Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The One Plus One

Written by Jojo Moyes

Published by Michael Joseph

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

The One Plus One

The One Plus One

JOJO MOYES

MICHAEL JOSEPH
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

MICHAEL JOSEPH

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2YR
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park, 181 Jan Smuts Avenue,
Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published 2014
001

Copyright © Jojo's Mojo Ltd, 2014

The moral right of the author has been asserted

All rights reserved
Without limiting the rights under copyright
reserved above, no part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior
written permission of both the copyright owner and
the above publisher of this book

Set in 13.5/16 pt Garamond
Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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

HARDBACK ISBN: 978–1–405–91557–1
TRADE PAPERBACK (ILLUSTRATED COVER) ISBN: 978–0–718–17700–3
TRADE PAPERBACK (PHOTOGRAPHIC COVER) ISBN: 978–0–718–17905–2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Books is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council™ certified paper.

To Charles, as ever.

1.

JESS

The irony did not escape Jessica Thomas that she lost the best job she'd ever had because of a diamond. Not because she stole it but because she didn't.

Jess and Nathalie had cleaned Mr and Mrs Ritter's holiday home for almost three years, since the Beachfront holiday park was part paradise, part building site. Back when the developers promised local families access to the swimming pool, and assured everyone that a large upmarket development would bring benefits to their little seaside town, instead of sucking out what remained of its life. The Ritters were standard occupants. They came down from London most weekends with their children. Mrs Ritter generally stayed on throughout the holidays while her husband stayed in the city. They spent most of their time on the manicured stretch of the beach, and visited the town only to fill up their people-carrier with diesel or to top up their groceries at the retail park. Jess and Nathalie cleaned their spacious, Farrow-&-Ball-painted four-bedroom home twice a week when they were there, and once when they weren't.

It was April and, judging by the empty juice cartons

and wet towels, the Ritters were in residence. Nathalie was cleaning the en-suite bathroom and Jess was changing the beds, humming along to the radio that they carried between jobs. As she whipped off the duvet cover she heard a sound like the crack of a high-velocity air rifle. Living where she did, she knew this sound well. She could have bet money that there were no air rifles at Beachfront.

Her gaze was caught by something glittering on the floor. She stooped by the window and picked up a diamond earring between her thumb and forefinger. She held it up to the light, then walked next door to where Nathalie was on her knees, scrubbing the bath, lines of dark sweat outlining her bra strap. It had been a long morning.

'Look.'

Nathalie climbed to her feet, squinting. 'What is it?'

'Diamond. It fell out of the bed linen.'

'That can't be real. Look at the size of it.'

They gazed at the earring, as Jess rotated it between finger and thumb. 'Lisa Ritter isn't going to have fake diamonds. Not with their money. Can't diamonds cut glass?' She ran it speculatively down the edge of the window.

'Great idea, Jess. You just keep going until her window falls out.' Nathalie stood up, rinsed her cloth under the tap. 'More importantly, where's the other one?'

They shook out the bed linen, peered under the bed, sifted through the deep pile of the beige carpet on their hands and knees, like police at a murder scene. Finally

Jess checked her watch. They looked at each other and sighed.

One earring. Your basic nightmare.

Things they had found while cleaning people's houses:

- False teeth
- An escaped guinea pig
- A long-lost wedding ring (they were given a box of chocolates for this)
- A signed photograph of Cliff Richard (no chocolates; owner denied all knowledge)
- Money. Not just small change, but a whole turquoise wallet stuffed full of fifties. It had fallen behind a chest of drawers. When Jess handed it over to the client – a Mrs Linder, who had rented number four Beachfront for three months over the summer – she had looked at it in mild surprise. 'I was wondering where that had gone,' she said, and pocketed it without a backward look, as you would a mislaid hair slide or a remote control.

Guinea pigs aside, it was not as great as you might think, turning up valuables. One earring or a pile of loose notes, and clients would give you that vague, sideways look, the flicker in their eyes that meant they were wondering if you had pocketed the rest. Mr Ritter would definitely assume they had taken the other earring. He was the kind of man who made them feel guilty just for being in his house. That was on the days he deigned to acknowledge they were there.

'So what do we do?'

Nathalie was bundling up the duvet cover, ready for the laundry. 'Leave it on the side. We'll just write a note saying we couldn't find the other.' They usually left a note or two out during their rounds, saying what they'd done. Or a polite reminder that they were owed money. 'It's the truth.'

'Should we say we shook out all the bedding?'

'Whatever. I just don't want her thinking we took it.'

Jess finished writing, and placed the earring carefully on the piece of paper. 'Mrs Ritter might already have the other one. She might be glad we found it.'

Nathalie made the face that said Jess would look on the bright side of a nuclear apocalypse. 'Personally, I think I would have known if there was a diamond the size of an eyeball in my bed.' She dumped the dirty laundry outside the bedroom door. 'Right. You vacuum the hall, and I'll change the kids' beds. If we get a wiggle on, we can be at the Gordons' by half eleven.'

Nathalie Benson and Jessica Thomas had cleaned together every weekday for four years, the somewhat uninspired moniker Benson & Thomas Cleaning Services on the side of their little white van. Nathalie had stencilled 'A Bit Dirty? Can we Help?' underneath for two whole months until Jess pointed out that half the calls they were getting were nothing to do with cleaning.

Nearly all their jobs were in Beachfront now. Hardly anybody in the town had the money – or the inclination – to hire a cleaner, except for the GPs, the solicitor and

the odd client like Mrs Humphrey, whose arthritis stopped her doing it herself. She was one of those old women who believed cleanliness was next to godliness, her life's worth previously measured in starched curtains and a freshly scrubbed front step. Sometimes they suspected she'd saved up a whole forty-eight hours of conversation just for the hour that they were there. Wednesdays they did Mrs Humphrey after their Beachfront jobs, the Ritters and the Gordons, and, if they were lucky, whichever of the holiday cottages the other cleaning firms had failed to turn up for.

Jess was lugging the vacuum cleaner along the hall when the front door opened. Mrs Ritter called up the stairs, 'Is that you, girls?'

She was the kind of woman to whom all women, even those collecting their pensions, were 'girls'. 'I had the best girls' night out on Saturday,' she would say, her eyes rolling with mischief. Or, 'So off I went, to the little girls' room . . .' but they liked her. She was always cheerful, and wore her money lightly. And she never treated them like cleaners.

Nathalie and Jess exchanged looks. It had been a long morning, they'd done two ovens already (what kind of people roasted pork on holiday?), and Mrs Humphrey's tea tended to be the colour and consistency of stair varnish.

Ten minutes later they were sitting round the kitchen table, while Lisa Ritter pushed a plate of biscuits towards them. 'Go on, have one. If you eat them, I can't be tempted.' She squeezed a non-existent roll of

fat over her waistband. Nathalie and Jess could never agree if she'd had work. She was the kind of woman who floated somewhere in the carefully maintained hinterlands between forty and sixty-something. Her tinted chestnut hair was set in soft waves, she played tennis three times a week, did Pilates with a private instructor, and Nathalie knew someone at the local salon, who said that she was waxed to within an inch of her life every four weeks.

'How's your Martin?'

'Still alive. To the best of my knowledge,' Natalie said.

'Oh, yes.' She nodded, remembering. 'You did tell me. Finding himself, was it?'

'That's the one.'

'You'd have thought he might have found himself by now. There was enough of him.' Mrs Ritter paused, and gave Jess a conspiratorial smile. 'Your little girl still got her head stuck in a maths book?'

'Always.'

'Oh, they're good children, yours. Some of these mothers round here, I swear they don't know what their lot are doing from dawn till dusk. That Jason Fisher and his friends were throwing eggs at Dennis Grover's windows the other day. Eggs!' It was hard to tell from her voice whether she was more shocked at the act of aggression or the waste of good food.

She was in the middle of a story about her manicurist and a small, incontinent dog, breaking off repeatedly as she was overcome with laughter, when Nathalie held up her phone. 'Mrs Humphrey's tried to call,' she said,

pushing back her chair. 'We'd better get off.' She slid off the stool and made her way out to the hallway to fetch the cleaning crate.

'Well, the place looks lovely. Thank you both so much.' Mrs Ritter reached up a hand and patted her hair into place, briefly lost in thought. 'Oh, before you go, Jess, you wouldn't give me a hand with something, would you?'

Most of the clients knew Jess was good at practical things. There was barely a day where somebody didn't want help with some grouting, or picture-hanging, jobs they swore would only take five minutes. Jess didn't mind. 'If it's a big job though I may need to come back,' she said. *And charge*, she added silently.

'Oh, no,' Lisa Ritter said, walking towards the back door. 'I just need someone to help me with my suitcase. I cricked my back on the plane, and I need someone to get it up the steps for me.'

'Plane?'

'I went to see my sister in Mallorca. Well, now the children are at uni, I've got all this time to myself, haven't I? I thought it would be nice to have a few days' mini-break. I left Simon to it, bless him.'

'So when did you get back?'

She looked at Jess blankly. 'You saw me! Just now!'

It took a couple of seconds to hit. And it was a good job that she was already headed outside into the sun because Jess felt the colour actually drain from her face.

*

That was the problem with cleaning. It was a good job on the one hand – if you didn't mind other people's stains and pulling lumps of hair out of other people's plug-holes (she didn't, funnily enough). Jess didn't even mind that most of those who rented holiday homes seemed to feel obliged to live like pigs for a week, leaving mess they wouldn't sit in at home because they knew there was a cleaner coming. You could work for yourself, organise your own hours, pick and choose your clients when times were good.

The downside, weirdly, was not the crappy clients (and there always was at least one crappy client), or the dirt, or that scrubbing someone else's toilet somehow left you feeling like you were one step lower on a ladder than you had planned to be. It wasn't even the constant threat from other companies, the leaflets through your clients' doors and the promises of cheaper by the hour. It was that you ended up finding out much more about other people's lives than you really wanted to.

Jess could have told you about Mrs Eldridge's secret shopping habit: the designer-shoe receipts she stuffed into the bathroom bin, and the bags of unworn clothes in her wardrobe, the tags still firmly attached. She could tell you that Lena Thompson had been trying for a baby for four years, and used two pregnancy tests a month (rumour had it she left her tights on). She could tell you that Mr Mitchell in the big house behind the church earned a six-figure salary (he left his payslips on the hall table; Nathalie swore he did it deliberately) and

that his daughter smoked secretly in the bathroom and lined up all her cigarette butts in neat rows on the window ledge.

If she was that way inclined, she could have pointed out the women who went out looking immaculate, hair faultless, nails polished, lightly spritzed with expensive scent, who thought nothing of leaving soiled knickers in full view on the floor, or the teenage boys whose stiff towels she didn't want to pick up without a pair of tongs. There were the couples who spent every night in separate beds, the wives insisting brightly when they asked her to change the spare-room sheets that they'd had an 'awful lot of guests lately', the lavatories that required a gas mask and a HAZCHEM warning.

And then every now and then you got a nice client like Lisa Ritter and popped over to vacuum her floors and came home with a whole load of knowledge you could really have done without.

Jess watched Nathalie walking outside, the cleaning crate under her arm, and saw with a terrible clarity what was going to happen next. She saw the bed upstairs, immaculately made with clean linen, the polished surfaces of Mrs Ritter's dressing-table, the cushions neatly plumped on the little sofa in the bay window. She saw that diamond, sitting where she had left it with her scrawled note on the dresser, a tiny glittering hand grenade.

'Actually,' Jess said, hauling the suitcase past Nathalie,

'can I have a quick word, Nat?' She tried to catch her eye, but Nathalie was busy gazing at Mrs Ritter's shoes.

'I love your pumps,' she said breathlessly.

'Do you, Nathalie? I got them while I was away. They were an absolute bargain.'

'Mrs Ritter's been to Spain, Nat,' Jess said pointedly, stopping beside her. 'A *mini-break*.'

Nathalie glanced up and smiled. Nothing.

'She got back *this morning*.'

'Lovely,' said Nathalie, beaming.

Jess felt panic rising inside her, like an unstoppable tide. 'I tell you what, I'll carry this upstairs for you,' she said, pushing past Mrs Ritter.

'You don't have to do that!'

'It's no bother.' She wondered if Lisa Ritter had registered the strange set to her face. She could make it upstairs, she thought. She could run into the bedroom, fetch the earring, stuff it into her pocket and shove Nathalie into the car before she could say anything, and Mrs Ritter would never know. They would decide what to do about it later.

But even as she hurled herself through the back door some part of her already knew what would happen.

'So did Jess tell you?'

She was halfway up the stairs. Nathalie's voice carried, as clear as a bell, through the open window.

'We found one of your earrings. We thought you might have the other one put by.'

'Earrings?' said Mrs Ritter.

'Diamond. I think it's a platinum setting. Fell out of the bed linen. You're lucky we didn't vacuum it up.'

There was a short silence.

Jess closed her eyes, stood very still on the stairs and waited as the inevitable words floated up to her.

'How was I supposed to know Mrs Ritter doesn't have pierced ears?'

They sat in the cleaning van, slumped in their seats. Nathalie was smoking. She had given up six weeks ago. For the fourth time.

'I don't look at people's ears. Do you look at people's ears?'

'I think you must have been mistaken,' Lisa Ritter had said, her voice quivering slightly with the effort, as she held it in her hand. 'It's probably my daughter's, from when she came home last time. She's got a pair just like it.'

'Of course,' Jess said. 'It probably got kicked in here. Or carried in on someone's shoe. We knew it would be something like that.' And she knew right then, when Mrs Ritter turned away from her, that that would be it. Nobody thanked you for bringing bad news to their door.

Nobody wanted a cleaner knowing their bad business.

'Eighty pounds a week, guaranteed. And holiday pay.' Nathalie let out a sudden scream. 'Bloody hell. I actually want to find the tart who owns that bloody earring and thump her for losing us our best job.'

'Maybe she didn't know he was married.'

'Oh, she knew.' Before she'd met Dean, Nathalie had spent two years with a man who turned out to have not

one but two families on the other side of Southampton. 'No single man keeps colour-coordinated scatter cushions on his bed.'

'Neil Brewster does,' Jess said.

'Neil Brewster's music collection is sixty-seven per cent Judy Garland, thirty-three per cent Pet Shop Boys.'

At the end of the road a padded toddler toppled gently onto the ground like a felled tree and, after a brief silence, let out a thin wail. Its mother, her two armloads of shopping bags perfectly balanced, stood and stared in mute dismay.

'Look, you heard what she said the other week – she'd get rid of her hairdresser before she'd get rid of us.'

'Before she got rid of "the cleaners". That's different. She won't care whether it's us or Speedicleanz or Maids With Mops.' Nathalie shook her head. 'Nope. To her, from now on, we'll always be the cleaners who know the truth about her husband. It matters to women like her. They're all about appearances, aren't they?'

The mother put down her bags and stooped to pick up the toddler. A few houses away, Terry Blackstone emerged from under the bonnet of his Ford Focus, a car that had not run in eighteen months, and peered out to see what was making all the noise.

Jess put her bare feet up on the dashboard and let her face fall into her hands. 'Bugger it. How are we going to make up the money, Nat? That was our best job.'

'The house was immaculate. It was basically a twice a week polishing job.' Nathalie stared out of the window.

'And she always paid on time.'

'And she used to give us stuff.'

Jess kept seeing that diamond earring. Why hadn't they just ignored it? It would have been better if one of them had stolen it. 'Okay, so she's going to cancel us. Let's change the subject, Nat. I can't afford to cry before my pub shift.'

'So, did Marty ring this week?'

'I didn't mean change the subject to *that.*'

'Well, did he?'

Jess sighed. 'Yup.'

'Did he say why he didn't ring the week before?' Nathalie shoved Jess's feet off the dashboard.

'Nope.' Jess could feel her staring. 'And no, he didn't send any money.'

'Oh, come *on.* You've got to get the Child Support Agency onto him. You can't carry on like this. He should send money for his own kids.'

It was an old argument. 'He's . . . he's still not right,' Jess said. 'I can't put more pressure on him. He hasn't got a job yet.'

'Well, you're going to need that money now. Until we get another job like Lisa Ritter's. How's Nicky?'

'Oh, I went round to Jason Fisher's house to talk to his mum.'

'You're joking. She scares the pants off me. Did she say she'd get him to leave Nicky alone?'

'Something like that.'

Nathalie kept her eyes on Jess and dropped her chin two inches.

'She told me if I set foot on her doorstep once more she'd batter me halfway to next Wednesday. Me and my . . . what was it? . . . me and my "freakazoid kids".' Jess pulled down the passenger mirror and checked her hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. 'Oh, and then she told me her Jason wouldn't hurt a fly.'

'Typical.'

'It's fine. I had Norman with me. And, bless him, he took an enormous dump next to their Toyota and somehow I forgot I had a plastic bag in my pocket.'

Jess put her feet back up.

Nathalie pushed them down again and mopped the dashboard with a wet wipe. 'Seriously, though, Jess. How long has Marty been gone? Two years? You've got to get back on the horse. You're young. You can't wait around for him to sort himself out,' she said, with a grimace.

'Get back on the horse. Nice.'

'Liam Stubbs fancies you. You could totally ride that.'

'Any certified pair of X chromosomes could ride Liam Stubbs.' Jess closed the window. 'I'm better off reading a book. Besides, I think the kids have had enough upheaval in their lives without playing Meet Your New Uncle. Right.' She looked up, wrinkled her nose at the sky. 'I've got to get the tea on and then I've got to get ready for the pub. I'll do a quick ring-round before I go, see if any of the clients want any extras doing. And, you never know, she might not cancel us.'

Nathalie lowered her window, and blew out a long trail of smoke. 'Sure, Dorothy. And our next job is going to be cleaning the Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.'

Number fourteen Seacove Avenue was filled with the sound of distant explosions. Tanzie had calculated recently that, since he'd turned sixteen, Nicky had spent 88 per cent of his spare time in his bedroom. Jess could hardly blame him.

She dropped her cleaning crate in the hall, hung up her jacket, made her way upstairs, feeling the familiar faint dismay at the threadbare state of the carpet, and pushed at his door. He was wearing a set of headphones and shooting somebody; the smell of weed was strong enough to make her reel.

'Nicky,' she said, and someone exploded in a hail of bullets. 'Nicky.' She walked over to him and pulled his headphones off, so that he turned, his expression briefly bemused, like someone hauled from sleep. 'Hard at work, then?'

'Revision break.'

She picked up an ashtray and held it towards him. 'I thought I told you.'

'It's from last night. Couldn't sleep.'

'Not in the house, Nicky.' There was no point telling him not at all. They all did it around here. She told herself she was lucky he had only started at fifteen.

'Is Tanzie back yet?' She stooped to pick up stray socks and mugs from the floor.

'No. Oh. The school rang after lunch.'

'What?'

He typed something into the computer then turned to face her. 'I don't know. Something about school.'

It was then that she saw it. She lifted a lock of that dyed black hair, and there it was: a fresh mark on his cheekbone. He ducked away. 'Are you okay?'

He shrugged, looked away from her.

'Did they come after you again?'

'I'm fine.'

'Why didn't you call me?'

'No credit.' He leant back and fired a virtual grenade. The screen exploded into a ball of flame. 'The number's on the table. If it's about me, I was there on Friday. They must have just not seen me.' He replaced his earphones and went back to the screen.

Nicky had come to live with Jess full time eight years previously. He was Marty's son by Della, a woman he'd gone out with briefly in his teens. He had arrived silent and wary, his limbs thin and elongated, his appetite raging. His mother had fallen in with a new crowd, finally disappearing to somewhere in the Midlands with a man called Big Al, who wouldn't look anyone in the eye and clutched an ever-present can of Tennents Extra like a hand grenade in his oversized fist. Nicky had been found sleeping in the locker rooms at school, and when the social workers called again, Jess had said he could come to them. 'Just what you need,' Nathalie had said. 'Another mouth to feed.'

'He's my stepson.'

'You've met him twice in four years. And you're not even twenty.'

'Well, that's how families are, these days. It's not all two point four.'

Afterwards, she sometimes wondered whether that had been the final straw; the thing that had caused Marty to abdicate responsibility for his family altogether. But Nicky was a good kid, under all the raven hair and eyeliner. He was sweet to Tanzie, and on his good days he talked and laughed and allowed Jess the occasional awkward hug, and she was glad of him, even if it sometimes felt as if she had basically acquired one more person to feel anxious about.

She stepped out into the garden with the phone and took a deep breath, her stomach a knot of anxiety. 'Um . . . hello? It's Jessica Thomas here. I had a message to call.'

A pause.

'If it's about Nicky, I did check his study-periods rota. He said he was allowed to do revision at home and I thought that this was how they –'

'Mrs Thomas, I was calling you about Tanzie.'

A clench of panic. She glanced down at the number, registering. 'Tanzie? Is . . . is everything all right?'

'Sorry. I should have said. It's Mr Tsvangarai here, Tanzie's maths teacher.'

'Oh.' She pictured him: a tall man in a grey suit. Face like a funeral director's.

'I wanted to talk to you because a few weeks ago I had

a very interesting discussion with a former colleague of mine who works for St Anne's.'

'St Anne's?' Jess frowned. 'The private school?'

'Yes. They have a scholarship programme for children who are exceptionally gifted in maths. And, as you know, we had already earmarked Tanzie as Gifted and Talented.'

'Because she's good at maths.'

'Better than good. Well, we gave her the paper to sit last week. I don't know if she mentioned it? I sent a letter home but I wasn't sure you saw it.'

Jess squinted at the sky. Seagulls wheeled and swooped against the grey. A few gardens down Terry Blackstone had started singing along to a radio. He had been known to do the full Rod Stewart if he thought nobody was looking.

'We got the results back this morning. And she has done well. Extremely well. Mrs Thomas, if you're agreeable they would like to interview her for a subsidized place.'

She found herself parroting him. 'A subsidized place?'

'For certain children of exceptional ability St Anne's will forgo a significant proportion of the school fees. It means that Tanzie would get a top-class education. She has an extraordinary numerical ability, Mrs Thomas. I do think this could be a great opportunity for her.'

'St Anne's? But . . . she'd need to get a bus across town. She'd need all the uniform and kit. She – she wouldn't know anyone.'

'She'd make friends. But these are just details, Mrs Thomas. Let's wait and see what the school comes up with. Tanzie is an extraordinarily talented girl.' He paused. When she didn't say anything, he lowered his voice: 'I have been teaching maths for almost twenty-two years, Mrs Thomas. And I have never met a child who grasped mathematical concepts like she does. I believe she is actually exceeding the point where I have anything to teach her. Algorithms, probability, prime numbers –'

'Okay. This is where you lose me, Mr Tsvangarai. I'll just go with gifted and talented.'

He chuckled. 'I'll be in touch.'

She put down the phone and sat heavily on the white plastic garden chair that had been there when they'd moved in and had now grown a fine sheen of emerald moss. She stared at nothing, in through the window at the curtains that Marty always thought were too bright, at the red plastic tricycle that she had never got round to getting rid of, at next door's cigarette butts sprinkled like confetti on her path, at the rotten boards in the fence that the dog insisted on sticking his head through. Despite what Nathalie referred to as her frankly misguided optimism, Jess found her eyes had filled unexpectedly with tears.

There were lots of awful things about the father of your children leaving: the money issues, the suppressed anger on behalf of your children, the way most of your coupled-up friends now treated you as if you were some kind of potential husband-stealer. But worse

than that, worse than the endless, relentless, bloody exhausting financial and energy-sapping struggle, was that being a parent on your own when you were totally out of your depth was actually the loneliest place on earth.

2.

TANZIE

Twenty-six cars sat in the car park at St Anne's. Two rows of thirteen big shiny four-wheel-drives faced each other on each side of a gravel path, sliding in and out of the spaces at an average angle of 41 degrees, before the next in line moved in.

Tanzie watched them as she and Mum crossed the road from the bus stop, the drivers talking illegally into phones or mouthing at bug-eyed blond babies in the rear seats. Mum lifted her chin and fiddled with her keys in her free hand, as if they were actually her car keys and she and Tanzie just happened to have parked somewhere nearby. She kept glancing behind her. Tanzie guessed she was worried she was going to bump into one of her cleaning clients and they were going to ask what she was doing there.

She had never been inside St Anne's, although she'd been past it on the bus at least ten times because the NHS dentist was on this road. From the outside, there was just an endless hedge, trimmed to exactly 90 degrees (she wondered if the gardener used a protractor) and those big trees where the branches hung low and friendly, sweeping out across the playing fields as if they were there to shelter the children below.

The children at St Anne's did not swing bags at each other's heads, or bundle up in huddles by the corner of the playground, backing someone against the wall to tax their lunch money. There were no weary-sounding teachers trying to herd the teenagers into classrooms. The girls had not rolled their skirts six times over at the waistband or backcombed their hair. Not a single person was smoking. A lot of them wore glasses. Her mother gave her hand a little squeeze. Tanzie wanted her to stop looking so nervous. 'It's nice, isn't it, Mum?'

She nodded. 'Yes.' It came out as a squeak.

'Mr Tsvangarai told me that every single one of their sixth-formers who did maths got A or A starred. That's good, isn't it?'

'Amazing.'

Tanzie pulled a bit at Mum's hand so that they could get to the head's office faster. 'Do you think Norman will miss me when I'm doing the long days?'

'The long days.'

'St Anne's doesn't finish till six. And there's maths club on Tuesdays and Thursdays so I'd definitely want to do that.'

'Tanze,' she said, and stopped.

'Mum. *Look*.' There was a girl walking along reading a book. Actually reading a book. Nicky said if you walked across the playground reading a book at McArthur's you got battered. You had to hide them, like cigarettes.

Her mother glanced at her. She looked really tired.

She was always tired, these days. She put on one of those smiles that wasn't really a smile at all, and they went in.

'Hello, Mrs Thomas. Hello, Costanza. It's very good to meet you. Do sit down.'

The headmaster's study had a high ceiling, as white and perfectly decorated as a wedding cake. Little white plaster rosettes sat every twenty centimetres, and tiny rosebuds exactly halfway between them. The room was stuffed with old furniture and through a large bay window a man on a roller could be seen travelling up and down a cricket pitch. On a small table somebody had laid out a tray of coffee and hand-made biscuits. It took Tanzie a few minutes to realize they were for them. 'Can I have one?' she said, and the headmaster pushed them towards her.

'Of course.'

'Mouth closed,' Mum murmured.

They were so good. You could tell they were home-made. Mum used to make biscuits before Dad left and they were just like these. She sat down on the edge of the sofa and gazed at the two men opposite. The one with the moustache smiled like the nurse did before she gave you an injection. Mum had pulled her bag onto her lap and Tanzie could see her holding her hand over the corner where Norman had chewed it. Her leg was jiggling.

'This is Mr Cruikshank. He's the head of maths. And I'm Mr Daly. I've been head here for the past two years.'

She shook their hands and smiled back. Tanzie should have shaken their hands, but all she could hear were the words 'head of maths'. She looked up from her biscuit.

'Do you do chords?'

'We do.'

'And probability?'

'That too.'

Mr Cruikshank leant forward. 'We've been looking at your test results. And we think, Costanza, that you should sit your GCSE in maths next year and get it out of the way. Because I think you'd rather enjoy the A-level problems.'

She looked at him. 'Have you got actual papers?'

'I've got some next door. Would you like to see them?'

She couldn't believe he was asking. She thought briefly of saying, 'Well, DUH', like Nicky did. But she just nodded.

Mr Daly handed Mum a coffee. 'I won't beat around the bush, Mrs Thomas. You are well aware that your daughter has an exceptional ability. We have only seen scores like hers once before and that was from a pupil who went on to be a fellow at Trinity.'

Tanzie nodded, although she was pretty sure she didn't want to be a fellow. Everyone knew girls were better at maths.

He went on and on then. She tuned out a bit because she was trying to see how many biscuits she could eat so what she heard was '. . . for a very select group of pupils who have a demonstrably unusual ability we

have created a new equal-access scholarship.' Blah, blah, blah. 'It would offer a child who might not otherwise get the advantages of a school like this the chance to fulfil their potential in . . .' Blah, blah. 'While we are very keen to see how far Costanza could go in the field of maths, we would also want to make sure that she was well rounded in other parts of her student life. We have a full sporting and musical curriculum.' Blah, blah, blah . . . 'Numerate children are often also able in languages . . .' blah, blah '. . . and drama – that's often very popular with girls of her age.'

'I only really like maths,' she told him. 'And dogs.'

'Well, we don't have much in the way of dogs, but we'd certainly offer you lots of opportunities to stretch yourself mathematically. But I think you might be surprised by what else you enjoy. Do you play any instruments?'

She shook her head.

'Any languages?'

The room went a bit quiet.

'Other interests?'

'We go swimming on Fridays,' Mum said.

'We haven't been swimming since Dad left.'

Mum smiled, but it went a bit wonky. 'We have, Tanzie.'

'Once. May the thirteenth. But now you work on Fridays.'

Her smile went really strange then, like she couldn't hold the corners of her mouth up properly.

Mr Cruikshank left the room, and reappeared a

moment later with his papers. She stuffed the last of the biscuit into her mouth, then got up and went to sit next to him. He had a whole pile of them. Stuff she hadn't even started yet!

She began going through them with him, showing him what she had done and what she hadn't, and in the background she could hear Mum and the headmaster's voices rumbling away. 'We're very conscious of the pitfalls, psychological and otherwise, that can occur if children are only encouraged to go in one direction . . . blah, blah, blah . . . If Costanza comes to us, while we would consider her mathematical ability an asset, her pastoral care would be . . .'

It sounded like it was going all right. Tanzie let her attention travel to what was on the page. It might have been renewal theory. 'Yes,' Mr Cruikshank was saying quietly, his finger on the page. 'But the curious feature of renewal processes is that, if we wait some predetermined time and then observe how large the renewal interval containing it is, we should expect it to be typically larger than a renewal interval of average size.'

She knew about this! 'So the monkeys would take longer to type *Macbeth*?' she said.

'That's it.' He smiled. 'I wasn't sure you'd have covered any renewal theory.'

'I haven't, really. But Mr Tsvangarai told me about it once and I looked it up on the Internet. I liked the whole monkey thing.' She flicked through the papers. There was tons of it. The numbers sang to her. She could feel her brain sort of humming she wanted to read them so

much. She knew she had to go to this school. 'Mum,' she said. She didn't usually interrupt, but she was too excited and forgot her manners. 'Do you think we could get some of these papers?'

Mr Daly looked over. He didn't seem to mind about the missing manners. 'Mr Cruikshank, have we any spares?'

'You can take these.'

He handed them over! Just like that! Tanzie began flicking through them. Outside a bell rang and she could hear children walking past the office window, their feet crunching on the gravel. She poked her head up to look at them. She wanted to see if any others were reading books.

'So . . . what happens next?'

'Well, we'd like to offer Costanza . . . Tanzie . . . a scholarship.' He lifted a glossy folder from the table. 'Here's our prospectus, and the relevant documentation. The scholarship covers ninety per cent of the fees. It's the most generous scholarship this school has ever offered. Usually fifty per cent is our maximum, given the extensive waiting list of pupils hoping to come here. The new scholarship is designed to recognize children with unusual levels of ability.'

'Like me,' Tanzie said.

'Like you.' He held out the plate towards her. Somehow they had replaced the biscuits on the plate with new ones. This really was the greatest school ever.

'Ninety per cent,' Mum said. She put her biscuit back on her saucer.

'I do appreciate that there is still a considerable financial commitment involved. And there would also be uniform and travel costs, and any extras she might want, like music or school trips. But I would like to stress that this is an incredible opportunity.' He leant forward. 'We would love to have you here, Tanzie. Your maths teacher says you're a joy to work with.'

'I like school,' she said, reaching for another biscuit. 'I know lots of my friends think it's boring. But I prefer school to home.'

They all laughed awkwardly.

'Not because of you, Mum,' she said, and helped herself to another. 'But my mum does have to work a lot.'

Everyone went quiet.

'We all do, these days,' said Mr Cruikshank.

'Well. It's a lot for you to think about. And I'm sure you have other questions for us. But why don't you finish your coffee, while we talk, and then I'll get one of our pupils to show you around the rest of the school? Then you can discuss this between yourselves.'

That evening Mum went up to Nicky's room and got him to hook the computer up to Skype. Every Sunday she would text Dad half an hour before, and he would set up the computer at Grandma's so that Tanzie could speak to him. She would sit at Nicky's desk and try not to be distracted by the little image of herself in the corner. It always made her look like she had a really weird-shaped head.

Except it wasn't Sunday.

Tanzie was downstairs in the garden throwing a ball for Norman. She was determined that one day he would fetch it and bring it back. Tanzie had read somewhere that repetition increases the probability of an animal learning how to do something by a factor of four. She wasn't sure Norman could count, though.

They had got Norman from the animal shelter when Dad first left and Mum stayed awake for eleven nights in a row worrying that they would be murdered in their beds once everyone realized he'd gone. Brilliant with kids, a fantastic guard dog, the rescue centre said. Mum kept saying, 'But he's so big.'

'Even more of a deterrent,' they said, with cheery smiles. 'And did we mention he's brilliant with kids?'

Two years on, Mum said Norman was basically an enormous eating and crapping machine. He plodded around the house shedding hair and leaving evil smells behind him. He drooled on cushions and howled in his sleep, his great paws paddling the air as if he was swimming. Mum said the rescue centre had been right: nobody would break into their house for fear Norman would gas them to death.

She had given up trying to ban him from Tanzie's bedroom. When Tanzie woke up in the morning he was always stretched across three-quarters of the bed, hairy legs across her mattress, leaving her shivering under a tiny corner of duvet. Mum used to mutter about hairs and hygiene but Tanzie didn't mind. She and Norman had a special bond. She knew that one day he would show it.

They'd got Nicky when she was two. Tanzie went to bed one night and when she woke he was in the spare room and Mum just said he would be staying and he was her brother. She didn't know if they had a special bond, even though they were actually 50 per cent related. Tanzie had once asked him what he thought their shared genetic material was, and he'd said, 'The weird loser gene.' She thought he might have been joking, but she didn't know enough about genetics to check.

She was rinsing her hands under the outside tap when she heard them talking. Nicky's window was open and their voices floated out into the garden.

'Did you pay that water bill?' Nicky said.

'No. I haven't had a chance to get to the post office.'

'It says it's a final reminder.'

'I know it's a final reminder.' Mum was snappy, like she always was when she talked about money. There was a pause. Norman picked up the ball and dropped it near her feet. It lay there, slimy and disgusting.

'Sorry, Nicky. I . . . just need to get this conversation out of the way. I'll sort it out tomorrow morning. I promise. You want to speak to your dad?'

Tanzie knew what the answer would be. Nicky never wanted to talk to Dad any more.

'Hey.'

She moved right under the window and stood really still. She could hear Dad's voice.

'Everything all right?' Dad sounded tense. She wondered if he thought that something bad had happened.

Perhaps if he thought Tanzie had leukaemia he might come back. She had watched a TV film once where the girl's parents divorced and then got back together because she got leukaemia. She didn't actually want leukaemia though because needles made her pass out and she had quite nice hair.

'Everything's fine,' Mum said. She didn't tell him about Nicky getting battered.

'What's going on?'

A pause.

'Has your mum decorated?' Mum asked.

'What?'

'New wallpaper.'

'Oh. That.'

Grandma's house had new wallpaper? Tanzie felt weird. Dad and Grandma were living in a house that she might not recognize any more. It had been 348 days since she last saw Dad. It was 433 days since she'd seen Grandma.

'I need to talk to you about Tanzie's schooling.'

'Why – is she playing up?'

'Nothing like that, Marty. She's been offered a scholarship to St Anne's.'

'St Anne's?'

'They think her maths is off the scale.'

'St *Anne's*.' He said it like he couldn't believe it. 'I mean I knew she was bright, but . . .'

He sounded really pleased. She pressed her back against the wall and went up on tippy-toes to hear better. Perhaps he'd come back if she was going to St Anne's.

'Our little girl at the posh school, eh?' His voice had puffed up with pride. Tanzie could imagine him already working out what to tell his mates at the pub. Except he couldn't go to the pub. Because he always told Mum he had no money to enjoy himself. 'So what's the problem?'

'Well . . . it's a big scholarship. But it doesn't cover everything.'

'Meaning what?'

'Meaning we'd still have to find five hundred pounds a term. And the uniform. And the registration fee of five hundred pounds.'

The silence went on for so long Tanzie wondered if the computer had crashed.

'They said once we've been there a year we can apply for a hardship fee. Some bursary or something where, if you're a deserving case, they can give you extra. But basically we need to find the best part of two grand to get her through the first year.'

And then Dad laughed. He actually laughed. 'You're having me on, right?'

'No, I am not having you on.'

'How am I meant to find two grand, Jess?'

'I just thought I'd –'

'I've not even got a proper job yet. There's nothing going on round here. I'm . . . I'm only just getting back on my feet. I'm sorry, babe, but there's no way.'

'Can't your mum help? She might have some savings. Can I talk to her?'

'No. She's . . . out. And I don't want you tapping her

for money. She's got worries enough as it is.'

'I'm not tapping her for money, Marty. I thought she might want to help her only grandchildren.'

'They're not her only grandchildren any more. Elena had a little boy.'

Tanzie stood very still.

'I didn't even know she was pregnant.'

'Yeah, I meant to tell you.'

Tanzie had a baby cousin. And she hadn't even known. Norman flopped down at her feet. He looked at her with his big brown eyes, then rolled over slowly with a groan, as if it was really, really hard work just lying on the floor. He kept looking at her, waiting for her to rub his tummy, but she was trying too hard to listen.

'Well . . . what if we sell the Rolls?'

'I can't sell the Rolls. I'm going to start the weddings business up again.'

'It's been rusting in our garage for the best part of two years.'

'I know. And I'll come and get it. I just haven't got anywhere to store it safely up here.'

The voices had that edge now. Their conversations often ended up like that. They would start off with Mum being all nice and then something would happen so that they both got really clipped and tense with each other. She heard Mum take a deep breath. 'Can you at least think about it, Marty? She really wants to go to this place. Really, really wants to go. When the maths teacher spoke to her, her whole face lit up like I haven't seen since –'

'Since I left.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

'So it's all my fault.'

'No, it's not all your fault, Marty. But I'm not going to sit here and pretend that you going has been a barrel of laughs for them. Tanzie doesn't understand why you don't visit her. She doesn't understand why she hardly gets to see you any more.'

'I can't afford the fares, Jess. You know that. There's no point you going on and on at me. I've been ill.'

'I know you've been ill.'

'She can come and see me anytime. I told you. Send them both at half-term.'

'I can't. They're too young to travel all that way alone. And I can't afford the fares for all of us.'

'And I suppose that's my fault too.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake.'

Tanzie dug her nails into the soft parts of her hands. Norman kept looking at her, waiting.

'I don't want to argue with you, Marty,' Mum said, and her voice was low and careful, like when a teacher is trying to explain something to you that you should already know. 'I just want you to think about whether there is any way at all you could contribute to this. It would change Tanzie's life. It would mean she never has to struggle in the way that . . . we struggle.'

'You can't say that.'

'What do you mean?'

'Don't you watch the news, Jess? All the graduates are out of work. It doesn't matter what education you get.

She's still going to have to fight. She's still going to struggle.' He paused. 'No. There's no point us going further into hock just for this. Of course these schools are going to tell you it's all special, and she's special, and her life chances are going to be amazing if she goes, et cetera, et cetera. That's what they do.'

Mum didn't say anything.

'No, if she's bright like they say she is, she'll make her own way. She'll have to go to McArthur's like everyone else.'

'Like the little bastards who spend all their time working out how to bash Nicky's face in. And the girls who wear four inches of makeup and won't do PE in case they break a nail. She won't fit in there, Marty. She just won't.'

'Now you sound like a snob.'

'No, I sound like someone who accepts that her daughter is a little bit different. And might need a school that embraces it.'

'Can't do it, Jess. I'm sorry.' He sounded distracted now, as if he'd heard something in the distance. 'Look. I've got to go. Get her to Skype me Sunday.'

There was a long silence.

Tanzie counted to fourteen.

She heard the door open and Nicky's voice: 'That went well, then.'

She leant over and finally rubbed Norman's tummy. She closed her eyes so she didn't see the tear that plopped onto it.

'Have we done any lottery tickets lately?'

'No.'

That silence lasted nine seconds. Then Mum's voice echoed into the still air:

'Well, I think maybe we'd better start.'

3·

ED

Ed was in the creatives' room drinking coffee with Ronan when Sidney walked in. A man he vaguely recognized stood behind him; another of the Suits. In their sombre grey, with their end-of-the-world expressions, they resembled a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses.

'We've been looking for you.'

'Well, you found us.'

'Not Ronan, you.'

He studied them for a minute, waiting, then threw a red foam ball at the ceiling and caught it. He glanced sideways at Ronan. Investacorp had bought half-shares in the company a full eighteen months ago but they still thought of them as the Suits. It was one of the kinder things they called them in private.

'Do you know a woman called Deanna Lewis?'

'Why?'

'Did you give her any information about the launch of the new software?'

'What?'

'It's a simple question.'

Ed looked from one to the other. The atmosphere was strangely charged. His stomach, a packed elevator,

began a slow descent towards his feet. 'We may have chatted about work. No specifics that I remember.'

'Deanna Lewis?' said Ronan.

'You need to be clear about this, Ed. Did you give her any information about the launch of SFAX?'

'No. Maybe. What is this?'

'The police are downstairs searching your office, with two goons from the Financial Services Authority. Her brother has been arrested for insider trading. On the basis of information that you gave them about the launch of the software.'

'Ha-ha-ha! Funny.'

'Deanna Lewis? Our Deanna Lewis?' Ronan began to wipe his spectacles, a thing he did when he was feeling anxious.

'Your Deanna Lewis?'

'We knew her back in college.'

'Did you now? Well, her brother's hedge fund made two point six million dollars on the first day of trading. She alone cleared a hundred and ninety thousand on her personal account.' They weren't laughing.

'Her brother's hedge fund?'

'Yes, his hedge fund.'

'I don't understand,' Ronan said. 'What is this?'

'I'll spell it out. Deanna Lewis is on record talking to her brother about Ed telling her about the launch of SFAX. She says Ed said it was going to be enormous. And guess what? Two days later her brother's fund is among the biggest purchasers of shares. What exactly did you tell her?'

Ronan stared at him. Ed struggled to gather his thoughts. When he swallowed it was shamefully audible. Across the office the development team were peering over the tops of their cubicles. 'I didn't tell her anything.' He blinked. 'I don't know. I might have said something. It's not like it was a state secret.'

'It was a fucking state secret, Ed. It's called insider trading. She told him you gave her dates, times. She told him the company was going to make a fortune.'

'Then she's lying! Shooting her mouth off. We were . . . having a thing.'

'You wanted to bone the girl, so you shot *your* mouth off to impress her?'

'It wasn't like that.'

'You had *sex* with Deanna Lewis?' Ed could feel Ronan's myopic gaze burning into him.

Sidney lifted his hands, turned to the man behind him. 'You need to call your lawyer.'

'But how can I be in trouble? It's not like I got any benefit from it.'

'Michael Lewis's hedge fund was the biggest single investor in Mayfly in the week before SFAX went live.'

'I didn't even know her brother had a hedge fund.'

Sidney glanced behind him. The faces suddenly found something interesting to look at on their desks. And he lowered his voice. 'You have to go now. They want to interview you at the police station.'

'What? This is nuts. I've got a meeting in twenty minutes. I'm not going to any police station.'

'And obviously we're suspending you until we've got to the bottom of this.'

Ed laughed at him. 'Are you kidding me? You can't suspend me. It's my company.' He threw the foam ball up in the air and caught it, turning away from them. Nobody moved. 'I'm not going. This is our company. Tell them, Ronan.'

He looked at Ronan, but Ronan turned away. Ed looked at Sidney, who simply shook his head. Then he looked up at the two uniformed men who had appeared behind him, at his secretary, whose hand was at her mouth, at the carpet path already opening up between him and the office door, and the foam ball dropped silently onto the floor between his feet.

Deanna Lewis. Maybe not the prettiest girl, but definitely the one who scored highest on Ed and Ronan's campus-wide Girls You'd Give One Without Having To Drink A Fourth Pint First points system. As if she'd look at either of them. He guessed that when she walked through the computer-science centre they had worn the same expressions as a basset hound watching a passing hamburger.

He'd bet she'd never once registered him in the whole three years, apart from that time when it was raining heavily and she was at the station and asked him for a lift back to halls in his Mini. He had been so tongue-tied the whole time she was in the passenger seat he had said barely a word, except a vaguely strangled, 'No worries,' when he let her out at the other end. Those two words

somehow managed to cover three octaves. She gave him a look that told him he was watching too many Australian soaps, then stooped to peel the empty crisps packet from the sole of her boot, dropping it delicately back into the footwell.

If Ed had it bad, Ronan had it worse. His love weighed him down like a cartoon dumbbell, his hopes for it based on evidence less substantial than dust motes. He wrote her poetry, sent anonymous flowers on Valentine's Day, smiled hopefully at her in the dinner queue and tried not to look crushed when she failed to notice. He grew philosophical in the end. It only took three years. Ed and he had both understood that someone so pretty, so far up the campus pecking order, wouldn't make time for either of them. And after they had graduated, set up their company, and swapped thinking about women for thinking about software until software became the thing they actually preferred thinking about, Deanna Lewis fell into that weird pocket of reminiscence you bring out when you've had too much to drink and want to show your co-workers you had some kind of social life at university and didn't spend the entire three years stuck behind a screen. 'Oh . . . Deanna Lewis,' they would say to each other, their eyes distant, like they could see her floating in slo-mo above the other drinkers' heads. Or occasionally, of some other girl standing at the bar: 'She's nice. But she's no Lewis.'

And then, three months ago, some six months after Lara had left, taking with her the apartment in Rome, half the contents of his stock portfolio, and what

remained of Ed's appetite for relationships, Deanna Lewis had contacted him via Facebook. She had been based in New York for a couple of years, but was coming back and wanted to catch up with some of her old friends from uni. Did he remember Reena? And Sam? Was he around for a drink at all?

Afterwards, he was ashamed that he hadn't told Ronan. Ronan was busy with the new software upgrade, he told himself. It had taken him ages to get Deanna out of his system. He was in the early stages of dating that girl from the not-for-profit soup place. Why stir it all up again? The truth was, Ed was still stuck in his post-divorce slough. He hadn't had a date in for ever. And a bit of him wanted Deanna Lewis to see what he had become since the company was sold a year previously.

Because money, it turned out, bought you someone to sort out your clothes, skin and hair. It bought you a personal trainer. Ed Nicholls no longer looked like the tongue-tied geek in the Mini. He wore no obvious signs of wealth, but he knew that, at thirty-three, he carried it like an invisible scent around him.

They met at a bar in Soho. She apologized: Reena – did he remember Reena? – had blown them out at the last minute. She had a *baby*. She lifted a faintly mocking eyebrow as she said this. Sam, he realized long afterwards, never showed. She never once asked about Ronan.

He couldn't stop staring at her. She looked just the same, but better. She had well-cut dark hair that bounced on her shoulders like a shampoo advert, and had lost the

traces of puppy fat around her cheeks. She was nicer than he remembered, more human. Perhaps even golden girls were brought down to earth a little, once out of the confines of university. She laughed at all his jokes. Every now and then he glanced sideways to see her blinking at him and registered her brief flash of surprise that he was not the person she remembered. It made him feel good.

They parted after a couple of hours, and a little piece of him was surprised when she called two days later to suggest they hook up again. This time they went to a club and he danced with her, and when she lifted her hands above her head, he had to focus really hard not to picture her pinned to a bed. She was just out of a relationship, she explained, over the third or fourth drink. The break-up had been awful. She was not sure she wanted to be involved in anything serious. He made all the right noises. He told her about Lara, his ex-wife, and how she had said her work was always going to be her first love, and that she had to leave him to save her sanity.

'Bit melodramatic,' Deanna said.

'She's Italian. And an actress. Everything with her is melodramatic.'

'Was,' she corrected him. She kept her eyes on his as she said it. She asked him about work – was blunt in her admiration of what he had done with the company. 'I mean I'm a total tech klutz,' she said. 'But it sounds amazing.' She had picked up the beginnings of an American accent. Her leg rested against his.

He tried to explain it. She watched his mouth as he spoke, which was oddly distracting. He told her everything: the first trial versions he and Ronan had created in his bedroom, the software glitches, the meetings with a media tycoon who had flown them to Texas in his private jet and sworn at them when they refused his buyout offer.

He told her of the day they'd gone public, when he had sat on the edge of his bath watching the share price go up and up on his phone, and begun to shake as he grasped quite how much his whole life was about to change.

'You're that wealthy?'

'I do okay.'

'Define okay.'

He was aware that he was *this* close to sounding like a dick. 'Well . . . I was doing better until I got divorced, obviously . . . I do okay. You know, I'm not really interested in the money.' He shrugged. 'I just like doing what I do. I like the company. I like having ideas and translating them into things that actually work for people.'

'But you sold it?'

'It was getting too big, and I was told that if we did, the guys in suits could handle all the financial stuff. I was never interested in that side of things. I just own a lot of shares.' He stared at her. 'You have really nice hair.' He had no idea why on earth he said this.

She'd kissed him in the taxi. Deanna Lewis had slowly turned his face to hers with a slim, perfectly manicured

hand and kissed him. Even though it was more than twelve years since they were at university – twelve years in which Ed Nicholls had been briefly married to a model/actress/whatever – some little voice in his head kept saying: *Deanna Lewis is kissing me.* And she wasn't just kissing him: she hitched up her skirt and slid a long, slim leg over him, apparently oblivious to the taxi driver, pressed into him, and kissed his face, his neck, and slid her hands up his shirt until he couldn't speak or think, and when he came to pay outside his flat, his words came out thick and stupid, and he not only didn't wait for the change but didn't even check what was in the wad of notes he handed the driver.

And the sex was great. Oh, God, it was good. She had porn moves, for Christ's sake. With Lara, in the last months, sex had felt like she was granting him some kind of favour – dependent on some set of rules that only she seemed to understand: whether he had paid her enough attention, or spent enough time with her or taken her out to dinner, or understood how he'd hurt her feelings. Sometimes she would turn silently away from him afterwards like he'd done something awful.

When Deanna Lewis looked at him naked, her eyes seemed to light up from inside with a kind of hunger. Oh, God. Jesus Christ. *Deanna Lewis.*

Afterwards, she had lain in bed, lit a cigarette, and said, 'I hardly smoke any more, but after that . . .' and chuckled throatily.

'I might take it up myself.'

And then, after she had finished her cigarette, she had given him head so good that he had suspected the downstairs neighbours would be lighting cigarettes too.

She stayed with Ed the night after, and went home reluctantly. She was living with her brother in Fulham in the week, and at weekends in Bristol with her parents. That first week she emailed daily and rang him three times. He didn't tell Ronan. He instant-messaged her from his bed, his laptop a glowing ocean in the middle of his vast duvet, and tried not to think about her. They were just mucking around, he told himself. It was nothing serious. It wasn't as if Ronan was ever likely to bump into her.

Besides, he and Deanna were both just out of bad break-ups. They had discussed how cynical they were about relationships, how it was good to find your feet alone. And then one night he'd had a few drinks. He'd been feeling a bit melancholy. He'd paused for about thirty seconds, then typed: 'Come out with me this weekend.'

'I can't,' came the reply.

'Why?'

'Broke.'

Ed thought of the way her long dark hair felt entwined in his fingers. He thought about how nice it had been just to have someone in his head who wasn't Lara. And he wrote: 'I'll pay. Come.'

She arrived on Friday night. They walked round the local bars, took a trip down the river, had a pub lunch. She linked her arm in his and he found himself staring

at her fingers and exclaiming silently, *Deanna Lewis! I'm sleeping with Deanna Lewis!* She was funny and sparky. She had this way of smiling that made you smile right back. And it was just so good to have guilt-free sex with someone whom you weren't afraid might steal your wallet while you were asleep.

On Sunday night they had a good meal, drank a lot of champagne, and then headed back to his place, and she had worn these crazy black silk knickers with ribbons at the sides that you could just pull undone so that they slid slowly down her thighs like a ripple of water. She rolled a joint afterwards, and he didn't normally smoke but he had felt his head spin pleasurably, had rested his fingers in her dark silky hair and felt like life was actually pretty good.

And then she said, 'I told my parents about us.'

He was having trouble focusing. 'Your parents?'

'You don't mind, do you? It's just been so good . . . feeling like . . . I belong in something again, you know?'

Ed found himself staring at a point on the ceiling. It's okay, he told himself. Lots of people tell their parents stuff. Even after two weeks.

'I've been so depressed. And now I just feel . . .' she beamed at him '. . . happy. Like madly happy. Like I wake up and I'm thinking about you. Like everything's going to be okay.'

His mouth felt oddly dry. He wasn't sure if it was the joint. 'Depressed?' he said.

'I'm okay now. I mean, my folks were really good. After the last episode they took me to the doctor and

got me pills. And they definitely helped. They do apparently lower your inhibitions, but I can't say that anyone's complained! HA-HA-HA-HA!'

He handed her the joint.

'I just feel things very intensely, you know? My psychiatrist says I'm exceptionally sensitive. Some people bounce through life. I'm not one of those people. Sometimes I can read about an animal dying or a child being murdered somewhere in another country, and I will literally cry all day. Literally. I was like it at college too. Don't you remember?'

'No.'

She rested her hand on his cock. Suddenly Ed felt fairly certain it was not going to spring to life.

She looked up at him. Her hair was half over her face and she blew at it. 'It's such a bummer losing your job and your home. You have no idea what it's like to be really broke.' She gazed at him as if weighing up how much to tell him. 'I mean properly broke.'

'What – what do you mean?'

'Well . . . like I owe my ex a load of money but I've told him I can't pay him. I have too much on my credit card right now. And he still keeps ringing me, going on and on about it. It's very stressful. He doesn't understand how stressed I get.'

'How much are you talking about?'

'Oh. A fair bit.'

'How much?' He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

She told him. As his jaw dropped, she said, 'And don't offer to lend it to me. I wouldn't take money from my

boyfriend. Makes things too complicated. But it's a nightmare.'

Ed tried not to think about the significance of her use of the word 'boyfriend'.

He glanced down at her and saw her lower lip tremble. He swallowed. 'Um . . . are you okay?'

Her smile was too swift, too wide. 'I'm good! Thanks to you, I'm really fine now.' She ran a finger along his chest. 'Anyway. It's been lovely not having to think about it. It's been heaven going out for nice dinners without wondering how I can afford it.' She kissed one of his nipples.

That night she slept with one leg slung over him. Ed lay wide awake, wishing he could ring Ronan.

She came back the following Friday, and the Friday after that. She didn't pick up on his hints about things he had said he had to do at the weekend. Her father had given her the money for them to have a meal. 'He says it's such a relief to see me happy again.'

He had a cold, he told her, as she came skipping across the road from the Tube station. Probably best not to kiss him.

'I don't mind. What's yours is mine,' she said, and attached herself to his face for a full thirty seconds.

They ate at the local pizza place. He had started to feel a vague, reflexive panic at the sight of her. She had 'feelings' about things all the time. The sight of a red bus made her happy, the sight of a wilted pot plant in a café window made her vaguely weepy. She was too much of

everything. She smiled at too many people. She was sometimes so busy talking that she forgot to eat with her mouth closed. At his apartment she peed with the bathroom door open. It sounded like a visiting horse was relieving itself.

He wasn't ready for this. She was just too needy. Too erratic. Too everything. Ed wanted to be on his own in the apartment. He wanted the silence, the order of his normal routine. He couldn't believe he had ever been lonely.

That night he had told her he didn't want to have sex. 'I'm really tired.'

'I'm sure I could wake you up . . .' She had begun to burrow her way down the duvet and he actually had to haul her upwards. There followed a tussle that might have been funny in other circumstances: her mouth poised to plug onto his genitals, him desperately hauling her up by the armpits.

'Really. Deanna. Not . . . not now.'

'We can snuggle then. Now I know you don't just want me for my body!' She pulled his arm around her and emitted a little whimper of pleasure, like a small animal.

Ed Nicholls lay there, wide-eyed, in the dark. He had forgotten, in the four years that he had been dating and married Lara, how swiftly someone could pivot 180 degrees in your imagination from the most desirable person you had ever seen to someone you would gnaw your own limb off if it meant escaping. He took a breath.

'So . . . Deanna . . . um . . . next weekend I have to go away for business.'

'Anywhere nice?' She ran her finger speculatively along his thigh.

'Um . . . Geneva.'

'Ooh, nice! Shall I stow away in your case?'

'What?'

'I could be there waiting for you in your hotel room. When you come back from your meetings, I could soothe your troubled brow.' She reached out a finger and stroked his forehead. It was all he could do not to flinch.

'Really? That's nice. But it's not that kind of trip.'

'You're so lucky. I love travelling. If I wasn't so broke I'd be back on a plane in an instant.'

'You would?'

'It's my passion. I loved being a free spirit, going where the whim takes me.' She leant over, extracted a cigarette from the packet on the bedside table and lit it.

'So you'd like to travel again?'

'I'd be off like a shot.'

He had lain there for a bit, thinking. 'Do you own any stocks and shares?'

She rolled off him and lay back against her pillow. 'A few. I think my grandma left them to me. A hundred shares in some building society and another two hundred in Woolworths. Hah.' She half laughed. 'And don't suggest I bet on the stock market, Ed. I haven't got enough left to gamble with.'

It was out before he really knew what he was saying. 'It's not a gamble.'

'What isn't?'

'We've got a thing coming out. In a couple of weeks. It's going to be a game changer.'

'A thing?'

'I can't really tell you too much. But we've been working on it for a while. It's going to push our stock way up. Our business guys are all over it.'

She was silent beside him.

'I mean, I know we haven't talked a lot about work but this is going to make a serious amount of money.'

She didn't sound convinced. 'You're asking me to bet my last few pounds on something I don't even know the name of?'

'You don't need to know the name of it. You just need to buy some shares in my company.' He shifted onto his side. 'Look, you raise a few thousand pounds, and I guarantee you'll have enough to pay off your ex-boyfriend within two weeks. And then you'll be free! And you can do whatever you want! Go wherever you like!'

There was a long silence.

'Is this how you make money, Ed Nicholls? You take women to bed and then get them to buy thousands of pounds' worth of your shares?'

'No, it's –'

She turned over and he saw she was joking. She traced the side of his face. 'You're so sweet to me. And it's a lovely thought. But I don't have thousands of pounds lying around right now.'

The words came out of his mouth even before he knew what he was saying. 'I'll lend it to you. If it makes

you money, you pay me back. If it doesn't, then it's my own fault for giving you dud advice.'

She started laughing and stopped when she realized he wasn't joking.

'You'd do that for me?'

Ed shrugged. 'Honestly? Five grand doesn't really make a big difference to me right now.' *And I'd pay ten times that if it meant you would leave.*

Her eyes widened. 'Whoa. That is the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me.'

'Oh . . . I doubt that.'

Before she left the next morning he wrote her a cheque. She had been tying her hair up in a clip, making faces at herself in his hall mirror. She smelt vaguely of apples. 'Leave it blank,' she said, when she realized what he was doing. 'I'll get my brother to do it for me. He's good at all this stocks and shares stuff. What am I buying again?'

'Seriously?'

'I can't help it. I can't think straight when I'm near you.' She slid her hand down his boxers. 'I'll pay you back as soon as possible. I promise.'

'Here.' Ed reached over for a business card, and took a step backwards. 'That's the name of the company. And do this. I promise it'll help. Can't have you feeling hemmed in!'

He smothered the warning voice in his head. His *faux* cheer bounced off the apartment walls.

Ed answered almost all of her emails afterwards. He was cheerful, non-committal. He said how good it was to

have spent time with someone who understood how weird it was just to have got out of a serious relationship, how important it was to spend time by yourself. She didn't answer that one. Oddly, she said nothing specific about the product launch or that the stock had gone through the roof. She would have made more than £100,000. Perhaps she was busy sticking pins into a picture of him. Perhaps she had lost the cheque. Perhaps she was in Guadeloupe. Every time he thought about what he had done his stomach lurched. He tried not to think about it.

He changed his mobile-phone number, telling himself it was an accident that he forgot to let her know. Eventually her emails tailed off. Two months passed. He took Ronan on a couple of nights out and they moaned about the Suits; Ed listened to Ronan as he weighed up the pros and cons of the not-for-profit soup girl and felt he'd learned a valuable lesson. Or dodged a bullet. He wasn't sure which.

And then, two weeks after the SFAX launch, he had been lying down in the creatives' room, idly throwing a foam ball at the ceiling and listening to Ronan discuss how best to solve a glitch in the payment software when Sidney, the finance director, had walked in and he had suddenly understood that there were far worse problems you could create for yourself than overly clingy girlfriends.

'Ed?'

'What?'

A short pause.

'That's how you answer a phone call? Seriously? At what age exactly are you going to acquire some social skills?'

'Hi, Gemma.' Ed sighed, and swung his leg over the bed so that he was seated.

'You said you were going to call. A week ago. So I thought, you know, that you must be trapped under a large piece of furniture.'

He looked around the bedroom. At the suit jacket that hung over the chair. At the clock, which told him it was a quarter past seven. He rubbed the back of his neck. 'Yeah. Well. Things came up.'

'I called your work. They said you were at home. Are you ill?'

'No, I'm not ill, just . . . working on something.'

'So does that mean you'll have some time to come and see Dad?'

He closed his eyes. 'I'm kind of busy right now.'

Her silence was weighty. He pictured his sister at the other end of the line, her jaw set, her eyes raised to Heaven.

'He's asking for you. He's been asking for you for ages.'

'I will come, Gem. Just . . . I'm . . . I'm out of town. I have some stuff to sort out.'

'We all have stuff to sort out. Just call him, okay? Even if you can't actually get into one of your eighteen luxury cars to visit. Call him. He's been moved to Victoria Ward. They'll pass the phone to him if you call.'

'Okay.'

He thought she was about to ring off, but she didn't. He heard a small sigh.

'I'm pretty tired, Ed. My supervisors are not being very helpful about me taking time off. So I'm having to go up there every weekend. Mum's just about holding it together. I could really, really do with a bit of back-up here.'

He felt a pang of guilt. His sister was not a complainer. 'I've told you I'll try and get there.'

'You said that last week. Look, you could drive there in four hours.'

'I'm not in London.'

'Where are you?'

He looked out of the window at the darkening sky. 'The south coast.'

'You're on holiday?'

'Not holiday. It's complicated.'

'It can't be that complicated. You have zero commitments.'

'Yeah. Thanks for reminding me.'

'Oh, come on. It's your company. You get to make the rules, right? Just grant yourself an extra two weeks' holiday. Be the Kim Jong-un of your company. Dictate!'

Another long silence.

'You're being weird,' she said finally.

Ed took a deep breath before he spoke. 'I'll sort something. I promise.'

'Okay. And ring Mum.'

'I will.'

There was a click as the line went dead.

Ed stared at the phone for a moment, then dialled his lawyer's office. The phone went straight through to the answering machine.

The investigating officers had pulled out every drawer in the apartment. They hadn't tossed it all out, like they did in the movies, but had gone through it methodically, wearing gloves, checking between the folds of T-shirts, going through every file. Both his laptops had been removed, his memory sticks and his two phones. He had had to sign for it all, as if this was being done for his own benefit. 'Get out of town, Ed,' his lawyer had told him. 'Just go and try not to think too much. I'll call you if I need you to come in.'

They had searched this place too, apparently. There was so little stuff here it had taken them less than an hour.

Ed looked around him at the bedroom of the holiday home, at the crisp Belgian linen duvet that the cleaners had put on that morning, at the drawers that held an emergency wardrobe of jeans, pants, socks and T-shirts.

'Get out of town,' Sidney had said. 'If this gets out you're seriously going to fuck with our share price.'

Ronan hadn't spoken to him since the day the police had come to the office.

He stared at the phone. Other than Gemma, there was now not a single person he could call just to talk to without explaining what had happened. Everyone he knew was in tech and, apart from Ronan, he wasn't sure right now how many of those would qualify as actual

friends. He stared at the wall. He thought about the fact that during the last week he had driven up and down to London four times just because, without work, he hadn't known what to do with himself. He thought back to the previous evening when he had been so angry, with Deanna Lewis, with Sidney, with *what the fuck* had happened to his life, that he had hurled an entire bottle of white wine at the wall and smashed it. He thought about the likelihood of that happening again if he was left to his own devices.

There was nothing else for it. He shouldered his way into his jacket, picked a fob of keys from the locked cupboard beside the back door and headed out to the car.

4.

JESS

There had always been something a bit different about Tanzie. At a year old she would line up her blocks in rows or organize them into patterns, then pull one or two away, making new shapes. By the time she was two she was obsessed with numbers. Before she even started school she would go through those books you can get full of maths problems and ask questions, like, 'Why is a one written as "1" and not "2"?' or tell Jess that multiplication was 'just another way of doing addition'. At six she could explain the meaning of 'tessellate'.

Marty didn't like it. It made him uncomfortable. But then anything that wasn't 'normal' made Marty uncomfortable. It was the thing that made Tanzie happy, just sitting there, ploughing through problems that neither of them could begin to understand. Marty's mother, on the rare occasions that she visited, used to call her a swot. She would say it like it wasn't a very nice thing to be.

'So what are you going to do?'

'There's nothing I can do right now.'

'Wouldn't it feel weird, her mixing with all the private-school kids?'

'I don't know. Yes. But that would be our problem. Not hers.'

'What if she grows away from you? What if she falls in with a posh lot and gets embarrassed by her background?'

'What?'

'I'm just saying. I think you could mess her up. I think she could lose sight of where she comes from.'

Jess looked over at Nathalie, who was driving. 'She comes from the Shitty Estate of Doom, Nat. As far as that goes, I would be happy if she got early-onset Alzheimer's.'

Something weird had happened since Jess had told Nathalie about the interview. It was as if she had taken it personally. All morning she had gone on and on about how her children were happy at the local school, about how glad she was that they were 'normal', how it didn't do for a child to be 'different'.

The truth of it was, Jess thought, that Tanzie had come home from the interview more excited than she had been in months. Her scores had been 100 per cent in maths and 99 per cent in non-verbal reasoning. (She was actually annoyed by the missing one per cent.) Mr Tsvangarai, ringing to tell her, said there might be other sources of funding. Details, he kept calling them, although Jess couldn't help thinking that people who thought money was a 'detail' were the kind who had never really had to worry about it.

'And you know she'd have to wear that prissy uniform,' Nathalie said, as they pulled up at Beachfront.

'She won't be wearing a prissy uniform,' Jess responded irritably.

'Then she'll get teased for not being like the rest of them.'

'She won't be wearing a prissy uniform because she won't be bloody going. I haven't got a hope of sending her, Nathalie. Okay?'

Jess got out of the car, slamming the door and walking in ahead of her so that she didn't have to listen to anything else.

It was only the locals who called Beachfront 'the holiday park'; the developers called it a 'destination resort'. Because this was not a holiday park like the Sea Bright caravan park on the top of the hill, a chaotic jumble of wind-battered mobile homes and seasonal lean-to tents: this was a spotless array of architect-designed 'living spaces' set among carefully manicured paths and lodges, in tended patches of woodland. There was a sports club, a spa, tennis courts, a huge pool complex, which the locals were not allowed to use after all, a handful of overpriced boutiques and a mini-supermarket so that residents did not have to venture into the scrappier confines of the town.

Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays Benson & Thomas cleaned the two three-bedroomed rental properties that overlooked the clubhouse, then moved on to the newer properties: six glass-fronted modernist houses that stood on the chalk cliff and looked straight out across the sea.

Mr Nicholls kept a spotless Audi in his driveway that

they had never once seen move. A woman who said she was his sister came once with two small children and a grey-looking husband (they left the place immaculately clean). Mr Nicholls himself rarely visited, and had never, in the year they'd been doing it, used either the kitchen or the laundry room. Jess made extra cash doing his towels and sheets, laundering and ironing them weekly for guests who never came.

It was a vast house; its slate floors echoed, its living areas were covered with great expanses of sea-grass matting and there was an expensive sound system wired into the walls. The glass frontages gazed out onto the wide blue arc of the horizon. But there were no photographs on the walls, or suggestions of any kind of actual life. Nathalie always said that even when he came it was as if he was camping there. There must have been women – Nathalie once found a lipstick in the bathroom, and last year they had discovered a pair of tiny lacy knickers under the bed (La Perla) and a bikini top – but there was little to suggest anything else about him.

Jess thought of her own house, the narrow, creaking stairs, the peeling wallpaper, and unusually (she rarely thought about clients' houses in relation to her own – that truly was the way to madness) she felt briefly wistful for all this space. This was a man who'd never had to put a clothes rail on the upstairs landing, or run out of space for bookshelves. This was a man who'd never fretted about how to find a registration fee.

'He's here,' muttered Nathalie.

As they closed the front door, a man's voice echoed

down the corridor, his voice loud, his tone argumentative, as if on the telephone. Nathalie pulled a face at Jess and walked slowly through the hallway.

'Cleaners,' she called. He did not respond, but he must have heard.

The argument continued the whole time it took to clean the kitchen (he had used one mug, and the bin held two empty takeaway cartons). There was broken glass in the corner by the fridge, small green splinters, as if someone had picked up the larger pieces but couldn't be bothered with the rest. And there was wine up the walls. Jess washed them down carefully. The place smelt like a brewery. And he was still arguing. She couldn't hear what he was saying, as his door was partially closed and too far away, but even muffled and at a distance his frustration was evident. She and Nathalie worked in silence, speaking in murmurs, trying to pretend they couldn't hear.

When they had finished the kitchen Nathalie moved on to the living room and Jess headed down the hall. She did the downstairs loo, then the dining room, with its untouched bleached oak table and perfectly matched chairs. She dusted the picture frames with a soft cloth, tilting the odd one a centimetre or two to show they'd been done. Outside on the decking sat an empty bottle of Jack Daniel's with one glass; she picked them up and brought them inside.

While she washed up, she thought about Nicky, who had returned from school the previous day with a cut ear, the knees of his trousers scuffed with dirt. He

shrugged off any attempt to talk about it. His preferred life now consisted of people on the other side of a screen; boys Jess had never met and never would, boys he called SK8RBOI and TERM-N-ATOR who shot and disembowelled each other for fun. Who could blame him? His real life seemed to be the actual war zone.

She thought about Tanzie, and how she'd looked while talking to that maths teacher. Ever since the interview Jess had lain awake, doing calculations in her head, adding and subtracting in a way that would have made Tanzie laugh. The scholarship would not leave her head. It had lodged in there like toothache, and Jess worried away at it, trying every possible way to build financial mountains out of molehills. She sold her belongings. She ran through mental lists of every single person she might be able to borrow money from and who wouldn't mind if it took time to pay it back. She considered the most likely, and the most unlikely people – her mother, her aunt Nell in Dorset, the retired teacher she used to clean for who always said he could see that Tanzie was a bright girl – but while she might have been able to beg fifty pounds here and there, there was nobody who would lend ten times that much. Nobody she knew even had it.

The only people likely to offer Jess money were the sharks who circled the estate with their hidden four-figure interest rates. She had seen neighbours who had borrowed from friendly reps who turned gimlet-eyed, hanging over them like financial vultures. And again and again she came back to Marty's words. Was McArthur's comp really so bad? Some children did well there. There

was no reason why Tanzie shouldn't be one of them, if she kept out of the way of the troublemakers.

The hard truth of it was there like a brick wall. Jess was going to have to tell her daughter that she couldn't make it add up. Jess Thomas, the woman who always found a way through, who spent her life telling the two of them that it would All Work Out, couldn't make it work out.

She finished the dining room in which no dining had ever taken place, and observed with some distant part of her that the loud talking had stopped. Mr Nicholls must finally be off the phone. She hauled the vacuum cleaner down the hallway, wincing as it bumped against her shin, and knocked on the door to see if he wanted his office cleaned. There was silence, and as she knocked again he yelled suddenly, 'Yes, I'm well aware of that, Sidney. You've said so fifteen times, but it doesn't mean –'

It was too late: she had pushed the door half open. Jess began to apologize, but with barely a glance the man held up a palm, like she was some kind of a dog – *stay* – then leaned forwards and slammed the door in her face. The sound reverberated around the house.

Jess stood there, shocked into immobility, her skin prickling with embarrassment.

'I told you,' Nathalie said, as she scrubbed furiously at the guest bathroom a few minutes later. 'Those private schools don't teach them any manners.'

Forty minutes later they were finished. Jess gathered Mr Nicholls's immaculate white towels and sheets into her

holdall, stuffing them in with more force than was strictly necessary. She walked downstairs and placed the bag next to the cleaning crate in the hall. Nathalie was polishing the doorknobs. It was one of her things. She couldn't bear fingerprints on taps or doorknobs. Sometimes it took them ten minutes to leave an address.

'Mr Nicholls, we're going now.'

He was standing in the kitchen, just staring out through the window at the sea, one hand on the top of his head like he'd forgotten it was there. He had dark hair and was wearing those glasses that are supposed to be trendy but just make you look like you've dressed up as Woody Allen. He wore a suit like a twelve-year-old forced to go to a christening.

'Mr Nicholls.'

He shook his head slightly, then sighed and walked down the hallway. 'Right,' he said distractedly. He kept glancing down at the screen of his mobile phone. 'Thanks.'

They waited.

'Um, we'd like our money, please.'

Nathalie finished polishing, and folded her cloth, unfolding it and folding it again. She hated money conversations.

'I thought the management company paid you.'

'They haven't paid us in three weeks. And there's never anyone in the office. If you want us to continue we need to be up to date.'

He scrabbled around in his pockets, pulled out a wallet. 'Right. What do I owe you?'

'Thirty times three weeks. And three weeks of laundry.'

He looked up, one eyebrow raised.

'We left a message on your phone, last week.'

He shook his head, as if he couldn't be expected to remember such things. 'How much is that?'

'One hundred and thirty-five all together.'

He flicked through the notes. 'I don't have that much cash. Look, I'll give you sixty and get them to send you a cheque for the rest. Okay?'

On another occasion Jess would have said yes. On another occasion she would have let it go. It wasn't as if he was going to rip them off, after all. But she was suddenly sick of wealthy people who never paid on time, who assumed that because seventy-five pounds was nothing to them it must be nothing to her too. She was sick of clients who thought she meant so little that they could slam a door in her face without so much as an apology.

'No,' she said, and her voice was oddly clear. 'I need the money now, please.'

He met her eye for the first time. Behind her Nathalie rubbed manically at a doorknob. 'I have bills that need paying. And the people who send them won't let me put off paying week after week.'

She couldn't get it out of her head: the flat dismissal of his palm, the way he had just slammed the door in her face.

He frowned at her, as if she was being particularly difficult. It made her dislike him even more. She wondered,

for a moment, whether to tell him to stick his stupid job. But there were some principles you couldn't afford.

'I'll have to look upstairs,' he said, disappearing. They stood in uncomfortable silence as they heard drawers being shut emphatically, the clash of hangers in a wardrobe. Finally he came back with a handful of notes.

He peeled some off without looking at Jess and handed them over. She was about to say something – something about how he didn't have to behave like an utter dickhead, about how life went that little bit more smoothly when people treated each other like human beings, something that would no doubt make Nathalie rub half the door handle away with anxiety. She didn't care. Even the way he handed out the money suggested he was giving her something she wasn't quite entitled to. But just as she opened her mouth to speak his phone rang. Without a word Mr Nicholls spun away from her and was striding down the hallway to answer it.