

A MISSING GIRL
A GUILTY MAN
A DEADLY SECRET

INVISIBLE GIRL

LISA
JEWELL

THE MILLION COPY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lisa Jewell

INVISIBLE GIRL



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CENTURY

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Contents

Valentine's Night

Before

- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19

After

- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24

Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51
Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55
Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58

Now

Chapter 59

Chapter 60

Chapter 61

[Acknowledgements](#)

Chapter 60
Chapter 61

[Acknowledgements](#)

About the Author

Lisa Jewell was born in London. Her first novel, *Ralph's Party*, was the bestselling debut novel of 1999. Since then she has published another 8 novels, most recently a number of dark psychological thrillers, including *Girls* and *Then She Was Gone* (both of which were Richard & Judy Book Club picks) as well as *I Found You* and *Watching You*. Lisa is a top ten *York Times* and number one *Sunday Times* bestselling author who has published worldwide in over twenty-five languages. She lives in north London with her husband, two daughters, two cats, two guinea pigs and the best dog in the world.

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Also available by Lisa Jewell

Ralph's Party
Thirtynothing
One-Hit Wonder
Vince & Joy
A Friend of the Family
31 Dream Street
The Truth About Melody Browne
After the Party
The Making of Us
Before I Met You
The House We Grew Up In
The Third Wife
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To Jack, Sonny, Cocoa: all the lovely animals I have
loved and lost this year

To Jack, Sonny, Cocoa: all the lovely animals I have
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Valentine's Night

23:59

I duck down and pull my hoodie close around my face. Ahead of me the woman with red hair is picking up speed; she knows she's being followed. I pick up my speed to match hers. I only want to talk to her, but I can tell from the way she's moving that she's terrified. I slow down at the sound of muffled footsteps behind me. I turn and see a figure coming after us.

I don't need to see their face to know who it is.

It's him.

My heart starts pounding beneath my ribs, pumping blood through my body so hard and fast that I can feel the cut on my leg begin to throb. I duck back into the shadows and wait for the man to pass. He turns the corner and I see his body language change as he sees the woman ahead. I recognise the shape of him, the angles of his body, and I know exactly what he is planning to do. I move from my hiding place in the shadows. I stride out, towards the man, towards danger, my actions my own but my fate left wide open.

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Before



SAFFYRE

My name is Saffyre Maddox. I am seventeen years old.

I am mostly Welsh on my dad's side and partly Trinidadian, partly Malaysian and a tiny bit French from my mum. Sometimes people try to guess my heritage but they always end up getting it wrong. If anyone just says that I am a mixed bag and leaves it at that. No reason for anyone to know who slept with who, you know. It's my business really, isn't it?

I'm in my first year of sixth form at a school in Chalk Farm where I'm doing Maths, Physics and Biology because I'm a bit of a boffin. I don't know what I want to do when I leave school; everyone expects me to go to university, but sometimes I think I'd just like to go and work in a zoo, or a dog groomer's.

I live in a two-bedroom flat on the eighth floor of a tower on Alfred Street, right opposite a school I don't go to, because they hadn't actually built it when I started secondary.

My grandma died shortly before I was born, my mum died shortly afterwards, my dad doesn't want to know and my granddad died a few months ago. So I live alone with my uncle.

He's only ten years older than me and his name is Aaron. He looks at me like a father. He works at a betting shop, nine to five, and does people's gardens on the weekends. He's probably the best human being in the world. I have another uncle, Lee, who lives in Essex with his wife and two tiny daughters. So there are finally some girls in the family, but it's a bit late for me now.

I grew up with two men and, as a result, I'm not that great with girls more accurately, I'm better with boys. I used to hang out with the boys I was a kid and got called a tomboy, which I don't think I ever was. But I started to change and became 'pretty' (and I do not think I'm pretty, I know that everyone I meet tells me that I am) and boys stopped wanting to hang out as a mate and got all weird around me and I could tell that I'd be better off if I could harvest some girls. So I harvested some girls and we're not close, don't reckon I'll ever see any of them again once I've left school but we get on OK just as something to do. We've all known each other a long, long time now. It's easy.

So, that's the bare outline of me. I'm not a happy, happy kind of person, I don't have a big laugh and I don't do that hugging thing that the other boys like to do. I have boring hobbies: I like to read and I like to cook. I'm not into going out. I like a bit of rum with my uncle on a Friday night while watching TV but I don't smoke weed or take drugs or anything like that. It's amazing how boring you can get away with being when you're pretty. It's one of those things that everyone seems to notice. When you're pretty everyone just assumes you must have a great life. People are so short-sighted, sometimes. People are so stupid.

I have a dark past and I have dark thoughts. I do dark things and I sometimes scare myself sometimes. I wake in the middle of the night and I've twisted myself into my bedsheets. Before I go to sleep, I tuck my bedsheet under the mattress, really hard, really firm, so the sheet is taut enough to bounce off. The next morning all four corners are free; my sheet and I are entwined. I don't remember what happened. I don't remember my dreams. I don't think I've ever rested.

When I was ten years old something really, really bad happened to me. Let's maybe not get into that too deep. But yes, I was a little girl and it was a big bad thing that no little girl should have to experience, and it changed me. I started to hurt myself, on my ankles, inside my ankle socks, so no one would see the scratches. I knew what self-harming was – everyone knew about these days – but I didn't know why I was doing it. I just knew that it stopped me thinking too hard about other things in my life.

Then when I was about twelve my uncle Aaron saw the scratches and the scars, put two and two together and took me to my GP, who referred me to the Portman Children's Centre, for therapy.

I was sent to a man called Roan Fours.

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CATE

‘Mum, can you talk to me?’

Cate’s daughter sounds breathless and panicky.

‘What?’ says Cate. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘I’m walking back from the Tube. And I feel ...’

‘What?’

‘It’s, like, there’s this guy.’ Her daughter’s voice lowers to a whisper.
‘He’s walking really close.’

‘Just keep talking, G, just keep talking.’

‘I am,’ snaps Georgia. ‘I am talking. Listen.’

Cate ignores the teenage attitude and says, ‘Where are you now?’

‘Just coming up Tunley Terrace.’

‘Good,’ she says. ‘Good. Nearly here then.’

She pulls back the curtain and peers out on to the street, into the blackness of the January night, waiting for the familiar outline of her daughter to appear.

‘I can’t see you,’ she says, starting to feel a little panicky herself.

‘I’m here,’ says Georgia. ‘I can see you now.’

As she says this, Cate sees her too. Her heart rate starts to slow. She pulls the curtain drop and goes to the front door. Folding her arms against the freezing cold she waits for Georgia. Across the street a shape disappears from the driveway of the big house opposite. A man.

‘Was that him?’ she asks Georgia.

Georgia turns, her hands clasped into fists around the sleeves of her oversized Puffa coat. ‘Yes,’ she says. ‘That was him.’ She shivers as C

closes the door behind her and bundles her into the warmth of the hallway. She throws her arms briefly around Cate and hugs her hard. Then she says, 'Creep.'

'What was he doing exactly?'

Georgia shrugs off her coat and throws it carelessly on to the nearest chair. Cate picks it up and hangs it in the hallway.

'I don't know. Just being creepy.'

'Creepy in what way?'

She follows Georgia into the kitchen and watches her open the fridge, peer into it briefly and then shut it again.

'I don't know,' Georgia says again. 'Just walking too close. Just being weird.'

'Did he say anything to you?'

'No. But he looked like he was going to.' She opens the larder cupboard and pulls out a pack of Jaffa Cakes, takes one out and puts it whole into her mouth. She chews and swallows, then shudders. 'Just freaked me out,' she says. Her eyes catch sight of Cate's white wine and she says. 'Can I have a sip? For my nerves?'

r. Cate rolls her eyes, then passes her daughter the glass. 'Would you recognise him?' she asks. 'If you saw him again?'

'Probably.' Georgia is about to take a third sip from Cate's wine and she snatches it back from her.

'That's enough,' she says.

'But I've experienced a trauma!' she says.

ckness 'Hardly,' says Cate. 'But it just goes to show. Even somewhere like London, somewhere supposedly "safe", you need to keep your wits about you.'

'I hate it round here,' says Georgia. 'I don't know why anyone would want to live here if they didn't have to.'

'I know,' Cate agrees. 'I can't wait to get home.'

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ate
The house is a rental, temporary accommodation after their home away was damaged by subsidence. They'd thought it would be an adventure to live somewhere 'posh' for a while. They hadn't thought that posh areas were full of posh people who didn't really like the fact there were other people living in close proximity. They hadn't thought about the unfriendly security-gated houses and about how eerily quiet these leafy, mansion-streets would be compared with their bustling Kilburn terrace. It hadn't

way. occurred to them that empty streets could be scarier than streets full of
says, people.

A little while later Cate goes to the bay window in her bedroom at the
t chair. of the house and pulls back the curtain again. The shadows of bare trees
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where an old house has been ripped down to make way for something
Cate sees pickup trucks reverse through a gate between the wooden
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She thinks of her girl turning that corner, the fear in her voice, the
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occurred to them that empty streets could be scarier than streets full of people.

A little while later Cate goes to the bay window in her bedroom at the front of the house and pulls back the curtain again. The shadows of bare trees whip across the high wall opposite. Beyond the high wall is an empty plot of land where an old house has been ripped down to make way for something new. Cate sees pickup trucks reverse through a gate between the wooden construction panels sometimes and then reappear an hour later filled with soil and rubble. They've been living here for a year and so far there has been no sign of a foundation being dug or a hardhatted architect on site. It is that rarest of things in central London: a space with no discernible function, a gap.

She thinks of her girl turning that corner, the fear in her voice, the footsteps too close behind her, the audible breath of a stranger. How easy it would be, she thinks, to break open that hoarding, to drag a girl from the street, to hurt her, kill her even and hide her body in that dark, private void. And how long would it take for it to be found?

‘Georgia had a scare last night.’

Roan looks up from his laptop. His pale blue eyes are immediately focused on Georgia. ‘What sort of scare?’

‘She got a bit spooked walking back from the Tube station. Thought someone was following her.’

Roan had been out late the night before and Cate had lain alone in bed, listening to foxes screaming in the wasteland opposite, watching the silhouettes of the branches outside waving like a crowd of zombies through the thin fabric of the curtains, overthinking everything.

‘What did he look like, the man who followed you?’ she’d asked Georgia earlier that night.

‘Just normal.’

‘Normal, how? Was he tall? Fat? Thin? Black? White?’

‘White,’ she said. ‘Normal height. Normal size. Boring clothes. Boring hair.’

Somehow the blandness of this description had unnerved Cate more than Georgia had said he was six feet seven with a face tattoo.

She can’t work out why she feels so unsafe in this area. The insurance company offered to pay up to £1,200 a week for replacement accommodation while their house is being repaired. With that they could have found a nice house on their street, with a garden, but for some reason they’d decided to use it as a chance to have an adventure, to live a different kind of a life.

Flicking through a property supplement, Cate had seen an advert for an apartment in a grand house in Hampstead. Both the kids were at school, Swiss Cottage and Roan worked in Belsize Park. Hampstead was closer to both places than their house in Kilburn, which meant they could walk instead of getting the Tube.

‘Look,’ she’d said, showing the advert to Roan. ‘Three-bed flat in Hampstead. With a terrace. Twelve-minute walk to the school. Five minutes to your clinic. And Sigmund Freud used to live up the road! Wouldn’t that be fun’, she’d said blithely, ‘to live in Hampstead for a little while?’

Neither Cate nor Roan is a native Londoner. Cate was born in Liverpool and raised in Hartlepool, while Roan was born and brought up in Rye on the Sussex coast. They both discovered London as adults, without any sense of its demographic geography. A friend of Cate’s who’d lived in London all her life said of their temporary address, ‘Oh no, I’d hate to live around there. It’s so anonymous.’ But Cate hadn’t known that when she signed the contracts. She hadn’t thought beyond the poetry of the postcard, the proximity to Hampstead’s picturesque village centre, the illustriousness of the blue plaque on Sigmund Freud’s house around the corner.

‘Maybe you should go and meet her from now on?’ said Roan. ‘What if she’s walking around at night?’

Cate imagines Georgia’s reaction to being told that her mother would be accompanying her on all nocturnal journeys outside the house. ‘Roan, she’s fifteen! That’s the last thing she’d want.’

He throws her that look, the one he uses all the time, the look that says, ‘Well, since you have put me in the position of conceding all decision-making to you, you will therefore have to take full responsibility for any bad things that happen as a result of those decisions. Including the potential rape/attack/murder of our daughter.’

Cate sighs and turns to the window where she can see the reflection of her husband and herself, a hazy tableau of a marriage at its midpoint. Twelve years, more than if five years married, likely another twenty-five to come.

Beyond the reflection it’s snowing; fat swirls of flakes like TV interludes over their image. Upstairs she can hear the soft feet of their neighbours, an American–Korean couple whose names she can’t quite remember though she knows they smile and greet each other profusely whenever their paths cross.

Somewhere there is the distant whine of police sirens. But apart from that, the street is silent. This road is always so silent and the snow has made it quieter.

‘Look,’ says Roan, turning the screen of his laptop slightly towards Cate.

Cate drops her reading glasses from her head to her nose.

‘Woman, 23, sexually assaulted on Hampstead Heath’.

She takes a breath. ‘Yes, well,’ she counters, ‘that’s the Heath. I wouldn’t want Georgia walking around the Heath alone at night. I wouldn’t want

of the children walking alone on the Heath.'

minutes 'Apparently it's the third attack in a month. The first was on Pond S
it be Cate closes her eyes briefly. 'That's a mile away.'

Roan says nothing.

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innate 'Good,' says Roan. 'Thank you.'

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'Apparently it's the third attack in a month. The first was on Pond Street.'

Cate closes her eyes briefly. 'That's a mile away.'

Roan says nothing.

'I'll tell Georgia to be careful,' she says. 'I'll tell her to call me when she's walking home at night.'

'Good,' says Roan. 'Thank you.'

‘I know who it was!’ says Georgia, who has just burst into the kitchen with Tilly in tow. It’s just turned four thirty and they’re both in their school uniforms. They bring a blast of winter cold and an air of panic into the room with them.

Cate turns and gazes at her daughter. ‘Who what was?’ she says.

‘The creepy guy!’ she replies. ‘The one who followed me the other night. We saw him just now. He lives in that weird house across the street. You know, the one with the gross armchair in the driveway.’

‘How do you know it was him?’

‘It just totally was. He was putting something out in the bins. And he just looked at us.’

‘Looked at you how?’

‘Like, weirdly.’

Tilly stands behind Georgia nodding her agreement.

‘Hi, Tilly,’ says Cate belatedly.

‘Hi.’

Tilly is a tiny thing, with gobstopper eyes and shiny black hair; she looks like a Pixar girl. She and Georgia have only recently become friends after being at the same school for nearly five years. She is the first really decent friend Georgia has acquired since she left primary school and while Cate can’t quite work Tilly out, she is very keen for the friendship to flourish.

‘He knew it was me,’ Georgia continues. ‘When he looked at me. I can tell he knew it was me, from the other night. It was a really dirty look.’

‘Did you see it?’ Cate asks Tilly.

Tilly nods again. ‘Yeah. He was definitely not happy with Georgia. I can tell.’

Georgia opens a brand-new packet of Leibniz biscuits even though there's a half-empty packet in the cupboard and offers it to Tilly. Tilly says no to you and then they disappear to her bedroom.

The front door goes again and Josh appears. Cate's heart lifts a little. Georgia always arrives with news and moods and announcements and atmospheres, her little brother arrives as though he'd never left. He doesn't bring things in with him, his issues unfurl gently and in good time.

'Hello, darling.'

with flat night. ou 'Hi, Mum.' He crosses the kitchen and hugs her. Josh hugs her every time he comes home, before he goes to bed, when he sees her in the morning when he goes out for longer than a couple of hours. He's done this since she was a tiny boy and she keeps expecting it to stop, or to peter out, but he's still here fourteen now and he shows no sign of abandoning the habit. In a strange way, Cate sometimes thinks, it's Josh who's kept her at home all these years beyond her children's need to have a stay-at-home mother. He still feels vulnerable for some reason, still feels like the small boy crying into the arms of his hands on his first day of nursery and still crying four hours later when she came to collect him.

'How was school?'

e He shrugs and says, 'It was good. I got my Physics test back. I got six out of sixty-five. I was second top.'

'Oh,' she says, squeezing him again quickly. 'Josh, that's amazing! Well done you! Physics! Of all the things to be good at. I don't know where you get it from.'

Josh helps himself to a banana and an apple and a glass of milk and sits with her for a while at the kitchen table.

looks 'Are you OK?' he asks her after a short silence.

fter She looks at him with surprise. 'Yes,' she says.

cent 'Are you sure you're OK?'

ite 'Yes,' she says again, with a laugh. 'Why?'

h. He shrugs. 'No reason.' Then he picks up his milk and his schoolbag and heads to his room. 'What's for dinner?' he says, turning back halfway down the hallway.

'Chicken curry,' she says.

I could 'Cool,' he says. 'I'm in the mood for something spicy.'

And then it is quiet again, just Cate and the dark shadows through the window, her unfocused thoughts passing silently through the back tunnel.

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Later that night it happens. A sort of coalescence of all of Cate's weird unformed fears about this place.

Georgia's friend Tilly is assaulted moments after leaving their flat.

Cate had invited Tilly to stay for supper and she'd said, No, thank you. Mum's expecting me, and Cate had thought, Maybe she just doesn't like curry. Then a few minutes after she left there was a knock at the door and a doorbell rang and Cate went to answer it and there was Tilly, her face pale, her huge eyes wide with shock saying, 'Someone touched me. He touched me.'

Now Cate hustles her into the kitchen and pulls her out a chair, gets a glass of water, asks her exactly what happened.

'I'd just crossed the road. I was just over there. By the building site, there was someone behind me. And he just sort of grabbed me. Here.' Tilly gestures at her hips. 'And he was trying to pull me.'

'Pull you where?'

'Not anywhere. Just kind of against him.'

Georgia sits Tilly down at the table and holds her arm. 'Oh my God, you see him? Did you see his face?'

Tilly's hands tremble in her lap. 'Not really. Sort of. I don't think ... all just ... quick. Really, really quick.'

'Are you hurt?' says Georgia.

'No?' says Tilly, with a slight question mark, as though she might be. 'No,' she says again. 'I'm OK. I'm just ...' She stares down at her hands. 'Freaked out. He was ... It was horrible.'

'Age?' asks Cate. 'Roughly?'

Tilly shrugs. 'I don't know.' She sniffs. 'He was wearing a hood and a scarf around his face.'

‘Height?’

‘Kind of tall, I guess. And slim.’

‘Should I call the police?’ asks Cate and then wonders why she’s asking a sixteen-year-old girl who’s just been assaulted whether or not she should call the police.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ said Georgia. ‘Of course you should call them.’ Tilly is there before anyone else has a chance to pick up their phone, she’s calling 911.

And then the police arrive, and Tilly’s mum arrives and the night takes a strange tangent off into a place that Cate has never been before, a place where policemen in her kitchen, and a tearful mother she’s never met, and a nervous energy that keeps her awake for hours after the police leave and her mother disappears in an Uber and the house is quiet yet she knows no one can be sleeping peacefully because a bad thing happened and it’s something to do with them and something to do with this place and something else, some indefinable thing to do with her, some badness, some mistake she’s made because she’s not a good person. She has been trying hard to stop thinking of herself as a bad person, but as she lies in bed that night, the sudden awful knowledge of it gnaws at her consciousness until she feels raw and unpeeled.

her a

Cate awakes just before her alarm goes off the following morning, having slept for only three and a half hours. She turns and looks at Roan, lying peacefully on his back, his arms tucked neatly under the duvet. He is a pleasant-looking man, her husband. He has lost most of his hair and she now, revealing the strange contours of his skull that she had not known existed when she’d first met him thirty years ago. She’d presumed his head would be a smooth thing, the underside of a pottery urn. Instead it is a landscape with hills and valleys, a tiny puckered scar. Raised veins run across his temples to his brow. His nose is large. His eyes are heavy-lidded. He is her husband. He hates her. She knows he does. And it’s her fault.

She slips out of bed and goes to the front window, a large bay overlooking the street. The just-risen sun shines through the trees, on to the building across the road. It looks innocuous. Then she looks further to the right, at the house with the armchair on the driveway. She thinks of the man who lived there, the creepy man who’d followed Georgia home from the Tube station, the man who’d thrown her and Tilly dirty looks last night as he put out his bins.

man who matches the description that Tilly gave of the man who assaulted her.

Cate locates the card the policeman gave her last night. Detective Inld call Robert Burdett. She calls him, but he doesn't answer so she leaves a message for him.

'I'm calling about the assault on Tilly Krasniqi last night,' she begins. 'I don't know if it's anything but there's a man, across the street. At number twelve. My daughter says he followed her home the other night. And she says he was staring at her and Tilly strangely on their way home from school last night. I don't know his name, I'm afraid. He's about thirty or forty. Thank you, Tilly. I know. Sorry. Just a thought. Number twelve. Thank you.'

'Have you spoken to Tilly today?' Cate asks Georgia as her daughter sits around the flat readying herself to leave for school later that morning.

'No,' says Georgia. 'She's not been answering my messages or taking my calls. I think maybe her phone's switched off.'

'Oh God.' Cate sighs. She can't bear the sense of guilt, the feeling that somehow she made this happen. She imagines Georgia, her beautiful guileless girl, a man's hands on her in the dark on her way home from a friend's house. It's unbearable. Then she imagines tiny Tilly, too traumatised even to take messages from her best friend. She finds the number that Tilly's mum gave her and presses it into her phone last night and presses it.

Tilly's mum finally answers her phone the sixth time Cate calls her. 'Oh, Elona, hi, it's Cate. How is she? How's Tilly?'

There is a long silence, then the sound of the phone being handled and muted voices in the background. Then a voice says, 'Hello?'

'Elona?'

'No. It's Tilly.'

'Oh,' says Cate. 'Tilly. Hello, sweetheart. How are you doing?'

There's another strange silence. Cate hears Elona's voice in the background. Then Tilly says, 'I've got something to tell you.'

'Oh?'

'About last night. The thing that happened.'

'Yes.'

'It didn't happen.'

'What?'

ilted 'A man didn't touch me. He just walked quite close to me, and Georgia had got me so freaked out about that man who lives opposite you, you spector and I thought it was him, but it wasn't him, it was someone completely message different and – and I came rushing back to yours and I ...'

There're more shuffling sounds and then Elona comes on the line again. 'I 'I'm so sorry,' she says. 'So, so sorry. I said she'd have to tell you herself just don't understand. I mean, I know they're all under a lot of stress, the he says girls, these days – exams, social media, everything, you know. But still ol last no excuse.'

at's all Cate blinks slowly. 'So, there was no assault?' This doesn't make any sense. Tilly's pale skin, her wide eyes, her shaking hands, her tears.

'There was no assault,' Elona confirms in a flat tone, and Cate wonders pins maybe she doesn't quite believe it either.

Outside Cate sees DI Robert Burdett climbing into a car parked across the street. She remembers the message she left on his phone early this morning about the strange man across the road. A wave of guilt passes through her stomach.

less 'Have you told the police?' she asks Elona.

house. 'Yes. Absolutely. Just now. Can't have them wasting their resources take with all these cuts they're having. But anyway, I'm sending her into Scotland put now. Tail between her legs. And again, I am so, so sorry.'

Cate turns off her phone and watches the back end of DI Burdett's car reaches the junction at the bottom of the road.

Why would Tilly have lied? It makes no sense whatsoever.

nd

Cate works from home. She's a trained physiotherapist, but she gave up practice fifteen years ago when Georgia was born and never really got into treating patients. These days she occasionally writes about physiotherapy for medical publications and industry magazines, and every now and then rents a room in her friend's practice in St Johns Wood to treat people she knows, but most of the time she is at home, freelancing (or being 'a housewife with a laptop' as Georgia puts it). In Kilburn she has a small area on the mezzanine, but in this temporary set-up she writes at the kitchen table; her paperwork sits in a filing tray by her laptop, and it's a struggle to keep everything organised and to stop her work stuff being absorbed in the general family silt. She can never find a pen and people scrawl things on

gia back of her business correspondence, yet another thing she hadn't thou
know, through properly before making the move to a small flat.

7 Cate peers through the front window again at the house across the ro
Then she goes back to her laptop and googles it.

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and leave their furniture to rot on the driveway.

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back of her business correspondence, yet another thing she hadn't thought through properly before making the move to a small flat.

Cate peers through the front window again at the house across the road. Then she goes back to her laptop and googles it.

She finds that the last time a flat was bought or sold at number twelve was ten years ago, which is extraordinary for an eminent address such as this. The freehold to the building is owned by a company in Scotland called BG Properties. She can find nothing else about the address or anyone who lives there. It is a house of mystery, she decides, a house where people come and never move out again, where people hang thick curtains and never open them and leave their furniture to rot on the driveway.

Then she googles ley lines at the address. She doesn't quite know what a ley line is but she thinks there might be some strange ones at this junction, where there are no voices in the street late at night, where empty plots of land stay undeveloped, where the foxes scream every night, where teenage girls are followed home and assaulted in the dark, where she feels uncomfortable, where she does not belong.

In the wake of the events of the night that Tilly claimed to have been assaulted, Cate stops walking past the house with the armchair in the driveway.

The position of her house is such that she can turn either left or right to the main road or up into the village and she chooses now to turn left. She does not want to risk crossing paths with the man she'd inadvertently seen the police to question three days ago about an attack on a young girl that apparently hadn't really happened. He wouldn't know it was her, but she would know it was him.

She tries not to even look in the direction of the man's house, but she tracks quickly towards it now as she heads into the village with a bag full of parcels. Her website returns to drop at the post office. A woman is standing at a right angle to the front door, around Cate's age, maybe ten years older. She is wearing a long grey coat, a selection of patterned scarves, ankle boots, and her hair is steely-grey and held up in a bun very high on her head, almost to the point of tipping over her hairline and on to her forehead. She wears black eyeliner under her eyes and is clutching a small suitcase and a selection of airport carrier bags. Cate watches her go through her handbag before removing a set of keys and turning to face the front door. She sees her for a moment in the hallway to riffle through some mail on a console table before the door closes behind her.

Cate realises she is standing in the street staring at a closed door. She turns quickly and heads up the hill towards the village.

After dropping the parcels in at the post office, Cate takes the scenic route back to the flat. If she made a mistake choosing this location for her first temporary accommodation, she wants to make up for it by enjoying

Hampstead village as much as possible while she's here. Kilburn is busy and loud and grimy and real and Cate loves it with a passion. But Kilburn has no heart, no centre, it's just a ladder of small roads set perpendicularly to a big road. Hampstead on the other hand has alleys and crannies and turns and cottages and paths and hidden graveyards and it spreads out in this way in every direction for a mile or more, all the way to the Heath in the north and back down to the wide stately avenues in the south and west. It is the most beautiful London village and every new corner Cate discovers on her walks up hill and down dale colours her day in some way.

Today Cate finds herself walking further than before, across a small section of the Heath grooved with footpaths, through a whispering copse of trees and then down a winding lane lined with interesting old houses, many Georgian, until suddenly she finds herself in a different landscape altogether. The houses are flat and low, with white James Bond-style houses layered together like a mosaic of tiles, attached with concrete walkways and spiral staircases. Each house has a wide terrace overlooking the woods and the Heath beyond. She gets out her phone and she does what she always does when she finds herself somewhere new in this village: she googles it. She discovers that she is in the most expensive council estate ever built, possibly anywhere in the world, part of an idealistic Labour government experiment in the 1970s to house the poor, though they were rich. The land cost nearly half a million pounds to buy. Each house cost £72,000 to build. The project turned sour when the government tried to recoup their investment by charging tenants well above market odds for social housing. The experiment was a resounding failure.

Now these houses are an architect's delight. Cate finds a two-bedroom house on an estate agent's website for over a million pounds. Who would have thought, she wonders, who would have guessed that this futuristic little enclave would be hidden away here behind an Edwardian mansion?

She looks behind her and is suddenly aware that she is entirely alone. There is not a soul around. She hears the wind talking to her through the leaves of the trees that surround this strange enclave. They are telling her to go. Now. That she should not be here. She walks faster, and then faster until she is almost running across the grassland, past the houses, down the hill, back to the high street, to the beauty salons and the boutiques and shops that sell nonsense for far too much money.

As she passes the Tube station her eye is caught by a poster for the local news-sheet, the *Hampstead Voice*; 'SEX ATTACK IN BROAD

stling DAYLIGHT’.

urn has She stops, stares at the words, the adrenaline still fizzing through her
off a She wonders for a moment if the headline is from a parallel reality, wh
astiles stayed too long in the place that was telling her to go, whether if she re
; way article she will discover that it was her, Cate Fours, fifty-year-old moth
orth andtwo, brutalised on a desolate 1970s council estate, unable to explain wh
ultimate had been doing wandering there alone in the middle of the day.

ere Then she thinks of Tilly again, as she has done nearly every minute
every day since she first saw her standing in the doorway four nights a
she wonders if there is maybe some connection between the spate of se
se of attacks in the local area and what Tilly claimed didn’t really happen or
nainly Monday night.

gether: Further down the hill she passes the local newsagent. Here she buys
; roof of the *Hampstead Voice* and heads back home.

ie has a

it her Roan is late back again that night. Roan is a child psychologist and wo
where the Portman Centre in Belsize Park. Having a husband who is a child
t psychologist is not as useful as it sounds. Her husband is, it would seem
rt of an incapable of empathising with children who have sociopathic tendencies
or as (sociopathy in children is his specialism). Children like their own who
y. bit odd in some ways, but perfectly and utterly normal in most of the o
ways, seem to confound him entirely and he reacts as though he has ne
ver the before encountered a teenage child or, indeed, had any personal experi
being a teenager himself whenever either of them does something that
om flat only be described as the stereotypical behaviour of a teenager.

re This infuriates Cate, who has never felt more in touch with her own
e world teenage self than she has since her children became teenagers, as if she
walked through a door at the far end of parenting and somehow met her
e. coming the other way.

ie ‘How was your day?’ she calls out to him now, in the tone of voice
ier to uses to lay out her intent to be pleasant. If she can start the evening’s
r still, discourse on a high note, then it can’t possibly be her fault if it all goes
the downhill later on. She has no idea if Roan can detect the hint of theatre
the particular tone but he responds from the hallway with a hearty:

‘Not at all bad. How was yours?’

ocal And then he is there, in the kitchen, her husband, his shaved head co
with a beanie, wrapped up against the January chill in a padded black j

and gloves. He pulls off the beanie and puts it on the table. Then he pulls out his gloves, revealing long angular hands. He takes the cross-body bag from her shoulder and puts it on a chair. He doesn't look at her. They don't really talk to each other any more. It's fine. Cate isn't in great need of being seen by him.

What she notices His hand goes to the *Hampstead Voice* on the table. He looks at the headline. 'Another one?'

of 'Another one,' she replies. 'Next road down this time.'

go and He nods, just once, carries on reading. Then he says, 'Daylight.'

ex 'I know,' she says. 'Horrific. That poor woman. Just going about her business. Thought it was going to be a normal day. Some sick little fuck decides he can do what he wants, decides he has the right to touch her. She shudders as she thinks again of tiny Tilly, her wide eyes on her door. Georgia walks in.

She's in her lounging gear: silky jersey shorts and a hoodie. Cate doesn't like to have lounging gear when she was a teenager; she had her clothes and her pyjamas and nothing in between.

Roan puts the *Hampstead Voice* in front of her. 'Look, Georgie,' he says. 'A sex attacker in the area. Last attack was just down the road. In the next few days of the day. Please, please keep your wits about you. And try not to stumble about with your earbuds in.'

Georgia tuts. 'My wits are totally about me,' she says. 'Remember when we were young. Not old and shit like yours. And I bet you anything it's that creep who could look totally rapey.'

Cate shivers slightly at the mention of the man across the road and she flushes with shame. She hasn't told Roan or the kids about calling the police and seeing them going to talk to him. She's too embarrassed. It was such a middle class, meddling thing to have done.

'How's Tilly?' she asks, moving the subject along. 'Has she said anything to you about Monday night?'

Georgia shakes her head. 'Nope. I've tried talking to her about it but she won't. She just says she's too embarrassed.'

'And what do you think? Do you think she made it up?'

Her daughter considers the question. 'In one way, yeah. I mean, it's not the sort of thing she'd do? If you see what I mean? She's lied about stuff before.'

lls off 'What sort of stuff?'

off his 'Oh, just small things, like saying she knows the name of some, like
ly look rapper, or someone on YouTube, and then when you ask her who it is
by realise she hasn't got a clue. So she says things sometimes just to fit in
one of the crowd. And she gets this, like, blind look in her eyes when s
knows she's been rumbled and then you feel really bad for putting her
spot.'

'But this, lying about something like this. Do you think she's capabl
lie that big?'

r 'I dunno,' she says. Then she shrugs and says, 'Yeah. Maybe. She
:k overreacts to things. Maybe she just, you know, overreacted.'

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orstep. more by the headline on the front page of the *Hampstead Voice* and sh
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‘What sort of stuff?’

‘Oh, just small things, like saying she knows the name of some, like, rapper, or someone on YouTube, and then when you ask her who it is you realise she hasn’t got a clue. So she says things sometimes just to fit in, to be one of the crowd. And she gets this, like, blind look in her eyes when she knows she’s been rumbled and then you feel really bad for putting her on the spot.’

‘But this, lying about something like this. Do you think she’s capable of a lie that big?’

‘I dunno,’ she says. Then she shrugs and says, ‘Yeah. Maybe. She overreacts to things. Maybe she just, you know, overreacted.’

Cate nods. It’s possible, she supposes. But then her eye is caught once more by the headline on the front page of the *Hampstead Voice* and she feels a dark shadow of doubt passing through her head.

It's the day before Valentine's Day and Cate is in her local shopping centre looking for a card for Roan. She won't get him anything romantic. Indeed there have been at least a dozen years over the preceding thirty when she hasn't got him a card at all. Valentine's isn't really their scene. But something about the fact that they've made it to another Valentine's Day intact in spite of everything that happened last year, makes her think the card might be in order.

She picks up a card that has a drawing on the front of two stick figures holding hands. The wording above their heads says: 'Yay! We still like each other!'

She puts it back on the shelf as though it has scalded her.

She is not sure that she and Roan do.

Eventually she picks up a card that simply says 'I Love You Lots', with a big red heart. This is true. She does still love him. The love part is simple, everything else that's complicated.

It was this time, a year ago, Cate recalls, that she and Roan had nearly broken up. It was just before the half-term. They'd thought that they might have to cancel a seven-thousand-pound holiday, that's how bad it had been.

It was her fault.

All of it.

She'd thought Roan was having an affair. No, not thought, *believed*, every fibre of her being, with no element of doubt, without having even seen Roan with another woman, without having found texts from him to another woman, without having seen so much as a smudge of lipstick on a collar. She'd gone completely mad for a while.

For six months Cate had obsessively infiltrated all her husband's most private spaces: his email account, his text messages, his WhatsApp, his

photos, even his work documents. She'd pored over the terrible details psychologically scarred but very beautiful young girl, looking for some to back up her belief that Roan was having sex with her, shamelessly breaching the privacy of a child who'd thought that everything she'd said to her psychologist was shared in the strictest confidence.

Roan had found out what she'd been doing in early February. Or, rather, she'd had to confess to what she'd been doing after he came home from work and told her that he thought his new assistant had been going through his patients' private records and even his email and his phone and that he'd been monitoring her and was prepared to report her if necessary.

entrepreneur, she'd panicked at the thought of an official investigation and said, 'It's me. It's me. It's me,' and started crying and tried to explain but made no sense, no sense at all because back then, for a few months, she'd been utterly mad.

ay, still She'd hoped for his arms around her after her confession, for his lovingly reassuring voice in her ear saying it's OK, it's OK, I understand, I forgive you, it's fine.

res, Instead he'd looked at her and said, 'That is about the lowest thing I've ever heard of in my life.'

Of course he had not been having an affair. He had just been working hard, stressed, dealing with unimaginable horrors on a day-to-day basis, dealing with a new assistant who was not up to scratch, with a sick father. He'd been trying to get fit by taking up jogging on an ad hoc basis, and consequently it's frustrated that there was never enough time to get into a routine. He was as he'd said, struggling, struggling with it all. And there she'd been, idly splitting she was, snuffling like a pig through his private affairs, breaching his professional security, endangering his job, imagining the very worst of the very worst.

'Why on earth', he'd said, looking at her imploringly, disbelievingly 'would I be having an affair?'

with her seen it. Such a simple question. She'd paused and taken a moment to think about it. Why would he be having an affair?

other 'Because I'm old,' she'd said eventually.

ar. 'I'm old too.'

'Yes, but you're a man. You don't have a sell-by date.'

ost 'Cate,' he'd replied. 'Neither do you. Not to me. You and me, for God's sake. We don't have sell-by dates. We're us. We're just ... us.'

of a He'd moved out for a few days after that. It had been her idea. She r
ething to clear her head. When he came back, he'd said, 'I feel like we've los
thread. Like we were in the zone and now we're out of the zone and I c
aid to know how to get back into it again.'

And she'd said, 'I feel the same way.'

ther, There'd followed a few days of existential drama and angst and mar
n work discussions about the cancellation of the extremely expensive skiing ho
his and how the children might take it and looking at insurance policies (th
was was no special clause for 'unexpected marital discord'). Then two days
before they were due to fly, they'd shared a bottle of wine and had sex
It's decided just to go on the holiday and see if it fixed them.

10 And it had, to a certain extent. The kids had been on good form, full
utterly, laughter, the sun had shone all day, every day, and the hotel they'd cho
had been jolly and full of nice people. They'd returned home a week la
v, both decided, subliminally and without further discussion, just to get o
give it and forget that it had ever happened.

But still, it had. She had crossed lines and boundaries, she'd broken
've trust between them and even now she still feels like a lesser person. Be
mother had given her so much command over the moral high ground, l
ig late, six crazy months she'd ceded her position entirely and to this day she s
ling flinches under Roan's gaze, scared that he'll see through her façade to
d also insecure, pathetic core of her. She feels safer now when he doesn't loo
stantly her, when he doesn't see her. Because if he can't see her then he can't
as just, her. And he hates her. She knows he does.

iot that

Saffyre, that was the name of the patient whose private records she'd r
him, through. Saffyre Maddox. She was fifteen years old at the time and ha
self-harming since the age of ten.

7, One day during the madness of last winter, Cate had actually gone to
Saffyre's school and watched her through the railings. There she was, 1
about Cate had been so sure was having an affair with her husband: tall, lean
chested, her dark curls pulled back into a bun, her hands in the pockets
black blazer, pale green eyes scanning the playground, almost regal. N
all what Cate had expected. She'd watched as a boy approached the gi
playfully trying to engage her in some kind of banter. She'd seen Saffy
od's eyes drift over his shoulder and then she'd watched the boy fade away,

needed back to his friends, his good-natured demeanour that of someone who
t our expected much more than he'd got.

lon't Then two girls had walked towards Saffyre and the three of them had
fallen into step together, heading back to the school building.

iy Saffyre hadn't looked like a girl who cut herself with unfurled paper
She'd looked like the Queen Bee.

oliday The last time Cate saw Saffyre was a couple of months after they'd
iere to the flat in Hampstead. She'd been walking down the Finchley Road
s an older man and she'd been pulling a nylon shopping trolley behind her

and Cate had followed them for a while, her heart racing lightly with fear
being caught. The older man had a pronounced limp, and Saffyre stopped
of every moment or so to allow him to catch up with her before they both
osen into an estate at the Swiss Cottage end of the Finchley Road and disap
iter and through aluminium doors at the bottom of a tower block.

n with As the door closed behind them, Cate stopped and caught her breath
suddenly aware of what she was doing. She'd turned quickly and headed
the home at a brisk pace trying to purge the wrongness from her psyche.

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back to his friends, his good-natured demeanour that of someone who hadn't expected much more than he'd got.

Then two girls had walked towards Saffyre and the three of them had fallen into step together, heading back to the school building.

Saffyre hadn't looked like a girl who cut herself with unfurled paperclips. She'd looked like the Queen Bee.

The last time Cate saw Saffyre was a couple of months after they'd moved to the flat in Hampstead. She'd been walking down the Finchley Road with an older man and she'd been pulling a nylon shopping trolley behind her.

Cate had followed them for a while, her heart racing lightly with fear of being caught. The older man had a pronounced limp, and Saffyre stopped every moment or so to allow him to catch up with her before they both turned into an estate at the Swiss Cottage end of the Finchley Road and disappeared through aluminium doors at the bottom of a tower block.

As the door closed behind them, Cate stopped and caught her breath, suddenly aware of what she was doing. She'd turned quickly and headed home at a brisk pace trying to purge the wrongness from her psyche.

Roan passes Cate a red envelope across the table the following morning with a shy smile. ‘Don’t worry if you haven’t,’ he says. ‘It was just a ... you ...’

She smiles and takes her own red envelope from her handbag and hands it to him. ‘Go us,’ she says lightly.

They open their envelopes in tandem, slightly awkwardly. Roan’s card says Cate is a Banksy. It’s a Band-Aid-covered red heart balloon from a wall in Brooklyn in New York. It’s beyond apt.

She opens the card.

There in his loose scrawl are the words: ‘Are you ready to take off the plasters yet?’

She glances at him across the table. A small laugh escapes her mouth as her stomach knots and unknots pleasantly. She says, ‘Are you?’

He drops his head into his chest and then lifts it again. He’s smiling. ‘Totally,’ he says. ‘I have been for a long time. I just ...’ He glances down at the card she’s just given him, with its bland inscription: ‘To my lovely husband, Happy V Day! Love, C x’. ‘I’ve been waiting,’ he says.

She nods. She’s confused for a moment about who exactly has been wearing plasters on their hearts, about who’s been healing and who’s been waiting. She’d thought it was the other way around. That she’d hurt him.

‘Shall we go for a drink tonight?’ he suggests. ‘Somewhere a bit shifty maybe? Everything else’ll be fully booked.’

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll think of somewhere a bit shifty.’

After Roan leaves, Cate opens her laptop and starts work. She’s slightly unnerved by the interaction with her husband. Everything has felt so off since they moved here. Even her marital disharmony has changed.

somehow, shifted along a little to a place that she doesn't quite recognize. She almost misses how straightforward it had felt in the months after her confession to Roan. Roan good. Cate bad.

But since moving to Hampstead she's not so sure any more. Roan's behaviour *had* been strange. For months. He *had* come home late and distracted and impatient with her and the children. He *had* cancelled family plans at short notice, often without a reasonable explanation. He *had* taken whispered calls on his mobile phone behind locked doors and out on the street. There'd been something. Definitely. Something.

She picks up his card again, reads the words again. It's virtually an admission that she had reason to be hurt too. But by what? By his harsh response to her behaviour? Or by something else? She closes the card and puts it upright on the table. As she works, her eye keeps being drawn back to it.

She's too unfocused to work so she flicks screens to her browser and lands in 'pubs near me'. As she scrolls through, she's aware of the clatter of a letterbox in the communal front door, the thump of mail hitting the door. She jumps to her feet, glad of the distraction, and goes to the hallway to collect the post. She removes the letters for the other residents of the house and takes her pile through to the flat. Most of them sport large white post redirection stickers, obscuring their address in Kilburn. But one is handwritten and addressed directly to Roan, at this address.

She stares at it for a moment. The handwriting is feminine, the postcard incomplete and the contents are stiff, clearly a card of some kind. It could be anything, she theorises: a money-off invitation from the local dry cleaner, or some fancy window cleaner's business card. Anything.

She leaves it on top of the pile on the kitchen table and goes back to an internet search for local pubs.

A message arrives on her phone. It's from Georgia.

MUM. As if she was calling to her from down the hallway.

She sighs and replies. *Yes.*

Can you bring my form for the Geography trip? Like, now.

Cate rolls her eyes. *Where is it?*

Don't know. Somewhere in kitchen.

Cate scours the kitchen, fans through piles of her own paperwork, finally finds it in the recycling bin. She smooths it out and replies to Georgia.

Got it. I'll bring it in now.

ise. In truth she's glad of the excuse to get out of the flat. It's sunny out
er she can pop to the shops on her way back. Plus she always gets a little
going through the door of her children's secondary school, infiltrating
mysterious world they inhabit for eight hours a day.

een She passes the tower block on her way to school, the block she'd seen
amily Saffyre entering all those months ago, pulling the wheeled shopper behind
ken her. She slows for a moment and gazes up. The sunlight glitters off the
ie windows, reaching high up into the sky. She thinks again about the car
arrived this morning, the feminine cursive addressed to Roan, and she
feel it bubbling to the surface once more, the itchy, discomfiting feeling
had plagued her into doing the unthinkable things she'd done a year ago

h Quickly, she picks up her pace and carries on briskly towards the
and burgundy-clad walls of her children's school where she's buzzed in by
ack to young woman behind a desk who smiles encouragingly at her as though
d types might be about to ask her something awkward.

the 'For a student,' she says, passing her the folded paper. 'Georgia Four
ormat. Eleven G.'

o 'Oh, lovely, thank you. I'll make sure she gets it.'

ouse Cate's eyes scan the foyer, searching out a hint of a child she recogni
ostal little something to take away with her. But it's lesson time and there are
children around. She heads back out on to the street and breathes in deeply.
She's conscious of her heart beating a little too fast. She's aware of
ode is everything feeling heightened and highly tuned as though there's a frequency
uld be in the air that she's only just become aware of.

er's, In the supermarket she picks up avocados for Georgia, chicken gouj
her and a baguette for Josh, a litre of apple and mango juice that will be gone
within thirty seconds of the children getting home from school. She picks
stock cubes and salt in a rare moment of remembering to get stock cubes
salt. She picks up butter and milk and a box of chocolate-covered honey
and pays using the self-service check out. There's no one behind her in
queue so she scans slowly and calmly, her eyes going to the taxi rank where
the same drivers are here every day, milling together on the pavement,
social scene of sorts. Then her gaze passes beyond the taxi drivers, towards
the entrance to the Tube station where she sees a familiar figure heading
nally inside. Tall, slim, a smooth dome of bare skull, a bag slung diagonally
FFS. his body, a pronounced ball-of-the-foot bounce in each step.

Roan, she says quietly, under her breath.

and There's her husband. In the shadowy secret moments of his life. It's
thrill similar to the feeling of being in her children's school. She pulls out her
the phone and calls him. It rings ten times and then cuts off. For some reason
pictures him pulling his phone from his pocket, seeing her name and picture
en it back in his pocket.

mind It's midday. As far as she's aware he doesn't undertake out-of-clinic
appointments. Maybe he's meeting someone somewhere for lunch?

and that The fact that it is Valentine's Day passes fleetingly through her mind
can she finds herself picturing Roan in a trendy Soho restaurant, a single rose
g that on the table, a waiter pouring champagne into a flute for the beautiful young
woman sitting opposite him.

She shakes her head to rid herself of the image.

She will not be that person again.

h Cate

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There's her husband. In the shadowy secret moments of his life. It's similar to the feeling of being in her children's school. She pulls out her phone and calls him. It rings ten times and then cuts off. For some reason she pictures him pulling his phone from his pocket, seeing her name and putting it back in his pocket.

It's midday. As far as she's aware he doesn't undertake out-of-clinic appointments. Maybe he's meeting someone somewhere for lunch?

The fact that it is Valentine's Day passes fleetingly through her mind and she finds herself picturing Roan in a trendy Soho restaurant, a single red rose on the table, a waiter pouring champagne into a flute for the beautiful young woman sitting opposite him.

She shakes her head to rid herself of the image.

She will not be that person again.

Roan gets home just before 7 p.m. that night. Cate watches him flick through the letters on the kitchen table. He gets to the letter in the white envelope, pulls out the card in it and she sees it, a crackle of something pass through him, a tiny pulse of electricity. His fingers stumble, vaguely, but he keeps flicking through them then wordlessly puts the letters back down on the kitchen table.

‘You still up for drinks tonight?’ he asks.

‘Definitely,’ she responds quickly. ‘I did have a look online but I couldn’t find anything that didn’t need to be booked.’

‘Maybe we should just head into the village. Go to the least Valentin looking pub we can find?’

‘That’s fine with me. Eightish?’

Roan nods. ‘Eightish sounds good. I think I might just head out for a drink then. What time’s dinner?’

She glances at the oven where Josh’s goujons are cooking. She hadn’t even thought about dinner for Roan. For her. ‘Are we not eating out tonight?’

‘Can do. Fine with me. I’m not that hungry anyway.’

She opens her mouth to say, ‘Oh, that’ll be because you went and had lunch in town somewhere, with someone, for some reason.’ But that’s not how she wants the night to start. Instead she smiles and says, ‘Great. Happy to have a good run.’

Georgia appears a moment later. She goes to the bread bin and takes out the loaf of expensive rye and sourdough bread that Cate buys especially for her. She puts it in the toaster and then goes to the fridge, pulls open the vegetable drawer, rummages for a moment, emerges with the fresh avocado in her hand, slices it over the sink, tugs out the stone with the tip of the knife, drops the stone in the bin, mashes the avocado in the same bowl in which she always mashes her avocado, grinds salt into it, smears it over the two loaves

slices of toast, sits it on the table with a large glass of apple and mango and bites into it.

Georgia sees Cate watching her. 'You all right, Mum?' she says.

Cate nods, shaking herself out of her mild reverie. 'I'm fine, yes.'

Georgia picks up the Banksy Valentine's card with her spare hand and examines it. 'Aw,' she says. 'Sweet. Dad got you a card. Bless. What's mean?'

'It means ...' She tugs a piece of kitchen towel from the roll and uses it to mop up some spilled tea on the counter. 'I don't know. I think maybe I just think I'm still a bit sensitive after what happened last year.'

rough 'Oh, you mean your *crisis*?'
pe with

'Yes. Our crisis.'

like a 'That was so weird,' Georgia says, her mouth full of food. 'Just so, s
king, weird. What was it even about?'

They'd never told the children what it was about. They'd never told the children how close they'd come to splitting up. They'd just said they wouldn't be having a bit of a crisis, totally normal after so many years together, that they were going to spend a few days apart and see how they felt after. And there hadn't really been an after. Roan had moved back. They'd gone on with their lives. Life had continued.

Cate shakes her head. 'I'm still not too sure,' she says. 'Just one of the things. Happens to every couple, I guess.'

'But you're cool now? You and dad?'

'Yes. We're cool now. In fact, we're going out to the pub tonight.'

'Ooh, ooh, can I come too?'

Cate raises an eyebrow. 'What on earth for?' She laughs.

id 'I like pubs.'

not 'You're so strange.'

lave a 'What's strange about liking pubs?'

'Nothing.' Cate smiles. 'Nothing.' Then she says, 'Get any cards today?'

'Mum, it is very old-fashioned of you to ask such a question. You shouldn't be asking me if I gave anyone a card. I'm not some passive blob, sitting around waiting for boys to do things to impress me.'

ocado 'Good,' she says. 'Glad to hear it. So, did you give anyone a card?'

knife, 'No way!' she says. 'Have you seen the boys at my school?' She pushes the Valentine's card down again. 'Where's Dad?'

arge 'Gone running.'

o juice ‘Freak.’

Georgia and Cate share an anti-running sensibility. Neither of them designed for running. They get stitches too easily and feel the ground hard and heavy beneath their feet. They also both think that Roan looks fairly ridiculous in his Lycra outfits.

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Josh enters the kitchen in his shambling, slightly lost way, as though heartedly looking for something. He comes to Cate and hugs her. She says school on him, and the deodorant he always wears. Then he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a battered envelope.

‘Happy Valentine’s,’ he says.

so
She opens the envelope and finds a card he’s made himself out of blank card with a red paper heart stuck on the front attached by a paper hinge. Inside it says, ‘To the best mum in the world. I love you so much.’

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t they
then
He’s made her a Valentine’s card every year since he was tiny. He’s put those boys: loves his mum more than anything in the world, puts her on a pedestal. In a way it’s glorious. In another, she feels worried that she’s never one bad decision or harsh word away from completely destroying

skiing. ‘Thank you, my lovely boy,’ she says, kissing him on the cheek.

‘You’re welcome,’ he says. Then, ‘What’s for dinner?’

hose
She switches off the oven and takes out his chicken goujons and places the card next to the two already standing on the kitchen table. And as she does so, her heart jolts.

Georgia has opened the white envelope addressed to Roan; she has the card out and is about to open it.

‘Oh my God, Georgia! What are you doing?’ She snatches the card from Georgia’s hand.

‘God! Why are you overreacting? It’s just a card.’

‘Yes, but it’s addressed to Dad. You can’t go around opening other people’s mail.’

lay?’ ‘You open mine!’

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ts the
‘Yes, but you’re a child! And I would never open something like that which looks so personal.’ She picks up the envelope, hoping to slide the card in, but in classic Georgia fashion, she’s virtually torn the envelope clean in half to get the card out. ‘Oh, fuck. Georgia. I can’t believe you did that. What were you thinking?’

Georgia shrugs. ‘I just wanted to see who was sending Dad Valentine’s cards.’

Cate forces the card roughly into the bottom half of the torn envelope and shoves it in a drawer. She can't deal with this right now.

'Aren't you going to look? See who it's from?'

'No, I am not. It's none of my business.'

'But how can you say that? He's your husband. Valentine's cards from strangers is literally, one hundred per cent your business.'

'It's probably just one of his patients,' Cate says. 'i.e. none of my business whatsoever.'

'But if it's one of his patients, how the hell did they get this address?'

'No idea,' Cate says. 'Maybe it was written on something in his office I don't know.'

'Hm.' Georgia raises her brow dramatically and puts a finger to her chin.

'Well, have a nice Valentine's night at the pub then,' she says facetiously.

She takes her empty plate to the sink, letting it fall loudly as she always does.

'Anything good for pudding?'

Cate passes her the box of chocolate-covered honeycomb, then turns her back to the kitchen window where she sees her face reflected back at her, the face of an older woman who looks just like her, a woman whose life, she feels very strongly, is heading down a dark, twisty path to somewhere she doesn't want to be.

Her fingers find the handle of the kitchen drawer, the one where Roan's mystery card is hidden. She pulls the drawer open, then shuts it again, slides it firmly, and leaves the room.

Roan doesn't get back until well after eight o'clock. Cate calls him three times between eight oh five and eight fifteen but he doesn't answer his phone. When he finally appears in the hallway at eight twenty, sweaty, almost gaunt-looking, he goes straight to the bedroom to shower in the ensuite.

'I'll be five minutes,' he shouts to her down the corridor.

Cate sighs and picks up her phone, passes a few moments mindlessly scrolling through Facebook. The card is still in the drawer. She still hasn't looked at it.

At eight forty, Roan is finally ready and waiting to go.

They say goodbye to the children who are both in their rooms doing their homework, or at least doing something on their laptops that they claim is homework.

and The air is damp and cloying as they head up the hill into the village
Cate feels her skin grow clammy. She thinks of reaching out to hold Roan's
hand, but she can't bring herself to do it. These days, holding hands, like
cuddling in bed or instigating sex or kissing on the lips, feels like an
expression of approval, like stars on a reward chart, actions that need to
be deserved or earned in some way. To hold Roan's hand now would
suggest that they were still the same people they'd been twenty-five, thirty
years ago, that she still feels the way she felt about him then, about the
way she can't negate everything that has happened since then. She can't pretend
that none of it ever happened.

 'So,' she says, 'long run today?'

 'Yeah, well, I had a big lunch. I was making sure I had an appetite for
dinner.'

 'Oh, what did you have for lunch?'

 'Big bowl of pasta, with some kind of creamy sauce. I hadn't been
expecting the creamy sauce but ate the whole lot anyway.'

 'At your desk?'

 'No, no, I went into town.'

 His tone is light. There is no sign that there was anything untoward about
his lunch in town, but her voice still comes out wrong, slightly high-pitched.

 'Oh, what was that for then?'

 'Just met up with Gerry. You know. From UCL? He wants me to run
first-year module for him next year in childhood psychoses. Three hours
a week. A hundred an hour.'

 'Oh,' she says, the strange darkness starting to lift slightly. 'That's
amazing! Are you going to do it?'

 'Too right I am! Extra £1200 a month. That'll pay for a decent holiday
two. A couple of new sofas when we move home. Plus I really like Gerry.
And I got free pasta. So yeah. A no-brainer, really.'

 He glances down at her and he smiles and it's a great, great smile, free
of any editing or hidden agenda. He had a good lunch with a good person
now has a good job that will provide them with a good holiday and some
good sofas. She cannot help but return the smile in the same spirit.

 'That's brilliant,' she says. 'Really brilliant.'

 She wants to ask why he didn't mention the lunch when they were talking
this morning. She would tell him if she was meeting someone for lunch

and talk about a job. But she bats the complaint away and holds on to the g
oan's feeling.

ke They reach the top of the hill and Hampstead village opens up to the
a dream or a film set as it always does. They find a pub down a cobble
o have alleyway with fires burning in the grates and dogs stretched out on gna
d be to old floorboards and although they'd said it would be an anti-Valentine
irty Roan comes back from the bar with a bottle of champagne and two chi
m, but glasses and they toast his new job, and their faces fall in and out of sha
attend the light of a dancing flame, and Roan's hand finds hers on the seat be
them and he takes it in his and it feels nice, and for quite some time Ca
forgets about the card in the drawer at home.

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They reach the top of the hill and Hampstead village opens up to them like a dream or a film set as it always does. They find a pub down a cobbled alleyway with fires burning in the grates and dogs stretched out on gnarled old floorboards and although they'd said it would be an anti-Valentine night, Roan comes back from the bar with a bottle of champagne and two chilled glasses and they toast his new job, and their faces fall in and out of shadow in the light of a dancing flame, and Roan's hand finds hers on the seat between them and he takes it in his and it feels nice, and for quite some time Cate forgets about the card in the drawer at home.

SAFFYRE

I was twelve and a half the first time I met Roan Fours.

I'd been cutting myself for more than two years by this stage.

I'd just started year eight and boys were becoming a problem.

All the attention, the look in their eyes, the idea of the things they were thinking, of the things they were saying about me to each other – I'd spent most of my childhood hanging out with boys so I knew what happened behind the scenes – was starting to make me feel tired, used, worn-down. I quite liked the idea of *therapy*, of being in a quiet room with a quiet man talking quietly about myself for an hour or so.

I'd been picturing a wild-haired guy in glasses, maybe a tweedy jacket and even a monocle. I had not been expecting a cool guy with eyes too blue, cheekbones too sharp and long, spidery legs in black denim that he crossed and uncrossed and crossed and uncrossed until you were almost dizzy. And hands that moved like some weird pale exotic birds whenever he tried to describe something. And peng trainers. You know, really good ones. And an old guy. And a smell, of clean clothes, my favourite smell, but also of grass and clouds and sunshine.

I didn't clock all of this the first time I met him, obviously. When I first met him I was still a child and just thought he was kind of cool-looking, Dr Who kind of way.

He looked at a notebook for quite some time before he looked at me. 'Saffyre,' he said. 'That is a tremendously brilliant name.'

I said, 'Yeah. Thanks. My mum chose it.'

It's totally a name a nineteen-year-old mum would choose for a baby, is it?

Then he said, 'So, Saffyre, tell me about yourself.'

'Like what?' Everyone knows you shouldn't ask kids open questions that suck at answering them.

'Like, tell me about school. How are you getting on?'

'Good,' I said. 'I'm getting on good.'

Here we go, I thought, some bloke ticking boxes, filling in forms, going home to watch *Game of Thrones* and eat quinoa or whatever with his wife. My thought: This is not going to work.

And then he said, 'Tell me, Saffyre, what's the worst, worst thing that has ever happened to you?'

And then I knew we were going to get somewhere. I didn't know what to say yet, I just knew that I was at a point in my life when I needed someone to tell me what the worst thing that ever happened to me was, rather than ask me if their eyebrows were on fleek or if I wanted chicken or fish for dinner.

I didn't answer him immediately. My head flooded. The obvious thing that came first. The thing that happened when I was ten. But I didn't want to tell him that. Not yet. He waited, a good minute or so, for me to answer. Then I said, 'All of it.'

'All of it?'

'Yes. All of it. My mum died before I knew her. And my grandma. My granddad was a single dad raising three children and a grandchild, then he got so ill that my uncle had to look after all of us from when he was like, nine. So he had no proper life. Ever. We had a budgerigar. It died. The lady who used to fix my hair for me, her name was Joyce – she died. My favourite teacher at primary school, Miss Raymond, got cancer and died, for an after she got married. My granddad's got arthritis and is in pain nearly all the time.'

I stopped abruptly, just short of the defining event of all the bad events that had brought me to his door. I stared at him, at the blue, blue eyes that reminded me of one of those dogs that look like wolves. I wanted to go, 'Oh, poor you. No wonder you've been cutting yourself all these years.'

Instead he said, 'Now tell me the best thing that ever happened to you.'

I was taken aback, to be honest; it was like nothing I'd just said meant anything. Like maybe he hadn't even been listening.

y, isn't For a moment I didn't even want to answer him. I just sat there. But something suddenly came into my head. There was a girl at primary school called Lexie. She was very popular, very kind; all the teachers loved her. They all the children loved her. She lived in a nice house on a nice street with crystal chandeliers and velvet sofas and she always invited the whole class to her birthday parties, even me, who wasn't really one of her proper friends.

One year she had an animal party. A man with white hair came with a van full of boxes and cages and in each box and cage was a different animal. We were allowed to touch them. He brought a chinchilla, a snake, some insects, a vole, a ferret, some birds, a tarantula. He also brought a barn owl that ever was called Harry.

The man with the white hair looked around at all the children and he asked me and he said, 'How about you, would you like to hold Harry?'

He brought me to the front and gave me a big leather glove to wear. I asked him if then he put Harry the owl on my outstretched arm and I stood there and he turned his big head and looked at me and I looked at him and my heart was blowing up with something warm and velvety and deep and soothing. It was so hard to tell I loved him, like I loved this owl. Which was just stupid because I didn't know him and he was an owl.

So I looked at Roan Fours and I said, 'The time I held an owl at Lexie's birthday when I was nine years old.'

My granddad said, 'I love owls. They're extraordinary creatures.'

When he got to my age. I nodded.

He said, 'What did it feel like when you held the owl?'

I said, 'It felt like I loved him.'

My granddad wrote something down. He said, 'Who else do you love?'

I thought, Hmmm, aren't we supposed to be talking about owls? Then I said, 'I love my granddad. I love my uncles. I love my nieces.'

'Friends?'

'I don't love my friends.'

'What does love feel like?'

'It feels like ... it feels like need.'

'Like need?'

'Yeah, like you love someone because they give you what you need.'

'And if they stop giving you what you need?'

'Then that's not love. That's something else.'

'And the owl?'

then I stopped. 'What?'
school 'The owl. You said it felt like you loved the owl.'
er and 'Yes.'
h 'But you didn't need the owl.'
class to 'No. I just loved him.'
nds. 'Did it feel the same as the way you love your granddad?'

a van 'No,' I said. 'It felt ... pure.' I realised that sounded wrong and corny
al, and myself. 'Not that there's anything not pure about the way I love my
e stick granddad. But I worry about him. I worry that he'll die. I worry that he
owl. It be able to give me what I need. And that makes me feel bad. I didn't feel
about the owl. I only felt good.'

e saw 'Do you think both types of love are equal?'
'Yes.' I nodded. 'Yes, I do.'
and He stopped then and looked up at me and he smiled. I hadn't been
d Harry expecting him to smile. I thought that it was in his contract not to smile
just during therapy. But he did. And maybe it was because we'd just been talking
as like about it, I don't know, but I got that feeling again, the soft, velvet owl
r't feeling.

ie's So yeah, maybe I needed Roan Fours already, even before I knew it.

The first time I saw Roan outside of a therapy session at the Portman was
about a year or so after our first session. I was walking home from school
he was just leaving an appointment at the school opposite my flat when
of his patients was a student. He was all smart and briefcasey, wearing a
shirt, and he was talking to another man, also smart and briefcasey. They
separated and he turned to cross the street and he saw me looking at him.

en I I thought he might just wave and walk on. But he didn't. He crossed
road and came to stand with me.

'Well, hello,' he said. He had his hands in his pockets and kind of rocked
backwards on his heels. It made him look like a teacher for some reason
had that really eww feeling you get when you see a teacher out of school
they're naked or something. But at the same time I felt really pleased to
him.

' I said, 'Hi,' and wondered what I looked like to him. I was wearing
eyelashes that day; this was early 2016 – everyone was wearing false
eyelashes. I didn't think I looked stupid at the time but I probably did.

'Finished school?' he said.

‘Yeah. Just heading home.’ As I said this, I looked up at the tower, the eighth floor. I always recognised my floor from the ground because of the ugly red and green striped curtains in the window of flat thirty-five next door. It was like a marker.

‘Up there?’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Up there.’

‘Nice views, I bet?’

I shrugged. I’d happily forsake the views for a home with more room.

‘So, our next appointment ...?’

‘Wednesday,’ I said.

‘Five thirty p.m.?’

‘Yep.’

‘See you then.’

‘Yeah. See you then.’

I headed towards the entrance to the block. I turned around as I pulled the door open, because for some reason I expected Roan to still be standing there to be watching me. But he wasn’t. He was gone.

Roan and his family moved to a flat near the Portman Centre January 1st of that year. How do I know this? Because I saw them, literally on the day they moved in. I was walking to the village, up those big roads that go up the hill from my estate, those roads of mansions and Teslas and electronic gates. And there was this van double-parked with hazards flashing and some blue young guys unloading boxes and lamps and chairs and whatnot. The door of the house was wide open, and I always like to look inside an open door. I saw a woman; she was thin and wearing jeans and a pink jumper and the door was open. Her hair was blonde and fine and shoulder-length. And there was a boy and a teenager, and they were carrying things through a door at the end of the hallway, and then a man appeared coming the other way and it was him. He was Roan. He was wearing a hoodie and jeans. He went to the back of the van and was saying something to one of the guys inside the van and I walked on but I suddenly had this urge to let him know I’d seen him. I was about to cross over the street and say hello when the woman in the pink jumper appeared. I didn’t know she was his wife then, but I assumed she must be.

They said something to each other and then both disappeared inside the van and I caught my breath and carried on my way.

o the But before I carried on walking, my eye took in the number on their
the door: seventeen.

xt door. I never told Roan I'd seen him move into his new home. We didn't t
about stuff like that. I'd never even really thought about where he might
or what his life might be like outside our room at the Portman. When v
our next session, about four days after I saw him moving house, we jus
straight down to business as usual. He didn't tell me he'd moved and I
ns in it. tell him I knew.

Then about two weeks later, Roan said that he thought we were read
start thinking about terminating our therapy. He said this as though I sh
be pleased, as though I'd actually quite like to finish therapy, as if it w
school or swimming lessons or something. He said he thought another
three sessions should 'bring us to where we need to be'.

Strange, you know, because I'm not stupid but I'd been stupid enoug
ed the think that therapy would just keep on and on until I was ready to stop.
g there, maybe, you know, forever.

'How do you know?' I asked. 'How do you know where we need to

He smiled, that weird, lazy smile of his, like he's not bothered but th
ast thinks, Fuck it. 'That's my job, Saffyre.'

y 'Yeah, but don't I have some say?'

ie hill 'Of course you do. Of course. What would your say be?'

es. I had to stop then and really think about my answer, because I didn'
ne exactly know what I wanted. On a fundamental level I wanted the wee
oor to punctuation marks of an hour in Roan's room; the familiarity of the
r, and I suspended ceiling with the three halogen lights, one sickly yellow, two
rainers. white; the double-glazed window with the view of a snapped branch o
y, a that swung back and forth on winter nights when the wind blew, cuttin
e shadows through the sodium glow of a street light beyond; the two red
n. It with the nubby fabric; the low wooden table with the tissues and the lit
the white lamp; the brown carpet with the crusty white patch near the foot
almost armchair; the muted sounds of people walking past the door. I wanted
was carry on seeing Roan's feet every week, in leather lace-up shoes, in his
k white trainers, in nasty strappy Velcro sandals, in snow boots. I wanted
he hear his low, measured voice asking me questions, the slight clear of h
throat as he waited for me to answer. And then after the session, I wan
the walk past the drama school, past the Tube, past the farmers' market, pa
theatre, feel the seasons changing in the textures beneath my feet: slipp

front wet leaves, hot paving stones, slimy snow, dirty puddles, whatever; all
months and months and now years and years of Roan Fours, how could
talk end? It was like telling me that day and night would no longer exist, th
ht live there would no longer be twenty-four hours in a day. It was that fundam
ve had Eventually I said, 'My say would be that I don't think I'm ready.'
st went 'In which ways, would you say, are you not ready?'
didn't I shrugged. I said some bullshit about still thinking about hurting my
when I hadn't thought about hurting myself for over a year.

ly to He gave me a look, calling me on my bullshit with his eyes. 'Well,'
ould said. 'We're looking at another two or three weeks yet. I'll get the pro
as motion. We can always double back on it closer to the time if you still
two or we need to. But genuinely I don't think you're going to feel the need to
You're amazing, Saffyre. The work we've done is incredible. You sho
gh to pleased.'

Or I still hadn't told him about the bad thing that happened to me when
in year five. I wanted to say that to him, to shut him up. I wanted to say
be?' *someone did something unbearable to me when I was ten years old and*
ien *you've been talking to me non-stop for more than three years and you*
don't know that so how can you say I should be pleased? I wanted to s
you're a shit psychologist. I wanted to say all sorts of things. But I did
just left.

t Roan Fours signed me off three weeks later.
kly He tried to make a big, happy moment of it.
I pretended it was OK.

o bright But it was not OK.
n a tree It was far from OK.

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wet leaves, hot paving stones, slimy snow, dirty puddles, whatever; all the months and months and now years and years of Roan Fours, how could it end? It was like telling me that day and night would no longer exist, that there would no longer be twenty-four hours in a day. It was that fundamental.

Eventually I said, 'My say would be that I don't think I'm ready.'

'In which ways, would you say, are you not ready?'

I shrugged. I said some bullshit about still thinking about hurting myself when I hadn't thought about hurting myself for over a year.

He gave me a look, calling me on my bullshit with his eyes. 'Well,' he said. 'We're looking at another two or three weeks yet. I'll get the process in motion. We can always double back on it closer to the time if you still feel we need to. But genuinely I don't think you're going to feel the need to. You're amazing, Saffyre. The work we've done is incredible. You should be pleased.'

I still hadn't told him about the bad thing that happened to me when I was in year five. I wanted to say that to him, to shut him up. I wanted to say *someone did something unbearable to me when I was ten years old and you've been talking to me non-stop for more than three years and you still don't know that so how can you say I should be pleased?* I wanted to say *you're a shit psychologist*. I wanted to say all sorts of things. But I didn't. I just left.

Roan Fours signed me off three weeks later.

He tried to make a big, happy moment of it.

I pretended it was OK.

But it was not OK.

It was far from OK.

Did I tell you that I am a trained killer? That I'm a ninja warrior?

Well, I'm not really. But I am a black belt in taekwondo. There's a martial arts school just over the road from me, in the sports centre. It's what's in the trade as a dojo and I've been going there since I was about six years old. So you'd think I'd have been able to defend myself from a puny Year Six boy with wandering hands and a sick mentality. But no, I was path it happen, and then punished my own self for it for years afterwards when Harrison John got to swan off to secondary school without a backward glance.

He would have said that I enjoyed it, because I was so passive. But I didn't.

At taekwondo classes every week I kick and grunt and sweat, pretending every blow is on Harrison's head. I picture the walls splattered with his blood, bits of his tiny pea brain, fragments of his skull.

But at school, when I was a small child, I just let it happen.

I let it happen three times.

I still go to taekwondo once a week; it's just habit really, but my skills have come in very useful the past few months. I'm not a small person, five feet eight and when my hair is loose, I look even taller. I take up space in the world. People see me. But I can move light on my feet, I really can move about like a shadow if I need to. I pull up my hoodie, keep my chin down, eyes up. I reckon I could walk past my own uncle on the street and he wouldn't see me, if I put my mind to it.

The first week that went by without me having a session with Roan was the first I'd missed the occasional session before if I'd been ill, or he'd been on holiday or whatever. It was when the third week loomed up that I suddenly felt this cold drip in the pit of my stomach, like icy water. I imagined I

sitting in our room, on our nubby chairs, with some other kid, some kid with stupid annoying issues, and he'd have to pretend to be as interested in me as he was in mine.

I was walking home from school one afternoon. It was about twenty five and I remembered that this was the exact time I would normally have been on my way to the Portman for my session with Roan.

Suddenly, I found myself turning right instead of left, walking those familiar streets towards the Portman Centre. The sun was just setting and I was wearing a big black Puffa over my school uniform, black tights, black shoes, hair scraped back, hood up. I crept between the trees in the park area to the front and peered up at his window.

nartial- Do you know how long I stood there for?

known I stood there for nearly an hour.

ears It was March and it was cold. Really, really cold.

ear I saw occasional suggestions of movement, then I saw the lights pin-pointed, let all the consulting rooms and I realised it had turned to night-time. My ears were chattering but I felt like I'd been there so long that I couldn't go in that I couldn't go until I'd actually seen him.

He finally appeared about twenty minutes later. He was wearing a black coat and a pull-on hat. I could see his breath even from a distance as a yellow cloud of it in the street light. He smiled then and I thought for a moment that he'd seen me, but he hadn't, he was smiling at someone else, a girl coming behind him. She looked about eighteen, nineteen. He held the door for her, then the girl lit a cigarette and I watched them share it. I thought: You don't share a cigarette with someone unless you know them really well. I also thought that I'd never seen Roan smoke, not once in the years I'd been his patient.

I'm After they'd finished smoking the cigarette they went back into the building, Roan held the door for her again and he seemed to press himself against her as he followed her through. I saw her turn and smile at him.

I'd come to the Portman to sate some weird need for the familiarity and he but I had set my eyes upon him and I had seen him as another person, a person who smoked, who stood too close to young women.

is OK. I was not sated. If anything, my appetite for seeing him was increased. I stood outside for another half an hour, until the car park began to empty, only the front door opening and shutting constantly as staff left for the day, Roan out cheery goodbyes, talk of a quick one, comments about how cold it

d with recognised some of the people, the secretaries, receptionists, nurses I'd
theirs with over the years. And then Roan reappeared. He was with the young
again. Again, he held the door for her, chivalrously, and she exited her
past his outstretched arm, like a move in a dance, smiling at him as she did
ave took a photo. Call me weird, but it just seemed like something I needed
able to study at my own leisure in the privacy of my own room. I needed
analyse the girl's body language and Roan's smile and work out what
nd I happening, what I'd seen.

lack I kind of expected them to go somewhere together, but they didn't. I
ing had a little hug, a kind of half-embrace, where only their shoulders and
cheeks touched, then she hitched her bag up on her shoulder and walked
away in the direction of the Tube station. Roan stopped for a moment,
out his phone, tapped his screen a few times. I saw his face in the glow
screen; he looked old. Then his face lifted and lightened and he put his
g on in away and he turned and caught up with the girl and they were close en
teeth now for me to hear him call out to her. 'Wait, Anna, hold up,' he said.

ow, She stopped and turned and I could see the glitter of multiple earrings
her ear.

ig 'I've got half an hour,' he said. 'If you're not dashing home, maybe
e, the could have that coffee? Or something stronger?'

l He sounded nervous, like a bit of an idiot.

lse, a But the young girl smiled and nodded. 'Sure,' she said, 'yes. I'm not
the rush.'

em 'Great,' said Roan. 'How about that new place that's just opened, off
the Tube?'

all the 'Fab,' said Anna.

self They fell into step, their footsteps ringing out in the cold dark against
tarmac, and away on to the street, me still there, frozen to the core, invis
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recognised some of the people, the secretaries, receptionists, nurses I'd dealt with over the years. And then Roan reappeared. He was with the young girl again. Again, he held the door for her, chivalrously, and she exited beneath his outstretched arm, like a move in a dance, smiling at him as she did so. I took a photo. Call me weird, but it just seemed like something I needed to be able to study at my own leisure in the privacy of my own room. I needed to analyse the girl's body language and Roan's smile and work out what was happening, what I'd seen.

I kind of expected them to go somewhere together, but they didn't. They had a little hug, a kind of half-embrace, where only their shoulders and cheeks touched, then she hitched her bag up on her shoulder and walked away in the direction of the Tube station. Roan stopped for a moment, pulled out his phone, tapped his screen a few times. I saw his face in the glow of the screen; he looked old. Then his face lifted and lightened and he put his phone away and he turned and caught up with the girl and they were close enough now for me to hear him call out to her. 'Wait, Anna, hold up,' he said.

She stopped and turned and I could see the glitter of multiple earrings in her ear.

'I've got half an hour,' he said. 'If you're not dashing home, maybe we could have that coffee? Or something stronger?'

He sounded nervous, like a bit of an idiot.

But the young girl smiled and nodded. 'Sure,' she said, 'yes. I'm not in a rush.'

'Great,' said Roan. 'How about that new place that's just opened, opposite the Tube?'

'Fab,' said Anna.

They fell into step, their footsteps ringing out in the cold dark against the tarmac, and away on to the street, me still there, frozen to the core, invisible between the trees.

OWEN

Through the plate-glass window of the third-floor reception area, Owen watches flakes of snow tumble lazily from a heavy grey January sky. He hates London snow, the way it promises so much but delivers nothing but treacherous pavements, late trains and chaos.

Owen teaches Computer Science to sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds at Tertiary College. He's been teaching here for eight years. Right now, though, he is not teaching anyone. He is currently waiting to be called into the principal's office for some unspecified but rather ominous-feeling reason. His stomach roils unpleasantly at the prospect.

Finally, the principal's secretary calls him in. 'Jed's ready for you,' she says, putting down her phone.

In Jed's office, Owen is surprised to see Holly McKinley, the head of human resources and Clarice Dewer, the student welfare officer. The atmosphere is weighty and murky. Clarice doesn't look at him as he enters and he's always thought of Clarice as a friend, or at least as a person who sometimes talks to him.

Holly gets to her feet. 'Thank you for coming in to see us, Owen.' She holds out her hand and Owen shakes it, aware that his hands are damp, resisting the urge to apologise.

'Please, take a seat.' Jed gestures at the empty chair before them.

Owen sits. He glances down at his shoes. They're quite new and this is his first day since he bought them that they haven't hurt. They're not his usual style; they're brown leather, slightly pointy, kind of trendy. He keeps

expecting someone to notice them, to say *nice shoes*, but so far nobody. Now he looks at them and wonders why he bought them.

‘I’m afraid,’ Clarice begins, ‘that we’ve had a complaint. Well, in fact we’ve had two complaints. Both pertaining to the same incident.’

Owen squints slightly. His brain scrolls through everything that’s happened at work over the past few months for anything that could be described as an incident, but he finds nothing.

Clarice drops her gaze to her paperwork. ‘On December the fourteenth year, at the Christmas party?’

Owen squints again. The Christmas party. He hadn’t intended to go. He hadn’t been for the two preceding years. As a member of staff at a student party there was a sweet spot between being a dour observer and an overenthusiastic participator and if you missed the spot it was no fun at all. But he’d bowed to pressure from two girls in his second-year class, Monique and Maisy.

‘Come on, sir,’ they’d said (they insisted on calling him sir even though everyone else called him Owen). ‘We want to see your moves.’

There was nothing new about this form of reverse sexual harassment, though, happened all the time: because Owen was a quiet man who didn’t like to reveal much about his private life, because he had a tendency to awkwardness and a need to maintain clear lines between his professional and personal personas, certain students made sport out of trying to breach his defences. Usually girls, and usually using their sexuality to do so.

But they’d worn him down, Monique and Maisy – *Don’t be so boring, life’s too short* – and he’d capitulated eventually.

He’d stayed until the end, in the event. He’d had shots. He’d danced and raised a sweat – *Ew, sir, you’re really sweaty!* – he’d taken a late Tube and woken the next morning with a head like a wet tea towel. But he’d had fun, he’d felt, upon reflection. It had been a night worthy of its aftermath.

‘Two female students maintain that you made’ – Clarice refers to her paperwork again – ‘inappropriate comments regarding their sexual preferences.’

Owen rocks slightly in his chair. ‘I made ...?’

Clarice cuts back in. ‘That you described your own sexual preferences in excessive detail. That you touched them inappropriately.’

‘I—’

has. 'Around their shoulders and their hair. Apparently you also flicked sweat from your forehead and hair on to the girls' faces, deliberately.'

ict 'No! I—'

'Not only that, Owen, but there was a more general suggestion of a way of talking to women in lessons, a *dismissive tone*.'

Owen's hands are curled into fists on his lap. He looks up at Clarice and says, 'No. Absolutely not. I talk to all my students the same. One hundred per cent. And as for the sweat, that was an accident! I was dancing, I spun around and some sweat flew off my head! It was absolutely not deliberate! And the girls, I know exactly which girls you're talking about, they've been peering at me, winding me up for months.'

'I'm afraid, Owen, that we're going to have to launch an investigation into this. At the moment it's your word against theirs. The girls in question have others willing to testify to your sexism in the classroom. And your behaviour at the Christmas party.'

Owen feels a hard lump of fury pass through his consciousness. He wants to claw it out of his head and hurl it at the disciplinary panel, particularly at Clarice who is staring at him with an antagonistic blend of pity and embarrassment.

'There was no "behaviour" at the Christmas party. I don't *do* behaviour. I am utterly professional at all times and in every situation. In the classroom and out of it.'

'Well, Owen, I'm terribly sorry, but we will be launching an investigation, *sir*, and to that end, I'm afraid, we will have to suspend you from work while the investigation is ongoing.'

l. He'd 'What!'

'We cannot run a fair investigation while you're still in the classroom confronting your accusers. It's policy. I'm really, really sorry.'

This came from Jed, who, to his credit, did at least look really, really sorry. Mainly, Owen suspected, because now he was going to have to rework his lesson timetables to ensure that his classes were covered, which, given that Eliza Brewer, Owen's counterpart, was about to go off on maternity leave, would prove very problematic.

'So, what ... I mean, how long?'

'We'll start with two weeks and then be in touch. But I doubt it will be longer than a month. Assuming, of course, that the outcome is in your favour.'

some 'And so, do I just ...?'

'Yes, take what you need from your office and Holly will be waiting for you in the foyer to say goodbye.'

certain Owen closes his eyes, then slowly opens them. He is to be escorted out of the premises. Yet he has done nothing wrong. He wants to pick up the chair and he on which he's sitting and chuck it through the window behind Jed's head and let it smash a hole through the plate glass, see the shards sparkling in the round, fallen snow in the car park below. He wants to walk into classroom 6D and tell the boys he knows that Monique and Maisy are currently halfway through a lecture on micro services and stand before them mustering as much of his five feet and a half inches as possible and shout into their stupid faces. Instead he walks slowly to his feet, all his rage held tight inside his stomach, and he leaves the claim room.

d to

It's stopped snowing when he leaves the Tube station at Finchley Road an hour later. His rucksack weighs a ton on his back; it now contains the contents of his desk, including his lava rock lamp. He should have left the lamp behind; he'll be back in a couple of weeks, but something had made him do it up, a little voice saying, *What if they're right?*

our. I There's a small and very steep hill leading from the Finchley Road to the school street. At the top of this hill there are two private schools. He realises as he starts his ascent that it is three thirty, that it's the end of the school day and the hill, consequently, is swarming with small, meandering children, mostly girls, strolling behind clutching tiny rucksacks and brightly coloured water balloons.

While the snow on the ground has turned to slush it still lies in thick clumps on the car bonnets and the children scoop off handfuls and hurl them at each other. They weave about and wander blindly into his path. He nearly loses his footing and has to grab hold of a wall to stay upright. The mothers are completely oblivious; Owen hates these mothers, these school mums with their well-worn leggings and blown-out hair, their fat winter coats with rabbit-fur hoods and fading winter-holiday sun tans, box-fresh trainers. What do women like to think about, he wonders, when it's just them and the kids are in bed, and they've got one of those gigantic fishbowls of wine in their hands? What do they do when they're not at the gym or collecting their children from school? Where do they exist on the scale of humanity? He cannot imagine. But all women are an eternal mystery to him, even the ordinary ones.

Owen lives in a cavernous first-floor flat carved out of a grand mansion for one of the finest streets in Hampstead. In front of the house is a driveway unkempt and unused, except as a storage area for bins and things the owners from residents of the house don't want in their homes. There has been an armchair sitting on the lawn in front of the house for almost a year now. No one had, complains because no one really cares; it's a building full of old people in the recluses.

The flat is owned by his aunt, Tessie, and is the largest apartment in the building, boasting the highest ceilings, the tallest windows, the solid floor at nine panel doors with fanlight windows above that the other floors of the house don't have. Owen's bedroom is at the back-left corner of the flat, with a window overlooking the scruffy communal garden that no one takes responsibility for and a wasteland beyond a dividing wall where a grand mansion once stood. The house is an aberration on this street of glossy apartment blocks and shiny mansions with security gates. The freeholder, a mysterious Scotsman known only as Mr G, who appears to have washed his hands of his responsibility for the upkeep of this once beautiful building, Tessie has tried writing to him but has received no response.

Tessie is currently away; she has a house in Tuscany, equally as run-down as her London apartment, and is there for substantial periods of time. Whenever she's away she locks each door of her flat apart from the bathroom and kitchen. The kitchen. She says it's to keep her things safe from burglary but Owen knows it's because she thinks he's going to go through her things. Even when she's here she locks doors behind her and Owen has never, not even on special occasions, gone beyond the door of her elegant, high-ceilinged sitting room. Now Owen lets himself into the apartment and breathes in the familiar faintly toiletry scent of the economy fabric conditioner Tessie uses on a washing, the stale aroma of old cushions and dusty curtains, the sweet stench of the dead ashes in her grate.

It's already starting to get dark at this, the bleakest time of the year, so Owen turns on lights, flicking the yellowed Bakelite switches that fizz alarmingly beneath his fingertip. Dirty lightbulbs give off a sad, jaundiced light and it's freezing cold. Owen's room contains an electric storage heater but Tessie doesn't run the heating when she's not here, and rarely even when she is, so he also has a plug-in blow heater hidden behind his wardrobe. Tessie would make him get rid of it if she discovered it, convinced as she is that it would send her electric bill through the roof.

He drops his rucksack on to his bed and flops heavily into a small fl
armchair. He reaches down to the blow heater and switches it on. Beca
the height of his ceilings it takes a while for the room to heat up, but o
does, he kicks off his new shoes, so that they disappear beneath his be
does not want to see the shoes again, let alone wear them. For some
inexplicable reason he feels that the shoes are to blame for the events c
afternoon. They have made him someone that he is not: a man capable
inappropriate sexual comments to his students, a man in need of being
walked off premises.

He pulls off his sweater and then runs his hands down his static-fille
Owen has fine hair. He tries to wear it in a side parting but it always fl
into a middle parting and he ends up looking as though he's deliberate
chosen to wear his hair that way, like that tall bloke in *The Office*. Not
Owen looks like the bloke from *The Office*. Owen is much better-looki
than him. No one's ever told him he's good-looking. But then no one's
told him he's ugly, either.

Through the window Owen can see another flurry of snow fill the ta
brown sky outside, each flake briefly lit on one side by light from the s
He starts to worry about it settling again, about struggling down the hil
Tube station the next morning, holding on to cars and walls to stop hin
from falling. And then he remembers. There was an 'incident'. He is
suspended. The contents of his office are currently in a bag on his bed.
has nowhere to go tomorrow. There is food in the fridge – enough for t
days. The snow can fall and settle; he has no reason to care.

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He drops his rucksack on to his bed and flops heavily into a small floral armchair. He reaches down to the blow heater and switches it on. Because of the height of his ceilings it takes a while for the room to heat up, but once it does, he kicks off his new shoes, so that they disappear beneath his bed. He does not want to see the shoes again, let alone wear them. For some inexplicable reason he feels that the shoes are to blame for the events of the afternoon. They have made him someone that he is not: a man capable of inappropriate sexual comments to his students, a man in need of being walked off premises.

He pulls off his sweater and then runs his hands down his static-filled hair; Owen has fine hair. He tries to wear it in a side parting but it always flops into a middle parting and he ends up looking as though he's deliberately chosen to wear his hair that way, like that tall bloke in *The Office*. Not that Owen looks like the bloke from *The Office*. Owen is much better-looking than him. No one's ever told him he's good-looking. But then no one's ever told him he's ugly, either.

Through the window Owen can see another flurry of snow fill the tar-brown sky outside, each flake briefly lit on one side by light from the street. He starts to worry about it settling again, about struggling down the hill to the Tube station the next morning, holding on to cars and walls to stop himself from falling. And then he remembers. There was an 'incident'. He is suspended. The contents of his office are currently in a bag on his bed. He has nowhere to go tomorrow. There is food in the fridge – enough for two days. The snow can fall and settle; he has no reason to care.

Later that evening Owen opens up his laptop and types in ‘false accusations of sexual misconduct’. He’s looking for some online advice, but instead finds himself reading a human-interest article in the *Guardian* about the experiences of various men of being falsely accused of rape. The accusations levelled against him pale in comparison to what these men were told they’d done. The stories shock him at first, but then the shock recedes into a kind of numb acceptance, a sense that he’d always known this about women. Of course. Women lie. Women hate men and want to hurt them. And what easier way there to hurt a man than to accuse him of rape?

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He can feel the suppressed rage from his meeting earlier that day rise through his body like mercury. He thinks of Monique and Maisy; they’re not even particularly good-looking yet they act as though he should be grateful to them for the warped attention they pay him. Maisy’s actually quite attractive (though no doubt thinks of herself as ‘curvy’ in the modern parlance. *Attraction* only exists where a body goes in at the middle as far as Owen’s concerned, not when it sticks out).

Then he thinks about the previous evening, about that stupid girl who got off the Tube at the same time as him, who’d crossed the Finchley Road at the same time as him, who’d taken the same turning off the Finchley Road as him and then acted like he was about to jump on her just because he doesn’t live on the same street as her. He’d seen her take out her phone and call someone, the breathlessness of her voice, the little turns of her head over her shoulder every few minutes. She’d honestly thought he was deliberately following her. As if he’d have any interest in her. She was just a child. Owen has no interest in children. Owen likes proper women, mature women.

grew up when he grew up, women who have good jobs and wear nice clothes and don't dress like vagrants as teenage girls seem to these days.

The girl's mother had been waiting in the doorway for her, her face screwed up with nerves as she ushered her inside, safe and sound.

No nasty men in here, darling.

Owen feels his nails dig into the flesh of his palm and loosens his fist. He stares at the red half-moons and rubs them absentmindedly with his thumb. Then he turns his attention back to the screen and scrolls to the bottom of the article, to the comments. Owen loves the comments, the grey places where the dusty trolls live; he loves to see how low some people will stoop to get the endorphin rush of a reaction. He's been known to do it himself on occasion. It can feel like sport at the time, though afterwards he feels a bit of pathetic remorse. What has he contributed to the great vibrant soup of humanity? Nothing whatsoever.

There are some angry men in the comments section of this particular article, but one in particular catches Owen's eye. His user name is You're right and he seems articulate and well informed. He has been through this highway and he says:

My colleague, who, might I say, was no oil painting, decided that rather than attempting to offer her advice about her love life (and I can tell you, this woman ever talked about was her love life. I was locked in a small office with her and another woman who literally talked about men *all day long*) were actually meant as sexual overtures. And no course she did not say this to my face. Of course not, because that would just be civilised and human. No. Straight to Human Resources. They offered her counselling. They offered me nothing but dirty looks and assumptions of guilt. They never proved anything and I kept my job. But this woman asked to be moved to another area of the business, while her colleague swapped offices with someone across the landing and was replaced by a man. This man has a beard and looks at me in disdain. He puts soya milk in his coffee and refers to homosexuals as LGBTABCDXYZs or what the fuck EVER. He has clearly been radicalised by some rampant feminazi in his life. The stupid thing is that I genuinely believe in women's rights. I believe women should earn the same as men (providing they work as hard as men). I believe they should be allowed to go off and have babies and

clothes then come back to work (providing they don't keep taking time off
all go and see little Sally in her nativity play, leaving all their colleagues
knee-deep in the shit). I believe they should be free to go out at night
and get drunk and wear short skirts without being raped. So yeah, I
a feminist too. But I'm also a realist. The pendulum has swung
st. He waaaay too far imo. It's time to throw a spanner into the pendulum
umb. stop its trajectory, send it back a little our way. No wonder men want
of the to be women these days. What teenage boy seeing what the future holds
here in store for him wouldn't prefer to be a lady, to have all the rights and
to get all the protection? Who's protecting the men? Nobody. Nobody gives
a shit about us. It's time, people, it's time ...

sort of YourLoss's comment ends there, on something of a cliffhanger. Time for
what? Owen wonders. Time for what?

er Owen goes to the kitchen to get himself a cup of tea. He stands with
YourLoss back against the counter as he waits for the kettle to boil. The tiled floor
himself, cold beneath his socked feet. There's a huge curtain of thick cobweb hanging
across the top of the kitchen window. Tessie used to have a cleaner but
died three years ago and was never replaced. Owen does what he can, but
doesn't extend to climbing up stepladders with a feather duster.

ny He thinks about YourLoss's post as he waits. He feels strangely uneasy
all by it. He senses a connection with the author: a man of a similar age to
t living somewhere bourgeois in the south, dealing with the aftermath of
, of wrongly and unfairly accused of sexual misconduct by a vile-sounding
woman. The kettle clicks off and he makes his tea. He opens a cupboard
and takes out a packet of Tessie's special Italian biscuits. She's not due back
in a week; they'll be stale by then. She'll probably have a little dig about it
but he doesn't care. He's got bigger things to worry about right now than Tessie's
precious biscuits.

s Early on Tuesday morning, five days after his suspension from work, a man
appears at Owen's door.

to He is tall, six feet four or so. He towers over Owen and Owen immediately
feels threatened.

as 'Good morning, sir, I'm DI Robert Burdett. I'm investigating an incident
last night.'

nd *An incident.* That word again.

'to 'Are you, Mr Owen ...' He examines his notepad. 'Pick?'

ies 'Yes.'

ht 'Great, thank you. Yes. A young girl, a teenage girl, was sexually as
'm last night. Here.' He turns and gestures towards the crossroads. 'Just on
the wasteland. I wondered if you heard anything? Saw anything?'

, Owen flushes red. He feels immediately guilty. Not because he's do
nt anything, but because he might have done something. He's spent his w
has life feeling like he might have done something wrong.

and He breathes in hard to try to bring down the colour in his cheeks but
ves makes it worse. He blows the air back out and says, 'No. No. I heard
nothing.'

for 'Your living room.' The policeman nods his head towards the front
window to the left of the door. 'It overlooks the street. Maybe you noti
something without quite realising what it was?'

his 'I wasn't in my living room last night. I mean, it's not even my livin
or is icy room.'

anging 'Ah, you live with someone else?'

t she 'Yes. My aunt. Tessie McDonald. It's her living room. I never go in

but that 'Might she have seen something?'

rgised 'No. She's in Tuscany. She has another property. She's often there.
there now.'

o him, He's burbling. Tall men make him feel this way. Policemen make hi
f being this way.

'Right,' says DI Burdett. 'Anyway. It was at about eight thirty p.m.
rd and you were watching something on the TV about that time? Maybe that v
ck for a jog your memory? Something untoward you noticed? A strange noise?
, but he Someone walking down the street who made you feel alarmed in some
sie's

'No. Honestly. I was in my room all day yesterday. It's at the back c
house. I haven't seen anything or heard anything.'

'A neighbour claims ...' DI Burdett glances down at his notebook a
a man 'to have seen you, on your driveway, at approximately four thirty p.m.
yesterday.'

diately Owen clamps his hand to his forehead. He has barely processed the
ident, accusations he's suffered at work and now there are anonymous neighl
spying on him and reporting his movements to the police in relation to
attack.

'What?'

‘Would that have been you? At four thirty p.m.?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says. Then he remembers that today is bin collection day and that yes, he had put the rubbish out yesterday. ‘I put the rubbish outside at some point,’ he says. ‘But I can’t tell you when.’ As he says this, he remembers the girls that had walked past. Two schoolgirls. One was the one who’d acted like he was going to jump her when he was walking home the other night; the other was a tiny girl with black hair. They’d looked over at him and said something to each other; then they’d picked up their pace before disappearing into the house across the road.

He’d thought he was being paranoid at the time, that he’d imagined talking about him. Now he can only assume that they had been. He sighs.

‘But roughly?’

‘Roughly the afternoon. It was dark, I remember.’

‘And you haven’t left the house apart from that?’

‘No. I have not.’

DI Burdett folds his notepad in half and tucks it in to his pocket. ‘Thank you, Mr Pick. I appreciate your time.’

‘That’s fine,’ he replies. And then, just as the policeman turns to leave, he adds, ‘Is she all right? The girl?’

She’s fine. DI Burdett smiles slightly. ‘She’s fine,’ he says. ‘But thank you for asking.’

‘Good,’ says Owen. ‘Good.’

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DI Burdett smiles slightly. ‘She’s fine,’ he says. ‘But thank you for asking.’

‘Good,’ says Owen. ‘Good.’

Owen had been a beautiful child, oddly. His mother had put him in for modelling when he was about four. He hadn't been taken on because he was awkward in front of a camera. But he'd had a cherubic face: dark eyes, lips, a dimple.

But the face that had looked so beautiful on a small child had not translated into a good face for a teenager and he'd been a shockingly awkward-looking boy. To this day he cannot bear to look at photos of himself between the ages of eleven and eighteen.

But now, at thirty-three, he feels his features have settled again; he looks in the mirror and a relatively handsome guy looks back at him. He particularly likes his eyes; they are so brown that they are almost black. He inherits them from his maternal grandmother who was half Moroccan.

He doesn't work out, that is true to say. He has little definition, but in the clothes you wouldn't know that; you wouldn't know about the softness of his skin around his belly button, the slightly mammary sag around his pecs. In carefully chosen clothes, he looks just like any average gym-goer.

Owen doesn't believe that he's being rejected by women on the grounds of not having a 'fit bod'. This he could accept. But no woman has seen him undressed. Not once. Not ever. It appears that for some unexplained reason Owen fails to meet the criteria of every single woman in the land. And he sees men far worse-looking than himself, every single day, with women who appear to like them, or with children, proving that at some point a woman liked them enough to let them do that to her, or wearing wedding rings with photos on their desks of nice-looking women or photos of the children that nice-looking women have let them make inside them and really, it baffles him, it absolutely baffles him.

It's not as if Owen is fussy. He really isn't fussy; in fact he would probably say yes to 80 per cent of adult women if they asked him out to dinner. Even 90 per cent.

In Tessie's bathroom, which is heated by an electric bar above the door that glows as red as a Saharan sunset, and which would probably fail a fire and safety inspection, there is a full-length mirror opposite the toilet. Owen has no idea what would possess someone to put a full-length mirror opposite a toilet. But there it is, and over the years he's grown used to it. He ignores most of the time. But sometimes he uses it to assess himself, physically. He needs to look upon himself at regular intervals, to see himself, because no one else sees him and if he doesn't remind himself of his three dimensions he might just dissolve and disappear. He looks at his penis. He has a nice penis. He's watched the dating show with the naked men standing in pairs being scrutinised by fully clothed women and nearly every one of the men has had an ugly penis. But his penis is nice. He can see that objectively. No woman has ever seen it.

He sighs, puts himself back into his underwear and zips up his trousers. He goes back to his room and to YourLoss's blog, which Owen had discovered yesterday after clicking a link included in his online comment.

YourLoss's website is a portal into a world that Owen did not know existed.

He describes himself as an incel. The term is hyperlinked at the top of the website to a Wiki page that describes incels thus:

... members of an online subculture^{[1][2]}. who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one, a state they describe as *inceldom*.^[3] Self-identified incels are largely white and are almost exclusively male heterosexuals.^{[4][5][6][7][8][9]} The term is a portmanteau of 'involuntary celibates'.^[10]

YourLoss is thirty-three, like Owen, and very open about the fact that he hasn't had sex since he was seventeen.

Owen, on the other hand, has never had sex.

He once had a girl touch him inside his trousers, when he was about nineteen. But it had ended badly and prematurely, with the girl withdrawing her hand rapidly and rushing to find a sink. It was one of the most embarrassing moments of his life. He'd replayed it in his head for years.

probably and over, like slicing himself over and over with a sharp knife. The man
Maybe thought about it, the scarer he'd become of ever putting himself in that
position again and he's blamed himself ever since for the lack of sex he
hasn't experienced, for the women who haven't looked at him or touched him
for as far as he's concerned, it's his fault, entirely. But as he reads YourLoss's
Owen he begins to wonder about this.

Because YourLoss doesn't blame himself. YourLoss blames everyone
and he is really angry.

He's angry at people he calls 'Chads'. Chads are guys who get sex.
According to YourLoss, Chads don't get sex because they're better than
guys who don't get sex. They get sex because they're *looksmaxxing* and *mu*
This means that they are pumping their bodies artificially to look more
attractive than normal guys, that they are fake-tanning and tooth-white
and getting plastic surgery and having things done to their eyebrows and
skin. They get sex because they are stacking the system unfairly against
men like YourLoss. And, Owen suspects, men like him too. They are, appar-
ently, cheating.

But mainly, he's angry at women. Stacys and Beckys as he refers to
Stacys are the high-value women, the trophy women, the women who
have any man they want. These women sicken him because they know
exactly what they're doing; they know their power and their worth and
deliberately to make guys like YourLoss feel worthless. Beckys are the
attractive women who still feel they have the right to reject men like
YourLoss whom they deem to be not up to scratch.

YourLoss walks a lot. He walks and he sits on benches and in quiet
of pubs and he looks and he reports what he sees; the injustices he perceives
to be lurking in every corner of the nameless town in which he lives.

Owen clicks on an entry called *Snow Joke*. He reads:

My town is white today. We're snowy. It makes me feel for a minute
like anything is possible; everything hidden away, like the world's
wearing a uniform. And everyone in their biggest, warmest, least
attractive clothes, we're all equal now.

Except we're not, are we? Under the snow, that car there is still a
Mercedes coupé and that car there is still a Ford Focus and you
bloody well know it without having to scrape the snow away; there
that glint of red paintwork, that particular curve to the bumper,

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unmistakeable. So even though we're all wearing our worst clothes it's still plain to see who's winning and who's losing. There's the sad Becky trailing her squashed old Uggs through the snow; doesn't she know they're not waterproof? Sheesh. No, she does not because she is stupid. And, look, there's a Stacy striding along in a pair of Hunter wellies – £100 a pair, don't you know? Ugly as all fuck. But at least they don't let in the water. And I'm sure there must be someone out there with a fetish for green rubber footwear ... And she's in full make-up, of course, can't let a few frozen fractals stop you slapping on the slap. Can't let your standards drop completely.

This town, this fucking town. Full of poseurs. And if you're not a poseur you're a wannabe poseur. And if you're not a wannabe poseur then you're a loser, even when you're a winner.

I go to the gastropub just off the common. It's only been a gastropub for a few weeks. It was just a pub before that. Or actually an inn, to be precise. The Hunters' Inn as it was once known. It has lamps outside and a carriageway where horses would once have been tethered. In spite of its gentrification, in the snow, with its glowing lamps, it still looks vaguely Dickensian and for a minute I feel timeless and happy, as if I belong somehow. In the old days every man could find a woman. And if they couldn't make a woman fall in love with them, there were other ways of finding women and keeping them. Women needed us then, more than we needed them. What the hell happened to this world?

I buy a pint. I sit by the window. I watch the ducks skittering about on the frozen pond on the common. I watch the snow.

Tomorrow it will be gone.

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unmistakeable. So even though we're all wearing our worst clothes it's still plain to see who's winning and who's losing. There's the sad, sad Becky trailing her squashed old Uggs through the snow; doesn't she know they're not waterproof? Sheesh. No, she does not because she is stupid. And, look, there's a Stacy striding along in a pair of Hunter wellies – £100 a pair, don't you know? Ugly as all fuck. But at least they don't let in the water. And I'm sure there must be someone out there with a fetish for green rubber footwear ... And she's in full make-up, of course, can't let a few frozen fractals stop you slapping on the slap. Can't let your standards drop completely.

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Tomorrow it will be gone.

Owen puts on a grey button-down shirt and dark jeans. He assesses his reflection in the mirror on the outside of his wardrobe. He looks fine. Possibly overdone with his haircut; his fringe hangs a little limply over his eyes. And he's very pale. It is February and he is always pale in February. He is due at a meeting at college in an hour and a half. It will be the first time he's left the house for anything other than food shopping in over two weeks. His stomach churns slightly with nervous anticipation. Not just about the thought of going to the Tube and sitting opposite people and walking through crowds of strangers but also of what they are going to say to him. They have carried out a full investigation into the girls' allegations. They want him to 'pop in for half an hour or so' so that they can give him an update.

'Can't you just tell me over the phone?' he asked.

'No,' Holly had said. 'I'm afraid not, Owen. It needs to be face-to-face.'

He fishes the dreaded shoes out from under the bed where they've been lurking ever since he kicked them under there two weeks ago. They are trailing a family of dust bunnies in their wake. He appraises them in the light of two weeks' absence. No, he decides, they are bad shoes. He will not wear them again. He puts on his comfy, rubber-soled black lace-ups instead, the ones he's had to glue the soles back on to twice.

He gets himself some breakfast in the kitchen: a slice of toast and a slice of cheese. Tessie appears as he's putting the butter back in the fridge. She has just come back from Italy and has been in a strange mood ever since she returned.

'Aren't you going to be late?' she says. 'You know it's nearly ten o'clock.'

'I'm not due in until eleven,' he says.

He hasn't told her about his suspension. Why would he? She would only judge him, say something about his mother, make everything 10 per cent worse than it already is.

‘All right for some,’ she says, brushing past him to the sink where she takes an upturned tea cup from the draining board and examines the inside of it before rinsing it and switching on the kettle.

Tessie is his mother’s big sister. His mother is dead. She died when Owen was eighteen. Owen’s father lives in south London with another wife and another son. Owen lived with them for a month after his mother died. It was the loneliest month of his life. He remembers Tessie, at his mother’s funeral, touching his arm and saying, ‘Remember, I will always have a room for you if you need it.’

Turns out she didn’t really mean it. But now she’s stuck with him, fifty years later and counting. She was forty when Owen moved in. Now she’s due a fifty-five, but she acts as though she is sixty-five. You wouldn’t catch her in Lycra leggings and a hoodie. Her hair is steel grey and frothy and she shops at the odd boutiques in Hampstead that sell voluminous linen tunics and trousers with baggy crotches and floppy hats.

‘I bumped into Ernesto last night,’ she says.

Owen nods. Ernesto is a single man of a certain age who lives in the city, above theirs.

‘He said there was a visit from the police a couple of weeks back. Saw him talking to them on the front step. What was that all about?’

Owen breathes in hard. ‘Nothing,’ he says. ‘Some sort of attack in the street. They were doing door-to-doors.’

‘Attack,’ she says, narrowing her eyes. ‘What sort of attack?’

‘I don’t know.’ He throws his crusts in the bin. Thirty-three years old, really should be able to eat crusts at his age. ‘An assault, something like that.’

‘Sexual?’ she asks.

‘Yes,’ he replies. ‘Probably.’

There is a tiny but significant silence. Inside the silence he can hear the little intake of his aunt’s breath; sees a thought passing through her mind so fast that it makes her head roll back slightly. Her eyes narrow again and then it passes.

‘Well,’ she says. ‘I hope they caught whoever it was. I don’t know what’s been happening to this area. It used to be so safe.’

After a tense five-minute wait in the reception area at the college, Owen is shown into the same office he was shown to last time. Jed Bryant is the

he once again, with Holly and Clarice. And there is another woman, small
side of sharp, who is introduced to him as Penelope Ofili. She is an adjudicator

‘Why do we need an adjudicator?’ he asks.

Owen ‘Just for transparency.’

nd *Transparency*. Owen blinks slowly and sucks in his cheeks.

It was ‘Please,’ says Jed, ‘take a seat.’

meral, ‘How’ve you been?’ asks Holly. ‘Hope you’ve had a chance to relax

or you ‘Not really,’ he says. ‘No.’

The smile freezes on Holly’s lips and she turns away abruptly and says

fifteen ‘So, thank you so much for coming in again, Owen. As you know, we’

e is been working very hard to investigate the claims made by two of your

her in students regarding your behaviour at the Christmas party last December

shops Owen wriggles slightly in his chair, uncrosses his legs, crosses them

ousers He’s been over the events of that night a hundred times since the alleg-

were made and he still cannot find the point at which his behaviour broke

the line between jovial and abusive. Because that is the bottom line here

flat order for all these people to be sitting in this room together, taking time

of their own days, calling in the services of an independent adjudicator

aw you must be some fundamental belief that abuse has taken place.

He uncrosses his legs for a third time and is aware that this will look

re area. and uncomfortable, which is understandable but might also make it seem

he is feeling guilty. He should have spoken to someone, he realises that

Things have escalated rather than de-escalated since he last sat here.

d. He ‘We’ve spoken to several people who were there on the night,’ Holly

re that.’ continues. ‘I’m afraid, Owen, that they all corroborate the original

accusation.’

He nods, his eyes cast downwards.

the ‘Several people saw you touch the girls in question. Several other peo-

nd so report being present when you splattered the girls with the sweat from

d then forehead. They all attest that it was a deliberate action and that you did

more than once when asked by the girls to stop.

what’s ‘Furthermore, we’ve had several reports backing up the claims of

inappropriate teaching: favouring boys, belittling girls, ignoring them,

marking them more harshly in some cases or not prioritising their work

in is others. Some usage of inappropriate language in the classroom.’

are, He glances up. ‘Like what?’

l and 'Well.' Holly looks at her notes. 'Using terms such as "man up". Re
r. to certain pieces of code as "sexy". Referring to female students as girl
Referring to other students as "insane" and "mental".'

'But—'

'Making fun of students with food allergies.'

'Intolerances ...'

z.' 'And students who are vegans.'

Owen closes his eyes and sighs. 'For God's sake,' he mutters under
ays, breath.

ve Holly narrows her eyes at him, her finger on the last line of her note
says, 'Also, excessive blasphemy.'

r.' 'Blasphemy?' he says. 'Really? Dear God.'

l again. He realises his faux pas and shuts his eyes.

ations 'So,' he says, 'what happens now?'

ached There is a brief silence. All three people in the room exchange a glar

re: in Then Holly pulls a piece of paper from her folder and passes it across t

e out table to him. 'We would like you to attend this training course, Owen.

; there week long and addresses all the issues we've been discussing today. If

end of the course it's felt that you've properly engaged with the trainin

edgy have a clearer understanding of what's appropriate and inappropriate in

em that workplace with children, we can start talking a return to work. But you

t now. to commit to it. One hundred per cent. Have a read. Let me know what

think. You're a very valued member of staff here, Owen.' A rictus smi

y don't want to lose you.'

Owen stares at the piece of paper for a while. The words swim and s

before his eyes. The word 'brainwashing' passes through his head. A v

trapped in a room with a bunch of paedophiles being reprogrammed to

people that vegans are superior beings and women can have penises.

your No, he thinks. No thank you. He pushes the paper back across the ta

l it towards Holly and says, 'Thank you, but I'd rather be sacked.'

Owen walks aimlessly for quite some time after he leaves Ealing Colle

can't face the thought of the Tube journey home. He can't face the tho

κ in Tessie peering at him through her horn-rimmed glasses and saying, *Wh*

you doing back so early? And then sitting in his lumpy armchair for th

of the day staring at a screen.

ferring He could call the college, recant his resignation, agree to the training
ls. course. There are avenues still open to him. But if the best-case scenario
that he gets his job back and has to come into work every day and look
faces of those two girls across his classroom and be surrounded by rev
teenagers who all think he is a pervy fascist then really, what is he fight
for?

his Owen has savings. Tessie charges him what she charged him fifteen
ago when he was a newly bereaved teenager: twenty-five pounds a week
has no social life, no expensive hobbies, and he certainly hasn't been
s and spending his hard-earned money wining and dining a string of ladies over
years. He has thousands in the bank. Not enough to put down a deposit
nice flat, but more than enough to live on for a few months. He does not
his job back. He does not want to fight for it.

He calls his father.

nce. 'Dad,' he says, 'it's me.'

he He hears the tiny pause, his father subconsciously recalibrating his r
It's a to take his son into account.

at the 'Oh hi, Owen,' he says, 'how are you?'

g and 'I haven't seen you for ages,' Owen begins. 'It's been, like, *months*.

n a 'I know,' says his father apologetically. 'I know. It's awful, isn't it,
i have the time just slips away.'

: you 'How was your Christmas?' Owen asks this sharply, not wanting to
le. Wehis father any more opportunity to blame anything other than his own
uninterest for their lack of communication.

swirl 'Oh, it was, you know, hectic. I'm sorry that—'

veek 'It's fine,' he interjects again. He doesn't want to go over it all again
think sick mother-in-law, the half-brother having some kind of pathetic Gen
Z crisis to do with drugs and gender dysphoria, *all a bit much this year*
ble *we're going to batten down the hatches*. The idea that his father *batten*
down the hatches involved the exclusion of his firstborn son had been
enough when it was first announced and it hasn't improved with the pa

ge. He of time.

ught of 'Did you ... How was your ...?'

at are 'I spent it alone,' Owen says.

e rest 'Oh,' says his father. 'I assumed you'd be with Tessie, or ...?'

'No. Tessie went to Tuscany. I spent it alone. It was fine.'

g ‘Right,’ he says. ‘Good. Well, I’m sorry. And hopefully next Christ
io is will be a bit less ...’

t at the ‘Hectic?’

olting ‘Yes, a bit less hectic. And how’s ... how’s work?’

iting ‘I resigned from my job today. They were accusing me of sexual
misconduct.’

years ‘Ouf.’ He hears his father wince.

ek. He ‘Yes, apparently I stroked a girl’s hair at the college disco, and appa
use triggering language in lessons and apparently being a normal man
ver the longer an acceptable thing to be in the classroom. Apparently we all ha
t on a be like robots these days and think about every last word before it leav
ot want lips. Apparently modern women cannot cope with anything, with anytl
all.’

He’s shouting. He knew he would shout. It was why he’d called his
His father knows he’s let Owen down, he knows he’s been a shit, shit
nood lets Owen shout at him from time to time. He takes it. He doesn’t fix
anything, but he takes it. And that’ll do for now.

’ ‘Oh, Owen, it’s all so bloody ridiculous, isn’t it? Political correctnes
tuts. ‘It’s madness, it really is. But do you think resigning was the righ
how response, really? I mean, how will you get another job?’

give Owen winces against the unpalatable question. Then he thinks of
YourLoss, strolling around his poncey little market town, writing his
existential blog, doing his boring shitty office job. He seems happy enc
He seems to have it all under control.

’ ‘I’ll get another job,’ he says. ‘It’s all just so ...’

i: the ‘I know,’ says his father, ‘ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.’

eration There’s a significant pause. Owen feels the onus is on him to fill it
; son, somehow. But he can’t and he doesn’t. Instead he leaves the way comp
ing clear for his father to say, ‘Well, Owen, it’s been good talking to you. I

bad sorry to hear you’re having a bad time of it. And we must get together
assage We really must. I mean, your birthday ...?’

 ‘Next month.’

 ‘Yes. Next month. Let’s do something.’

 ‘Yes. Let’s.’

 ‘And Owen?’

 ‘Yes?’

nas 'These allegations. The, you know, sexual impropriety. I mean, there's nothing to them. Is there?'

Owen sighs, lets himself sink to his haunches, his back against a wall. Dad. No.'

'Good. That's good. Bye, Owen.'

'Bye, Dad.'

Owen pulls himself back to standing. The anger that he transferred so recently to his father has turned straight back on to himself, twice as intense and dark and sharp. He feels his veins fill with electricity. He walks fast towards the Tube station. He's about to turn into the entrance when he sees across the road the rose-gold glow of a pub window. It's twenty to two. Owen is not much of a drinker. He likes wine with a meal or on a night with colleagues, but not drinking just for the sake of drinking. Then he thinks of his cold bedroom, of Tessie bumping about resentfully, and his dad. He thinks of Your Loss with a pint in a quiet corner of a pub, watching, learning, thinking, being. He imagines him as a tall man, broad-shouldered, short and neatly cut, maybe even a short beard or moustache. He imagines him in a button-down shirt and worn jeans and walking boots. He imagines him wiping away a slick of foam from the tips of his moustache, placing his head carefully back on the beer mat, centring it just so. Lifting his gaze. Watching, learning, thinking, being.

He turns away from the Tube station, back to the pedestrian crossing. He waits for the green man to flash and heads into the warmth of the pub. He orders a pint. He finds a table for one. He sits at it.

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soon.

‘These allegations. The, you know, sexual impropriety. I mean, there’s nothing to them. Is there?’

Owen sighs, lets himself sink to his haunches, his back against a wall. ‘No, Dad. No.’

‘Good. That’s good. Bye, Owen.’

‘Bye, Dad.’

Owen pulls himself back to standing. The anger that he transferred so very briefly on to his father has turned straight back on to himself, twice as hard and dark and sharp. He feels his veins fill with electricity. He walks fast now, towards the Tube station. He’s about to turn into the entrance when he sees across the road the rose-gold glow of a pub window. It’s twenty to twelve.

Owen is not much of a drinker. He likes wine with a meal or on a night out with colleagues, but not drinking just for the sake of drinking. Then he thinks again of his cold bedroom, of Tessie bumping about resentfully, and he thinks of YourLoss with a pint in a quiet corner of a pub, watching, learning, thinking, being. He imagines him as a tall man, broad-shouldered, short hair, neatly cut, maybe even a short beard or moustache. He imagines him in a button-down shirt and worn jeans and walking boots. He imagines him wiping away a slick of foam from the tips of his moustache, placing his pint carefully back on the beer mat, centring it just so. Lifting his gaze. Watching, learning, thinking, being.

He turns away from the Tube station, back to the pedestrian crossing, waits for the green man to flash and heads into the warmth of the pub. He orders a pint. He finds a table for one. He sits at it.

A few hours later Owen pushes his way heavily through the door of the Oriental Star opposite his local Tube station. He waits at the till for a set of chow mein and a can of Tango and then takes them to the counter in the window where he watches people pouring from the Tube, wondering at the terrifying unknowability of strangers.

He uses the noodles to try to soak up the three pints of lager he had drunk while he was in the pub by himself. Being drunk alone was an alarming experience. He'd gone to the toilet and pissed on his shoes, wobbled, laughed at his reflection in the mirror and talked to himself, then bumped into a table and fell away out causing the wine in a woman's glass to slosh over the rim. 'I am very sorry,' he said. 'Please don't report me to the authorities.' And she looked at him sideways, unsmilingly, and he'd said *fucking bitch* under his breath, left the pub and then immediately wished he hadn't said it.

After his noodles he ascends the steep hill to his road. The drunkenness receding, dampened. He looks up and sees the moon shining down between two tall trees, against a navy-blue sky. He takes out his phone and tries to capture it, but the moon refuses to show off for him, imprinting itself as a vague white smudge on the image.

He puts his phone back in his pocket and then turns, and as he does a thin figure comes hurtling towards him, shoulders him roughly, nearly knocks him backwards.

The figure barely slows as it turns backwards. 'Sorry, mate. Sorry.'

The figure then reverses and hurtles down to the end of the hill, runs across the grassy spot, then turns and hurtles back up the hill, right up the middle of the road.

Owen stands and watches him.

He sees that it is a middle-aged man, wearing tight Lycra leggings and a zip-up jacket with strange black flaps over his ears and wires coming out of the

tiny pocket in his jacket.

A jogger. He throws Owen a strange look, before running back down again. The road is a dead end, separated from the six lanes of traffic on Finchley Road by a set of stone steps. For a while it is just Owen and the jogger.

As the jogger reaches the top of the hill for the sixth time he stops and collapses into himself, breathing so loudly he sounds as though he might. He glances up at Owen. 'You all right, mate?' he asks.

Owen feels something stir deep inside himself, something dark. He looks at the jogger and he says, 'Are you married?'

The jogger grimaces and says, 'Eh?'
'Married?' says Owen. 'Got a girlfriend?'
'What's it got to do with you?'
'Nothing,' he replies. 'I just wondered.'

He starts to head around the corner to his street when the man catches up with him. 'Do I know you?' he asks.

'I have no idea.'
'Are we neighbours? I feel like I've seen you ...'

'I live there. Number twelve.' He points at Tessie's building and shrugs.
'Ah, yes. That's right. We live there.' The man points at the house opposite, the one where the teenage girl lives, where the stupid mother and the concerned face lives.

Owen nods. The man gives him a tight smile before jogging away from him. 'See you around,' he says.

'Yeah,' says Owen. 'See you around.'

The TV in Tessie's sitting room rumbles through the closed door. She's watching the live feed from the Houses of Parliament. Something to do with Brexit. It sounds like a donkey compound.

He tiptoes past, gets himself a pint of water from the kitchen and then locks himself away in his bedroom where he undoes the top three buttons of his shirt, kicks off his scruffy shoes and opens up YourLoss's blog. There's a new post up but he doesn't read it. Instead he scrolls down the page to a link that says *Contact*. *Hi*, he types in the contact form:

My name's Owen. I love your blog. Would love to chat sometime.
I've just lost my job. Don't really know what my next steps are.

n Yo, Owen [*comes the reply*], what's going down with you?

i the

he I'm a teacher. I was accused of 'sweating on a student' and 'taking the mick out of vegans'. And I just turned down the chance to attend

nd

ht die.

No way! Tell me more!

looks

Owen replies succinctly. The outline of the thing. The party, the tequila, the girls, the meetings. The curl of distaste on the mouths of Clarice and Holly every time the word 'sweat' was mentioned.

es up

What's the deal with you [*asks YourLoss*]? Are you celibate? Infrequent? Never? What?

Celibate [*he replies*]. Never.

ugs.

Do you like anyone? I mean, are you romantic?

with

Owen considers the question. He can't find an answer. Eventually he replies

om

I don't know. I don't like anyone. But I have liked people.

Dated?

's

with

Kind of.

Dinner and flowers? The pub?

in

ons of

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the

Dinner and flowers. Once.

And how did that go?

Shit. She left halfway through the date, said her mum was having a medical emergency.

LOL. Fuck that. What fucking bullshit. So, what are you going to do about your job?

I dunno. Going to take some time out. I've got savings.

And? What will you do with your time out?

Haven't really thought about it. Maybe try to start something up, a company. Something like that.

You need a plan, mate. Otherwise you'll wake up one morning and your savings will be gone and you'll have put on a stone and have nothing to show for any of it but a load of trousers that don't fit you any more.

I'm not sure I'm ready for making a plan.

YourLoss doesn't reply for quite some time. Owen wriggles slightly and clears his throat, worried that he's said something to put him off. Then a plip and another message appears.

Where d'you live, Owen?

North London.

Righty-ho. Not far from me then.

Why, where do you live?

Just outside London. Look, here's my email address. Write to me. I've got a proposition for you. *Bryn@hotmail.co.uk*. Email me now yeah?

Owen opens his email account, pastes Bryn's email address into the bar and starts typing.

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Owen and Bryn arrange to meet for a pint at a pub near Euston station.

Bryn has told Owen that he will be wearing a green jacket and has ‘short hair’ and wears glasses. Owen has told Bryn that he will be wearing a blue jacket and jeans and then struggled to find any other identifying features they share with him.

He walks into the pub now; it’s a scruffy mock-Tudor affair, set on a street corner, with weather-beaten tables on the pavement and leaded windows. The air is thick with beer and dust. Lone men sit in corners. Owen’s eyes scan the room until they come upon a man on the left, who is looking at him with some semblance of recognition. It doesn’t somehow compute that this might be YourLoss and Owen’s gaze passes across him. But then the man stands on his feet and coming towards him. He has a strange forward-leaning posture and is short. Very short. His hair explodes from his scalp and recedes far back like a clown wig. The bald part of his skull is shiny and raw-looking. His green zip-up jacket has a stain on it.

‘Owen! Yes? Cool! Nice to see you, mate!’ He grabs Owen’s hand and pumps it up and down.

‘Bryn,’ says Owen. ‘Great to meet you too. Can I get you ...?’ He gestures towards the bar.

‘No. No. I’m good.’

Owen gets himself a glass of red wine and heads back to Bryn’s table.

‘Well, well, well,’ says Bryn. ‘This is a turn-up for the books.’

‘It is a bit,’ Owen agrees.

The last thing he’d been expecting, in fact. Bryn had emailed him the night before and asked him a bit more about his technical qualification abilities, interests, asked him about the circumstances around his resignation from the college. Owen hadn’t quite been able to fathom his intent. Th

Bryn had suddenly said: *This is kismet, karma, you and I were meant to drink? Tomorrow? Euston way?*

‘How’s your day been?’ he asks now.

Owen, who is unused to people asking him how his day has been, blinks slightly. ‘Good. It’s been good.’ Then, checking himself, he adds, ‘You?’

‘Oh, you know. Same old shit.’

‘Are you working right now?’

‘Yeah. I am. Just come straight from the office in fact. Unlike you, you lucky bastard, you gentleman of leisure. How did you spend your day?’

He shrugs. ‘Slept late. Had a long bath. Watched a few episodes of *Arrested Development*. Ate a bowl of pasta.’

‘Oh, you lucky, lucky fucker. Fuck, I’d kill for a day like that. Anyways, He raises his pint of something murky-looking towards Owen’s red wine glass and says, ‘Cheers.’

He is absolutely nothing like Owen had imagined. But he has a certain charisma, a cartoonish charm. He has self-confidence, a touch of cockiness. The confidence was what attracted women to a man and that it was his own lack of confidence that was scuppering his chances.

Owen’s eye falls to the stain on Bryn’s jacket; it’s unidentifiable. It looks like it’s been there for so long that Bryn no longer sees it. He pictures himself pulling Bryn’s jacket off and shoving it in a washing machine on a hot half-day setting. He pictures himself with a pair of shiny snip-snip scissors, chopping off the ludicrous curls, yanking off his unfashionable glasses, telling himself to *stop smiling like that*. He’s strangely furious with Bryn for sabotaging himself and then making himself the mouthpiece for men like Owen who do everything right; who don’t have stains on their jackets and clothes yet still can’t get a woman to look them in the eye.

Bryn doesn’t have a clue, Owen thinks. He doesn’t have a clue what he feels like to be totally normal yet be overlooked by the world for no discernible reason. He seems to want to be despised by women. He thinks again of Bryn’s comment under the article about being accused of sexual misconduct at work and he thinks of the women in Bryn’s office, and for the first time in a long while, in that moment he feels sorry for them.

But he hides these misgivings from Bryn and smiles and says, ‘Cheers, mate. Great to meet you.’

en

o meet. 'So.' Bryn rubs his hands together. 'I suppose you're wondering what is all about?'

He nods.

anches 'Bryn lowers his voice and glances around the pub. 'I wanted to meet you face-to-face, because what I want to discuss with you. It's kind of ... sensitive. I don't want to leave anything in my trail. You know.'

Owen nods again.

you 'So. You and me. I feel there's a kinship, yes?'

' Owen nods for a third time.

a show. 'I'm looking at you, and I see a nice-looking fella. You're nicely dressed. But you're telling me that you've never, you know, you've never been with a woman.'

ne and Owen smiles apologetically.

ain 'So, what does that tell you about the world?' Bryn doesn't wait for Owen to reply. 'It tells you that the world is wrong. The world, Owen, is just wrong, fucking wrong. And why do you think that is?'

self- Again, he doesn't wait for an answer.

lack 'It's a conspiracy. And I'm not some nutjob conspiracy theorist. I promise you that. But this, the shit that guys like you and me have to deal with, is a full-blown conspiracy. Full-blown. End of. They call us "incels".' He makes the c-word with his fingers. 'Like it's just bad luck. You know. Like there's nothing anyone can do about it. But that's the thing, Owen. They are doing this to us – deliberately. The media are doing this to us. And they've got the liberals and the feminists eating out of their hands. The world's collective brain is shrinking. People are becoming more and more stupid. More and more fixated on detail. Fucking eyebrows. There's a whole industry out there dedicated just to eyebrows. Did you know that? Multi-million-pound industry. And meanwhile the gene pool is shrinking and shrinking with men like you and me in it. Extrapolate another three generations into the future and what are we going to end up with? Nothing but a billion Stacys and Chads. And that's bad for the world, Owen. It's bad for the planet. It's bad for the likes of us. It'll be a world full of people with shiny teeth and tattoos, all fucking each other and making more Stacys and Chads. In the time gone by, there was a woman for every man, because women needed men. Now women think they rule the world. They get to pick and choose which men flail around waxing their eyebrows and pretending they're OK with their girlfriends calling them useless wankers. The world's destroyed, Owen'

at this totally destroyed. And I've got a platform; I have over ten thousand subscribers to my blog. And it's building by the day, by the minute. I c that platform, target people who might be on the same page as me. I m t up, obviously we're all angry about the way we've been fucked over by th world. But it's a matter of targeting people who might be prepared to s of their boxes and do something about it. Start a revolution.'

Owen looks at Bryn, questioningly.

'I'm talking about war, Owen. Are you in?'

essed. Owen lies on his back on his single bed. He stares upwards at the ceiling with a eight feet overhead. Strands of cobweb dance about up there, blown by draught from the window. It is midnight. He is tired, but he cannot sleep

Every moment of his night out with Bryn is playing and replaying th Owen his thoughts. Bryn's words roll about his mind like an upended bucket totally marbles, skittering about deafeningly.

Even now, two hours after getting home, an hour after getting into b Owen cannot quite fathom the meaning behind Bryn's words. Bryn wa promise unclear, his thought processes didn't seem to keep pace with his words It's a seemed a bubbling geyser of ideas and anger and excitement and purpose quotes without any clear focus or intent. The one key thing he kept coming ba ng was the idea of a revolution.

Eventually he'd passed Owen a small pot of pills, with the words, 'I s to us can't get it legally, then just fucking take it. While they're sleeping.'

Owen had looked back at Bryn. 'I don't understand,' he said.

'Oh, you do understand,' said Bryn. 'You totally understand.'

He sat back, his arms folded across his chest. He eyed Owen triumph e for a second and then leaned in again. 'Imagine,' he said, 'a whole arm ount lot doing this. Hundreds of us. Do you see? Do you see?'

Owen felt his lunch rising gently up the back of his throat.

Bryn leaned in even closer and looked at him urgently. 'This isn't al We'll sex, you know that, don't you? This is about *us*. Fuck, if we were an nd endangered animal there'd be a charity out there doing everything they lays to keep us alive. They'd be sending us every fucking fertile female ani en. they could throw our way to preserve our species. So why should we b while different? Why should we get a worse deal than a fucking animal, Owe th their

He steepled his fingers and looked at Owen across the tips.

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They'd left the pub a minute or two later. 'Think about it,' had been an use parting words. Owen had watched him leaping up the steps to Euston s
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e down backs of his shoes flashing in and out of sight.

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Owen sits up now, and logs into one of the incel chat rooms that he's been frequenting since he started following Bryn's blog.

He found these forums reassuring at first. There has not been one day of Owen's life when he has woken up and felt OK about his aloneness. Not one day when he hasn't glanced at a couple on the street and wanted to scream in their faces about the unjustness of it all. And he was so relieved to find that he wasn't the only man in the world who felt the way he did.

But now Owen thinks of the stain on Bryn's coat, juxtaposed against the arrogance of what he thinks the world owes him and he looks again at the forum and imagines, hiding behind the avatars and grandiose user names, a sea of Bryns with stained jackets and unkempt hair and ridiculous rape fantasies, and he finds himself feeling sorry for these men; maybe, he thinks, they simply don't deserve nice women.

And now he wonders if maybe there's not anything wrong with him after all. That maybe he's just been in the wrong headspace, that he's just been overthinking it all these years. The answer, he suddenly realises, is not Bryn's pathetic war against the world, the answer is making peace with himself.

He reaches down to the floor by his bed for his phone. He switches it on and swipes the screen, looking for the little red flame logo of the Tinder app.

It's 7 p.m. on Valentine's Day and Owen puts on a dark navy crew-neck jumper with a white shirt underneath. He can't quite get the collar to sit and it looks a little scruffy, but he's running out of time so it will have to do. His hair is all wrong, but that's par for the course. He wears a smart blazer over his sweater and chinos, mainly to try to camouflage his wide hips.

Owen is taking a woman out for dinner. A woman he met on Tinder nights ago. He's tried the Tinder approach to meeting women before but it never worked out for him, nothing more than a run of excruciating encounters with women who weren't even particularly good-looking, and which he's handled, he felt in retrospect, quite badly.

But he was a different person then, more brittle, less world-weary. He'd pinned too much on each encounter, set his hopes way too high. If his interlude with Bryn had done one thing for him, it was to reset his idea of romance. Anything that wasn't date-rape now seemed like a good thing.

The woman is called Deanna. She's thirty-eight, lives in Colindale and works in marketing for a direct-mail company. She has a ten-year-old son and a face like a sincere apology for something that really isn't her fault. None of her photos show her body from the shoulders down which suggests that she might be overweight. But that's fine. Owen doesn't mind.

He crosses paths with one of Tessie's friends as he exits his bedroom. A man called Barry who sometimes stays the night, but often doesn't. Barry reeks of very strong aftershave and is wearing a handkerchief in the top pocket of an expensive-looking grey woollen jacket.

'Good evening, Owen,' he says gruffly.

'Hello, Barry,' he replies.

Tessie appears from the sitting room and looks strangely at Owen. 'You look very smart,' she says suspiciously. 'Where are you off to?'

Owen reaches for his coat and pushes his arms into the sleeves. 'I'm to meet a friend.'

Tessie pulls a mustard-coloured scarf from the hook in the hallway and starts wrapping it around her neck. Her demeanour softens. 'Oh,' she says. 'A friend. A red roses and chocolates kind of a friend?'

'No,' he says firmly, not wanting to give anything of his private life to Tessie that she might one day throw back at him. 'Nothing like that. Just a friend.'

She sighs. Then she says, 'Owen. Are you ... well, do you have any interest in women? Or men? I mean, I'm sorry if that seems intrusive, but you're – what are you now? Thirty-five?'

'I'm thirty-three.'

'You're thirty-three. You've lived here since you were eighteen. An adult that time ...' She leaves the end of the thought hanging, like a loose thread.

Owen decides to pretend that it wasn't said. He picks up an umbrella and says, 'You going out too?'

'Yes, Barry's taking me to Villa Bianca. Have fun with your friend.'

She pulls a lipstick from a drawer in the console, twists it up and puts it in the mirror. He hears the lipstick smack of her lips as he pulls the door closed behind him.

He'd

weird On the Tube Owen tries to stifle his nerves. He can feel damp patches developing in the armpits of his shirt, his forehead feels clammy and he suspects he looks quite shiny. He exits the Tube at Covent Garden and greedily breathes in the cold, damp night air. Glancing at his phone he sees a message from Deanna.

one of It says: *Here early! At a table near the back!*

it she Owen gulps.

Why is she early? Who on earth turns up early for a date with someone they met on Tinder? He picks up his pace, annoyed that now he is going to get even hotter and arrive even more flustered and unkempt than he already feels. People get in his way as he tries to negotiate his way up Neal Street. He tuts at them and shoulders past them.

Then he is there: a jolly Italian restaurant, lots of red and white, walls covered with black and white photos of dead Italian film stars eating spaghetti. The woman at the desk says, 'Have you made a reservation?' and he says, 'Yes, Pick, eight p.m.'

going 'Ah yes, your companion is already here.'

Owen clears his throat, touches his hair again, straightens his jacket, and follows the woman through the winding path between the tables until he says. 'Athere. In front of her.'

Owen says, 'Hi. Deanna?'

to And she immediately says, 'It's De-ahna. Not De-anna.'

ist a He says, 'Oh. Sorry.' Then he says, 'I'm Owen.'

'I guessed,' she says. She's smiling but Owen can't work out if she's facetious or not.

but 'Shall I sit down?' he asks.

She nods and rubs awkwardly at the tips of her elbows.

He realises he should have kissed her, or shaken hands with her, or d in all something like that, but she threw him off completely with her correcti read. the pronunciation of her name and now he feels as though he's fallen c a and tracks and can't get back on them. It has been at least ten seconds since he or Deanna said something and he sees Deanna staring at him, strang

'Are you OK,' she says, 'or ...?'

ckers Her eyes go to the door and he thinks that she is suggesting that they or should maybe cut the date short, that it has already gone so wrong, in a minute, that they should end it now. He sighs and lets his shoulders dro And then he does something quite out of character, because he feels so much like he has nothing left to lose.

e From a soft, open part of his psyche that he barely knew existed, he 'I'm really sorry. I'm a bit ... *nervous*.'

sees a She smiles encouragingly.

He says, 'In fact, I'm very nervous. Unbelievably nervous.'

Her face softens completely now and she says, 'Well, then, that mak of us.'

one And now Owen looks at her, properly, for the first time since he wal ig to into the restaurant and he sees a pleasant-looking woman, possibly not 'eady smooth-skinned as the woman in the photographs on the screen of his j eet and eyes possibly not as bright or quite as blue, jawline a little less sculpted it is her, recognisably her, and she is looking at him playfully, as though ls hung wanting him to say something else. His mind immediately empties and It's blanches but she laughs and it's not a laugh of derision or humiliation, he laugh of kindness, a laugh that says, 'Look at us, on a Tinder date, isn' nts?'

A waiter arrives to take an order for drinks.

Owen thinks of the money sitting in his bank account, the money he spends, and while Deanna peruses the wine list he looks at her and says 'Champagne?'

He sees immediately that he has hit a jackpot of some description, that Deanna is the type of woman to respond very positively to the suggestion of champagne. She opens her mouth to say something and he opens his mouth and finds himself saying, 'My treat.'

She smiles and says, 'Well, in that case then,' and closes her wine list.

They spend some time discussing what to eat and then Deanna looks at Owen and says, 'You know, you look better in real life than you do in online pics.'

Owen smiles, almost laughs, and says, 'Wow, thank you. That photo is probably the best photo I've ever seen of myself, so ...'

There's a short silence and Owen realises what he's supposed to do. He clears his throat and he says, 'You look much prettier, too.'

It's not entirely true; she doesn't. But she's certainly far from ugly. Her photos were not dishonest.

'Thank you,' she says.

'Your hair is a lovely colour.'

It is a lovely colour, a kind of brittle toffee shade, with blonder bits at the ends.

'Takes three hours in the salon,' she says, touching the tips. 'I'm naturally mousey.'

'Mice are good, too,' he says. And she tips her head back and laughs.

A waiter appears with their champagne and makes them feel suitably special as he arranges an ice bucket and chilled, misted glasses in front of them. He shows Owen the bottle and Owen knows that he is to nod, just and say, 'That's good,' even though he can't remember the last time he had champagne.

When the champagne is poured, they touch their glasses together and Deanna says, 'Cheers. Here's to Tinder sometimes getting it right.'

Owen blinks. Then he smiles. 'To Tinder, sometimes getting it right.'

He glances about himself, briefly. All around are couples. He wonders how many are on first dates. He wonders how many met on Tinder. He wonders how many are virgins. She sees him looking and says, 'Nice restaurant chosen.'

‘Thanks,’ he says. ‘It’s just a chain, but you know, Valentine’s night never beggars can’t be ...’

‘... choosers.’ She completes his sentence for him and they catch each other’s eyes and smile again.

‘So,’ she says, ‘how’s your day been?’

‘Oh, pretty boring really. Got up late. Mooched about. I’m just kind of enjoying my freedom for now.’

He explained his current work situation to Deanna during one of the online chats, veering away from the aspects that reflect badly on him and playing up the aspects that made her say, *Oh honestly, you can’t say anything about these days, can you?*

‘I don’t blame you,’ says Deanna, now. ‘That’s exactly what I’d be in your position. I am so tightly strapped to the treadmill that it’s not even funny. Up at six every day, on the bus with Sam to breakfast club – he usually the first one there, poor soul – another bus to the Tube station, by eight thirty, eight hours of utter tedium, Tube, bus, collect Sam from school club, bus home, cook dinner, homework, housework, bed. Every single day. I would give anything for a break. For a chance to jump off the treadmill for a while. See what else life might be able to offer me. I mean, I know it’s shitty that your employers have let you go without a fight, but wow, just some time to breathe, some time to be yourself.’

Owen says, ‘What about your son’s father? Does he never help out?’

‘He’s dead,’ she says, her voice catching.

Owen gulps. Not the feckless undeserving bastard he’d assumed but a man. ‘I’m really sorry,’ he says. ‘Really, really sorry.’

‘Yeah, well, you know. It’s been way longer that he’s been dead than I knew him. We were only together for a couple of years. He died nine years ago. It’s a strange statistic. Hard to know how to feel about it really. And what about you? Have you ever been married? Anything like that?’

He shakes his head. ‘No,’ he says. ‘Nothing like that.’

She smiles at him, knowingly, as though she sees him and his loneliness and his desperation but is not put off by it. As though she has met someone like him before.

Their food arrives: tagliatelle al ragù for Owen, a seafood risotto for Deanna.

‘Well, I’m having a really nice time,’ she says.

t, Owen pauses, his fork halfway to his mouth. He puts down the fork
ch looks at Deanna, and with a hint of wonder in his voice, he says, 'Yes.
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Owen pauses, his fork halfway to his mouth. He puts down the fork and he looks at Deanna, and with a hint of wonder in his voice, he says, 'Yes. Me too.'

On the Tube on the way home, Owen feels a plume of pleasure rising through his physiology; he pictures it as pink ink blooming over wet cartridge paper. He is being reconstituted somehow, and all because a nice, slightly overweight lady from Colindale talked to him as though he was a human being for an evening.

He's a little drunk too, which is adding to his sense of well-being. Deanna, it transpired, was a fast drinker, faster than him, and he'd had to race to catch up with her. The champagne had disappeared in under forty minutes, after which they'd shared a bottle of wine and when that had gone, before the desserts arrived, they'd each ordered a cocktail. Owen can't remember what his was called, but it had tequila in it and tasted like smoke.

He's drunk enough and happy enough not to feel other people's eyes on him on the strip-lit Tube carriage. He doesn't feel jealous of the loved-up couples clutching single red roses swarming the streets. He doesn't feel when people walk across him or fail to let him through. He doesn't care if they can see him or not, because, for a full three hours this evening, he has been seen.

Owen replays the night over and over in his mind's eye: the easy exchanges, the kind look in Deanna's eye, the way she kept touching him, her nodding encouragingly at him when he was talking about himself, the slowness at the end of the night, as though she was trying to delay its finish.

As he climbs the hill back to his house the air is icy sharp. A couple goes by, holding hands, the woman clutching a posy of red flowers. They sip wine. Owen almost says something to them, something like 'Happy Valentine's, fellow lovers!' but thinks better of it and stops himself with a second to spare.

Owen stifles a laugh and turns left. He passes a man walking a small dog. The man says, 'Good evening,' making Owen jump slightly.

'Oh,' he manages to toss over his shoulder, just a beat too slow, 'even though I've walked past this man and his dog a hundred times over the years, this is the first time he's ever said hello. Owen smiles to himself.

Around the next corner he sees a woman. She has hair the colour of copper and wears a brown coat that ties up at the waist. She's looking at her phone. As he gets closer, he can see that she's pretty, very, very pretty. Probably pretty enough to be a model. Owen's defences automatically go up, as they always do when he is confronted with extreme female beauty. He aver- through gaze and veers across the pavement, trying to clear her a path, but she's busy looking at her phone to notice and wanders straight towards him. He tries to make room for her by moving the other way, but she moves too suddenly they are standing face-to-face only a foot or so apart and she looks up from her phone and straight at him and he sees it there, utter, utter f- eanna, 'Oh,' she says.

Owen moves again so she can pass. Yet again she moves in the same direction. He sees her eyes fall to her phone, the edge of her thumb touching the emergency icon on her screen.

He gestures her past with his arms and says, with some indignation, 'Maybe you could try not looking at your phone for five minutes. You find it easier not to walk into people.' He turns and starts to walk away then:

'Fuck you, creep.'

He stops. 'What?'

'I said, *Fuck you, creep.*'

He rocks slightly.

He closes his eyes and draws in his breath. He pictures himself turning around, now, turning and running at her and pushing her over. He exhales, counting three. He carries on walking.

'Bitch,' he calls out over his shoulder as he walks.

He hears her call something out to him, the fading urgent echo of her voice against the paving stones, the ringing in his ears of adrenaline pumping through his system; he feels the wine in his stomach curdle slightly and his legs turn to jelly. He stops for a moment and holds a wall to steady himself. His head spins and for a moment he thinks he might be about to throw

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Dear Owen, I really enjoyed myself tonight. Thank you for being such good company and making me feel good about myself for the first time in a very long time. I hope you sleep well and I look forward to seeing you next week. My treat this time! Deanna x.

All the rage and nervous energy leaves his body immediately.

Smiling, he turns the last corner of the block and arrives outside his house. The lights are all off and the moon shines blue off the lead on the roof. He stops to peer through the hole carved into the wooden gate of the building site next door where he sees two amber dots glowing in the dark. A fox, staring at him.

‘Hello, foxy,’ he says into the darkness. ‘Hello, beautiful!’

He glances across the street. There is a light still shining in one of the windows. He sees the suggestion of movement behind it. He hears raised voices coming from somewhere out of sight. Then he sees a person standing outside the house: tall, slender, in a black hoodie, tips of angular elbows protruding from their sides like wings. The person stands for just a moment, watching the light in the window, just as he does. Then the person turns and in profile he can see it is a young girl, her hands stuffed into the pockets of a hoodie, her jaw set hard.

As he watches her, she turns and looks at him.

I know you, he thinks, *I know you.*

After



Cate spots it late in the day, a small piece in a copy of *The Times* she picked up for free in the supermarket the day before. She often picks up the complimentary paper but rarely reads it, and she only reads it today because she's looking for an article advertised on the front page about how to have sex in your fifties.

She turns the pages quickly but her eye is caught first by the word 'Camden' halfway down page eight.

The headline says: 'Camden schoolgirl still missing. Police question locals'.

And there, beneath the headline, is a photo of a young girl with exquisitely symmetrical features, an enigmatic smile, large hoop earrings, dark curls held back on one side in a single tight braid, pale green eyes. Cate does not immediately recognise her. But then she reads on and her eye is drawn to the girl in the photograph and then she knows it is her.

Camden schoolgirl Saffyre Maddox, 17, has not been seen since she left home on the evening of 14 February to visit a friend in Hampstead. Saffyre, who lives with her uncle, Aaron Maddox, 27, Alfred Road NW3, is studying for A-Levels at Havelock School, NW3. The school describe her as a good student and a sociable member of the school community. According to Aaron Maddox, she left home at roughly eleven o'clock on the night of her disappearance wearing dark jogging bottoms, a black hoodie and white trainers.

Cate gasps and looks around her as though there might be someone here to share this with. The children are both off school for half-term but neither is in, and Roan is at work.

She picks up her phone, photographs the story and before she's had chance to think about what she's doing, has WhatsApped it to Roan.

For obvious reasons, Saffyre's name has not been mentioned by either of them, but there's no reason why Cate shouldn't still recognise it when she sees it printed in a national newspaper.

The tick remains grey. Roan always has his phone in flight mode when he's with patients. That was one of the (many) things that had fanned the flames of her madness the year before: that he always forgot to take it out of flight mode afterwards, would walk around completely uncontactable, until the evening. She'd never been able to work out how he could go around with a dead phone without automatically feeling the need to turn it back on.

She reads through the article again.

Six days ago. Valentine's night. The night she and Roan walked into Hampstead and had champagne in a murky, fire-crackly pub and then had a red beef curry at a Thai restaurant on the way home, the night they'd really well and found lots to talk about and laugh about and not been like those long-married couples trying to hold it together in public on Valentine's night, but like a real, compatible, happy couple.

And meanwhile Saffyre had been somewhere between Swiss Cottage and Hampstead wearing not enough clothes for what was a very cold night. Maybe they'd walked past her? Maybe they'd even seen something? Was it possible?

She shakes the thought from her head. Of course it wasn't possible. There would have been thousands of people between Swiss Cottage and Hampstead on Valentine's night, thousands of places she could have been. And maybe Saffyre hadn't been going to Hampstead at all, had just said that to cover her tracks, had left her home and walked in totally the opposite direction, but she's not a fool, and her uncle none the wiser.

She pulls open her laptop and googles 'Saffyre Maddox'.

The papers all run a story about her disappearance, they all use the same photograph of her. None of them has any extra detail.

At around 2 p.m. she gets a reply from Roan.

It says, simply: *Oh my God.*

She replies: *I know.*

But the ticks remain grey.

He's gone already.

a The card that arrived on Valentine's Day for Roan still sits in the kitch
er of drawer in its ripped envelope. Cate had tucked it firmly away between
she of tea towels, hidden from prying teenage fingers. She had categoricall
he looked at it after their lovely Valentine's night in Hampstead, and then
ren the following day either. Then it had been the weekend and now it was
he term and, strange as it sounds, she has stopped thinking about the card.
out of bears no relationship to the harmonious atmosphere in their home, to th
long exchanges between them, the sex they've had twice since then, both tim
round initiated by her. The card has become metaphorical dust, of no consequ
k on. or interest to her.

But now.

She claps her hands to her ears as something passes through her tho
high-speed train of a notion. The feeling takes her back to last year, to
shared her whole life had felt like this, when every minute of every day had b
got on spent potholing through doubt and paranoia and distrust. She had not b
ke one happy in that place and she does not want to go back there. She is happ
right here, in this rose-hued world of Valentine's cards and snatched h

She decides to strip the beds. Cate is not usually the type of person t
e and domestic drudgery to take her mind off things, but now she sweeps thr
the three bedrooms of the flat, trying to put as much space between her
as it and the drawer in the kitchen as possible.

In Georgia's room she pulls off the crystal-white sheets that her dau
There insists upon; long gone are the days of pink and lilac fairies. White she
instead white lamps, white sheepskin rug. When Georgia was younger, thirtee
aybe fourteen, Cate would find it virtually impossible not to rifle though her
er her daughter's things when she was in her bedroom, desperate for clues to
er person she was turning into. Now she has no need; Georgia shows hers
Cate crystal clear, every minute of every day. She hides nothing.

Cate moves efficiently around her bed, balls the sheets together and
ame them on the floor in the hallway. Then she goes to Josh's room.

Josh is a tidy boy; he always has been. She pulls the blue chambray
from his bed, then puts on a fresh green sheet. His laptop is tucked
underneath his bed, plugged in and charging. She is half tempted to op
to see what her mysterious son does when he's alone in here, but for so
reason her son's privacy seems more sacred, more fragile than her dau
She doesn't ponder for too long on why she might feel like this, she ju

en Then she goes to her bedroom, her marital quarters, where, for the last
a pile days at least, marital things have been happening. She snatches up the
ly not bedding and creates another ball, adds it to the pile in the hallway, stre
not pale blue sheet over their mattress, puffs up the duvet inside a fresh co
; half- The curtains in here are still drawn; at this time of the year it someti
. It seems futile to open the curtains in a room which was dark when you a
ne soft and will be dark once more when you return.

nes She pulls them apart and is startled by the reminder of the world bey
ience There is her street, there is the man with the white dog, there is the bin
corner that only gets emptied once a fortnight when its contents are spi
on to the street, there is a Sainsbury's delivery van, an Amazon deliver
ights, there is the house across the street with the armchair on the driveway a
when She stops. She remembers. Remembers standing right here. It was n
een time. There was something ...What was it? When?

een She shakes her head slightly, trying to locate the source of the half-f
y here, memory.

ugs. Was it that night? Was it Valentine's night? Drawing the curtains, re
o use herself for the possibility of sex with Roan, a figure, out there? Moven
ough Muted voices. A sense of being under surveillance? Or was she imagin
self that?

ghter She had not been sober, after all. There had been champagne, follow
ets, beer, followed by more beer in the Thai restaurant. No, she had not bee
sober, not at all.

n, She turns, as if someone has just called her name.

But they haven't of course; she is alone.

the It's the card in the kitchen drawer calling her. The card telling her th
self to there is something she's not seeing, that maybe she's not mad or bad o
wrong.

leaves Before she can check herself or think herself down, she strides back
the kitchen, pulls open the drawer, flips through the tea towels and pul
sheets out.

Her hands shake as she takes the card from the envelope.

en it, The card has a pink bird of some description on the front, a watercol
ome rather insipid. Inside, in a very childish script, are the words:
ghter's.

st does. *Dear Roan*

Thank You for being my therapist.

ast five *Please be my Valntine.*

grey *Love*

tches a *Molly*

ver. xxx

mes

woke She shuts the card and collapses against the edge of the kitchen counter.
A card from a child.

ond. Molly.

on the Little Molly who still writes phonetically.

illing Little Molly who wants a bald fifty-year-old man to be her Valentine.

y van, Little Molly who knows his home address.

nd ... She stuffs the card back into the envelope and tucks it inside the tea
ight- again, her heart racing lightly.

ormed A couple of hours later Georgia appears, with Tilly.

adyingfor ages.’
ent. ‘Oh,’ says Cate, looking up from her work. ‘Hello, Tilly. Haven’t seen you for ages.’

ing It’s the first time Tilly’s been here since the night back in January when
she claimed to have been sexually accosted.

‘How are you?’ asks Cate.

ved by ‘Good,’ says Tilly, eyeing her own feet awkwardly. ‘I’m good.’

en Georgia is plundering the drawers and cupboards for food. She is standing
apparently, having not eaten breakfast and only having had ‘like, a few
nuggets’ for lunch. She finds some sweet and salty popcorn and pours
and Tilly each a large glass of juice, then they disappear.

iat ‘Thanks for changing my bedding!’ Cate hears her daughter call back
r down the hallway.

‘You’re welcome!’ she calls back.

into Cate sits down again and tries to focus on her work but finds there are
ls it too many other things needing to be put in order in her head: the card from
child (whose handwriting is that on the envelope? Who bought and licked
stamp? Who put it in a letterbox?); the lingering strangeness of Tilly lying
lour, about being accosted that night (something must have instigated it, surely
the disappearance of Saffyre Maddox (somewhere between her own home
and here); the figure outside the window on Valentine’s night (or was it
figment of her drunken imagination?); the weird guy across the road (e

time she sees him, he gives her an odd look that chills her to the bone); increasing number of daylight sexual assaults in the vicinity.

But they refuse to be put into any sort of order; they refuse to line up and make sense of themselves.

Tilly leaves a couple of hours later.

r. Georgia appears in the kitchen.

‘How’s Tilly?’ asks Cate.

‘She’s all right.’

‘Did you ever ... Has she ever explained? About that night?’

e. ‘Kind of. Not really.’

‘Meaning?’

towels ‘Meaning, I think something did happen. But it wasn’t what she said was.’

‘So, something like what?’

‘Don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me.’

‘en you ‘What do you think it might have been?’

‘Don’t know.’

hen ‘But—’

‘Really, really don’t know, OK? You’ll have to ask her yourself.’

‘I—’

‘Look, Tilly’s just weird, all right. She’s weird. Whatever it was, it’s not surprising, probably something really boring.’ She pauses for a second, then looks

at Cate curiously. ‘If she says anything, I’ll tell you. OK?’

herself ‘OK,’ says Cate. ‘Thank you.’

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‘Meaning, I think something did happen. But it wasn’t what she said it was.’

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‘Don’t know. She wouldn’t tell me.’

‘What do you think it might have been?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘But—’

‘Really, really don’t know, OK? You’ll have to ask her yourself.’

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‘Look, Tilly’s just weird, all right. She’s weird. Whatever it was, it was probably something really boring.’ She pauses for a second, then looks at Cate curiously. ‘If she says anything, I’ll tell you. OK?’

‘OK,’ says Cate. ‘Thank you.’

SAFFYRE

Everyone needs a hobby, don't they?

Well, for pretty much the whole of last year, my hobby was watching Roan.

I didn't have anything else to do. I had no real friends. No boyfriend. I'd do my homework late, when I was in bed. I was never mentally ready to go to bed before eleven o'clock, never in the right headspace. I'm a night owl. So after school I'd wander across to the Portman Centre most days, see what Roan was up to. The thing with the young woman fizzled out pretty quickly. I liked her a lot, because she was a smoker so spent a lot of time outdoors. I thought she was a secretary. She wore a lanyard but looked too young to be a secretary or a clinician. But I never saw her and Roan share a cigarette again; I didn't see them swan off for drinks or whatever. I think maybe she went off him after their little rendezvous that first evening. Maybe she realised she was too young for him. Or maybe he was inappropriate in some way.

And that's the weird thing, because all those months and years I spent watching Roan as a patient I never got anything sexual off him, not ever. He was not quite avuncular, not fatherly, but sort of matey. Like one of those teachers at school that you feel you can be yourself with, yet you still respect them.

But outside of that room with its halogens and its nubby chairs, I saw another side of him. He didn't seem to be able to have a conversation with another woman without some kind of physical contact with them: hugs, squeezed arms, doors held open but not leaving enough room for the woman to get through without pressing against him, shared umbrellas, linked arms

His eyes were always on a woman. If he couldn't find a woman to look at, he looked lost.

The days started getting longer and at some point it was still light when I came after school and I realised I couldn't hide in the trees in broad daylight. I needed to be more mobile, to keep moving. So I started to wait across the street, pretending to look at my phone, and then I'd follow him wherever he went. And it was surprising how infrequently he went straight home. He often joined people for drinks at the scruffy pub on the corner of Colles Crescent, or for coffee at the place opposite the Tube station.

I had my hair braided about this time. The braids were pale pink. It wasn't meant as a disguise, per se, but he hadn't seen me for a while; I'd grown up and my hair was different. I followed him into the pub one night last summer. We'd had a non-uniform day at school and I wore a crop top, baggy bottoms, a canvas jacket, all in dark colours, my hair under a baseball cap. I ordered a lager and took it out into the beer garden. The football was showing on a big screen. There were loads of guys out there. Only two other women apart from me. I sat under a canvas canopy on a metal chair, with my back mostly towards him.

He was with a woman and two men. It was loud in the garden, men cheering at the football, the animal sound of the crowd pumping out through two huge speakers. I couldn't hear what they were saying.

The woman with them was about thirty. She had soft red hair tied in a long plait that sat over her shoulder. She wore no make-up and smiled at first. At first the conversation was between all four members of the group, but then the other two guys started watching the football more seriously, turning their backs slightly to Roan and the girl, leaving them to talk between themselves.

I played with my phone on my lap, turning every now and then to watch Roan and the woman. They were engrossed. I could have stood square in front of them and blown a raspberry and they wouldn't have noticed. I took a picture of the two of them. I turned away again.

The football finished and the volume in the beer garden went down. I heard one of the guys with Roan offer to go to the bar for more drinks. There was a pause; then Roan said to the girl, 'Want another drink? Or we could maybe go on somewhere else?'

'I don't mind,' said the girl. 'Whatever you want to do?'

'I dunno,' said Roan. 'I mean, we could wander up the road a bit maybe and grab something to eat?'

at, he 'Yeah,' said the girl. 'Yeah. Why not?'

I drained my lemonade superfast. I waited till they'd passed by me and then I followed them a few steps behind. They turned left and wandered aimlessly for a moment, peering at menus in restaurant windows. They settled on a Chinese with shiny ducks hanging in the window.

I sat at a bus stop across the road. They sat at a window table. He was over her. He cupped her face with his hand. He stroked her plait. He stared and stared at her. He was creepy as fuck. But she seemed to like it. She took mouthfuls of food from him like a baby. She kept the eye contact. She wasn't touching his hand across the table. She threw her head back with laughter.

They were in there for an hour. Then the bill came and I saw him in the process of paying. I thought, That's nice, you, with a family at home, buying noon for some girl young enough to be your daughter. I thought, You total want a lemonade. He walked her to the Tube station afterwards. They did a sort of handshake; sports squeezing thing, a quick hug, no kissing, too close to home I guess, too close to work.

I saw his face as he turned back to cross the road, the sly little smile on his face. I thought of his skinny blonde wife back at their posh Hampstead probably putting some freshly cooked meal in the freezer because her rough husband had eaten his dinner out tonight. I wondered what he'd told her about *a bite with colleagues*.

I watched him cross the Finchley Road, sprinting through a break in the traffic when the red man was up. He took his phone out at the other side and without doubt texting his skinny wife: *On my way home now!*

It was starting to get dark; the sky was a kind of chalky lilac and cars started to put on their headlights. I was hungry and I knew Aaron had caught something good for dinner. Part of me just wanted to go home, get rid of my heavy rucksack of books, eat something good in front of the TV. Another part of me wanted to find out what Roan Fours looked like walking into his house after taking a woman out for dinner.

I waited for the red man to turn green; then I sprinted across the road. I was caught up with him just as he turned the corner to the stone steps up to the steep hill. He'd put his earphones in now. I could hear him humming very quietly under his breath. He walked fast and I was out of breath by the time we got to his street. I didn't realise how fit he was.

Then he was outside his house, looking for his keys, opening the door and closing it behind him. He had a certain swagger to his entrance, like he

lord of the manor.

nd I was standing outside a kind of empty building plot; it had a big wooden gate across it and high brick walls overhung with flowering foliage. I pushed through a hole in the gate and saw a huge piece of empty land covered with flowers and rubble; it didn't look quite real, like a secret park or fairyland. I could see the foundations where a big house had been. The land must have been covered at least an acre, maybe even more. Above it the sky had turned a pale yellow and gold. There was a notice taped to the gate. Apparently they were going to build some flats here. The notice was dated three years ago. I hoped that no one would ever build flats here, that it would just stay like this, hidden away, growing layers and layers, getting denser and denser.

I saw a movement to one side. Something fleeting and shiny. A fox. It stopped for a moment and stared at me. Right at me.

My stomach rumbled. I hitched my schoolbag up on my shoulder and headed home.

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One morning, a few days after Valentine's night, Owen's doorbell ring waits for Tessie to answer it but she appears to be out.

After the second ring, he goes to the intercom and says hello.

A female voice responds. 'Hello. Is this Owen Pick?'

'Yes.'

'Good morning, I'm Detective Inspector Angela Currie. We're making door-to-door inquiries about a missing person. Could I ask you to spare a minute to answer a few questions?'

'Erm ...' He peers at himself quickly in the mirror by the front door. He hasn't shaved for three days and his hair is in dire need of a wash. He looks dreadful. 'Yes, sorry, sure. Come in.'

Angela Currie is a heavy-set young woman, short and broad, with disproportionately small feet. She has what looks like naturally blonde hair braided across her hairline and tucked into a bun at the back. She has a pale face and is wearing a flick of black eyeliner across each eyelid.

Behind her is an equally young man, introduced as PC Rodrigues.

'Could we come in?'

'Er ...' Owen looks behind him at the open door to Tessie's flat. How can he explain that there is nowhere to sit in his own home as his aunt won't let him sit in her living room? 'Is it OK if we talk out here?' he says.

He is aware that this makes it sound as if he is trying to hide something.

'It's my aunt's flat,' he explains. 'She's a bit funny about letting people in.'

DI Currie tips her chin to look into the space visible through the crack in the apartment door. 'No problem,' she says.

They settle themselves on the small bench next to the stairs leading to two upper-floor flats. It wobbles precariously, not really designed for such

on but for resting parcels and such on. DI Currie has to sit with her head slightly forward to avoid the mail baskets nailed to the wall above.

‘So,’ she begins, ‘we’re investigating the disappearance of a local girl. I wonder if I could show you some photographs?’

Blood rushes to Owen’s head. He doesn’t know why. He nods and then covers the hot parts of his face with his fingers.

DI Currie pulls a printout from an envelope and passes it to him.

It’s a photo of a pretty girl, mixed race by the looks of it, though hard to ascertain precisely her ancestry. She’s wearing large hoop earrings and her hair is worn in a similar style to DI Currie’s, a kind of tight plait close to the skull, holding it to one side. She’s wearing what looks like a school uniform and is smiling.

He passes the sheet back to the detective and awaits another question.

‘Have you ever seen this girl before?’

‘No,’ he says, his hand moving from his face to the back of his neck, which he can feel growing blotchy and hot. ‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘Where were you on the night of February the fourteenth, Mr Pick?’ she starts to shrug; then DI Currie says, ‘It was Valentine’s night. That might make it easier to recall.’

He sucks in his breath, covers his mouth with his hand. Yes. He knows what he was doing on Valentine’s night.

‘Were you home? Or out in the local area? Might you have seen any other girls?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘No. I was out. I went for dinner. With a friend.’

‘Ah. OK. And what time did you get home? If you can remember?’

‘Eleven thirtyish. Maybe midnight.’

‘And how did you get home that night?’

‘I got the Tube. From Covent Garden to Finchley Road.’

‘And did you maybe see anything strange as you were walking back from the Tube station? Anything untoward?’

He draws his hand across his mouth and shakes his head. He thinks about the strange episode on the street, when that pretty girl had called him a bitch and he’d called her a bitch. It feels like the twisted remnant of a strange dream when he thinks about it now, as if it didn’t really happen. Every detail about that night now feels dreamlike, faded in parts like an old photograph.

‘No.’ He shakes his head slowly. ‘No. Nothing.’

He sounds like he’s lying, because in a way he is.

id bent 'And you said you live with your aunt? Is that ...' She looks at a list
clipboard. 'Tessa McDonald?'

irl. I He nods.
'And where is Ms McDonald?'

ries to 'I don't know. She's probably in the village. Shopping.'
'Great, well, we'll be back again, I'm sure, once we've built up a be
picture of the situation. In the meantime, maybe you could pass my car
d to your aunt when she gets home, ask her to give me a call if she can rem
l her anything about that night.' She peers up the staircase. 'Anyone else in,
to the you know?'

iform He shakes his head. 'No idea. You can ring on their doorbells, if you
She smiles, clicks her ballpoint pen shut, slides it into her pocket and
n. 'No. I'm sure that will be fine. Maybe I could leave some more of these
here?' She points a couple of printouts towards the mailboxes above the
, bench. 'And some more of my cards?'

'Yes,' he says, getting to his feet. 'Yes, of course.'

He 'Well,' she says, hitching her leather bag up higher on to her shoulder
ght 'thank you, Mr Pick, for your time. I really appreciate it. I'm just at the
of a line if you, or anyone else, remembers anything.'

ws 'You know,' he says, suddenly, his eyes feeling suddenly too big for
head as a buried memory bursts through the clouds, 'I did see something
'thing?' night. I saw someone. Out there.' He points through the front door to the
house opposite. 'Standing outside that house, in the dark, just sort of looking
in. I thought it was a man at first. And then they turned around and it was
girl.'

'A girl?'

'Well, at least I think so. It was hard to tell, because they had a hood'

: from His eyes drop to the page in his hand; he reads the description of what
missing girl was wearing just as DI Currie says, 'What sort of hood?'

back to 'Like, a hoodie? I think?'

. creep 'How tall was this girl?'

e 'It might not have been a girl. It might have been ... I wasn't sober.
thing some wine. Quite a lot of wine. I can't be sure.'

raph. 'This person, how tall? Roughly.'
'I genuinely can't remember.'
'And roughly what time was this?'
'Just as I got to my front door. Midnight. Ish. Maybe later.'

on a 'And it wasn't' – she taps the printout with her fingertip – 'it wasn't girl?'

'I really, really don't ... It was dark and, like I say, I'd had some wi really don't ...' He's started to talk very fast now. He's aware that he s panicked. He's wishing he hadn't said anything now about the strange tter the hoodie. The police would be gone now and he could be safely back d on to room.

ember 'Well, actually, that's very useful, thank you so much. I'm glad you do able to remember that for us. And if you don't mind, we'd like to be in again. Once we've had a chance to talk to people who live across the s

1 like?' The people across the street.

d says, The people who give him dirty looks whenever they pass.

e The skinny blonde woman with the annoying face.

ie Her thunder-thighed daughter.

The ridiculous father with the leggings, running up and down that hi the dark as though seeking oblivion.

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‘And it wasn’t’ – she taps the printout with her fingertip – ‘it wasn’t this girl?’

‘I really, really don’t ... It was dark and, like I say, I’d had some wine. I really don’t ...’ He’s started to talk very fast now. He’s aware that he sounds panicked. He’s wishing he hadn’t said anything now about the strange girl in the hoodie. The police would be gone now and he could be safely back in his room.

‘Well, actually, that’s very useful, thank you so much. I’m glad you were able to remember that for us. And if you don’t mind, we’d like to be in touch again. Once we’ve had a chance to talk to people who live across the street.’

The people across the street.

The people who give him dirty looks whenever they pass.

The skinny blonde woman with the annoying face.

Her thunder-thighed daughter.

The ridiculous father with the leggings, running up and down that hill in the dark as though seeking oblivion.

Cate has her bag on her shoulder and is opening her front door about to go to her borrowed room in St John's Wood to treat a patient when she just catches the sight of a small blonde woman dressed in black, accompanied by a man in a police uniform. She stops and stares at them for a moment. Immediately she knows that they are here to talk about Saffyre Maddox.

'Hi,' she says. 'Sorry. I was just on my way out.'

'That's OK. We can come back.'

'Oh,' she says, 'no. It's fine. I can spare a few minutes.'

'If you're sure?'

She shows them into the living room, freshly tidied, thank goodness the cushions all in a neat row.

'Nice flat,' says the woman.

'Oh,' says Cate. 'It's not mine. I mean, it's a rental. Just temporary.'

'Well, it's lovely. I love the high ceilings. DI Currie.' She extends a hand. 'And PC Rodrigues.'

'Can I get you anything?'

'No, we're fine. But thank you.'

They all sit down and DI Currie takes out a notepad and sheaf of paper.

'We're looking into the disappearance of a local schoolgirl.' She passes a sheet of paper to Cate who stares blankly at the familiar photograph of Saffyre Maddox.

'Ah,' she says. 'Yes. I saw this in the papers.'

'Good, then you know a little about the case?'

Cate nods. She waits for the DI to say something about Roan, about his connection to Saffyre Maddox, but is surprised when the DI says,

'Valentine's night. Can you remember where you were?'

‘Oh,’ she says. ‘Right. Yes. I was in Hampstead, having drinks and with my husband.’

‘And what time did you get home?’

‘Roughly eleven thirty.’

‘And did you see anything? Anyone? When you returned?’

Cate stops. She’s about to say something about the figure she glimpsed through the curtains. But something stops her. ‘Not that I can remember,’ she says.

‘Around midnight? Maybe?’

‘No.’ She shakes her head. ‘No. I was in bed by midnight.’

‘And your husband?’

‘My husband?’

‘Was he also in bed? At midnight?’

She can’t remember. She cannot remember. ‘Yes,’ Cate replies firmly. ‘I’m pretty sure he was.’ She looks at the time on her phone. ‘I’m really sorry,’ she says. ‘I’m going to have to go now. I have a patient in St John Wood in twenty minutes.’

‘Oh, a patient. Are you a doctor?’

‘No. I’m a physiotherapist.’

‘Oh. I’m so sorry,’ says DI Currie, getting to her feet. ‘Please don’t keep you another minute.’

They all leave together in a slightly awkward huddle. DI Currie and Rodrigues stand by the front door and examine the doorbells. ‘Anyone in?’ DI Currie asks.

‘Sorry, no idea.’ Cate smiles at them apologetically; then she says, ‘Goodnight,’ and turns and heads down the street, her heart racing painfully behind her ribs.

per.

Roan did have an affair once. It was in the very early days of their marriage when they were still very young and getting used to the fact of being married when none of their friends were.

Cate had kind of guessed it was happening. Roan had been pretty busy covering his steps. Condoms had started disappearing at a rate that was incommensurate with the amount of sex that they’d been having – still a lot back then, pre-babies. Cate had been responsible for picking up the condoms from the family-planning clinic so she was more aware than most women about how many condoms should be in the box.

dinner Roan had still been a student then, that had been part of the problem. Cate had graduated three years earlier and was working full-time at a rehab gym. There'd been a disconnect for a year or two; Cate was bringing in money, spending her days with people older than her, tired by ten o'clock. Roan was bringing in no money, spending his days with other students usually in the pub at 10 p.m.

er,' she He'd been having sex with another student. Her name was Marie; she was the same age as Cate and she had very long hair. Roan ended the affair but then refused to acknowledge that it was an affair, said it was just 'basic sex' – the moment Cate confronted him with her suspicions. Marie came to their flat an hour later and Cate ended up holding her on the pavement outside while she cried and rocked and wailed.

ly. When Cate went back indoors a moment later, she found one of Marie's long hairs on her cardigan. She pulled it off and stared at it for a moment before discarding it on the floor. Roan sat with his head hanging, his shoulder slumped between two pointed peaks of contrition, sniffing in some kind of approximation of tears.

 'Has she gone?' he said.

 She nodded and poured herself a glass of wine.

let us 'Are we over?'

 'Over?' she asked facetiously. 'We're married. What do you mean, over?'

PC 'I mean, is that the end of our marriage?'

else She remembers staring at Marie's solitary hair, no longer a part of Marie's long hair, but a foot and a half long, an S-shape on the carpet. S for sex. S for shame. S for slut. She remembers imagining Roan's fist around her hair in bed while he did 'basic sex'. She'd had to stifle a laugh. The whole thing was so pathetic.

ard 'I can't live without you. You know that, don't you? I can't live without you.'

riage, Then he'd started to cry, properly, contrite shoulder blades heaving and shoulders slumped down like pistons. The horror of it, she recalled now, the shock. For a moment she'd wondered if she even loved him, if she'd ever loved him.

id at 'I'd die without you,' he'd said as she passed him a tissue. 'I'd literally die.'

s quite a

most Roan had graduated a year later, quickly found his way to the Portman Institute, and had become a serious, grown-up man, widely respected, superb at his job. He'd even been able to crack a joke about Marie eventually, about her appearance.

, while with her red-rimmed eyes that evening, ending up in Cate's arms on the pavement. The fact they'd been able to joke about it had put a stake in the ground, a definitive sign that what had happened had been an aberration, an off-kilter thing, something unconnected to them and the couple they were to become and the parents they were to become, the life they would go on to build for themselves.

Nobody knew about it.

Cate hadn't even told her closest friends.

It was theirs and theirs alone.

So, she hadn't been totally mad to think the worst a year ago. She'd said much to Roan. 'It's not as if', she said, 'it hasn't happened before.'

He'd scoffed at that, as if it was somehow irrelevant. And she'd allowed him to scoff because she'd been so ashamed of her own actions.

But in retrospect she could see that he'd been clawing back the moral ground from her after twenty-five years, expunging his own memories of a crying, pathetic, desperate man in the scruffy flat in Kilburn claiming to kill himself if she left him. Maybe he'd known that Cate had questioned his own love for him in that moment. Maybe he'd been waiting for a moment to suggest that he too was capable of questioning his. Redressing the balance.

Theirs is a strong marriage. It has survived a lot. And still they are a couple. They find a way to feel good about each other.

But as Cate walks to her patient appointment that morning, a watery sheen playing on the flush on her skin, she thinks of DI Currie's very particular question, and she thinks again of the figure outside her window and she wonders again where Roan was and what he was doing at midnight on Valentine's night.

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with her red-rimmed eyes that evening, ending up in Cate's arms on the pavement. The fact they'd been able to joke about it had put a stake in its path, a definitive sign that what had happened had been an aberration, a one-off, something unconnected to them and the couple they were to become, the parents they were to become, the life they would go on to build for themselves.

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Theirs is a strong marriage. It has survived a lot. And still they are able to find a way to feel good about each other.

But as Cate walks to her patient appointment that morning, a watery sun playing on the flush on her skin, she thinks of DI Currie's very particular question, and she thinks again of the figure outside her window and she wonders again where Roan was and what he was doing at midnight on Valentine's night.

‘The police came this morning,’ Cate tells Roan that evening. ‘They were asking about Saffyre Maddox.’

Roan’s phone has been switched off all day and this is the first chance she’s had to discuss the day’s events with him.

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘What did they say?’

‘Said they were doing door-to-doors. But I didn’t see them going to anyone else’s door. Just ours. I suspect they’ll probably be on your trail soon, too.’

‘Oh,’ he says. ‘Yes. They came to see me this morning.’

He says this nonchalantly, as though the police coming to talk to him about a missing girl was a day-to-day occurrence. Cate almost gets the feeling that if she hadn’t asked him about it, he wouldn’t have brought it up.

‘What did they say?’

He shrugs, goes through the mail on the kitchen table, unties his work scarf. ‘They wanted an insight, I suppose. An idea of what sort of person she is, why she might have run away.’

‘Run away?’

‘Yes. Although I had to tell them that I haven’t seen her for months. I’m not sure really what sort of state she’ll have been in recently.’

‘But I thought she was missing. Not run away?’

He looks at her blankly. ‘Well, it’s kind of the same thing really, isn’t it? Until you know what’s happened.’

‘But a runaway would take a bag, surely?’

He shrugs. ‘Maybe she did?’

‘She did. But there was nothing in it. Look.’ Cate points firmly at the bag. ‘That’s exactly what it says. Surely that’s what they said to you?’

She’s being overzealous, but she’s feeling some kind of bizarre connection with the whole thing, as if it is oddly connected to her in some way.

‘They didn’t say, no. They gave me very little information at all. They were much keener to understand her condition while she was under my

‘And what was it? What was her condition?’

He looks at her again. ‘You know I can’t tell you that.’

‘But she’s not even your patient any more, surely you can—’

‘No,’ he snaps. ‘You know I can’t. I can’t believe you’re asking me.

ere And there he is again, that man from last year, the brittle, righteous man she’d nearly left because of all her misgivings about him. The man who made her feel mad and bad and toxic. But this time round it’s different isn’t her feeling that something’s amiss and hunting desperately for evidence to back up her feelings; this time something *is* amiss: a young girl is missing

ce ‘But was it something that could make her behave like this? I mean, don’t have to tell me exactly what it was, but do you think she was unsafe

She’s pushing him but she doesn’t care.

He puts his hands palm down on the kitchen table, raises his eyes to anyone and says, ‘I signed her off because she was doing well. She’d stopped too.’ harmful patterns of behaviour. Beyond that I have no idea. I don’t know what was happening in her life before she disappeared.’

n about ‘You didn’t see her again?’

g that He sighs, audibly, for her benefit, so she can see how far she is pushing him. ‘No. I didn’t see her again.’

‘So, what’s your theory? What do you think’s happened to her?’

ollen ‘I have absolutely no idea. She’s seventeen. Rocky upbringing. Burden on she trauma. Who knows?’

He sounds as if he finds the whole concept of Saffyre’s disappearance bothersome in some way. He sounds almost glib.

So She looks at him and says, ‘You sound like you don’t care.’

He rolls his eyes. ‘Of course I care.’

‘But you don’t sound like you do.’

’t it? ‘My professional duty of care is one thing and Saffyre no longer comes under that. But of course I care about her and her outcome. Of course I care that she’s disappeared. I just don’t really see what I can do about it.’

e flyer. Cate pauses. She collects two used mugs from the table and slowly takes them to the sink. She rests her hands on the edge of the counter and stands of the window. ‘They asked what we were doing at midnight that night plicity says. ‘You know, Valentine’s.’

He doesn’t respond.

ey 'I said we were in bed.'
/ care.' 'Well, we were, weren't we?'
'Well, *I* was. You were ... I don't know. I lay there for quite some ti
waiting for you to come. And when you did, I asked you what you'd b
doing and you said you hadn't been doing anything and then we had se
' 'And?'
man 'Well, what had you been doing?'
o'd And there it is. A question too far. Immediately they are back in the
; this place where they'd spent all those hellish weeks last year.
idence 'Cate,' he says, in that tone of voice she'd got so used to back then,
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‘I said we were in bed.’

‘Well, we were, weren’t we?’

‘Well, *I* was. You were ... I don’t know. I lay there for quite some time waiting for you to come. And when you did, I asked you what you’d been doing and you said you hadn’t been doing anything and then we had sex.’

‘And?’

‘Well, what had you been doing?’

And there it is. A question too far. Immediately they are back in the same place where they’d spent all those hellish weeks last year.

‘Cate,’ he says, in that tone of voice she’d got so used to back then, that patient, do-I-really-have-to-put-up-with-this-nonsense tone of voice, ‘what on earth are you talking about?’

She unpeels her fingers from the kitchen counter and turns again, puts a smile on her face. She doesn’t want to go there.

‘Nothing,’ she says lightly. ‘Absolutely nothing.’

SAFFYRE

I watched Roan Fours's adulterous affair with the girl with the red hair over the summer months.

Her name was Alicia. I knew that from overhearing him calling to her across the car park at the clinic. They went to the scruffy pub on the corner quite a lot. They'd press themselves into the tightest corners of the beer garden and talk like they were gonna die of each other. They looked quite good together, despite the age gap. A better match than him and his wife in some ways. His wife looked like life had got to her, whereas Roan had that box-fresh look about him; he never looked tired or worn down, always looked like he'd just had a shower, just had a holiday, was ready to get up and go. He had a glow. I don't know how old he was, but around fifty. Alicia was much younger, but somehow they matched.

I did some googling and found a junior psychotherapist at the Portmarnock called Alicia Mathers. There was a biography for her on the website. She had a degree and a masters in psychology from UCL and a PhD. Clever girl. I followed Alicia home one night after one of their early-doors dates (they rarely said goodbye to each other later than about eight, nine o'clock). She lived in a flat in a small block off Willesden Lane. Kind of nondescript. I had a light go on on the fourth floor after she got home. So that was where she lived, then. Useful to know. I took some photos and I found my way home.

Of course, Granddad and Aaron were getting a bit worried about the amount of time I was spending away from home. I just said vague things. I'm seventeen now, I'm nearly an adult, give me some space. I could tell Aaron was particularly worried about me. He even said at one point, 'You

seem anxious, Saff, maybe I should get in touch with Dr Fours?’ (Aaron loved Roan, was virtually reverential towards him. If Aaron had had a he’d have doffed it, that sort of thing.)

I said, ‘Don’t be stupid. What for?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘maybe you’re stressed about your exams? Is there’s something else going on in your life. I mean, is there a ... like a

I laughed. There’d never been a boy and I couldn’t imagine for a moment there ever would be. That part of me had shrivelled and died when Har John did what he did to me when I was ten years old. I could look at a and see nice eyes, or a good face, or even a fit body, but that never translated to feelings. I never *wanted* them or their attention. I said, ‘No, there’s not I’m just walking a lot. Clearing my head. You know.’

Sometimes if I had a free period during the day I might come down and unfurl look at Roan’s wife. I felt so bad for her. There she was in her Fat Face and her flowery tops, trundling about the place, obviously buying stuff, er cook for her family, fluffing out duvets, filling in forms, clearing out the orner fridge, wiping down floors, all that stuff I imagine middle-class housewives r do. And for what? For her husband to walk through the door one day and uite ‘I’ve met someone. She’s younger than you and prettier and I want to have fe, in sex with her whenever I like.’

this And then what? What happens to a woman like that with a pretend j children just about to leave home? Where would Cate Fours end up? I honestly really ached for her. I truly did. It’s horrible when you know I’d say something that someone else doesn’t know; it makes you feel somehow responsible for their predicament.

an Then, towards the end of that summer, the day after I got my GCSE he had in fact (I got six A’s and three A*’s, in case you were wondering), a stuff. I thing happened.

ey It was late on a Friday night; I’d been at my friend Jasmin’s for a talk She and to listen to music. She was getting ready to go out to a club or something. I saw I didn’t want to go. Not my scene, not my thing. But I like watching my she friends get ready, I like listening to music, I like chicken tikka and parathome. like Jasmin, so you know, I hung out for a while.

It was about nine o’clock when I left Jasmin’s. The sky was darkening like: it was still warm, so I decided to walk home via Roan’s house. I wasn’t ell intending to hang around, just pass by, take a look, carry on home. It was You

on such a part of my make-up by this point, I was like a dog or a pigeon: i
cap, like a homing thing.

I came from the other direction because of being at Jasmin's, past th
of the building site that backs on to another road. Even before I got to t
Maybe site, I could smell it, the sickly-strong smell of weed. I stuck my head t
a boy?' a gap in the foliage and peered around the plot. Couldn't see anything.
oment but then I saw the glow of a phone and the burning red tip of a fat zoot
rison a face, a boy's face. He was alone. He looked young. The red tip grew
boy and brighter as he inhaled. The light of the phone died when he switch
olated off. And then I saw him turn and look behind him. I heard him make a
to boy. under his breath and saw him put his hand into his pocket. He brought
something out of his pocket and then turned again, making the same no

and And then there he was: the fox. He stopped for a moment and just st
e jeans the boy. I thought he would just run away eventually, like every fox I'
ff to met on the street always did. But this fox did not. This fox started to cr
ie forward, very slowly, an inch at a time, his head down, his shoulders b
wives He looked behind himself every few seconds. But eventually he was si
nd say, side with the boy. I heard the boy say, 'Good evening, sir,' to the fox a
ave saw him hand the fox something to eat. The fox took it a few feet from
ob and ground. The boy held out another piece of food, between his finger and
thumb. The fox came back and took it gently.

Then, crazily, the boy touched the fox's head and the fox let him.

v My jaw fell open. I had never seen such a thing in my life. I took a p
boy and fox, side by side. I took it just as the fox turned to look up at t
results Almost like a faithful dog looking at his master.

range The boy finished smoking his zoot and ground it out at his feet. The
heard a sound from somewhere far off and scampered away from him.
seaway the boy get to his feet, pick up a rucksack, wipe down his trouser legs
ething. backside with his hand. I turned away sharply so he wouldn't see me. I
y out my phone and pretended like I was just standing about looking at
atha, I SnapChat and then he peered out of the foliage by the corner, climbed
the top of the wall and jumped down on to the pavement. He turned the
ng but corner and I saw him saunter towards Roan's house and it was only the
t I clocked who it was: it was Roan's boy. Old gangly legs.

was And I thought: Every family has its black sheep, its shady character.
that one in my family, that's without a doubt. Now it looked like I'd fo

it was the shady one in Roan's family. Who was this young boy picking up h
from? Why was he smoking it all alone on a building site? And how w
e side hanging out with a fox? What kind of Dr Dolittle weirdness was that?
the I zoomed in on that photo when I got home. I loved it. The boy had
throughface, like his dad's but not quite formed. In the dark, colourless shadow
at first, the photograph with his harsh haircut, his raw, over-developed features
. I saw earnest expression, he looked almost Victorian. And then I zoomed in
bigger fox, its eyes fixed on the boy, the light from the street just glinting off
ed it white whisker. So beautiful. So calm. It was a photo that could have w
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I saved it into my favourites.

oise. Then I put down my phone, closed my laptop and, while Jasmin hea
ared at into town with her boobs popping out of her Boohoo top and a hip flas
d ever vodka in her tiny bag, while Roan did whatever Roan did with that bea
leep pre-Raphaelite girl with the PhD after work on a Friday, while his son
ack. his room stoned and with his pockets full of meat, I sat on my bed and
de by opened a book.

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the shady one in Roan's family. Who was this young boy picking up his draw from? Why was he smoking it all alone on a building site? And how was he hanging out with a fox? What kind of Dr Dolittle weirdness was that?

I zoomed in on that photo when I got home. I loved it. The boy had a good face, like his dad's but not quite formed. In the dark, colourless shadows of the photograph with his harsh haircut, his raw, over-developed features, his earnest expression, he looked almost Victorian. And then I zoomed in on the fox, its eyes fixed on the boy, the light from the street just glinting off one white whisker. So beautiful. So calm. It was a photo that could have won a prize in a competition.

I saved it into my favourites.

Then I put down my phone, closed my laptop and, while Jasmin headed into town with her boobs popping out of her Boohoo top and a hip flask of vodka in her tiny bag, while Roan did whatever Roan did with that beautiful pre-Raphaelite girl with the PhD after work on a Friday, while his son sat in his room stoned and with his pockets full of meat, I sat on my bed and opened a book.

The following morning Cate's road is cordoned off. Two squad cars are parked diagonally across the street, their blue lights slowly revolving, creating patterns across the walls of Cate's bedroom. There's an unmarked van in the middle of the road and two uniformed policemen standing by the ribbon telling people to go the other way. Across the road curtains are twitching, people are peering through front doors in their dressing gowns.

Georgia appears behind Cate and says, 'What the hell is going on?'

'I have no idea. I assume it must be something to do with that girl. S Maddox.'

'Oh my God.' Georgia claps her hands to her cheeks. 'Do you think they've found her? Her body?'

'Oh, God, Georgia. Don't. That's ...' Cate trails off, but it had already occurred to her. The big wooden gate into the building site across the road is wide open and there are plain-clothes officers going in and out.

'I'm going to ask,' says Georgia, turning on her heel and leaving the door.

'Georgia, don't,' says Cate. 'Leave them, they're trying to get on with it ...' She hears the front door go, then sees Georgia, still in her pyjamas, her hoodie thrown on over the top and just the fronts of her feet wedged in her trainers which she is still trying to put on properly as she hops along to the uniformed policemen. Cate watches through the curtains as her daughter stands in front of them, her hands in the front pocket of her hoodie, not shaking her head, pointing to the building site, pointing back towards the house. After a moment she turns and heads back. Cate meets her at the door.

'What did they say?'

Georgia kicks off the unfastened trainers and heads into the kitchen, talking to Cate over her shoulder. 'They said they've found something'

building site. They've got forensics in there. I asked if it was a body. They said no, it wasn't a body. I asked if it was to do with Saffyre Maddox. They said they weren't at liberty to tell us. They said they're going to be in there today, maybe tomorrow, too.'

Cate nods. Her stomach turns. She looks at the time; it's just after 9. Roan had left early for work this morning at 7 a.m. She wonders if they were already here when he left. She wonders how that would have made her feel. She sends him a WhatsApp message: *Police cordon on our street over forensics in the building site over the road. Any idea what's happening?*

The tick stays grey. She puts down her phone and fills the kettle. 'Would you like a cup of tea?' she asks Georgia.

Georgia is halfway through a Cadbury's Mini Roll. She says, 'No thanks, I'm going back to bed,' then tugs off her hoodie and drapes it over the back of a chair. She drops the Mini Roll wrapper in the vague area of the rug but it misses and lands on the floor. Cate is about to call her back to pick it up, but she can't find the will, so sighs and picks it up herself.

Tiny shocks pass through her nervous system as she moves.

She goes to the drawer where the tea towels live and pulls out Roan's mysterious Valentine's card again.

As she does so, something occurs to her: Molly's card is not the same shape as the envelope. It is slightly too tall, not quite wide enough. The card did not come with this envelope. She pulls it out again, opens it, reads it. Little Molly. What a strange little girl she must be, sending Valentine's cards to old men.

She turns the card over in her hands, examining it for something, something that might make more sense of it. But there's nothing. Roan's job, all, is the care of strange children; why should she be surprised that one of them would behave strangely towards him?

She sighs and puts the card back in the drawer.

Then she turns and jumps. Josh is standing in the doorway. He is wrapped up in a towelling dressing gown; his hair is ruffled. 'Why are there lots of police outside?' he says.

'Don't really know,' she replies. 'Something to do with that missing girl maybe. They've found something in the building site, got forensics in there.'

'Really?' he says, wandering back to the hallway, into Cate's room, peering through the window. She follows him. The back of his neck is still in that from a fearsome haircut the day before, the *Peaky Blinders* haircut all

They boys seem to be getting these days that makes their heads look too big
They their bodies.

here all She stands behind him at the window. They both watch as a man and
a woman in plain clothes exit the entrance to the site holding plastic boxes
a.m. police manning the cordon pull it back for another police vehicle to pull
police Two more people get out. One of them Cate immediately recognises as
the him detective who'd sat on her sofa the day before, the one who'd asked so
, specifically about where she'd been at midnight on Valentine's night. 'I
I? are fifty streets between Alfred Road, where Saffyre lives, and the village
'ant a where she told her family she was going. A thousand houses. Tens of
thousands of people. Yet the police chose her doorbell to ring, her sofa
bank on, her whereabouts to ask after and now the building site opposite her
r the to investigate. Not to mention the fact of her husband's relationship to
the bin, they're trying to find.

ck it She and Josh both crane their heads upwards as the sound of helicopter
blades starts to rumble and boom overhead.

'Reporters,' says Josh. 'I wonder how they found out?'

's 'It only takes one phone call,' says Cate. 'It's not as if the police are
anything to hide what's going on here.'

ie Cate sees a movement across the road and the front door of the house
e card opposite swing open. There's the man, the weird man. She ducks slightly
it. she's not visible.

s cards Behind him is the woman he appears to live with, the statuesque silver
haired woman she'd seen looking for her keys in her bag that morning
me tiny ago. And behind the silver-haired woman is a very tall gentleman with
b, after slicked-back hair.

e Slowly they emerge. The older man looks upwards at the sky for the
helicopter he can hear. The woman walks to the police by the cordon and
Cate watches her ask them questions. The older man and the younger man
apped stand side by side, a few feet away. Suddenly it occurs to Cate that maybe the
rads of weird man has something to do with all of this, that maybe the police came
to her house to ask about midnight on Valentine's night was nothing to do
; girl, with her and everything to do with him.

there.' She stares at him now, overriding her physical discomfort. He has his
fingers over his mouth, one arm wrapped around his waist. He keeps trying
raw to look at the building site. After a minute he leaves the older couple standing
the on the front drive and heads back into the house.

for She sees the female detective talking to the two people who have just
walked out of the building site with plastic boxes. She asks them some
d One of them nods. One of them shakes their head. They all turn to look
es. The building site. Then the female detective turns and looks directly at Cate
ll in. house, at Cate herself. It looks exactly as though they have been talkin
s the her, about her family.
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There minutes. 'Let's leave them all to it.'
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says. 'I want to stay here and watch.'
t to sit She sighs. 'OK,' she says lightly. 'Do you want a cup of tea?'
'house 'Yes please,' he says. 'Thank you. Love you.'
the girl 'Love you, too,' she replies. Her heart aches a tiny bit at the thought
him. Her soft boy with his endless love and his raw, shaved neck.
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She sees the female detective talking to the two people who have just walked out of the building site with plastic boxes. She asks them something. One of them nods. One of them shakes their head. They all turn to look at the building site. Then the female detective turns and looks directly at Cate's house, at Cate herself. It looks exactly as though they have been talking about her, about her family.

'Come on,' she says to Josh, who has barely breathed for the past two minutes. 'Let's leave them all to it.'

She touches his shoulder and he recoils, almost imperceptibly. 'No,' he says. 'I want to stay here and watch.'

She sighs. 'OK,' she says lightly. 'Do you want a cup of tea?'

'Yes please,' he says. 'Thank you. Love you.'

'Love you, too,' she replies. Her heart aches a tiny bit at the thought of him. Her soft boy with his endless love and his raw, shaved neck.

Owen hears helicopter blades breaking apart the air above the house. He opens his bedroom window and peers out as far as he is able. At this time of year, before the trees come back into leaf, he can see parts of the big open space next to their house.

There used to be a mansion there called Winterham House. For decades it had sat with broken windows and ivy climbing up to precarious balconies, toppled chimney pots, graffitied walls and overgrown grass. When Owen moved into Tessie's flat it was two months away from a demolition order. He'd watched in fascination as the whole building was dismantled and demolished, brick by brick, all the finery being taken away in vans to be sold as reclaim at vastly inflated prices, the bricks taken away to be put back in stock, everything else being broken down into components small enough to fit in the back of a pickup. It took about three months and then the demolition people left and suddenly the dust stopped, the noise stopped, there was a breeze through the trees and into Owen's room, birdsong and foxes, meadow flowers every summer. Occasionally on warm nights Owen can hear teenagers laughing there and the smell of skunk wafts into his room.

One day a notice went up outside to say that someone had applied for planning permission to build a development of five luxury townhouses on the site. Of course the whole neighbourhood joined together to try to block it, but in the end the house-builder who had bought the site compromised with planning for a small block of flats, thus maintaining the maximum amount of green space. That had been approved four years ago but since then, nothing has happened.

The open, verdant aspect from his bedroom has made Owen feel rather lonely though he lives alone, in a wilderness; the view from his room is nothing but trees; there is no sign of urban life to be seen.

But as he peers from his bedroom window now, he sees that that silk oasis is teeming with people. Voices call out to each other; radios crackle; he sees the suggestion of bodies moving across the open space while the blare of the helicopters overhead fades in and out. He assumes this is something to do with the missing girl, the one the police asked him about yesterday. He assumes it is his fault they are here, because it was him who stupidly mentioned the girl in the hoodie outside the house opposite on Valentine's night. And he's not even particularly sure what he saw. The night is a blurred, sped-up film that stops occasionally on a random still and then moves on again at high speed. He can barely remember getting into bed that night. He had woken up wearing his shirt and one sock.

He heads out into the hallway. Tessie and Barry are already there, standing in the front door, watching the activity.

'They've found something,' she says. 'Something to do with that girl you were asking you about, the one on the flyer.'

'What have they found?'

'They wouldn't tell me. But they're going to be keeping the road closed all day. And they asked for access to the outside areas.'

'Of what?'

'Of here. Of the house. I said of course.'

Owen blinks.

'You don't mind, do you?' she asks, her eyes narrowed.

'No,' he says. 'Why would I mind?'

'I don't know. You might feel it was a breach of your privacy. Or something like that.'

'Well, it's not my garden, is it? It's everyone's garden.'

'Yes,' says Tessie, 'yes. That's right.'

There are police in their back garden now, picking through the undergrowth, over the piles of rusty old gardening equipment that no one ever uses. He watches them for a while, trying to hear what they're saying. He catches the occasional word but not enough to form any idea what they might be talking about.

There appears to be a smaller group of detectives searching in the vicinity of his bedroom window, at the back of the house. A flash of anxiety passes through Owen's gut and he heads back to his bedroom and closes the door behind him.

ent He hears a voice, close to his window, a man calling to someone else. He 'Here, look. Bring the flashlight.'

oom He catches his breath, stands to one side of the window, his back pressing against the wall, listening.

He 'Get the governor,' says the man.

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on Owen peers cautiously around the window frame. He looks down at the tops of three heads, a light being shone into the grass, a suggestion of gold glinting in the beam. He sees gloved hands gently parting the blackening grass. He can see the phone case being plucked from the grass and dropped into an outstretched plastic bag.

l they The air feels electric. Something is about to happen. Something extraordinary. Something appalling.

The helicopter blades spinning overhead sound like herds of heavy-laden off animals thundering through thick black dust.

Owen turns away from his window and collapses against the wall.

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A moment later he hears a woman's voice. 'What have you got?'

Owen peers cautiously around the window frame. He looks down and sees the tops of three heads, a light being shone into the grass, a suggestion of rose gold glinting in the beam. He sees gloved hands gently parting the blades of grass. He can see the phone case being plucked from the grass and dropped into an outstretched plastic bag.

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SAFFYRE

Roan's son's name was Josh. Joshua Fours. You almost have to say it otherwise it doesn't sound right. He went to the school opposite my flat and I saw him from time to time that autumn term. I would never have picked him out in the crowd before, just your typical gangly white dude in a North jacket and black trainers. He had a friend; weirdly this friend had red hair and a pointy face and it was almost as though the friend and the fox were somehow interchangeable, like maybe Josh only liked things that resembled foxes.

I followed him home a few times that autumn. He walked so slowly, like a tortoise. If he wanted to look at something on his phone he'd literally just stop in the middle of the pavement, oblivious to whoever was behind him or near him. Sometimes he'd cross the street for no good reason, then cross back again. He'd stop and look into shop windows that didn't look like the sort of shop he would even care about. It was as if, I sometimes thought, he was trying to drag it out. Like maybe he didn't even want to go home.

He slipped through the bushes into the empty plot quite often, to smoke weed. One night he went in with the boy with the red hair. I heard them laughing a lot and I was pleased that he had a friend to laugh with.

Then one day, late September, during my first few weeks in the sixth form I went to my Thursday class at the dojo, and there he was, all green and nervous, doing a trial class. I was a few minutes early for my class so I stayed and watched him finish his. He was a foot taller than everyone else; it was a beginner class so mainly kids. I couldn't work out what he was doing but he was this shambling, weed-smoking, fox-chatting boy. He did not seem the

He'd been paired with a small girl for the last exercises. He looked embarrassed. She looked resigned.

Then it was over and they were taught how to end the class:

'Kahm sa hamnida.'

'Ee sahn.'

He shuffled into the changing rooms and reappeared a moment later in school uniform, his North Face coat, his schoolbag. He caught me staring at him and I nodded. He flushed and turned away.

It seemed like it meant something, that this boy was there, at my dojo. I wondered for a moment if he'd seen me following him and was trying to turn the tables on me; you know, like letting me know that he knew what I was up to. But he never seemed to notice me there; he didn't have a vibe about him as if he was aware of my presence.

Josh The third time he was there I arrived late and I was in the changing room with him. The curtain was pulled across. Two small boys sat cross-legged on the floor tying up the laces on their school shoes. I took off my coat and my North Face hoodie and hung them from a peg. I turned to Josh and I said, 'How are you finding it?'

He looked at me as if I was the first person who had spoken to him in his whole life. 'What?'

'I said, how are you finding it? You're new, yeah?'

He nodded and said, 'It's OK.'

'What's your objective?'

'Sorry?'

'What's your objective? I've been at this since I was six. Did it so that no one on the street could scare me, intimidate me, you know. Just wondering what you were getting out of it?'

'Same, I guess.'

'Self-defence?' I asked.

'Yeah,' he said. 'Kind of. I was mugged.'

'Oh my God,' I said, 'when?'

'Like, a few weeks ago.'

'Shit. That's bad.' I glanced down at the small boys on the floor and

'Sorry.' Then to Josh: 'Did they hurt you?'

He shrugged. 'No. Not really. I didn't put up much of a fight, so, you know.'

I did know. I really, really did know. 'Any idea who it was?'

‘No. Just a white guy, with a hood.’

‘Scary,’ I said.

‘Yeah,’ he said. Then he picked up his bag and left without saying goodbye.

He never came back again.

in his

ing at One night at around the same time I first saw Josh at the dojo, I got home and found my granddad flopped in the armchair; his skin looked grey. I said

o. I ‘Granddad, are you OK?’

to turn He said, ‘I think so. I’m not sure.’ He said he had indigestion, so I got some Rennies. He rubbed his chest a lot and grimaced.

t him Aaron got home an hour after me and called an ambulance.

area Shortly after that I was in a squeaky plastic chair at the Royal Free hospital, holding my granddad’s hand and telling him that everything was going to be all right.

ged on But it wasn’t.

d my It was all wrong.

e you Granddad spent three days on the ward having various tests. He was diagnosed with angina and then, after more tests and more scans, with coronary artery disease. He was sent home with a long list of new ways in which to live his life, things he should be eating, medicines he needed to take. I could tell he had no intention of doing any of it. He’d lost his wife and a daughter, he’d been in pain for years, he had no social life and no job at the moment. Now I was nearly grown, nearly an adult, he could not see the point in changing everything just so he could be around in twenty years’ time. So he pushed away all the healthy food that Aaron bought and cooked for him and he left the pills sitting on the table next to his chair and he refused to go out for nice walks with me and then, before we’d even really started to save his life, he had a massive heart attack and died. He was only fifty when he passed away. Sounds so much younger than sixty when you’re talking about dying.

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l said, So, there I was. No mum, no dad, no grandparents, just two uncles and a little cousins. Not enough.

u I couldn’t get out of bed for a week after Granddad’s funeral. I felt like I like you could just blow me away or crush me under your thumb.

For the first time in my school career, I fell behind with my coursework.

Aaron went to talk to my teachers and they sent this woman over, something to do with safeguarding or pastoral care or whatever; I'd never seen her before in my life. She was grumpy with a face like a lump of putty – it's not like the movies you know, where Sandra Bullock or someone like that comes over and turns your life around – and she sat on the other side of a little dining table from me, both of us with our fingers wrapped around mugs of tea made by Aaron, and she said stuff to me and there were a lot of words, and she meant well and she was nice and all, but the minute she left I just went straight back to bed.

not him

It was Bonfire Night that got me out of the slump. Sitting on the back of the sofa with Aaron and pulling open the curtains and watching the sky explode into all those different colours. It was weird Granddad not being there, but I right. also reminded me that life goes on, as mundane as that sounds, life just goes on; fireworks still pop, people still watch in wide-eyed wonder, children still hold sparklers, foxes still skulk through urban blackness looking for carcasses. I finally bones.

I put on my Puffa coat and I told Aaron I was going to get lemonade from the shop downstairs. Instead I bought a packet of Fridge Raiders and headed to take the lift up towards Hampstead, through the leafy avenues where the fireworks had exploded privately in people's back gardens, smudges of glitter just visible above ancient trees. On the corner of Roan's road, I sneaked through the same gap I'd seen Josh using to access the empty plot. It wasn't cold at all till I took off my Puffa and used it as a blanket.

I opened the packet of Fridge Raiders and sat it on the damp gravel I had used for me, hoping that the smell would wend its way across the open space. I used to switched on my phone and messaged Aaron. *I'm going over Jasmin's place, I'm trying* See u later.

Twenty-nine He replied, *Everything OK?*

He started to type my response and then I stopped at the sound of rustling behind me. It was him; it was the fox. I rested my phone on my lap and held my breath. I could hear his little paws, pad-padding across the gravel, and closer to me. I put my hand inside the Fridge Raiders packet and pulled out a nugget of whatever in hell that stuff actually is, held it between my forefinger and thumb, just out by my side. I still didn't turn and look. I could hear the fox's breathing, an anxious, active sound. I felt him stop and I told him he was inches away from me. And then I felt the warmth of his breath.

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ver But he didn't move. So I pushed the bag forward a few inches to see if
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And still the fox stood by my side.

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I thought, Ha, see, Roan Fours, I didn't need you, after all. I only ne
place. nature. I only needed owls and foxes and stars and fireworks.

I was fixed.

Or so I thought.

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against the skin of my hand. I dropped the meat and heard him snaffle it up. But he didn't move. So I pushed the bag forward a few inches to see if he'd follow it. And then there he was, standing by my side, looking down at the bag expectantly, like a pet dog.

'Want another one?' I said.

He didn't look at me, just stared intently at the bag, his little gingerbread eyes totally fixed on the spot. 'OK then,' I said, taking one out. 'Here you go.'

A huge firework exploded overhead and for a moment the fox looked like he was going to scamper away. But he held his ground and his snout appeared in my peripheral vision and then there he was, taking the snack from between my fingers. I inhaled so hard I heard my own breath catch.

And here I was, I realised, back in the same place I'd found myself that time at Lexie's animal party, when the guy gave me the owl called Harry. All the black inside me turned silver and gold. I felt the punch of a connection with the ground, the sky, the trees, the air, so strong that it almost winded me. Butterflies whipped through my stomach. I stifled a giggle and covered my mouth with the back of my hand. I looked up into the gunpowder-stained night sky and I searched with my eyes until I found a star, muted and grubby, but there, and I clasped my hands together in a prayer and said, 'I love you, Granddad. I love you, Grandma. I love you, Mum.'

I picked up my phone and replied to Aaron's message.

I'm all good! with a smiley face emoji.

And still the fox stood by my side.

I passed him more snacks and laughed out loud.

I thought, Ha, see, Roan Fours, I didn't need you, after all. I only needed nature. I only needed owls and foxes and stars and fireworks.

I was fixed.

Or so I thought.

The police cordon is still stretched across Cate's street the next day. The helicopters are back. But there's nothing on the news. Clearly they have found nothing yet. Clearly there's no body in there. If there was, Cate thinks, surely they'd have found it by now?

Roan is eating a bowl of cereal, standing up. He's making annoying noises, scarfing it down for some reason as though he's late for something.

'Are you in a hurry?' asks Cate.

'Yeah, a bit. I want to be at work early.'

'You went in early yesterday.'

'Yes. Lots on. Two other clinicians on holiday – you know, half-term. Need to catch up with myself.'

'You could do that here,' she says, gesturing at the kitchen table.

'This is your zone,' he says.

'Not at seven in the morning it's not. I'm about to have a shower and get ready, why don't you stay here a while and catch up?'

He scrapes the bowl for the last spoonful of cereal and swallows it down. 'I need to be at work,' he says, taking the bowl to the sink. 'I need access to the tools there. Why are you so keen to keep me here?'

She shrugs. 'All this, I suppose.' She points upwards in the direction of the helicopters. 'And that.' She points towards the front of the house. 'It's unsettling. I mean, if something did happen to that girl, right here, right on the road, then maybe it's not safe. I mean, do you think we should be thinking about keeping Georgia in at the moment?'

Roan stops, his back curved over the sink. He sighs, then turns. 'Maybe I should ask the police about that? See what they say.'

She nods. 'Yes,' she says, 'maybe.'

He moves towards her, puts a hand on her arm. 'It'll be fine, whatever I'm sure we're safe.' He picks up his bag, his coat, his scarf. 'I will see you later. I'll try and get back early tonight. Maybe we could even do some more work together.'

She forces a smile. 'Yes,' she says. And then, before he disappears from view, she says, 'Roan? Who's Molly?'

He stops. Then he turns and looks at her. 'Molly?'

'Yes. I kept meaning to say. You got a card from her. Valentine's daughter, Georgia opened it by mistake and I put it away because I knew you'd be worried about her opening your stuff. Then I forgot about it.' She goes to the drawer and pulls it out. 'Here,' she says. 'Sorry.'

Roan walks towards her and takes the card from her hand. She watches him open it and read it. He smiles. 'Oh,' he says, '*Molly!* Yes. I know her. She's a patient. Or at least, she was. I don't see her any more.'

'And she has your address?' She shows him the envelope.

He looks slightly confused. 'She does appear to, yes.'

'How?'

He takes the envelope from her hand and stares at it for a moment. 'I literally have no idea,' he says. 'I mean, maybe it was in my office, on my desk, or something?'

Cate takes the card from him and puts it back in the drawer. 'Well,' she says, 'you should be more careful.'

He gives her a strange look. 'Yes,' he says. 'You're right.'

He kisses her briefly on the cheek and then he goes.

She grips the back of a chair, feeling her heart racing in her chest, the sickening rush of adrenaline caused by the confrontation. She hears the door slam, but almost immediately she hears it open again. She hears a voice in the hallway and then a female voice.

The door to the apartment opens and Roan walks back in, with DI Anna Currie following behind.

'No problem,' he's saying to her. 'No problem at all.' He catches Cate's eye. 'This is DI Currie. She just wants to ask us a few questions.'

Cate touches her collarbone. 'Me too?'

'Yes, please. If you have the time?' says the detective.

'Sure. Yes. Can I get you anything? A tea? Coffee?'

DI Currie taps a plastic bottle of water in her hand and says, 'Thank you. I'm fine.'

er it is. Roan leads her into the living room. She sits on the armchair. Cate and you Roan sit side by side on the sofa.

thing.’ ‘So,’ DI Currie begins, ‘sorry to bother you this early in the morning from literally just came to our attention, and I have to be honest, I don’t really know how we missed this before, but having interviewed you both separately regarding this missing person case – Mrs Fours as a potential witness and Fours as someone who worked closely with Saffyre – it has only just come to our attention that you both live here. And obviously that throws a very different complexion on things; opens up a whole new angle. So I hope you don’t mind if I ask you both a few more questions?’ She smiles and then she looks upwards and says, ‘Bloody helicopters. I’m so sorry. It must be a Molly nightmare. But we’re nearly done now. They’ll be gone soon. I promise.’

She pulls a ballpoint pen and notebook from her shoulder bag.

‘Mr Fours, we spoke a couple of days ago about Saffyre coming under your care for a while and you confirmed that you stopped your session with her roughly a year ago?’

I ‘That’s right.’

a letter ‘And you didn’t see her again after that?’

she ‘No. Or, as I told you yesterday, I saw her around the area a couple of times, but not to stop and talk to.’

‘So after you signed her off from treatment, that was the end of your relationship with her?’

‘Yes. That’s correct.’

ie ‘Great,’ says DI Currie, ‘thank you for clarifying that for me. And then the night of February the fourteenth, Valentine’s night, it was the two of you and Roan’s that had dinner together, in the village?’

They both nod.

ngela ‘And you both returned home at around eleven thirty p.m.?’

They nod again. Cate says, ‘Roughly.’

ate’s ‘And you were both in bed by midnight?’

Cate and Roan exchange a look. Cate says, ‘Yes, thereabouts.’

Roan nods and then he turns to the detective and says, ‘Well, I might have been a bit later than that. I seem to recall going outside for some reason.’

Cate stares at him.

s, but ‘I mean, it’s not particularly fresh in my mind, it was over a week ago and I wasn’t sober, but I do remember coming outside – I think I was putting

nd rubbish out. And I heard something. And I looked over the road and th
the one from the house opposite, he was just standing there.'

g, but it 'Standing there?'

ly 'Yes.'

arately 'Did he see you?'

nd Dr 'No. I was in the front garden, by the bins. I was out of view. I coul
ome to him through a gap in the hedge.'

'And what was he doing, this man?'

e you 'Just standing, staring. He looked drunk. I've had run-ins with him t
en she when he's drunk. He stared at me once when I was out running, around
a corner. Stood and stared for quite some time. When I asked him what l
e.' problem was, he just asked me if I was married. I thought it was ... od
then there was that other time.' He turns to Cate and gives her a compl
ler look. 'Remember, earlier this year, when Georgia was walking home i
s with dark and he got really close to her and was freaking her out.'

Cate stiffens slightly. She's not completely comfortable with what F
implying. 'Yes,' she says, 'that is true. And he is a bit odd, but that doe
mean ...'

of 'No,' DI Currie cuts in. 'No, you're right, Mrs Fours. It doesn't mea
anything. Obviously. But it's all worth making a note of.' She turns ba
: Roan. 'So this happened at roughly midnight?'

'Yes, roughly midnight.'

'And then you came back inside and went to bed?'

en, on 'Yes. That's right.'

of you 'And when you were out there, putting out the rubbish at midnight, i
from the man across the street, did you see anything else? Anyone else

'No. That was all. The man across the street.'

'Is it possible', she continues, 'that he might not have been staring a
that he might have been staring at someone else?'

Roan wrinkles his brow. 'I don't know what you—'

DI Currie closes her notepad. 'Would it be possible, do you think, fo
it have to show me exactly where you were standing that night, when you saw
n.' neighbour staring towards you?'

'Sure,' says Roan.

go, I They all get to their feet.

g some Cate throws on one of Josh's hoodies from the hallway and follows
DI Currie follows Cate and they head out to the little wooden covered

at guy, the front garden where the communal bins are located.

‘I was standing here,’ says Roan. ‘I put the bag in the bin. I’d just closed the lid and I saw him through here.’ He points out a gap in the hedge that grows in front of a low brick wall.

DI Currie stands in Roan’s place and peers through the gap. She starts to see back and peers around the corner to the front path and the metal gate at the bottom. Then she peers once more through the gap in the hedge. She writes something down in her notebook and then she shuts it.

‘Wonderful,’ she says, ‘thank you so much. I think that’ll be all we need from you both for now. But a last question, Dr Fours. I know you say that you hadn’t seen Saffyre since your final appointment with her back in 2018, but can you think of any reason, any reason at all why she might have been in the vicinity of your house on the night she went missing?’

‘So, she was—’ Cate begins.

‘We don’t know anything for sure yet. We’re looking at dozens of possibilities. But that is one possibility, yes. So, Dr Fours, can you ...?’

Cate looks at Roan. Roan shakes his head, firmly. ‘No,’ he says. ‘No. There is absolutely no reason I can think of why she would have been in the area. None.’

‘And you definitely didn’t see her?’

‘I definitely didn’t see her.’

There is a long pause, as though DI Currie is hoping that Roan might see something else. When he doesn’t, she smiles again, that unnerving smile that is half Clinique consultant in Debenhams and half twisted primary school teacher. ‘Thank you again, so much, both of you. And as I say, I’m nearly done here. I reckon the cordon will come down in the next hour or two. You can get your street back!’

She puts her hands into the pockets of a very nice green woollen coat with big buttons, smiles one more time, and then she is gone.

Cate and Roan look at each other. He takes his phone out of his pocket and checks the time. ‘Fuck,’ he says, ‘I really need to get going.’ He drops another perfunctory kiss on Cate’s cheek and, moving very quickly, struts away from her, down the garden path and on to the pavement.

Roan.
area in

the front garden where the communal bins are located.

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Cate and Roan look at each other. He takes his phone out of his pocket and checks the time. ‘Fuck,’ he says, ‘I really need to get going.’ He drops another perfunctory kiss on Cate’s cheek and, moving very quickly, strides away from her, down the garden path and on to the pavement.

SAFFYRE

Last December was cold. Do you remember it? So cold. Or maybe I remember it that way because I spent so much of it outdoors.

It's odd, I know. I had a home, a warm home – almost too warm, you know the way they heat these council buildings, no thermostat, central settings. I had Aaron taking care of me and nice food and a nice bedroom yet ... for some reason I really did not want to be there. Maybe it was because my granddad wasn't there any more. Maybe it was that simple felt more complicated than that to me, like I was turning into something something not entirely human.

I don't know, maybe I read too much Harry Potter growing up, but I feel grounded up there on the eighth floor; I felt untethered, like there was no gravity up there. I needed my feet on solid ground. I needed the air on my skin. I needed trees and soil and damp and moonlight and daylight and wind and pigeons and foxes. It was like I was becoming feral.

That's an exaggeration. Obviously. I was still going to school every day, I was still showering, still making my hair look nice, wearing eyeliner, wearing clean underwear, you know; I wasn't *dirty* feral. I was just outdoorsy. Whenever I could be outdoors I took the opportunity.

I spent a lot of time in the building plot opposite Roan's house. It was a good spot there. I could see all the comings and goings through the gaps in the hedge without any risk of being spotted. The fox came to see me often. I brought him other processed-meat gifts and he was always very grateful to me. Then there was the guy whose bedroom window faced out on to the lan

don't know what his name was, but I called him Clive. I don't know what he just looked like a Clive.

He was kind of odd. And I say that as someone who is also kind of odd. I stood on top of the JCB that was parked on the plot I could see right into his room through the gap in his curtains; it was like an old lady's bedroom. He had this nylon counterpane thing over his lumpy little bed, and one of those clunky antique wooden wardrobes like they have in bad B & Bs with a window on the outside door and his manky little stripy dressing gown hanging on the back of his door and a painting of a rugged landscape in a crap frame. His room looked cold. He sat in it every night in an armchair with his head on a pillow and a laptop on a cardboard box in front of him and he looked at his screen – I don't know what stuff, I couldn't see the screen. Not porn though, I don't think that, because I never saw him doing what men do when they look at porn.

Sometimes the woman would come in, the white-haired woman he lived with. I always saw him sigh and roll his eyes before he opened the door for her. She would have her arms wrapped round her waist and a sour look on her face and say something to him and he would say something to her and she would go out and he would look even more sour, then go.

I felt sorry for him. I couldn't imagine what it must be like to be him. But it looked old enough to be married with a kid or two. He was clearly doing something else, something wrong to be living as he was living. I wondered if he was crying about being so lonely. I wondered about Clive a lot.

Our paths crossed about a week before Christmas. He was walking up a little hill that joins Roan's road to the Finchley Road. It was late, about eleven o'clock. He looked a state. His hair was all over the place; his vest bag was hanging off his shoulder, pulling his jacket down on one side. His shirt had a big stain on it and he was kind of stumbling along. He glanced at me and I saw that he was drunk. He smiled then and as we passed each other he said, 'Merry Christmas!' and I said, 'And a Merry Christmas to you Clive.'

He stopped and said, 'Clive?'
I smiled and said, 'Nothing. Just kidding. Merry Christmas.'
'Owen,' he said. 'My name's Owen.'
'Owen,' I said. 'I'm Jane.'
'Merry Christmas, Jane.'
We shook hands. His was clammy and sticky.

hy, he 'Sorry,' he said, 'bit sweaty. Been dancing. A school disco. I'm a te
though. Not a student. Obviously.'

odd. If He laughed. I laughed.

into his 'Night night, Jane.'

l. He 'Night night, Owen.'

those Then he went and I went and I thought, Owen, his name's Owen.

l mirror

off the Roan took Alicia out for dinner just before Christmas. He took her to t

The little French restaurant nestled below my block of flats. I'd followed th

phones from the clinic, watched them go in. I took my paparazzi-style photos:

s stuff click.

[know Alicia looked beautiful. She was beautiful. Much more beautiful tha

orn. Roan's wife. And she was getting more beautiful the longer her affair v

ived Roan went on, like he was pumping her full of some magic elixir. She

r to her red hair down in long waves and was wearing a black coat and red

κ on Chelsea boots and a pink scarf and red lips and black tights. She could

and shes smiling. He looked more circumspect, held the door for her, as was his

quick look over his shoulder as he went in.

l. He I watched them being led to a table right at the back of the restauran

ng I wouldn't be able to see them from where I was standing so I put m

ross phone back in my pocket and went home.

Aaron was there. He'd bought a Christmas tree and that cheered me

ip the One good thing about Granddad going was that Aaron got to sleep in t

t bedroom now, not in the living room, and we could have a proper Chri

work tree, not the funny little skinny space-saving one we'd been using for y

His which sat on a tabletop. The tree smelled so good. I stood with my face

ced at buried inside its branches and breathed it in.

l other Aaron passed me the box of decorations from the cupboard in the ha

l too, 'There you go,' he said. 'Girls' work.' He winked and I gave him a sho

Aaron's not exactly a feminist but he's no chauvinist either. He likes th

of the world being run by women. He likes women.

I dressed the tree and stared from the window every now and then, c

the plaza below where the posh little restaurant was and as I stared I fo

myself wondering what I was doing, following Roan about the way I d

taking pictures of everything he did. I wondered where it was all headi

wondered if I was mad, maybe. But I didn't feel mad. I felt totally fine

acher Aaron put our dinner on the table. He said, 'It's nice to have you here
once.'

 He said this with a smile because he wasn't having a go at me. He n
as it sounded.

 'You know,' he said, spooning yellow rice on to his plate, glancing
my shoulder at the twinkling tree, 'it feels kind of strange. First Christmas
without my dad. If you want to talk about it ...'

he nice I just smiled and shook my head and said, 'I'm fine. Really.'

iem 'I do worry about you, Saff. We all do.'

click, I threw him a questioning look.

 'The family. Me. Lee. Tana. The girls.'

n 'Not much of a family really, is it?' I said.

with 'Oh. That's harsh.' He smiled. 'It's quality, not quantity, yeah?'

had I smiled too. 'Yeah,' I said.

 'Just keep us in the loop, Saff, OK? Whatever it is that's bothering y
n't stop Who ever it is that's bothering you. We're all here for you. Yeah?'

; way, I looked up at him. 'But what about you?' I said. 'Who's here for yo
He looked kind of abashed. 'What do you mean?'

t. I said, 'You're nearly thirty. You work two jobs. You haven't had a
y girlfriend since you were like twenty-four or something. Who's worryi
about you?'

up. Aaron put down his knife and fork and looked at me very sternly. A
he looking stern, I should add, is not very stern at all. He has the face of a
stmas angel.

years, 'Saff,' he said, 'I don't need worrying about, OK. Please God, don't
e about me. Just focus on yourself. Focus on school, on these A-levels. T
focus on getting into university. Then focus on getting a good degree. .

llway. then, maybe then, I'll let you worry about me. But until then, we're go
ove. here, OK?'

ne idea I nodded but I felt a lurch in the pit of my stomach. Aaron would be
one by the time I left university. And then what? I thought of Clive, or
lown to or whatever his name was, and his sad little bedroom and his sad little
und dressing gown and I thought he looked like he was probably about thir
id, and I didn't want that for Aaron.

ng. I 'I might not even go to university,' I said.

. 'Course you will,' he said.

re. For 'Why? Just because I'm clever, there's no law about it. I can do what I want to after I've left school. I could get a job and get my own place and meant it you could have this flat to yourself.'

over He laughed. 'I don't want this flat to myself! Why would I want this myself?'

nas 'So you can start a family.'

He laughed again, loud and hard. 'I don't want a family, fam! You're family!'

I laughed too, but inside I was starting to feel panicky. Aaron was such a good man. He'd worked hard at school, like me, and got good exam results but here he was working in a betting shop and doing people's gardens then coming home and having to worry about me, wasting the prime years of his life, and I thought, you know, maybe it would be better if I wasn't there.

rou. After dinner I told Aaron I was going to Jasmin's and he said *have fun*. I said *will do* and I headed out with a heart full of strangeness about everything. I sat on one of the outdoor gym bikes on the plaza and idly wheeled the pedals round and round with my hands inside my pockets, hood up against the chill night air. I put some music on my phone and listened for a while, watching people come and go. No one looked at me, no one saw me. When you wear a hood, you're invisible.

aron And then after a while Roan and Alicia left the restaurant, and I waited to see what they would do and you want to know what they did? Those dirty devils? They checked into a hotel, the Best Western by the drama school.

worry My jaw fell open. I don't know why I was surprised. It had all been so obvious when I was with Roan. He was going to have sex with that woman he wasn't married to. About half a mile away from the woman he was married to. He was going to lay her down on a bed and do things to her.

od I shuddered slightly, pulled down my hood, showing my pink hair to the world, and I went to see Jasmin.

thirty-
Owen,
stripy
ty-one

‘Why? Just because I’m clever, there’s no law about it. I can do whatever I want to after I’ve left school. I could get a job and get my own place and then you could have this flat to yourself.’

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And then after a while Roan and Alicia left the restaurant, and I waited to see what they would do and you want to know what they did? Those dirty devils? They checked into a hotel, the Best Western by the drama school.

My jaw fell open. I don’t know why I was surprised. It had all been leading to this moment. But it still shocked me. Roan was going to have sex with a woman he wasn’t married to. About half a mile away from the woman he was married to. He was going to lay her down on a bed and do things to her.

I shuddered slightly, pulled down my hood, showing my pink hair to the world, and I went to see Jasmin.

Owen and Deanna had spent two hours messaging the night before. She'd been trying to persuade him to think about getting his job back at the club. She'd made some good points, some compelling points. Mostly to do with the fact that the girls who'd reported him would be gone in a few months, there'd be a whole new intake, no one to remember what had happened, he could have a clean slate. Also to do with the fact that he'd quite enjoyed his job. And the longer he left it without having a job, the harder it would be to explain to a potential employer what he'd been doing.

Her concern had made him realise that up until now he'd not had one person in his life to offer him proper, empathetic, sensible, caring advice about his life, his choices, not ever. Not since his mother had died.

They'd said goodnight at eleven o'clock; Owen could have gone on for hours, but Deanna of course had to be up early for work. Owen had fallen asleep with his phone on his chest, a smile on his face.

He gets out of bed now and goes to his bedroom window. The police are still back. They're still picking around in the back garden. They'd cordoned off the whole garden off last night before they left, spoken to all the residents, told them not to cross the cordons. There'd been a solitary policeman stationed outside the building site all night long.

Owen peers down to the spot in the grass that the police had been examining yesterday, where they'd found the phone case. Something flashes through his thoughts as he stares at the grass.

A movement of some kind, a cry of pain.

He shakes the thought from his head and heads to the bathroom where he showers and washes his hair. In the mirror in the bathroom he looks at his hair and decides that it is now officially too long. He's not sure he can be bothered to go to the hairdresser's just for a trim, so he takes a pair of scissors

from the bathroom cabinet, smooths his hair down on to his forehead with his fingers, then trims it across the line of his eyebrows. He starts at the left and watches the dark fronds fall into the sink where they look like tiny discarded moustaches. He is about to trim from the right-hand side and to the middle when there is a loud, insistent thumping at the door. He jumps slightly and the tip of the scissors nicks his skin. A bead of blood appears as he rubs at it roughly and shouts out, 'What!'

'Owen,' says Tessie. 'The police are here. They need you to come out now.' He sighs. 'I'll be a few minutes.'

'Sir' – he hears a male voice – 'we need you to come out now. Please'

e'd 'I just got out of the shower. You'll have to wait.'

ollege. 'Sir, please just come out.'

with 'Fuck's sake,' Owen mutters under his breath. He dries himself roughly with his towel and pulls on his old dressing gown. He opens the door and sees Tessie recoil slightly at the sight of him.

d his 'Can I at least get dressed?' he says to the uniformed officer standing beside her.

be to The officer turns to a woman standing behind him. It's DI Currie, the female detective. She nods. 'But I'll need PC Rodrigues to go in with you. I'm afraid.'

'What?'

talking 'I'm so sorry. It's just procedure.'

l fallen 'But what's the issue here? What's the urgency?'

e are 'The urgency, Mr Pick, is that we need to bring you into the station to question you regarding the disappearance of Saffyre Maddox. We also have a warrant to search your room.' She holds up a piece of paper. Owen blinks. 'I'm afraid that means that we need to ensure that you don't touch anything in your room. I'm so sorry.' She smiles at him. It's an unnerving smile. It looks almost soft, but there's something cold and hard at the very corners of it.

lashes He starts to say something, but then realises he can't find any words. He is also aware on some level that whatever is going on here is something that could make infinitely worse by saying or doing the wrong thing. So he nods firmly, and heads for his room, the male PC following close behind. He goes around his room as he dresses; he tries to think what might be hidden there that they might find that could connect him in any way to the disappearance.

scissors

with his of a girl he'd never heard of until two days ago, a girl he may have imagined from the other side of the street, seeing entirely.

'Faster, Mr Pick, if you wouldn't mind.'

He throws on yesterday's outfit. He'd put it on his washing pile, intending to wear something fresh today, but he can't think straight enough now to get together another outfit. He pulls on his old, glued-together shoes and runs his fingers through his wet hair. Something on his forehead comes away under his fingertip; it's the dried blood from the nick from the scissors. Blood follows and he goes to pull a tissue from the box by his bedside table but the policeman says, 'Sir. Please do not touch anything.'

'But I'm bleeding.'

'We can sort you out once we have you in the car. Just leave that for a moment please, sir.'

Owen tuts. Then he takes one more look around the bedroom, grabs his jacket from the hook on the back of the door and follows the policeman down the hallway.

Tessie stands by the door. She is wearing a silk kimono over green pyjamas. Her hair is down. She looks tired and sad. As Owen passes he touches his arm and says, 'What did you do, Owen? What did you do?'

'I didn't do anything, for God's sake. You know I didn't do anything.' Tessie turns and walks away.

'For God's sake, Tessie,' he shouts after her. 'You know I didn't!'

She walks into her bedroom and pulls the door quietly shut behind her. He feels a hand on his shoulder. 'Mr Pick, please, we need to leave.' He shrugs the hand off, anger beginning to replace the shock and awestruck coming,' he says. 'I'm coming, OK?'

As he leaves the house, he is suddenly aware that the proportions of the street outside are all off, that there's something not right, a feeling of impending chaos, and then they appear: a flock, a pack; a dozen men and women with cameras, with microphones, pressing towards them. The policeman and the detective both cover him instinctively with their arms and hustle him onwards, through the throng.

'Mr Pick, Mr Pick!'

They know his name. How do they know his name? How did they know this was going to happen? How did they know?

He glances up and straight into the lens of a camera. He opens his eyes wide and is dazzled by a burning white flash. Something forces his head

imagined down again. He is in a car. The car door is closed. There are faces at the window, faces and lenses. The car moves quickly; people touch it; they close Owen doesn't understand why their feet aren't being crushed by grinding tyres. And then he is not on his street any more, he is on the main road to put there are no more people with cameras, just normal people going about his business. Owen sits back in the seat. He exhales.

under 'Who told them?' he asks the backs of the heads of the two people sitting in the front.

out the 'The press?' says the woman.

'Yes. Who told them you were coming to get me?'

'I'm afraid I have no idea. They knew we'd been searching the area. Now, People talk. I'm sorry you had to experience that.'

'But ... it'll be in the papers,' he says. 'People will think I did it.'

his 'Did what, Mr Pick?'

in back He peers at her face in the rear-view mirror. She's looking right at him. There's that chilling smile again.

'The thing!' he says. 'Whatever the thing is that you're arresting me

er, she 'You're not under arrest, Mr Pick. Not yet.'

'Then why?' He stares out of the window, watches a small girl from a walking company trying to load a giant bloodhound into the back of a van. 'Why am I here?'

He looks at himself in the rear-view mirror. His hair has started to droop shorter on one side than the other and sticking up on the top. The blood on his cut has dried into a kind of huge tear shape, dripping into his eyebrow. 'I'm looks horrendous. Absolutely horrendous. And the nation's press has just photographed him like this, being placed into the back of a police car to be questioned about a missing teenage girl. He doesn't even like teenage girls. And he's not even under arrest. He's left his phone at home. What if Doreen is trying to message him? What if she thinks he's ignoring her?'

And then an even worse thought hits him. What if he's in the papers tomorrow? With his crooked hair and blood-encrusted eyebrow and yesterday's clothes looking like a horrible pervert, with a headline screaming something like 'IS THIS SAFFYRE'S KILLER?' He groans out loud.

now 'Are you OK, Mr Pick?'

'No!' he replies. 'God. No. Of course I'm not OK. I'm going to be in the papers and I'm not even under arrest! Is that even legal?'

id 'Yes, I'm afraid it is legal, Mr Pick. I'm afraid it is.'

ie ‘But everyone will have seen my face and then you’ll let me go and
y are so will care that I didn’t do it, they’ll just remember my face. I’ll never ge
the I’ll—’ He envisages Deanna peeling open the *Evening Standard* on the
and tonight. ‘Oh God!’

t their ‘Mr Pick. Let’s just take this one step at a time, shall we? Hopefully
be able to let you go within an hour or two. We’ll notify the press. The
itting have no interest in running the story if there’s nothing to it. So, let’s ju
how we get on, shall we?’ She smiles again.

Owen sits back, folds his arms around his stomach and rocks slightl
world feels like a straitjacket, sucking all the air out of his chest cavity
squeezing his bones. He looks at people out of the window: normal pe
doing normal things. Walking to the shops. Going to work. Being norm
suddenly looks like the most alien concept in the world, something he
barely conceive of.

im. ‘Do I need a lawyer?’ he asks.

‘That’ll be up to you. Do you have one?’

for.’ Tessie’s friend Barry is a lawyer. But he’s not Owen’s lawyer. ‘No,’
says.

a dog- ‘Well, we can assign you one if necessary.’

van. ‘No,’ he says. ‘No. I’m sure I’ll be fine.’

‘Let’s see how we go, shall we?’

ry. It’s Owen nods.

l from And then, like a house falling on him from the sky, its shadow gettin
ow. He bigger and bigger, faster and faster, he suddenly remembers something

ust In his underwear drawer. Shoved in in a slightly shameful rush after
o be night out with Bryn, with the intention of putting them in the public bi
girls. the street corner next time he was out, and then completely forgotten a

Deanna The date-rape drugs.

A terrible overdose of adrenaline hits the pit of Owen’s stomach. Hi
spins. His heart stops and then races, sickeningly. ‘Oh my God,’ he wh

‘Everything OK?’ says DI Currie, peering at him in her mirror.

eching ‘I think I’m going to ...’ He puts his hand over his mouth. He sudde
realises he’s going to be sick. ‘I’m going to ...’

DI Currie tells the PC to stop the car. They pull over by a grass verg
n the DI Currie exits and opens his door just as Owen tips forward and thro
noisily, painfully. His skin ripples with goosebumps and his head thro
the force of it. He gasps and throws up again. DI Currie appears in fro

no one him, a tissue in her hand. She looks down at him. Owen can't tell if it's
at a job, in her face, or disgust. He takes the tissue and dabs his mouth with it.

Tube 'All OK?' she asks him.

He nods.

'we'll 'Ready to keep going?'

'y'll He nods again.

st see She smiles and waits for him to put his legs back into the car before
closing the door and going back to the passenger seat.

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He nods.

'Ready to keep going?'

He nods again.

She smiles and waits for him to put his legs back into the car before closing the door and going back to the passenger seat.

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He nods, his fist balled against his mouth. 'Yes,' he says. 'Must be.'

She smiles, but she doesn't look as though she believes him.

‘Mum,’ says Georgia, walking into the bathroom without knocking. ‘I just arrested him!’

‘Who?’

‘The policewoman detective person. She just went into the house over the road with another cop. Came out with the creepy guy. Put him in a car and drove him away! There’s journalists and all sorts out there, taking pictures. Come and see!’

Cate dries her hands on the backs of her jeans. It’s been two hours since Currie was here talking to them, since Roan left for work. She’d thought things might be winding down, but apparently not. She goes to the front with Georgia.

There are people hanging around, a couple of small film crews pack their things away. Cate goes outside and wanders over to a young woman in a yellow anorak with a furry hood and says, ‘What’s been going on? What have they taken that guy?’

‘Owen Pick, you mean?’ The woman, whom Cate assumes to be a journalist, shoves some wires into a black bag and zips it up.

‘I don’t know his name – the guy who lives in that house? Youngish, dark hair?’

‘Yeah. Owen Pick. They’ve taken him in for questioning.’

‘About Saffyre Maddox?’

‘Yes. Apparently they found some of her stuff outside his bedroom window and traces of blood on the wall and in the grass.’

‘Oh my God.’ Cate brings her hands to her mouth. She hears Georgia gasping beside her.

‘Oh my God, is she dead?’ asks Georgia.

The woman shrugs. ‘No body found yet, but it’s looking increasingly likely.’

‘God, that’s so sad,’ says Georgia. Then she says, ‘That guy is weird doesn’t surprise me much that he could do something like that.’

The journalist stops and looks at Georgia. ‘They don’t know for sure that he did. So probably best not to start spreading that about.’ She pauses, looks at Owen Pick’s house and then back at Georgia and says, ‘Although you know ...’

Cate follows her gaze towards the house. She thinks about that night ago when Georgia thought she’d been followed home by Owen Pick. She thinks about that night a few days later when Tilly appeared on her door to say she’d been accosted on the other side of the street. She thinks of a string of sex attacks in the area. She thinks about Roan seeing Owen Pick on Valentine’s night, staring at their house.

She feels a weight lift from her gut, a weight she had barely acknowledged until now: the weight of doubt, the weight of suspicion, of thinking that any moment now the world could collapse on her head.

Since DI

She and Georgia make a cake. It’s nearly the end of the half-term holiday. Georgia’s been revising all week, or out with friends, and Cate’s barely seen her. It’s one of those grey, muffled days where everything feels fuzzy and unformed. The focus of weighing and measuring and counting and stirring is exactly what the day calls for.

Georgia has one of her playlists on Spotify, a mixture of music that she once danced to in nightclubs and modern music that sounds meaningless and empty to her ears. They’re making something they found on the internet called a Choca-Mocha cake. Cate gets an espresso from the coffee machine, leaves it on the side to cool. Georgia is creaming sugar and butter together. The oven hums as it heats up.

Owen Pick’s face keeps passing in and out of Cate’s consciousness. She notices the vaguely displeased look he has about her, as though he’s constantly thinking about unsavoury things. His hair with that slightly defeated, second-hand look about it. The worn-down shoes, incongruous in contrast with his smart clothes that look as though they don’t come naturally to him. He’s the type, she thinks. He seems the type: a single guy, living alone with an eccentric landlady in a grubby-looking house with tatty curtains at the windows.

y And now there is blood under his bedroom window.

l. It She glances up at Georgia. Georgia's cheeks are pink from the heat
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Cate leans towards her and pushes the hair behind her ear for her. Georgia drops a kiss on to Cate's hand and says, 'Thank you, Mum.'

They exchange a look. Cate knows they're both thinking the same thing.

Saffyre Maddox might be dead and their neighbour, who might have killed her, could have killed Georgia, too.

But now the police have him in custody and they are safe: they are making a cake.

SAFFYRE

Christmas Day last year was good.

Lee came over with the family, Aaron cooked amazing food, a mix of British Christmas fare and things I've been told my grandma used to cook. Christmas lunch: baked macaroni, sweet potato pie. We drank rum punch with umbrellas and tinsel in it and did karaoke with the machine Lee brought over and the tree looked amazing and we put a fake fire on the plasma and it really was, in spite of Granddad not being there, a proper Christmas Day.

I was so fat and tipsy and sleepy after that I didn't even really want to go outdoors. I felt quite grounded that evening with my big belly in my cocoon chair on the eighth floor. I just sat and rubbed my stomach and watched my little cousins playing with their new things. I'd spent months and months then following Roan and his family and his lover around and to spend time connecting to people in a real and proper way felt like magic. Maybe if I could have held on to that feeling, the sense that I belonged in that world, that I was meant to be there and not somewhere else, then maybe everything would have been different.

But for one day at least, I was chilled, I was present. It was nice.

The day after Boxing Day I started getting really antsy again. The flat was hot and there was this awful feeling of confinement in the block, like we were all gerbils locked up in tiny boxes. The sun was out and I put on my sneakers, pulled up my boots with my pyjama bottoms, tied back my hair and threw on my Puma jacket. I looked rough but I didn't care, I just needed to get out.

I called in on Jasmin. She looked rough too. We both laughed about shit we looked, how fat we were. She came out for a walk with me and went to Starbucks on Finchley Road and sat on the sofa there just chatting had half an eye on the big plate-glass window on to the street, just in case saw anyone I knew walk past. Then she said she had to get back because had family staying and she was supposed to be around and I walked home and then it was already starting to get dark, that stupid moment in the middle of winter when you've only been awake a few hours and the sky suddenly turns dirty yellow and the bare trees turn into black skeletons and night falls bang slap middle of the day.

I turned and looked back at the estate, at the top floors of my block. The windows glowed different colours and flashed with Christmas lights. It looked warm up there. It looked pretty.

I shivered slightly and, instead of going home, I turned and walked uphill towards the village.

ook for

Hampstead village looked like a life-size snow globe at this time of year. All the trees wrapped up in white lights. I liked walking up there for the exercise really; it's uphill the whole way from my flat so it's good aerobically. After two days sitting in my flat eating Ferrero Rocher it felt great to have the cold air passing in and out of my lungs, to feel my blood whooshing through my veins. I should have run it really, but I'm built for many things and running is not one of them.

It was busy in the village: the sales had started already and the shops were out in force. I peered into shop windows at things I couldn't afford didn't need. The shop for yoga mummies with the hundred-pound leggings Designer tile shops, designer paint shops, a shop selling just one brand of cooking pan in about twenty different colours: Le Creuset. I didn't quite understand Hampstead, but I liked it.

I was about to head right up to the other end of the village, to the very top of the hill where the air is thinner, where the Heath begins with its ragged entryways and endless vistas and its futuristic view of the pointy glass skyscrapers all the way over the other side of London, and I turned, and as I turned I was face-to-face with a man and that man was Roan.

I wasn't wearing my hood up so he recognised me immediately and I had a tiny beat it was a bit awkward. He was wearing a cloth cap and a padded

how and was carrying a huge Reiss carrier bag with the word 'Sale' printed
l we in red. He hadn't shaved and looked kind of bizarre.

ting. I He said, 'Hi, Saffyre. Wow, how are you?'

ase I 'I'm good. I'm good,' I said. 'How are you?'

se she He glanced down at his big bag. 'I'm great. Just exchanging a gift th
r home didn't fit.'

niddle 'From your wife?' I said, before I could check myself.

nly 'Yes,' he said, and I noticed his smile set like cement. 'Yes. Too big
t-time Unfortunately.'

I nodded encouragingly and smiled.

All the 'And you?' he said. 'You're OK?'

t 'Yeah. Well, my granddad died.' I shrugged. 'A couple of months a
that was bad.'

up the 'Oh, Saffyre, I'm really sorry to hear that.'

'You know,' I said. 'One of those things, isn't it? People die.'

ar with He nodded. 'Yes, people die, that is true. But it is horrible. I'm very
for your loss. I know how close you all were. How are you coping?'

e 'Well, you know, in some ways it's easier? Because Aaron doesn't l
do so much cooking and caring and stuff. But in other ways, it's shit re
elt because my family is just too small now. It's too, too small.'

ood I said this lightly, like maybe it was a joke, but I think it came out m
for emotional than I intended because Roan put his hand on my arm and l
at me with great concern and said, 'Do you think you need to talk this
pers through with someone?'

d and I thought, Ha, yeah, right, because you did such a good job of fixing
things. last time I came to you broken, didn't you?

of But I kind of laughed it off. 'No, honestly. It's all good. Just takes a
te getting used to.' Then there was a brief pause and I said, 'How's the fa

ry top He made a weird shape with his mouth and nodded. 'Good,' he said
'We're all good.'

gedy And then – and there's no point telling me that I shouldn't have don
towers because it's too late now, I did it, it's done – I looked him hard in the e
I saw I said, 'How's Alicia?'

Strike me down dead. Whatever. He deserved it. Standing there in h
for a poncey cap with a coat in a bag that his wife bought him because she s
ed coat thought he was her loyal husband, not some horny sex beast.

on it 'Sorry?' he said, and I could see the panic swimming about in his eyes like tiny tadpoles.

'How's Alicia?' I asked again, and then I got the adrenaline rush to my heart as my brain finally caught up with what my mouth was doing. 'Your colleague.'

He nodded, then shook his head and said, 'Sorry? But how do you know Alicia? Have you been back to the clinic?'

I just shook my head and smiled at him.

I could see him scrambling for the next thing to say or do and I decided that now was the time to step away from the hand grenade I'd just unpeeled. I said, 'Anyway, nice seeing you, Roan. Have a happy holiday.'

He turned as I left and said, 'But, Saffyre – what did you mean by that? Can't stop. Must dash.'

I walked that last leg of the hill at about a hundred miles an hour. Down the trees full of twinkly white pom poms. Restaurants full of rich people. I saw art galleries, estate agents, nail bars with pink chandeliers. It was proper dark by the time I got to the top. I stood with my hands on my hips and I gave to looked down, my breath coming in and out of me so loudly I could hear myself really,

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Owen is in a room with pale blue walls, a plate-glass window on one side and a tall thin window on the other with opaque, textured glass and three vertical white metal bars.

In front of him are DI Currie and another detective, a man called DI Henry. He's wearing a really nice blue suit with a tight white shirt underneath. He has blond hair, like DI Currie, and is about the same age as her; they look strangely like a couple, as if they've just ordered pizzas from a branch of Zizzi's and are trying to think of something to talk about.

'So, Owen.' DI Currie smiles at him, running a fingertip over her paperwork. 'I'm really grateful to you for agreeing to come at such short notice and for being so cooperative. Thank you.'

Owen says, 'That's OK.'

'We'll try to keep this as short as possible. I'm sure you've got things you need to be getting on with. But we do, just for your information, have a warrant to keep you for questioning for twenty-four hours. So if there's anyone you need to talk to, just let us know and we can contact them for you. OK?'

She smiles again.

Owen nods.

'So,' she begins, after setting the machine to record. 'Owen. Let's go back to the night of February the fourteenth, if you don't mind. I know we've already spoken about this, but just for the sake of our recordings, so we can get it on record. You went out that evening?'

'Yes.'

'And where did you go?'

'I went to an Italian. On Shaftesbury Avenue.'

'And who were you with?'

'I was with a woman called Deanna Wurth. On a date.'

'So, you had a drink?'

'I had a few drinks.'

'How many, would you say, roughly?'

'We shared a bottle of champagne and then a bottle of red wine. And a cocktail. I'm not really a big drinker, so that was quite a lot for me.'

'Gosh,' says DI Currie. 'I'd say that was quite a lot for anyone!' She exchanges a look with DI Henry, who shakes his head and smiles.

'So,' she continues. 'You weren't sober when you got home?'

'No. I was really quite drunk.'

ide, a 'And this was what time?'

tical 'Roughly eleven thirty. Maybe later.'

Jack 'And what did you do when you got home? Could you talk us through again please? How did you get home?'

ge as 'I got the Tube to Finchley Road. Then I walked to my house, via in a Winterham Gardens.'

in a 'And then?'

'I saw the person in the hoodie outside the house opposite. I went in. I went to bed.'

ort 'And just going back, if you don't mind, to your walk from the Tube station that night?'

Owen blanches slightly at the hazy memory of a woman, her fearful gaze on him, her finger over the emergency icon on her phone screen.

a 'Did you perhaps see anyone when you were walking home?'

s He shakes his head.

or you. 'Yes or no, please, Mr Pick.'

'No,' he says. 'No, I didn't see anyone.'

'What about this lady?'

DI Currie passes him a photograph. It's an attractive young woman who looks like an official company portrait. She has long blond hair and is wearing a red blouse.

o back He shakes his head, rubs his chin nervously. 'No,' he says. 'I don't know her.'

'Well, this lady lives two doors down from you. And she says on the subject in question that you physically threatened her at around midnight. That she attempted to block her path. That you called her "a bitch". She says she was very, very intimidated by you and nearly called the police.'

Owen inhales deeply. ‘That’s not what happened.’

‘OK, so you do remember this lady.’

‘Well, I do now. I just didn’t recognise her from that photo. But I remember her being there. She was staring at her phone. She didn’t see coming. And it was her who got in *my* way. She was rude to *me*. I was defending myself. Reacting to her rudeness. For God’s sake.’ He tuts and folds his arms petulantly.

‘OK, so you’re heading home. You have a contretemps with this lady. I see the young girl outside your neighbour’s house at about midnight. Can you describe it for us now? Whatever you can remember about that?’

He sighs. ‘I mean, I don’t even know any more. It was late. It was dark. I was still quite drunk. It could have been anything.’

‘Just try, Owen, please. Thank you.’

‘I saw ...’ He pauses, tries his hardest to put himself back there, outside the house, the chill air of his breath around him. ‘A figure. With a hood. Short. Not tall. Not short. I thought it was a man at first. They were staring at the top of the footpath, by the gate. They had their hands in their pockets. Their elbows were sticking out like this.’ He makes pointy wings of his elbows. ‘And then, after about a minute – less, half a minute – they turned slightly towards me, and I saw then that it was probably a girl. With kind of ...’ He searches for the right word. ‘Puffy hair.’

‘Puffy? You mean like Afro-Caribbean type of hair?’

‘I don’t know,’ he says. ‘I don’t really know what that means.’

‘OK. So you saw this figure. And then what happened?’

Owen shakes his head gently, searching his memory for the moment it came after the girl’s eyes met his. But there’s nothing there.

He shakes his head properly. ‘Nothing happened. I saw her and then she went straight indoors.’

‘And then?’

‘I got into bed and I fell asleep.’

‘Did anyone see you coming back in?’

‘No, not that I’m aware of.’

‘We’ve asked the neighbours in your building and none of them recalled hearing the door close at that time of night.’

He blinks. ‘I don’t see ...’ he begins. ‘They were probably all asleep. I don’t think they would have heard the door go.’

‘I don’t know, Mr Pick. But it’s a big heavy door. And it does make loud bang when it’s shut.’

He blinks again and shakes his head. ‘Not really,’ he says.

‘Well,’ says DI Currie, ‘I suppose that’s a matter of opinion.’ She glances at the other detective. ‘OK, I think DI Henry has a few questions too. / OK? Can I get you some more water? A hot drink? Anything to eat?’

He shakes his head. ‘No, thank you.’

DI Henry opens his notes. He clears his throat and he says, ‘So, you can see your neighbours across the street, the, er, the Fours?’

Owen shakes his head.

‘Cate and Roan Fours.’

‘No, I don’t know who they are.’

‘OK, well, they live in the house across the street where you say you saw his figure on the night of the fourteenth.’

He nods. ‘Right.’ He knows who they’re talking about now. That faded face, the Lycra dad and the nervous wife and the over-confident daughter and the gangly boy. ‘The ones with the kids?’

‘Yes, the ones with the kids, that is correct. How would you say your relationship with them is?’

‘I don’t have a relationship with them.’

‘Dr Fours says that you once accosted him in the street when he was out for a run; he said you were rather drunk and asking him strange questions.’

Owen repositions himself in his chair. ‘What has this got to do with me?’

‘Well, nothing directly, Mr Pick. But tangentially, we are forming a picture of what happened here.’

Owen breathes in sharply as he realises what is happening. He is being led by this pair of bland, blond, cookie-cutter human beings down an opaque, twisting path towards incriminating himself.

‘You know what,’ he says. ‘I think maybe if you’re not going to be able to find me anything to do with actual evidence of me having done anything wrong, and you’re just going to talk about things I may or may not have said to my neighbours three weeks ago, then maybe I should have a lawyer. Please.’

The blond twins look at each other and then back at him. ‘Of course, Owen. Absolutely. Do you have a number I could call?’

‘Mr Barrington Blair. Barry. I think he works in the West End someplace, near Soho, that sort of area.’

quite a 'Great, we'll get someone to call him now. In the meantime, maybe take a short break.'

They shuffle their papers together. DI Henry straightens his jacket, lances collar. DI Currie touches the back of her complicated hairstyle, pressing a loose strand into place. Owen wonders if they're real people, or very sophisticated androids.

'Someone will bring you something to eat, Owen. Just hold tight.'

And then Owen is alone. He stretches his legs out and crosses them at the ankle. He scrapes a piece of encrusted food off the cuff of his jumper. He suddenly thinks that there may be a row of police officers and detectives sitting on the other side of the plate glass watching him so decides to n about as little as he possibly can.

A moment later a young uniformed policeman comes in with a couple sandwiches and a paper cup of tea.

'Tuna,' he says. 'Or chicken Caesar wrap?'

'I'm not hungry,' Owen replies.

'I'll leave both,' he says. And then he gives him the tea and leaves the room.

'How long?' Owen calls towards him through the crack in the door.

The boy reappears. 'No idea,' he says chirpily. 'Sorry.'

There's nothing in this room to look at. Nothing to distract him. He fiddles with his fingernails, he fiddles with his hair, tries to straighten his stupid asymmetric fringe. He touches the scab on his forehead. He crosses and uncrosses his legs. Time passes in long, hollow moments, stretched out in shape by the weirdness of the scenario.

He pulls one of the sandwiches towards him. Tuna mayo and cucumber. He hates tuna and he hates cucumber and it's brown bread, which he's actually eaten. He doesn't even look at the other one; he knows he won't be asking it.

He sips the scalding tea gingerly. His heart jumps about again at the thought of the police rifling his bedroom, the pills in his sock drawer. He tries to work out what he's going to say about the pills when they inevitably find them. How will he explain Bryn? How will he explain his relationship with her, an insane incel who wants to incite mass rape of women?

Owen taps his fingertips against the tabletop and tries to control his breathing. He can feel a red ball of panic hurtling towards him, threatening to swallow him up. He pictures the police behind the reflecting glass again

we'll cannot freak out, he cannot. Barry will be here soon. Barry will tell him to do.

He takes another sip of tea, too quickly, feels it scald the inside of his mouth, winces and says *fuck* under his breath.

Finally the door opens again and the two detectives return. The woman says, 'We've contacted Mr Blair. He's on his way. We can carry on talking while we wait – that could get you home quicker? Or you can wait until here. It's up to you.'

He thinks again of the pills in his underwear drawer.

He says, 'I think I'll wait.'

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He says, 'I think I'll wait.'

Roan comes back from work early that evening.

Cate glances up at him from the screen of her laptop when he walks the kitchen. 'Oh!' she says. 'You're back early.'

He walks past her and directly to the fridge and starts pouring himself a glass of wine before he's even taken off his coat. He holds the bottle aloft and says, 'Want one?'

It's barely 6 p.m., but she nods.

'How was your day?' she asks.

'Pretty grim,' he says, unzipping his coat and taking it off. 'Pretty bloody grim.'

She knows there's no point expecting him to expand. It usually means a suicidal patient, or some violence or something appalling involving blood and fluids. It also sometimes means a set-to with a colleague or a superior. Whichever is the case in this instance, Cate doesn't ask. She merely raises the wine glass to his and says, 'Here's to Friday night.'

He returns the gesture drily and gets out his phone, starts scrolling through something on his screen. Then he turns it to face her. 'Have you seen this?'

She takes the phone, puts on her reading glasses and looks at the screen. 'Oh my God.'

It's a photo of the guy from across the street. His mouth is open and he can see his fillings and a grey tongue. He has blood encrusted on his face and his hair is greasy and slightly brutal-looking. It's a shocking photo. The headline above it says: 'Is this Saffyre's killer? Man taken in for questioning after "blood and phone case" found on his property'.

'Did you see this happening?' he asks her.

'I didn't no. But Georgia did.'

'Did you know about the blood the detectives found?'

‘Yes. A journalist told us. Who told you?’ she asks.

‘A colleague. Well, many colleagues. It’s all anyone’s talked about. It’s ... fuck. It’s just awful.’

She looks at the page on Roan’s phone again. She imagines a million phones in a million hands, a million people looking at this man’s face, now. This man who lives across the road from her.

She reads the story beneath:

Earlier today, Owen Pick, a 33-year-old college lecturer, was brought in by north London police for questioning regarding the disappearance of 17-year-old Saffyre Maddox. Pick, who lives in Hampstead with his aunt, Tessa McDonald, was recently suspended from his job as a Computer Science lecturer at Ealing Tertiary College, after allegations of sexual misconduct from several students. One student, Maisy Driscoll, told reporters that Pick had a reputation amongst the female students at her college for ‘being creepy’. She said that he had stroked her hair at a college party and shaken sweat into her face a number of times. The college would give no comment about Mr Pick’s employment with them.

Neighbours in his leafy Hampstead avenue describe Mr Pick as ‘odd’, ‘a loner’ and, one woman, Nancy Wade, 25, recalls being accosted by him on the street just before midnight on the night of Saffyre Maddox’s disappearance. She told reporters that Mr Pick ‘deliberately blocked my path. When I asked him to move out of my way, he turned nasty and abused me verbally. I was genuinely scared for my life.’

Ernesto Bianco, 73, who lives in the flat above Mr Pick and Ms McDonald, told reporters that this is not the first time Mr Pick has been questioned by the police in recent weeks. According to Mr Bianco, Mr Pick had previously been visited by the police in relation to a string of serious sexual assaults in the area, including two in the immediate vicinity of his property. No one has yet been found or charged with these attacks. It is thought he will be questioned about these events too.

Unsubstantiated reports suggest that while searching the area beneath Pick’s bedroom window, police officers uncovered possessions, including a phone case, that are suspected to belong to

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the missing teenager. It is also thought that they discovered bloodstains on the brickwork close to Pick's bedroom and in the garden below. Forensic officers are still on site and the case is ongoing. Nobody has yet been found and the search for Saffyre Maddox continues.

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Cate hands the phone back to Roan. She thinks about how guilty she'd feel after sending the police to Owen Pick's door those weeks earlier. But she's been right, she thinks to herself now, she'd followed her instincts and her instincts had been absolutely spot on.

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'Did you read that bit?' she asks him. 'About the sexual misconduct work. I mean, it looks pretty clear, doesn't it? It must be him.'

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Roan takes his phone from her outstretched hand. 'Looks like it. Yeah.'

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Cate takes a sip of wine and looks at Roan thoughtfully. 'But it's still a bit odd, isn't it? That she was here? On our street? I mean, why here? Of all the places? And why him and why her? It's just ...' She shivers. 'It's unsettling.'

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Roan shrugs. 'I guess she didn't live that far from here. And this is close to the roads you'd walk up to get to the village. Maybe it's not that weird all.'

'But where was she really going? No one says they'd made arrangements to meet her?'

'I don't know,' says Roan, spreading his arms. 'I don't know anything about her or her private life.'

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She sighs. 'Just to think,' she says, 'that time he was following George last month ...'

'Well, thank God she had the common sense to call you.'

'Yes. Absolutely. I can't even ...'

'No,' Roan says, shaking his head gently. 'No. Neither can I.'

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Cate watches from her bedroom window that night, to see if the police have searched Owen Pick home. But the street is quiet. A fine drizzle falls from a black, clouded sky. She can see the silky filaments of it through the yellow streetlights. The police ribbon has gone from the road, but is still taped across the gate into the building site. It's the weekend tomorrow. Do police carry out forensic searches of crime scenes at the weekend? She has no idea. She hears a sound behind her and turns, expecting to see Roan, but it's not, it's Jack.

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'What're you doing?' he says.

‘Just seeing what’s happening over there.’

‘ass He puts a hand on to her shoulder and she covers it with hers.
o ‘I feel sorry for him,’ he says.
She turns and looks at him.
‘Who?’
‘Him,’ he says. ‘The guy over there. I feel bad. Everyone will just th
felt did it, whether he did or not.’
she’d ‘What makes you think he didn’t?’
ner ‘I didn’t say that,’ he says. ‘It’s just, innocent until proven guilty and
at that. But people, you know, they like having someone to blame, don’t
s.’ They like knowing who the bad person is. Who to throw the eggs at. T
ll so cups his cheeks, feels the suggestion of three-day-old boy-stubble, soft
all the summer grass. ‘You’re such a lovely boy,’ she says. ‘Such a lovely boy
tling.’ He smiles and rubs his face against her palm, then draws her toward
one of for a hug. She feels the bones of him, the sinew and the tendon. He sm
after the fabric conditioner she uses. He smells of something else, too, a slig
nents tobaccoey smell. She wonders if he smokes. And if he does, she wond
ng she minds. She smoked at fourteen. In fields and by railway tracks and
rgia behind walls and hedges. She smoked Silk Cuts. She stole them from h
mother and then when her mother found out and started hiding her Silk
she smoked roll-ups instead. Can she be angry with him for doing wha
herself had done?

She feels that in the current climate of murder and blood she does not
that her son might be smoking. Maybe she will mind later on. She lets
and smiles.

‘I’m sure justice will be served,’ she says reassuringly. ‘I’m sure the
person will be punished.’

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‘I feel sorry for him,’ he says.

She turns and looks at him.

‘Who?’

‘Him,’ he says. ‘The guy over there. I feel bad. Everyone will just think he did it, whether he did or not.’

‘What makes you think he didn’t?’

‘I didn’t say that,’ he says. ‘It’s just, innocent until proven guilty and all that. But people, you know, they like having someone to blame, don’t they? They like knowing who the bad person is. Who to throw the eggs at. The rocks. I feel bad for him.’

Cate turns and looks at her boy. She puts a hand to the side of his face and cups his cheeks, feels the suggestion of three-day-old boy-stubble, soft as summer grass. ‘You’re such a lovely boy,’ she says. ‘Such a lovely boy.’

He smiles and rubs his face against her palm, then draws her towards him for a hug. She feels the bones of him, the sinew and the tendon. He smells of the fabric conditioner she uses. He smells of something else, too, a slightly tobaccoey smell. She wonders if he smokes. And if he does, she wonders if she minds. She smoked at fourteen. In fields and by railway tracks and behind walls and hedges. She smoked Silk Cuts. She stole them from her mother and then when her mother found out and started hiding her Silk Cuts, she smoked roll-ups instead. Can she be angry with him for doing what she herself had done?

She feels that in the current climate of murder and blood she does not mind that her son might be smoking. Maybe she will mind later on. She lets him go and smiles.

‘I’m sure justice will be served,’ she says reassuringly. ‘I’m sure the right person will be punished.’

It is nearly midnight. Owen is still sitting in a pale blue room with a lone narrow window and a two-way mirror. DIs Currie and Henry are still sitting facing him. On the table in front of them are two empty paper cups, the wrappings of three Kit Kat bars, four empty sugar packets and three wooden stirrers. Owen drags his finger through the edges of a small puddle of toothpaste and makes a tentacle out of it. He does this seven more times, until it is an octopus.

Apparently they are awaiting a report from the guys who've been ransacking his bedroom all day. Barry sits next to Owen, picking at his cuticles. He wears cufflinks with green stones in them and a lilac and grey checked shirt. He looks incongruous in this room with the bland, identical detectives, the peeling walls and Owen himself, who is starting to feel stale and unfragrant.

Owen hasn't told Barry about the Rohypnol in his sock drawer. When Barry walked in four hours ago, Owen had taken one look at him and realized the only reason he was here was to get paid. There was no smile of recognition or of empathy, no suggestion that Barry had ever seen Owen before in his life. He'd been businesslike to the point of cruelty.

The door opens and two more policemen enter. They look at Owen strangely as they walk in and Owen feels his stomach curl at the edges. He knows what that look means.

They take DI Currie out of the room for a few minutes; then she returns alone. She spreads some new paperwork on the table in front of her, clears her throat, says something into DI Henry's ear, stares straight at Owen and says, 'Well. Mr Pick. I think ...' She moves the paperwork around again. She's clearly working out her next move, wants to make sure she pitches it just right. 'I think, maybe, we need to back up a little here. I think we need

discuss, maybe, your activities over the past few weeks – since, in fact date of your suspension from Ealing College. Would you say, Mr Pick that experience has changed you at all? Made you view life differently

Barry leans forward, runs a finger down his exquisite silk tie and says ‘Don’t answer that, Owen. It’s a ridiculous question.’

Owen closes his mouth.

DI Currie inhales and starts again. ‘Mr Pick, we have been through t browsing history of your laptop. We’ve found some quite disturbing er in a number of what I believe are known as *incel* forums. Mr Blair, do know what an incel forum is?’

ng ‘Indeed I do,’ says Barry, taking Owen somewhat by surprise. Barry as though he came straight from 1960; Owen cannot imagine him own sitting e computer, let alone knowing what an incel forum is.

ooden ‘You have been frequenting these forums quite a lot lately, Mr Pick, ea and you say?’

He shrugs and says, ‘No. Not really.’

; ‘Well, I can tell you exactly how much time you’ve spent frequentir forums, Mr Pick, because we have the data right here. Since Thursday green January the seventeenth, the day you were suspended from your job at College, you have spent roughly four hours a day on these forums.’

ikit ‘Owen, you still don’t need to say anything. This is all complete nor

very ‘Owen, you’ve said some pretty dreadful things on these forums. Yc joined in discussions on how to rape women, which sort of women des en be raped, and why. And you’ve referred to women in such derogatory realised that I can barely bring myself to repeat the terminology. You sit here, I like butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth, with your big, sad eyes, while en thinking these things, expressing these vile, vile opinions about women

. He Her voice is raised, her eyes flash. For the first time since Owen firs eyes on Angela Currie, she is showing some genuine personality. She t the papers around so he can see the words he typed in a frenzy of euph meeting people he could relate to.

irns The words swim in front of his eyes.

ears ... Slag ... Mouth ...

and ... Fist ...

in. ... Whore ... Hard ...Face ...

es it ... Slut ...

need to

, the ... Bitch ... Bleed ... Hole ...
, that
' He closes his eyes.
ys, He didn't mean any of those words.
He'd just been joining in. The new boy. Getting carried away.
'Can you confirm that these were written by you?'
he He looks at Barry.
tries Barry just blinks at him. He is disgusted.
you Owen nods his head.
'Please affirm verbally, Mr Pick.'
r looks 'Yes. I wrote these words. But I didn't mean them.'
ing a 'You didn't mean them?'
'No. Not really. I mean, I am, I *was* cross about a lot of things. I was
would about being reported for things I hadn't done at work ...'
'Hadn't done?'
'Hadn't done in the way those girls *said* I'd done them.'
ig these 'You mean they misread your intentions?'
'Yes. No. Yes. I don't have the slightest interest in teenage girls. No
Ealing that way. They look like children to me. So whatever it was they thought
done, it had to have been done entirely innocently, unintentionally.'
sense.' DI Currie nods. 'So you were cross about that, and you went to these
ou've places on the internet' – she stabs a piece of paper with her fingertip –
erve to you said disgusting, violent things about women, because you were an
terms Owen nods. 'Yes. That's right. But I didn't mean any of it.'
looking 'Just like you didn't mean to flick sweat on those girls or ask them if
' liked girls or boys?'
1.' 'What? I didn't say that ...'
t set 'They say you did, Mr Pick. Nancy Wade says you made her fear for
turns life while she walked alone in the dark. Your neighbours identified you
oria at potential sex threat when their daughter's friend said she'd been accosted
close to their home last month and a police officer was sent to ask you
that. You have spent dozens of hours in chat rooms and on forums discussing
the best way to rape women and we have found traces of Saffyre Maddox's
blood on the wall and in the grass beneath your bedroom window, Saffyre
Maddox's phone case also beneath your bedroom window, and now, Mr
Pick, we have been told of the existence of a large amount of the prohi-
drug, Rohypnol, in one of your bedroom drawers – Rohypnol being, as

sure we're all aware, a very well-known example of what is known as rape drug.

'The time is currently twelve-oh-three a.m., the day is Saturday the third of February. Owen Michael Pick, I am placing you under arrest for abduction of Saffyre Maddox. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Do you understand?'

Owen looks at Barry as if there is something he should be saying or that could make this go away.

But Barry just closes his eyes and nods.

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sure we're all aware, a very well-known example of what is known as a date-rape drug.

'The time is currently twelve-oh-three a.m., the day is Saturday the twenty-third of February. Owen Michael Pick, I am placing you under arrest for the abduction of Saffyre Maddox. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Do you understand?'

Owen looks at Barry as if there is something he should be saying or doing that could make this go away.

But Barry just closes his eyes and nods.

SAFFYRE

A few days before New Year's Eve, I found Aaron standing at the door of our flat looking edgy and bouncy. I'd just got out of the lift. I said, 'What's up with you?'

'I've got a surprise for you.'

I smiled suspiciously at him. 'Oh yeah?'

'Take your coat off,' he said. He took it from me as I slipped my arms out of the sleeves and hung it up for me. 'Come. But be quiet. OK? Take your shoes off.'

I kicked off my trainers and looked at him questioningly.

Then I followed him into the living room. He led me towards the Christmas tree and said, 'Oh look! There's another present under the tree. Santa must have come back because you have been such a good girl!'

I frowned at him and then knelt down next to the parcel. It was more like a box than a parcel, a shiny red box with a lid and a golden bow.

'You'd better open it, don't you think?'

I slowly pulled the lid up. I looked in the box. And then I gasped. My hands went straight to my mouth. I looked at Aaron and I said, 'No!'

'Actually, yes.' He smiled hard.

Inside the box was a tiny cream kitten. It was like the sort of kitten you see on Instagram: big blue eyes, so much fluff. It opened its mouth like a lion about to roar, and made a tiny, pathetic mewling sound. I laughed and put my hands into the box to scoop it out. It barely weighed anything; it was a fluffball and no physical mass, just a tiny breath of a thing. 'Is it ours?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'He's yours. He's your cat.'

I made some weird noise, like a squeal mixed with a groan. All my life I'd been asking for a pet and all my life I'd been told no, that it was too much work, we didn't have enough space, that Granddad had allergies, that it was too expensive, too much. And I'd finally given up asking a couple of years back and now here was my pet. Here he was. In my hands. I kissed his forehead and said, 'For real?'

And Aaron said, 'Yes. For real.'

'Oh my God. Oh my actual God. I can't believe it. I really can't believe it.'

I put the kitten down on the floor and let him explore. He stood on his hind legs and pawed at a low-hanging bauble. Aaron and I looked at each other and laughed.

He said, 'What are you going to call him?'

'Gosh, I don't know. What do you think?'

r of
hat's 'I dunno. I mean, the blue eyes – Frank Sinatra?'

'Who?'

'Frank Sinatra. He's a singer from the old days. Called 'Ol Blue Eyes' because of his blue eyes. How do you not know this?'

'Why should I know this? I'm young. I'm not old like you.'

ns out
our 'But Frank would be a cool name for him, don't you think?'

I picked up the kitten and looked at his big blue eyes. He did the tiny thing again. I thought, No, he doesn't look like a Frank. He looks like an angel. I said, 'Angelo. I'm going to call him Angelo.'

ee!
e of a
y I know why Aaron bought me the kitten. I'm not stupid and it was pretty obvious. He bought me the kitten to make me want to stay home. I knew I was uncomfortable about the amount of time I was spending outside the house and he's not stupid either. It was kind of genius. Because how could I be hanging around outside on my own in the dark and the cold and the rain when I could be cuddled up with Angelo, the kitten of my dreams?

ou see
ion
put my
ll fluff
Aaron. But it didn't really work. It was kind of out of sight, out of mind. When I was home with Angelo, I was obsessed with him. I stared at him; I watched him like he was the best TV show ever made. Everything he did enchanted me. In the mornings he'd wake me up by walking across my face with his little needle claws out, and I didn't even mind. He smelled like a cloud of soft fluff, like a pool of fresh water, like the top of a mountain. I picked him up sometimes just so I could smell him. I loved him. I really, really did love him.

life, all But he wasn't enough, not enough to stop me wanting to go out, pull
: was my hood and disappear in plain sight.

gies,

ears The first time I spent the whole night outdoors was New Year's Eve.

head I told Aaron I was going to a party at Jasmin's and spending the night.
Aaron had a job behind a bar in Kilburn for the night, double hourly rate and
massive tips; he did it every year, usually came home with a couple of
hundred pounds for one night's work. I said I'd be home early on New Year's
eve it.' Day to take care of Angelo, and Aaron said he'd take me out for a late
his back Nando's if I was up for it.

ther I packed up my overnight bag, and got my sleeping bag out of the top of
my wardrobe (bought for and not used since my year six PGL trip. It was
bright pink with hearts on it). I packed some food, some meat for the fire, a
hot-water bottle in a furry cover, a portable charger for my phone, a toilet roll
and some hand sanitiser. I wore lots of clothes even though it wasn't that
cold. I picked up Angelo and kissed him and pulled his claws out of my
clothes and smelled him and left him in the kitchen with some newspaper
down and some biscuits in his little bowl.

The last thing I heard before I left was the sound of his little teeth
y noise crunching up his food.

an

I did show up at Jasmin's. She was having what she kept calling a soiree.
Rolling her Rs. A swor-r-r-ay. I don't even know where she got the word
from. She looked appalled when I took off my coat and she saw me all
ty layered up in hoodies and fleeces and my worst joggers.

w he 'Are you even trying any more?' she asked.

ie flat, I said, 'I've got plans. I need to be warm.'

wet 'Tell me you've got some cute little bralet on underneath that or
something?'

hen I I said, 'No. I look shit. Deal with it.'

:ched I stayed till about eleven o'clock. It was fine. It was the girls from school
nted a couple of their boyfriends. I had a glass of red wine. I figured it would
his me sleep. There was music and chatting and then some of Jasmin's au-
t, like a turned up drunk from the pub and they were really loud and funny and
mes there was louder music and some dancing and it was nice. I knew eventually
would make a fuss about me disappearing before midnight, that they'd

I up to persuade me to stay. So I didn't say I was going. I just picked up my rucksack and the end of a bottle of wine and I went.

I peered into Roan's windows from the street. They were a little steam ht. so I figured they were home. I wondered what people like Roan and hi te and did on New Year's Eve. Did they go out for posh dinners? Or get drun dance in their mates' houses? Or did they just sit and drink wine on the Year's I climbed over the wall into the empty plot and set up my little sleep area behind the JCB. No one would see me there if they happened to w in. It also protected me from the wind. I put a blanket down on the gro p of after moving a few chips of rock out of the way. I took off my top hoo was rolled it up into a pillow shape. I put my Puffa coat back on and pulled ox, a beanie down over my ears. I sat with my back against the JCB and I dr ilet roll wine from the bottle. I'd never had more than one glass of wine before at was pleasantly surprised by how good it felt, what a difference it made y everything. I looked at my phone: Jasmin was posting endless films of per everyone dancing and screeching and leering into the camera. I didn't like I was missing out. I was where I wanted to be.

I checked the time: 11.28 p.m.

I messaged Jasmin and told her I'd gone home because I was tired a wished her a Happy New Year and she didn't reply which meant she w ée. having fun. I didn't want her to worry about me.

rd I finished the wine and felt a blanket of goeey drunkenness envelop

At midnight the sky filled with fireworks. I thought of Aaron behind bar in Kilburn, loading a dishwasher with glasses, surrounded by drun people. I thought of Granddad up in the sky doing whatever dead peop in the sky.

And then I heard a door open and close, and the sound of a man cou I went to the front wall and peered through the trees and saw Roan shr on a coat, leaving his house. I tiptoed round the perimeter and watched chool, as he turned the corner and pulled his phone from his pocket.

ld help 'Hi,' I heard him say. 'It's me. Happy New Year.'

ities I heard a tinny woman's voice in the background.

then 'Are you OK? Are you ...? Oh, OK. Yeah. Good. No, I can't talk fo yone I just said I was putting some rubbish out. Yeah, we're all just, you kn all try hanging out. Having champagne. Nothing special. You know. No. Not like that. Quite quiet. Yes. I know, I wish that too. Fuck, yes, of course

7 it. You know I do. I wish it so much. Alicia. Fuck, I love you so much. Yes. This time next year, I swear. I swear. This time next year it will be and me, the Maldives, maybe, the Seychelles, yes! Better food! God, you and me. Just us. I promise. I swear. I love you so much. I love you so much. Fuck Alicia. I need to go back in now. Keep the faith, my beautiful girl. Just keep the faith. Yes. Yes. You too. Happy New Year. I'll see you in three days on the sofa? I love you. I love you, Bye. Bye.'

And then, silence.

I went back to the front of the plot and looked towards Roan's house. The wife was there, in the doorway, in a sparkly jumper and jeans, socked feet and a glass of champagne in her hand.

'Where've you been?' she called out to Roan as he turned the corner.
'Nowhere,' he said. 'Just thought I heard something.'

'Heard something?'

'Yeah. Shouting. I was just being nosey. Think it was just merrymaking.'

I didn't hear what the wife said in reply because another load of fire went off. But my heart raced. Roan Fours, the man I'd sat in a room with every week for more than three years while he unpeeled the layers of my psyche so gently and skilfully: here he was, making plans to leave his home for some titian-haired temptress. *This time next year.*

This time next year the skinny wife would be living in some shit flat somewhere because it would be all she could afford and his kids would have to shuttle back and forth between two shit flats and sit making awkward conversation with Alicia, and looking after their mum because her head would be broken and she wouldn't be the mum they knew any more, she'd be a new mum, and their childhoods would be shattered and changed. And I did I know all this? I just did. I could see it in the skulking form of the wife with his spliff and his fox, who already knew that life was going to be difficult and in the confident swagger of the big-boned daughter with the booming voice who thought that life was always going to be this easy. And I saw the nervous elbow-rubbing of the wife who'd built her life around a man who thought would never let her down, whilst knowing all along that he would. I knew it because I could see it. With my own eyes. Because, as I kept talking for so long. you, I'm not stupid.

I felt the red wine start to sour in my stomach.

And then I moved back into the shadows again at the sound of the front door opening and closing once more. I heard soft footsteps approach and

. Yes. turn the corner.

e you A male voice. 'Flynn. Mate. Over here.'

es! 'Yo.'

ck. 'Happy New Year and all that.'

: keep 'Yeah.'

ys! I 'Twenty nineteen.'

'Fuck. Yeah.'

'Hope it's not as shit as 2018.'

e. The 'All years are shit.'

feet, a 'True. Very true.'

r. I could see the shadowy outline of the two boys fist-bumping each other through the hedges. Then I saw them turn the corner and head towards the gap between the trees. I flattened myself into the furthest corner. Another load of fireworks went off and I used the noise to cover the sound of my burrowing my way into the undergrowth.

works 'Whoa,' I heard one of the boys say. 'Look. Rough sleepers.'

ith I saw the light from a phone arcing across my little campsite.

ny I felt a burst of territorialism and had to stop myself from storming off and telling them to leave my shit alone.

'Wonder who it is?' said one of the boys.

t 'Looks like a girl,' said the other. 'Look. Pink sleeping bag.'

d have 'God, that's really sad. Fancy having to sleep rough when you're a girl.

d 'Got wine though,' said one of them, holding my empty bottle up.

rt I saw them both stop then and look around the plot. And once they were reassured that the mysterious rough sleeper wasn't about to jump out at them, they sat down and built themselves a zoot.

son I was close to 'Clive's' bedroom window in my little hidden corner.

hard, glanced up at the muted light seeping from his curtains and wondered what he was doing in there. Poor old Clive and his nylon counterpane.

it in The smell of draw reached me a minute later. Their voices drifted slowly across with their exhaled smoke. 'Things are going to be different this year.'

ould. I I couldn't tell which boy was speaking; they both sounded the same.

elling 'Oh yeah. You mean ...?'

'Yeah. The mask's coming off.'

One of them laughed. Then the other one joined in.

ront 'No more Mr Nice Guy?'

nd then 'No more Mr Nice Guy. Fuck that. Fuck it hard.'

More laughter.

‘This time next year.’

‘Yeah, this time next year.’

‘Maybe we’ll be famous.’

‘Infamous.’

‘Yeah ...’

More fireworks obliterated the rest of that particular conversation.

After a few minutes they packed their stuff away and got to their feet.

‘No fox tonight?’ said one of them.

‘Probably scared by the fireworks,’ said the other.

Other They both paused and looked down at my little pile of possessions. ‘I wonder if the homeless girl will turn up.’

the ‘Maybe she’s already here.’

her ‘Ooooh, scary!’

ie ‘Shall we leave her something?’

‘Like what?’

‘I dunno. The rest of this champagne?’

over I noticed for the first time that one of them was holding a bottle by the neck.

‘Yeah. Why not, I don’t want it.’

girl.’ They planted the bottle carefully on the ground by my things. Then they said, ‘Happy New Year, homeless girl.’

And then the other one said, ‘Hope your year gets better, homeless girl.’

And then they disappeared again.

I watched them part ways on the street outside. I saw Joshua walk straight across the street to his house and his equally lanky friend walk the other way down the hill.

what And then the fireworks stopped; the sky cleared; it fell silent. I took out my trainers and put on the big fluffy socks I’d packed. I tucked myself into my sleeping bag. I sniffed the rim of the half-drunk bottle of champagne and thought better of it. I switched on my phone and replied to some messages including one from Aaron saying he was on his way home and he’d see me the morning. I stared up at the sky, the fresh 2019 sky. Black, new, unbroken.

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Cate goes to see her house in Kilburn on Sunday. She doesn't like going during the week when the builders are there and she gets in the way and she looks at her curiously as if she has somehow caught them in the act of doing something bad.

It's early when she leaves the flat; the children are still asleep and Richard is in bed, propped up on pillows with his laptop, catching up on some work. She decides to walk; it'll take thirty minutes and it's a pleasant morning. She crosses the street and peers into the empty plot through the foliage. You would never know, she thinks to herself, you would never know about the detectives and the police cars and the helicopters; it was as if none of it had ever happened. Then she walks past Owen Pick's house, not avoiding it once. All is quiet. Curtains are drawn. The morning has only just come.

In her empty house in Kilburn, she can see her breath. Her footsteps ring on the bare floorboards; carpets will be coming, tiles will be coming, curtains and furniture and wallpaper and cushions will be coming. The bare bones are in place now and she can almost picture it as her home again. She stares out of the window on the mezzanine level, out into their wrecked back garden full of bags of cement and lengths of wood and the grass is obliterated by the builders' debris. She pictures herself out there, in a few months' time: it will be high summer, the sky will be acid blue, they will have some nice new garden furniture – she's already picked out the things she wants from the catalogue – and maybe there will be a barbecue going. She will no longer have to see Owen Pick's house every time she leaves her front door. She will no longer have to pass by the scary empty plot with its screaming foxes.

She inhales deeply and holds on to the quiet thrill that passes through her at the anticipation of it all. She passes up the staircase to the room that is

near to being her bedroom again; it overlooks the street, out towards a unthreatening terraced houses, just like hers. No sinister empty spaces, ancient, creaking trees throwing shadows across her bed, no sex pests behind heavy doors and grubby curtains. Just normal houses filled with normal people. She will never take Kilburn for granted again.

She takes some photos of the progress for Roan to look at later and then she locks the door behind her, lays the palm of her hand briefly, affectionately, against the outside wall of the house and heads back to flat.

Roan is in the kitchen making toast when she gets in.

He says, 'Want some? I can put another slice in?'

She says, 'No, thank you, I had breakfast already.'

He looks strangely perky, she thinks. Upbeat. 'Have you seen that?' says, pointing at the screen of his laptop. She touches it and she sees the home page. The headline says: 'College Lecturer Arrested for the Abduction of Saffyre Maddox'.

'Oh my God,' she says. 'They've arrested him!'

'I know,' says Roan. 'I'm so relieved.'

She glances up from the screen. 'Relieved?' It strikes her as a strange choice of word.

'Yes,' he says. 'Now maybe we'll find out where she is.'

She drops her eyes again and reads the story.

Thirty-three-year-old former college lecturer, Owen Pick, has been formally arrested and is being held at Kentish Town police station charged with the abduction of missing teenager, Saffyre Maddox. Miss Maddox, 17 years old, was last seen ten days ago on Valentines night heading into Hampstead village after telling family she was going to meet a friend. Police sources say that Pick, who is unmarried and lives with his aunt in her flat in Hampstead, has provided no explanation for blood traces found at his property. He has also been found to be active on a number of what are known as 'incel forums' internet websites where men who identify as 'involuntary celibates' unable to form sexual relationships with women despite a desire to do so, come together to share their frustrations. It is theorised that the abduction of Saffyre Maddox might have been the result of the only

row of radicalisation of Pick by other forum users. Many recent mass
no shootings in the USA have been attributed to the influence of radic
lurking elements on such sites.

1 Pick's family have been unavailable for comment. It is believed
that his bail has been set at one million pounds.

hen

'Incel forums?' says Cate, her stomach churning at the concept. She'd
the documentary about incels once that had chilled her to her core. The ha
and the bile and the bitterness. 'Christ.'

'I know,' says Roan. 'Kind of adds up though, doesn't it? When you
at him, when you see where he lives. I mean, you can tell, just by look
him, that no one gives a shit about him.'

he know, someone who hates girls because girls don't like them?'
ie BBC

action 'God yes,' says Roan. 'Little boys who will totally grow up to be on
forums talking about the best way to rape women. I certainly have. I ha
eleven-year-old boy once, a few years ago; he'd been caught at school
writing elaborate and very violent rape fantasies.'

ge Cate shakes her head, slowly, wondering not for the first time about
gruelling nature of her husband's job. 'Doesn't it ever, just, you know,
you? Dealing with kids like that?'

He stops buttering his toast and turns to look at Cate. 'Of course it d
he says. 'Christ. Of course it does.'

It's the Sunday before the children go back to school after the February
term, which means that Georgia will spend the whole day in her pyjam
angrily finishing her homework, shouting at junctures about how much
ie's hates school and hates exams and hates Cate for making her go to schc
hates the government for making her go to school and hates life and ha
ied everybody and doesn't care about her GCSEs anyway. Until finally the
homework will be done and she will make herself something sugary to
1 and have it in front of the television which she will feel she has totally
' worked for and deserved and enjoy all the more for it. It will be a high
' day, a draining day and Cate is ready for it from the moment she hears
do Georgia's bedroom door opening at eleven thirty that morning.

'Hello, angel.'

ine

al 'Urgh,' says Georgia. 'I woke up at, like, eight o'clock or something couldn't get back to sleep.'

'Well,' says Cate, 'I came in and looked at you at about ten thirty and were out cold.'

'Yeah, well, I was kind of drifting in and out.'

'Want something to eat?'

seen a Georgia yawns and shakes her head. 'It's nearly lunchtime. I'll wait

tred 'I went to see the house earlier,' Cate says, turning on her phone and bringing it to Georgia.

1 look 'Oh,' says Georgia, brightening. 'House! House! Let me see!'

ing at Cate shows her the photos and then heads down the hallway to Josh's bedroom to check in on him. He's normally up earlier than Georgia. She

'You would have heard the shower going by now, the sound through the wall music coming from his phone which he props up against the tooth mug there'd been nothing.

1 incel She knocks gently. 'Joshy?'

ad an There's no response.

'Josh?'

the She pushes the door open.

get to Josh's bed is empty.

oes,' She goes to the bathroom and finds Roan sitting on the toilet with his trousers round his ankles playing Candy Crush.

'Seen Josh?'

'No,' he says. 'He's still in bed, isn't he?'

y half- 'No,' she says. 'He's not. He must have gone out somewhere.'

ias She goes back to the kitchen and takes her phone back from Georgia. 'I have no idea where Josh is?' she asks her.

1 she Georgia shakes her head. 'I think I heard the front door go half an hour ago?'

ol and Cate composes a message to Josh and sends it. *Where are u?* She waits for the tick double, but not turn blue. She sighs.

ites The ticks stay grey for another hour. She calls him. The call goes through to his voicemail. She leaves him a message. They have lunch – spaghetti, chilli and garlic and prawns. She scoops out the last portion into a bowl, covers it with cling film and puts it in the fridge.

eat At two o'clock Georgia finally settles down at the kitchen table to do her homework. Roan and Cate sit side by side in the living room and try to

g and I a film on TV but Cate can't concentrate. The room grows gloomy as th
starts to slide down the horizon and Cate checks her phone every thirty
id you seconds. She sends Josh five more messages and calls him three more
As the credits roll on the film she turns to Roan and says, 'I think we s
call the police.'

'What!'

.' 'It's nearly four. He's been gone about five hours.'

l 'Cate. He's fourteen years old. It's daytime.'

'I know,' she says. 'But he's not the sort of fourteen-year-old to just
disappear. He always tells me when he's going out. And why isn't he
's answering his phone?'

ne 'Probably run out of charge, or maybe he's on the Tube.'

ll of 'Josh doesn't go on the Tube,' she replies with exasperation. Really,
,. But sometimes it felt like Roan didn't actually know his children. 'He gets
attacks, remember?'

'Well, whatever, I really think calling the police would be a bit over
top.'

'But how long are we going to wait?'

'Dinnertime?' says Roan. 'But even then, it won't even have been tv
hours.' He stands up and stretches. 'I think', he says, 'that I might just
s a run. I can keep an eye out for him on the way.'

'Yes,' says Cate. 'Yes. Brilliant. You do that. I'm going to try and fi
number for Flynn.'

Flynn is Josh's only known friend.

a. 'Any they're going out together. He has never been more than a flash of red
and a name to Cate.

our 'Georgia,' she says, coming into the kitchen. 'You don't happen to l
number for Flynn, do you?'

atches 'Flynn?'

'Yes, you know, Josh's friend. With the red hair?'

rough 'Why on earth would I have a number for *Flynn*?'

tti with 'I don't know, darling. I just thought maybe you might. I mean, is h
l, any social media with you?'

'Of course he isn't. God.'

o her 'Do you know his surname?'

) watch

ie sun 'Oh my God, no. Of course I don't. I don't even know him. He's just
7 he's just Josh's friend. He's nothing to do with me.'

times. 'Do you ...?' Cate starts cautiously. 'Do you have any theories about
hould where Josh might be? He's not answering his phone.'

Georgia exhales heavily. 'Mum,' she says, 'I'm trying to do my hon
and you're really not helping right now.'

'No, no, I'm sorry. You're right. But I'm worried about him ... it's
dark ...'

'He's fourteen years old, Mum. He's fine. Try looking in the plot ac
the road.'

Cate stiffens. 'What?'

'The building plot. You know. Where the police were. He used to ha
a lot there last summer. Him and Flynn sometimes too.'

panic 'Hang out doing what?'

'How am I supposed to know? Do you think I care?'

the 'No. But ...'

'Look, he's your son. Your guess is as good as mine. He's a mystery
me. All I know is that he used to hang out across the road sometimes.'

velve 'But how did he get in?'

go for 'There's a gap,' Georgia says dismissively, as if everyone should al
know about the gap. 'Around the corner. Where the wall is low.'

ind a Georgia turns her attention back to the schoolbook in front of her an
heads down the hallway. She picks up her coat and her door keys and l
outside.

if The sky is turning from grey to black in petrol tones. She switches o
hair torch on her phone and feels her way along the foliage around the corn
she locates the point where the trees are wide enough apart to allow he
ave a squeeze through. She lands on the other side, on a patch of ragged gras
plot looks vast from this angle. She throws the light from her phone ac
the space.

'Josh,' she calls out. 'Josh?'

e on She shines her light into corners and behind machinery. There is not
there.

Across the space she peers through the trees and into the back garde
Owen Pick's house. There, facing the plot, is a sash window with draw
curtains. His bedroom. She pictures him there behind it, his face lit by
glow of his laptop, writing depraved things on incel forums, plotting h

it ... abduction of a beautiful, troubled young girl, fantasising about what he going to do to her when he finally had her in his disgusting clutches.

it She glances around as though maybe she is here, Saffyre Maddox, although the dozen police officers who spent three days combing every i network this space might just have missed her, that she might just rise up from ground and walk towards her.

getting She feels her phone buzz inside her hand and switches it on. It's a te from Josh.

ross *On my way home, Mum. See u soon x.*

Where've you been? she replies hastily.

Cinema, he replies. *Phone on silent. Soz.*

ang out She turns off the phone and clutches it to her heart, gazing upwards the petrol sky. *On his way home.* Her heart loosens. Her breathing stea The cinema. Her baby boy had been at the cinema.

She clammers back through the gap between the tree and lands in fro surprised dog walker.

y to 'Oh,' says the woman, clutching her heart.

'Sorry,' says Cate. 'I was looking for my son. But now I've found h The dog walker looks behind her as if the son might be about to app

ready 'He was at the cinema,' she says breathlessly. 'Not in there.'

The woman nods and carries on her way, the small dog skittering al d Cate behind her, throwing Cate a few bemused looks over his tail as he goes reads

'What did you see?' she asks Josh when he walks in a few minutes late n the cheeks red with the night cold.

er until 'That thing with Dwayne Johnson,' he says. 'About wrestlers. Can't r to remember what it was called.'

is. The 'Oh,' she says, wondering at her son's choice of film. 'Was it any go

ross Josh shrugs. 'It was OK. Can I eat something?'

She pulls the pasta from the fridge and puts it in the microwave.

'Why didn't you tell me?' she asks. 'That you were going to the cin

ody How come you just disappeared?'

He shrugs. 'Just a bit last minute.'

n of 'But I was in here.' She points at the kitchen floor. 'Like literally, st m right here. You could have just popped your head around the door and the goodbye.'

is He shrugs again. 'I'm sorry. I didn't think.'

She's been using her phone as she talks, to google the film her son says he's just been to see. She finds something called *Fighting With My Family*.

She turns the screen of her phone towards him and shows him the picture. 'This?' she says. 'You went to see this?'

He nods.

'Have you been out on a date?' she says, a smile forming on her lips, a warm glow going through her at the thought of her funny, lonely boy, sitting in the back row of the movies, watching a quirky comedy about female wrestlers with his arm around a girl.

'No,' he says.

She thinks he's lying.

If it were Georgia standing in front of her blatantly lying, she would waste a second before calling her out on it. She would say, 'Bullshit, tell me what really happened,' and Georgia would smile that smile she smiles when she knows she's been backed into a corner and then tell her the truth.

But she can't bear to put her boy on the spot, to make him squirm, to see him suffer. He wouldn't smile a smile. He would just look pained. So she says, 'OK,' and takes his pasta out of the microwave.

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‘You’ve got a visitor.’

Owen sits up with a start. It’s been three hours since his last interview with the detectives and he’s been sitting in his cell with no idea what’s happening next. He was given lunch in his cell: some kind of meat in breadcrumb potatoes and green beans. And then a beige pudding with a jam sauce. He was almost embarrassed by how much he enjoyed it; it’s the sort of meal his mother used to cook for him, bland and salty and safe. He scraped his plate absolutely clean.

‘Who is it?’ he asks now.

‘I have no idea,’ says the police officer drily.

‘Am I going to them, or are they ...?’

‘I’m taking you to an interview room. Can you stand back from the door, please?’

He stands back from the cell door and the officer opens it and leads him through three sets of locked gates to a small blue room. Tessie is sitting there wearing a green velvet wrap around her shoulders and huge silver earrings with matching green stones at their centres. Her mouth is already pursed in disapproval.

She starts talking before he’s even sat down. ‘I’m not staying long, Owen. But I brought you some things. Your phone. Though you’re probably not allowed it. And some underwear and a change of clothing, etc. I bought them new. I didn’t want to go rifling through your things. Especially not after the police found what they found in your drawers. Good God, Owen. And that girl, Owen. What on earth has happened to that lovely girl?’

Tessie covers her face with her fingers, mismatched rings overlapping like a kind of armour. She stares down at the table for a long moment and then looks up and her eyes are full of tears.

‘Owen. Please. You can tell me. Where is she? What have you done her?’

Owen smiles. He can’t help it. It’s just too ridiculous.

‘Tessie,’ he says, his hands clutching the edge of the table. ‘Really? really think I had something to do with it?’

‘Well, what on earth else do you expect me to think? Her blood! On your wall! Her phone cover outside your bedroom window. Date-rape in your sock drawer. And all those things, those terrible things you wrote on the internet. My goodness, Owen. You don’t have to be Miss Marple to figure it out. But for the sake of that poor girl’s family, you have to tell the police what happened.’

‘Oh my God!’ Owen tugs at his hair and then bangs the table. ‘I did nothing to that girl! I’m not even sure I saw that girl! I just saw a girl who might not even have *been* a girl. It might have been a boy. And the only reason, literally the *only* reason I said anything was because I was trying to be helpful. I mean, Tessie, seriously, if I had killed that girl or done something dreadful to her, why would I have told the police that I’d seen her? What do you think? Think about it, for God’s sake. Just think about it. It doesn’t make any sense.’

Tessie pushes down her lower lip and shrugs. ‘No,’ she says. ‘It doesn’t make sense. But then, Owen, nothing about you makes any sense. Not even your name. What do you mean, what are you, thirty-four ...?’

Owen sighs. ‘I’m thirty-three, Tessie. Thirty-three.’

She continues. ‘Thirty-three, yet you’ve never had a girlfriend. You never go out. You dress like ...’ She gestures at him vaguely. ‘Well, you dress like a girl, strangely for a man of your age. You only eat white food. I mean, Owen, you face it, you’re very odd.’

‘And that means I killed a teenage girl, does it?’

She narrows her eyes at him. But she doesn’t reply. Instead she says, ‘I’ve already spoken to your father. He’s very worried.’

Owen rolls his eyes. ‘I’m sure he is.’

‘Yes,’ she says firmly. ‘He is. I suggested he come and see you but I think he needs some persuading, he’s slightly ... overwhelmed.’

‘Don’t bother, please, Tessie. I have no desire whatsoever to see him again. Certainly not in these circumstances.’ Owen lets his head drop so that his gaze falls between his kneecaps to the scuffed linoleum on the floor. He is tired. He has had two nights on a horrible bed in a cell. He has had hours in the interview room with a rotating group of detectives trying harder and harder to get a confession out of him.

with harder to get him to tell them where Saffyre Maddox is and Owen has enough police dramas to know how these things are orchestrated, layered different approaches until the interviewee doesn't know their left from right. But it doesn't matter how much they try to befuddle and confound the one constant, the one thing he knows for sure, is that he has nothing to do with Saffyre Maddox or her disappearance.

Barry told him something interesting yesterday.

Apparently Saffyre Maddox was once under the professional care of a Lybra man across the road, the jogger. Apparently, Lybra Man is a child psychologist at the Portman. Apparently Saffyre Maddox was under his care for over three years and apparently Lybra Man has a rock-solid alibi. He was not in bed with his wife.

Owen can hardly believe that the police would take such a flimsy alibi on face value. It's typical of course, typical to give credence to married people to assume that of course married people would be in bed together on Valentine's night, that married people would have no reason to lie about their whereabouts.

He'd told the police yesterday about Bryn. He'd been unable to think of any other reasonable explanation to offer them for the presence of Robert in his bedroom.

'Bryn who?' they'd asked.

'I don't know his surname.'

'Address?'

'I don't know where he lives. Somewhere just outside London. His town, let's say, comes into Euston, that's all I know. And he's thirty-three. Like me. Oh, He's got a website! www.yourloss.net.'

'Bryn someone. Outside London. Thirty-three. Got a website.'

Sceptical was an understatement. But they'd gone away and looked for Bryn and come to him this morning and told him that no such person existed. That his website didn't exist, that the only people in the UK who were called Bryn lived in Chester, Aberdeen, Cardigan, Cardiff, Llanelli, Bangor, Newport and Dartmouth. There was, apparently, nobody in the Home Counties called Bryn who was currently thirty-three years old.

'Well,' Owen said. 'There you go. Thanks to the British press and media he's plastered all over the papers, he's had time to disappear. But he's there in the forums you found me on. Run searches for him, for YourLoss. You know he's a leader. An influencer. People kind of look up to him.'

seen 'And you?' said a detective whose name Owen hadn't quite caught.
ing on you look up to him?'

their 'Yes,' he said. 'In a way. But not,' he quickly countered, 'not in *that*
id him, When he gave me those drugs, when he told me what he wanted me to
g to do what he wanted *all of us* to do ...'

'All of us?'

'Yes, us on the forums.'

f the 'Incels, you mean?'

ld He hadn't liked the sound of that. It had made them sound like Masc
s care Ku Klux Klan, giraffes, even, something other. Something not quite hu

le was 'So you would call yourself an incel, would you, Owen?'

He shook his head. 'No,' he said firmly. 'No. Going on those forum
ibi on was a phase. It was a response to what happened with my job. I was cr
eople, frustrated. I felt impotent. I needed to vent and the forums gave me a p
vent. But I never thought I was one of them. I never felt I belonged. A
ut their Bryn ...'

'Yes, tell us about *Bryn*.' They'd said his name as if it was in italics,
k of he was a character in a book.

ypnol 'Bryn was just funny, I suppose. A lot of those guys on the forums v
just dark and humourless, took it all so seriously. Bryn was funny. And
charismatic. People liked him. *I* liked him. But then when I finally met
person, I saw him for what he really was.'

'And what was that, Owen?'

train 'Well,' he said, after a moment's consideration. 'Mad. I suppose.'

h. But now as he sits opposite his aunt and thinks about the cruel unjust
being played out against him as a single man, an 'odd' man, a lonely m
man who is clearly not decent or honest enough to have found a mate t
for him alibis for his heinous crimes against young girls, he feels a yearnir
xisted. Bryn and his view of the world. Not the stuff about impregnating wom
thirty- against their will, but the stuff about how imbalanced the world was, h
ondon, was all geared towards favouring the wrong people for the wrong reasc
e would like to discuss that now with someone who saw the truth. But B
gone – Bryn, or whatever his real name was. He's disappeared like one
y face those little felt rabbits in a sleight-of-hand trick. Pouf! And now no one
, in all ever believe him about how he ended up with date-rape drugs in his dr
i'll see. that he'd never had any intention of using them.

‘Did He looks back up at Tessie. She’s staring at the top of his head. She
‘Do they let you wash in here?’
t way. He nods.
do, ‘Do you want me to bring you some soap? Some nice shampoo?’
He nods again. ‘Yes,’ he says in a small voice. ‘Please. And, Tessie,
you do something else for me? Please. Can you contact someone for m
woman I went out with on Valentine’s night? We’d been chatting a lot
Messaging. And we were supposed to be going out again next week. I
ons or don’t want her to think, you know, that I’ve forgotten about her.’
man. ‘Oh Owen. Dear Owen. You’re all over the papers, all over the new
guarantee she knows why you haven’t been in touch.’
s – it He swallows down another burst of anger, closes his eyes and then s
oss andopens them. ‘Please, though, Tessie. Would you mind? Whether she ki
lace to where I am or not, I’d like her to know that I’m thinking about her. Th
nd wish ... I wish I wasn’t here, that this wasn’t happening, that things we
... you know. Please, Tessie.’
, as if She rolls her eyes and takes a notepad from her bag and a pen.
He gives her Deanna’s email address as it’s the only one of her cont
vere details he can remember off by heart.
l ‘Tell her I think she’s amazing, please, Tessie. Tell her I’m not that
: him inthe person in the papers. Tell her that if she comes to see me, I can exp
everything. Tell her to come and see me, Tessie. Please. If you don’t d
anything else. Just that one thing. Yes?’
He watches her close her eyes; he sees the hollows of her cheeks for
tices then disappear again. ‘Fine,’ she says. ‘Fine. Though I’m not lying on
ian, a behalf, Owen. I’m not going to say anything I don’t believe is true.’
o give ‘No.’ He shakes his head. ‘Don’t say anything apart from just what
ig for Promise me.’
en She sighs and says, ‘Yes. Yes, fine.’ Then she glances at her wristw
ow it and sighs again. ‘I have to go. It’s my afternoon at the shop. Good Goc
ons. He gets to her feet and grinds her jaw – ‘what on earth am I going to say to
ryn has people? Because they’ll ask, Owen, they’ll ask.’
e of Tessie works one afternoon a week at the Oxfam bookshop in the vi
e will It makes her feel good about herself and her indulgent life. He watches
awer, leave. She doesn’t touch him or attempt any sort of farewell. She just g
The police officer standing in the corner opens the door and leads he
The other police officer, sitting at the end of the table, clears her thro

says, 'Ready?' she says to Owen.

He gets to his feet and follows her to the door.

The room still smells of Tessie, of dusty velvet and cheap fabric conditioner and Penhaligon's iris perfume.

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'Ready?' she says to Owen.

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SAFFYRE

I got home at 6 a.m. on New Year's Day. Aaron was asleep and Angel in the little bed I kept by the side of mine. He got up lazily when he saw me walk in and I picked him up and smelled him and sat him down on the floor next to me. I felt empty. Blank. It was so quiet. All night long I'd fallen in and out of sleep to the sounds of revellers, the wind through the tall branches of the trees, cars going past every few minutes, the chipboard gates creaking, birds twitching. Every time I fell asleep, I'd dream that the fox was there, licking my face, breathing into my ear, and I'd wake up and find myself alone. It was electric; it was cold; I was alive out there in the black of night.

Now I stared at the dirty white of my bedroom ceiling, the pink paper shade with the cut-out heart shapes that I'd chosen when I was eight years old, from Homebase. It came with a matching duvet set and table lamp. I didn't know who that child was or the person she might have been if Harrison hadn't done what he'd done to her when she was ten years old.

It was silent apart from the thrum of the sleeping building. I thought I didn't belong here. I belong out there. And once again the other part of me, the part that does her homework and paints her nails and watches *The Great British Bake Off*, that part of me whispered in my ear and said: 'Are you really you're not mad?' But I knew I was not mad. I knew I was changing. Becoming. Unfurling.

I took my things again that night, and slept across the street from Room Four. I told Aaron I was sleeping over at Jasmin's. He just gave me a look that said, 'I kind of don't believe you but you're nearly an adult and you're close to breaking and I don't want to be the one to push you over the edge.'

The night after that I slept at home, just for Aaron's sake, not for my but my soul ached at being trapped indoors, I felt swallowed up by my mattress, my duvet, the warm air swirling around me. I felt claustrophobic and anxious; the sheets were twisted around my legs when I woke up the next morning and for a minute I thought I was paralysed. I felt a sharp feeling of panic right in the pit of my gut. I untwisted my legs from the sheet and started panting. I knew I couldn't spend another night indoors. I knew then that the change was nearly complete. At night I would wait for Aaron to go to bed and then I would leave.

I didn't sleep those nights. Barely. I just lay there in the dark feeling my soul fill, my head vibrating, my blood flowing through my veins, warm and vital. I didn't need to sleep. I was operating on some other level, using a weird energy pumped into me from the moon above me, from the soil beneath.

At dawn I'd go back to the flat and get ready for school. Aaron had to go to work and if he did, he never said anything. He probably thought I had a boyfriend. He treated me like blown glass, like he couldn't say anything to me. It worked in my favour.

Then, halfway through January, it happened. It was a moment, I think I'd known would happen one day. A moment that had sat just out of my line of sight since I was ten years old. Because in any community, even a small community set on the edges of a major arterial junction where six lane traffic thunder past morning, noon and night, a community of double-decker buses and high-rise buildings and billboards and banks, there is still a small world in small streets where people's paths cross and uncross and cross again, where you know people from the schools they went to, from the shops, from their mums shop, from walking the same lines to the same places at the same times, and you know that, even in a community like mine, at some point you will see the person who stuck their fingers inside you when you were ten years old. You just will.

And there he was, in the cold cloak of early dawn as I turned the corner from Roan's road on to the Finchley Road. There he was, dressed in black with his hood up just like mine, a Puffa coat just like mine, a bag slung over his shoulder just like me. There was no other soul around; sodium light from the lamp in between us shone off particles of gauzy morning mist. At first I felt nervous because he was a man and it was dark and we were alone.

own, then I caught the shape of his face, the heavy brow, the slight dip in his
as if someone had pressed it in with their thumb.

obic, Harrison John.

ext The boy who wiped out the girl with the pink lampshades.

ng of He looked at me. I looked at him.

. sat up I saw that he saw me. He smiled. He said, 'Saffyre Maddox.'

at my I said nothing, walked past him fast as I could, looking for the bright
bed of early-morning traffic coming down the Finchley Road.

'Saffyre Maddox!' he called after me. 'Not going to say hello?'

; my I wanted to turn and walk back up the hill, square up to him, breathe
1 and his face, say *you filthy, disgusting piece of shit, I hope you die.*

some But I didn't. I kept walking. Kept walking. My heart pounding. My
stomach swirling.

I got home and I scrambled through all the drawers in the kitchen until
no idea found a paper clip. I untwisted it into a small hook and I rolled down my
friend. socks. I touched the tip of the hook against my skin. I pulled it back and
until finally a bead of red appeared, and then another, and another, until
finally I felt something stronger than the power of Harrison John.

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I got home and I scrambled through all the drawers in the kitchen until I found a paper clip. I untwisted it into a small hook and I rolled down my socks. I touched the tip of the hook against my skin. I pulled it back and forth until finally a bead of red appeared, and then another, and another, until finally I felt something stronger than the power of Harrison John.

February half-term is over. The flat is quiet. Not the same quiet as when the kids are still in bed, not the spring-loaded quietness of bedroom doors to be opened, breakfasts and showers yet to be had, but the proper, pure silence of an empty house: coats taken from hooks, bags collected from chairs, empty beds, wet bathmats, children at school, Roan at work, a day ahead of nothing but her.

Cate should be working but her focus is splintered.

There was another sex attack the day before. It's been all over the news because the police have taken the step of issuing safety guidelines to women in the area. The victim this time was a middle-aged woman, walking back from lunch with friends on West End Lane as dusk fell, pulled into the shadows behind an estate agent's office just off the main road and 'subjected to serious sexual assault'. The attacker was described as white, slim, twenty-four years old, much of his face covered by a stretchy black covering of the sort that motorcyclists wear under their helmets. The attacker said nothing at all during the attack and left the woman in need of medical attention.

Dusk.

That was the word in the news article which had jumped out at her. A very specific word for such a fleeting part of the day. Immediately, she thought about dusk yesterday, when she was prowling around the building plot with her torch on, looking for her missing son. Her missing son was returned moments later, starving hungry and with a story of seeing a Dwayne Johnson movie on his own.

Dusk.

She goes to the door of her son's bedroom. Her hand grips the doorknob. She pushes the door open. The curtains are drawn, the bed is made, the pyjamas are folded on the pillow. She pulls open the curtains and lets in

weak morning light. She turns on the overhead light. You wouldn't think anyone lived in this room. Josh has no stuff. While Georgia always has cups half-filled with stale water on her bedside table, handfuls of jewel book or two, numerous chargers snaked into each other, a sock, a ball of tissue, a chapstick with the lid missing and a pile of coins on her bedside table, Josh has nothing. Just a coaster.

Dusk ...

She falls to her knees and peers under his bed. There's his laptop, plugged into the wall to charge, the wires all neatly tucked away. She pulls it out and rests it on her knees; she won't sit on his bed as she worries she won't be able to get his covers as neat as he's left them and he'll know she was in here.

She opens it and switches it on and knows already that the password she used for everything when he was small and she was allowed to know his password (*donkey321*) will no longer be his password and she will have to find some other way to access his computer. But she got quite good at codebreaking last year when she thought Roan was having an affair. She even managed to access his work login. She waits for the screen to wake up and then she types in *donkey321*. She waits for the error message but instead the computer switches screens and she is in.

She blinks in surprise and feels a surge of relief. If there was something wrong with his computer that he didn't want anyone to see he would for sure have changed his password to one his mum didn't know.

She clicks through his windows. Worksheets for maths, iTunes, an email on *Animal Farm* and a browser with ten tabs open, nearly all schoolwork related. The last tab is for Vue Cinemas and shows the films currently showing at the cinema on the Finchley Road.

She feels her heartstrings loosen a little.

There, she thinks, there. Just as he'd said. Gone to the movies.

She scrolls through the timings. *Fighting With My Family*. Three twenty p.m. That would have finished well after dusk.

Then she clicks on his browsing history (she'd done this once on George's laptop a year or so ago and been flabbergasted by the eclectic range of pornography her then fourteen-year-old daughter had been watching).

The most recent search term is 'vue finchley road films today'. She vaguely registers the fact that he hasn't used his laptop to browse since yesterday morning. The search before that is 'Owen pick arrest'.

The search before that is for 'Owen pick'.

nk The search before that is for ‘Owen pick saffyre maddox’.

s three The search before that is ‘saffyre Maddox missing’.

lly, a The search before that is ‘saffyre Maddox missing teenager.’

d-up This is totally understandable.

de Cate has been obsessed with the story of Saffyre Maddox ever since
broke. Hardly surprising, given that Saffyre is a former patient of Roan
that the man who abducted her lives across the street from them. Cate
ugged not be surprised in the least that her son is taking such a keen interest i
it and story. Her current browsing history, she is sure, would look very simila
be ablehis.

re. She closes the laptop and slides it carefully back under his bed. Then
l he goes to his cupboards. Here his clothes are folded into squares and pile
is neatly. This is also where he keeps schoolwork he doesn’t need to take
re to school, and his pens and stationery for doing homework on a table that
he’d clear the desktop, clip it to the wall and put everything back into the
ke up cupboard, Cate cannot begin to imagine. He is Roan’s child, not hers, i
nstead respect. In the bottom of the cupboard is his linen basket. She decides,
she is here, to empty it. She pulls the basket out of the cupboard and se
ing on tucked behind it, a carrier bag.

 A scrunched-up bag is not a normal thing to find in Josh’s domain s
takes it out, unties the knot and peers inside. Old sports kit. A strong s
ssay damp and something worse than damp. Not quite sweat, but something
rk animal as sweat. She pulls out Lycra leggings: they’re Roan’s. Then a
long-sleeved top with neon orange stripes on the arms. Also Roan’s.

 She pulls out a pair of black socks and a pair of grippy gloves. And
last of all she pulls out a piece of black jersey that she cannot at first id
She holds it out and turns it this way and that, stretches it out and puts
enty hand through a hole in the middle of it.

 And then finally she works out what it is.

orgia’s It’s a balaclava.

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This is totally understandable.

Cate has been obsessed with the story of Saffyre Maddox ever since it broke. Hardly surprising, given that Saffyre is a former patient of Roan and that the man who abducted her lives across the street from them. Cate should not be surprised in the least that her son is taking such a keen interest in the story. Her current browsing history, she is sure, would look very similar to his.

She closes the laptop and slides it carefully back under his bed. Then she goes to his cupboards. Here his clothes are folded into squares and piled neatly. This is also where he keeps schoolwork he doesn’t need to take to school, and his pens and stationery for doing homework on a table that clips flat to the wall when he’s not using it. Why on earth he bothers every day to clear the desktop, clip it to the wall and put everything back into the cupboard, Cate cannot begin to imagine. He is Roan’s child, not hers, in that respect. In the bottom of the cupboard is his linen basket. She decides, while she is here, to empty it. She pulls the basket out of the cupboard and sees, tucked behind it, a carrier bag.

A scrunched-up bag is not a normal thing to find in Josh’s domain so she takes it out, unties the knot and peers inside. Old sports kit. A strong smell of damp and something worse than damp. Not quite sweat, but something as animal as sweat. She pulls out Lycra leggings: they’re Roan’s. Then a shiny, long-sleeved top with neon orange stripes on the arms. Also Roan’s.

She pulls out a pair of black socks and a pair of grippy gloves. And then last of all she pulls out a piece of black jersey that she cannot at first identify. She holds it out and turns it this way and that, stretches it out and puts her hand through a hole in the middle of it.

And then finally she works out what it is.

It’s a balaclava.

Every bone in Owen's body hurts. The mattress he sleeps on at Tessie's is about a hundred years old. Its springs are gone, it sags in the middle, it is soft and flaccid, but his body has adjusted to it over the years. The bed in his cell is basically a slab of concrete with a thin mattress on top of it. He can feel his hip bones grinding against it even when he's sleeping.

He can't remember his bed at home, the home where he lived with his mum before she died. He can't remember if it was soft or hard. He only remembered it was a single bed in a single room in the tiny flat that had been all that was left of the family home he'd shared with his parents until he was eleven years old, once it had been sold and split into two. It was in Maida Vale, a never-going-to-be-gentrified area of north London way out on the Piccadilly line. His mum had made it look really nice because she was used to that sort of thing, but it was essentially a horrible flat. She'd always said, 'This is your inheritance, it's all in your name if anything happens to me.' And then something had happened to her. A brain aneurism, when she was forty-eight. Owen had got home from sixth-form college and found her slumped face down on the kitchen table.

He'd thought maybe she was drunk, which was a strange thing for her to have thought as she, like him, drank only on very rare occasions.

The flat hadn't ended up being much of an inheritance. Once he'd paid off all his mum's credit-card debts, of which there'd been a very surprising amount, there'd been nothing left. A few thousand pounds.

And then he'd ended up in Tessie's spare room with the saggy mattress which, like everything about his tragic existence, he'd grown used to and had to come to accept unquestioningly.

Breakfast is brought to him in his cell: leathery toast and cheap jam, coffee, of tea and a hardboiled egg. He wolfs it down, hiding the toast crusts u

the paper napkin so that the officer who takes his tray away again won't find them.

A few minutes later DI Angela Currie appears outside his cell. She is wearing a fitted dress with big patch pockets on the front, thick tights and boots. She has her hands inside the pockets with her thumbs hanging out the top. She looks very jolly.

'Morning, Owen. How are we today?'

'I'm OK.'

'Nice breakfast?'

'It was OK.'

'Ready to talk some more?'

Owen shrugs and sighs. 'Is there anything left to talk about?'

She smiles. 'Oh yes, Owen, oh yes. Plenty.'

The guard unlocks his door and he follows DI Currie through the byways of the corridors to the interview suites. He had a shampoo last night with the one that Tessie dropped off for him. His hair is now clean and his clothes are clean, but he still has a big scab on his forehead from where he accidentally stabbed himself with the scissors and he still has an asymmetric fringe that makes him look slightly psychotic.

In the interview room he sits himself down in front of DIs Currie and Henry. DI Henry is looking a little the worse for wear today. Apparently he has a newborn and is finding the sleepless nights quite painful. Not that Owen has been chatting to DI Henry about his personal life, but he picks things up when they're talking between themselves.

A moment later Barry arrives. He smells overwhelmingly of aftershave, not the fresh sporty sort of stuff that comes in blue glass bottles from the airport, but the heady, dark sort of stuff that comes in brown bottles from the ancient shops in Mayfair backstreets. He says, 'Good morning, Owen,' but doesn't make eye contact with him.

The interview is set up in the way with which Owen is becoming very familiar. He clears his throat, takes a sip of water from a polystyrene cup and puts it back on the table.

'So, Owen. Today is Monday the twenty-fifth of February. It's now eleven days since Saffyre went missing. The blood we found on your bedroom wall—'

'It's not *my client's* bedroom wall,' Barry says stiffly. He has to correct them every single time. 'It's a wall that is part of a house that has lots of'

't see other people in it. It does not *belong* uniquely to my client's bedroom.'

s 'No, sorry, let me rephrase that. The blood we found on the wall beneath your bedroom window ... it was at least a week old.'

and 'Possibly older,' Barry says. This is all being recorded and he's not over the to let them get away with sloppy wording that might incriminate Owen

my client has mentioned on many occasions now, we have no idea exactly how old that blood is and he was aware of teenagers habitually using the room on the other side of that wall as a place to gather to take drugs. This girl we now know had an association with the family opposite the plot, might well have been using the space herself to hang out in. She might have been high and behaving stupidly one night and injured herself. The blood on the wall proves nothing. Nothing at all other than that Saffyre Maddox was in the vicinity of my client's house at some point over the past couple of weeks.

DI Angela Currie sighs. 'Yes,' she says. 'Indeed. But the fact remains that Saffyre's blood was found on a wall beneath your bedroom window and the fact that she was in the vicinity of your home at roughly the time of her disappearance is significant enough for us to pursue the issue, relentlessly, if need be. We would not be doing our jobs properly if we didn't. So, Owen, it's been eleven days since she was last seen, by you, outside the house opposite yours.'

ly he 'It wasn't her,' he says. 'I know that now. I keep replaying it and replaying it and the more I think about it the more I know it wasn't her. It was a girl.'

ks He sees DIs Currie and Henry exhale heavily. 'It was a person, according to your previous statement, matching the description of the missing girl.'

ave, 'Yes,' says Owen, 'exactly. Which doesn't mean it was her. It could have been anyone matching the description of the girl. Everyone looks the same with a hood up.'

' but DI Currie doesn't respond to this. Instead she slowly, deliberately, picks up a sheaf of papers from a folder on the table in front of her. She spends a moment looking at the papers, an act of pure, blatant theatre. Owen knows this now.

been 'Owen,' she says, showing him the papers. 'Do you remember telling me that you weren't sexually attracted to teenage girls?'

He feels a flush of blood to his face. He can sense something bad coming his way. He clears his throat and says, 'Yes.'

rect 'Do you remember a girl called Jessica Beer?'

of 'No.'

' 'The name doesn't ring a bell?'

death 'No,' he says again, more forcefully.

going 'Well, Jessica Beer remembers you, Owen. She was one of your stu
back in' – she refers to the paper in her hand – 'back in 2012. She was
1. 'As seventeen years old. She's twenty-three now and yesterday I went to st
ctly We chatted. And she told me about a very worrying incident.'

he plot 'What? Sorry? Jessica who?' He peers at the paper but can't see any
rl, who to explain what's about to happen here.

ght 'Jessica Beer. She claims ...' DI Currie leaves a dramatic pause – sh
been would not be winning any Oscars any time soon: '... that you forced y
1 that on her during a Christmas party on college premises and told her that y
s in the been watching her in your lessons and that she was pretty. That she wa
'ks.' *perfect*. She claims you touched her face and told her that her skin was
ns that radiant. That you breathed in her ear.'

id the 'What! No! That never happened!'

r DI Currie pulls a photograph from her folder and turns it to show to
sly if It's a very pretty mixed-race girl with soft brown curls, a freckled nose
ven, rose-pink lips. She looks familiar. But Owen can't recall her entirely. I
e possible she'd been a student of his, but then this was six or more year
and he's had hundreds of students in the intervening years, hundreds o
playing girls. He might well have taught this girl, but one thing was for sure, h
boy.' never, ever said those things to her.

rding 'This never happened,' he said definitively. 'I may well have taught
l.' and that I can't remember, but I did not talk to this girl, or any girl, eve
l have such a fashion. I just wouldn't.'

ame 'Were you drunk on the night of the Christmas party in 2012, Owen

'Oh my God, how am I supposed to remember. It was seven years a

ulls a 'Just over six years ago, to be more accurate, Owen.'

ows 'Six, seven, whichever, how can I possibly be expected to remembe
not remember this girl; I do not remember this party.'

g us But Owen does remember this party. He remembers it very well. Th
party was the reason why he hadn't gone to a Christmas party for years
afterwards. He had got horribly drunk that year. Some boys who'd bee
ming friendly to him all term long had plied him with tequila shots. The room
started spinning at one point; he remembered standing in the middle of
dance floor staring up at a rotating disco ball and then realising that the
room was rotating and he was rotating and he'd run to the toilets and tl

up in a cubicle. Luckily no one had seen him or heard him and he'd been there half an hour later slightly grey and clammy and immediately gone home. There'd been no incident with a girl. There simply hadn't. He hadn't done that. He wouldn't and he didn't.

'This girl's lying,' he says. 'Whoever she is. She's lying. Just like the other girls.'

'Looks a bit like Saffyre, doesn't she?' says DI Currie, turning the photo back to face her and pulling a really annoying face, as though this was the first time she'd noticed the similarity.

'I don't know,' Owen replies. 'I barely know what Saffyre looks like.'

'Here.' She turns a photo of Saffyre to face him.

'Similar colouring,' he says. 'That's about all.'

'Same age. Both very pretty.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' says Owen, banging his hands down on the table. 'I literally don't know who this girl is. I have never seen her before. I've never seen this girl before either.' He touches the photo of Saffyre. 'I don't like touching people. I don't like touching people. I don't approach women sexually, ever, which is the exact reason why I'm thirty-three and I've never had sex. I can't look at women. Women terrify me. Girls terrify me. The first pretty thing I would do is go anywhere near a pretty girl at a party and start saying slimy things to them. I wouldn't want to do it and even if I *did* want to I'd be too scared!'

'But not if you were drunk, Owen. Because that seems to be a unifying feature here, doesn't it? This incident' – DI Currie touches the photo of Jessica Beer – 'at a party, while, according to Jessica's statement, not sober?' Then the girls at college who complained about you – about your behaviour while at another party, again, not sober. Your unpleasant exchange with Nancy Wade on the street, when you deliberately blocked her path—'

'Or so she *claims*,' Barry interjected. 'We only have her word for that, don't we?'

'When she *claims* you deliberately blocked her path and called her a slut?' That was on Valentine's night when you, by your own admission, weren't quite sober. So my theory is that maybe, Owen, you are one of those people who behaves extremely out of character when they've been drinking, that in normal circumstances you are not the sort of man to approach women or talk to young girls or touch them inappropriately or toss verbal abuse at them as you pass in the street, but that maybe after a few drinks, your guard goes

merged and this other side of you comes out, this different personality. And that
ie. But maybe that other side of you, as abhorrent as it might seem to you now
me fact capable of taking a young girl off the street and bringing them to some
kind of harm. And it's been eleven days now, Owen, eleven days since
those Valentine's night and it's long enough. Don't you think? Long enough
to make everyone suffer. To prevent Saffyre's family from getting some
closure. So, Owen, please, please just think back to that night, when you
weren't sober, when you might have behaved out of character and done
something you didn't mean to do, something that had some kind of
momentum of its own. Please, Owen. Tell us what happened. Tell us what
you did to Saffyre Maddox.'

'I did not do anything to Saffyre Maddox,' Owen says, softly, but even
he says it, he feels something small but persistent pushing at the periphery
of his consciousness. Like a tiny fruit fly, hovering by his nose. The girl,
never hood. The name *Clive*. He feels an echo in the soles of his feet. An echo
like his footsteps, following the girl in a hoodie, calling to her in the darkness
heading after her into his garden.

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and this other side of you comes out, this different personality. And that maybe that other side of you, as abhorrent as it might seem to you now, is in fact capable of taking a young girl off the street and bringing them to some kind of harm. And it's been eleven days now, Owen, eleven days since Valentine's night and it's long enough. Don't you think? Long enough to make everyone suffer. To prevent Saffyre's family from getting some kind of closure. So, Owen, please, please just think back to that night, when you weren't sober, when you might have behaved out of character and done something you didn't mean to do, something that had some kind of momentum of its own. Please, Owen. Tell us what happened. Tell us what you did to Saffyre Maddox.'

'I did not do anything to Saffyre Maddox,' Owen says, softly, but even as he says it, he feels something small but persistent pushing at the periphery of his consciousness. Like a tiny fruit fly, hovering by his nose. The girl, in the hood. The name *Clive*. He feels an echo in the soles of his feet. An echo of his footsteps, following the girl in a hoodie, calling to her in the darkness, heading after her into his garden.

Cate spends the rest of that morning with a cold shiver of dread trapped in her spine, making her shudder over and over again.

She's done nothing with the scrunched-up carrier bag and its contents, merely rolled it up and stuffed it behind the linen basket again.

Cate is supposed to be submitting a first draft of this latest manual to publishers by the end of the month and she's nowhere near ready. She opens her laptop and types an email carefully, explaining that she will be late. She sighs as she presses *send*; being late is not something she makes a habit of. But she's too distracted to rush it out; every time she looks at the screen, her mind goes blank.

Instead she switches to her browser and googles 'sex attacks NW3'. She opens a notepad and takes the cap off a biro.

The first attack in this spate now assumed to be have been carried out by the same balaclava-clad man was on 4 January, in Pond Street.

A young woman of twenty-two had her breasts roughly fondled at eight-thirty in the morning by a young man dressed in black who then escaped quickly on a hired bicycle when someone approached.

She writes: '11.30 a.m., 4 January'.

The next attack was three days later. A sixty-year-old woman, who had had her breasts grabbed by a young man dressed in black. The attack left her with bruises. It was at about four o'clock in the afternoon, near the school centre, near the school.

She writes it down.

The next was on 16 January. This was the one that she and Roan had read about in the papers. A Twenty-three-year-old woman grabbed from behind and sexually assaulted through her clothes; she never saw the man who attacked.

her but described him as smelling of laundry detergent and having small hands.

She writes that down too.

She knows the next two, both on roads very close to here. Both days. Both involving grabbing and bruising. And then the latest one, 24 February at dusk, on the other side of the Finchley Road. Near the cinema. This most serious so far, a woman in hospital with injuries.

She breathes in hard and goes to her online calendar. Here she compares the dates and times with her own activities, desperately searching for something that does not correlate, for proof that nobody in this house could in her possibly be responsible for the terrible things that have been happening to women in the area.

ts, She remembers the smell on Roan's running clothes she'd found in her bedroom: not washing detergent at all, but sour, musky, ugly.

o her She thinks of the boys that Roan treats at his clinic, the boys not yet sits at who are already fantasising about hurting women.

e. She She thinks of Josh, his hugs, his unknowability, his silence.

t of. The shiver goes down her spine again.

n her But they are not Josh's clothes, they are Roan's clothes, and Roan to his empty spaces. He is out all day and makes himself uncontactable. / She he runs in black Lycra; sometimes he runs for two hours, sometimes more. He comes back electrified and gleaming. He has secrets. Even if there it by an affair last year, there was something. And there is the Valentine's card from the child that is the wrong size for the envelope. And the missing leaven who used to be his patient, who had been seen outside their house the night ed very she disappeared.

There is so much. So much that is wrong. And now there is a bag full of foul-smelling Lycra. Now there is a balaclava.

also But she cannot find a date that doesn't correlate with either her husband left son being the attacker. On every single occasion her husband and her leisure might possibly have been out of the house.

She looks at the time. It's nearly eleven. She imagines Josh at school at work. Those spaces. The cracks and the gaps where things can get in.

l read She picks up her phone and searches her contacts for Elona's number. hind, Tilly's mum. She lets her finger hover over the call button for a moment. acked loses her nerve. She presses the message icon instead and types a text. *Elona. Hope you and Tilly are both well. I just wanted to talk to you all*

ill something. Wondered if you were free for a coffee any time soon. Let n know!

Elona replies thirty seconds later. *Sure. I'm free now if that's any go ime.*

uary, They meet at the Caffè Nero on the Finchley Road. Elona is very groo one the black hair pulled back into a sculpted ponytail, a black cape with a fur black jeans and high-heeled boots. Cate can't understand how people c ares bothered to be so glamorous. The effort, every day, the attention, the ti the money. Elona hugs her, enveloping her in a miasma of honey-swee ould perfume.

g to 'It's so lovely to see you, Cate,' she says in her sing-song Kosovan a 'You look well.'

Josh's 'Thank you,' Cate says, although she knows she does not.

'Let me get you a coffee. What would you like?'

men Cate doesn't have the energy to argue about who should be buying t coffee so she just smiles and says, 'A small Americano please. With w milk.'

She settles into an armchair and glances at her phone. There's a mes o has from Georgia. *Mum?*

At night Then another one: *Mum. Can I make a cake tonight? Can you buy fl ore. And eggs?*

wasn't Then two minutes later: *And soft brown sugar. Love u.*

ard Cate replies with a thumbs-up emoji and puts her phone away.

girl If anyone had told her a few years ago that one day Georgia would t ight least of her problems, she would not have believed them.

Elona returns with an Americano for Cate and a mint tea for herself. ll of she says, 'how've you been?'

'Oh, God, you know,' Cate begins. 'All a bit high drama. As you ma and or know?'

on Elona nods effusively. 'I heard, yes.'

It occurs to Cate that Elona probably cleared her diary in the thirty s l, Roan after receiving Cate's message.

1. 'So, what's been going on?' Elona asks.

er, 'Well, you know they've arrested the guy? The one who lives oppos nt, but us?'

Dear 'Yes. I read that. Wow. And what do you think? Do you think it was bout

ne ‘Well, it certainly looks that way, doesn’t it? Though I read somewhere
od? that it was him who told the police about seeing Saffyre there. Why would
med: they’ve done that if he did it? If he hadn’t said anything, they’d never have
trim, known she was on our street. They’d never have looked in that building
can be they’d never have found her phone case and the blood. It all seems a bit
me, strange.’

‘Unless he wanted to get caught?’

‘Well, yes, I guess that’s possible. But still, something doesn’t seem
it right to me.’

‘So, what’s your theory?’

accent. Cate laughs nervously. ‘I don’t have one. I just have an anti-theory.’
Elona smiles, blankly, clearly hoping for more.

Cate changes the subject. ‘So, how’s Tilly. I haven’t seen her for quite
while.’

he ‘No,’ says Elona, her eyes dropping to the leaves in her tea. ‘No. She
arm become a bit of a homebody. Doesn’t really like going out. Probably the
weather. You know. The dark nights.’

sage ‘When did this start?’ she asks. ‘The not going out?’

our? ‘Gosh, I don’t know. A few weeks ago, I suppose. Since the New Year.
She’s just ...’ She pauses. ‘She just seems happier at home.’

‘Does it seem ...?’ Cate begins and then pauses to find the right words.
‘Do you think maybe it had anything to do with that night? The night she
leaving ours. When she said the man had grabbed her.’

oe the Elona looks up at Cate. ‘You know, the thought did occur to me.’

‘And?’

‘So,’ Elona shrugs. ‘She swears blind that nothing happened. That she made
up.’

ay ‘It’s weird, though, isn’t it? The timing of it? And now it turns out that
the sex attacks in the area this year were kind of similar to what she originally
said happened to her?’

seconds ‘They are?’

‘Yes. It was in the papers. Six since the New Year. All carried out by
young man in black. All involved rough grabbing and groping.’

ite Elona looks vaguely appalled.

‘I mean, can you see any reason why she might have taken back the
; him?’ Maybe she was scared to go to the police?’

ere 'I honestly don't know. I mean, we've barely spoken about it. I was
ould he cross with her for wasting everyone's time like that, for lying. I was so
re embarrassed by her behaviour, you know, and I'm a single mum and
g plot; everything she does feels like such a reflection on me, you know, and
it thinks so highly of Georgia and of you and your family.'

'She does?'

quite 'Yes. Oh God, yes. So much. She never had a real friend before Ge
She's in awe of her. And I think both of us were just a bit, you know, t
by what happened that night.'

'Oh, honestly, no! She must never worry what we think. Or what Ge
thinks. Georgia is rock solid. Nothing throws her. She's really thick-sk
You must tell Tilly that whatever it was that happened that night, whet
ite a was real or not, she can tell Georgia. Georgia would never judge her. N
in our family would judge her. I promise.'

e's Elona smiles and puts her hand over Cate's. She has a heavy gold ch
ie around a narrow wrist; her nails are painted taupe. 'Thank you, Cate,'
says. 'Thank you so much. I will talk to her tonight and see if there's
anything she's not telling me. You're very kind to take such an interes

ear. Cate smiles tightly. She's not being kind. She's being desperate and
scared.

ds.

he was She walks home via the supermarket where she buys all the cake-maki
ingredients on Georgia's list. At the checkout she glances across the st
again at the entrance to the Tube station, subconsciously looking out fo
husband, as if the echo of his appearance there two weeks ago might st
ide it playing out infinitely.

at all She walks home circuitously, via a couple of the places the newspap
report mentioned, to the estate agent just past the cinema where she see
iginally police tape up around the back entrance, a police car still parked on the
outside. Then to the dogleg in the next road down from her road, the pl
she sometimes goes to post letters. She doesn't know the precise locati
y a this attack, but it makes her shudder nonetheless, looking at the hidden
here where a woman could easily be grabbed without anyone seeing.

claim? She walks home quickly after that, all her nerves on end, her breathi
coming slightly too hard. As she turns the next corner on to her street,
sees someone sitting on the wall outside her house. It's a young man, v
built. He's wearing a grey coat with a bright green hoodie underneath.

so so gets closer she sees that he is mixed race, very nice-looking. He gets to feet when he sees Cate turning on to her pathway. He says, 'Hi, do you here?'

she 'Yes,' she replies, thinking that she should be nervous, especially in light of what she's just been doing, but that she isn't. 'Can I help you?'

Georgia. 'I ... I guess. I don't know. My niece. Saffyre. She was here. I think know, Saffyre Maddox? She disappeared ... I ...' He pulls at his chin brown talks, as if trying to massage out the right words.

'You're Saffyre's uncle?' she asks.

Georgia. 'Yes, I am. Aaron Maddox. Are you Mrs Fours?'

inned. 'Yes.'

her it 'Roan Fours's wife?'

No one She nods.

'Would it be OK if I asked you a few questions?'

rain She knows she should say no. She should say *I've said everything th she needs to be said to the police* and send him on his way. But there's son in his body language that suggests he's carrying something with him, a t.'

She says, 'What sort of questions?'

'I've found something,' he says. 'In her room. And I know I should to the police. But I just kind of wanted to check in with you first. Becau ng I don't know. It doesn't make any sense. Could I come in?'

reet She looks across the street at Owen Pick's house. It's blank and quiet or her looks up at her neighbours' windows. 'Sure,' she says. 'Of course. Cor ill be

In her kitchen, Aaron Maddox sits for a moment in his big grey coat be ver Cate says, 'Here, let me hang that up for you.'

es 'Thanks, that's great. Cheers.'

street Underneath the coat his hoodie has the Marvel logo and a picture of lace Spiderman on it. She finds this strangely reassuring.

on of 'Can I get you something to drink? Tea? Something cold?'

places 'Water would be great. Thank you.'

She pours him a glass of water and places it in front of him.

ng He clears his throat and smiles awkwardly.

she 'You know,' he begins, 'I've met your husband, just before Saffyre vell her sessions with him, back in 2014. He's a good man.'

As she 'Yes,' she agrees. 'He is. He's a great clinician.'

his 'I put my faith in him. You know, a little girl like that, hurting herse
live she was, well, you know that there's something bad happening, someth
you don't really want to have to face. But he just got in there with her.
the her feel safe. And stopped her hurting herself.'

'She was self-harming?'

. You She does already know this, not because Roan told her, but because
as he hacking into his work files and reading his reports the previous year.

'Yeah. Started when she was ten years old. So bad. She's still got th
Like, here.' He points at the cuffs of his joggers. 'But your husband. H
cured her. So amazing. And then to find out that she was here, you kno
outside his house, when she went missing.' He shakes his head. 'Unrea
it can't just be a coincidence, can it? And, listen, I know' – he puts his
out, palm first – 'I know it's nothing to do with him. I know you were
that night; I know he was with you. But it's still weird. And I can't sto
at thinking about it. It spins round and round my head all the time. Becau
nothing far as I know, after she stopped her sessions with him, she never saw h
and not again. And I don't even know how she knew where he lived. That's w
me. How did she know where he lived?'

He leaves the question hanging, pendulously, between the two of the
take it 'Well, it's possible she saw it written down in his office one day, I s
use?'

Aaron nods and says, 'Yeah, I guess it could have been something li
et. She that. I'm probably overthinking it all. And that guy.' He gestures behir
ne in.' in the direction of the street. 'The one they reckon abducted her.' His v
cracks slightly on the words. 'What do you know about him? Did you
efore him at all?'

She shakes her head. 'No. I only saw him in passing. Not even on no
terms. He talked to my husband once, a few weeks back; he was drunk
apparently and asked my husband if he was married. Kind of weird. Bu
what we know now about his internet habits ...'

'Yeah,' says Aaron. 'That's some sick stuff. I didn't even know abo
that, all that incel thing. God. Sad, sad men.'

'Toxic masculinity,' she says. 'It's everywhere.'

He nods. But then says, 'Not in our house, it wasn't. I just want to si
started Saffyre lived in a house with two men who were both good, who put g
equal to boys. I want you to know that. Whatever happened I know she
wasn't trying to get away from stuff at home. Her home was good. Is g

If as Cate nods. She believes this man, completely, every word he says. ‘
ring you lost your father?’

Made ‘Yeah.’ He gaze drops to his water glass. ‘Back in October. She tool
badly. Stopped eating. Stopped doing schoolwork. I said to her that she
should come back and see Dr Fours. I offered to set that up for her. Bu
of said she was fine. I got someone in to talk to her from the school, a pas
teacher. Didn’t make much difference. And then early November she j
e scars. of snapped out of it. Started eating. Got back into her studies. We had
ie amazing Christmas, just being together, you know, like a real family. A
ow, then, I don’t know, after Christmas she just sort of ... drifted away aga
al. And ‘In what way?’

hand ‘Just wasn’t at home very much. Spent a lot of time at her best friend
out house. Or “going for walks”. Did a lot of sleepovers. And I suppose I j
p thought, you know, she’s seventeen, she’ll be an adult soon, I guess she
se as spreading her wings. And she was a late bloomer in that way, kind of y
im for her age, never really had a social life, didn’t do parties, boyfriends,
hat gets hanging out, nothing like that. So I thought, well, you know, good, it’s
time she found her feet in the world. And then ...’

em. She sees a film of tears across his eyes and feels an instinctive urge
oppose touch him, which she resists. He drags the back of his hand across ther
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ike going through her stuff. There wasn’t much, to be honest. The police h
id him still got her laptop, but I don’t think they’ve found anything on there; t
oice have said by now. Every night after work I just sit in her room, with he
know things, looking for something, anything that might explain what happe
her. Why she was here. What she was doing. And then last night, I fou
odding in the pocket of some old joggers ...’

He puts his hand into his back pocket and pulls out a piece of folded
it with He unfolds it and pushes it across the table to Cate.

She reads the words written on it and her blood runs cold and dark.
ut all

ay that.
irls
e
good.’

Cate nods. She believes this man, completely, every word he says. ‘I hear you lost your father?’

‘Yeah.’ He gaze drops to his water glass. ‘Back in October. She took it badly. Stopped eating. Stopped doing schoolwork. I said to her that she should come back and see Dr Fours. I offered to set that up for her. But she said she was fine. I got someone in to talk to her from the school, a pastoral teacher. Didn’t make much difference. And then early November she just sort of snapped out of it. Started eating. Got back into her studies. We had an amazing Christmas, just being together, you know, like a real family. And then, I don’t know, after Christmas she just sort of ... drifted away again.’

‘In what way?’

‘Just wasn’t at home very much. Spent a lot of time at her best friend’s house. Or “going for walks”. Did a lot of sleepovers. And I suppose I just thought, you know, she’s seventeen, she’ll be an adult soon, I guess she’s spreading her wings. And she was a late bloomer in that way, kind of young for her age, never really had a social life, didn’t do parties, boyfriends, hanging out, nothing like that. So I thought, well, you know, good, it’s about time she found her feet in the world. And then ...’

She sees a film of tears across his eyes and feels an instinctive urge to touch him, which she resists. He drags the back of his hand across them and smiles. ‘And yeah, so, I’m just left with all these questions. And I started going through her stuff. There wasn’t much, to be honest. The police have still got her laptop, but I don’t think they’ve found anything on there; they’d have said by now. Every night after work I just sit in her room, with her things, looking for something, anything that might explain what happened to her. Why she was here. What she was doing. And then last night, I found this in the pocket of some old joggers ...’

He puts his hand into his back pocket and pulls out a piece of folded paper. He unfolds it and pushes it across the table to Cate.

She reads the words written on it and her blood runs cold and dark.

SAFFYRE

School had started back on 7 January and I had gone back to being the Saffyre Maddox, the one who showed up in the classroom every morning clean and fresh, hair neatly tied back, some mascara, some lip gloss. It was so much that I actively wanted to look nice, it was more that if I didn't look nice, people would worry, they'd ask me questions, the pastoral-care woman would pull me into her office and expect me to tell her what was wrong with me. So I did my schoolwork. I traded in gossip. I smiled at boys but kept them at arms' length. It was like I was Superman or something, with multiple different personas. By day I was Saffyre Maddox, aloof but popular, reserved, well-mannered A-grade student. By night I was a kind of nocturnal animal, the human equivalent of a fox. My superpower was invisibility. There was no playground at school, or in the sixth-form common room, all eyes were on me, but at night I did not exist, I was the Invisible Girl.

The confrontation with Harrison had been horrific on many levels. The sound of my name on his lips. The same lips he'd licked while he'd done what he'd done to me when I was a child. The size of him, no longer a boy but a man, an adult. The way he appeared in the half-darkness, dressed in black. The thought of him out there now, just being able to go where he wanted and do what he wanted. And that was the root of it really. That was what turned my head from self-harm to Harrison-harm. I felt like we were occupying the same territory, the same ground. We were both invisible but we'd seen each other, like two foxes facing off in the muted street light. I thought, I do not want to hurt myself any more because of what this person did to me. I thought, I want to hurt *him*.

Now, wherever I went, I looked for him.

I knew it would be only a matter of time until our paths crossed again

Mid-January. Cold as cold can be. I had fallen asleep in the plot of land across from Roan that now felt very much like it was mine. I rarely slept when I did it was fast and immediate and hard and deep, usually for ten minutes, maybe sometimes as much as half an hour. Noises always woke me. Every noise. But this noise didn't wake me. The sound of a young man entering the empty plot at two o'clock in the morning and sitting behind the JCB just out of sight of me and my little campsite.

He didn't know I was there. I didn't know he was there. And then I woke wide awake and, with that strange intake of breath that accompanies a waking, I was upright. I looked up and I saw a face and it was a face I didn't know.

ing 'Oh my fucking God.' The boy clutched his heart. 'What the fuck?'

wasn't I said, 'Josh?'

look He said. 'Yes. Fuck. How do you know my name?'

roman And I was fuddled by sleep and not thinking straight and I said, 'I know your dad.' I pulled my sleeping bag high up around me, suddenly cold.

pt 'How do you know my dad?'

ly two 'I was in therapy with him.'

ild- 'Whoa,' he said. 'Really?'

like 'Yeah,' I said. 'More than three years.'

in the 'So why are you sleeping here?' said Josh.

e on 'It's a long story,' I said.

'Are you homeless?'

The 'No. I've got a home.'

ne 'So why ...? Is it something to do with my dad?'

child, Where to start with that one? I did not have a clue.

l in 'Yeah,' I began. 'Kind of. Or at least, it started off being about your

e And now it's about loads of other things. I just like being outdoors; it's not like I can't breathe with a roof over my head.'

ere 'You're claustrophobic?'

e but 'Yeah. Maybe I am. But only at night.'

t. I 'Do you sleep here every night?'

rson 'Yeah. I do now.'

'So, was it you,' said Josh, 'here, on New Year's Eve?'

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘I was here. I was hiding. In the corner over there.’
I didn’t know what made me so open to his questions. There was something about him, something pure, untainted. I looked at him and I thought he would understand me.

‘So you were listening to our conversation?’

‘Yeah. You and your friend were going to unmask yourselves. Or something.’

‘Ha. Yeah. That’s right. I think we were maybe a bit wasted.’

‘I thought maybe you were planning a school shooting.’

‘Er,’ said Josh wryly, ‘no.’

‘Good. So, what were you talking about?’

‘Just how we were going to change it up. You know, stop being invisible. Make ourselves “relevant”.’

‘Fuck that,’ I said. ‘Seriously. Fuck that. Don’t be seen. Stay behind scenes. That’s the place to be.’

We fell silent for a moment and then Josh came around the JCB and down with me.

‘So, my dad? Was he any good? I mean, was he a good therapist?’

I shrugged. ‘Yeah, in some ways. But in others, no. Like, I enjoyed his sessions and he did stop me from self-harming. But he left something behind inside me. It’s still there.’

‘Something? Like what?’

‘Like a cancer. It’s like he got rid of the symptoms, but he left the tumor.’

‘That’s shit,’ says Josh. Then he says, ‘I hate my dad.’

His words stopped me in my tracks. ‘Really? Why?’

‘Because he’s having a fucking affair.’

‘Whoa. How do you know that?’

‘Because I’ve seen him. He flaunts it. And my mum’s too much of a touch to see what’s right under her nose. They nearly split up last year. I reckon that was because of an affair, too.’

‘What do you mean, you’ve seen him?’

‘I mean, I’ve seen him. With this girl. All, like, touching her hair and Not even trying to hide it. And it’s like ... My mum is the best person in the whole world. She’s so sweet and loving and kind; she’d do anything for anyone. And he just plays about like he can do whatever he wants and come home and she’ll have cooked him a nice meal and she’ll listen to him moaning on about how stressful his job is. And I just wonder, you know

someone whose job it is to look after people, to fix their minds, to nurture, to cure, how they can do what he does to another human being every single day of his life. It makes me sick.'

I had so much I wanted to say. But I just tucked my hands between my knees to warm them up and stayed silent.

'And that's one of the things I want to change this year. Like I was supposed to do on New Year's Eve. No more Mr Nice Guy.'

'What are you going to do?'

His head dropped. He said, 'I don't know.'

'She's called Alicia Mather,' I said.

His head shot up. 'What?'

sible. 'The woman your dad's having an affair with. Her name's Alicia Mather. I don't know where she lives.'

the He blinked. 'How?'

sat 'I've been watching too. I've seen them. He met her at work. She's a psychologist, like him. They started dating in the summer. They spent the night at a hotel just before Christmas. She lives in Willesden Green. She's twenty-nine. She's got two degrees and a PhD. She's pretty smart.'

our He didn't speak for a moment. Then he looked at me with those eyes behind. like Roan's eyes, and said, 'Who are you? Are you real?'

I laughed.

'You're really pretty,' he said.

imour.' I said, 'Thank you.'

'Am I dreaming you? I don't get this. I don't get any of this.'

'We've met before.'

He said, 'What? When?'

i soft I spoke to you in the changing room. Do you remember?'

and I 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes. I do. You had pink hair then. Didn't you?'

'Yeah. That was me.'

'Did you know who I was? Even then?'

d stuff. 'Yeah. Yeah, I did.'

in the 'Is that why you spoke to me?'

r 'Yup.'

then 'I was so embarrassed. You were so pretty.'

him 'Yeah, you can stop saying that now.'

w, how 'Sorry.'

ure and I smiled. I didn't mind. There was something so easy about the boy.
gle day OK,' I said, 'I'm only joking. Why did you stop going? To the dojo?'

He said, 'I didn't. I still go. I just changed my class times. I go on Fri
my now.'

'Are you any good?'

saying He said, 'Yeah. Green belt. So, you know, getting there.'

'Remember you told me you wanted to be able to defend yourself? Why
why you were taking lessons? You told me you'd been mugged?'

He nodded.

'What happened?'

He put his hand into his pocket and pulled out a little bag. As he talk
ather. I constructed a spliff on his thigh.

'This guy,' he said, pulling out a Rizla from a paper packet. 'Came u
behind me. Last summer. Just down there.' He pointed down the hill. 'I
a arm round my throat, quite tight. Said, What you got? Put his hands in
the pockets. I tried to push him off but he said, I've got a knife. OK? Then
ie's took my phone and my earbuds and my debit card and he pushed me, r
hard, so I nearly fell on to my face and I grabbed hold of the wall to stop
s, so myself falling and then he ran. And I just stood there. My heart poundi
was, like, the scariest, scariest thing. And I didn't do anything. I just st
there and let him take my stuff. Stuff my mum and dad worked really h
pay for. Stuff he had no right to. And it makes me so fucking angry. I j
feel like now, if I saw him, I would kill him.'

His words hit me hard. I drew in my breath. 'I know exactly how yo

And then – and how weird is this, after three years of taxpayers payi
Roan to fix me in his warm room at the Portman, after all those hours a
place. hours and hours of talking and talking and talking but never saying the
thing that really mattered? – I finally found the words to tell someone a
Harrison John.

'Something like that happened to me,' I said. 'Someone took someth
from me. And I let them.'

'What was it?'

I let a beat of silence pass. Then I talked.

'When I was ten years old, this boy in the year above groomed me. I
the tallest boy in the year. He had two younger sisters in the school wh
was really protective of. He was naughty but the teachers all loved him
he kind of picked me out. When we played dodgeball at breaktime he'

'It's the other year sixes to get out my way. To let me have my turn. And he give me these looks like: *Don't worry, I've got your back*. He made me Fridays really special. And then one day ...' I stopped briefly to step back from wave of emotion. 'One day he beckoned me into this little section of the playground where the receptions usually played, but they were all in the classroom or something and he said, Do you want to see something ma That's And I said, Yes, yes and I followed him in and he said, You need to sq down, like this, and he squatted down to show me and I did what he sa I was looking up at him like, yes! I'm squatting! Now show me the ma And then he ... It was so quick. He inserted his fingers inside me and i ked he it really hurt and I said, Ow! And he said, It's OK. It only hurts the fir After that the magic happens. He stroked my hair and then he took his up away from me and he showed it to me and he smiled and he said, It'll l Put his better next time. I promise.'

all my It felt like a belt had been squeezed around my gut, and with every v he spoke, it was loosened a bit. By the time I got to the end I felt weirdly really could breathe. Even though my eyes were full of tears and my head acl op with the sadness of that little girl waiting for the magic that never ever ng. It I could breathe. Three times I let him do that to me. And then school fi ood for the summer and Harrison left and I never saw him again. But he sta ard to inside my head, inside my DNA, my marrow, my breath, my blood, in ust single part of me. He stayed. My tumour.

Josh licked the Rizla and stuck it down, twisted the tip, stuck in a tir u feel.' of cardboard to make a filter. He reached back into his coat pocket and ng for brought out a lighter.

and 'What a fucking bastard,' he said. 'That's just so sick. So sick.'

one 'Yeah. It was. But guess what? I saw him the other day. I saw the bc about did that to me.'

'Oh my God,' said Josh. 'Shit. Where?'

ing 'There.' I pointed down the hill. 'He was just coming up from the Fi Road. I was going down. He said my name. He recognised me and he s my name and it was like ... It felt like the playground all over again. L had the right to me in some sort of way, like he was entitled to me, to r He was body, to my name. You know? And for a day or two I felt myself goin, io he backwards, like I'd climbed the top of a mountain and then lost my foc l. And and started slipping back and was trying to find something to grab hold d tell stop me slipping but there was nothing there. And then I found someth

e'd Josh looked at me wide-eyed, his face lit with orange shadows from
e feel flame of the lighter he was using to light the spliff. 'What?'

1 a 'Revenge. I found revenge.'

ie 'Oh my God. What did you do?'

ieir 'Nothing. Not yet. But I just know that that's the only way for me to
agic? The only way to get him out of my DNA. I need to hurt him.'

uat Josh brought the spliff to his lips and inhaled. He narrowed his eyes
id and nodded. 'You really do,' he said.

agic! I glanced at him quickly. I'd just put something into words that had
t hurt, buried away so far inside me that I hadn't even known what it was until
it time. I actually said it. I needed to know what it looked like to another person

hand 'You think?'

be 'Yeah. Totally. He's probably still out there abusing people to this day
he was doing this when he was eleven, getting away with it, then ...'

vord I I looked at Josh again. He offered me the spliff. I shook my head.

like I And then we both turned at a sound from the undergrowth. Two am-
hed dots of light. The shimmer of red pelt. A snout held to the air. I put my
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nished all the time. I opened up the packet towards the fox and he came.

ayed, I laid the treats out around us and we watched as he picked each one
every turn, never once looking at us.

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‘You think?’

‘Yeah. Totally. He’s probably still out there abusing people to this day. If he was doing this when he was eleven, getting away with it, then ...’

I looked at Josh again. He offered me the spliff. I shook my head.

And then we both turned at a sound from the undergrowth. Two amber dots of light. The shimmer of red pelt. A snout held to the air. I put my hand into the outside pocket of my rucksack for the dog treats I now kept in there all the time. I opened up the packet towards the fox and he came.

I laid the treats out around us and we watched as he picked each one up in turn, never once looking at us.

‘I want to help you,’ said Josh. ‘Help you get your revenge. Please. Can I help you?’

The fox sat down and looked at my bag expectantly. His tongue darted out and he licked his lips.

I looked at Josh.

I said, ‘Yes. Please.’

‘How much longer can they keep me here?’

Barry shuffles some paperwork out of his briefcase. ‘Now they’ve c you, as long as they like.’

‘But they haven’t found any new evidence. I mean, they can’t take t court based on what little they’ve got.’

‘No. But they can keep trying, and believe you me, Owen, they are r up every single strand of your life, every filament, until they find the tl they’re looking for. And meanwhile they’re going to keep dragging yo into that room and asking you questions until you crack.’

‘Crack?’ says Owen, incredulously. ‘But I’m not going to *crack*. Ho I crack when I didn’t do it?’

But as he says the words, a curtain of doubt falls across his consciou His mind keeps taking him back to a moment he’s not even sure actual happened. The moment just after he saw the person across the street. T moment just before he thought he’d turned and gone indoors and gone

Because he cannot actually remember turning and going back indoo

And since this morning’s interview, Owen’s turned over every night life when he’s been out drinking and realised that frequently all he can remember are flashes of action, but none of the bits in between.

He can’t remember journeys home. He can’t remember folding up h clothes. He can’t remember who ‘Bill’ was whose phone number he fo his pocket the night after a leaving drinks a couple of years ago. He ca remember buying the bottle of whisky he’d found in a carrier bag on h bedroom floor once with a paper receipt with his card details on it, pro that he’d been into a branch of Tesco Metro and carried out the full transaction in person. He can’t remember stroking girls’ hair on the da floor. Flicking sweat at them.

He can't remember telling a girl called Jessica with soft skin that she's pretty. And he definitely can't remember going to bed on Valentine's night. He knows he woke up in his bed wearing his shirt and one sock. He knows he slept late. He knows he had a hangover. He remembers the girl who'd called him a creep, he remembers the man with the white dog and he remembers the girl in the hoodie. But he can't remember the rest.

And that picture keeps flashing in and out of his head: a figure, passing him outside his door, heading towards the back of the house. It could have been her, the girl in the hoodie. It could have been someone else. Or it could be just a ridiculous fragment of his imagination, something his psyche conjured up to deal with the trauma of his situation. You read about it all the time, about people confessing to things they haven't done. Is this how it happens? he wonders. Is it your own brain that does it to you, that plans things there to frame you, like a bent copper?

He stares down at his hands. They look alien to him, someone else's hands attached to his arms. He's starting to lose any sense of himself or who he should be or what he's meant to be doing or who he ever was. He tries to place himself back in that Italian restaurant with Deanna, tries to remember the way she looked at him that night, over the way DI Currie looks at him in the interview room. If only he could hold on to that, then maybe this night would end.

Barry strokes his fat silk tie and says, 'There's a girl missing. You're looking like they've got. And you're looking like a good bet to them. It's irrelevant whether or not you did it at this point. They're not letting you go anywhere until they have to.'

'I didn't do it, you know.'

Barry doesn't reply.

'I didn't do it.'

Barry narrows his eyes at Owen. 'Do what?' he says. 'What didn't you do?'

'Hurt that girl. I did not hurt that girl.'

Barry doesn't speak for a while. Then he looks Owen hard in the eyes and he says, 'Well, Owen, the time for you to prove that is right now. Proving it to me. Tell me something incontrovertible. Tell me something that'll get you out of here. Please. For both our sakes.'

once

‘So,’ says DI Currie, who is beginning to lose her fresh-faced glow as the investigation drags out. ‘Owen. Please, I know we’ve been over all of this. But it’s worth going over it again. The more we talk about it the higher the chance of you regaining some kind of memory. Please, tell us again about the night of the fourteenth of February.’

Owen exhales loudly. He can’t go through all of this again, he simply cannot. ‘What about Bryn,’ he says. ‘Have you still not found him?’

She smiles crisply at him. ‘No,’ she says. ‘We have not.’

‘Well, I wish you would. He should be in here. Not me. He’s the sickest. He’s the weirdo. He’s probably out there raping women right now, while you’re sitting here asking me the same questions, over and over and over again.’

DI Currie pauses. She looks at Owen through narrowed eyes and then says, ‘Fine, Owen. Fine. If you can tell us one thing about “Bryn” that will help us to locate him, then please, do feel free to do that. Whenever you’re ready. Please.’ She leans back in her chair and appraises him frostily.

Owen sighs. He rubs at his face and tries to recall something, anything Bryn might have said to out himself. He thinks back to the details of the blog post he read. Bryn sitting in a pub on a snowy day watching the Cumbrians and Stacys. He squeezes at his consciousness to remember more. The Dickensian outline of the pub in the swirling snow, the glow of the old hanging outside and the carriage driveway where the horses were once tethered and the name of the pub had been changed when it was gentrified and before that it was the ...

The Hunters’ Inn.

He grabs the edge of the table and says. ‘The town where he lives. It’s a gastropub. A new gastropub. It used to be called the Hunters’ Inn. It’s common. Opposite a pond. With ducks. It’s his local. He goes there all the time. If you could find the pub, you’ll find him. He’s got big curly hair that’s really small. He wears a blue jacket with a stain on the front. Ask anyone there who he is. They’ll know. He’s very distinctive.’

He sees DI Currie roll her eyes very slightly. She had not expected him to supply any useful information and she’s annoyed that he has.

‘We’ll look into that, Owen. Leave that with us. But, Owen, even if you find this “Bryn” character somehow – him having deleted his blog and his presence on every forum you claim he used to frequent – even if we find him and we ask him about the Rohypnol, what do you think he’s going to do?’

the you think he's likely to tell us what you want him to tell us, that he gave
this. you against your will, that you had no intention of using it? Owen, if that
exists and if we find him, he will deny all knowledge of knowing you
out the 'But his fingerprints. They'll be on the jar. And have you asked the
The pub in Euston? Have you asked to see their CCTV yet? For that night
ly That will prove that he knows me. And it might show him giving me the
drugs.'

'Yes, but what you don't seem to understand, Owen, is that none of
ko. makes any difference. The fact of the matter is that you had date-rape
candle hidden in your bedroom and frankly we really don't care where you got
them from or what you got them for. If you want to prove to us that you didn't
ever abduct Saffyre Maddox and cause some harm to come to her on the night
of February the fourteenth, then I'm afraid you're going to need to try and
do it entirely.'

Owen glances at Barry who looks at him as if to say, 'What did I tell

He draws in his breath and blinks. Then he looks straight at DI Currie
and says, 'Please tell me what you think happened to Saffyre? I would really
like to know. What do you think I did to her? How did I get this girl, that
quite tall girl, to wherever it is you think I took her? Me, on my own. I
didn't drag her through the streets of Hampstead at midnight without being
noticed? On Valentine's night, the streets full of people? I don't have a
I'm not particularly strong. I'd really like you to share your theories with
me. Because honestly, from where I'm sitting, you're grabbing at straws.'

DI Currie purses her lips. 'Owen,' she says. 'We are doing our jobs.
We are exploring many, many avenues of inquiry. Trust us. And we have
many theories about what happened to Saffyre and I can assure you we would
be paying thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money to keep you here if
we did not have a strong case to prove that you know what happened to Sa
ffyre. So, Owen, once again, from the top, please talk us through the events
of that night of the fourteenth of February as far as you recollect them. Start
with leaving the house to meet a woman called Deanna Wurth at a restaurant
in Covent Garden.'

Owen lets his head drop into his chest. Then he lifts it and says, 'At
six p.m. I left the house and walked down the hill towards Finchley Road
Tube station ...'

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Cate sits waiting for Roan to return. The piece of paper sits in front of Aaron had left it. She still wasn't sure why he hadn't taken it straight to the police. Some kind of misguided, misplaced loyalty to Roan, she suspected, was as if he'd been hoping she'd offer him a palatable explanation.

She places it side by side with her own piece of paper, pulled from the notebook she'd been making notes on earlier. Her eyes cast back and forth between them, taking in the similarities, and the one big difference. Her hands shift slightly as she smooths the pages out.

She glances at the kitchen clock. Seven eighteen. Where is he?

She's almost 100 per cent sure now, almost positive that something unthinkable has been happening. She'd felt her flesh crawl slightly when her son had hugged her this afternoon when he got back from school.

'Are you OK, Mum?' he'd asked, his blue eyes full of concern.

'I'm fine. Just think I might be coming down with something. Don't want to pass my germs to you.'

He had a copy of *Metro* with him. He waved it in front of her and pointed at the headline. 'Look,' he said, 'they still don't know what happened to Saffyre.'

There was a strange intimacy, Cate noticed, in the way he said Saffyre's name.

'Did you ever meet her?' she'd asked, casually.

'Who?'

'Saffyre. Did you ever meet her? I mean, she lived over the road from school. And apparently she did classes at that martial-arts place you go to. It's possible you might have met her?'

He'd shaken his head. Said, 'No. Definitely not.' Then, 'What's for dinner?'

Now she looks again at the piece of paper in front of her. The piece of paper with her son's name on it. Found in Saffyre's joggers. And not just her son's name, but the dates and locations of all the sex attacks in the area: the New Year. The same as the dates on her own sheet of paper. With one difference: Saffyre's list includes 21 January. The papers have not reported a sex attack on 21 January. But according to Cate's diary, 21 January was the day Tilly claimed to have been attacked outside their house.

In a neat cursive script underneath the dates are several seemingly random names.

her. Clive.

o the
cted. It Roan.

he pad Josh.

een
shake Alicia.

en her 'I just thought,' Aaron had said, 'that maybe it meant something. I saw those papers that you had a son called Josh. I mean, I know it's a popular name. But still. Would you be able to ask your son? Ask him if he knows who she means? If he knows her?'

o want The significance of the dates had hit her immediately. She'd said, 'Sure, I'll ask him,' and tried to keep the breathlessness from her voice. The moment he'd gone she'd torn the page from her notepad and compared it to her list. Her hand had gone to her throat.

o She'd walked straight into Josh's bedroom and pulled the linen basket from his wardrobe. The plastic bag was gone. She'd taken Josh's schoolbag from the shelves and flicked through them, frantically, with no idea what she was looking for. Who were Clive, and Alicia? Why did Saffyre have Roan and Josh's names written on a piece of paper with the dates of the sex attacks? *What was Saffyre doing outside their house on the night she disappeared?*

m your She'd found nothing in her son's bedroom. Nothing new on his browser history. Georgia had got home from school first, gone straight to her room, stripped off her uniform, tied an apron on over joggers and a sweatshirt, opened up a recipe on the iPad, propped it up in the kitchen and started to bake

of had circled her distractedly, clearing things away, loading them into the
ust her dishwasher, interjecting occasionally into her daughter's high-octane
a since monologue about how she wanted her bedroom decorated at the house
one maybe it should be dark, like, darkdark, maybe even black, or off black
orted a like, totally the other way, shades of white, like her bedroom here, but
is the cosier, isn't it?

Josh had got home an hour later and gone straight to his room after
andom greeting Cate.

The cake is on the counter now, iced in a chocolate buttercream and
decorated with crushed Flake bars. It gapes open on one side where Ge
has already cut herself a slice, showing the vanilla insides.

There's a pasta bake in the oven. The smell makes Cate feel slightly
nauseous.

She glances at the clock again.

Seven thirty-one.

'Mum!' It's Georgia. 'When's dinner ready?'

'Soon,' she calls back. 'When Dad gets back!'

She absent-mindedly lays the table, tips salad leaves into a bowl, cut
r in the baguette into ovals. They'll eat without him if they have to.

me. But a minute later she hears the door bang and then Roan is in the ki
at it glowing, radiating the heat of aerobic exercise.

'Oh,' she says, 'you've been for a run?'

ure, 'Yes, straight from work.' He's still breathless as he pulls off his glo
l them. his snood, his beanie. 'Had a lot of pent-up ... stuff. Ran all the way up
village and back. I found this place.' He unzips his jacket and pulls it c

et out 'Right up the other end of the village. Weirdest place. Like a kind of J
ooks Bond thing: crazy low-rise buildings, walkways, hidden away in this c
at she trees.' He drops the jacket on the back of a kitchen chair. 'Anyway, I g
loan it, and apparently it's what remains of the most expensive council estate
built! Some failed socialist experiment under a Labour government in
1970s. All owned privately now, of course – worth a fortune. But hone
The weirdest place. Like something from the future. Like a sci-fi film :

vsing Roan is burbling and Cate is aware on some level of what he's talkin
om to about and on some level she would like to respond, would like to say,
pened yes, *I saw that place too!* But the words stick halfway up her throat, be
e. Cate as he talks, her gaze goes to the angular outline of her husband's torso,

e way the Lycra clings to his long, sculpted arms and to the fluorescent c
pattern that works its way from wrist to shoulder up the sleeves.

, how 'Where did you find that top?' she interrupts him.

k, or, 'What?'

dark is 'That top? Where did you find it?'

'I don't know. My drawers, I think ... why?'

'I thought ...'

'What?'

'Nothing. I just haven't seen it for a while.'

orgia Somehow the top that was hidden away in the back of Josh's wardro
been laundered and returned to Roan's drawer.

Roan shrugs. 'I'm off for a shower,' he says. 'What's for dinner?'

'Pasta bake,' says Cate, her voice coming out at an oddly high pitch
salad.'

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way the Lycra clings to his long, sculpted arms and to the fluorescent orange pattern that works its way from wrist to shoulder up the sleeves.

‘Where did you find that top?’ she interrupts him.

‘What?’

‘That top? Where did you find it?’

‘I don’t know. My drawers, I think ... why?’

‘I thought ...’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. I just haven’t seen it for a while.’

Somehow the top that was hidden away in the back of Josh’s wardrobe has been laundered and returned to Roan’s drawer.

Roan shrugs. ‘I’m off for a shower,’ he says. ‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Pasta bake,’ says Cate, her voice coming out at an oddly high pitch. ‘And salad.’

SAFFYRE

Josh asked me what Harrison John looked like so I did a google for him and my hands shook as I did it. I couldn't bear to find out anything about him, whether that he had a kid, or that he'd done something good, or that he was clever or something. I was so scared that he'd have done something to redeem himself that I had to dilute my feelings of vengeance, because right then those feelings were my only feelings I really had; they were what got me up in the mornings, got me to school, got me to eat, got me to breathe.

I pressed the search button and held my breath.

And then there he was: his face, the squashed-down nose, the heavy-lidded eyes striking some kind of stupid gangster pose. According to the accompanying article, he was part of a community music project; something to do with the college he attended.

I turned the phone to Josh. 'That's him.'

'That's Harrison?'

'Yeah.'

'Looks like a loser.'

'Right,' I agreed. 'So much of a loser.'

We were in the playground outside my block where I'd told Josh to meet me. I was still in my school gear.

When Josh saw me, he'd said, 'You look so different.'

I'd said, 'This is my alter ego.'

'So, what's your plan?' Josh said now.

I turned off my phone. 'Well, I know where he lives now.'

Josh said, 'How did you do that?'

I tapped my nose. I said, 'I told you. I'm clever.'

'Are you going to stalk him too?'

I hit Josh on the arm, playfully. 'I'm not a stalker!' I said.

'You kind of are,' he replied.

He smiled and I liked his smile. Like when a dog looks at you in that soulful, pure way and you think, 'You are too, too good for this world.' It was what it was like when Joshua Fours smiled. Like he was too good for the world.

'Anyway,' I replied, 'I already started. I followed him to the Co-op back this afternoon. He didn't see me.'

'What did he buy?'

'Haribo. And some tobacco.'

'Classy.'

n. My 'Isn't it?' I said. 'And now I know where he goes to college. He'll h
like escape from me.'

ver or 'Can I come with you?'

imself, 'You mean, be my co-stalker?'

ere the 'Yeah.'

got me 'Of course you can.'

'Shall we go now?'

I checked the time on my phone. It was nearly five.

brow, 'Come on then,' I said. We jumped off the wall. 'This way,' I said. '
ying me.'

h the

Harrison lived up the other end of my road, towards Chalk Farm in a really ugly low-rise block of flats backing on to the railway line. We sat on a bench opposite. It was freezing cold and I could hear Josh's teeth chattering. 'OK?' I asked. 'You can go home if you want.'

He shook his head. 'No. I want to see him. In the flesh.'

I smiled a half-smile at him. Then we both turned back to watch the

meet And then there he was. Pushing his way through the front door of the block. He was dressed all in black again, the Puffa coat, black stretchy trousers, black trainers, a flash of bare ankle in between, a bag slung over his back. He lit a roll-up cigarette as he emerged on to the street, squinting and inhaled. And then he turned right, headed up towards Haverstock Hill. I followed him, silently. He caught a bus up towards Hampstead, running to catch it just before its doors closed.

Josh and I looked at each other. It was a single-decker bus. We would be able to get on it without being spotted. I headed back to my flat. Josh headed back to his flat. We arranged to meet up the next day, same time, same place.

t

That It was two days later that I saw the headline about a sex attack on Ham
for this Heath. A man, in black, wearing a mask. Pulled a woman down a quiet
and pathway and groped her. Put his hands inside her underwear. Grabbed
breasts. And then ran.

I thought of Harrison John jumping on that bus towards Hampstead
twenty, two days before, in his black coat, his black leggings. It was his
knew it was.

ave no On 21 January Josh called me. He sounded panicked. He said, 'I think
Harrison attacked my sister's friend. The police are here. Fuck. What should
do?'

He explained that his sister's friend had come over after school and
left just as they were about to sit down for dinner. Then she'd come back
a few minutes later saying that someone had accosted her.

'What did she say he looked like?' I asked.

There was a pause. 'She said she didn't see him. But she said he was
Following That he grabbed her from behind. By the hips. That he rubbed himself
her. Tried to get hold of her breasts. But she broke free and ran back to
Shall I say something, Saffyre? To the police? Shall I say I think I know
really it might be?'

bench My biggest regret is that I didn't say yes, didn't tell them. Tell them
'You name. Let them track him down to his door, search his black bag, take
prints, suspend his existence. Let them destroy him.

I didn't say that because I wanted to be the one. Because what if the
flats. knocked on his door and he said, It wasn't me? And they believed him
e then he would close the door and his chest would puff out and he'd think
was cleverer than anyone. Or what if they went to his door and brought
over his in and questioned him and it wasn't him? I wanted it to be him. I needed
; as he be him. He was evil and he needed to be stopped.

We So I said, 'No, don't say anything. Just keep quiet. Leave it with me
g to it with me.'

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Barry walks into the interview room. Owen can recognise the sound of leather soles on the wooden floors from a few metres away now, followed briskly by the ponderous smell of his aftershave.

‘Good morning, Owen.’

‘Are they letting me go?’

Barry stops and closes his eyes. ‘No, Owen, I’m afraid not. And you should know – this is happening now.’

He pulls a folded paper from his briefcase and throws it on the table in front of Owen. It’s this morning’s *Metro*: ‘SAFFYRE SUSPECT’S SIX PLAN TO DATE-RAPE DOZENS OF WOMEN’.

Below it is the awful photo, yet again, of Owen being jammed into the police car with the fresh cut on his forehead, the wet, asymmetric hair sticking up at angles, the dead look in his eye, the hint of a snaggle tooth between his lips.

He stops and looks at Barry. ‘But ...? I don’t ...?’

‘Just read it, Owen.’

Owen Pick, the disgraced college lecturer currently being held under arrest in a north London police station for the abduction and possible murder of missing teenager Saffyre Maddox, had a grand master plan according to a friend on an incel forum he used to frequent. The friend, who wishes to remain anonymous, told us of a horrifying plan revealed to him by Pick during a pub session earlier this month. He said, ‘Part of the problem for the incel community is that we are being bred out of society. Women refuse to consider us as sexual partners; therefore we are not being given the opportunity to reproduce. Our genes are being phased out deliberately, by our governments, the

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media and by society. This is an issue that goes very deep into the psychology of the incel community. It's something that Owen and I have discussed at great length. While I agree with the general theory and am myself active in the incel community in terms of trying to change the way we are viewed by society, I was very alarmed indeed the last time Owen Pick and I met up for a drink. He chose a shabby down-at-heel pub and I was surprised when I met him for the first time to see that he was quite well presented. He didn't, to my eye, look like a classic incel. He looked like he could pass in society. I couldn't see why he would have trouble attracting women. But there was something about him, something cold, an edge. He chilled me a little. I would say he had a lot of the traits of a psychopath. And then he told me he had a plan. He showed me a jar of pills. I had no idea what they were. He laid them on the table between us and he told me what his plan was. He was going to hook up with women on dating apps and then drug them and inseminate them while they were unconscious. He told me he was doing it for the good of the incel community, but I didn't buy it. There was something about him, a narcissism, a lack of humanity, of compassion. I would say he had a personality disorder and was using the incel community and our beliefs to legitimise a sick personal agenda. In my opinion, Owen Pick was a rapist, masquerading as an incel.

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A strange noise comes from Owen. He wasn't expecting to make it. It comes from the deepest pit of his stomach, a curdled growl. He raises his fists which had curled themselves up into rocks while he read the article, and brings them down hard on to the table. Then he collects the newspaper between his hands, pushes it into a ball and hurls it across the room.

'Fuck!' he yells. 'Fuck this. Fuck all of it!'

He sits down heavily, drops his face into the heels of his hands and starts to cry. When he looks up, Barry is sitting, adjusting the cuffs of his shirt. He sees Owen looking at him and passes him a handkerchief from inside his jacket.

'It's not looking good, Owen,' he says quietly.

'This is bullshit – you know that, don't you? Bullshit. None of that is what happened. He's twisted the whole thing. *He* was the one. *He* gave me

drugs. He's just pushing his agenda and throwing me under the wheels
it. Fuck!

Barry continues to look at him. 'Well,' he says. 'We've still got a lot
work to do. But this' – he points at the screwed-up newspaper – 'is all
hearsay and should have no bearing on the investigation. Let's just put
it behind us and see what our friends have got for us today, shall we?'

A few moments later DIs Currie and Henry walk into the room. Owen
reads their energy. It's been slowly depleting the past couple of days as
their so-called leads take them nowhere, as their case against Owen ref
grow. But now there is a certain bristle about the pair of them as they t
their seats, arrange themselves and their paperwork.

DI Currie gets straight to the point. 'Owen. Do you know a woman called
Alicia Mathers?'

Owen shakes his head. 'Never heard of her.'

'Well, Alicia Mathers claims to know you.'

Owen sighs. He's down the rabbit hole. He's in a world where people
tell him that the sky is green, the grass is blue, two and two is five, black is
and white is black. And in this world, yes, of course a woman called Alicia
Mathers would claim to know him.

'Does she?' he says.

'Yes. She says she saw you that night. And that you were talking to
a young girl in a hoodie.'

He rests his head on the table. The plastic feels cool against his forehead.
His eyes are closed and he counts to five silently before raising his head
again.

'And she is coming forward only now, because ...?'

'It's complicated,' says DI Currie. 'She has very good reason for not
coming forward before now. Very sensitive reasons.'

'And they are ...?'

'I'm not at liberty to share that with you.'

'No,' says Owen. 'No. Of course you're not. So, go on, what did this
Alicia claim to have seen?'

'Alicia says she saw you and a girl in a hoodie having a conversation
Outside your house.'

A bolt of light flashes through Owen's head. It's there again, that lo
moment, the moment that keeps showing itself to him in fractured shar
over and over again, whenever he closes his eyes. The girl in the hoodie, no

to do fact walking away, but walking towards him. Saying something. He th
it was false memory. But now he is being told that it wasn't.

t of 'That might have happened,' he says, feeling a surge of relief as the
leave his mouth. 'I've been getting flashbacks the past day or so. It mi
this have happened. But I have no idea what we talked about. I have no ide
she said. What I said. I have no idea.'

en Owen hears Barry sighing heavily to his right and he notices the fac
s all the two detectives contort slightly, muscles and nerves under their skin
uses to reacting to his words.

ake 'Owen, Alicia Mathers claims she saw the girl in the hoodie talking
outside your house. She claims she saw you follow her into your back
called garden.'

'Yes,' says Owen, his head swimming with blurred images, his skin
tingling with the uncertain memory of a girl's hand on his arm. 'Yes, t
might have happened. Yes. She ran towards me. There was a woman v
le tell towards the house opposite. The girl ran towards me. She ran across th
s white and she said ...' It's there now, risen from the vaults of his mind: *Clive*
licia *that you, Clive?*

'She called me Clive. She wanted to see something. She ...'

a What did she do? The room is entirely silent. He can see that Angela
breathing. He looks down at his hands. The skin on his palms tingles a
feels another memory returning. 'She asked me for a leg-up. To the ro
head. the garage. I put my hands out, like this.' He demonstrates his hands li
id together into a perch. 'She was heavy. I'm not very strong. She almost
back on to me, but she managed to grab hold of something. A gutter.
Something. And pull herself up. And then ...'

t He pinches the bridge of his nose. Where had this been? All these da

He continues: 'I don't know. I stood guard. I don't know how long.
talk to her. Then she jumped down. She jumped down. She said ow. A:
—!' He starts as something occurs to him. 'That must have been when
s cut herself! On my wall. And dropped her phone. She dropped her pho
then she picked it up again. And she ran. She said, "Thanks, Clive," an
n. ran.'

'Clive?' says Angela.

st 'Yes. I don't know. I don't know why she called me Clive. She mus
thought I was someone else.'

t in He sees DI's Currie and Henry exchange a look.

ought 'She ran?' says DI Currie.

words 'Yes!' he says, his voice full of elation. 'She jumped down. She said She dropped her phone. She picked it up. She said, "Thanks, Clive." A ght ran.'

a what He feels a burst of euphoria at recovering the weird chunk of time r between seeing her outside Lycra Man's house and seeing her run dow es of street, the sound of her rubber soles against the cold, dry pavement.

l 'And the woman across the street?'

to you, 'I don't remember. I don't ... She was ...'

And there it was, retrieved like an old photo dropped down the back sofa: the missing piece.

'She was talking to the man across the road. The man who goes runi The, you know, the psychologist. She was talking to him. She was sho

hat She was crying. And that's it,' he says. 'That's as much as I remember valking

The room falls silent. DI Currie writes something on a piece of pape

e road clears her throat.

?! Is 'Well, thank you for remembering, Owen. I must say, it strikes me a rather odd, after all these days, all this time.'

'It was when you said about the woman. I knew – I kind of knew th a is not been something missing. But I couldn't find the memories until you sa s he about that other woman.'

of of 'It's called a fragmentary blackout,' says Barry, sitting upright. 'Con nked after episodes of heavy drinking. And the lost memories can be trigger fell someone filling in a missing detail.'

Owen throws a look at Barry. There's something different about hin About his demeanour, the tone of his voice. A new softness. A new ca ays? almost, Owen thinks, as if Barry believes him.

I didn't DI Currie is going through her paperwork. 'Did we send someone u nd that the garage roof?' she asks DI Henry.

she DI Henry consults his own paperwork, flicks through it blindly. 'I'n ne and sure,' he says. 'I'll check it out.'

id she DI Currie slowly rests her hands on top of her paperwork and looks Owen. She says, 'Excuse us, please, we'll be right back.'

As they leave the room Barry turns to Owen and, for the first time si t have Owen was brought in on Friday morning, he smiles.

'Good work,' he says. 'Very good work. Now let's see what they co back with.'

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Cate's phone vibrates on the kitchen table. She picks it up and looks at screen. It's Elona, Tilly's mum.

'Cate?'

'Yes,' she answers. 'Hi!'

'Hi. It's Elona. I wondered if you had time to talk?'

'Yes,' she replies. 'Yes. Totally.'

'I spoke to Tilly. Last night. About the thing that happened. She got upset. I think she was shocked, in a way, that I was mentioning it again. I think she thought it was over. She kept saying, Why are you asking me why are you asking? But Cate, she started to cry and then she said, I can't tell you, I can't tell you. And I said what? And she said, It's bad. I can't. So – and here I am reading between the lines somewhat because she was making much sense – but I think she was telling me that it did happen, happened and that she knows the person who did it, but she seemed so scared, Cate, too scared to tell me who it was.'

Cate's thoughts spiral dizzily back to the night of the twenty-first in the kitchen. Curry on the hob. Josh saying, 'I'm in the mood for something spicy.' Tilly leaving. The four of them sitting down to eat. It had been had it? She squints to bring the image into focus: curry, table, Georgia, Roan, Josh. Had they sat down to eat when Tilly came back? No, it was soon. She must still have been laying the table or serving up the food. She can't remember who was in the kitchen then. She knows Georgia was there. And Roan and Josh must have been there too. She's quite sure.

But even as she thinks this, she feels doubts crawl in and start to cloud her memory.

'Right,' she says briskly to Elona. 'Well, thank you for letting me know.'

‘But who?’ says Elona, her voice tinged with desperation. ‘If it happens
If it did, and she’s too scared to say? Who might it have been?’

‘I have no idea, Elona. I’m so sorry.’

‘Should I go back to the police, do you think?’

‘Gosh, I really don’t know. It doesn’t sound like Tilly’s ready to talk
it ...’

‘But if they’re investigating this guy, the one who attacked the woman
behind the estate agent, this could be ... it might be the same guy, yes?
they should know?’

‘I really don’t know, I really ...’

‘I’m scared, Cate. What if this guy, what if he’s still out there and he
following Tilly? If she knows the attacker then he might know where she
lives, where we live? What shall I do, Cate? What shall I do?’

Cate’s stomach roils. She pulls the phone away from her ear and catches
her breath. She puts it back a second later and says, ‘I’m sorry, Elona.
I am, but I have to go now. I’m really sorry.’

And then she ends the call.

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‘But who?’ says Elona, her voice tinged with desperation. ‘If it happened? If it did, and she’s too scared to say? Who might it have been?’

‘I have no idea, Elona. I’m so sorry.’

‘Should I go back to the police, do you think?’

‘Gosh, I really don’t know. It doesn’t sound like Tilly’s ready to talk about it ...’

‘But if they’re investigating this guy, the one who attacked the woman behind the estate agent, this could be ... it might be the same guy, yes? And they should know?’

‘I really don’t know, I really ...’

‘I’m scared, Cate. What if this guy, what if he’s still out there and he’s following Tilly? If she knows the attacker then he might know where she lives, where we live? What shall I do, Cate? What shall I do?’

Cate’s stomach roils. She pulls the phone away from her ear and catches her breath. She puts it back a second later and says, ‘I’m sorry, Elona. I really am, but I have to go now. I’m really sorry.’

And then she ends the call.

Lunch is a thin ham sandwich, raw carrots, orange squash, a blueberry muffin. Such a shame about the blueberries. Owen picks them out and puts them on the side of the tray.

The atmosphere has changed since this morning, since he recalled the missing section of the night of the fourteenth. He's pretty sure he's been seen less as a twisted child killer and more as someone who might not actually have done it after all. But then his thoughts go back to the morning papers, to the fake story planted by Bryn. Whatever happens here, inside these walls, however soon he is allowed to go home, charges dropped, with a pair of apologetic handshakes from DIs Currie and Henry, regardless of anything that happens here before he gets to go home, he will still be the man on the front page of the papers, with the bloody forehead and the associations and the underwear drawer full of date-rape drugs. He will be the guy who called a strange woman a bitch and who had a girl's blood on the wall outside his bedroom, who was sacked for sweating on a girl at disco. He will always be Owen Pick, the weird, creepy guy who maybe hadn't killed Saffyre Maddox but sure as dammit had done *something*.

The door opens and the detectives return. They sit neatly and look at Owen. DI Currie says, 'Well, we sent someone up on to the garage roof and got their early findings back. Footprints that match Saffyre's trainers. I found fingerprints on the guttering. No evidence of you being up there. But, Owen, we can't take your word for what you say you remember happening there.'

night. We are not ready to drop you from the investigation. Nowhere n
So. Anything you suddenly remember, please share it with us.'

They straighten their files, and leave.

Owen looks at Barry and exhales.

'We're getting there,' says Barry. 'We're getting there.'

And then he says, 'Oh, by the way, Tessie just forwarded something
An email. Would you like to see it?'

'Erm, yes. Sure.'

Barry switches on his smartphone and slides it across the table to O
It's from Deanna.

Dear Tessie

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Thank you so much for your email regarding your nephew, Owen.
While I had a very pleasant evening with Owen on Valentine's nig
I think I have enough baggage in my life right now without taking
any more. I have no idea what to make of his arrest or of the
newspaper reports about his history and background. They do not
square with the man I had dinner with, who was gentle, civilised an
thoughtful. But then people can hide a lot of darkness behind
carefully constructed masks, can't they? I feel sad that you are goin
through this and I hope, for your sake, and for Owen's, that this all
blows over and that it turns out to be a case of mistaken identity.
Please do tell him that I'm thinking of him, but that I cannot possib
consider taking things any further with him in the light of the curre
situation.

Wishing you all the best,

Yours

Deanna Wurth

Owen reads it twice. His eye settles on the words of hope. He notes tha
nowhere in the message does she say she believes he is capable of mur
Nowhere does she say she never wants to see him again. Nowhere doe
say she hates him or is appalled by him. This, he thinks, is a chink of li
Something to hold on to.

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ight.

Josh gets back from school late that evening. He comes, as ever, direct to the kitchen and hugs Cate, his skin still cold from outdoors. 'Love you

'Love you too.' The words feel stilted as they leave her lips.

Then she says, quickly, before he leaves the room, before she loses her nerve, 'Josh. Can I ask you something? A bit of a strange question?'

He turns and looks at her. He looks thin, she notes, the dips below his cheekbones pronounced and shadowed. 'Yes?'

'I was in your room yesterday.'

His eyes widen and bulge slightly in their sockets, barely perceptible just enough to betray his anxiety. 'Yeah?'

'I was getting your dirty laundry. And there was a bag, behind the bed. Had some of your dad's running gear in it. Any idea why?'

There's a beat of silence. Then Josh says, 'I went for a run.'

'You went for a run? When?'

'I dunno. A few times.'

Cate closes her eyes. She thinks of the way he moves, her second-born child, so slowly. Always a few paces behind. She remembers when he was younger, the countless times she'd have to pause on the pavement and wait for him to catch up with her. 'Stop dawdling,' she'd say. 'Come on!' And even now, at almost six feet, he still walks like a slug. He does everything slowly. She cannot picture him running. She says, 'Really? You?'

'Yeah. Why not?'

'Because ... I don't know. You're not the running type.'

'Well. People change, don't they?'

She sighs. 'I suppose they do, yes. But here's a weird thing. I didn't take the kit; I left it there. But now it's gone and your dad's wearing it again. He says he found it in his drawer.'

Josh shrugs, moves one foot in front of the other. 'Yeah. I washed it
'You washed it?'

'Yeah.'

She closes her eyes again. 'So, let me get this straight. You borrowed
dad's kit to go running in. Without ever telling me that you were going
running. You left it in a carrier bag at the back of your wardrobe. Then
got it out, washed it, dried it, put it back in your dad's drawers?'

'Yes.'

'I don't understand, Josh. It doesn't make any sense.'

'What doesn't make any sense? It makes total sense.'

ly into .'
'No, Josh. It doesn't. And you're making me feel really uncomfortable
'Like there's something you're hiding from me.'

her
is
And then Josh does something Josh never does. He shouts. He opens
mouth and he growls and he says, 'OK. Fuck's sake. OK. I pissed myself
OK? I was out running and I don't know why. I do not know why, OK
pissed myself. Like totally through everything. And I couldn't tell anyone
because I was so embarrassed. So I just shoved the kit in the bag and hid
until I had a chance to wash it. OK? Are you happy now?'

e but
asket.
Cate sways slightly in the aftershock of her son's rage. And then she
to him. She takes him in her arms and she holds him and she says, 'I'm
I didn't mean to push you. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I'm sorry. I
OK.'

She feels his arms around her and his face buried into her shoulder and
realises that he is crying. He says, 'Mum. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I love
you so much. I really love you.'

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She rubs the back of his neck. She whispers in his ear. 'It's OK, Josh.
OK, whatever's going on, you can tell me. You can tell me. It's OK.'

'I can't tell you,' he says. 'I just can't. Ever.'

And then he pulls himself from her embrace and strides from the room

wash
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'Yes.'

'I don't understand, Josh. It doesn't make any sense.'

'What doesn't make any sense? It makes total sense.'

'No, Josh. It doesn't. And you're making me feel really uncomfortable. Like there's something you're hiding from me.'

And then Josh does something Josh never does. He shouts. He opens his mouth and he growls and he says, 'OK. Fuck's sake. OK. I pissed myself. OK? I was out running and I don't know why. I do not know why, OK? But I pissed myself. Like totally through everything. And I couldn't tell anyone because I was so embarrassed. So I just shoved the kit in the bag and hid it until I had a chance to wash it. OK? Are you happy now?'

Cate sways slightly in the aftershock of her son's rage. And then she goes to him. She takes him in her arms and she holds him and she says, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to push you. I didn't mean to embarrass you. I'm sorry. It's OK.'

She feels his arms around her and his face buried into her shoulder and she realises that he is crying. He says, 'Mum. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you so much. I really love you.'

She rubs the back of his neck. She whispers in his ear. 'It's OK, Josh. It's OK, whatever's going on, you can tell me. You can tell me. It's OK.'

'I can't tell you,' he says. 'I just can't. Ever.'

And then he pulls himself from her embrace and strides from the room.

SAFFYRE

I got a text from Josh at about eight o'clock on Valentine's Day. It said *storm brewing! Alicia's sent my dad a Valentine's card and Georgia's opened it. No one's read it yet. Don't know what the hell to do.*

I replied: *Burn it.*

He said: *I can't. Dad knows it's here. I'm going to confront him with*
He sent me a photo of the writing in the card.

It said: 'I can't wait any longer. I'm dying. Leave her now or I'm go
kill myself.'

I thought, Jesus, what a drama queen. I thought, How do these people
jobs where they're allowed to mess with the insides of children's heads?

I replied to Josh: *Don't do anything. Just wait.*

No, he replied. *It's time.*

My heart raced. I felt weirdly sick, like it was my family in jeopardy
somebody else's.

I didn't hear back from Josh for hours after that. It was cold and dark
and there was a light drizzle in the air and I thought, I don't fancy sleep
out tonight, so I got into my comfy joggers, ate lasagne out of the microwave
and watched *Shakespeare in Love* on the TV. Aaron came back about 10
and we chatted for a while. And then I got a message from Josh: *She's*
Alicia's here! At our house! She's going mental! Can you come over?

I called through to Aaron in the kitchen. 'I'm just popping over to a
friend's place.'

'Which friend?' he called back.

'Just a friend from school. Lives Hampstead way. I'll be back soon,

I got to Roan's place at about eleven fifteen. It all seemed quiet. I messaged Josh: *I'm outside. What's going on?*

He replied: *I think I got rid of her.*

What about your parents?

They're out, he replied.

I said: *I'll keep watch.*

I walked around the corner and sat on the wall. All was quiet. After fifteen minutes I saw Roan and his wife come home. They looked tipsy happy and were holding hands. Then it was quiet again for a while.

I messaged Josh. I said: *I think she must have gone home. No sign of her out here. I'll wait till midnight, OK?*

He replied: *You're the best.*

I replied with a smiley face and a medal emoji.

Shit just Another fifteen minutes passed. A couple walked past holding hands. A woman held a single rose in her other hand. A man walked past with a small white dog. A woman walked past staring at her phone.

And then And then I saw something, a movement in my peripheral vision. There was a woman standing right outside Roan's front door. She had her phone in her hand. She turned slightly and I saw that it was Alicia.

ing to I crossed the street so I was now on the same side of the road as Roan's house.

le get I whispered, 'Alicia!'

s? She turned and looked at me. I could see she'd been crying and I could see she was drunk. She said, 'Yes?'

I said, 'Whatever it is you're about to do, don't do it. OK?'

, not She said, 'Do I know you?'

np out 'I used to be a patient at the Portman Centre. I know Roan. And I know what you and Roan have been doing.'

ping She said, 'It's none of your business.'

owave 'No,' I agreed. 'It isn't. But Josh is my friend. If you do what you're thinking about doing, you're going to destroy his life.'

11 p.m. here! She turned away from me and back to the door.

'Don't do it, Alicia,' I said. 'Please.'

I heard footsteps then, coming from the other way. I turned, and then I saw a man coming towards us. He was kind of ambling. Shuffling. As he got closer, I saw it was Clive. Or Owen. Or whatever his name was. I looked back at Alicia. I folded my arms. I stared at her. 'Please, Alicia, go home. OK?'

As I said that, the door opened and Roan appeared. I darted to the other side of the garden gate, just out of sight. I heard Alicia say something like 'You can't just do this to me, Roan,' and then her voice went kind of muffled as if someone had their hand over her mouth and then I saw Roan pulling out of his front garden, on to the street. I wanted to see what was going on but I couldn't from where I was standing. I turned and saw the guy called Clive or Owen or whatever and he was standing outside his house and he was watching the drama and I ran across. I said, 'Clive, I need your help. Get on that roof. Quick.' And God bless him, he did as he was told, hoisted me there. And then I could see everything.

I got my phone out and I recorded it. Alicia was going insane. She was punching Roan and he was letting her and she was saying stuff about how she was going to kill herself and it would be his fault and he just kept grabbing her wrists and saying, Shush, shush, please, Alicia, keep your voice down. Please. God. And it was obvious that Roan cared more about his wife than he cared about whether Alicia was going to kill herself or not. She got louder and louder and I saw him put his hand over her mouth. I saw her bite his hand and I saw him slap her. She tried to slap him back but he grabbed her arms and pushed her away from him, so hard she fell. My phone shook. It was horrible. Like watching animals.

When Alicia finally left, I saw Roan just standing on the pavement, rocking back and forth. I filmed him walking back to the house.

Clive called up. He said, 'I'm going in now.'

'Wait, wait, help me down!' I said.

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

'No, Clive, wait.'

He looked like he was about to walk away and leave me there so I jumped down but misjudged it badly; my leg hit the wall on the way down and my joggers rip. I landed hard on my bum in a knot of limbs and dropped my phone. I was winded; I could hardly breathe and I could feel blood seeping through the hole in my joggers, but I managed to get to my feet. I felt it on the grass for my dropped phone then pushed past Clive and ran after Alicia. I wanted to check she was OK.

I had almost caught up with her when I heard the click and buzz of a security camera outside a gated mansion turning to watch me. I ducked and pulled my hoodie closer around my face, still the invisible girl.

her Ahead of me Alicia was picking up speed; she knew she was being
like, followed. I picked up my speed to match hers. But then I slowed down
nuffled as I heard muffled footsteps behind me and I saw the long black shado
ing her person coming after us.

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Ahead of me Alicia was picking up speed; she knew she was being followed. I picked up my speed to match hers. But then I slowed down again as I heard muffled footsteps behind me and I saw the long black shadow of a person coming after us.

And I knew, even before I saw their face, whose shadow it was.

Breakfast the next morning is lukewarm porridge, a small banana and a kind of unspecified juice – tropical, maybe? Owen thinks he will miss this when it's time to go home. He likes prison food. It's like real food but most of the challenging elements removed. He likes the way it's arranged on a tray; he likes not having to think about it. Maybe he'd like prison too much. He ponders. Maybe he'd be happier in prison than out in the world having to make decisions about food, having to deal with women looking at him as if he was going to rape them, having to worry about getting a job, a girlfriend. Maybe this was, in fact, his destiny? Maybe they'd find Saffyre Maddox's body cut up in pieces underneath his bed and he'd suddenly remember yes, he had indeed killed her, case closed, life in prison, no parole. Lots of bland featureless food on trays forevermore. Maybe a cult following of strange women wanting to marry him now he was the cold-hearted murderer of a beautiful young girl. Maybe it would be a better outcome all round.

He passes the empty tray to the policeman on the other side of the desk. His name is Willy. He's Bulgarian. He's utterly humourless, which isn't a great state of affairs for someone called Willy.

It's just gone eight o'clock. It looks like a sunny day. Is it possible, Owen wonders, to become institutionalised in under a week? He's lost any real sense of what life used to feel like. The guy in Tessie's bathroom about to trim his fringe feels like a distant memory. The guy who used to go to school every day and teach teenagers how to code also feels like a dream. The guy in the papers, the incel with a taste for impregnating comatose women is a fictional version of himself. The only version of himself that feels real is the one here, sitting alone in his cell in Kentish Town. He sits for a few moments, staring at the sunny angles painted on to the walls of his cell.

feels a strange moment of hopefulness. Deanna doesn't think he's a man. That's enough. That's all he needs to go about the rest of his life.

His thoughts begin to curl back on themselves, beyond the sunny ceiling beyond cutting his fringe in Tessie's bathroom, beyond the steamed-up windows of his classroom at Ealing College, beyond Tessie's hand on his shoulder at his mother's funeral, beyond his mother slumped over the table, looking as though she was drunk but actually being dead. They curl back to the other version of himself: the pretty little boy who wouldn't look for the camera in the modelling agency studio. Who was that little fellow? He wonders now. Who was he and how did he end up here?

He tries to remember moments of pain that might have brought him to this point. He thinks about the build-up to his parents' divorce when he was eleven years old. Divorce, he thinks, is damaging for children; everyone knows that. But was there something in particular about the way his parents broke apart that might have led, of all the myriad possible versions of himself, to this one?

He thinks of the house they once lived in, in Winchmore Hill. A posh thing with pebble-dashed walls and small windows, a porch full of spiky plants, a dark dresser with a phone on it and notepad, a small chandelier that his mother had a thing about chandeliers. He remembers his mother on the bottom step, the phone in her hand, talking to a friend, a crumpled tissue in her nose, saying, 'I think it's over this time, Jen, I really do.'

He remembers the smell of cigarette smoke curling up the stairs to where he sat on the landing. He remembers coming down a minute after the phone call ended and saying, 'What's over, Mum?' and her smiling and stubbing out her cigarette and saying, 'Nothing, Owen. Nothing at all. Now get to bed. School tomorrow.'

But he'd been on high alert after that, watching his parents like a hawk for the thing that would show him what was really happening.

Suddenly Owen's flesh crawls as a memory returns to him, something he used to think about all the time but hasn't thought about for years, not since his mother died, because it sickens him so much.

He remembers his father coming home from work one night, late, through the maze of London pubs about him. Owen saw him from the top of the landing, dropping his keys on to the dark dresser. Unzipping his jacket. He saw his father sigh and then pull back his shoulders as if bracing himself for something. 'Ricky?' His mother's voice from the front room. 'Ricky?'

monster. His father sighing again and then moving towards the door. ‘Hi, love
ll, And then the sound, as his father opened the door of the front room,
ll, music, not TV music, but strange, dreamy music, an American man singing
something about a wicked game. His mother saying, ‘Hello, darling, come
his into my boudoir.’ And Owen tiptoeing down the stairs and peering through
kitchen the banisters and seeing his mother standing in a room full of candles and
curl strange items: underwear with holes cut out, something around her neck
smile heels four inches high, lips painted red and Owen’s father walking in, his
ow? he mother grabbing his tie and pulling him towards her saying, ‘I want you
fuck me like I’m a whore.’

to this And then the door closing and noises – grunts, bangs, muffled wails
s before they stop, very suddenly, and his mother is sobbing and his father
ie walks out of the room, doing up his trousers, his face red and says, ‘Accuse
rents whore, I’ll treat you like a whore.’

His mother crying, ‘Ricky. Please. Please. I want you. I need you. Please.
I’ll do anything!’

st-war Her mascara running down her cheeks. One breast loose of the cut-c
der Drooping. Puckered.

er. His ‘Ricky. Please.’

His father picking up his coat in the hallway. Picking up his keys. Looking

ie at The man singing about his wicked game.

The front door shutting.

where Two weeks later Owen’s father left for good. The house was sold. The
hone was bought. His mother died. His father hated him. His father’s wife hating
ing him. His aunt hated him. Girls hated him. He lost his job. He got arrested
back to killing a girl. He developed a taste for prison food.

Could it be that simple? he wonders. The sight of his mother whoring
wk for herself to his father? The rejection by his father of his mother? Was that
the root of everything that had gone wrong since? His fear of women?

ng he rejection? And if it was that simple, then surely it could be blotted out?

since Redacted from the story of his life? And then it could start over again.

how? How can he excise that moment? He realises there’s only one way
e smellerase it and that’s to go to the heart of it. To his father.

He goes to the door of his cell and he bangs on it.

him Willy opens the window flap. ‘Yes.’

ng. ‘I need to make a phone call,’ he says. ‘Please. It’s very urgent.’

Willy blinks slowly. ‘I will have to find out.’

e.' 'Please. I haven't made a call yet. I'm allowed one call. And I haven't
of one yet.'

ing Willy lets the window flap close and says, 'I'll find out. Wait.'

ome A moment later Willy is back. He says, 'Pick up your things.'

ough 'What things?'

wearing 'Your clothing and your toiletries. Apparently you are being allowed
to, leave.'

his 'What? I don't ...?'

u to 'I don't know either; I'm just saying what I've been told. Please pack
your things. Now. It's time to go.'

– 'I don't understand. What's happened? Have they found her?'

er 'Now.'

it like a Owen packs up his things. He looks at the golden shadows on the ceiling,
the dent in the mattress, the neatly folded blanket. He looks at the square
lease. blue sky through the cell window. He thinks of the hours he has spent in
room that feels so much like the only place he has ever known. And yet
out bra. somehow, he is free of it.

But he knows one thing with a blinding certainty: he is not going back to
the other life. He is not going back to Tessie's flat with the locked door
eaving. is not going back to being the sort of person that people would think capable
of rape and murder. He's not going back to the incel forums and seedy
with raging women-haters.

he flat Willy opens the door and Owen silently follows him through the corridors
ated through rooms of people who return things to him and ask him to sign
ed for Then he is out. On a pavement in Kentish Town. The sun is bright today,
warm sun, a portent of spring, a portent of new beginnings.

g He checks his wallet for a debit card and cash, then puts out his arm
at at hails a taxi.

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‘Please. I haven’t made a call yet. I’m allowed one call. And I haven’t had one yet.’

Willy lets the window flap close and says, ‘I’ll find out. Wait.’

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‘What things?’

‘Your clothing and your toiletries. Apparently you are being allowed to leave.’

‘What? I don’t ...?’

‘I don’t know either; I’m just saying what I’ve been told. Please pack up your things. Now. It’s time to go.’

‘I don’t understand. What’s happened? Have they found her?’

‘Now.’

Owen packs up his things. He looks at the golden shadows on the cell wall, the dent in the mattress, the neatly folded blanket. He looks at the square of blue sky through the cell window. He thinks of the hours he has spent in this room that feels so much like the only place he has ever known. And yet now, somehow, he is free of it.

But he knows one thing with a blinding certainty: he is not going back to the other life. He is not going back to Tessie’s flat with the locked doors. He is not going back to being the sort of person that people would think capable of rape and murder. He’s not going back to the incel forums and seedy drinks with raging women-haters.

Willy opens the door and Owen silently follows him through the corridors, through rooms of people who return things to him and ask him to sign things. Then he is out. On a pavement in Kentish Town. The sun is bright today, a warm sun, a portent of spring, a portent of new beginnings.

He checks his wallet for a debit card and cash, then puts out his arm and hails a taxi.

Cate is at Kentish Town police station with Josh. She hasn't told Roan they are here. She hasn't told Georgia. She phoned Josh's school this morning and told them that he had an emergency medical appointment.

She perches her bag on her lap and clears her throat nervously, watching the swinging doors in front of her open and shut every few seconds, uniformed and non-uniformed police passing through holding files, bags, coffees, phones.

She turns to Josh. 'Are you OK?'

He nods nervously. He looks like every fibre of his being is resisting the urge to jump to his feet and run.

Finally, fifteen minutes after they arrive, DI Currie appears.

'Hi, Mrs Fours,' she says. 'Thank you so much for coming in. And you, Josh?'

Josh nods and shakes her hand.

'Follow me this way, if you would. I think I've managed to get us an interview room, fingers crossed; we're crazy busy in here today for some reason.'

They follow her through a corridor to a door. She knocks and someone answers. 'This is my partner DI Jack Henry. We've been working together on the Saffyre Maddox case. Please, take a seat. Coffee? Tea?'

Someone goes to get them water and then DI Currie smiles at them and turns and says, 'So, Josh. Your mum says you might have some information about the whereabouts of Saffyre Maddox.'

Cate looks at Josh. He shakes his head, then nods. He says, 'I don't know where she is. I just know what happened. That's all.'

'What happened?'

‘Yeah. On Valentine’s night. And I know it was nothing to do with the guy over the road. I know that. But I don’t know where she is. I don’t know where Saffyre is.’

Cate sees the two detectives exchange a look. DI Currie turns and smiles kindly at Josh. ‘So, were you there? On Valentine’s night?’

Cate catches her breath because Josh has already told her this and she knows what is coming and it will be worse, she thinks, the second time round.

He’d come to her this morning, in her room. He’d perched on the end of her bed and said, ‘I have to tell you something. Something really bad.’

that She’d dropped the facecloth she’d just squeezed out to wash her face and sat down next to him on the bed.

‘Tell me,’ she’d said.

hing And then he’d told her.

And her world had fallen into shreds.

gs, DI Currie continues: ‘And what did you see happen?’

Josh looks up at her. ‘I didn’t just see it,’ he says. ‘I was part of it. My Saffyre. We were trying to stop something happening. And it all went wrong.’

g the And then she just ran. She ran away. And I don’t know where she went. She won’t reply to my messages and I’m scared something bad’s happened to her. I’m so scared.’

you are DI Currie inhales slowly. She smiles that slightly wooden smile again as she says, ‘OK, Josh, I think we’re getting ahead of ourselves here. I think it might be best if you start from the very beginning. From when you first met Saffyre. How you knew her. That kind of thing.’

ne Josh throws Cate a quick look and places his hands carefully on top of the table. ‘She was sleeping in the building plot. Across the way. I used to sit there sometimes. Just for some privacy. For some space. You know. Another time there was a fox.’

‘A fox?’

each in ‘Yeah. A semi-tame fox. I used to like to sit with it. And then one night I went in there to see the fox and she was there. Saffyre. And she told me she was a former patient of my dad’s.’

know ‘Did she tell you why she was there?’

Josh looks at Cate. She squeezes his hand encouragingly.

‘She was there because she’d been watching my dad. Watching my dad. I don’t really know why. And I think she had issues. Like, claustrophobia.’

that something? She couldn't sleep in her own bed. So she slept outdoors, u
know the stars.'

'And why the fascination with your father, do you think?'

niles Cate squeezes his hand once more.

'I think, at first, it was because she felt abandoned by him? She was
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She remembers the sickening thump of it to her chest when Josh hac
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had probably always been having an affair. For all three decades of the
together. A continuous succession of interleaving affairs from Marie ri
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'Going wrong?'

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'And why the fascination with your father, do you think?'

Cate squeezes his hand once more.

'I think, at first, it was because she felt abandoned by him? She was in his care for, like, three years or something? From when she was a child? And then she felt like he let her go before he'd fixed her. And she wasn't ready to let go. So she kind of followed him about a bit, and watched him. Wanted to still be part of his life. And then, while she was watching him, she worked out that he was ...' Josh gulps. 'He was having an affair.'

Cate feels the encouraging smile fix hard on her face.

She remembers the sickening thump of it to her chest when Josh had told her earlier this morning. Followed rapidly by the sickening draining-away feeling of the inevitability of it. Of course Roan was having an affair. Roan had probably always been having an affair. For all three decades of their lives together. A continuous succession of interleaving affairs from Marie right through to Alicia. Of course, she'd thought. Of course.

'And then,' Josh continues, 'I think she became fixated on him, on what he was doing, and on us, on his family. I think it was almost like she was watching over all of us. But that night, the first night we met, we got talking. It was really weird. We just kind of opened up to each other. We talked for ages. She had all these issues, about something that happened to her when she was a child. And she had this idea of how she could cure herself. And I said I'd help her. And that was when it all started kind of ... going wrong ...'

'Going wrong?'

'Yes. Kind of really wrong.'

Owen's dad's house looks just like the house they lived in in Winchmore Hill: post-war, small leaded windows, a front garden, a porch, a stained sunray above the front door. Owen's never been here before. Just written address on birthday cards and Christmas cards. He pays the taxi driver heads up the path. His dad used to work in the civil service but is retired

The doorbell chimes electronically when he presses it. He clears his throat and he waits. A shadow appears through the dimpled glass of the front door. Owen breathes in, hoping it's his dad and not his dad's wife. The door opens and yes, it's his dad. He watches his face splinter into a hundred different pieces, sees it go from surprise, to fear, to horror.

'Owen, my God, what are you doing here?'

His dad looks older than he remembers. He only retired last year but seems to have aged five years since then. His hair had once been a mass of different shades of brown and silver and white, but now it's nearly all white.

'They let me go,' he says.

'The police?'

'Yes. Just now. They let me go.'

'So ... what? You didn't do it, then?'

'No, Dad. No. God. Of course I didn't do it.' Owen peers over his father's shoulder. 'Can I come in?'

His dad sighs. 'It's not really a good time, Owen, to be honest.'

'Dad, let's face it, it's never a good time for you. It never, ever is. Because you what, I've just spent nearly a week in a police holding cell being interrogated about a crime I had nothing to do with. I've had my face splashed all across the front pages of all the papers and been defamed by people who don't even know me. And now I've been exonerated, been told I'm a f

man, that I've done nothing wrong and allowed out into the world to go with my life. So maybe, just maybe, now is a good time for *me*.'

His dad drops his head slightly. When he lifts it again, his eyes look watery. He says, 'Come on then. But I don't have long. I'm really very sorry.'

The house is warm. Every wall is painted a different colour. There are neon signs on the walls: 'GIN THIS WAY', 'LOVE', 'OUR HOUSE'. A rainbow. A rearing unicorn that changes colour as it rears.

'Gina loves her colour,' says his dad, leading him into the front room. There is a small bow window, plantation shutters, pink velvet sofas scattered cushions embroidered with jungle animals and more slogans. 'Sit down, please.'

He doesn't offer Owen a drink. But Owen doesn't care.

'Dad,' he says. 'I've been doing a lot of thinking while I've been locked up. About how I got myself into that position. How I am the way I am. Do you know?'

His dad shrugs. He's wearing a grey jumper and navy trousers and very silver hair he looks like a glitch in the relentless colour of the room.

'You know what I'm talking about, Dad. You know I've never been right. Since being a little boy. But I'm not a little boy any more. I'm a man. I'm thirty-three. Nearly thirty-four. The worst thing that could ever happen to an innocent man just happened to me, because of the way I am. And you abandoned me. You let me leave your flat that night, eighteen years old. You buried my mother, you let me leave. Why did you let me leave?'

His father shuffles slightly on the pink velvet. 'It seemed for the best,' he said. 'You know. That flat was too small for all of us. We had a young girl there. You weren't happy there ...'

'I wasn't happy there because I was made to feel unwelcome. So I wasn't happy there because I was made to feel unwelcome.'

'Well, there might be a shred of truth in that. But it wasn't personal. It was the situation we all found ourselves in. And when Tessie said she'd take me out I tell—'

'You know what Tessie's like, though, Dad. You know she never let me in her living room. She doesn't let me in her living room. Did you know that? I'm not allowed in her living room. And I'm her nephew. Why? Why didn't you want me in her living room?'

'I told you, Owen. It was nothing personal.'

et on 'Yes, Dad, yes, it was. It's all been personal. All of it. Everything that happened to me has been personal. Because people don't like me.'

'Oh, now, Owen, that's nonsense. I like you. I like you very much.'

'Dad. Tell me what happened between you and Mum. Why did you split up? Was it because of me?'

'What? No! Goodness, no. Nothing to do with you. We were just ... mismatched. That was all. She wasn't ... enough. In some ways, she was too much in others. She wanted another baby. But it didn't happen. This went very much into herself. Very deeply into herself.'

'You know,' Owen begins slowly, 'I saw something once. When I was about eleven. I saw Mum, in the living room, wearing sexy lingerie. There were candles. She pulled you in. And then ...'

Owen's dad sighs. 'Yes,' he said. 'I did tell her. I told her you might be in. I told her it was stupid.'

You 'You called her a whore. And then you split up after that. Was she a whore? My mum? Is that why you left us?' He knows the answer, of course, but he does, but he needs to hear his dad say it.

'Your mother? Oh, God, no, of course not!'

quite 'So why did you call her a whore?'

man. 'Oh, Owen. God. I don't even remember saying it.'

open to 'You said, *Act like a whore, I'll treat you like a whore.*'

ou Owen feels a muscle twitch in his cheek as he waits for his dad to respond, just

'Did I say that?'

'Yes. You did.'

t,' he 'Well. It was a bad time for us. You know. We were drifting apart. I knew I'd met someone. She was ... I suppose she was desperate. Trying anything to keep me. And there's something so dreadful about a desperate woman, Owen. So dreadful.'

They both fall silent for a moment. Then his dad says, 'You know I loved your mum, Owen. I loved her very much. And you.'

ce you 'Me?'

'Yes. Leaving you behind killed me.'

ked me. 'Did it?'

owed in 'Of course it did. You were my boy. Just on the cusp of it all. Just about to blossom. But I was under pressure. Gina wasn't getting any younger. She wanted to start trying for a family immediately. She pulled me, really p

at ever me very hard, away from you both. And I can see now that that wasn't for you.'

split 'So you didn't leave because Mum was a whore. You left because C wanted you all to herself.'

His dad nods. 'Essentially. Yes.'

we Owen pauses to absorb this.

She 'And you let me leave when I was eighteen because Gina wanted he
i. She family to herself?'

was 'Again, there were other factors at play. But yes. There was some ..
ere pressure there.'

Another silence falls; then Owen says, 'Dad. What do you think abo
t walk women? Do you like them?'

'Like them?'

'Yes.'

course 'Of course I like them! Goodness. Yes. Women are remarkable. And
been blessed that two of them have let me share their lives with them. I
look at me ...' He gestures at himself. 'I'm not exactly catch of the day
I? I've been punching above my weight all my life. And I wouldn't ha
any other way.'

There's a sound at the door and Owen turns and there's Gina. She's
wearing a black satin blouse with dark flowers printed on it and tight b
spond. jeans. Her hair is dyed a shiny mahogany and up in a ponytail. She's p
sixty but still looks youthful.

she 'Oh,' she says. 'I thought I heard voices. Ricky' – she looks at Owe
ig –'what's going on?'

rate 'They let him out, Gina. This morning. Dropped all charges. He's a
man.'

'Oh.' She clearly doesn't know what to say. 'That's good then?'

loved 'Of course it's good! It's wonderful.'

'And everything else?' she asks, still standing in the doorway. 'The
college? The date-rape drugs ...?'

'Gina—'

out to 'No, Ricky. It's important. Sorry, Owen, but it is. Look. I don't kno
she very well, and I'm sorry about that. I've – we've – had a lot on our pla
pulled over the years with Jackson, as you know. But there's no smoke witho
Owen. And even if you've been cleared of that girl's disappearance, th
still an awful lot of smoke around you. An awful lot.'

easy Owen feels a familiar tug of anger in his chest. But he quells it, breathes hard. He turns and he engages Gina properly, in a way in which he has never engaged a woman, with clear eyes and an open heart and he says, 'You're right, Gina. I totally understand what you're saying. I've been far from my best version of myself over the years and I take my share of the blame for everything that's happened to me. But this, what I've just been through, has changed me. I don't want to be that person any more. I'm going to work on myself.'

. He sees a chink in Gina's defences. A slight tip of her chin. 'Well, that's good,' she says. 'And you could probably start by apologising to those people. The ones you made feel uncomfortable at the college disco.'

'Yes,' he says. 'Yes. I'm going to sort it all out. All of it. I swear.'

Gina nods and says, 'Good boy.' Then she looks serious for a moment. 'But if it wasn't you who abducted that girl, then who was it?'

I've Owen blinks. He didn't ask. He'd been so shell-shocked by the unexpected sequence of events that he'd just walked out without even wondering.

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‘My dad got a Valentine’s card,’ Josh explains to DI Currie. ‘My sister opened it, my mum snatched it away from her, told her it was private and she wasn’t to open it. And there was a bit of a row between my mum and sister, my sister telling my mum that she should want to know who was sending Valentine’s cards to my dad. And then my mum hid it away in a drawer. I snuck in when she wasn’t looking and read it. It was from the woman. Alicia.’

‘And what did it say?’ asks DI Henry.

‘Oh, just all this desperate stuff. Like how she needed him and couldn’t live without him.’

‘So it looked like he was going to leave your mother for her?’

Josh shrugs. ‘Yeah, I guess. And I just ... I was so angry with my dad when I saw that card, that what he was doing with that woman had somehow found its way into my home. And I ended up confronting him.’

‘When was this?’

‘That night. Valentine’s night. He went out for a run and I ran out after him and stopped him on the corner. I had the card in my hand. I said, Dad, the fuck are you doing? You’re going to kill mum if you do this. You’re going to kill her!’

‘But then Dad told me he’d taken Alicia out for lunch that day, to tell me that he wasn’t going to leave Mum for her. That their affair was over. Mum and Dad hugged and I was crying and he said he was sorry, he was sorry. I said, What are we going to do about this card. I said, We can’t do anything about it because Mum knows it’s in the house. If it disappears, she’ll know there was something fishy going on. She’ll know. He said, Leave it with me, I’ll sort it out. Leave it with me. And then he and Mum went out for dinner. Mum and Georgia were at home and at about eleven o’clock the doorbell

and I thought it was going to be Mum and Dad, forgotten their keys, but wasn't, it was her. It was Alicia. And she was really drunk. Crying, saying, 'Let me in, let me in. I want to see him. Let me in! And I said, He's not here. He's out with Mum. I told her to fuck off. To leave us alone.'

'And where was your sister when all of this was happening?'

'She was in her room, it's at the other end of the hallway and she was watching a movie with her AirPods in so she didn't hear anything.'

DI Currie writes this down and then nods at Josh to continue.

'I called Saffyre then, to tell her what was happening. She said she'd been over.'

'Why did she say that?'

Josh shrugs. 'Like I said, we just kind of look out for each other. We look out for our friends. I was helping her. She was helping me.' He picks up his water bottle and puts it down again. 'She got to our street at about eleven fifteen. Saffyre messaged me to say that she was outside and the coast was clear, no sign of Alicia. She said she'd stay and keep an eye on the place. And then I heard Mum and Dad get back about fifteen minutes later and I thought that was it. That it was all over. But a few minutes later I heard voices outside my bedroom window and I saw Dad in the front garden and then I saw him pulling someone out on to the pavement. Her. Alicia.'

'I didn't know where Saffyre was then. I thought maybe she'd just gone home. A few seconds later I saw Alicia running past our house; she looked like she was crying. And then out of nowhere I saw Saffyre, running behind her. And that was the last time I saw Saffyre. Running after Alicia.'

Josh clears his throat and takes a sip of his water.

'And where did Saffyre and Alicia go? Do you know?' asks DI Currie.
Josh shakes his head. 'I have no idea. But Saffyre called me later that night, about one in the morning. She said she couldn't tell me where she was but that she'd done something, something really bad, and that she needed to go into hiding for a while because she was scared. She told me not to tell anyone, not the police, not even her uncle. She turned her phone off afterwards so I couldn't contact her. But ...' Josh wrings his hands together, and then strokes them. 'Saffyre was hunting someone. She was hunting a guy who was threatening something to her when she was a child. She'd found out where he lived and she'd been following him and she was convinced – we were both convinced that he had something to do with all the sex attacks in the area. You know the guy who's been grabbing women?'

at it DI Currie looks at Josh in surprise. 'Oh,' she says. 'OK. And do you
ying, any idea who that might have been?'

here. 'She told me never to tell anyone. She told me not to. But now I'm r
worried he's done something to her. Because she should be back by now
she was safe, she'd be back, wouldn't she?'

as 'Who, Joshua? Who do you and Saffyre think has been attacking wo
the area?' DI Currie asks gently.

l come response.
Josh sighs and there is a moment of weighty silence while he forms

Cate stares at him.

re Finally he replies. 'It's a guy called Harrison John. He lives on Alfr
Road, up the Chalk Farm end. He's about eighteen. He hurt Saffyre wh
cup was a child and now she thinks he's hurting other women.'

he The two DIs exchange a look. The male DI leaves the room and DI
gn of turns back to Josh. She says, 'Thank you, Josh. Thank you so much. D
ard Henry's going to follow that up right now.'

as it. 'But there's another thing. Just ...' Josh pulls his hands down his fa
one more thing.' He looks up at DI Currie. 'I've been following him to

1 He glances at Cate. Cate widens her eyes at him, He hadn't told her
earlier.

gone 'That was what Saffyre said to me when she called me at one o'clock
oked night. She said she couldn't come back until the police had got him, H.
ehind John. She said she was scared he was going to kill her. She told me to
watching him until I caught him in the act, until I had some definite ev
that it was him who'd been carrying out the attacks. So I've been out a
ie. just following him about. Waiting for him to do something. Anything.'

at Cate swallows hard. She's overwhelmed by mixed emotions: pride,
ie was horror, love; she feels as though she might drown in them all.

led to 'Then a few days ago I heard him on his phone telling someone he v
ell meeting a girl on Sunday afternoon, that he was taking her to the O2 C
ter to watch a movie. So I went along and I sat through the movie with the
d Cate watched him and he was all over this girl and I could tell she was findi
ho did really annoying, she kept pushing him away, and then they left and I sa
d and pulling this girl along the road, towards the back end of the cinema and
iced was trying to make out like he was playfighting with her but I could te
ow, wasn't enjoying herself and so I stayed really close. Really really close
close. Because he saw me and he got me against a wall like this.' Josh

I have a fist around a collar. 'He said he didn't know who I was or what I was but if he saw me hanging around anywhere near him ever again, he'd see me. He said, I've seen your face now, faggot, I've seen your face. Next time I see you, you're dead.'

Josh pauses. He licks his lips. He turns to Cate. 'And that was when I was in myself.'

Cate's eyes fill with tears. The thought of her beautiful boy being held against a wall. The terrible, inevitable heat of a bladder emptied in fear, shaking hands forcing the damp, stinking clothes into a carrier bag, she pressed into the corner of his wardrobe.

'I said, What did you do to Saffyre? He said, Don't mention that when she name to me. She's a dirty little skank. I said, Where is she? Where the hell is she? He said, I don't fucking know. Getting whatever's due to her, I hope. Currie Now fuck off, stalker faggot.'

Josh's shoulders slump. Then he looks up at the detective and he says, 'I never caught him doing anything, Harrison John. I tried so, so hard. But you get him, anyway? Get him off the streets, please? So that Saffyre can come back. Please.'

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a fist around a collar. 'He said he didn't know who I was or what I wanted but if he saw me hanging around anywhere near him ever again, he'd shank me. He said, I've seen your face now, faggot, I've seen your face. Next time I see you, you're dead.'

Josh pauses. He licks his lips. He turns to Cate. 'And that was when I wet myself.'

Cate's eyes fill with tears. The thought of her beautiful boy being held against a wall. The terrible, inevitable heat of a bladder emptied in fear. His shaking hands forcing the damp, stinking clothes into a carrier bag, shoving it into the corner of his wardrobe.

'I said, What did you do to Saffyre? He said, Don't mention that whore's name to me. She's a dirty little skank. I said, Where is she? Where the fuck is she? He said, I don't fucking know. Getting whatever's due to her, I hope. Now fuck off, stalker faggot.'

Josh's shoulders slump. Then he looks up at the detective and he says, 'I never caught him doing anything, Harrison John. I tried so, so hard. But can you get him, anyway? Get him off the streets, please? So that Saffyre can come back. Please.'

SAFFYRE

Every muscle in my body went hard, every sinew tensed, every hair stood on end. My heart, which was already thumping, started to race. I could see Harrison closing in on Alicia, his pace picking up.

I thought, Oh no you don't, Harrison John, *oh no you don't*.

I stayed back in the shadows waiting for him to pass and then I ran up behind him, hooked my arm around his neck and brought him down on the floor. His body made a satisfying cracking noise as it hit the pavement and he was pinned there for a while with his face ground into the pavement so he couldn't see me.

'What do you want?' he said.

I brought my mouth close to his ear, close enough to smell his aftershave and the lingering aroma of a recently smoked cigarette.

I hissed into his ear. I said, 'Want to see something magic, Harrison?'

I took off my beanie hat and shoved it in his mouth to muffle his screams. And then I reached down for his hand.

His right hand.

I bent it back and brought it up to his face.

Then very slowly I took each of the three fingers he'd put inside me and he was ten years old and I snapped each one in turn.

Every time he cried out in pain I said, 'It only hurts the first time, Harrison. It only hurts the first time. The next time it will be *magic*.'

'Agh,' he said, cupping his broken fingers, his face contorted with pain. 'Agh, fuck's sake. What the fuck!' He managed to overpower me then he turned me over and looked straight into my eyes. He raised his arm as

was going to hit me with it but then his vision blurred and he slumped of me in a dead faint.

I looked up and there was the face of an angel, backlit by a street lamp halo of red hair. It was Alicia.

‘Are you OK?’ she said. I saw the beginnings of a bruise on the edge of her cheekbone where Roan had hit her.

I pushed Harrison off me and he started to stir, clutching his broken fingers, moaning.

I looked at Alicia and said, ‘Are *you* OK?’

She looked at me blankly. ‘Who are you?’

I said, ‘Let’s get out of here. You got Uber?’

She nodded and pulled her phone out of her bag. Her hands were shaking.

Harrison was trying to get to his feet. He started to lumber after me but I grabbed Alicia’s hand and together we ran down the hill.

‘I’m going to kill you, Saffyre Maddox,’ I heard him yell after me. ‘The next time I see you, you’re fucking dead. Do you fucking hear me? *Dead.*’

The Uber took us to Alicia’s flat. I thought about telling her that I’d seen her block before, that I knew she lived on the fourth floor. But I thought, upon reflection, that the night had already been weird enough for both of us without adding that into the mix.

Her flat was really cute. Mint-green sofas with buttons on the backs and squat wooden feet, funky art in white frames, a lot of plants, a lot of books. Alicia made us tea and opened some biscuits. As I picked up my mug I saw that my hands were shaking. I put the mug down again and breathed hard. In my head I replayed the feeling of Harrison John’s bones snapping, the weird noise they made, like the noise when Angelo crunched his biscuits. And then I pictured him lumbering home to his flat on Alfred Road overlooking the railway track, clutching his broken fingers. I saw him in the A & E department at the Royal Free Hospital and I pictured him leaving a while later with some kind of plastic covering over his hand, and bandages and whatnot holding his hand in place while it healed. I thought, How will he explain this to the world? And then I thought, What if I go to the police? I imagined him telling some fresh-faced, straight-out-of-Hendon cop that a girl called Saffyre had felled him in one blow and broken his fingers on a pavement in the dark for no good reason, and I couldn’t do anything about that happening.

on top 'Are you going to tell me who you are now?' Alicia asked me.
'I'm Saffyre Maddox,' I said.

np, a 'And you used to be a patient of Roan's?'
'Uh-huh.'

e of her I watched everything processing through Alicia's head, saw her big
brain trying to compute everything, and failing.

'And that guy?'

'I used to know him. He hurt me. Now I've hurt him.'

'He said he was going to kill you if he saw you again.'

'Yeah,' I said. And that was the problem. That was why my hands were
shaking. I'd finally purged the childhood event that had destroyed me by
inflicting pain on the perpetrator, but in doing so I'd opened myself up
but I more pain, more fear, more hurt.

'Have you got anywhere you can stay?'

Next I stared at my fingers. 'I live with my uncle,' I said.

'Are you safe there?'

'Not really,' I said. 'It's very close to where that guy lives. My school
en her just around the corner from his flat.'

pon 'You can stay here tonight, if you want?'

I glanced up at Alicia. Her eyes were still red from crying and the scar
her cheek from where Roan had hit her was swelling up now. I thought
and needs me as much as I need her right now. So I nodded and said, 'Thank
you so much. I really appreciate that.'

ing I

ed in I ended up staying at Alicia's for a fortnight.

ing, And for a fortnight I resisted the urge to contact Aaron. I can't really
scuits. explain it, how I could have done that to him. To someone who loved and
cared about me the way I knew he did. I knew he would be suffering, but
sitting each day that dawned I thought, Not today, not yet, he'll be OK for a few
more hours, I'll go home soon. Each day I thought would be my last day
splints hiding. Each day felt like it was the day that Josh would track down
John, that he would be detained by the police and that I would be safe.

ill he Time didn't have much form during those days. Without the punctuality
-of- being the version of myself that puts on eyeliner and goes to school every
broken day, I just stayed in a kind of sleep mode. My instincts didn't work properly.
not see Alicia had to remind me to eat; I would wake up at three in the morning
think it was daytime and that I was blind.

Alicia called in sick for the first few days and she did her best to keep safe and sane. In weird, disjointed streams of consciousness I ended up telling her everything, everything I'd never told Roan about the real reason why I'd been self-harming.

clever Alicia was twelve years older than me, but for those days we spent together, she felt more like a friend than a therapist. The sort of friend, thought, that I'd managed to keep at arms' length almost my entire life. Alicia went back to work and I was in her flat all day by myself. I could barely remember my name sometimes. Shards of my existence flashed through my mind like a psychedelic slideshow; I'd see the fox in the corner of the room sometimes. Other times I'd hear Josh's voice coming from Alicia's TV, the mewl of a tiny kitten outside the front door, Jasmin's laugh coming from the flat upstairs. And every time I closed my eyes, it was Harrison John, looming at me from every direction with a claw for a hand, threatening to kill me.

police It took the shock of seeing Owen Pick's face on the front page of the paper that Alicia brought back with her from work to wake me up out of my fugue. I thought, Oh no, oh no, this can't be happening. Not Clive. Not that poor bastard with his crappy single bed and his evil landlady. I felt sick to my stomach. She felt guilty.

thank you. I nearly went, that day, nearly walked into Kentish Town police station to tell them the truth and get that poor bastard out of there. But something stopped me. The same thing that stopped me from contacting Aaron. At that point, I realized that I needed to let the game play itself out, that there was a different ending just out of sight, and that it was the right one, somehow.

me and And then over the next few days I read about Owen Pick being an idiot about how they'd found Rohypnol in his underwear drawer, how he was planning to go around date-raping ladies in revenge for no one wanting to have sex with him and I thought maybe this was a good thing? I thought maybe all the women Owen Pick wouldn't get to date-rape now and thought perhaps it was good that I'd disappeared because it meant that a bad man was gone from the streets.

everybody Alicia pointed at the photo and she said, 'Totally looks the type, doesn't it? When you think about it?'

and I nodded and said, 'He really does,' and I tried not to think of him that night, all cross-eyed with Valentine's wine, helping me up on to the roof

solid feel of his shoulders through his smart jacket, the way he kept flipping his fringe out of his eyes so he could see what he was doing, the innocent look on his face, the guilelessness.

And I tried not to think too much about the time we'd passed on those weeks earlier when he was drunk and how we'd had that pleasant exchange and I'd told him my name was Jane and he'd said, 'Night night, Jane.' Sweet as can be. I tried really hard not to think about any of that.

On Tuesday I woke up in a cold sweat from a nightmare. The details of the nightmare fled as consciousness returned, but the main elements remained. Aaron had died in this dream, and so had my kitten.

I knew without a doubt that it was a shout from my deepest self, telling me to end this thing, to end it now. I walked into Alicia's bedroom. It was 7 a.m. and I figured her alarm would be about to go off so I sat at the foot of her bed and I wiggled her feet. She woke with a start.

I said, 'Can you call the police today? Can you tell them you were terrified that you saw me. That Owen Pick didn't hurt me. Can you tell them you were running away? You don't have to tell them you know where I am. I don't want you getting into trouble. But just tell them what you saw. Tell them that Owen Pick didn't kill me. Please.'

The following day Alicia brought home a copy of the *Evening Standard* and the headline said, 'SAFFYRE SUSPECT FREED'.

I flattened it out hard on her coffee table and read it super fast.

North London police have today released the prime suspect in their hunt for the abductor of 17-year-old schoolgirl, Saffyre Maddox. Former college lecturer Owen Pick, 33, was sent home without charge after fresh evidence was brought to the case from a new witness who claims to have proof that Saffyre is safe and well in hiding. The reasons for her disappearance have not been revealed. As a result of this new evidence, police today arrested an 18-year-old man, Harrison John, from Chalk Farm, on suspicion of various sex attacks in the local area. John, who has been arrested before for crimes including mugging and petty theft, is currently being held for questioning.'

I looked at Alicia and I said, 'You told them about Harrison John?'

cking She shook her head. 'Not me.'

ence of I threw back my head and I gasped. 'Josh!' I said. And then I laughed

And then, this morning, Alicia called me from work. She said, 'They
hill all charged Harrison John. It's all over the news. A young girl came forward
t say that he'd attacked her and then threatened to kill her and her mother
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And then, this morning, Alicia called me from work. She said, 'They've charged Harrison John. It's all over the news. A young girl came forward to say that he'd attacked her and then threatened to kill her and her mother if she ever said anything to the police. It's over, Saffyre,' she said, and I could hear a smile pouring out of her so real and so good that I felt like it might drown me. 'It's over. You can go home.'

Aaron is sitting in his car opposite Alicia's flat. I don't see him at first push my way through the doors, shading my eyes from the sun. But he sees me and opens his car door. He walks fast up the path to meet me halfway and almost knocks me over as he throws himself at me, locks his arms around my shoulders, buries his face into my hair.

I put my arms around him too and I hold him hard, hard, hard; harder than I've ever held on to anything or anyone before and I feel his love for me. I feel that he loves me, I know that I am loved.

He's crying and I realise that I'm crying too.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, feeling my tears seeping into the cloth of his coat. 'For everything. For the worry. For the lies. For hurting you. I'm so, so sorry.'

'It's OK,' he says. 'It's OK.'

'I didn't mean to ...' I begin, with no idea what it is that I want to say.

'It doesn't matter,' he says. 'It doesn't matter. It's done now. It's done.'

We pull apart and Aaron looks at me, looks hard into my eyes. 'I know you were safe,' he says, 'I knew all along that you were safe. I could feel it.' He touches my chest with his fist. 'I could feel it in here. A connection. With you. With your soul. We're family,' he says. 'Whatever. Forever. Yeah?'

I wipe the tears from my face with the ends of my sleeves and I look at my uncle, this good, good man, and I smile and I say, 'I really want to have a kitten.'

'He's grown big, man, since you left. He's, like, almost a cat now.'

'Did he miss me?'

'Course he missed you! We both missed you!'

We climb into his crappy car and I pull on my seatbelt.

'Can I explain, Aaron? Can I explain what happened?'

‘In your own time,’ he says. ‘We have loads of time. All the time in world. But first, let’s just get you home. OK?’
‘OK,’ I reply. ‘OK.’

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'In your own time,' he says. 'We have loads of time. All the time in the world. But first, let's just get you home. OK?'

'OK,' I reply. 'OK.'

Now



Owen leaves the unit in Hammersmith where he's spent every day for past two weeks. It's late March. It's sunny. It's his thirty-fourth birthday. He turns to say goodbye to a woman behind him. Her name is Liz. She was on the same course as him. The course was called Sexual Conduct Training and Rehabilitation for Employees and Management. Liz is an HR manager at a chain of Ealing libraries. She handled a sexual harassment case earlier this year on behalf of two female employees and did everything wrong. They all know a hell of a lot about each other after two weeks of role-playing and debating, watching videos and first-person testimonials. And of course, everyone already knew who Owen was the minute he walked through the door on the very first morning. A surge of energy had gone through the room. An almost audible gasp. It was him, the man who'd been arrested for killing that girl. The perv. The weirdo. The creep. He'd seen all the women in the room recoil slightly.

It didn't matter that he'd been exonerated. It didn't matter that the girl had been found and reunited with her family. Her smiling face on the front page of the newspapers had not, for some reason, cancelled out his grimacing face from the front pages of the papers. There was still a potency about the look of his face, about his name. It would take weeks, months, possibly years for him to lose the terrible associations of his time as one of the most reviled men in the country.

The police had found Bryn. They'd brought him in for questioning and he'd left his local pub opposite the duck pond in the leafy commuter town. On the same day they'd let Owen go home. His name was not Bryn, of course. It was Jonathan. They found more date-rape drugs in his flat. Reams of illicit literature. Violent pornography. Drafts of his blog posts on his laptop. They took his prints and matched them to those on the pot of pills he'd given

Owen. He's on their watch list now, as a terrorist threat. That made Owen happy.

Liz smiles at him as she passes him and says, 'Bye, Owen. It's been getting to know you. I really wish you all the best, all the very, very best. I hope you can put everything behind you. You're a good man and I've enjoyed getting to know you.' She kisses him quickly on the cheek, squashes the top of his arm.

He watches her dash across the street to someone waiting for her in a parked car. She waves at him from the window and he waves back.

The training course has been a revelation. Not just in terms of what it's taught him about how to behave in the workplace, but what it's taught him about how to behave, full stop; how women's minds work, what makes them feel safe, what makes them feel unsafe, what's banter, what's creepy.

Earlier in the week a woman had come in to talk to them about the sexual harassment she'd experienced from a former employer, how he had seemed so nice at first, but after a while she'd realised that every single second of every single encounter, whatever they were doing, whatever they were talking about, he was seeing her as a woman, not a human being. That really hit Owen dead centre. He'd been doing that all his life, he realised he had never, ever had a conversation, an interlude, an encounter with a woman without the primary thought in his head being that she was a woman. Not once, not ever.

He'd put up his hand and he'd asked her how to stop doing it.

The woman said, 'You can't simply stop doing it; if you consciously stop doing it, you'll still be putting the woman's gender at the top of your mind in every encounter. The only way', she'd said, 'to stop doing it is to acknowledge yourself when it's happening, to own your reaction. To work around it by focusing on something else. Say to yourself, This is a human being wearing a blue jacket. Or, This is a human being with a northern accent. Or, This is a human being with a nice smile. Or, This is a human being with a problem who needs my help. Own your reaction. Work round it.' She'd smiled at him encouragingly and he'd put her advice into action immediately. He turned the sensation of talking to a young, reasonably attractive woman into the sensation of talking to a human being with brown shoes on. It had worked. It broke the spell. He'd smiled at her and he'd said, 'Thank you. Thank you very much.'

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Owen no longer lives with Tessie. He's renting a studio flat in West Hampstead, just for now. He'll make proper plans soon. But in the short term it was important that he escape from her and her poisoned view of him. She tried to pretend she was sad that he was going. But she wasn't. Owen has a sofa now, not an armchair, a double bed, not a single, and he keeps his home as warm as he wants it to be.

He heads towards the Tube to take the Piccadilly line to Covent Garden. Just before he descends the escalator, he gets out his phone, finds Deanna's number and sends her a text. *Just getting on the Tube*, it says. *Be there in twenty minutes.*

He waits a beat to see if she'll reply. Then there it is: *See you in twenty minutes, birthday boy!*

He switches off his phone, smiles and heads into the underground, towards dinner, with his girlfriend, on his birthday.

Cate puts the key in the shiny new lock on the front door of their house in Kilburn. She looks behind her at the children. Georgia gives her a little nod and says, 'Go on. Get on with it!'

She turns the key and pushes the door and there it is. Their house. It's a lovely April morning, halfway through the Easter holidays. The removals men are on their way from the flat in Hampstead and finally, 456 days after the builders first arrived, Cate's house is hers again.

The sun plays off immaculate pastel-grey walls and leaves pools of light on the newly sanded and waxed floorboards. There's not a fleck of dirt, a dirty mark or piece of clutter anywhere. It's a beautiful blank canvas, just what she needs for new beginnings.

Georgia gasps. 'It looks so awesome!' she says, before running up the stairs to check out her bedroom.

Cate goes to the kitchen and runs her hands over the pale wood of the work surfaces, the dove-grey tongue-and-groove cabinet doors, the gleaming ceramic hob. She can barely remember what her kitchen looked like because so much has happened in between.

Cate has finally said goodbye to Roan. After Josh had come to her the morning back in February and told her about his father's affair, Cate had numbly thought she might still be able to make it work. She'd done it before, she figured, she could do it again, keep the marriage artificially alive for a few more years, until the children were gone. But once the drama of Sam's disappearance had settled and life had returned to its normal proportions, she'd woken up very early one morning, looked down at her sleeping husband's face, always so peaceful in sleep, his skin still unlined and with a vaguely smug smile on his face and she'd thought, Everything about you

an illusion. You have conned me for thirty years and I can never trust you again.

He'd cried when she told him she wanted him to leave. Cried and said he couldn't live without her. Of course he had. That was Roan's MO. But he enjoyed the feeling of the power tipping back her way again after so long being made to feel the unhinged wife. He's taken a sabbatical from work to get over the trauma of finally being made to feel the consequences of his actions. He's back in Rye, in the spare bedroom of his parents' cottage where he phones a lot and talks about how much he can change. But Cate doesn't want him to change. She just wants him to leave her alone to get on with the rest of her life.

And what is the rest of Cate's life going to be? Last week she put down a deposit on a treatment room at a clinic in Neasden and once Georgia's finished her GCSEs she's going to start practising physiotherapy again full time. The children are mainly self-sufficient these days. Josh has blossomed since becoming friends with Saffyre and Cate no longer feels the innate need to be at home for him all the time. She will remortgage the house to pay for his share and will need an income for the repayments. She also needs a life of existence beyond her kitchen table, the stimulation of interaction with people she's not related to; doing the grocery shop can no longer be the sole focus of her days.

So many things had dropped into place in the aftermath of Josh's interview with the police. Everything had been oddly connected.

It turned out that Tilly had in fact been attacked outside their house and that the attacker was Harrison John, the same boy that Josh and Saffyre had been hunting down. Tilly had recognised Harrison halfway through the assault; he'd been at her school for a couple of years, before being expelled for disruptive behaviour and moved to a special unit. Everyone at the school knew his name; he was infamous for his bad behaviour. Harrison had seen the recognition in her eyes and realised that he knew Tilly too, that he had friends with someone who lived on the same floor in her block. Apparently when he saw that he'd been recognised, he'd grabbed her wrists, hard, and whispered into her ear, 'I know where you live, OK, remember that. *Tilly, where you live,*' before quoting her address at her and disappearing into the night.

And there'd been a weird and rather unsettling postscript to the Harrison John story; it emerged, once he was under arrest for Tilly's attack, that

you had treated him at his clinic for a few weeks, back when he was eleven old. In a strangely sickening quirk of fate, it turned out that Harrison John was the little boy who'd written the violent rape fantasies, the boy Roan she'd mentioned in passing only a few weeks before. The connectivity was unnerving.

Once Harrison had been charged by the police for his attack on Tilly, he was held on remand, just as Josh predicted, Saffyre reappeared. She never told him. He explained where she'd been, just told police that she'd been in fear for her life after being threatened by Harrison John and that she'd been 'with a friend'. The day after Cate took Josh to the police station, Saffyre returned to her flat on the eighth floor of the block on Alfred Road, to her uncle and a kitten. That was the photo that accompanied all the articles in the paper: a smiling Saffyre Maddox and her kitten Angelo. A happy ending.

Except of course it wasn't.

Nothing is perfect. Even this house, she thinks, her eyes casting about the clean lines of it, is not perfect. Even now, she sees, in this newly plastered and painted room, that there is a large crack running from the point where the corners meet. And the builders only left yesterday.

Nothing can ever be perfect. And that's fine. Cate doesn't want perfection. She just wants now, this, here, this moment as they walk around their clean, shiny, paint-smelling home, summer on its way, the garden furniture she'd ordered from Ikea in cardboard boxes waiting to be assembled, the barbecue party she dreamed of back in the winter months so close now she can almost smell the sweet hickory smoke.

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Nothing can ever be perfect. And that's fine. Cate doesn't want perfect. She just wants now, this, here, this moment as they walk around their empty, shiny, paint-smelling home, summer on its way, the garden furniture she ordered from Ikea in cardboard boxes waiting to be assembled, the barbecue party she dreamed of back in the winter months so close now she can almost smell the sweet hickory smoke.

SAFFYRE

There're no such things as happy endings; we all know that.

You know, here I am safe back home with Aaron. I got over my claustrophobia and I sleep in my bed now, under a duvet, with my kitten. When I wake up in the mornings, my sheets are still attached to the bed and not knotted around my legs. I'm predicted to do really well in my mock levels in spite of missing two weeks of school. Oh, and I have a sort of boyfriend. Someone who's been in love with me for years. It's not quite a real deal but it's nice, you know. And it's just good that I can finally be letting someone in, you know, letting someone get close.

Alicia works in a different clinic now and has no idea what she ever did to Roan. We're still good friends and I go over once a week or so for a cup of tea and a chat.

I stayed in touch with Josh, too. He told me that his parents split up, doesn't surprise me too much. I'm glad for his mum; she looked like the kind of woman whose whole life had been moulded around a man and now she was free to find what shape she really wanted to be. Roan had some kind of mental breakdown and is currently on sabbatical from work and living with his parents down in Sussex somewhere.

And Harrison John is on remand for what he did to that little girl.

He's also on remand for two of the other attacks on that list I made a few years ago. The victims came forward when they saw his photo in the newspapers and identified him as their attacker. CCTV footage showed him in the vicinity of the attacks and his fingerprints matched a print taken from one victim's handbag. So, there, I got what I wanted, I got justice. I got

disgusting human being put away and now the whole country knows who he is.

And then there's Owen Pick. Weirdly I bumped into him the other day. He was just coming out of the Tube station; I was going in. We stopped for a little while and I finally got the chance to apologise to him properly for going to the police earlier to let them know he had nothing to do with his disappearance. I said, 'My head was all over the place back then. I didn't know right from wrong.'

He said, 'Yeah, I know what you mean. My head was in the same place as yours was too.' He told me he'd asked for his job back at the college and they'd agreed. He told me he no longer lived in the house next to the building site, that he had his own place now, for the first time in his life. And he told me that he had a girlfriend. 'Early days,' he'd said. 'But so far, so good.'

We hugged as we said goodbye and it felt like the last piece of the puzzle was falling into place. I walked away from him thinking, There. It's all done. Everything's back in one piece.

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But.

Something doesn't sit right. Something to do with Valentine's night when I was sitting outside Roan's old place.

That first night at Alicia's I looked at the footage on my phone that I'd filmed from the top of Owen's garage roof. I watched it over and over. I zoomed in on the look on Roan's face as his hand came into contact with Alicia's porcelain skin. The engorged rage of it. The fury. The darkness of it.

I know how the world works.

Men hit women.

Women hit men.

Girls break boys' fingers in revenge for childhood abuse.

But there was something stone-cold terrifying about the look on Roan's face as he hit Alicia, this man whose job it was to cure people. Just like he had said that night when we first got chatting: How did a man with a job like his reconcile himself to causing pain to people he loved on a daily basis?

I showed the footage to Alicia that night. She had a packet of peas hidden under her seat, and she'd seen the bruise on her cheekbone. She flinched when I showed it to her. I said, 'Fuck, Alicia, what sort of man is this?'

She said, 'I don't want to dwell on that.'

I said, 'What do you mean?'

What he She let the bag of peas drop to her lap. 'It's like he goes through life wearing a mask. Tonight, I saw it come off and I didn't like it. It made me wonder,' she said. 'It made me wonder about things.'

or a 'What sort of things?'

or not 'Just things he'd talk about. Things he wanted to do in bed. Things I can't say.' 'Like what?'

n't She brought the peas back to her cheek and shook her head lightly. 'I've caught him once,' she said, her breath catching slightly on the words, 'I caught him in his office. He was ... pleasuring himself. I teased him, and he agreed. He was thinking about me. He laughed it off, said of course he was thinking about me. But I saw, out of the corner of my eye, Saffyre, I saw an essay of his patients had written. A rape fantasy.'

My eyes opened wide.

uzzle 'Look,' she said. 'He's one of those guys, you know? One of those guys that nothing would surprise you about, not really, if you actually stop and thought about it. If you looked behind the mask. That he might actually be the bad guy, not the good guy. That he might not be the saviour.' She paled when I said I looked up at me. 'He might be the predator.'

For a moment after she said that, I kind of stopped breathing.

I'd

I went back to visit my little plot of land opposite Roan's old place the other day, just for old times' sake. Looks like the flats are finally going to be built. The foundations are being filled. The girders are ready to put in place. There are people there all day long, the gates are open, vehicles driving in and out.

My little place has gone now, and with it the peace and the stillness, the little red fox.

And I sit on my bed now, on this bright April evening, and I stare up at the pink paper lampshade with the heart-shape cut-outs and I feel better about it. I remember an eight-year-old girl who chose it, because she grew up to be a kick-ass, a girl like breaking girl who got her revenge on the person who hurt her. I look down at Angelo, not a scrap any more, a proper little cat, my little bit of wild outdoors, and I should be happy, but something's buzzing and buzzing through my head. Despite Harrison being on remand for three of the sex attacks, he has alibis for all the others and it looks like maybe there was more than one predator at large all along.

I uncross my legs and go to my window and stare down into the plaza. Then I remember a night, earlier this year, one of the nights when Josh

went out looking for Harrison John.
me And the truth hits me like a dart in the chest.
‘Try and make yourself invisible,’ I’d said to him.
The next time we met up he’d arrived in Lycra running gear, a zip-u
ie’d jacket, a black beanie hat. I didn’t know it was him at first because his
was covered by a balaclava. As he approached, he pulled it down and I
I his smiling face emerge.
I He said, ‘What do you think? Invisible enough?’
sked if I pointed at the balaclava and laughed and said, ‘Where’d you get th
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ay one He shrugged. ‘Found it in my dad’s drawer.’
He smiled again. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s go hunting.’

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He said, ‘What do you think? Invisible enough?’

I pointed at the balaclava and laughed and said, ‘Where’d you get that scary-assed shit from?’

He shrugged. ‘Found it in my dad’s drawer.’

He smiled again. ‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s go hunting.’

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are theoretically for thanking the people who help to write the book in which they are published. So in that case I mainly thank me, myself and I! I do write without input or advice for the major part of the year, just me and my (three) typing fingers and my weird imaginary world. I get to the end and put in place the final full stop without anyone's assistance. I don't do research, even when I should, because it puts me on my own stride (so apologies for all the bloopers) and I don't like editorial input. I'm still working it out for myself.

But from the moment that final full stop is typed, all these magical people appear over the brow of the hill and silently walk into the imaginary world you've created to fix it for you and make it look pretty, to design cover and talk to people in bookshops and ask them to sell it, and to take it to foreign publishers and ask them to publish it, to make it look appealing on bookshelves so that people will notice it and buy it and read it, and to write nice things about it to encourage other people to read it. They bring you to bookshops and libraries to talk to readers about it and they urge friends to read it and they write to you to say nice things about how the book makes them feel.

So of course it's not all down to me. If it was all down to me this would be a rather rough-around-the-edges, vaguely nonsensical document on my own, full of errors and typos and you would not have it in your hands right now.

So thank you to everyone, from the ground up. To Selina, my UK editor and Lindsay my US editor and Jonny and Deborah, my agents, for the early editing notes. To Richenda Todd for skilfully copy-editing it, Luke, Anna and the film and TV team at Curtis Brown for putting it front of people who do films and TV, and Jody and the foreign rights team for getting it out across the globe. To the sales teams across the world for making sure it gets into bookshops, to Sarah and her marketing team and Laura and her publicity team.

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Thank you.

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Thank you.

A note on the character name ‘Angela Cur

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I have been very happy to support this campaign over the years and this year’s winners is featured in this book as the character Angela Cur

The campaign will launch again on eBay in March 2021. Further details will be available at www.clicsargent.org.uk in the build-up to the auction.

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