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Opening Extract from...

NEVER SAW YOU COMING

Written by **Hayley Doyle**
Published By **Avon, a division of
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Born in Liverpool in 1981, Hayley Doyle trained at the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts, LIPA, and worked as an actress for more than a decade, including playing Ali in West End show *Mamma Mia!* She then went on to live and work in Dubai, where she founded Hayley's Comet: a children's theatre company specialising in musical theatre, acting and playwriting. During her time in Dubai, she was also a regular talk-show host on Dubai Eye 103.8, the UAE's no.1 English-speaking talk radio station. Hayley currently lives in London with her husband and their two children.

Never
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For Oli.

The truth is, of course, that there is no journey.
We are arriving and departing all at the same time.
— *David Bowie*

PART ONE

1

Zara

‘I’m going,’ I tell Katie over the phone. ‘My bags are packed.’

I’m sitting at a waterside cafe drinking fresh mint lemonade, watching people ferry back and forth across Dubai Creek on traditional wooden water taxis, known here as *abras*. To my far right, the Burj Khalifa pings from the Downtown skyline like a giant pen, touching the cloudless blue sky with its tip. Katie was supposed to be meeting me, but as usual of late, she cancelled again.

‘So, you’re leaving Dubai,’ Katie says, ‘to go and live in some British city that you’ve never been to before, with a fella you hardly know?’

‘Nick and I talk about living together all the time,’ I say.

‘And yet you haven’t seen Nick for six months.’

‘That’s nothing when you plan to spend a lifetime with somebody.’

‘Zara Khoury. You’re not thinking straight.’

How patronising. It’s not about not thinking straight.

It's about thinking off-course, doing something that's out of the ordinary. And there's nothing wrong with that, is there? How can wonderful things happen to us if we don't do wonderful things to start off with?

'Your daddy can't bankroll your love life,' she says.

'Oh, don't worry,' I reply. 'He won't.'

She doesn't respond, unless she's waiting for an explanation.

'I've got some savings, Katie. And a plan. I want to study again; finish my degree.'

'Right. You know what they say? Once a dropout . . .'

'Look, it's not just about Nick Gregory.'

'Ah, come on, Zara, don't kid yourself. It's *all* about Nick Gregory.'

The call to prayer filters across the creek, a beautiful and somewhat haunting melody that pauses me momentarily as I glance towards the mosques in the distance. Dusk will fall soon. Day turns into night so quickly in this patch of the world, the bold sun taking a break to allow an even bolder moon to rule the purple sky. I've never felt at home here, even though it's been the place I've spent the majority of my thirty years. I long to feel an urge to root down, but all I can feel is flight; a gentle breeze trying to lift me from this seat and take me far away. The scar sitting on my right cheekbone, the size of my middle fingernail and the shape of Australia, is no longer a reminder of what can go wrong, but a sign of what can turn out right.

'Believe me,' I say. 'This is all meant to be.'

Katie tells me she has to go; she has a meeting. I don't get wished a safe flight, or nudged to give her all the juicy gossip. She doesn't even mention the weather; and expats love to mention the British weather. She just goes.

As I intend to.

Tomorrow morning, I will land at Heathrow Airport. I'll go and buy that second-hand car I found online and drive two hundred miles north of London, to a city famous for its football, its accent and, of course, The Beatles. A place where they call something good *boss*.

'If only you could come here,' Nick says, often. 'You'd love it.'

Well, Liverpool, here I come.

2

Jim

‘Unknown’.

I always answer my phone if the number’s unknown.

It’s one of my three life rules. Being up at six to get here, the Mersey Tunnel toll booth, for work at seven a.m. is another. This rule’s partnered with navy pants, a V-neck pullover and high-visibility jacket, otherwise I’ll lose my job. And the last rule’s making sure my ma takes her tablets and climbs the stairs five times daily to keep her heart pumping.

Beyond this, I let myself be.

Except now, ‘Unknown’ flashes, skittering beside my hand, vibrating.

My phone lies face up on the small desk my knees are crammed beneath, next to a tattered paperback. Gene Wilder’s autobiography; another Oxfam bargain. I’ve been at work for the best part of an hour, but this desk isn’t mine. Tomorrow I might be put in the toll booth next door. Yesterday I worked three booths to my left. I watch my phone, itching to answer.

‘Y’never heard of a barber, mate?’

It’s the fella in the Ford Focus. He exchanges his quid for the correct tunnel fare every morning whilst listening to local radio, some crass breakfast show churning out the latest, not-quite-greatest hits. I’ve met with the overbearing stench of his aftershave many a time, not to mention the same old jibe about my hair.

‘Have a good day, mate,’ I reply, handing over the change.
‘Nice one.’

And off the Focus speeds through the tunnel with an unnecessary rev. The next car pulls up; the window winds down; I hand over change.

‘Unknown’ continues to vibrate.

Christ. I always answer unknown numbers. Ever since my dad died eight years ago. Look, I don’t want to delve into it. But seeing that word flashing before me reminds me. I hadn’t answered the first time, had I? Or the second. And it was only on the third attempt I bothered picking up. It’d been the hospital, calling to ask for a Jim Glover, and I said, ‘That’s me.’ The voice, light and female I recall, asked me to come and identify a man, thought to be Roy Glover, brought in dead on arrival. A heart attack on the Dock road.

But guess what?

There’s a gleaming problem with answering my phone right now. You see, it’s a sackable offence. I’m allowed to read. We all are. Books, papers, even a good old crossword. But phones? Nope. The use of mobile phones whilst working within the cage of a toll booth is a sackable offence. No ‘three strikes and you’re out’. It’s an automatic lock-in.

‘Unknown’.

I hunch over the desk, press the green circle, grumble, ‘Hello?’

‘WELL, SOMEONE’S STILL HALF ASLEEP,’ the male voice belts into my ear. It’s a harsh, nasal twang. I can’t place it but it’s an altogether familiar sound.

‘Who’s this?’

A flurry of laughter ensues, overpowered by a husky female voice.

‘HEAVY NIGHT, WAS IT?’ she asks, finding herself hilarious.

Shit. Noticing a lady waiting in her car beside my booth, I whip my phone beneath the small desk and dish out some change. Then, peeping over my shoulder to check there isn’t another car behind, I bring the phone back to my ear.

‘WE’VE LOST HIM,’ the male voice says.

‘I’m here,’ I say. ‘Who is this?’

‘SHALL YOU TELL HIM, CONNIE? OR SHALL I?’

‘OH, GO ’EAD, CARL, THE PLEASURE’S ALL YOURS.’

‘Hurry up, I can’t really talk.’

‘JIM GLOVER?’ Carl sings.

‘How do you know me name?’

‘YOU’RE LIVE ON AIR, MERSEY WAVE 103.4.’

‘Y’what?’

Connie’s husky laugh takes over. ‘You’re live on the breakfast show with Connie and Carl, Jim. Now’s your chance to become a winner.’

‘A winner?’

Stretching ahead of me, and behind me, is grey tarmac. That single word, winner, is not part of my daily vocabulary. The two simple syllables sound full and foreign in my mouth, my breath still fresh from instant coffee.

‘You’re head to head with Sophie,’ Carl says. ‘Say hi to Jim, Sophie.’

‘Hiya Jim,’ a crackled voice says, the slight echo confirming

that Sophie's using a hands-free kit from her car. And yet, who is this Sophie? And why is she – with me – live on the radio?

'Whoever answers this question first will become the proud owner of a brand-new BMW,' Carl goes on. 'Or, as Connie would call it, "a posh white car".'

'That's a bit sexist,' Sophie's voice says.

Her comment is completely ignored. The game that me and her are somehow a part of continues. Cars filter into the tunnel ahead of my glance, weaving their way from other booths. Any second now, a car'll pull up beside me and this game, this quiz, this radio prank, will come to a sudden end.

Why haven't I already hung up?

For every second I remain on the line, I'm begging to be fired. The joy it'll give Derek Higgins to demand that I see him in his office, to click his dry, swollen fingers as he orders me to remove my high-vis jacket. If reading is the perk of my role, then dishing out a P45 is Derek's.

'Jim? Sophie? Are you ready?'

We both mumble a *yeah*.

A mashup of the theme tunes to *Countdown* and *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* comes whistling through the speaker. Instead of waiting eagerly for the question, I can only focus on willing the banging in my chest to piss off. I'm breaking my boss's rule to adhere to my own, and it could result in me losing my job. Sure, rules are rules, but what about priorities? I should hang up.

'Okay; First one to say the correct answer wins.' Connie clears her throat. 'Name the author of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, *Dr No* and *Thunderball*.'

A gasp from Sophie tickles my ear. 'JAMES BOND!'

Bloody hell. My heart lightens. My knees are numb squashed beneath this little desk, my fingertips clammy.

‘Ian Fleming,’ I say.

A white van pulls up beside my booth, and with the efficiency of a robot, I hand change to the driver.

‘Good fucking morning to you, too,’ the driver spits. ‘Rude fucking bastard.’

I sigh and take a breath, knowing it’s now or never.

There’s a good chance that Connie and Carl and the whole of Merseyside missed my muffled answer. Or perhaps Sophie heard it, and she’s now ready to steal, to shout it out louder, clearer, stronger . . .

I blink. ‘IAN FLEMING.’

And just like that, I win a brand-new car.

Connie and Carl play ‘Congratulations’ across the airwaves, singing the word ‘commiserations’ to Sophie, finding themselves unbearably funny.

I put my handset on loud speaker, drop the phone onto my knees.

‘Stay on the line, Jim,’ Carl says.

A horn honks.

Again.

‘The producer’ll chat to you in a mo.’

Four, maybe five cars have piled up behind my booth, the one in front honking away with unashamed clarity. Derek’ll be making his way over any minute. With expert speed, I hand change to the impatient driver before he bombs it through the barrier. I recognise the next car. A Nissan Micra, silver, a sun-shaped sign stuck on the back window that reads *Be the Light. Namaste*. The girl behind the wheel passes through the tunnel regularly, never at a specific time of day. Sometimes, her hair’s snatched up or curled all fancy like a Charlie’s Angel, her wrists decorated with a bunch of bangles. Ed Sheeran sings through her

speakers. Even now, in November, she never fails to wear oversized sunnies.

‘Hey, you,’ she says, rolling down her window and dipping her glasses to the edge of her nose. I give her a one-sided smile. She’s a right chatterbox, this one, always trying to entice me out on the lash with her mates or making a remark about me looking ‘cold’ or ‘hot’ or ‘tired’. Today it’s ‘worried’.

‘I’m going for a few drinks tonight in Oxton,’ she tells me. ‘Fancy coming?’

Oxton. Pretty posh. Over the water.

A horn honks.

‘Me best mate’s having a party,’ I say. ‘Bonfire night, and all that.’

Another horn honks.

The girl pushes her sunnies up her nose with her middle finger, mouths, ‘whatevs’ and drives away. Another car pulls up. Then, another. My head’s frazzled. Have I really, *really* just won a car? Come on, focus. I move fast, get the queue of cars to settle into a smooth, quiet rhythm as I wait for the producer to speak to me. I’m still on hold. And still trying to fathom how this has happened.

Last month’s payday.

Yep, that was it. The day I signed my name.

I’d been sheltering from the wet drizzle, browsing around a discount book store. Fluorescent strip lighting and BOGOF offers surrounding me, I stood reading the back of a Truman Capote biography. My phone rang.

‘Alright, Mam, what’s up?’

‘It’s nothing, love. I’m okay. Honest.’

‘You don’t sound okay. What happened?’

‘I was just making tea, that’s all. Me mind must’ve

wandered. I forgot to concentrate for a moment. I burnt me hand. It just dropped, the kettle, it just dropped.'

'I'm on me way. Don't worry.'

I discarded Capote into the bargain bucket beside me and headed through town, towards Liverpool One to catch the bus to my ma's. Wind whistled through the city, a cold chill reminding shoppers that autumn was falling into winter. I was almost at the bus stop when I noticed a white BMW made entirely from Lego. It wasn't on the road, of course, but beside the shopping centre's crowd-pulling outdoor piano. Impressive. As were the two young girls holding clipboards, approaching passers-by to sign up. Resembling a manufactured girl band, all petite with dark lashes and pouty pink lips, they wore bikini tops and hot pants, oblivious to the current climate.

'We only need three more names,' one of the girls shrieked.

I dodged out of her way, but her mate stepped in.

'Come on, sign up,' she said. 'We're not allowed on our break 'til the sheet's full.'

'I can't,' I said. Because I couldn't. I had to get to my ma's.

'Don't you wanna win a car?' both girls sang, like a kitsch pop duo.

A pen got thrust into my hand.

'What's the catch?' I asked, scribbling down my name and number as fast as possible. I never waited for their answer. I just legged it for the bus.

Had it been as simple as that to win a car? Really?

'Jim Glover?'

The voice from within my phone hollers around the toll booth.

'Yeah?' I reply.

The producer of Connie and Carl's breakfast show gives me strict instructions for how and when I can collect my prize. She's most unenthusiastic, as if me winning this car is a hassle her life can do without.

'You're totally serious, like?' I ask.

'Why did you take part if you didn't think it was serious?' she snaps.

Bloody hell. My whole morning's gone from boring to bonkers. I'm really trying to control myself here, but Christ, I've just won a car. What's the catch? Come on. Surely there's a catch.

'There's no catch,' the producer says.

She hangs up and the line goes dead. The rain outside has stopped, the sun stretching through the cold, windy air. Steam clears from the windows of my toll booth and a hint of blue sky frames the top of the tunnel entrance. I allow myself to smile, a wide, cheesy grin.

'Jim Glover?'

I stare at my phone. Who said that?

A rat-a-tat-tat sounds against the reinforced plastic window.

Derek Higgins.

His dry, swollen finger signals me to get out of the booth.

'Follow me.'

The office door swings on its hinge, creaking, a fault in the frame preventing the satisfaction of it shutting.

'How's your missus?' I ask.

'On a diet,' Derek tells me. 'But we need to talk about you, Jim.'

There isn't a clue in sight to prove that Derek has occupied this office for years. The walls remain white, the desk

uncluttered; a desktop computer and a single biro. A shift rota hangs beside a plain calendar. No family photograph, no football logo, no tea-stained personal mug. To those who don't know, it could be Derek Higgins' first day.

'You're going nowhere,' Derek barks, choosing to perch on the desk, his navy trousers bulging at the crotch, his navy socks not quite hiding his pasty calves. Offering me the only chair in the office with his hand, he removes his glasses, squinting. 'Nowhere,' he reiterates. 'And in a way, it's quite endearing. The fact that you're going nowhere.'

Now, I'm a tall fella. My growth spurt was quick and early – I was towering over my teachers by the time I started secondary school. I'm neither proud nor ashamed of my height, although my ma still nags me about my natural hunch. And yet here, in Derek Higgins' office, I feel small; worthless.

'You know what I'm gonna say, don't you, Jim?'

I nod.

'It hasn't been an easy decision for me. Lots of pros, lots of cons.' Derek holds out his palms like a pair of weighing scales. 'You're a pretty predictable character, Jim. Which is good on one hand, but . . .' He trails off. 'You're going nowhere.'

'So you keep saying, Derek.'

'Don't be offended. It's no criticism. It's the way you are. Most lads your age have either tried to get somewhere and failed, or actually gone somewhere, like down south, or –' he lowers his voice, '– *London*.'

I sit back into the office chair, letting my long legs spread.

'You're a good-looking lad, Jim. You are. I mean, you're not *my* type, if you catch my drift? But, you'd have to be blind not to notice you've got the looks. You're what my wife'd call a "dish"; a "bad boy". They all love a bad boy, don't they?'

Oh, Christ. I best brace myself.

‘You could’ve been in sales, Jim. Retail. But you didn’t go anywhere. You weren’t one of those lads who did something soft, like . . . form a band.’

‘I was in a band,’ I mutter.

‘What did you play?’ Derek leans back and plays air guitar.

‘Vocals. Lead vocals actually.’

‘Exactly my point.’ Derek clicks his fingers, such a strong, perfected click that its echo bounces off the walls. ‘You never pursued it.’

‘I was fifteen. Everyone’s in a band when they’re fifteen.’

‘I wasn’t.’

There were four of us in the band. Snowy, Griffo, Mikey, and yours truly.

Brian ‘Snowy’ Walsh – who got his nickname from his resemblance to Snow White; skin as white as snow, hair as black as ebony – played lead guitar. The drummer, Mikey Farley, was the youngest of six kids, so learning to play the drums was his only way of being heard. I was the front man and Phil Griffin was on bass. Griffo’s dad was always away on business which meant that Griffo’s mum went out with the girls a lot, so it was in their triple garage where we formed, rehearsed. The Griffins had a cook and a cleaner and electric gates. In fact, still do. None of us knew what Griffo’s dad did, but we all knew he was raking it in. We drank a lot of his expensive spirits, wrote songs. We only ever performed covers. Led Zeppelin, the Stones, Chili Peppers.

‘We used to do a boss cover of “Video Killed the Radio Star”,’ I tell Derek.

Derek sings a line, falsetto.

‘Did you ever play The Cavern, though?’ he asks.

‘Once. Student night.’ And it’s true. The sweat does drip off the walls.

‘Predictable,’ Derek says.

‘Or maybe I’m not so predictable,’ I say, standing. ‘I can’t be arsed with this.’

‘Excuse me?’

A horn honking outside startles us, ripping away my sudden confidence to storm out. I sit back down. Derek begins to pace the office and I realise, yeah, he’s only being honest. I am predictable. Nothing I’ve ever done during eight years of working in the toll booths could’ve given Derek any other impression. My timekeeping’s impeccable. My hair’s always a mess. I only drink instant coffee from the machine. I chat to my colleagues, ask after their kids and buy them Mars bars when they’re sick. You see, Derek didn’t know me prior to my toll-booth days. He doesn’t know about my old impulsive nature.

‘You’re right,’ I say. ‘I’m going nowhere. But maybe that’s about to change.’

Derek pulls himself away from the rota and puts his glasses back on, glaring at me.

‘Derek, I won a car.’

‘A car?’

‘Yeah, a car.’

‘A real one?’

‘Yep.’

‘How?’

‘On the radio. On the breakfast show.’

‘Jesus Christ, lad. What sort of car?’

‘BMW.’

‘A BMW?!’

Derek loosens his tie a little further, wipes his brow. ‘Congratulations, lad.’

‘Cheers.’

The passing cars fill the dead air hanging between us, until Derek starts to laugh.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Oh, lad. I’m just imagining you driving around your neck of the woods in a BMW. I mean, it’s not gonna last five minutes round there.’

The laughing produces tears and Derek removes his glasses again to mop them up with his thumb. He’s got a bloody nerve.

‘That’s out of order, Derek. Out of order.’

But, is it? Maybe Derek has a point. The joy of winning is still boiling hot. I haven’t had a second to think this through, let the cold water splash me in the face. I think about the flat I rent above Wong’s chippy. The living room overlooks a dual carriageway flyover. Below my bathroom is a tiny back yard, just enough space for a wheelie bin. Where the hell am I going to park a BMW out there?

The bubble bursts.

‘Look, Jim. You’re better off selling the bloody thing and going on a spending spree.’

‘What do you reckon it’s worth?’ I ask. I watch cars speed past day in, day out, but I don’t know much about them. As a kid, I preferred my bike and my books. I passed my driving test years ago, like. I’m not soft. But I lost all interest in getting a car because I couldn’t afford one.

Derek blows his lips. ‘Twenty grand. More. I’m not a BMW man myself. More a Merc.’

‘Twenty grand?!’ Shit.

An hour ago, I was trying to read Gene Wilder’s autobiography cocooned in a toll booth. Now, I could be sitting on a small fortune. Derek Higgins’ white office walls are suddenly leaping with rainbows and fucking unicorns.

‘Sell it, Jim,’ Derek tells me. ‘I mean, where would you drive it anyway? You haven’t exactly got anywhere you need to be, have you?’

Twenty thousand pounds. That’s way more than I earn in a whole year. There’s no need to worry about getting sacked. I’ll be okay.

Actually, I won’t just be okay.

I’ll be grand. Twenty fucking grand!

‘Anyway, Jim. Back to my original point.’

My shoulders relax. I take my hands out of my pockets. An intense warmth encases me for the first time in, God, probably over a decade. Since I graduated from uni. Christ, back then I had options, I had hope. But a new car is more solid than an English degree, isn’t it? Holding my hand out, I smile, feeling a tingle of the old Jim Glover returning. I’ll save Derek the pleasure of firing me and call the shots myself. I’ll quit.

Derek doesn’t spot my outreached hand. He opens a drawer beneath his desk.

‘Surprise!’ Derek says, handing over a letter. ‘You’re the Chosen One, Jim!’

‘Y’what?’

I crouch over, resting my elbows on my knees, and skim the words to get the gist.

‘You’re sending me on a training day?’ I ask. ‘For card payments?’

‘Yes, I am, Jim. Yes. I. Am. We have to move with the times. Not everyone wants to buy a Fast Tag for the tunnel and drivers are becoming more and more tired of using coins. You’ll be our representative, learning how to use the card machine. You’re the brainy one out of all the numpties here.’

‘Love how you just described yourself as a numpty, Derek.’

‘Watch it.’

‘Do I get paid extra for going?’

‘Oh, aye.’

This is officially my lucky day. I should go and buy a scratch card. I’ve never been promoted, never done the whole ‘rounds are on me’ down at the Pacific Arms with my mates. Would my dad be proud, I wonder?

‘How much extra?’ I ask.

‘You’ll be paid in . . . respect.’

‘Ah, for fuck’s sake.’

‘Language, lad. I chose you ’cause you’re smart.’

‘I’m touched, Derek.’

‘Don’t be a smart-arse.’

The words *I quit* are tickling the edge of my tongue. I want to say it – scream it – but for some reason, they don’t escape.

‘Now, get back in the booth,’ Derek says. ‘Break’s over.’

Predictably, I obey.

3

Zara

I've just landed in Heathrow Airport.

My teeth are brushed, my hair is behaving, likely due to the expensive product I'd felt obliged to buy after treating myself to a chestnut and blonde balayage. It was worth it. My Lebanese genes are to be thanked for my hair, which has a mind of its own, like my papa's. I ate a small cheese sandwich offered to me before we started our descent and now it's sitting in my stomach like a brick. For such a frequent flyer, I can never seem to sleep on planes, not unless I drink a huge amount of red wine. Last night, I didn't touch a drop because I wanted to be as fresh as possible for this long drive to Liverpool. I tried to rest, I did, except I managed to get through three whole movies. The sky here is low and thick and white. It will be lunchtime in Dubai now, an endless blue rooftop stretching high above the locals and expats, the sun shining its warmest rays across the desert.

But I'm not here for the sky or the sun. I'm here for more than the whole damn sky.

I'm here for the universe.

I'm here.

I buy a UK SIM card for my phone from one of those machines in the terminal and call the guy selling me his car. We arrange to meet outside of Boots and he shows up like a taxi driver, holding a piece of crumpled paper with *Zara Khoury* written in bold marker pen. He reminds me to get insured, then mentions something about me having to go online to tax the car and hands me some paperwork. I'll go through all this in detail with Nick later. I handover my cash and the guy tosses me the keys – which, of course, I drop – and he tells me where the car is parked. A no-frills deal for a no-frills car.

Pushing a luggage trolley with two large suitcases, a holdall, a canvas tote bag and a mop – yes, a mop – I wander around Level Two of the airport parking lot, looking for my new car, shivering. God, I'd forgotten how damn cold this country is.

Nobody gave me a huge send off in Dubai, not even Katie. I'm not embarrassed or anything, I just don't think they got it. What I'm doing. Maybe if I was on the outside looking in, I wouldn't get it either. Or, maybe I just didn't know my friends as well as I thought I did. That happens when you move a lot; multiple settling-in periods. But I always listen to my gut. It will lead me to put down roots one day. I know it.

Anyway, if I'm honest, I haven't socialised much during the past six months. Work has dried up since the scar lodged into my cheek. Companies aren't keen on employing promo girls with something that isn't a beauty spot or a beaded jewel. At first, I hit an all-time low, but once Nick helped me

to find some confidence again, I knew I had to hold onto my small pot of savings. I wouldn't be here today otherwise, looking for my new (well, used) car.

Where *is* it? I hope I haven't been fooled.

I can hear Katie in my ear, tutting. She's my oldest friend because she's lived in Dubai her whole life, consistently too, unlike me. She's Irish and belongs to the tight-knit, well-connected Kelly family who own a chain of Irish pubs planted inside big-brand hotels. One pub even has a cartoon drawing of a fish dressed up as a leprechaun framed behind the bar, something I drew back at uni before I dropped out. So, whenever I returned to the Sandpit, whether as a kid, a teenager or an adult, Katie was always there to jump back into the scene with.

It's a transient place, Dubai, people coming, people going. You're at the mercy of your sponsor or your work visa and when people feel like they've done a good stint, they're ready to move on. Or go home. It's a really easy place to make friends. Not so easy to keep hold of them. The most recent crowd I fell in with were better described as drinking buddies. A whole international mix, but predominantly South African or British, they were stellar at organising dhow cruises around the Omani Peninsula or thinking up group costumes for the Rugby Sevens: busy bees with feather dusters; Smurfs. Last year, a bunch of the guys dressed as human-sized fast food items and lay stacked on each other, swapping the order of the burger layers each time one of them needed to use the bathroom. I mean, it was hilarious. Katie's dating the lettuce now. I think it's serious.

Don't get me wrong, she was great when the scar on my face was new. No, *new* doesn't sound right. It makes it seem like I went out and bought something shiny. I think a better

word is *raw*. But she got bored with me. I became a lot less up for it, a lot less fun. And Katie Kelly likes fun.

At least I had Nick.

‘You have him on a screen,’ Katie liked to remind me. ‘You don’t have him here.’

‘That’ll change one day,’ I told her.

And that day has arrived. Today.

Bingo! I find my new car. A small Peugeot 106. Haggard, and much more *used* than simply a ‘used car’, it’s the most hideous colour on the planet: not red; not brown; somewhere in between, like old dried blood. The pictures that guy posted online had told a different story. But, if this car gets me from A to B today, then so what? I love it. Plus, it’ll give me independence, which is key when moving to a new place. I don’t want to be too dependent on Nick, despite what Katie thinks.

I open the trunk and get a rush of excitement at the reality of what’s happening.

‘I need to see you,’ Nick had told me yesterday via Skype. ‘Now.’

‘If only that were possible,’ I teased.

Little did he know my bags were packed and waiting downstairs by the front door of my papa’s villa. I told Nick I was going camping in the desert with friends, not to be offended if I didn’t reply to his messages that evening, as it would be unlikely I’d have signal. He pretended to sulk, sticking out his bottom lip, then edged closer to the screen and realised something was missing from beside my bed.

‘Where’s the mop, sweetheart?’ he asked.

It was downstairs, of course, with my luggage.

‘Lulu found it in my room and used it to clean the floor,’ I said, thinking on my feet.

‘No way!’

‘I know, right. Can you believe it? So it’s drying out in the utility room.’

And now, I’m fitting that mop into the Peugeot, sliding it through the trunk and letting the handle poke through to the passenger seat. Its accessories – wigs, hats, novelty spectacles – are stuffed into the holdall. I was prepared for some drama getting the actual mop through check-in, expecting the odd glance from other passengers, but it’s all been smooth sailing. My plan is actually going according to plan.

I settle into the driver’s seat and make a phone call to get myself insured.

Then, I turn the key, start the Peugeot’s engine.

I’ve driven a manual before, but not for years. I stall twice and hear my papa’s voice saying, ‘Why drive when you can catch a cab?’

By some sort of magic, I get the car going on the third try. Chugging out of the parking lot, the planes groaning overhead, I pull over into a temporary stopping bay to set up the portable satnav. I found it in a kitchen drawer at my papa’s villa. It was there amongst old phone chargers and a toaster with a European plug socket, so I figured he wouldn’t miss it any time soon. I enter the address for my final destination, one that’s imprinted on my mind, my heart.

I set off and once I’m comfortably in fourth gear, I squeal in delight.

Nick Gregory is going to get the surprise of his life.

4

Jim

At three o'clock, when my shift at the tunnel finishes, I catch the bus to my ma's.

My family moved into this red brick terrace when I was five. Two up and two down, with a back yard and no front garden, we Glovers embraced the move, elated that we finally had our own staircase. The house hasn't changed much in thirty years, except for the addition of them slogan cushions with things like, '*Home Is Where the Heart Is*' littering the settee. One whole wall is covered with family photos, mainly of our Lisa and Emma, my sisters. I'm not offended. They're a right pair of posers, all dolled up in high heels and massive feathers, dancing on cruise ships. Imagine me doing that? No ta. I find the opposite wall more appealing anyway, carpet to ceiling with bookshelves. We all love a good paperback. Well, me and my ma still do.

'Jesus Christ,' I cry, letting myself in. 'Do you really need to whack the central heating up this high?'

‘Sorry, love, it’s been on all day,’ my ma says, swallowed up into my dad’s old armchair, the telly blurring.

‘All day?’ I bend down to pick up the mail.

‘Oh, calm down, will you? Go and put the kettle on.’

During the week, I clean my ma’s house, make her tea, watch *The Chase* with her. I make sure the mobile hairdresser comes to set her hair. Thursday’s usually corned beef hash, but I just swung by the Asda to get a couple of microwave cottage pies. I’m picking up my brand-new BMW in an hour. I’ll have to give *The Chase* a miss and hope the excitement of my win isn’t too much for her. She’s got a chronic irregular heartbeat.

‘There’s no catch,’ the producer had said.

God, I keep replaying those words over and over. Commercial radio stations are a bitch for pulling pranks on their listeners. How can I be so sure that this competition is legit? What happens if there’s no car wrapped in a red ribbon for me to take home? I should prepare myself for another phone call in the morning, Connie and Carl laughing their arses off, informing me that I’m the biggest joke on Merseyside.

‘Ethel brought some Jaffa Cakes round,’ my ma says. ‘Put them on a plate, love.’

I strip off my fleece and head into the kitchen. Clothes remain damp in the washing machine, a bowl with the dregs of soggy cereal sits in the sink. The bills, held up against the fridge by a novelty selection of magnets, are in the wrong place for me to ignore. Debts. My ma’s run up a fair few since my dad died, not quite registering the way a credit card likes to work, to bite you in the backside. She’s still paying for birthday pressies for our Emma’s kids years after they’ve outgrown them, but she’s too delicate to know, to be told. So, I take care of it. I glance at the mail: bills, more bills, and a postcard from Florida.

‘What you reading at the mo?’ I ask, placing a cup of tea and a plate of Jaffa Cakes on the little side table next to my dad’s armchair. ‘Anything decent?’

‘It’s upstairs on the bed, the name of it escapes me. Something about a family buying an old farmhouse in Scotland. The mother’s gonna have it off with the recluse who lives on the other side of the loch. Obvious. Bloody good, though.’

I turn the heating down and perch on the arm of the settee, eat a Jaffa Cake whole.

‘How’s the Gene Wilder one going, love?’

‘Great. He was really into the craft of acting.’

‘You’re the spit of your dad, loving all them real-life stories. I prefer the made-up ones.’

I wonder if my sisters are still passionate about reading. Their faces look directly at me from the wall – Lisa drenched in white lace at her Holy Communion, Emma’s senior school portrait, the shoulder pads of her blazer shrinking her head to the size of a pea. And how they both look now, Christ. I haven’t seen either of them in person since our dad’s funeral. After their cruise-ship days, they settled in Florida and set up a dance school, the promise of a stateside get-together still in the pipeline. I bloody hate this shrine to them, their American teeth and blow-dried hair a lifetime away from the Scouse girls they once were.

Which reminds me.

‘A postcard came today,’ I say.

‘Ooh, go and get it then, soft lad!’

My ma holds the postcard an inch away from her face, squinting, then after studying the sketch of Mickey Mouse holding a pumpkin, turns it around to read our Emma’s writing.

‘She says, “Tell Jim I’ve emailed him photos of the kids in their Halloween costumes”.’

I never check my emails. My phone's data package is useless and I don't own a laptop. In fact, I only recently got Wi-Fi in my flat so I can watch Netflix, an outgoing which I know I can do without, but it feels worth it.

My ma's doing a little hmm. Hmm. Hmm.

'They don't half mention Jesus a lot in these postcards,' she says.

'You did bring us up Catholic,' I point out.

'Yes, I know, but since when did any of you talk about Jesus willingly? I had to bribe you all with a bag of cola pips to get your backsides to mass.'

A strong whiff of floral body spray floats into the room, paired with a voice that makes nails on a chalkboard sound like Mozart. I nearly fall off the edge of the settee. A large woman lingers at the bottom of the stairs.

'You're out of toilet roll,' Ethel Barton announces.

'Bloody hell, Ethel, where did you sneak in from?' I ask.

'Well, where else does your mother keep her toilet roll?'

For a woman turning eighty-four, she's made of the sort of steel that comes from surviving the Home Front as a child. My ma, a decade younger, wilts in comparison.

'Now, are you bringing your mother to our Yvonne's sixtieth tomorrow night?' Ethel enquires. 'Or do I need to pick her up? It's at the club, we've got a buffet and everything.'

'She's never sixty,' my ma pipes up. 'You wouldn't think she was a day over forty. Not a wrinkle or a grey hair in sight. And I'll get a taxi, thank you. Don't be ferrying me around. Jim goes the Pacific Arms with his mates on a Friday, don't you, love?'

'Still living life in the fast lane, Jim?' Ethel huffs.

Going the pub for three or four pints is hardly the fast lane, is it? During my uni days, yeah, I partied hard, blew

my student loan and did soft things like shave my eyebrows off, but God, that feels like a bloody lifetime ago.

‘Although you do look smart today,’ Ethel says, heaving towards the table to pinch another Jaffa Cake. ‘In that pullover.’

‘It’s me uniform.’

‘Well, it suits you. I only ever see you in those t-shirts with the daft slogans on them.’

‘Bands . . . they’re not slogans, they’re bands.’

‘You’re not a teenager, Jim. You’re thirty-five,’ Ethel exclaims.

‘Thirty-three,’ my ma corrects her.

‘How’s your job going? You’ve managed to hold this one down, haven’t you?’

‘Eight years,’ I confirm.

‘Still, we all had higher hopes for you than a toll booth,’ Ethel says, mid munch.

My eyes wander up towards the framed photo of me in my cap and gown, hanging on the wall above the telly. My ma’s looking at it, too. What a day. On the steps of Liverpool’s Anglican Cathedral, my dad wearing his only suit, the shirt having been ironed twice that morning, his burly arm around my ma’s slender shoulders. She wore a polka-dot dress and red lipstick, black shoes with little white bows on the toes. Such a bold outfit for a woman who’s always chosen the shadows over the sun. ‘First in the family to get a degree,’ my dad had sung, gloating, as we all emerged from the ceremony.

‘It’s a shame you’re not coming to our Yvonne’s sixtieth, you know,’ Ethel says, sucking the melted Jaffa Cake chocolate off her fingers. ‘Our Yvonne’s niece is about your age, unattached, works for the Civil Service. I mean, you’d be very handsome if you got your hair trimmed. You would, you know.’

‘Oh, leave him alone, Ethel,’ my ma sighs.

‘There’s lots of nice girls who work in the Asda, you know,’ Ethel goes on, talking to me but looking directly at my ma. Then she looks outwards, as if addressing an audience much grander than two. ‘They all know me in there, you know. They know I get your mother’s bits and bobs for her, you know. They ask how I find the time to do me own shopping, you know. They really do. They’re nice girls, Jim. They are, you know.’

‘I know,’ I say.

‘He knows,’ my ma says. Christ, she looks shattered next to Ethel’s booming energy. Her dark greying hair is damp and fragile, her effort of mascara smudged below her eyes.

‘But aren’t all your mates married? Settled?’ Ethel asks, taking one of her shoes off, followed by the other, cracking her toes.

‘Settled,’ I say, ‘is when you have an argument with someone, and you find a way to reconcile. Or, if a problem arises, you resolve it. So, no, me mates aren’t settled. One’s married, two’ve got kids. I reckon that’s the very opposite of settled.’

Ethel scoffs.

‘Too clever for his own good, this one, isn’t he?’ she says. I flick the standing lamp on, draw the curtains.

‘Right, I need to get going,’ I say. ‘I’ll speak to you later, Mam.’ ‘Everything alright, love?’

‘Everything’s boss. I just need to nip home, get changed for the bonfire—’

‘He’s got a date!’ Ethel butts in.

‘Not exactly . . .’

‘Oh, that means he’s definitely got a date.’

I rub my eyes, scratch my head. Maybe I do need a haircut.

‘I had three children by the time I was your age,’ Ethel

tells me, wagging her bloody finger in my face. 'In fact, it's borderline selfish that you haven't given your mother some grandkids who live on this side of the Atlantic. Three children, I had. Three.'

'There's two cottage pies in the freezer,' I say, kissing my ma on the cheek. Then she gives me a look – you know, the sort that only mothers seem to master – that suggests – no, tells me – to kiss Ethel, too. For an easier life, I grit my teeth, oblige. Ethel pretends to get all flustered and fans herself with the sudoku puzzle book lying on the settee, calling me a tease.

'Wish your Yvonne a happy birthday from me,' I say, opening the door.

'She doesn't look a day over forty,' my ma reiterates. 'I mean it.'

Cold drizzle hits me. I welcome its bite and zip up my fleece, my feet picking up a fast pace. I'm going to collect my prize. My golden chalice. It's like being thirteen again and beating Snowy on the Sega. Christ, it's better than that. I haven't been excited about anything for so long that I've forgotten how to be excited. Doubt's a fucker. It clouds my every right to be dancing on the moon, but let's be honest, it protects me too. Still, I was told I've won a car. This is Christmas morning, this is my twenty-first again, this is an ice-cold cocktail whilst lying on a beach somewhere in the Bahamas. This is my turn.

I'm halfway down the street when I hear my name being yelled. Ethel's standing on the step of my ma's house, waving her arms.

'Go and get us a four pack of toilet roll from the Asda, will you? It'll only take you five minutes if you run. Hurry.'

5

Zara

‘You have reached your destination,’ the satnav announces.

It’s nothing like I’ve imagined. I double check the address, and yes, this pleasant but dull suburban close is Clifton Crescent. Nick’s front door is in my view, third house along. Butterflies dance in my stomach. I know he’ll be there because he works from home. Plus his car is in the driveway. He’s sent me many selfies from that exact vehicle, recorded himself singing Queen songs to me from the driver’s seat as he rested his phone on the dashboard.

‘But it’s a house,’ I mutter. Not an apartment.

On my phone, I find the screenshot I took of Nick’s address below his email signature; Nicholas Consultancy, The Loft, 6 Clifton Crescent. Well, this is it. And it’s big, for a British house. Semi-detached with its own garage, the roof extension, which of course must be Nick’s office, clearly in view. Why had I thought he lived in an apartment? Hadn’t he told me that? A long front lawn spreads beneath a large

bay window, well kept with a neatly trimmed hedge and a miniature wishing well. The front door has a cute plaque that says 'Welcome to the Mad House'.

I adjust the rear-view mirror and give myself a check.

No smudged eyeliner, no goop in the corners of my eyes. Good. I grab my make-up bag and top up my lip gloss, a peachy pink. My scar is still more prominent than my long nose, the first damn thing I see whenever I catch a glimpse of my reflection. But that doesn't matter. If anyone can see past that scar, it's Nick Gregory.

Oh my God. I can't deal with the fact that I'm here. I'm actually here!

I'm too excited to move. I want to relish every little detail. It's like the moment where you receive a beautiful gift wrapped with a bow: although you can't wait to open it, you also want to savour it as a mysterious box.

It's bang on four o'clock; starting to go dark. How is the day almost over before it's even begun? Mind you, it's already eight o'clock in Dubai. What would I be doing if I was there, instead of here? Thursday nights are the start of the weekend. Restaurants are filling up, taxis difficult to hail, the traffic moving slowly around Mall of the Emirates. A twinkle of party-time dancing in the air. Not for me, though. Not anymore. I'd be curled up in my PJs by now, watching *Grey's Anatomy*, waiting for Nick to call me on Skype. Nine-ish was usual for us on Thursdays; five-ish for him in Liverpool.

I take out my phone. I've got three messages from Nick.

It's almost Fri-yay!

I hate it when he says Fri-yay.

Haha, I know you love it when I say that.

Haha.

So, what you up to today? And how was camping? I miss you xxx.

Thrilling. That's what this is; absolutely thrilling. Nick thinks this is just a regular day for me, four thousand miles away from him, and yet here I am, outside his house. Everything we have talked about for months is about to start. Now.

I type my reply.

Hey, hey! Camping – meh! Sorry I've been off the radar. Phone issues. Boring! I miss you too xxx.

Agh. He's read it already. And he's typing.

'Come on!' I sing out loud, psyching myself up. 'Let's do this.'

I open the door and get out of my little hatchback. Pushing the driver seat forward, I lean into the back seat and grab my army jacket; authentic – apparently – US Army, with badges that have seen better days sewn along the sleeves; I love it. It's a fond reminder of hopping from festival to festival with an awesome group of people a couple of years ago, partying in green field after green field after green, muddy field. We covered quite a distance, from Suffolk to Budapest, although it kind of rolls into one. Shame we've all lost touch. I slip the army jacket on over my denim pinafore and grey t-shirt, patterned with silver stars. I've thought about my outfit carefully. And yes, I'm a bit cheesy, but really, the stars are aligning.

I open the trunk, slide the mop out. Everything else can

remain inside the car for now. The mop and I are the same height, neither likely to be described as tall. The bow tie has fallen into the boot, so I fix it back around the edge where the handle is visible below the mop's head. I place a pair of cheap aviators into the mop's ropery hair.

'Hey, you,' I grin. 'Shall we?'

And throwing my shoulders back, I march up Nick's garden path, past the wishing well, and ring the doorbell. The mop stands beside me, proud, like a centurion's spear. How totally British this house is; the bricks, the grey and white painted door frame, the stained glass patterned panels. I take a deep breath, my future about to become my present.

A little girl with tatty braids and wide blue eyes answers the door.

'Oh, hello!' I say, startled.

Another even littler girl hangs off the bigger one's legs. Both are dressed in sparkly tutus over what looks like bottle-green school uniforms, tiaras hanging out of their messy hair. They look from me to the mop and back to me again.

'Hey kids,' I smile, aware of the shake in my voice. 'Is Nick here?'

'Mummy!' the littlest one yells. 'Is Nick here?'

The older girl just continues to stare.

'Who's Nick?' the little one asks.

'Mummy' appears, throwing a towel over her shoulder. A navy-blue baggy tracksuit hangs off her curves. With black shiny hair cut into a short bob, her baby pink lips curl beneath a neat button nose.

'Nick doesn't live here,' she says, clear, with an air of confidence, unless it's her accent that gives that effect. She looks down at her little girls and pushes out her bottom lip, pulling a perplexed face which makes them giggle.

'I'm so sorry,' I say, checking out the house number again, scanning Clifton Crescent. 'My mistake, I guess.'

'Yep. Your mistake,' the woman says.

'Her mistake,' the littlest one says.

Turning to my domestic pal, I give the mop an awkward smile and catching my reflection in the aviator lenses, I feel my face flush. I'm totally lingering on a stranger's doorstep, and there's nowhere to go other than back to my crappy car to readdress the situation. Maybe the satnav's directions were wrong. The wishing well didn't feel very *Nick*. There might be many Clifton Crescents on the outskirts of Liverpool. All it takes is one wrong letter to make one big error.

'Come on, girls,' the woman says, and ushers them inside. 'It's Thursday, which means?'

'Egg and chips at Nana's house!' the girls cheer, jumping up and down.

'Let's go and get ready then.'

'Sorry . . . bye!' I say, but the door slams shut.

Except, wait. This car, here beside me on the driveway, it's just *like* Nick's car. But, God, what do I know about cars? If it's got four wheels and a roof, it's the same as the next car with four wheels and a roof. I take in my surroundings. There are three, four, five cars all parked on driveways in this close that are kind of similar. Totally similar. Well, practically identical.

I back away. The sign, 'Welcome to the Mad House', is making me feel most unwelcome. The gravel stones on the path are noisy beneath my suede sneakers. I just want to disappear; my whole presence feels so unnecessary, so misplaced, outside this neat yet bland house. The older of the little girls is at the front window now, watching me and the mop. She hadn't spoken, but her eyes are wide,

inquisitive. She waves, and I instantly feel like less of an intruder. I return the wave and mouth, 'Sorry,' again, pulling a funny face that says *silly me*. The little girl smiles, her big teeth wonky, not quite the right fit for her small mouth yet.

The mop slips back into its place in the trunk, poking into the passenger seat via the car's interior, and I open the driver's door, wondering what my next move should be. I've got no reason to look back; it's the wrong house. But, without intention, I do it anyway.

And there he is.

Standing upstairs, peering from behind the curtains of the front bedroom.

I blink, my heart pulsating, and I stop dead, frozen between an open car door and the driver's seat. It's definitely him. His round, thick shoulders, that cream knitted sweater he wears whenever he feels the cold working in his roof office. His hair, styled specifically to look slightly messy on top.

'Nick?' I whisper.

Except Nick doesn't live there. So who is that man?

6

Jim

‘Just sign here, here and here.’

I’m trying to pay attention, but there’s a massive distraction in my way.

A brand-new BMW M3.

A five door, nineteen-inch alloys, three litre turbo engine, high-performance saloon. The interior is fitted with black leather racing seats, a nine-speaker sound system, built-in satnav; the dashboard’s made from black carbon fibre and chrome. The seats are heated.

The producer tosses me the keys.

‘It’s all yours. Congrats.’

I climb into my car. *My* gleaming white car. The soft heated seat engulfs my body and I take my fleece off, chucking it onto the back seat, feeling the sheer comfort of the leather close to my skin. The powerful rev of the engine is euphoric.

Driving away from the studio’s underground car park,

the producer's scowl gets smaller and smaller in my rear-view mirror. I focus on the road ahead like I've never focused before. No traffic signal can be ignored, no other driver taken for granted.

Cruising down the Dock road, I turn up side streets and drive in circles, bringing myself back onto the Dock road again. Tunes blast from the speakers: Daft Punk; The Doors; a bit of Bowie. I swing by my flat above Wong's chippy, park around the corner and run like the wind to get changed, throwing on the first t-shirt and jeans I lay my hands on. Getting back inside my car is like receiving a huge hug; I can't bloody believe it. I run my fingertips over the interior features, the music pumping. It's not that far to Snowy's. I'm going to cruise, take my own sweet time.

Twenty grand. Derek Higgins reckons that's what I'll get if I sell it. How much will it cost to take my ma to Florida to see my sisters? Does she even have a passport? I do, but it's never been used. Neither of us have ever been abroad.

Actually, with twenty grand, I could work for free for a while, become an intern. It wouldn't be irresponsible of me to do that with twenty grand in the bank, would it? Even at my age? Like taking a step back to go forward, starting over again.

After my degree, I got a job in the mailroom at a publishing company, home to a whole host of local lifestyle magazines. My plan was to start by sorting letters and move into writing features, maybe even become editor. Only, a problem swamped me: competing with those who could afford to work for free. Thanks to their smug faces, any chance of escaping stamps and pigeonholes was as likely as me finding a golden ticket in an invoice. I wasn't like them, you see. The way I was brought up, you worked to earn, even if it meant

a pittance, and I wasn't going to suck up anyone's arse for free whilst scrounging off my hardworking family. So, even when I arrived early and stayed late, just to make contact with the editors, I was dismissed like an opened, redundant envelope. I was the mailroom fella. Why would they give me a shot? So I thought fuck it. And quit.

'But, you've got a degree, son,' my dad had said.

'A lot of people have degrees, Dad.'

'You got a First.'

'It doesn't mean I'm qualified for much, though.'

'But surely it qualifies you for something?'

'And I'll find something soon, Dad. Promise.'

Oh, Dad. I'm sorry. Salty, hot tears well up, but I blink them away, swallowing hard.

Fireworks are beginning to explode across the city. From the comfort of my driver's seat, I watch as mini rockets dart through the sky, whistling, fizzling. Even if I keep the car, this is still a new start for me, isn't it? I mean, driving to work every day in this awesome beast would at least get the day off to a bloody great start.

I turn into Snowy's road, crawl up beside his house, put the handbrake on. God. Even *that* feels good.

'It's yours?' Snowy's hands are plastered to his neat black hair. He loves new stuff. Trainers, tablets, the latest smart telly. Situated in a new-build development, his whole house is a show home minus the plastic fruit. He gets a new car on a lease every two years, but not one in this sort of league.

'It's mine.'

'So, you're saying you gave two birds in town your phone number and now suddenly you're the owner of this fucking beauty?'

‘You couldn’t write it, mate.’

‘You fluky bastard.’

Circling my prize, Snowy’s jaw is so far dropped that his usual smiley, squinting face is unrecognisable. He runs his index finger across the bonnet.

‘She’s exquisite,’ he says.

‘Quite. I just can’t believe I’ve got me own wheels,’ I say. ‘For years, I’ve sat stationary, watching everyone else driving, going through the tunnel, wondering where they’re going . . . and now, I’m going somewhere.’

Snowy laughs. ‘You’re a deep fucker, mate,’ he says.

‘And you, Brian Walsh, are blessed with the intellectual capacity of a jellyfish.’

‘What you got against jellyfish, eh?’

‘Oh, I didn’t say they don’t play a sophisticated role in the ecosystem.’

‘Okay, you’ve lost me now. As per usual. And I need a drink. Got some tins on ice in our new freezer.’

‘Can’t drink, lad.’ I jangle my keys, dangling them like a carrot. ‘I’m driving.’

We snigger, before pushing each other back and forth, the odd mock punch thrown in, until we both hug unashamedly. Neither of us has a brother, but that’s okay, we’ve got each other.

‘It couldn’t have happened to a better fella, mate,’ Snowy says, his grip still tight.

‘Cheers.’

‘I mean it, Jimbo. If anyone else pulled up outside me house having won a dream car for doing absolutely fuck all, I’d be fuming, mate. I’d wanna rip their smug head off and feed it to the dog. But, you. You, Jimbo. I’m over the moon for you. I am. Truly. What did your ma say?’

‘Haven’t told her yet.’

‘This is boss. Just so . . . *boss*. Fucking hell, mate, you’re making me cry here.’

I don’t admit that I nearly cried earlier. It’s different for Snowy, who blubbers often and always quite comfortably has, and who’s now blowing his nose on a fresh, clean handkerchief from his shirt pocket.

‘You soppy get,’ I say.

‘Fuck you. Anyway, why don’t you leave the car here tonight? Get smashed.’

‘Nah, I’m off work tomorrow. Doing the Sunday shift instead. Double time.’

‘All the more reason to get smashed, then. What’s wrong with you? You pregnant?’

‘Look, I don’t wanna waste me day in bed hungover.’

‘Ah, yeah. It really sucks to be you,’ Snowy chuckles, pulling a stupid face. ‘I mean, you’re a boss drunk. A riot. But you’re a fucking bastard with a hangover.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Ah, you’re the worst, mate. The worst! You act like someone’s done a massive shit in your head and you’re all like, “oh, woe is me,” and then the next minute you’re like the monster coming over the hill, a scary motherfucker.’

‘We’re getting old. Can’t handle it anymore.’

‘Speak for yourself, I’m always fine the next day.’

‘You’re a one in a million, lad.’

‘I know I am. Now, come on, Jimbo. Let’s get inside. The burgers should be done.’

‘Who has a barbecue in November?’

‘It’s bonfire night.’

‘It’s fucking freezing, mate.’

‘It’s an indoor barbecue.’

‘Oh, so you mean you’re grilling burgers and sausages inside? That’s not a barbecue.’

‘Ooh, did someone lose his sense of humour whilst driving a BMW?’

‘Have you got onion rings?’

‘Ha!’ Snowy laughs. ‘Have we got onion rings? We’ve not only got onion rings, but we’ve got corn on the cob, spicy chicken drumsticks, garlic bread – with cheese – and for those who think they’re too posh for a burger, we have hummus.’

Any excuse for a party, Snowy has it. Even as the dad of three-year-old twins, there’s always a reason for some sort of shindig. These days, the occasion gets tweaked to suit the kids, until they conk out, and then old-school partying begins. You see, Snowy used to be a tour manager, gigging all over the world, until fatherhood forced him to pack it in. He doesn’t half crave that lifestyle, though, and loves to drag us along.

The twins and a bunch of local kids are sat, crossed arms and cross-legged, on the patio in the back garden, wrapped up in coats, hats and scarves like Christmas pressies. Us lot, the grown-ups, stand around, all waiting for the firework display to kick off. A couple of older kids clamber onto the roof of Snowy’s new shed for a better view.

‘If anybody dares to touch the fairy lights, there’ll be no hot dogs,’ Snowy announces.

‘And if you cross the line, there’ll be no fireworks,’ Mikey adds, indicating the imaginary line with his arms. He’s a high school music teacher now, and my God, he loves to use *that* teacher voice. Although it doesn’t take him long to sneak through the house and admire my new car. I follow him.

He whistles, sizing it up. Then, he looks at me and back to the car again.

‘You’ll get fifty for this, Jimbo,’ Mikey says, sipping his drink. ‘But, don’t drive it anywhere. If you’re selling it, sell it now. Once you hit a hundred miles, its value’ll drop to about forty-five.’

Hold on. What the . . . What the actual? Fifty. Grand. What the fuck?

Now, I’m never sure whether Mikey knows what he’s talking about or if he’s a complete bullshitter. Still wearing his school ‘uniform’, Dumbo flying across his tie and his striped shirt tight around the middle, Mikey’s rarely seen without a glass of whiskey in one hand, a ciggie in the other.

‘I was gonna get meself one of these,’ Mikey continues. ‘But the missus was giving me grief. Said it wasn’t right for the kids. What did she expect me to do? Ring Noddy, see if he’s selling his little red and yellow car? I said to her, I don’t think your spray tan’s right for the kids, but I just got more grief. You’re a lucky man, Jimbo. A bachelor with a bimmer.’

‘Rolls off the tongue, doesn’t it?’ I say.

Mikey loves to bitch about his family, but Christ, he’d be lost without them. The only married one in the gang, his wife is Victoria and likes to be called Tori. They had one of those massive weddings in a castle in Ireland and are still paying the bill seven years on. His two young girls – ballet obsessed, gymnastics obsessed – put a few extra lines on Mikey’s forehead, but they still manage an all-inclusive family holiday twice a year. I’d swap my life with Mikey’s in a heartbeat.

‘You want my advice?’ Mikey asks, pausing long enough for me to blink. ‘Don’t sell it. Don’t give this baby away to anyone. You drive this around and you’ll have a bird in no time. A classy bird, too. I mean, my Tori’s classy, but she’s got a dirty mouth. Gets it from her ma.’

‘Mate. It’s not exactly me life goal to get a girlfriend who only wants me for me wheels.’

‘Well, what is your life goal?’

Good question.

BANG! Red and blue fizz above our heads into white glittering droplets. *Oohs* and *ahhs* echo from the back garden. I look at my car, then back at Mikey.

‘How’d it go with Tori’s mate?’ he asks, and sticks his tongue between his teeth like a right sleaze. ‘Tapas, eh?’

Shit. I was hoping Mikey had forgotten about that. He leans back, resting against the BMW. I kind of wish he wouldn’t.

‘She was nice,’ I say, putting a strong downward inflection on the ‘nice’, a way to bring this chat to an end before it begins. ‘Where’s Griffo tonight?’

‘Working. But, don’t change the subject, gis a bit more juice than that. Come on, what happened after the patatas bravas? Did you double dip in the garlic sauce? She’s been after you for ages, according to Tori. What’s her name again . . . ?’

‘Rebecca – well, Becca – I presume her full name’s Rebecca.’

‘So, not much talking then? All action?’

‘No, Mikey. Leave it.’

‘Such a prude.’

But I’m not a prude. You know what I am? I’m embarrassed. Yeah, I went on a date with Tori’s mate, but we didn’t go to the new tapas place for a meal. We just went there for a drink. It was all I could afford and as much as I fully support equality, I can’t let a girl pay for anything on a first date. Look, I know I’m old-fashioned in that sense, but so what? It’s how I was brought up.

‘Seeing her again?’ Mikey probes.

‘Nope.’

Mikey pushes himself off the BMW, tutting.

‘I suppose she wasn’t “The One”’, he says, making inverted commas with his fingers whilst still holding his glass and ciggie. ‘You’re so hard to please, Jimbo. Yeah, you’ve got the whole sexy look going on, but who you holding out for? Salma fucking Hayek?’

‘Nah, she’s too old.’

‘Ha. Well, I hope you let Little Miss Becca down nicely. We don’t want another girl in Liverpool crying herself to sleep over Jimbo Glover, do we?’

I hadn’t needed to let Becca down nicely. I’m not soft. The way she sipped that Rioja when I told her what I did for a living, well, let’s just say I’m glad she didn’t choke. Girls like Becca want a fella with their own desk. Not one they share with other toll-booth workers. To throw her a lifeline, I told her I still lived with my ma. A white lie, but the final nail in the coffin.

‘You have a seriously warped opinion of me, don’t you, Mikey?’

‘Let’s go and get a top up,’ Mikey says, rattling the ice around his empty glass.

Inside, passed out on the pastel-pink sofa in the lounge, are Snowy’s twins, still in their warm coats and woolly hats, the CBeebies bedtime story glowing from the telly. Snowy gets the tequila out. I decline. God, I feel so boring. And guilty. Guilty for all the times I laughed at the designated driver or rolled my eyes at how dull people were for bringing their car. At least Snowy had raised a good point. I won’t have to cope with a rotten hangover tomorrow.

Something as cold as ice clasps the palm of my hand.

‘Looks like you need some sort of pick-me-up?’ It’s Helen, Snowy’s girlfriend, one hand holding a bottle of opened prosecco, the other holding mine.

She's not dressed for a cold bonfire night. Her tight jeans are ripped at the knees, a loose Oasis t-shirt hangs off one shoulder revealing a red bra strap. Long, thick, red locks bounce over her other shoulder.

'I'm not drinking, Hel—'

'Ah, shut it, Jimbo. We ALL know you're not drinking; you're DRIVING. Show off.'

Her lips, a little smeared, match her lingerie with shocking power, but the rest of her face is fresh, clear, rosy. Helen has flawless skin. Snowy and Mikey are stumbling by the breakfast bar trying to force the contents of a tequila bottle into a giant water pistol.

'I feel like I'm standing in a zoo, looking at all the animals behind the bars,' I say.

'That's why I NEVER drive,' Helen says.

'Didn't know you could drive.'

'There's a lot you don't know about me, Jimbo.'

I sip my Coke, like a loser. 'No way, Hels. I know everything about you. Twenty-two years, you can learn a lot about someone in that time.'

'Fuck me, Jimbo. Is that how long we've known each other?'

'Yep. Since Year Seven.'

'Year Seven was TWENTY-TWO years ago?'

'Do the maths, Hels.'

'I was shit at maths. God! I still *feel* twenty-two.'

'Well, if it's any consolation, you look about twenty-three.'

Helen lifts the bottle of prosecco and swigs. 'Charmer.'

'On a good day, I mean. On a bad day, I reckon you look about twenty-eight.'

Her hand is still in mine.

'Come with me,' she says.

No. I tug my hand away and shove it into my jeans pocket.

I'm not going anywhere with Helen. With a few drinks down me, yeah, I always follow her, listen to her. She bloody loves an antisocial one-on-one. But it feels very different tonight. The blend of bright kitchen lights and my being fully aware of everyone in the room makes slipping away awkward. And as innocent as it is, being sober doesn't hand me an excuse.

A squirt of liquid hits me between the eyes. Snowy's got the tequila gun in his hand, killing himself laughing. He throws his head back, aims for his own mouth and shoots a blast of tequila down his throat, then turns the gun back on me as his target.

'Mikey said you blew Becca off,' Snowy shouts over the music.

Helen playfully hits my shoulder.

'Who's Becca?' she asks.

'No one,' I say.

Snowy squirts me again, this time getting me right in the eye.

'Ah, pack it in, mate!'

'Not "The One"?' Snowy mocks, which pisses me off.

Mikey snatches the gun and gives himself a shot, followed by a whoop.

'The One, or not The One, *that* is the question,' he says, and shoots Snowy.

Helen puts the bottle of prosecco on the table and walks off, heading into the lounge to check on the twins. I watch as she removes their coats, holding their little limbs like delicate china. The boy, Rocco, turns his body into the sofa and curls up tight, determined to slip right back into the deep sleep that his mum's just disturbed him from. Helen bends her knees and sweeps the girl, Maisie, up into her arms.

Just before she reaches the stairs, Helen's eyes catch mine. So, I creep into the lounge, take Rocco in my arms and follow her.

In Year Seven, because our surnames both began with G, I had to sit next to Helen Gladstone for all lessons except music. It took me until Year Nine to ask her to go out with me.

Helen was my first kiss. According to Helen, I was her second. We went to the pictures every Saturday night until we were old enough to start trying to get into pubs. Helen's mum called me the son she never had. My dad loved her. She even came to Rhyl with us every summer. It took Helen a whole year to let me touch her boobs, then, on the eve of our final GCSE exam, we lost our virginity to each other in Helen's dad's shed. Helen left school and went to college to do nursing. I stayed on to do my A Levels. During my first year at uni, we were careless and Helen fell pregnant. She wanted an abortion.

Neither of us ever said out loud that our relationship was over.

We didn't need to.

And now, Helen and Snowy's gorgeous little twins are conked out, with me and Helen tucking them into bed, together, as friends.

'We need a bigger house,' Helen whispers. 'These two can't share forever.'

'You've only just moved in,' I whisper back.

Helen slouches down into a bean bag. The twins' room is spacious, maybe because the furniture is so small. A gentle lamp with a soft blue bulb calms the room, making me sleepy. It's only about seven o'clock.

Tapping the bean bag, Helen invites me to sit beside her.

‘Remember when we used to think Fleetwood Mac followed us around?’ she mouths, a hint of sound escaping her red lips.

‘They did.’ I smile.

‘Everywhere we went, one of their songs was playing.’

‘That random pub in Southport.’

‘Exactly.’

Simultaneously, we both whisper the lyrics of ‘You Can Go Your Own Way’.

‘I wish we hadn’t,’ Helen says, bringing her knees up to her chest.

‘What?’

‘Gone our own way.’

I let out a small laugh, and Helen follows, cringing at herself.

‘Sssh,’ she says. ‘I’m being serious.’

‘You’re pissed, Hels.’

‘Patronising.’

Maisie begins to stir. I hold out my hand, gesturing Helen to stay sitting as I drag myself up, placing my hand on Maisie’s tummy. I’ve seen Helen do this numerous times. Snuggling further into her bunny, she settles. Raven haired, just like her dad, Maisie’s a real-life little Snow White, whereas Rocco’s got his mum’s fiery hair and freckles.

‘Don’t be sad, Hels,’ I whisper. ‘You’ve got a gorgeous family here.’

Helen replies with a sigh.

‘Come on, Helen. Get up. Let’s join the party.’

‘I chose the wrong man, Jimbo.’

‘No, you didn’t. Don’t be a drama queen. You didn’t choose anyone, it wasn’t like that.’

‘You’re saying I had no choice?’

'I'm saying you didn't have to choose. It wasn't like me and Snowy were about to duel and you swanned over to decide who you wanted. Me and you were kids, Helen. You and Snowy happened years later. A lifetime later.'

'He doesn't understand me, doesn't give me what I need.'

'He makes you laugh.'

'He makes everyone laugh.'

'I'm going downstairs.'

I'm already by the door, tired from whispering, when I feel Helen's breath on my neck.

'I don't love him, Jim.'

'Well, I'm sorry for you. I am. But it's not my problem.'

She twists my shoulders, forcing me to turn to her, face to face.

'It is your problem.'

'Since when?'

'Do you remember the last time we slept together? Before I got pregnant with the twins?'

'It was long before that, and you know it.'

'So, you *do* remember our last time?'

'Stop it.'

But, she stretches onto her tip toes and kisses me. It's so soft, so entirely familiar, that, shit, I allow it to happen. My arms naturally wrap around her waist, one hand reaching to the small of her back. The fruity, acidic taste of her tongue is strong, making me all too aware of how sober I am.

Maisie wakes again, this time calling for her mummy.

Breaking away, Helen doesn't hesitate in going to her girl. I get out, head straight to the bathroom, lock the door and splash my face with cold water. I rest on the edge of the bath, plastic crabs and seahorses in a rainbow of bright colours

stuck to its sides. Pressing my palms into my eyes, I rock forward, my hair falling across my face, annoying me, itching me.

What a mess.

Today was supposed to be a good day; the best – the start of something new.

I know she offers it on a bloody plate sometimes and Christ, it's getting tiresome, but how could I let myself kiss Helen? And while she's drunk?

That's what scum do.

I flush the toilet and open the door to be met on the landing by Snowy, toothy grinned, thrusting his hips to the beat of the music coming from downstairs.

'Mate,' Snowy cries, unaware of his kids trying to sleep. 'I'm buzzin'.'

'Keep your voice down, will you?' Helen emerges from the twins' bedroom.

Snowy keeps thrusting and shimmies his way towards his girlfriend, circling her whilst pulling that face kids do when they're told off for being 'silly'. I can't help but find him funny, my bonkers best mate, and even Helen plays with her hair and cackles.

'I'm buzzin',' Snowy repeats. 'But, I'm also bursting. See ya later alligators!' And he plants a loud kiss onto Helen's cheek, not forgetting to slap her on the bum before disappearing into the bathroom.

'Let's just get the fuck downstairs,' I say.

'Agreed,' Helen says.

At the bottom of the stairs, swigging a bottle of Perrier water and admiring a set of three framed Jack Vettriano prints, is Griffo's dad. Griffo's dad doesn't drink alcohol, despite having a fully functioning bar in his house: draft,

premium spirits, the lot. I've never asked him why he doesn't drink. He's not the sort of man you ask questions of.

'Alright, our James.' He nods.

There's always a light on when it comes to Griffo's dad, never a moment when he switches off, looks caught unaware. His name's Richard. But I don't call him by his name because I once overheard him say to someone, 'You don't get to call me Richard. You don't get to call me anything. Got that?' The way he spoke was sinister, his teeth gritted, his lips doing all the talking. So, although I've known him since I was a kid, he's always just Griffo's dad.

'Hey,' I manage.

'Popular these, aren't they?' Griffo's dad says, nodding at the frames.

I shrug. Well, I know Helen loves them.

Griffo's dad places a strong arm around my shoulders, his pumped muscles encasing me like giant bubble wrap. Christ, I always feel like such a scruff-bag beside this man. My old t-shirt, printed with a fading camper van, is creased and noticeably poked with holes next to his Ralph Lauren polo shirt, his smart suit jacket tailored to perfection. Although I washed my hair yesterday, I'm aware of its stench in comparison to the shining shaved head beaming beside me, expensive aftershave thickening the air between us.

'The lads tell me you've got yourself some wheels,' Griffo's dad says.

'Some random stroke of luck . . .'

'Well, you gonna show me or what?'

And it seems Mikey wasn't bullshitting about the value of my car. According to Griffo's dad, it's actually worth fifty-four thousand quid. The sound of the numbers spoken out loud

knocks the breath out of my body. I'm fucking shivering, although I feel hot, clammy.

'Depends when and how you want to sell it, though, James. Your problem's getting that sort of money for it when a buyer could just go and pick their own straight from a car showroom. Then again, you might get lucky, might find someone who'd rather deal with the seller direct. You got lucky once, why can't you get lucky again? That's my outlook anyway.'

Griffo's dad gives my shoulder a small squeeze.

'The more you drive it, the more it'll lose its value. Just bear that in mind, James.'

'I need to take me ma for a spin. At least.'

'Of course you do. I'm just giving you advice, lad.'

Advice isn't all he gives me either.

Griffo's dad offers me fifty grand in cash if he can buy the car tomorrow.

'Cash?!'

'I only deal in cash.'

'Deal.'

We shake hands, although fuck, I'm shaking all over. I feel my phone vibrate once and take it out of my pocket. No, it's not my ma. It's just a text, thank God, from Helen.

Jim. I'm so so sorry about b4. Don't know what I was thinking. H xx

Oh Christ, Griffo's dad's still talking to me, going through the terms of our deal, making sure neither party is unhappy with the offer on the table. I'm trying so hard to listen to what he's suggesting, but all I can hear is *fifty grand, fifty grand, fifty grand, fifty grand* . . .

‘You don’t want any dickheads scratching the doors ’cause they’ve nothing better to do,’ Griffo’s dad says. ‘And you want that whole fifty, don’t you?’

I swallow, nod.

‘Now look, Jim. I’m not saying you live in a shit hole—’

‘I do live in a shit hole.’

‘Stay in a hotel tonight. A good one. Valet park the car. You can afford it.’

‘Bloody hell. I can, can’t I? Well, I can tomorrow.’

‘We made a deal. You can afford it tonight,’ Griffo’s dad winks. ‘And enjoy it.’

His Perrier bottle empty, Griffo’s dad rejoins the indoor barbecue and I feel my phone vibrate again.

Sorry I do know what I was thinking but didn’t explain right. Sorry. H xx

Then, again.

Let me explain . . . U went ur way I went mine (FLEETWOOD MAC!!!!!!!!!!!!!!) I honestly honestly thought we were 2 different. I thought u were gonna move on and get some high flying job. I never thought ud stay here!!!! U wer 2 clever 4 someone like me. Lifes so unpredictable

Christ, Helen. I can’t be doing with this drama, not tonight. I get inside my car, decide to go and surprise my ma. This party isn’t doing me any good right now and I need to be on the ball tomorrow to meet Griffo’s dad. I’ve not even started the engine when my phone goes nuts, buzzing.

Sorry!!!! Pressed send by accident. I know we’ve talked

about all this b4 but I'm so miserable and so confused. I love the person Snowy is. But I'm not IN LOVE with him. U told me I went after him 4 an excitin life. U were right. I did. I thought I'd get 2 c the world and go on all those world tours with him. How stupid. I never got 2 go anywhere. I should've just stayed with u. H xx

Judging by the fact u haven't replied I'll just say SORRY 4 bein a soppy drunk. H xx

Forget all I said. Let's pretend the kiss was 4 old times sake haha. H xx