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Opening Extract from...

A DOUBLE LIFE

Written by **Charlotte Philby**
Published By **The Borough Press, an imprint of HarperCollins**

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A DOUBLE LIFE

Charlotte Philby worked for the *Independent* for eight years as a columnist, editor and reporter, and was shortlisted for the Cudlipp Prize for her investigative journalism at the 2013 Press Awards. A former contributing editor and feature writer at *Marie Claire*, she has written for the *New Statesman, ELLE, Telegraph, Guardian, Sunday Times* and presented documentaries for BBC World Service and *The One Show*. Charlotte is the granddaughter of Kim Philby, Britain's most infamous communist double-agent, the elusive 'third man' in the notorious Cambridge spy ring. This is her second novel.

Praise for *A Double Life*:

'Superbly crafted with heart-stopping twists and chills galore. A new star has arrived in the thriller firmament'

Thriller of the Year, *THE TIMES*

'A seriously stylish, hugely compelling mystery: Charlotte Philby redefines a male-dominated genre with her brilliantly complex female characters. I was utterly gripped' **LUCY FOLEY**

'I fell into the vivid, frightening world Charlotte Philby creates so skilfully and didn't resurface until long after I'd turned the last page. Her characters are so real you genuinely fret over their safety in their jobs and personal lives. Everything about this book feels as plausible as if it might happen tomorrow. She is a hugely original and talented writer' **JANE CASEY**

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'*A Double Life* confirms Charlotte Philby as the master of a sub-genre she basically invented, dealing in the dangerous area where working motherhood and international espionage collide. Heart-breaking, gripping and always beautifully written, I can't wait to see what she does next' **ERIN KELLY**

'Brilliantly executed and tense' ***SUNDAY TIMES***

'Terribly compelling . . . persuasive and absorbing'
OBSERVER

'Philby is creating her own niche of beautifully observed, fast-paced, multi-layered novels… In Gabriela and Isobel, Philby develops two fascinating characters who have to face challenges that women the world over will recognise, but rarely get to read about on the page. *A Double Life* is a wonderful novel' **HOLLY WATT**

'A pacy, gripping read that kept us on the edge of our seats'
INDEPENDENT

'I like a novel where the intrepid investigative journalist and the Foreign Office rising star are both women. And where two separate stories eventually converge around a conspiracy that touches the very top of the establishment and destroys everything'
EVENING STANDARD

'Dark and compelling' ***BELLA***

'As innovative a spy novel as we might expect from the granddaughter of Kim Philby . . . A gripping account of two complex lives'
IRISH TIMES

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A DOUBLE LIFE

CHARLOTTE PHILBY



THE BOROUGH PRESS

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The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
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For Jesse

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Also by Charlotte Philby

Part of the Family

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'The path of least resistance leads to crooked rivers and crooked men'
Henry David Thoreau

Mirror

In my mother's house
is the friendly mirror,
the only glass in which I look
and think I see myself,
think, yes, that's what
I think I'm like,
that's who I am. The only
glass in which I look and smile.

Just as this baby smiles
at the baby who always
smiles at her, the one in
her mother's arms, the mother
who looks like me, who
smiles at herself in her
mother's mirror, the friendly
mirror in her mother's house.

But if I move to one side
we vanish, the woman I thought
was me, the baby making friends
with herself, we move to one side
and the mirror holds no future, no past,
in its liquid frame, only the corner
of an open window, a bee visiting
the ready flowers of summer.

Maura Dooley

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Prologue

The woman's lips were blue, the same shade as the evening sky that shone in through the window, calm and unbroken.

The knot around her neck had been pulled tight. The note, propped against the hallway table, was short.

'I'm sorry, I couldn't do it. I love you both, please forgive me.'

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Chapter 1

Gabriela

It is hardly warm enough to warrant an evening in the garden, but something about the house is pushing her out. After all these years, and all the memories she made here in her teens and early twenties before Tom had so much as set foot inside its four walls, their home is already taking his side. So when he goes out for a smoke, savouring the single roll-up he still allows himself each day now that he is staring down the barrel of forty, she follows him into the starless night.

Pulling on a jacket, she brings with her the slightly too warm bottle of Sauvignon she picked up at the off-licence near Dartmouth Park Hill on her way home, partly to calm her nerves, partly for the excuse to partition off this section of her life, to annex it safely away from the day she has just left behind. The beginning of the end.

'Ten ninety-nine?' Tom takes a swig of his beer, incredulity written in the lines above the bridge of his nose. She follows his gaze to the bottle she is clutching by the neck and for a moment she feels herself on the cusp of laughter that will mutate into sobs if she is not careful. Screams that will reverberate through the house where their children sleep.

How the hell are they talking about the price of a bottle of wine? But he has no reason to suspect this is anything but an ordinary evening, the end of a day just like any other.

'How was work?' he asks as she takes a seat beside him on one of the worn garden chairs. It shifts precariously on cracked paving, the

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same shoddy stones that have been there since her father first bought the place, more than two decades ago. The memory of those days, however complicated they might have seemed at the time, soothes her briefly.

'Work?' she repeats, buying herself time, wondering if Tom notices her bristle as she pictures her desk; the job she fought tooth and nail to get and then to keep.

Before she can answer, he continues, uncharacteristically forthright. 'I'm worried about you, Gabs. This case. Ever since you came back from Moscow . . .'

'Jesus, Tom, it's not supposed to be easy,' she snaps, immediately holding out her hands by way of apology. 'I'm sorry, I'm just tired.'

It is true, she thinks: *I am so tired*. It is not the whole truth but what more can she tell him? She is bound to secrecy, her lips have been sewn shut. As he watches her from across the lopsided plastic table, she registers the sound of a car moving too fast on the street outside. She imagines the needle pushing through the skin at the edges of her mouth. Instantly, she is transported to the bedroom upstairs, just a few weeks after she and her father had moved in. She and her best friend Saoirse in matching crop-tops, kneeling on the floor, her head level with the mattress, her earlobe flat against the CD case, which Saoirse has placed on the bed.

'You've burnt the needle properly, right?'

'Obviously,' Saoirse says as she clamps Gabriela's shoulder with one hand and with the other removes the ice cube she has been holding against her skin. Cold water trickles down Gabriela's neck. As her friend breathes in sharply, Gabriela feels the remaining ice slide to the floor, Saoirse holding her shoulder a little too tight as she pushes the pin through the soft nub of flesh.

More than twenty years later, she touches her earlobe. The memory of her own cries of pain, tinged with defiant euphoria, ricochets around her head as she looks up to the window of that same room, where now stands the goose-shaped lamp that keeps guard on Callum's windowsill. The lamp which, now that he is five years old, her son

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claims to have outgrown, though he never pushes the point. Secretly, she knows he is no more keen to grow up than she is to lose him to the girls and then the women or the men who will inevitably step in to claim him. The hands that would have taken him from her even if she hadn't already made it possible for them to be torn apart.

Sadie is in the kitchen, already dressed in school uniform, fastening the clips on the violin she chose for her most recent birthday, when Gabriela heads downstairs the following morning. Seven years old: how the hell did that happen? Briefly, she wonders what the fall-out will be for Sadie, after all this. Will it send her over the edge? But there is no point trying to second-guess her daughter, whose emotions are always more nuanced, less discernible than her own at the same age. There is an air of pointedness about Sadie's refusal to cause trouble for them in the way that Gabriela is prepared for that she finds unsettling. No, she reprimands herself, her fists tightening – it is not Sadie whose behaviour she needs fear.

'Mum, have you seen my sheet music?'

As her daughter speaks, Gabriela's eye catches the wine glasses from the night before, which stand marooned on the table where she is packing her school bag.

'This what you're looking for?' Tom squeezes past cradling a cup and drops the pristinely kept wad of paper onto her school bag, winking at her as he settles on one of the chairs squeezed up against the kitchen table.

'Made you a tea,' he says and Gabriela fixes her jaw into a smile, moving forward to clear away the cereal bowls that will otherwise languish until she comes home, and then she stops. *I will not be coming home.* She hears the words as a whisper between her temples. There is a brief moment when she is struck by the enormity of it, but then she sees her son walking into the room and instantly everything is as it was. Once again she is Sadie and Callum's mother and she is preparing for a normal day at the office, for a job that Tom watches her forfeit so much of their life together, without ever

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making her explain why. The job in which he has watched her rise through the ranks while he takes bit parts as a freelance architect, picking up the pieces without so much as a suppressed sigh.

'Want me to walk you in?' he asks Sadie, leaning back in his chair, rustling open yesterday's copy of the *Guardian*. Sadie throws him the same look she has been giving him since she was a toddler – something between despair and total adoration. For the past few weeks, Tom has let her make the short journey alone and Gabriela can't tell him why it makes her so uncomfortable, their child being so far out of their reach.

Enjoying the familiarity of the rapport between himself and Sadie, the reversal of the traditional parent/child roles, he shrugs, widening his eyes as if to say, *What? We don't have to leave for five minutes.*

'Leave the girl alone,' Gabriela plays along, batting his feet off the table as she passes, sweeping up the trail of cups and bowls and opening the dishwasher.

'I'll do that,' he calls over from his seat, without moving.

Ignoring him, she stacks the crockery in a neat row.

'Are you out tonight or in?'

'Jesus, Tom . . .'

'I know, I know, I'm messing with you! I hadn't forgotten. It's on the calendar, right there, where it always is. So you'll be back on Thursday?'

'That's right.' She swallows, keeping her eyes trained on the dirty cutlery she is placing in the stand.

'You're going away again?' It is Callum's voice this time, and her heart strains so that it feels like it might tear.

'Oi, what's so bad about hanging out with your old dad? Come on, love, Mum's got to work, you know that.'

It's always Tom's instinct to dive in to protect her from the decisions she has made, and his refusal to let her defend herself grates on her.

'I'll make it up to you,' she says, the lie lingering in her throat. 'I promise.'

* * *

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As she opens the front door, she watches Sadie disappear around the corner of their street. Part of her wants to run after her daughter, to throw her to the ground and to hold them both there – to stop time, her face buried in Sadie's neck, and somehow to go back and unravel the knot. Not back, she scolds herself as she loses sight of her daughter, for the last time on this street. How could she think that?

The walk to Tufnell Park tube station helps clear her head, gently easing her mindset from the domestic world to her other life. The trees lining Dartmouth Park Hill radiate new energy, their shoots a reminder that whatever happens, the world will go on.

Preparing to cross at the traffic lights, she starts to think through everything she has to do, and only now does it strike her that she has failed to buy credit ahead of time for the second SIM card she keeps tucked in the lining of her handbag. She swears under her breath as the green man fades to red, cursing herself for allowing such a pivotal element to fall through the net. But it's pointless berating herself for it now – it is not an option, at this stage, to let things fall apart.

Heading into the newsagent's diagonally opposite the station, she skims the headlines of the newspapers to distract herself from the fear that pummels at her stomach as she makes her way through the aisles, making sure there is no one here she recognises, no one to pull her up on why she is using a burner, probing her with their hilarious quips about her being not a civil servant after all but a spy, or maybe a drug dealer.

It was the kind of joke Tom had made when she was seconded to Russia, her first posting after joining the FCO. And her last.

'What are you, some sort of double agent? Working for the FSB now, Gabs?'

But the jokes had stopped by the time she returned. In the days leading up to her most recent stint in Moscow, Tom had long since ceased laughing. By the time she got back he looked at her as though he didn't know her at all – and he was completely right.

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'Seven months?' His look had been disbelieving at first, as if he had been waiting for her to remind him it was April Fool's Day.

'I know, it seems like a long time.' She felt sick but she couldn't let him understand how wrong this was. The situation had to be presented as non-negotiable – a necessary but surmountable task.

'What about the kids?' His face changed then. 'We could come with you. It could be an adventure. You always said you wanted one of those.'

Her cheeks burn as she remembers how quickly she had snapped her reply.

No.

It must have been impossible for him not to notice the change in her since she came back, but he has worked so hard not to push her on it. He does not comment on the physical shifts, which she can't avoid when she looks at her reflection. Nothing about her body is unscarred, though it is her mind that will truly never be the same.

Leaving the newsagent with her phone topped up, she crosses towards the tube station. The carriage is unusually empty as she settles onto a seat, taking out the Burberry trench coat she bought to match the boots she denied to Tom when he asked if they were new.

Holding her bag tightly on her lap as if holding on for her life, she feels the outline of the car keys press reassuringly against her fingers, through the leather. Distracting herself, she looks up at the map of the Northern Line. For a moment, she pictures herself walking through the arch at King Charles Street, greeting the security guards who know her name and those of her children by now. She imagines familiar faces as she makes her way towards the main entrance, collecting her bag as it emerges from the scanner, nodding to the receptionists before heading through the turnstiles, the sound of metal grating closed behind her.

Except today this is not her route. Now, as the train stops at Embankment, she stands back to let an older lady off the train first, before stepping out onto the platform, walking past the exit

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sign, following the arrows indicating the District Line. There is a chance she will see someone she knows from the FCO but they will not question it; the sight of her heading away from the office in the direction of the Westbound District Line will not cause them any concern.

Taking a seat a few metres along the platform, she listens to the wind whistling through the tunnel. It is both warm and cold, and as the train approaches she stands, registering the air brushing against her face. Breathing deeply, taking a moment to gather herself, she steps forward towards the yellow line, looking to her right, watching the carriages tearing towards the crowd. For a moment, she meets the driver's eye and sees a hint of dread, and then he is gone and the train has stopped and her legs shake as the doors open and she steps inside.

It is fifteen stops until it's her turn to get off. There is too much time to think and so she closes her eyes, concentrating instead on the gentle rhythm until she hears the announcement: *Kew Gardens*. Opening them again, she is met by daylight as the train pulls into the outdoor station.

On the platform, she follows the familiar path towards the exit. The sun presses against her cheeks as she steps out onto the pavement, holding her head down, her hair falling in front of her face, reaching into her bag and pulling out a pair of sunglasses.

Putting the glasses on, she turns slightly and catches a glimpse of herself in the reflection of the boulangerie, and she is struck for a moment by the image of a woman she no longer recognises. Standing straighter, hardening herself against any doubts, she follows the familiar route, down Lichfield Road, past the perfectly manicured privet hedges, the pristine gravel and obligatory plantation blinds, turning right into an unsigned side street. A moment later she reaches into her bag, pulling out the keys and pressing the button to unlock the door. With a flash of the headlights, the Range Rover clicks open and she steps into it, breathing in the smell of fresh leather.

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As she turns the key in the ignition, the radio blares a song she knows and the shock of the unexpected noise makes her cry out. It takes a moment to compose herself, palms pressed against the steering wheel, before she looks over her shoulder and reverses, taking her usual route along the wide open streets of South-West London, towards Richmond. It's a different world here and she feels not so much safe as anonymous. These are not her people, and in this car with its tinted windows and hyper-clean paintwork she is almost certainly unrecognisable.

On Richmond Road, she turns into the Waitrose car park and pulls into a space. There is silence as the engine cuts out, apart from the sound of her breath rising and falling in shallow bursts in her chest. Stepping out onto the pavement, she helps herself to a trolley, working her way through the aisles, selecting the sort of basics you might buy for a picnic. As she turns into the baby and toddler aisle, she gives a cursory glance over her shoulder. Once she is sure she is alone, she continues walking, picking out a selection of organic purees she would never have dreamt of buying for Sadie and Callum.

It takes several minutes to gather all that she needs, making her way to the till as she pulls out the phone and dials. When Polina answers, she speaks more quietly than usual, unable to keep the relief of this contact out of her voice.

'How are you?' Gabriela asks, affecting her brightest intonation, giving a polite wave of recognition to the cashier and an apologetic smile at the rudeness of talking into the phone while the woman begins to scan the items on the belt.

'How are you?' Polina's voice asks on the end of the line and she replies, 'I'm good. I've had a change of plan with work so I'm on my way back now – I'm just at the supermarket picking up some supplies. Is there anything we need?'

Before Polina can answer, Gabriela adds quickly, 'How's Layla?'

'I'll put the phone to her ear,' Polina says.

Reaching into her bag for her purse, Gabriela stops as she hears the child's breath. The lump that has been rising in her throat softens

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into something thick and expansive, so that she can only stand stock-still, drinking in the broken inflections of her daughter's voice.

Gabriela's voice breaks. 'Oh baby . . . My baby, I've missed you. Mummy will be home in a minute, OK?'

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Chapter 2

Gabriela

The sky was full of movement the night she and Tom met, or maybe it had just been so long since she'd last looked up.

The queue outside the Jazz Cafe ran behind a shabby blue velvet rope so that she was pressed against the building on Parkway while Saoirse tucked the laces into the side of her trainers. It was Saoirse who had bought the tickets, turning up at Gabriela's house and making her dad let her in even though she'd told him she wasn't in the mood for visitors. But what could she expect? He was always so bloody weak.

She had just returned from her year abroad, in Paris, as part of her degree, and was back for good this time – or until she could find a way out. The last time she'd been home was an overnight return to London for her mother's funeral, earlier in the year. In Paris, she could almost forget that she was gone, but here in London the memory followed her so that it felt safer to keep still.

'Please, Saoirse, I just don't fancy it. Take someone else, yeah?' she had protested but Saoirse wouldn't back down.

'It's been four months – you have to come out sometime.'

Gabriela had wanted to scream at her, to take her face in her hands and tell her that her mother was dead and that she had hated her and she didn't know how to live without her and that she was terrified.

But instead, she said, 'Lee Scratch Perry? Never heard of him.'

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'He's a complete nutter,' Saoirse grinned. 'If you're lucky he'll be wearing a disco ball on his head . . .'

Inside the club, the room was dark and thick with cigarette smoke and dry ice as they moved through the crowd towards the bar.

'What you drinking?' Saoirse asked.

'I don't know,' Gabriela shrugged, as if what she wanted no longer counted for anything.

As Saoirse leaned in to order, Gabriela turned away and that's when she saw him, across the bar, watching her.

'Here you go . . .' Saoirse handed her a shot of tequila and Gabriela winced, licking the line of salt from her hand, the granules rough against her tongue, feeling the burn of the alcohol in her throat as she tossed back her head, sinking her teeth into the flesh of the lemon, her eyes squeezing together, pushing against the pain.

'Shit!'

'Right, another one!' Saoirse lined up two more shots. This time when Gabriela looked up she felt someone next to her and as she turned she saw him there, an inch or so away. Saoirse raised her eyebrows and grinned as if she were about to say something, but then she turned and started speaking to someone standing next to her, and then she was dancing on the other side of the room.

'Same again?' Gabriela lip-read his words through the smoke machine, his voice straining above the clash of the keyboards.

She shook her head, shuddering, and a moment later he passed her a beer.

Pausing briefly, she took the drink and clinked the base of her bottle against his.

'Thanks.'

He nodded and smiled, as if he was considering something.

'What?' She couldn't help but smile back at him.

He shook his head, still holding her eyes. 'Nothing.'

* * *

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The walk from the Jazz Cafe to his flat, in the basement of one of the tall smog-stained terraces that clung to one another on a short stretch of Prince of Wales Road, was surprisingly warm even at this time of night. The fact of the onset of summer, when she thought of it, knocked her sideways. If there had been a spring to speak of that year, it had completely passed her by.

In her mind, winter still enveloped London, her brain hovering over the funeral back in March, the scene flickering like a paused film: a small group of friends and family wrapped in black coats and colourful scarves lining the edges of the plot in Paddington Old Cemetery, their heads bowed against the wind; her dad's face ashen amongst them.

The immediacy of the memory stung at the corners of her eyes, but then she felt Tom's hand brush against hers as he worked the key in the front door, and the image fell away.

'It's a bit damp, hence the smell,' he said without a hint of apology. Away from the noise of the bar, she noticed the trace of a Scottish accent.

He moved ahead of her, making no attempt to kick away the coats that lay strewn on the floor, as if he'd left in a rush, cups scattered across every surface of the studio flat. Beneath the clutter, there was a certain order to the space: the guitar propped up on a stand in the corner, music stacked beside a small Yamaha keyboard. The table was rounded at the corners with A-line legs.

It occurred to her then that she had no idea what he did, this man whose flat she was suddenly inside. She had no idea how she had even come to be here.

'I'm a student,' he said as if reading her mind, and she squinted in disbelief.

'Really? How old are you?'

'Forty-two,' he shrugged and noting the faint look of alarm on her face, tilted his head. 'Oh, come on. Really? I'm twenty-four. But I'm studying architecture which takes about ninety-seven years, so . . . How about you?'

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She yawned. 'Younger than that . . . just.'

It can't have been much later than midnight but any energy she'd felt in the bar had faded so that all she wanted was to lie down and close her eyes.

'Would you like a drink?'

She shook her head.

He moved towards her slowly, so sure of himself and yet unimposing.

'You look knackered.'

She nodded.

'You can have my bed.' He pointed towards a single mattress in the corner.

'Come with me,' she held out her hand to him. They passed out sometime later, his arm pulling her towards the warmth of his body, pinning her there in a way that was both suffocating and yet so comforting that she had to wait until he was asleep before pushing him away.

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Chapter 3

Isobel

I look up through squinted eyelids, German techno beats sliding around my head. From here, above the outline of people's limbs, I can see it is dark outside. Around me, the party is still heaving so that I can only just make out a vague impression of Jess a few feet away on the sofa talking to a man, her lips moving in slow motion.

As if pushing through a brick wall, I manage to draw the strength to sit up, willing my eyelids to follow suit. My cheeks, the inside of which I've chewed raw, feel like they are sinking away from my face towards the floor.

'Jess?' My voice is unexpectedly loud, though no one else seems to hear it. I try again but the effect is a slosh of vowels.

Across the room, the man Jess is talking to inches forward and they both laugh, she stretching her head back as he nuzzles her neck.

Jess?

This time my voice sticks in my throat and I give up, succumbing to the weight of the exhaustion that has taken hold from the inside out, the chemicals prowling through my bloodstream, squeezing the life out of me. Letting my eyes drift shut, I feel the leather sofa swallow me whole. As my brain shuts down, I picture myself standing, taking my friend's hand and running down the stairs, out of the front door; the two of us tearing down the street at Chalk Farm, screaming at the top of our lungs.

* * *

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By the time I open my eyes again the music has descended into a low ambient throb; bodies, half-dressed, are scattered across a wooden floor; a man in jeans and a cowboy hat leans precariously against a yucca plant. The sky through the window has started to lighten, signalling it is time to leave. Slowly, as if bound in clingfilm, I turn to where Jess had been but now there is no one there.

Letting my eyes open and shut several times, I feel for my bag and fumble for my phone before realising the battery is dead.

Shit.

Taking a minute to unpeel my legs from my seat, I step across a sea of semi-comatose bodies into the hall.

In each room, different beats fall over one another, the same stale smell of smoke and spilt beer following me through the house. Finally I find Jess's boss slumped at a table, a black Amex card in his hand.

'Hugh,' I say, but he ignores me, a smirk impressed across his features.

'Oi!' I say, louder this time, and his head twists to look up at me.

'Is-o-bel,' he rolls each syllable of my name on his tongue, and I feel my stomach turn. 'The roving reporter returns . . . Listen, when are you going to give up that local paper shite and come work for me? Tell you what: wash your hair every so often and you'd have a face for TV.'

'Have you seen Jess?' I ask, focusing on the smudge of dye that has leaked from his newly chestnut locks into the peak of his receding hairline. Christ, if I'm still rolling around in shit-holes like this when I'm his age I only hope someone slits my throat. With that fleeting image, I remember the spate of stabbings in Somers Town I'm planning to dig into next week, focusing on the circulation of weapons across our part of the city. If I can pitch it around the ongoing tensions in Camden, I'm pretty sure I can spin a legitimate local interest angle.

'Yeah but what's the *angle*?' I picture my news editor, Ben, pre-empting the words of the editor, tucked away in his cheap glass box at the back of the room. 'We're a local paper, Isobel, not the New York fucking Times.'

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Hugh's face contorts, as if he is trying to place Jess's name - the name of the woman who has been his assistant for the past six years . . . *Assistant Producer, actually,* I can hear her voice correcting me in my head.

'Sit down,' he slurs. 'Want a line?'

He returns his attention to the table, haphazardly scraping and crushing white powder with his card.

'Have you seen her?' I repeat and he looks up again.

'Who?'

'I'm all right for shit K, thanks, Hugh,' I say, not bothering to answer, and he puckers his face into a grin, attempting a South American drawl.

'Issy, darling, this is pure cocaine straight from the streets of Ecuador!'

Is it fuck. 'Can I use your phone?' I ask and he slides it across to me before returning his attention to the pile of powder.

Jess's number goes straight to voicemail.

'Where are you?' I whisper into the handset before tossing the receiver back at him.

'Go on then,' I say, snatching the rolled £20 from his fingers, hoovering up both lines, wincing as the chemical hits the back of my throat.

Grateful for the instant burst of energy, I stand.

'Wait, where are you going?' I hear his voice fade into the distance as I move across the kitchen, through the doorway and towards the stairs, without looking back.

Walking out onto the street, my whole body seems to move as if by remote control. Sunglasses on, though autumn has long set in, I drift along Chalk Farm Road. Ordinarily I'd have walked through Camden Lock, past the tube station and onto the high street where my shoebox of a flat awaits me above the newsagent's. But this morning, the coke rushing through my veins, I need a horizon – the prospect of main roads, of roaring traffic, of crackheads and knowing shopkeepers making my chest tighten.

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Moving towards the estate, I weave instinctively through a warren of concrete alleys, the streets I have walked so many times that I no longer see the dog-ends or the piss stains on the walls.

I have no idea how long it takes, moving on autopilot down Prince of Wales Road towards South End Green, where the air has a certain clarity. Flinching, I step back as an ambulance swings past the curry house; the steel shutters clamped to the floor, the body of a man slumped in front of it.

My feet keep moving and soon I pass the old cinema which has been transformed into a chain food hall, towards Hampstead Heath overground, past the Magdala pub, and up past the terrace of big stucco-fronted houses. A woman leans out of the front door of the most beautiful building on this stretch, with tiled steps and wisteria hanging precariously over the top. She is stooped over as if shielding herself from the outside world, collecting the morning papers from the step, her pale blonde hair falling in front of her face. When she looks up and sees me, there is a flash of fear and for a moment I see myself through her eyes.

The image haunts me as I move, more quickly now, drawn onto the Heathland I know so well. Instinctively, I drift away from the path. It must be sometime around 6.15 a.m. and yet I cannot face the prospect of bed, knowing there will be hours of tossing from one side to another before sleep finally comes. For now, the Heath is calm and familiar: safe until the hordes descend with their flat whites and Bugaboos.

Steering across the hill towards the pond, I reach down and slip off my trainers, enjoying the sensation of the dewy grass against my toes; above me, the sky lingers somewhere between night and day. When I reach the bench overlooking Kite Hill, I sit, pulling my knees up under my chin, aware of the smell of mould and earth seeping up through the slats of wood. As a wave of cognisance strikes, I push it away, trying not to think about the press conference with the local council I am due to cover on Monday. It's the kind of painfully provincial story that makes me remember that I was approached by

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one of the nationals, just before everything fell apart. Would I even have taken it? Either way, there is no point thinking about that now.

My mouth is dry, my eyelids heavy and at the same time bolted open as if held in place with a match. Fumbling in my bag, I pull out a tiny block of hash and a lighter, enjoying the burning sensation at the tip of my thumb as I crumble it into a Rizla. The first drag burns the back of my throat.

Some time later, I feel a welcome wave of exhaustion float in from behind. The new day is sneaking in and soon London will be ablaze with sirens and the clinking of coffee cups. The park bench has started to embed itself into my bare thighs; suddenly drawn by the prospect of a pillow and fresh sheets, I stand, feeling in the pocket of my denim shorts for my front-door key and my phone, my trainers protruding from the top of my bag as I start the final walk home.

As the path splits, I veer slowly towards a forested patch of parkland. Pulling out a bottle of water from beneath my shoes, I take a sip. The pressure against my bladder is almost instant.

Above, I hear the distant calling of a crow as I lower myself beneath a thick canopy of trees. Pulling my hoodie closer around me, I shiver, the air cold and dank as I weave beneath the branches; by now my head is throbbing, the silence no longer comforting.

Finding a spot, I squat down in the shade of the tree, trying not to pee on my bare feet. Just as the relief comes, a warm trickle forming a pool beneath me, I feel my skin scratch against something sharp, a twig or a piece of glass.

The unexpected sharpness of it makes me jump and I glance down, a sliver of dark red blood trickling down my ankle.

'Shit,' I mutter, unsteady as I balance my weight on just one foot, lowering myself into a dark patch of moss and rummaging through my bag for anything that vaguely resembles a tissue. As my fingers comb the contents of my bag, I forget about the tissue, distracted by a more pressing realisation. Patting with increasing desperation amidst the crumbs and the loose tobacco lining the bottom of my

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bag, waiting for the tell-tale brushing of my skin against the small plastic baggy containing the hash. I can't have lost it, but I have. My fingernails dig into the palms of my hand at the memory of how much I had paid Tariq for that quarter.

Briefly I consider turning back, retracing my steps to the bench, but the thought fills me with fear, imagining the morning runners and the early-bird mothers with their toddlers who by now could well be roaming the pathway.

What I need is to get home, back to a safe space in which to let my mind melt into perfect nothingness. Slowly I stretch my legs back to standing position, ready to retreat to the safety of my flat with its four solid walls to fester behind. One moment I am standing, feeling my shorts brushing against my thighs; the next I hear a scream, which at first it might be another crow circling in the distance. And then I hear voices, unmistakably human, like a wall clattering down around me, fixing me to the ground.

For a moment in my disorientated state, I wonder if I have imagined it. It wouldn't be the first time, after all. But then they are there again, close enough that I can almost smell their breath. Taking a slow step forward, a twig quietly crunching beneath my foot, I hear a man's voice again, this time followed by a name: *Eva*. Amidst a distorted mush of syllables, a language I cannot understand, I hear the girl speak; I don't know the words but the meaning is clear. Stop, she is saying. *Please stop!*

The man's presence hangs in the air like an omen. Willing my body not to move, I feel my weight shift involuntarily below me as the air struggles for space in my chest. Any second now one of the twigs beneath my feet will crack under the pressure.

I am like an animal under attack, each of my senses amplified so that every smell, every sound, every taste rushes through my body all at once. And then I hear it, the snap as a tiny shard of wood gives way beneath the heel of my bare foot.

I feel the girl's face before I see it, turning slowly towards me. Time seems to slow down as the image is scored onto my memory:

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the dark unblinking brown eyes, pupils frozen in horror. For just a second our gazes lock, a bolt running down my spine, and then, without another thought, I feel my body rise.

No longer aware of the blood gathered in clots at my toes, I lunge towards my escape route, a tunnel of light spilling through the clearing; I manage two giant steps, my feet guiding me through a rotten knot of roots and bark. And then it comes, the scream, chasing me down the hill. I know it instantly: the sound of a life being torn out by the roots.

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