been intoxicating. Everything had lived and breathed. The flies had buzzed, excited and tantalised; the air had been rich with zest: an edible atmosphere. Not only that, there had been chatter, bustle, laughter and noise. Here it was silent: everyone had their heads down. Dead eyes scanning dead produce. They were selecting the cold, hard, dead fruits from crates and placing them into cold, hard wire baskets with less consideration and enthusiasm than they would use to select a pair of socks. Here children were trapped in metal trolleys, caged and then placated with salty or sugary snacks. There, they had tasted, explored and played.

Even the supermarkets he had seen in Brazil had offered the shopper ripe, fleshy, smelly, juicy and fresh fruit and vegetables, locally grown and picked. Here, food was a means to an end – eat and then get on with the important stuff of life: texting, tweeting, liking, pinning; shopping, buying, driving. There, food *was* life.

Taking a deep breath, Matthew consulted his list. A shopping list made him feel a little like a granny but he knew that it was the only way to navigate the store. Without a list he would end up wandering down aisles he should not wander down, aisles of distraction and convenience. Again, these were lessons learned from others. He could still hear Lucy's voice, the strident tone as she had harangued him about his fridge and cupboards full of dead food.

Smiling a little to himself, he bought the vegetables, fruit and then meat and fish he needed. He planned to make a big pot of the soup he had enjoyed so much in Brazil and then live on that for a few days. He ignored the little voice (it sounded like a strange mix of his dad and his mates, the men in his life) that was calling him a pussy for cooking. He knew real men cooked but he didn't know any actual men that cooked. The contradictory ideas settled uneasily in his mind, churning sourly, like his stomach after a bad night out when he had mixed beer and wine.

Concentrating on the list, he skirted the many aisles of distraction, bought some bagels and eggs. They were at the far end of the store for a reason, and he had a moment of pride in himself at knowing that he had navigated the middle of the store and remained focused. He then went down the freezer aisle, but only to avoid the alcohol. Frozen desserts were easier to not pick up than discounted January booze.

But, just as he neared the till, the pull of the aisle, the signage, the idea of a nice bottle of something became overwhelming. He backtracked and, intending to get just one, he saw it was cheaper to buy two.

At the checkout, he paid and then walked out, the bottles chinking against each other with every step.

Everything he did that afternoon needed doing. He needed to put the shopping away, he needed to check his emails,

he needed to empty his spam folder, he needed to check his Instagram feed, he needed to tidy the living room a little and he needed to check in with his friends on Facebook, needed to fire off emojis and ‘Hey, how you doing?’s and updates. And, now that was all done, he needed to do the things he had been promising he would get started on today: the big things.

But, sitting staring at the four patchily painted walls to avoid seeing the pile of marking still in front of him, Matthew felt too tired to do much else. It was 7pm on a Saturday night. There was that sense that everyone else was out having a good time, but, having been online, he was also very aware that that was not really the case: all his mates – the few that hadn’t settled down and still went out – were too skint to do much in mid-January. His FOMO was an ever-present background buzz that he was accustomed to in the same way that he had become used to the noise of the busy road outside his Rivenoak town centre flat.

He stared at the screens in front of him, laptop open, TV on, phone by his side. He was connected. He could do anything. Anything. He poured another glass of wine and clicked *Play next episode*.

As the screen began to move, he was aware that he did feel different. That, having been on his trip, he *was* different. He was not, he told himself, just another person sitting in alone, watching Netflix on a loop. He was even seeing things differently, as he had at the supermarket today, but what to do with that feeling? Being here and not at the pub, for example, seemed like a good first step, even if all he had done so far this evening was not do the marking.

There was a sense of wanting to make changes, to be part of something, but he was still struggling to imagine what that something might look like. The idea was so large, the changes needed to make the world a better place so vast and insurmountable, that it was like standing naked at the bottom of Everest. He felt hopeless, helpless and ill prepared.

With another glance at the pile in front of him, and as the chatter on the screen began, he turned up the volume, poured another glass of wine, and said, ‘Tomorrow! Tomorrow I will make a start!’

Naomi

Naomi had logged on over the weekend but had heard nothing from Mike. She knew he was busy and she had been too. The new year was already in full swing with James’s schoolwork and all the usual housework and errands that needed running, but that didn’t mean she didn’t have time to think about him, about how much she liked talking to him. Now it was Tuesday night. She had told Scott she was working. She wasn’t working. She had been chatting to Mike for well over an hour.

Oh, and then there’s this guy at work who drives me nuts, he typed.

Ooooh, she said, do tell... I want to hear all about it!

Well, you know, he’s one of those people who sends me very long waffly emails that use words like transformational and dovetail...

Haha, she typed. What else?

They tapped away, her asking lots of questions about work and his day and him telling her all about it.

Anyway, he typed, I’m sure you have plenty of other things you could be doing rather than chatting to me about how annoying people at work are.

I like to hear about it and it’s good to have some company, she replied.

I like keeping you company ;)

Staring at the screen, she hesitated. There, she thought, what is that?

I like that you like that, she replied.

Cool.

She rolled her eyes at the screen.

Cool?

Cool is coming back; awesome is so 2014. It's time for our superlatives to move on...

What's going to be the next big one, then? she asked, smiling as she typed. *Maybe something a bit more English, like marvellous?*

No...I don't think so. Little bit old-fashioned.

Sorry! That's what happens when you ARE old, I suppose.

You are not old!

Yes, I am! Especially compared to you and Carla – there's over ten years between us!

No! You're kidding me.

No, I'm not!

Anyway. I think you're cool.

Cool? Really?

She smiled. At him, but also at the outrageous fishing for compliments that she was indulging in.

Yes. Very cool.

Well, she typed back, if only you could tell my son that!

She pressed *Return* to send the message and then instantly regretted mentioning James. It made her feel even older, and it also seemed to corrupt the idea of her family somehow. She decided instantly not to mention James or Scott again.

There was a pause.

What to say now? she wondered. The mention of family, the reminder of her commitments and her life away from this screen, seemed to have knocked the conversation out of its groove.

Fun plans for the week ahead? she typed, falling back on a conventional enquiry. *I bet you have an amazing one planned!*

Yes! Out for a birthday – showing support for the poor sods with January birthdays :)

Sounds fun!

It should be. How about you?

Oh, not much...though, she added, you've inspired me and I think I might organise a night out!

Great idea! he replied. *An even better idea would be to come out with us!*

Ha! she replied. Did he really mean that?

Another time?

Sure...

Staring at the screen, eyes tired and sore, she willed him to say something else. She really didn't want this conversation to end.

I'd better go. Goodnight! he typed.

Damn. She hadn't thought of a new hook fast enough. *Goodnight!* she replied.

Walking down the stairs, Naomi grinned away to herself as she recalled bits of their conversation, the words scrolling through her mind. In the kitchen she made some tea and then took her mug through to the living room. It was late, and James had gone to bed, but Scott was up, watching TV.

'What are you watching?' she asked, sitting on the sofa next to him.

'Documentary thing...it's fascinating.'

'Oh, OK. You all right? Have a good day?' Messaging made her feel chatty in the same way that snacking would stimulate your appetite.

'Yes, busy. Which I know I shouldn't complain about after the last few years but still...it would help if Jeff were less hopeless.'

Naomi felt her desire to listen suddenly vanish. It was like being hungry and then receiving a plateful of something you had eaten every week for the last month. Knowing that they were about to have the same chat about the same people that they had been having for the last six months (six years, her mind added) took her appetite for listening away.

Oblivious, Scott carried on, 'This week, he came in with yet another plan he has drawn up. It uses all sorts of buzz words but doesn't actually have any concrete ideas about how to make things easier for us...'

'Words like *transformational*? And *dovetail*?' asked Naomi, half laughing and feeling excited about making a private reference to the conversation she had been having with Mike.

'No...' said Scott, sounding a little confused.

Naomi stared into her mug as he carried on talking about work.

'Oh, and Dad called,' he said.

Naomi stared harder into her mug. Wiping from her face the flash of annoyance that any reference to Scott's parents caused her, she looked up.

'Oh, yes?' she said, forcing some lightness into her voice.

'Yes, he said that Mum's been given some stronger medication now...for the high blood pressure. I always thought because they were quite active and slim it wouldn't affect them, but it seems as though it's getting worse.'

'It's how they eat,' sighed Naomi, thinking, Here we go again. 'I can barely taste the food, the amount of salt she puts in everything – and all that baking! It's just the two of them. Why does she still bake so much?'

'It's her hobby,' he said.

'I know, but...' Naomi shrugged. She had lost count of the number of times they had talked about this. It might be her hobby but, she thought sourly, visualising in her mind all the jars clogging up the kitchen cupboards, no one in their right mind eats that much bloody jam.

'I said we would go and see them soon, maybe in the next week or so. Dad sounded a bit down. You know how they are.'

Oh, yes, she thought. I know EXACTLY how they are.

She wished she liked Scott's parents more but, in the absence of her own mother who had died many years ago and to whom she had never been close, she just found them

annoying. They lived over three hours away. This meant that almost every trip involved staying over, and the constant food and cake, as well as the unhealthy dynamic of alternately bickering with and cossetting Leonard that Elaine indulged in, made Naomi uncomfortable. The older woman seemed to revel in making her husband feel small and then feeding him cake to make up for it. The idea of a visit, of being away from the computer, from Mike, made her heart sink in a way that surprised her.

‘Want some more tea?’ she asked Scott as she got up.

‘No, thanks.’

Naomi stood in the kitchen waiting for the water to go off the boil. She was thinking about Mike. The similarities between his work gripes and Scott’s had not escaped her – it was just that, well, Mike’s were new, and that was enough to make them more interesting. She remembered how she had felt, waking up on New Year’s Day, thinking that nothing could happen this year that would surprise or interest her. Lying there, she had felt numbed by the routine of family life; and yet, as she considered this surprising new friendship, she thought, maybe this year will be different after all...

Chapter Three

Wednesday 16th to Wednesday 30th January

Naomi

Naomi scrolled through the news feed. So many references to films and programmes she wasn't watching, music she hadn't heard, books she hadn't read. She knew it was how James and his friends spent a lot of their time and that was to be expected but these were all acquaintances of hers: adults.

Ignoring the nagging thought that she should be doing something else, that the week and the month were passing by and she had barely got started with things she needed to do at work and at home, she looked at Mike's feed and saw he had posted some references to books he was reading, too.

Was that aimed at her?

There was a beep. She smiled immediately and felt her stomach do a little flip of excitement in response.

Hey there, he had typed. Working late again?

Putting her tea down, she typed back, *Afraid so! How are you?*

It's been a long day but I'm OK. You?

Same, really. Busy but OK.

There was a pause. God. Since when had she become so boring? Did she have nothing to talk about except being busy?

No, she decided, she didn't. She felt the need to fill the gap so she continued: *January's a busy time for us. What are you working on?*

My tolerance to alcohol :P

Naomi raised her eyebrows. More drinking? Normally this would annoy her, but there was something appealing about his attitude, something she couldn't quite put her finger on. She had a sense of wanting to approve of him so that he would give her something back. Feeling unsure as to what that meant, aware of wanting something but not knowing what, she was keen to keep him talking to her. Smiling, she typed back, *Fair enough. Sounds like fun! Carla said you had a good time at the pub the other Sunday – dancing till all hours!*

Yes, we did. School nights are a temptation. Being too sensible isn't good for you, I don't think. Need to ration it.

I suppose!

Naomi leaned back in her seat and sipped her tea. She couldn't remember the last time she had gone out midweek, let alone on a Sunday. Since leaving London, she wasn't even having her Friday night drinks any more. After-work drinks were just not a thing at VitSip.

And I bought another book, he continued.

Oh! Really? What did you buy?

You inspired me to pick up a new copy of some classics. I had forgotten how much I missed reading.

Oh, great ... I'm enjoying re-reading Bleak House.

That's a big book.

You think so? she wrote. *I like to take my time reading things, immerse myself in them. I have a bit more time now that my commute is shorter ...*

Good. And I tend to agree that some of the best things take time.

They do indeed.

There was a pause. What was it about this messaging where she felt the urge to turn everything into a *double-entendre*?

Suppose I'd better go and read it, then... she continued. Praying that he would carry on talking to her.

There was another pause. There was something about these pauses: they seemed stuffed full of potential. She stared at the screen. The urge to *do* something was overwhelming. She went to type *Bye* and then saw the words *Mike is typing* and waited...

Talking of fun nights out, I often think about you at that New Year party. The party was dreadful but I loved your dancing.

Naomi cringed a little at the memory, and typed back, *You definitely need to increase your tolerance to alcohol if you think my dancing is good!*

I thought you looked great.

Another pause...while the phrase *Mike is typing* filled the message box. Naomi stared at what he had just written. Great? He thought she'd looked great. When was the last time she had heard that? And what would he say next?

I can promise you I wasn't drunk. If I had been, I might have had the courage to join you.

Naomi laughed and then frowned and smiled at the same time: a puzzled expression that twisted round on itself in the exact same way as her stomach was doing. God, she thought, is he actually flirting with me?

She sat up and then found herself typing back, *That would have been fun.*

She sat back and stared at the last few rows of text. Whether he was flirting with her or not, she was definitely flirting with him. Or trying to. Frowning again, she tried to remember the New Year party. She had had quite a lot to drink that night – after the Christmas they had had with Scott's parents, no one could have blamed her – and she remembered being introduced to Mike, but mostly she had spent her time chatting to Carla as well as trying to ignore the fact that Scott was sitting in the corner on his own, looking bored.

Though, she added, keen for the flirting to continue, I am a bit of a demon on the dance floor.

I'm fairly sure I could handle you.

You think so, do you?

There was a pause. Her stomach knotted a little tighter: what was she doing?

*Oh, yes. Very much so. I think I know *exactly* what you need.*

Oh...

She exhaled. What did *that* mean? Her skin tingled. Her body knew, even if she was pretending her mind didn't.

And she wanted to know. Wanted to know what he meant. Wanted him to tell her what she needed. Because, if he told her, then that would save her having to figure it out for herself. Because, sitting here, typing, having a conversation without moving her mouth, a conversation that seemed to be the more intense for being mute, she had begun to wonder what it was she was hungry for. She had also begun to feel a little scared.

And then he was gone.

Reading over the exchange again, she scolded herself for the flirting. It was all very U-rated, nothing that would upset the censors, but it was still there. Sitting back, she sipped her almost cold tea and continued to scroll through. Feeling slightly embarrassed at the ease with which she had begun to be suggestive, she wondered if it wasn't partly the medium that was to blame. There was something about the instantaneous nature of the messages, the way that you typed as you thought but also the fact that you couldn't see the other person. It induced a level of intimacy that would take longer to establish in real life. The lack of eye-contact, the removal of facial expressions, meant she worried a lot more about being misunderstood, but also that she went further, much further than she ever would in person.

It's just words, she insisted to herself. But, deep down, she knew it wasn't. As someone who worked in marketing, she

was very aware of the immense power of words: that there really was no such a thing as *just* words.

And, given the numerous lectures she'd delivered to James, she told herself, lectures conducted at the kitchen table, and operating under the heading of THE MULTIPLE PERILS OF THE INTERNET, lectures at which he always rolled his eyes, she should know to be careful with what she put down in black and white on a website ...

She read through the messages again. More carefully this time. Nothing to be too concerned about, she decided, passing judgement firmly in her own favour.

But, as she logged off, she told herself: I have to be more careful.

Mere days later, the warnings she had given herself had been forgotten. When she wasn't thinking about the messages, she was thinking about the fact that she was going to be seeing Mike at the pub lunch this weekend.

He had given her his mobile number. *Just in case you need it for the weekend*, he had said. She'd saved him in her phone under Carla's name. She wasn't completely sure why she had felt the need to do that, but that was what she had done. He had said how much he was looking forward to seeing her on Sunday at the pub, and she was finding it hard to admit to herself how much she was looking forward to it too.

Ordinarily they all watched TV together until late on a Saturday night, but Naomi had made an excuse about being tired and gone to bed early. Now, she was lying in bed staring at the ceiling. Was she really seeing him tomorrow? She could hardly bear the waiting. Various scenarios played over in her mind, each slightly crazier than the last. She had his photos on the website, photos she had stared at till her eyes had gone blurry, but she could barely remember what he looked like in person. All that filled her mind were the fun exchanges they

had been having. The way he had made her laugh, the way he had made her take things less seriously for a few hours at a time.

Her stomach rumbled. She had not managed to eat much today, or the day before. She felt hungry but also queasy. Her stomach seemed to be the locus for all her emotions: fizzing and burning, it felt empty and yet strangely satisfied. Hands clenched again, she shut her eyes, willing sleep to come and bring the next day quicker. She couldn't wait to see him, to remind herself of the reality of him. Part of her hoped that she would see him and not want him, see him and think, Oh, no, what was that about? And then it could be forgotten.

It needed to be forgotten.

The door opened, soft light from the hallway filtering into the room. Naomi rolled over and sighed.

'You still awake?' Scott asked softly as he undressed.

'Gnnff,' she said. It was a sound which meant both yes and no at the same time: *Yes, I am awake. No, I don't want to have sex.*

After Scott had settled into bed, Naomi turned on to her back again and continued to think about the following day. It was all she thought about until she fell asleep and it was the first thing she thought about when she woke up. She was still thinking about it when the phone rang at about 10.30am. Still in her dressing gown, she was looking forward to a long, hot shower and to taking lots of time getting ready. She answered the phone, her voice light.

'Hello!'

'Nomes! Hi, it's Carla.'

'Oh, hi.' Naomi's stomach rolled over. There could only be one reason for the call. 'Um, how are you?'

'I'm so sorry but we can't make it today. Mike is really poorly! One of those viral things! Been ill since Friday night. I hate people that flake out by text so I wanted to call. I'm so sorry!'

‘Oh, never mind,’ said Naomi as brightly as she could. She hesitated and added, ‘Say hi to him from me. Hope he gets better soon.’

‘Will do. Sorry again. He’s really gutted we can’t make it...’

‘Sure, OK. See you tomorrow!’

Holding the now silent phone in her hand, Naomi thought how much more satisfying it would be to have an old-fashioned phone that she could slam down.

It was Friday again and Naomi was working from home. Having said goodbye to both Scott and James, she had set herself up in her study. The heating was on full blast and had been since 6am, so the room was finally beginning to warm up.

It was a small spare room but, being upstairs and in the corner of the house, it had two external walls and so always felt cold. There was a knitted patchwork throw on the sofa bed in the corner and Naomi often had to wrap that round her legs and feet to keep herself warm in here.

Having spent all week feeling alternately angry at Mike for cancelling and at herself for having got so carried away about it all, today she was just tired and had work to do.

By lunchtime she felt slightly better, but restless. She was waiting for some feedback from the technical team now and, having got a lot done in the course of the morning, she felt drawn back to the social network site.

Logging in, she scrolled through the almost unchanged feed, pretending not to notice or care that the little dot next to his name indicated that he was online. She then found herself reading his messages again.

It really was all in my head, she thought.

After ten minutes, she got up and went to make some lunch. On returning, she saw the red flag of a new message and, setting her sandwich aside, stomach burning with anticipation, she clicked on it and smiled. It was him.

Hey.

Hey, she replied. *Feeling better?*

Yep! Sorry about the other day. I was really sorry to miss it.

Never mind, she typed back, hoping that the typed phrase conveyed all the nonchalance that she was feigning.

Another time?

Maybe, if you're lucky, she teased.

I am pretty lucky :P

She paused. What else was there to say?

What are you up to? he continued.

Working. You?

The same. Or at least pretending to. The office is pretty quiet today.

Right. Well, I'm working from home so trying not to get too distracted.

Should I leave you alone, then?

No. Stay.

OK. If you like...

Naomi rolled her eyes at the screen. God, he was infuriating sometimes. He would reach out and then pull away. Such a boy. But it also made her feel like such a girl. And she quite liked it. She felt as uncertain as a foal; trying to come to grips with this new communication was like trying to walk on a pair of stilt-like, skittish, skinny legs. She was worried she was in for a fall.

They chatted on and off for twenty minutes. Or rather, she let him chatter away. It was all quite one-sided but she didn't mind. She didn't want to talk about herself. She liked the way he made her laugh, sharing silly stories about what he and his friends got up to. It reminded her of her teenage years. Not all the memories were good ones but he made her think of the times she had enjoyed, and checking out the songs and clips he sent made her feel younger.

I've got to go, he said, eventually.

OK.

Can I talk to you later? he asked. *I'm in tonight.*

I should be about ...

Naomi took one bite of the slightly stale sandwich and then, taking the plate downstairs, she threw the rest in the bin.

She worked away through the afternoon. At around 4pm her phone rang. It was Scott.

‘Hi,’ he said.

‘Hi, how are you?’

‘I’m good. I had a call from Mum, though, and she seems to have completely forgotten that we’re coming to see them. I know I told her but she got really angry and started complaining about Dad, saying that he must have not told her about it. She was calling him all sorts of names down the phone. It was awful! I think it’s best if I go on my own tomorrow and see how they are.’

Naomi tried not to smile. Then she remembered Scott couldn’t see her and she grinned. Forcibly turning the corners of her mouth down to subdue her voice, she replied, ‘Oh, OK, well, as long as you’re sure, hon.’

‘Yes, I’m sure. I don’t want this to disrupt James’s weekend sport and things. I’ll head up there tonight ...’

The idea of having an evening free, no Scott, no dinner to cook, a whole evening to chat online, was very appealing.

‘That’s a GREAT idea,’ Naomi agreed quickly. ‘I’m sure your dad will appreciate it if he’s having a tough time with your mum. You could treat them to dinner out at that local pub they like.’

‘Good idea. You’re so thoughtful. I’ll come back to grab a bag and then head off ...’

‘Perfect. See you later ...’

‘Bye!’

Naomi smiled: this day was just getting better and better.

On hearing James come in from school, she went downstairs. ‘How was your day?’ she asked.

‘All right ...’ he mumbled from his seat at the kitchen table.

Naomi put the kettle on then turned it off, deciding she would have a gin and tonic instead. It was Friday, after all. Looking back at James staring at his phone, she smiled. The one thing her own recent addiction to messaging had given her was an appreciation as to why James’s phone was so important to him.

‘Dad is away tonight so you can go and see David if you like. If he’s free. I can give you some money for McDonald’s...’

‘Oh! Really? Cheers, Mum, you’re the best!’ he replied, rewarding her with a grin.

She smiled back. Being nice was easy when she was also getting what she wanted: an evening free to chat to her... What was he? A friend? Yes. A friend. Just a friend.

‘I’ve got a bit more work to do,’ she lied. ‘I’ll be down again soon. Help yourself to some money from my purse and I’ll see you later!’

‘Sure.’

Giving him a hug, Naomi went back upstairs.

I’m all yours tonight... she typed. Let me know when you’re free...

An hour or so later, there was the red flag of a message. She grinned at the screen, her stomach and head feeling suddenly very light.

Hey.

She loved that *hey*. Scott never said *hey*. *Hey* was sexy in a way that *hello* never could be, not even if it tried really hard. Ordinarily she hated the way everyday English had become Americanised, but there was something about *hey*. It seemed so much more intimate than a stiff English *hello* or a studiedly casual *hi*.

Having been taught about mirroring in her management training, she replied, *Hey*.

How are you?

She smiled and, sipping her post-gin glass of water, she sent back, *Good. Pleased it's Friday! You?*

Yes, me too ☺

Have you got much planned for the weekend? she asked, curious as ever about what he was up to.

Just the usual stuff – shops, lunch, cinema.

Sounds nice – lucky you. Naomi smiled again. His was such an easy life, she thought. Not that she would wish to go through the whole baby thing again, but she hadn't had the leisurely thirties that so many people she worked with seemed to be enjoying – this extension of their twenties while they put off starting a family. It looked like fun – but she couldn't help thinking that it would only make the transition to life as a parent even harder.

Can I ask you something? he typed.

Sure.

What are you wearing?

Naomi sat up straight. Her stomach did a tight roll. Oh, God, what was this?

Simultaneously a small voice inside her scoffed, Ha! Like you haven't been *dying* for him to say something like that.

She had no idea what to type. Did you say what you were really wearing, or make something up? She felt her stomach churn again, panic and doubt gripping and kneading her insides. It felt like some sort of test, a test that she had to pass to progress to the next level of the game.

Her hands hovered anxiously over the black keyboard, then fluttered up to her face, and then, trying not to think about it too much, she just began to type.

I wear work clothes even at home...fitted navy skirt, cream jumper, tights...

It was only after pressing the return key that she read the word *tights*. Aargh, no! she thought. Tights aren't sexy! Why did I type *tights*?

She waited anxiously for a response.

Mmmh. Is it a short skirt?

That was an easy one. *Yes.*

What colour underwear do you have on?

Easier still.

Black.

Which was true.

She added, *Lacy and tiny.*

Which was not.

There was a pause. The seconds seemed to stretch out. Was that the wrong thing to say? Was lace not 'in' any more? She felt as though she had perhaps made some sort of fashion blunder.

I would love to see you in those.

Really?

Really. If I close my eyes I can still see you dancing at New Year. You looked so good. So alive.

Naomi felt her face flush. All she could remember about that night was how good it had felt to be dancing: drinking and dancing on her own after the long Christmas holidays with the demands of Scott's parents as well as having James sulking round the house for two weeks eating too much rubbish and getting grumpy because he missed his friends.

But I bet you look even better without anything on. I want you to show me.

The door opened.

Startled, Naomi jumped and quickly minimised the screen. Turning round, she was startled to see Scott. She had completely forgotten that he had said he was coming home first to pack a bag.

'I'm nearly ready to go! Are you still working?' She saw his eyes glance at the screen.

'Yes! Just thought, you know, that I'd get on top of it if you weren't here. Help keep tomorrow clear...' Her voice trailed off as her lie ran out of steam.

‘Good idea. But don’t work too late or I’ll feel bad for you!’

He came over and kissed her on the cheek. As he walked away, she found herself unconsciously wiping the dampness off her skin.

She looked at the clock. It was 8pm.

Shit, she thought, shit, shit. Where had the time gone? And where had *he* gone?

Mike’s little button had gone off.

‘Ugh,’ she groaned with frustration.

She waited for Scott to leave and then logged back on; he still wasn’t there.

She typed, *I’ll make sure I’m wearing something more interesting next time...*

And then she logged off and went downstairs, an unfamiliar numbness in her crotch as she walked into the kitchen, grabbed the wine and a glass and went in to the living room.

The 7.57. The usual grim Monday morning silence. Except, behind the neutral façade, Naomi felt anything but grim. She was more excited than she had been in years.

Shifting in her seat, she ignored the sideways glares of the older man next to her. It was impossible to sit still: her mind was racing so fast that her body was keen to get in on the action. Forcing herself to maintain the illusion of calm, she stared out of the window, hands knotted together in her lap. Every thought revolved around the same question: what was going on? What was going on? What had started out as a bit of banter and chat had turned, as of Friday’s messages, into something else, but she wasn’t sure what exactly. All she knew was that it was thrilling, and that she could think of little else.

Taking her phone out of her bag, she immediately put it away again. The urge to look at the messages once more was overwhelming but she couldn’t. Not here. Not on the train.

Anyone might see. She laced her fingers together and placed her hands back on her lap. On her navy skirt. The line she had written came back: what had he thought when she had said that? Had he imagined her in it? Should she have asked what he was wearing too, or did you not do that? She had no idea.

Again she went to take her phone out of her bag and again she didn't. Instead, she knotted her hands together tighter, willing the train to go faster.

In the office, she turned the computer on and then went and made some coffee. Back at her desk, she logged in and read through the messages three times over. He had said she looked good when she was dancing; he had said he wanted to see her underwear. He had said those things. There it was in black and white. She smiled to herself.

Half an hour later, Carla walked by her door.

'Morning!' she called in, clinging on to the door frame as she always did, smiling as she always did.

'Hey,' Naomi replied. 'How are you?'

Carla swung into the room, saying, 'Yeah, good – we went out for the day yesterday which was fun.' Then she rolled her eyes, pulled an exasperated face and continued, 'But Saturday was a total write-off... Mike was drinking all afternoon on Friday, some client thing. He got so pissed and then spent all day on Saturday feeling sorry for himself and not wanting to do anything!'

Drunk. He had been drunk. Oh, God, Naomi thought. I am such a fool. Such an old fool.

She laughed politely, unable to reply. Luckily for her, Carla wiggled the purple plastic file she was carrying and said, 'It's not a macguffin this time – gotta go to HR! See you later!'

'See you!' Naomi choked out.

As soon as Carla was gone, Naomi sat back in her chair and said, 'Bastard,' in a hushed voice.

What had she been thinking? She got up and then sat down again and then, with an angry huff, she got back up and paced

about the office. He had been drunk. He had only asked her those things, said those things, because he was *drunk!*

Pacing about, hands clenched into her fists at her side, she couldn't remember the last time she had felt this angry.

But, maybe, said a voice in her head, *maybe he was only able to say those things BECAUSE he was drunk.*

With a slightly different emphasis, the idea of his being drunk suddenly became her ally rather than her enemy.

Maybe, she thought, sitting back down at her desk, allowing the thought to get comfortable. Maybe. Oh, but even so, she had to be more wary. She had no idea what he was doing or who he was with when he messaged her. He might even be doing it to make his friends laugh. The memory of that night at her old job came back, as unwelcome as ever. The smirks that were almost hidden behind hands but not quite. The younger guys in the office, lips curled in a sneer as they looked over at her in the pub. The message in their hard eyes had been very clear: *What are you doing here, you old cow? Go home and leave us to it...*

The memory always made her feel a little queasy and, shaking her head, she tried to be rid of it. Alcohol loosened the inhibitions, that was all. The idea that being drunk had meant he'd felt able to say what he wanted to was a reassuring one, one that she was happy to cling on to for now. Yes, she said to herself, yes, OK, so he was drunk but even so...I need to leave it. Leave it for a few days. Wait and see what he says next.

Back at her desk, she opened up the project file and set to work.

So much of the next two days were spent wanting to message him and not doing so that, by the time she got home on Tuesday night, all her willpower had drained away.

After supper, she found herself staring at the screen, mentally composing the perfect message. In her mind it was

the perfect balance of cool, calm nonchalance with just a hint of sexiness. *Hey, how are you?*

She then pretended to be interested in the other people on her news feed and in her emails, not staring at the photos on his profile page.

Seeing that he was now online, she tried to ignore the tension in her stomach as the minutes went by.

Then, there was the beep.

Hey there. I'm good. How are you, beautiful?

Great, thanks!

She had decided not to question him about Friday, to just wait and see what he said next. This decision – the decision not to query what he was doing or why – was a barely conscious one. If she had been able to be honest with herself, she would have said that she was scared: scared that if she shone too bright a light on whatever was happening it might vanish in a puff of smoke like a faerie or other imaginary, beautiful thing that was too impossibly perfect to survive in the real world.

Glad January is nearly over... he continued.

Yes! January can be rough but February is always worse! Got plans?

Not really. This and that but yeah, winter is dull, real dull. Needs livening up a bit, I think.

Oh, you think so, do you? she replied, hoping her teasing tone came across.

I do think so...

There was a pause. What was that meant to mean? He was so cryptic sometimes. It was frustrating.

How are you going to liven it up? she typed back, wincing slightly at her own forwardness but needing him to be clearer. She could feel her shoulders tense as she waited for the reply. With no facial expressions or eye-contact to go on, she felt as if she was operating blind, with no idea what type of response she might get next.

I can think of a few ways.

Can you now?

Oh, yes.

She paused. This is it, she thought: just say it, just say it...

Do they involve more questions about the colour of my underwear?

They might :P

Tease, she fired back, smiling.

Teasing is fun but being teased is even better.

I can do that.

Can you now?

She smiled at the mirroring. He probably wasn't even aware he was doing it but she recognised it.

What colour are they today? he asked.

Her face flushed again. Even when she was expecting it, hoping for it, it made her feel embarrassed.

White today but still tiny. Again, only half true.

Thong?

Might be? Is that what you like?

Yes. I like to bite through the tiny thin string at the side with my teeth.

She flushed even more and crossed her legs.

What are you wearing? she asked.

I want to know what else you have on.

White T-shirt, tight jeans... bare feet, red-painted toenails.

Nice – I like painted nails... I want to see those nails up by my ears.

Naomi sat back and gasped a little. She squirmed on the hard wooden chair.

Really? was all she could manage to write.

Really.

Oh.

Is that OK?

I don't know.

Well, if you don't want to play...

I don't know what I want.

There was a pause. It lasted a long time. These pauses had changed. They were stuffed full now: stuffed full of possibility, of potential. They were also almost unbearably sexy, the typed equivalent of a long, slow striptease. The sexual tension was pulsating down the phone lines or wherever it was the internet signal came and went from (God, how did she still have no idea how that worked?) and it seemed to flow in between her and the black letter keys. Her fingers dancing across the letters, like fingers tracing on skin. An image of his hands flashed into her mind and she dug her fingers into her palm, uncertain of what to say or do next.

Are you still there? he asked.

Yes. She hoped he understood that she was whispering.

I can stop.

Can you? she thought. *I'm not sure I can.*

No. Don't stop.

OK... If you need some more time, that's fine. I'm a very patient man.

Yes. OK. Thank you.

Staring at the screen, she reread what he had written. Something about him saying he would wait, could wait, made her feel as though *she* absolutely couldn't. Without thinking, not able to allow herself to do what she was doing consciously, she replied, *I'm on my own for a little bit of time tomorrow night.*

She then hurriedly logged off. Sitting back, she had to put her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry. She was trembling, her heart racing, her breathing fast and a little ragged. She had been typing so fast, she had barely even registered what she had said. She read over the messages a dozen times. They remained unchanged. Standing up, and running out of the room, she slammed the door shut behind her.

It was the next night. Scott was still at work and would be till late. James was out at football practice. Naomi was online.

She hadn't dared ask if he had been drinking. Instead, she had started herself as soon as she had got in. They had been chatting for an hour. She wanted him to make the first move. Wanted him to take action. In that way, she was absolved of the responsibility. Doing what you were told was an excuse that people had been using to justify much worse behaviour than she was hoping to indulge in. But she remained nervous, unsure. The tension, the holding back, was almost unbearable.

So, you're on your own tonight, he typed.

Yes.

Ah.

Ah?

Yes, ah...

Is this where you ask me what I'm wearing again?

This is where I tell you to strip.

Her face flushed and she shifted in her seat. Oh God, she thought, what am I about to do?

Do it.

Yes.

Naomi stood up, pulled the thick navy jumper up off over her head and wriggled out of her jeans. She felt terrified and yet exhilarated.

Tell me what you're doing.

I'm sitting on the chair, she typed, *in a black lace bra and panties.*

Put your hand inside your bra and stroke your nipple.

Easing her fingers uncertainly under the lace cup, Naomi felt the skin on her breast prickle under her fingertips.

Feels good. Where are your hands? she typed back slowly with one hand.

I want you to squeeze your nipple hard between your fingers then rest your hand on the outside of those panties.

Oh, that feels good.

I know it does. Slip your hand under the lace and then rest it there and press your palm against your clit.

She pressed her palm against herself.

It's so warm, she typed.

Massage it, rub it, and then slide a finger inside, hard and high, I want to feel inside you.

Oh, God, she thought, staring at the screen.

She could feel the heat under her fingers. She knew how long it had been since she had touched herself here. Knew it and yet none of that seemed important now. He was telling her to, and the telling changed everything. It helped her to forget about then and to focus only on now. It gave her permission.

I am already so wet, so hot and wet, she typed.

And she was saying it out loud now. Having waited and thought of little else for days, she could feel the anticipation herself: she was ready. The muscles in her thighs were tensing as she squirmed in the chair. Her face was flushed from the wine, her breathing beginning to quicken. On the hard chair, she felt the blood fill her pussy, felt the heat as every part of it began to swell and moisten.

Oh, God, she typed again. *I need to lie down.*

No. Stay there. I want you to slide two fingers up there now – I want you to think about my hard cock sliding up into you.

Oh, God.

I am sliding in and out of you – so hard and so deep – fucking you hard – I want to hear you come – what sound do you make when you come?

A loud one.

Make it then, come hard around my dick.

And Naomi slid to the floor. Pressing the heel of her hand to the soft swell of herself, she began to press there gently. Men wanted to think that you needed them inside you to make you come, but when she used to do this she usually stayed on the outside, teasing her clitoris and then building the pressure up until she came and came hard. With a gasp, she slid her fingers inside and cupped herself. She was so hot, wet and soft. Crying

out, she could feel the inside of her vagina rippling as the waves of orgasm travelled up. Trying to slow her breathing, she wished she could take the noise back. The sound of her coming seemed to echo round the room. She wanted to take it back – take it back inside, contain it. But it was too late. And, more than wanting it back, she wanted to hear it again. Pressing gently, she slid her fingers in higher, rhythmically fucking herself.

After coming hard again, she sat up, face hot, breath ragged. Back on the chair, she looked at the glowing screen, staring at the last line he had written. Her hands were still shaking. They hovered over the keyboard. What had she done?

Hey. How are you? Are you OK?

Yes, she typed.

No, she thought.

That felt great, she added.

Yes, it did.

But, she thought, I feel kind of shitty now. Tell me that's normal. Please.

There was a long pause.

Are you sure you're OK?

Honestly? I don't know.

I haven't felt that turned on in ages, he replied. *You make me so hard.*

Really?

Yes. I want you.

She slumped in her seat, feeling happy but also completely overwhelmed.

Shit...I've got to go, he typed. *Can we talk after the weekend? I need to talk to you.*

Sure xx

Xx

And then he was gone.

The room seemed to get colder and expand out so that she was left, small and shrunken, in the centre of it. This, she

imagined, was what it must feel like after watching porn: cold, mechanical, sated but also empty and very much in need of a hug, some warmth and tenderness. Shivering, she picked her clothes up off the floor and, hands trembling, she slowly put them back on.

When Scott came home an hour later with a midweek takeaway treat and a bottle of wine, Naomi was curled up on the sofa already cradling a wine glass and staring at the television screen. She had no idea what she was watching.

‘Hello, here’s dinner!’ said Scott as he put the bag down on the coffee table. ‘You OK?’ he asked as he went to get plates and cutlery and a wine glass for himself.

‘Yes. Yes, I’m fine,’ said Naomi, snapping to attention when Scott came back into the room. It was as if she was seeing him, her husband, for the first time. She saw his grey-flecked hair and soft hazel eyes; she saw his warm smile, the tired smudges under his eyes as well as the lines around his mouth and on his forehead. He was still striking on a good day, tall and broad, slim and smiling, but he looked tired. He would be fifty-one at the end of this year and sometimes, on a not so good day, that seven-year age gap looked and seemed more like seventeen.

‘Went for the usual. James still out?’

‘Great, and yes. Yes, he is. He texted earlier. He’ll be back by 9.30. He’s popping to David’s after football.’

Scott served up the curry and passed Naomi a plate. ‘What are you watching?’ he asked as he took a sip of red wine.

‘No idea!’ Naomi laughed, suddenly feeling light-headed. Looking at the food, she suddenly felt very hungry. In fact she was absolutely starving. Eating quickly, forking the spiced chicken and rice into her mouth, she was amazed at how she could be sitting here, eating and talking, watching TV, sitting next to her husband so causally when only an hour ago she had been masturbating for another man. The contrast struck

her as so stark as to be unreal. It was as if she had split in two and it was one Naomi who had done those things and a different one who was here now eating, talking, feeling warm in the cosy, firelit living room, sitting on the soft sofa in clean white underwear.

They talked and, as she listened to Scott, she marvelled at how much she loved him, how that feeling, the feeling of love for him remained unchanged by what had happened. For this she felt grateful, relieved and happy. Very happy. An hour later, James came in; he helped himself to the leftover curry and they talked about their respective days and the plans for the weekend. The strangeness of what she had done heightened the normality and naturalness of this moment even more: enhanced it, made it better.

Later, as Naomi brushed her teeth, she looked at herself in the mirror and thought, I got away with it. I really did.

And her next thought: I want to do it again.