

CLAIRE LOWDON

'A VANITY FAIR  
OF OUR TIMES'  
STYLIST

'A PIECE OF FICTION  
THAT IS FLAWLESS'  
IRISH TIMES

'A REMARKABLE  
DEBUT'  
SUNDAY TIMES



LEFT  
OF THE  
BANG

'A REMARKABLY COMPELLING AND SHREWD LOOK AT  
THE WAY WE LIVE NOW' WILLIAM BOYD



Claire Lowdon  
**Left of the Bang**

«HarperCollins»

## **Lowdon C.**

Left of the Bang / C. Lowdon — «HarperCollins»,

‘An unflinchingly honest portrayal of Londoner life with great empathy, style and humour ... A Vanity Fair of our times ... Tamsin Jarvis will resonate long after the final page is turned.’ StylistDaringly, radically honest and very, very funny, this is the best novel yet about the ‘lost generation’ of young Londoners today. Left of the bang: a military term for the build-up to an explosion. For failing concert pianist Tamsin Jarvis, the pressure is mounting. She thought she was happy with her adoring schoolteacher boyfriend Callum, but when Chris comes into their lives, that starts to change. In a few months Chris will be gone, leaving for his first tour of Afghanistan. Nothing seems to be working out the way Tamsin wants it to – in fact, she’s not even sure what it is she wants. With sharp, satirical humour, unparalleled social observation, extreme sexual honesty and great empathy, Claire Lowdon has captured the foibles, hopes and difficulties that characterise a strata of young London today. A funny, unflinching insider’s view on the generation born in the 1980s – who are often having much less fun than it seems – this is a Vanity Fair for our times.

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**CLAIRE LOWDON**

*Left of the Bang*

4th ESTATE • London

## Copyright

Fourth Estate  
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*  
1 London Bridge Street  
London SE1 9GF  
[www.4thestate.co.uk](http://www.4thestate.co.uk)

This eBook first published in Great Britain by Fourth Estate in 2015

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Song lyrics quoted from: ‘Hey Jude’ by John Lennon and Paul McCartney (Sony/ATV); ‘The Nearness of You’, music by Hoagy Carmichael, lyrics by Ned Washington (Sony/ATV); ‘Only Girl (In The World)’, by Crystal Johnson, Mikkel S. Eriksen, Tor Erik Hermansen, Sandy Wilhelm (Sony/ATV); ‘S&M’, by Ester Dean, Mikkel S. Eriksen, Tor Erik Hermansen, Sandy Wilhelm (Sony/ATV); ‘We Are the Champions’, by Freddie Mercury (Sony/ATV); ‘You’re Not the Only Oyster in the Stew’, music by Harold Spina, lyrics by Johnny Burke (Warner/Chappell Music)

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

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Source ISBN: 9780008102166

Ebook Edition © April 2015 ISBN: 9780008102180

Version: 2016-03-15

## Praise for *Left of the Bang*

‘Clear-eyed, audacious and disarmingly honest’ William Boyd

‘A disarming and affecting debut ... Lowdon has an acute ability to paint exquisite pictures of ordinary life and capture what is extraordinary about it. It is social observation at its very best with characters that are both painfully honest but also hilarious in their satirical humour ... Tamsin Jarvis will resonate long after the final page is turned’ *Stylist*, \*\*\*\*\*

‘In refreshingly flourish-free prose, Lowdon picks apart the cloaks that these millennial Londoners use to disguise their true selves, uncovering the startling disconnects underlying their friendships. The characters of this remarkable debut are neatly drawn and sharply skewered, the satirical observations crack like a whip and, most impressive of all, even the denouement arrives with the bang of the title’ *Sunday Times*

‘While [Lowdon’s] cast are hardly sympathetic, they’re too credible – and also too damaged – to be mere one-dimensional grotesques. The upshot is that they get uncomfortably under your skin, making Lowdon’s incendiary denouement real read-between-your-fingers stuff’ *Daily Mail*

‘In her deeply impressive and accomplished first novel, *Left of the Bang*, Claire Lowdon charts the lives of a group of twentysomethings in London with sharpness and precision, with humour and insight, and with generous helpings of humanity ... There are shades of Claire Messud’s *The Emperor’s Children* and hints of Lena Dunham’s *Girls*, too, in the book’s depictions of sex and in how it so flawlessly captures these twentysomethings’ expectations of what the world owes them, and the disappointments that flow from these misapprehensions ... The writing is razor-sharp, excruciating in its honesty ... It takes stylistic risks with voice, tense and point of view. These pay off, absolutely, and tempted this reader, upon finishing, to begin again from page one ... A piece of fiction that is flawless, beautifully paced and expertly judged. At age 30, Lowdon has the flair, polish and insight of a firmly established novelist ... A gifted and perceptive writer’ Sarah Bannan, *Irish Times*

‘Write what you know, they say. Yet it’s a clever author who does just that and succeeds in offering insight. Claire Lowdon spins this tale about twentysomethings living in London as only someone who knows the drill well could do: it’s full of references to real pubs, nights out and the very particular emotional angst that comes from that post-university period in a thrilling but indifferent metropolis ... The characters are well-drawn and sympathetic ... Lowdon flits deftly between the perspective of each character ... She takes time with the hopes and fears of each one, conjuring up a tension that builds painfully slowly ... Lowdon uses sex to show the characters’ real selves, their hidden wants and desires ... A smart and sober pronouncement on consequence’ Francesca Steele, *The Times*

‘Claire Lowdon’s serious-minded but nevertheless sparky debut novel can be seen as an extended rebuttal of the secret but abiding anxiety – especially among the youth – that everybody is having more, or better, sex than they are. What if, she asks, nobody is?... Lowdon is unobtrusively good on the non-glamour of London life ... *Left of the Bang* is not a didactic novel, but its story certainly mutates from social comedy into something far more disturbing’ Alex Clark, *Spectator*

‘Claire Lowdon has written the definitive novel of a generation of Londoners. So involved did I become in their lives, so closely did I feel I knew them, that the note of disquiet that carries through the pages like the eerie mowl of a tuning fork absolutely levelled me when finally it reached its full glass-shattering resonance three-quarters of the way through’ Gavin Corbett

‘Attuned to the nuances of social interaction that lie above the threshold of awareness and elude articulation, Lowdon observes interpersonal relationships with a satirist’s sharp eye. Her narrator pierces façades and parses hybrid, often contradictory, cocktails of emotion with an efficiency reminiscent of Alan Hollinghurst’s early novels ... Peeling the layers of her characters’ drives and

desires demands a precision that, as the subtlety of these observations attests, Lowdon possesses' Lindsay Gail Gibson, *Times Literary Supplement*

'A startlingly assured debut, chronicling the lives of twentysomethings in contemporary London. (I read it in the same fevered excitement as I read Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children*.) It's a social commentary, a page-turner and it's packed with beautiful sentences' *Sunday Business Post*

'All the way through what is essentially a realist novel about young Londoners runs an edge of tension, of suppressed panic. You await the explosion, never quite knowing what form it will take ... Minor events all seem to take place in the shadow of the loaded gun we know must be about to go off, in "those vacuum-packed, suspended seconds" before the obscure but inevitable bang ... The characters' moral wranglings and the machinery of the plot spiral inexorably inwards, into the bedroom. It's there that everything will eventually go bang' Lidija Haas, *Guardian*

'Lowdon has Evelyn Waugh's willingness to inflict gruesome plot twists on her Bright Young Things' *Literary Review*

'A fresh and sharp-minded writer' Blake Morrison, *Observer*

'Razor-sharp satire of millennial Londoners and their pretensions in this promising debut' *Sunday Times*

'Lowdon deftly maps the tangled love life of failed concert pianist Tamsin Jarvis ... She writes with an admirable honesty' Claire Allfree, *Metro*

'Deftly plotted and evocatively written. *Left of the Bang*'s characters are believable and their interactions ironically, wince-inducingly familiar' Sasha Garwood, *Marylebone Journal*

## **Dedication**

For my grandmothers, D.E.M. and G.M.M.L.

## Epigraph

*Left of the bang*: a military term for the build-up to an explosion. On a left–right time line, preparation and prevention are left of the bang; right of the bang refers to the aftermath.

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## One

Her father's arms around her. His voice vibrating through his chest and into hers.

'I'm here, tinker. I'm here.'

Her bleeding toenail, open like a birthday card.

## Two

When Tamsin Jarvis was twelve, she saw her father kissing another woman.

The whole family was up in Manchester to hear him conduct a celebration of British music at the Bridgewater Hall. It was a treat, at the end of the concert, for Tamsin to go to his dressing room all by herself. Her mother had to put ten-year-old Serena to bed in the Jurys Inn Hotel across the road. ‘Tell Daddy not to hang around chatting, the restaurant’s booked for nine forty-five.’

Backstage, everything was hushed. All the doors had leather quilting. The carpet was very thick. A stagehand with his radio earpiece hooked round his neck pointed her towards the end of the corridor. Tamsin pushed her father’s door open, enjoying its weight and the smooth, silent swing of the hinges.

Three seconds later she closed it again, just as silently. The lovers had been kissing with their eyes shut. Neither of them knew they’d been seen.

The woman was Valery Fischer, the mezzo from the concert. Val and her husband Patrick were old friends of the Jarvises. Their only son, a stocky, sporty eleven-year-old called Alex, played viola in the same youth orchestra as Serena. Last summer, the two families had even spent a long weekend together in a rented cottage in Suffolk.

Tamsin walked slowly back up the corridor, seeing it all over again. Bertrand’s left hand gripping Val’s bottom through the stiff satin of her turquoise strapless dress. His right hand crushing her loosely permed curls. A large raised mole in the middle of Val’s back, pale, like a Rice Krispie. The kiss itself: muscular, forceful, almost angry, as if they were fighting one another with their mouths.

In the foyer, she sat down on the floor next to the ice-cream stand and tried to think. When she closed her eyes, she could hear the sound of her own blood. She could feel it, too, each pulse a tight squirting sensation. Around her, adult chatter thinned to a trickle as the concert-goers left the building. Tamsin stayed where she was, eyes still closed. A Hoover began its melancholy drone.

‘Tamsin?’

It was her father. He was still wearing his black trousers, but he’d swapped his tux and dress shirt for a loose grey tunic. He held out one of his big hands for Tamsin to haul herself up with.

‘What are you doing down there?’

‘We have to go,’ said Tamsin. ‘We’ll be late for supper.’

\* \* \*

For five years she told no one.

Tamsin was frightened: of the pain that disclosure would cause her mother, of the possibility of divorce (a condition that ranked, in her twelve-year-old mind, as second only to cancer). Most of all she was frightened of her father’s anger – which, she realised, would no longer be the familiar, beneficent anger of grown-up to child, father to daughter, but real, unbounded, adult anger.

She hated being alone with him. Car journeys were the worst: prisoner in the passenger seat on the way home from school, her father asking about her day, trying to make her laugh. He was his usual garrulous, ebullient self, fond of hyperbole, susceptible to sentiment, domineering, opinionated, funny, warm. Tamsin could see nothing in his demeanour to suggest that here was a man with a terrible secret. And this was what made him truly monstrous.

Bertrand wasn’t as relaxed as he appeared. He was worried – by Tamsin, about Tamsin. Before, the two of them had been a team. Now she was nervy and skittish, slow in conversation, unwilling to meet his eye. If he hugged her, she hugged back, but she no longer initiated contact between them. On more than one occasion, he had the impression that his touch was actually unpleasant to her.

Before – but before what? Bertrand didn’t know; he couldn’t even really say when the change had occurred. He wondered if some male authority figure had behaved inappropriately towards her – a teacher, or perhaps one of the gap-year students who helped out at her summer music school.

When he suggested this to his wife, however, she dismissed it as a typical piece of melodrama. ‘She’s growing up, that’s all. She can’t be your little girl for ever.’ They were in the bedroom, getting ready to go out for the evening. Roz spritzed perfume onto her left wrist, then drew her right wrist across her left in a sawing motion. ‘She’ll be thirteen soon. It’s just hormones,’ she said decisively, meeting her husband’s doubtful frown with a brisk, case-closed sort of look.

Bertrand also wondered whether Tamsin knew about his affair. Somehow, it seemed to him that she might. No matter how firmly he told himself that his anxiety was unfounded, he felt increasingly uneasy in his daughter’s presence; and in time, he found he was unable to prevent unease from translating into mild aversion. He was ashamed of this feeling, and did everything he could to conceal it – to the point where he appeared, if anything, even more affectionate and indulgent towards Tamsin than before.

As far as her mother was concerned, Tamsin was a textbook teenager: surly and non-responsive at home, perpetually in trouble at school. She collected detentions, missed curfews, got a tattoo. At fourteen she spent a night in A&E with a stomach full of vodka and caffeine tablets. At fifteen she pierced her own bellybutton. ‘Hormones’ became Roz’s buzzword, mouthed unsubtly over Tamsin’s head to sympathetic friends. Secretly, she was a little frightened of her eldest daughter. Tamsin at sixteen was a good six inches taller than her mother and almost ethereally thin, with angular shoulders and no hips or breasts to speak of. Cropped halterneck tops exposed the bejewelled bellybutton, elongated by the tautness of her stomach and embellished, more often than not, with a purplish crust of infection.

On the rare occasions that her parents argued, Tamsin lay awake in bed, monitoring the muffled sounds coming up from the kitchen for any change in register that might signal the end. The end: expected and dreaded yet also, in a small, hard way, longed for. But the rapid cadences of blame and recrimination always rallentandoed into a truce, followed, a few minutes later, by her mother’s face at the bedroom door, flushed with guilt and tenderness.

*‘Darling. All couples argue. There’s nothing to worry about, I promise. Your father and I love each other. And we love you. Love you love you love you.’*

Roz perched her small frame on the edge of the bed. Her daughter’s large-lidded eyes – Bertrand’s eyes – were round and wide, a precious glimpse of the little girl who had long since morphed into this difficult, untouchable half-woman.

And so the silence continued, as if it might go on for ever. But later, when Tamsin looked back at that time, she would recall very clearly a sense of anticipation. A firework mutely blossoming, Concorde ripping noiselessly across the sky: those vacuum-packed, suspended seconds before the bang.

## Three

Five fifteen on a Tuesday evening in late November: the crowded southbound Bakerloo line. Tamsin Jarvis, now seventeen, still very skinny, had a seat. Even better, she had the end seat. This meant she could lean right away from the woman on her left and press her hot cheek onto the pane of glass dividing the seats from the standing section. She had shrugged off her parka at Marylebone to reveal a faded black Nirvana T-shirt bearing the slogan ‘flower sniffin kitty pettin baby kissin corporate rock whore’. In her lap, a book of Beethoven piano sonatas, open at No. 21. Tamsin had been tracing the melody with a chewed-down fingernail, pleasantly conscious of the incongruity: a grungy-looking teenage girl absorbed in classical music, performing the indisputable miracle of turning black marks on the page into sounds in her head.

She didn’t notice the suitcase until the train was pulling out of Piccadilly Circus. It was a pine-green, hard-shelled case with wheels and an extendable handle, pushed up against the other side of the glass panel. How long had it been there? At Charing Cross, she looked to see if somebody claimed it. People jostled past it on their way out, irritated by the obstacle. A small woman with a scrappy high ponytail banged her knee on it and let out a bleat of pain. The woman scowled around for the owner, but no one came forward.

Almost as soon as the train had left the station, it stopped. Tamsin looked at the suitcase. Then through the window behind her at the tunnel blackness with its dirty arcana of wires and pipes. Then back at the suitcase. Someone was watching her: a tall boy about her own age, with broad shoulders and something slightly Asian, Chinese or Japanese maybe, about the eyes. He was standing in the middle of the carriage, holding the handrail with both hands, elbows flexed as if about to do a chin-up.

The boy nodded towards the suitcase.

‘Is that yours?’

Tamsin shook her head. ‘Is it yours?’ she asked, stupidly.

‘No.’ The boy leaned forward and tapped the shoulder of an older man in a pale grey trench coat. ‘Excuse me, sir: does that case belong to you?’ His voice was respectful and refined, the accent upper class without a hint of arrogance.

The man frowned, shook a no, turned back to his paper.

Tamsin and the boy each read the same thoughts in the other’s face. When the train jolted, they both jumped. But it was just a false start; another jerk and they were moving again. Tamsin looked away, suddenly sheepish. No one else seemed concerned about the case; surely they were both being paranoid.

But her gaze was drawn back. Tamsin’s mind played forward to the blast, the train carriage crumpled like a Coke can. Though of course, she wouldn’t see that. She was sitting next to the suitcase; she would be killed outright. *Tamsin Jarvis, daughter of the conductor Bertrand Jarvis, was killed outright in the attacks of 25 November.* Unless the pane of glass was thick enough to protect her, just to begin with. Maybe it would shatter, or melt down onto her, sticking her clothes to her skin...

At Embankment, the same thing again: one lot of passengers shuffling off, the next lot starting to push their way on prematurely. And all the time the suitcase squatting there, unclaimed. At the last minute, Tamsin stood up and burrowed to the exit. Two seconds later the tall boy followed her out. Neither of them said anything.

In the bustle of the platform, Tamsin felt their fears start to shrink into silliness. The boy headed decisively for the help-point phone, only to find it was broken. As they discussed what to do, their convictions gave way to embarrassment. At last Tamsin said, quite firmly, that she thought they had both overreacted.

The boy laughed nervously. ‘Right. Bloody hell. Don’t know about you, but I could really do with a drink.’

‘I was meant to be meeting friends in Camberwell...’ She looked up at him. There was a charming, improbable smattering of freckles across the bridge of his very straight nose. ‘But yes, a drink would be lovely, yes.’

He held out his hand, smiling for the first time. ‘I’m Chris.’

On the escalator, Tamsin felt the elation she associated with playing truant, but there was something else, too: an intimacy thrown over them first by fear and now, increasingly, foolishness. Yet at the entrance to the station, they both paused and breathed in deeply, tasting concrete in the damp November air. The world was newly sweet.

Chris took her to Gordon’s Wine Bar on Villiers Street. ‘A real gem of a place,’ he said loudly, as they made their way down the little stone staircase. The bar had low-vaulted ceilings and red candles stuck into old wine bottles, each with a dusty ruff of stalactites. The clientele was mostly male and middle-aged; but there were also some groups of younger drinkers playing for sophistication, and a fair-haired couple with matching hiking boots and a *Rough Guide*. Tamsin was nervous about her fake ID – thus far, she’d done most of her underage drinking in Camden pubs – so Chris, already eighteen, went up to buy the drinks. As she waited, she gazed round at the framed newspaper clippings, the cobwebs (evidently encouraged), the line-up of bottles behind the bar.

Tamsin was indulging in an old, childish game of deciding which instrument each wine bottle would be – some were square-shouldered like violins, others sloped gently from the neck like double basses – when the fear she’d felt in the tube rose up again. What if, at this very moment, people were dying because she and Chris had been too – too what? too selfish? too shy? – to act?

‘How will we know what’s happened?’ she asked Chris, as he placed a little carafe of red and two glasses on the table in front of her.

Chris shrugged. He started to pour out their wine, still standing, not meeting her eyes.

‘It was definitely nothing.’ He sat down opposite her, tucking his long legs under the table with difficulty. Tamsin waited for him to settle, then lifted her wine glass and tipped her head to one side.

‘Cheers.’

The clink of their glasses registered as a punctuation mark. Somehow, it had been agreed that neither of them would mention the suitcase again.

Their conversation was unremarkable: where they lived, what A-levels, how many siblings. Hearing in each other’s voices the same expensive educations, he confessed, a little shyly, to Rugby (‘but on a bursary, you know’), she to St Paul’s. They ascertained that, aged fourteen, they had both been to the same teenage charity ball, where a friend of Tamsin’s had kissed a record twenty-five boys in the space of two hours. Perhaps Chris had been one of them? Tamsin described her friend: tallish, dyed blonde hair, heavy eyeliner? Chris didn’t think so; the girl he had kissed that night – the first girl he had ever kissed – was a brunette with traintracks. And so to kisses, first kisses, bad kisses, aborted kisses, swapping horror stories with that world-weariness peculiar to late adolescence, dismissive and vaunting at the same time. Tamsin referenced a one-night stand, ever-so-casually, and watched Chris’s eyes widen briefly, telling against his knowing nod.

‘Right.’ Tamsin emptied the last of the carafe into Chris’s glass. ‘My turn,’ she said, bending for her handbag. ‘Wait a moment ... here it is ... no, *fuck*. Fuck, I was sure I had twenty quid.’

Chris was already on his feet. ‘It’s fine, really, I’ve got plenty – I’ll get it. Please, allow me,’ he added as Tamsin made to protest. ‘It would be my pleasure.’

These last words seemed an absurd imitation of someone older. Tamsin started to laugh; but when she saw the discomfort in Chris’s face, she softened the laugh to a giggle that was inescapably flirtatious – becoming, without quite meaning to, a girl being bought a drink by a boy who wanted to buy it for her.

He came back with a bottle this time. ‘Friend of mine, he did a gap year working in Bordeaux, just picking grapes to start with, bloody hard work ... anyway, we’re meant to be tasting, what was

it, blackberries, and some sort of spice, oh, it was clove, and something else a bit weird – leather, I think...’

Tamsin watched Chris’s mouth while he talked. She was trying to work out whether she fancied him. He was undoubtedly good looking and, to her, a little exotic – his Japanese father, his Hong Kong childhood. But in spite of Chris’s charm and the off-beat romance of this impromptu date, she wasn’t entirely sure she liked him. There was something in him that couldn’t function without outside approval. He wasn’t a show-off, exactly, but he needed an audience.

(Later, she would forget this. In the edited version, only the romance would remain.)

Chris’s hand hovered near the book of Beethoven Sonatas, now lying on the table underneath Tamsin’s bag. ‘Uh, may I?’

He opened it gently. ‘All these notes ... I tried once, but I was no good. Think I just about made Grade 5.’ He shook his head in admiration. ‘I’d love to hear you play. Seriously, I think musicians must be the closest thing to angels.’

For a moment Tamsin thought it was a bad pick-up line; but one look at Chris’s face told her he was in earnest. She decided that she didn’t fancy him.

‘Are you going to be a professional?’

Tamsin nodded, then remembered to add a modest grimace. ‘If I make it. It’s pretty tough.’

Chris was impressed. ‘What about the rest of your family? Are they musical, too?’

‘My – yes, my mum’s a singer, actually. And my sister plays the oboe.’ Tamsin found herself reluctant to say who her father was.

Chris’s thoughts were rather more straightforward. He did fancy Tamsin, and he wanted to kiss her. She was tough and edgy and – a word that had powerful mystique for Chris – *artistic*. He was entranced. The more they talked, the more certain he felt that they had been brought together by fate and irresistible mutual attraction. Everything about the evening seemed tinged with inevitability.

They had had nothing to eat. By 9 p.m. when they stood up to leave, they were both fairly drunk. On the stairs, Chris dared a hand in the small of her back. Not wanting to embarrass him, Tamsin let it stay there; though she had a dim premonition that this would mean more serious embarrassment for both of them later.

But later never came. As soon as they reached ground level, Tamsin’s phone began to buzz.

‘Shit, loads of missed calls. Sorry—’

Tamsin wedged the phone between ear and hunched right shoulder, leaving her hands free to fumble with the zip on her parka. Chris could hear the low chirrup of the dial tone.

‘Mummy? Mummy, is that you?’

Her face went tight as she listened. ‘Okay. I’m coming home.’

Tamsin pocketed her phone and started on the zip for a second time. ‘I have to go.’ Her voice was hard and strangely adult, different from any other tone he’d heard her use that evening.

‘Is everything all right?’ Something warned him not to touch her again.

‘I can’t explain. Sorry. I have to go.’ It was a pedestrian-only road but she checked for cars out of habit, three quick pecks of the head. Chris called after her but she was already gone, over the street and into the bright tiled mouth of the tube station.

He didn’t have her phone number. He didn’t even know her surname.

And so for Chris – who never had the chance to discover that Tamsin didn’t want to be kissed – the evening retained all the allure of unrealised possibility. Time magnified her charms in his memory. Tamsin informed his type; he looked for her height in other women, her slightness, those small, widely spaced breasts that had barely nudged the fabric of her T-shirt. To say he thought about her constantly would be an exaggeration, but she was, in a sense, always there – as an ideal, a measure against which everyone else was found wanting.

\* \* \*

On the phone, her mother had been unintelligible. Tamsin assumed she had somehow uncovered the affair, but in fact, her father had simply announced that he was leaving and that he had been planning to leave for years. The trigger? Serena's sixth-form scholarship to the Purcell School: Bertrand had wanted to wait until both his daughters had a secure future ahead of them before disrupting their home environment. Now that Serena's musical career was more or less assured, he felt free to leave.

This was what he was explaining to his wife, for the fourth time that evening, as Tamsin came through the front door.

'My god. My fucking god.' Roz's voice was muted with disbelief. 'You actually think you've been *considerate*, don't you, you *shit*—'

In the hall, Tamsin hung up her coat; she felt as if she were preparing for an interview. The house smelled like it always did: wood polish, old suppers, stargazer lilies, home.

When she stepped into the sitting room, both her parents turned to look at her. Her mother was dressed, incongruously, in a ritzy black cocktail number with a swishy little fringe of bugle beads around the hem. Her usual five-inch heels had been kicked off; standing in her bare feet on the thick carpet, Roz looked very small indeed. The corn on her middle right toe shone in the lamplight.

'Your father's leaving us. He can't wait to get away, apparently. He's been sick of us for years, apparently.'

Bertrand took a step towards his wife, one hand raised. 'Roz, that's not fair, that's not what I said—'

'But luckily for you, he's deigned to stick around till now. So as *not to disrupt your home environment*. Now, isn't that nice of him, Tamsin? Aren't you going to say thank you to your father?'

'Roz, this is between you and me. I won't have you using Tam like this—'

'He says there's no one else, but I almost wish there was. I almost wish there was.' Roz fought down a knot of hysteria. 'I think I could understand that better than this, this *dismissal*—'

'Valerie Fischer.' Tamsin kept her voice as clear and steady as she could. Even in her anger, she was aware of the need to enjoy this longed-for consummation. 'It's Valerie Fischer, isn't it, Dad?'

Father and daughter held one another's gaze like lovers for three, four, five seconds before they remembered Roz.

She was motionless, a visionary staring through them to a strange new past.

\* \* \*

From then on, everything was different. Roz was unable even to choose between red and green pesto without consulting her daughter. There was no longer any question of Tamsin leaving home; Roz needed her too much. She attended the Royal College of Music as planned, but stayed in her old childhood bedroom at home in Holland Park. After years of friction, mother and daughter were now inseparable. Tamsin acted as spokesperson, supplying all the fury and indignation and disgust that Roz herself couldn't seem to muster.

'Tamsin's my sellotape,' Roz would tell her friends. 'She's the only thing holding me together.' She gave her mirthless laugh.

Tamsin's friends were wary of her, unnerved by the thought of her long silence. She was newly inscrutable. She even looked different: gone were the Nirvana T-shirts and the belly-button rings. At first, her new role – as her mother's counsellor, comforter, guard dog – felt like dressing up. Then she became it, and it grew harder and harder to remember a time when she and Roz hadn't been bound to each other in this way. The scar above her belly button faded, from aubergine through lavender to a little raised sickle-shape the colour of clotted cream.

It was around this time that Roz retired from singing, after twenty-four years as a soprano soloist. When she and Bertrand first met, Roz had been a rising star in the opera world, already well known for her unexpectedly powerful vibrato. Her size was her USP: it seemed extraordinary that such a small person could make such a big noise with apparently so little effort. It also helped that she

was beautiful. ‘Aha. Roz Andersen, the siren with the siren,’ Bertrand had quipped when they were introduced. Two weeks before their wedding, *The Sunday Times* ran a picture of Roz on the cover of the colour supplement, playing Desdemona in a big-budget ROH production of Verdi’s *Otello*. Then Bertrand’s career really took off, and together they became moderately famous. They were the golden-haired golden couple of music, rarely absent from *Tatler*.

Cigarettes had always been an occasional pleasure for Roz, a guilty secret kept carefully hidden from the agency that insured her voice. After the break-up, though, she took up smoking in earnest. A pack a day, then two packs. Everyone was worried. Roz lost count of the times she was warned about ruining her voice. Her response was unvarying: ‘I know. I don’t care.’ She took grim solace in this deliberate self-sabotage, which seemed to her to correspond with the magnitude of Bertrand’s crime.

(In fact, Roz’s voice was going anyway. Killing it off with a nicotine addiction induced by the trauma of separation was marginally preferable to watching her reputation fall into a slow, age-related decline.)

It was Tamsin, with her own unlimited supply of anger, who finally persuaded her mother to convert grief into rage. After three months of crying and smoking, Roz put on her sequined Louboutins and climbed up onto the roof of Bertrand’s precious Merc, with a steely Tamsin and two fearful, admiring neighbours (both women) looking on. The next day, she distributed his wine cellar amongst her friends.

During the divorce process the *Daily Mail* got in touch, hoping for photographs. Together, Roz and Tamsin sifted through two decades’ worth of holiday snaps to find the perfect pose: Bertrand on the beach, off-duty, paunch relaxed, clutching a can of Boddingtons. The amphitheatre of his gut. In a second photograph he and his moobs reclined on a deckchair. A third showed him sad-arsed under a beach shower, muffin-tops slopping over the waistband of his designer trunks. The *Mail* ran all three. The headline was ‘Conductor in the Odium’.

When Roz moved out, Tamsin moved with her. Bertrand offered to pay the rent on a separate flat, closer to the Royal College; but this, like all his attempts at rapprochement, was met by the cool, almost professional hatred that had come to define Tamsin’s relations with him.

There were no boyfriends during the Royal College years. On her one, brief visit to Roz’s therapist, in the immediate aftermath of the divorce, Tamsin had been diagnosed with ‘trust issues’. ‘That’s unoriginal,’ Tamsin had told the shrink, feeling herself equally unoriginal even as she said it: the privileged rich kid from a broken home, wisecracking back to her jaded psych. Since then, several of her friends had suggested the same thing – that her father’s behaviour made it hard for her to have any faith in men. Tamsin had another explanation: the Royal College boys simply weren’t to her taste. They were too precious, too aware of their own talent. She slept with a couple of them, but more out of a sense of obligation to a hedonistic student lifestyle than any real desire. Mostly, though, she was at home with Roz, or working at her piano.

Occasionally she still thought about the boy on the train. The faint aversion was gone. She remembered only that he had been good looking, and that there had been wine, and candlelight, and an exhilarating sense of adventure. Most of all she remembered herself, with the disconcerting feeling she was remembering someone else.

Then she graduated from the College, fell in love with a history teacher several years her senior, and forgot about Chris completely.

\* \* \*

When Tamsin was nineteen, her shoulders lost their angles; her arms and legs filled out; her nose and jaw took on a solidity that was unmistakably Bertrand’s. Her hair darkened to his exact shade of dirty gold, and even her newly swollen breasts appeared to belong more to her father’s side of the family than her mother’s.

Alarmed by the weight gain, Tamsin went to see her GP. She certainly wasn’t fat, but she was a lot bigger than she had been six months ago. Was it the Pill? Dr Lott didn’t think so. She scrolled

briskly back up through her notes, rows of Listerine-green data on a convex black screen giving their laconic account of Tamsin's life. Menstruation had started late, hadn't it? This was probably just the tail-end of a mildly delayed puberty. 'It happens sometimes. Nothing to be worried about. You're a healthier weight for your height now, actually. It's really not a problem.'

But it was. The mirror gave her back her father's face, leonine, handsome, hated.

## Four

The history teacher was called Callum Dempster. He and Tamsin met in the canteen of St Timothy's, the East London comprehensive where Callum was deputy head of humanities. Newly graduated from the Royal College, Tamsin was playing keyboard in an Arts Council-funded workshop designed to introduce children from disadvantaged backgrounds to classical music. Callum was embarrassed that he'd never heard of her famous father; she was delighted.

After five years at Cambridge, one year in Berlin and nearly a decade in London, Callum's Glaswegian accent was as strong as it had been when he left home. He hadn't consciously held on to it, but he'd never tried to lose it, either: in his experience, it had always been a social advantage. At Cambridge, many of his privately educated peers felt reassured by his background. If someone like Callum could make it from a high rise on the banks of the Clyde to rooms in King's, then the system wasn't entirely unfair. He also added colour. Making assumptions based chiefly on *Trainspotting*, people would talk to him about drugs – only to learn that he didn't even smoke. But a paracriminal prestige had clung to him anyway. Callum was tough, Callum was authentic, Callum was somehow more real than anyone who came from Wiltshire or Surrey or Hampstead.

Tamsin was a member of the Socialist Workers Party – something Callum teased her about so mercilessly that, six months into their relationship, she stopped going to the meetings. But she still read the email newsletters, and Callum still represented, for her, a vague yet unequivocally positive concept she called 'the Real World'.

So she was disappointed when he landed his dream job: teaching Classics at a prep school near Chalfont St Peter, about an hour's fast cycle ride outside London.

'I don't understand why you don't want to make a difference. Those children at your school, what's going to happen to them if people like you give up on them?' She was washing up, something she only did when she was angry.

Callum explained, patiently, that he wasn't making a difference at St Timothy's, he was just marking time. 'And anyhow, Tam, even if I could make a difference, it would never be big enough to justify how shite the job is. I'm not interested in crowd control. I'm interested in teaching. I'm not being defeatist here, I'm being realistic. And honest. I want to enjoy my life.'

The job at the prep school, Denham Hall, provided him with small classes of well-behaved children and a salary that meant he could finally put down a deposit on a flat. In the long holidays, he had time to start writing a book he'd been thinking about since his Masters: a study of the culture of combat in Roman society, and its impact on modern conceptions of warfare.

Once again, his accent came in handy. It was as classless at Denham Hall as it had been at St Timothy's. In both schools, it won him unworked-for respect.

\* \* \*

Callum's Cambridge friends had long since abandoned their Braudel and taken jobs as bankers, lawyers, management consultants. All of them were home-owners; and, with a few exceptions (Will Heatherington, devoted playboy; Colin Warner, probably gay; Leo Goulding, fledging neurosurgeon and workaholic), all of them were married.

And then Leo got engaged, to a pretty, plump anaesthetist called Bex. They celebrated with drinks at their new house in Herne Hill. Tamsin went to the party with Callum, a little reluctantly. She was eight years younger than him and she found his clever, older friends intimidating.

She also resented the ridiculous fancy dress that Callum's friends found so amusing. It seemed absurd that all these intelligent people, now mostly in their thirties, should want to make themselves foolish in this way. Tonight's theme was A&E: many guests had simply come in lab coats or pilfered scrubs, but there were also plenty of full-blown head wounds, pregnancies, crutches and stethoscopes. The room was decorated with crepe bandages and surgical masks. Even the playpen set up in the

corner for the few couples who already had babies had been draped with a Red Cross flag. Tamsin had let Callum stick a plaster on her cheek, but that was as far as she was prepared to go.

‘No no no that’s *precisely* the problem. The privileging of a university degree over all other forms of higher education,’ said a short girl wearing a tight white tank top covered in fake blood. Tamsin had met her several times before but she couldn’t remember her name. ‘If that doesn’t encourage elitism, then...’

Leo, their host, shook his head impatiently. ‘I just don’t think we can begin to understand what the world might look like to someone without certain basic advantages. And I’m not just talking financially.’

Tamsin had been stuck in this conversation for over twenty minutes and she was bored. Neither the girl, whom she didn’t like, nor Leo, whom she did, had thought to ask her opinion at any point. She went to drink her wine but her glass was empty. Callum was nowhere to be seen.

‘Tamsin Jarvis! Looking as ravishing as ever!’

Will Heatherington inserted himself between the girl and Tamsin and deposited a loud kiss on each of Tamsin’s cheeks. He was one of Callum’s closest friends; for three years at Cambridge, they had been on the university water polo team together.

For once, Tamsin was pleased to see Will. She actually knew him independently of Callum: his family had lived near hers in Holland Park, and Tamsin had encountered Will at intervals throughout her childhood, mostly at their parents’ parties. She remembered him as a boisterous teenager, teasing her unkindly about her skinny legs. Now thirty-two, Will was good-looking in the most obvious way: tall, with naturally olive skin, glossy dark blond hair, Bambi eyes and strong cheekbones. He could have been a mid-nineties boy-band pin-up. Only the full mouth was out of register. There was a hint of the predator about his pout, a complacency that was somehow aggressively expectant.

‘Tamsin, you’re dry, we can’t have that.’ Will produced a bottle of champagne and started to fill her glass. These days he was scrupulously polite to Tamsin; but there was always something in his tone that gave her the impression he was secretly laughing at her. ‘Hope you don’t mind, Leo, I invited some reinforcements for later. Including two hot lesbians,’ he went on, turning to the girl in the blood-stained tank top.

‘I’m not gay any more,’ she said.

Will grinned and ruffled her carefully styled hair, which was already sparked with grey at the sides. ‘I’ll believe that when I see it, darling.’

‘Reinforcements, yes, that’s fine,’ said Leo, detaching himself from the little group. ‘Sorry – got to go rescue Bex – she’s been cornered by those orthopods she was too nice not to invite—’

‘Sooooo,’ said Will, resting one forearm on Tamsin’s shoulder and the other on the un-lesbian lesbian’s, as if they were all jolly chums. ‘Isn’t this nice? Leo and Bex, the beating of two tender hearts as one, the unimpeded marriage of true minds, etcetera, etcetera?’

‘Mmmm,’ said Tamsin, who never quite knew how to respond to Will’s florid speaking style.

‘Talking of true love,’ he went on, ‘has my secretary managed to keep her paws off your boyfriend?’

‘Leah’s not your secretary,’ Tamsin replied evenly. She was remembering why she disliked Will so much.

‘Leah?’ asked the un-lesbian, suddenly interested. ‘As in Jonno-and-Baz-in-one-weekend Leah?’

‘The same.’ Will bowed his head.

‘Has she been trying it on with Callum?’ the girl asked Tamsin. She looked amused.

‘No, she’s just his flatmate.’

‘What, like they *live* together?’

‘Mm-hmm.’

The girl raised one dark eyebrow. ‘And how do you feel about that?’

Leah was a PR officer at Will's law firm, referred to by Will either as his secretary or 'our resident serial shagger'. But despite the girl's reputation, Tamsin didn't feel threatened. In fact, Tamsin never felt threatened by anyone where Callum was concerned: he adored her, and she knew it. Now, though, under the pressure of scrutiny, Tamsin found herself incapable of communicating this conviction. She took an overlarge gulp of champagne and blinked to clear the tears that the fizz brought to her eyes.

'Leah's cool, we don't see that much of her, but she seems cool,' she heard herself say, lamely. The un-lesbian stared at her for a moment, then turned back to Will.

'I heard she fucked Charlie Huffman.'

Tamsin held out her empty glass for more champagne. She was, if possible, having even less fun than she'd anticipated.

Callum, on the other hand, had been having a wonderful evening. He was not generally prone to sentiment, but tonight, fondly, tipsily, surely, he felt everyone he loved in the world was here, in this room. There was little Jake Simonson, excitedly telling everyone about his first architectural commission. There were Victor and Caitlin, a serious, hard-working pair of actuaries, deeply bronzed and full of stories from the year-long trip to India that everyone thought they'd never make; Zander Pownall, messing about in the playpen with his two-year-old son, no trace of the long depression he'd suffered in his mid-twenties; Antoine Namani, another neurosurgeon, making everyone laugh with his medically inflected rap ('I'm malignant, you're benign, when I lay down a rhyme, I metastasise straight into yo' spine'). And, of course, Tamsin, his Tamsin, beautiful tonight in a long wrap skirt tied high at the waist, her sulkiness visible only to him – which in itself felt like something precious. It was, thought Callum fuzzily, a roomful of happy endings.

Fetching a fresh beer from the drinks table, Callum noticed a tall man he'd never met before, dressed in a vamped-up nurse's outfit: tiny white skirt, choppy blonde wig, lumpily stuffed fake breasts. Under a grainy layer of foundation, the ghosts of several large freckles were visible. It was easily the most outrageous costume of the evening. When Callum complimented him on it, the man thanked him by lifting up the skirt to display a pair of women's knickers, his penis squashed obscenely behind the sheer fabric.

'Practically standard issue these days,' the nurse-man said cheerfully. 'No self-respecting officer seen dead at a party without see-through panties.'

'You're in the army?' Callum was immediately interested.

'Yes, sir. Just finished at Sandhurst,' said the man with irrepressible pride. He tugged off the wig, revealing a full head of closely-cropped black hair, which he proceeded to scratch with the innocent abandon of a dog shaking itself after a swim.

'And how did you find Sandhurst?'

'Still recovering from the final exercise. It was a total CF.'

'Is that the ten-day one? Diamond Victory?'

'Dynamic Victory. It's a beast.' The boy looked impressed. 'How do you know that?'

Callum smiled, pleased with the compliment. 'I'm writing a book, a sort of military history thing ... Sorry – what's a "CF"?'

'CF, charlie foxtrot – means "cluster fuck", basically a major beasting. Also a verb, as in, I got cluster-fucked. Which you do, at Sandhurst. That's the whole point.'

The two men laughed and clinked beer bottles properly this time, acknowledging their approval of one another.

'Is it true that you lot are using "muggle" for "civilian" now?'

They were fifteen minutes into a discussion on military slang when Callum noticed Tamsin watching them from across the room with an uninterpretable expression on her face. Callum waved her over, eager to show off his new find.

'Here, Tam, come on, I want you to meet—'

‘Chris.’ Tamsin said the name at the same time as Callum. ‘It is Chris, isn’t it?’

‘Have we...?’ The boy was embarrassed. Then his soft mouth pulled tight in an enormous grin. ‘My god – it’s Tamsin!’

‘Do you know each other?’ Callum asked, unnecessarily.

‘I can’t believe you recognised me under all this shit!’ Chris was still grinning broadly. ‘How do you guys—’

‘Callum’s my boyfriend.’ As if to illustrate this, Tamsin kissed Callum on the cheek. There was a longish pause. ‘So ... what are you up to these days, Chris?’

‘Well, actually, I’m in the army—’ Chris began, but he was interrupted by a violent thump on his shoulder. Leo’s brother Edwin, a small, smooth-faced man with thick dark eyebrows, had come to claim his friend.

‘Sorry to interrupt, but we’ve been waiting for this bastard to come and do shots with us for over half an hour.’

‘Great to meet you.’ Chris shook Callum’s hand vigorously. ‘And – and to see you too, Tamsin,’ he added, looking slightly confused.

‘Right fucker, your first one’s a triple,’ said Edwin, as he marched Chris over to their friends.

‘Where do you know him from?’ Callum asked Tamsin.

She looked vague. ‘Ages ago. I don’t know him at all, really.’ Tamsin’s unusually large eyelids gave her face a sleepy, sensual expression. When she had been drinking it sometimes seemed to Callum as if it cost her a physical effort to keep her eyes from closing altogether.

‘Callum, you dirty great faggot, where have you been all my life?’ It was Will again, pulling Callum into a back-slapping hug. Tamsin made a face at Callum over Will’s shoulder, but allowed herself to be led off to meet Will’s ‘reinforcements’, who were busy re-stocking the drinks table with stronger stuff. The playpen was being packed away.

\* \* \*

Tamsin woke from a dream about Bolognese sauce to the smell of Bolognese sauce. Then she remembered it was Sunday, and the smell modulated to bacon. She squinted at the other side of the bed. Callum was already up. Hoping to defer her hangover for another five minutes, she pulled the duvet over her head and settled back down into the pillow.

The flush of the toilet woke her again. Tamsin came out from under the duvet and the smell adjusted itself for a third and final time. The door to the little en suite bathroom was ajar.

‘Callum. God. You could at least shut the door,’ she croaked.

Callum emerged from the bathroom with an apologetic grin. He opened the window, filling the room with the fumes of the Edgware Road and the sickly strawberry scent from the shisha bar on the ground floor.

‘Shit, I feel rough.’ Tamsin pressed three fingers to each temple and glared up at Callum. ‘Why aren’t you in more pain?’

Callum sat down on the bed. ‘Because I wasn’t half as full of it as you were, you nugget.’ He leaned in for a kiss, but Tamsin clamped her lips shut.

‘Mm-mmm.’ She shook her head. ‘I don’t taste good. And I’m not kissing you while this room still stinks. En suite. Jesus. Maybe the least romantic proposition *ever*.’

‘All right, all right,’ he laughed, running a hand over his khaki-coloured hair, which immediately sprang back to attention. ‘I’ll get us some coffee.’

Callum came back with coffee, toast and yesterday’s newspapers, the cutlery jittering on the tray as he bent to settle it in Tamsin’s lap. He perched on the windowsill with his own mug, watching Tamsin through steam lit white by the morning sun. Her loose cotton vest sagged in the middle and he could see the two parallel lines marking the start of her breasts. In the beginning, Tamsin had been embarrassed by her breasts, which were full and heavy and sat low on her chest. It had taken Callum a

long time to get her to sleep without her bra on, and even longer to persuade her to stand up naked in front of him. Her left breast was noticeably larger than her right, something she hated and he adored.

‘You perving?’ asked Tamsin, without looking up from her paper.

‘Who, me? Never.’

There was a longish silence. Then Callum said, ‘Chris seems like a nice guy.’ The words had a slightly processed, unnatural timbre. This was because Callum had been preparing to say them ever since Tamsin woke up.

‘Mmm?’ Tamsin glanced up distractedly. ‘Oh yeah. Yeah, he does.’

‘How did you say you knew him?’

‘I didn’t say, did I?’ Now Tamsin put the paper down, frowning slightly. ‘I don’t remember if I said. I don’t think I did.’ She paused. ‘It was my first year at College. He was going out with a friend of mine for a bit. So I saw him a couple of times, through her. Then they broke up and I didn’t see him again. Until last night.’

Tamsin was surprised by both the lie and the facility with which she’d invented it.

‘Which friend?’ Callum wanted to know.

‘Girl called Kitty,’ Tamsin said. ‘Don’t think you ever met her.’

‘You didn’t know him biblically?’

‘What?’

‘Did you – sorry.’ Callum winced at his own question.

‘Christ, Callum!’ Tamsin shook her head in exasperation. ‘No. No I did not sleep with him.’

‘Okay. Sorry. Tam, I’m sorry. I just wondered. I don’t know why.’ Smiling sheepishly, Callum padded over to the bed and got in beside Tamsin.

‘Am I allowed to kiss you yet?’ he asked.

Tamsin put two fingers to his lips. ‘Only if you promise to stop being an idiot,’ she said, looking stern. ‘And be gentle, okay? My head *hurts*.’

Callum made a little growling noise and pretended to bite her fingers. Then he kissed her, very softly, on the upper lip. The blue-and-green-checked duvet had slipped halfway down the bed. Callum tugged it up over their shoulders and drew Tamsin towards him for a hug, tucking her head under his chin. Her hair smelled of Herbal Essences shampoo and Marlboro Lights.

‘I love you,’ Tamsin said to Callum’s collarbone. ‘I love you and I really should get up. I’m so behind with my practice it’s not even funny.’ She yawned and stretched, then drew in for another kiss. ‘Right. That’s it. I’m up.’

Callum lay with his hands behind his head and watched her dress. Halfway through the process – pale yellow cotton bra and faded jeans, no T-shirt – she went into the bathroom to clean her teeth and came back with a thick white blob of moisturiser above each corner of her upper lip. This was a preventative measure, talisman against the two deep lines flanking her father’s mouth. He watched her twisting the dome of her deodorant into her armpits. As she waited for it to dry, she held her arms away from her sides in a slightly simian pose. Callum knew all of this by heart and he loved it.

\* \* \*

On the way from Callum’s flat to the bus stop, Tamsin stopped between the Halal Fish’n’Chip shop and the Discount Drug Co. She wanted to undo it all, to go back and tell Callum the truth about Chris. She had never lied to him about anything like this before, and she wasn’t entirely sure why she had now.

But then, she thought, she had never told anyone about what happened – or rather, what didn’t happen – on the tube that day. At first, the enormity of her parents’ break-up had simply displaced everything around it. Later, when she remembered the incident, she felt no compulsion to turn it into an anecdote. As a little girl, one of Tamsin’s greatest pleasures was to eat an apple and throw away the core, in the knowledge that she was the first and last human being ever to set eyes on the sleek mahogany pips at its centre. A similar impulse had governed her silence on the subject of Chris and

the suitcase. The story formed a secret fold in the fabric of her life, and it seemed that to talk about it would be to spoil it, somehow.

Tamsin had been staring unseeingly into the window of the Discount Drug Co. – which, inexplicably, sold nothing even remotely pharmaceutical, just fake Gucci handbags and Louis Vuitton luggage sets. The salesman saw her looking and came to the door. ‘You want real leather, I give you good price.’

Tamsin shook her head and moved away. She couldn’t confess to Callum now. The fact that she’d lied in the first place would only create grounds for suspicion when really, she knew, there were none.

On the bus, the Edgware Road moved past jerkily, in instalments. Starbucks, M&S, Tesco Metro, traffic lights. Four newsagents all offering money transfer and mobile phone unlocking. More traffic lights. The man sitting in front of her got off at Paddington. Tamsin watched him down the street, thinking that his short, tight Afro had looked like a black version of one of those green kitchen scourers. She wondered whether it felt anything like a scourer, then wondered if that was a terrible thing to wonder. She realised that she’d never touched a black person’s hair and the thought suddenly seemed very shameful to her.

This was the sort of thing that bothered Tamsin. It also bothered her that she was twenty-five and still living with her mother in Notting Hill. Notting Hill itself bothered her. Taking the bus, she saw the Burberry hijabs and oil-black puffa jackets steadily giving way to faded denim and Havaiana flip flops. And then, when she got off, the walk down from the relative buzz of Pembridge Road into the hush of the side streets with their milk-white villas and dense green gardens. In central London, quiet like this has a direct correlation with money.

Quietest of all was Ashcombe Mews, where Tamsin lived with Roz, and, some of the time, her younger sister Serena (Beanie). Tamsin unlocked the door of Number 8 and stepped from the sunny street into the dark hallway. When her mother bought the house five years ago with the money from the divorce settlement, she had immediately painted all of the ground-floor rooms a rich midnight blue. She also coloured her long, naturally white-blonde hair black with a home-dye kit from Boots. *Colour therapy*, she had snapped at anyone who dared to wonder why. Then the dye grew out, leaving a ragged chevron of blonde and grey down the middle of her head. Smoking in dark glasses, Roz had looked like Ozzy Osbourne.

All this was before she discovered her new vocation. It was her friend Meredith Sykes (fifty-four, twice divorced, CEO of a successful lingerie chain) who first came up with the idea of the lectures. Initially, Roz was unconvinced. Her experience of heartbreak seemed too private to be of interest to anyone else. ‘But these are powerful universal tropes you’ve tapped into,’ Meredith had urged. ‘What you did to Bertrand – people dream about that sort of stuff all the time, but you actually went ahead and did it. Of course people will want to hear about it.’

She was right. Within a year, Roz was giving several talks a month on the healing properties of revenge. The audiences were small and exclusive: she advertised solely through word of mouth, and charged a considerable amount for her time. Roz found she liked the work. It went some way to filling the gap that singing had left in her life. She was still performing, after all, and she was still very good at it: her audiences loved her for the way she tempered the rhetoric of empowerment with just the right amount of self-irony. Grateful clients would send her photographs and even videos of their own acts of retribution, which Roz incorporated into her PowerPoint slideshow. She was especially popular with divorce parties.

These days Roz’s hair was still black, but she had it done professionally now, by Errol at Matthew Hershington’s in Maida Vale. Every three weeks, Errol ‘curated’ her hair (his word) into an inky bob shaped steeply at the back. Tamsin had been the one to encourage these visits in the first place (‘You need to start looking after yourself, Mummy, spend some time on *you* for a change’), but

she didn't like the cut. It was too severe. Her mother's neck was unforgivingly exposed, rigged with tendons that longer hair had kept hidden. She looked harder, as well as older.

But Roz was not quite the indomitable ideal she endorsed in her lectures. Her anger, unlike Tamsin's, contained impurities. It kept reverting back to a baser metal: sadness.

Today Tamsin found her mother hunched over her laptop, engrossed in a website with a familiar mid-blue banner at the top of the page.

'Facebook? Mummy, what are you doing on there? Please don't tell me you've signed up, it's really naff when older people—'

'It's fine, I'm using a different name, she doesn't even know I'm looking.' Roz spoke quickly, with a low intensity to her voice that Tamsin dreaded.

'Who doesn't know you're looking?' Tamsin asked, although there could be only one answer.

'Tammy, look, it's *her* page. I can see everything about her – all her photos, all the stupid things she posts on her board—'

'Wall,' Tamsin murmured, bending forward so that she could see over her mother's shoulder.

'God, but she's a shameless self-promoter,' Roz went on. 'Every bloody concert ... here, listen to this: "Glyndebourne rehearsals start tomorrow, so excited! Adès might just be my number one all-time hero, can't believe I get to work with him!" Who cares? Why does she think anyone's interested in her stupid little life?'

'Okay, that's enough. Let me have it.' Tamsin put out a hand for the laptop.

Roz hesitated, momentarily defiant; but then her shoulders sagged in defeat and she relinquished the laptop meekly. She applied her index fingers to the corners of her eyes to stop two tears that were forming there. 'I just don't understand how he can bear to be with someone like that. Why her? Why *her*?'

'What *I* don't understand,' said Tamsin, grimly, 'is why you're still asking yourself these pointless questions. No, really, I don't get it. How can you still be giving headspace to someone who treated you so badly? Think about it, Roz' – Tamsin reserved her mother's name for moments like this – 'it just doesn't make any sense, does it? Well, does it?'

They had arrived, with practised speed, at an old impasse in an old argument. Roz shrugged helplessly. She couldn't explain why she still thought about Bertrand so much. Her daughter's fierce logic left no room for the fact that he was there in her dreams every other night, being kind.

Tamsin raked her shoulder-length hair away from her face with her fingertips and held it scrunched at the back of her head. 'Sometimes it's almost as if you've forgotten what he did,' she said, sitting down heavily on the sofa next to Roz.

These were the opening lines of a story they both knew very well indeed, a story that began with the basic facts of Bertrand's betrayal and ended, by way of a list (not comprehensive) of the lies he had told, with a series of exhortations to emotional strength and independence. The trajectory of her mother's response – from silent tears through increasingly resolute sniffs to the desired declarations of outrage and contempt – was as familiar to Tamsin as the story itself.

'Shall I tell you something, Tamsin? I'm *glad* that what happened happened. I really am. To think that I lived with a monster like that for so many years with *no idea* of his capacity for *cruelty*—'

When the initial fervour of her renewed indignation had subsided, Roz gripped her daughter tightly around the waist and leaned her head sideways onto Tamsin's shoulder.

'What would I do without you.' It was a statement, not a question.

'Mmmm.' Tamsin's features contracted briefly in a frown her mother couldn't see. Then she stood up and smiled brightly at Roz. 'Right. Cup of tea and a cigarette?'

Serena was in the kitchen, eating a bowl of artisan ravioli.

'That stuff's expensive, you know,' Tamsin told her sister as she filled the kettle. 'You're not meant to eat it like it's cereal.'

'So?' said Serena through a mouthful of the pasta. 'It's not like you paid for it.'

Serena was wearing nothing but a navy-blue polo shirt belonging to an old boyfriend. On her tiny frame, it functioned as a dress: the sleeves reached past her elbows, the hem skimmed her pinkish knees. Like Roz, Serena was just five foot two. She had fine silvery-blond hair, which she wore pinned up high in a smooth, glossy twist. Her top two front teeth protruded very slightly, resting behind her lower lip and pushing it forward into a permanent pout. All of this – the hair, the teeth, the twenty-three inch waist – was Roz’s. Roz was privately ashamed of how much more strongly she felt the genetic allegiance between herself and her younger daughter. But again and again, she found herself both comforted and moved by the perpetual surprise of this everyday miracle.

Tamsin pushed a cup of tea towards Roz, who was holding her mobile phone away from her at arm’s length like a hand mirror in order to read a text message. Her glasses were on the counter, within easy reach. Tamsin bit back her irritation at this and turned it instead on Serena.

‘What are you doing here, anyway?’ she wanted to know. Serena, who had none of Tamsin’s scruples about accepting Bertrand’s money, shared a town house in Clapham with three girlfriends. Generally, she only came home if she wanted Roz to look after her in the run-up to a big concert.

‘Nice to see you too. I had my driving test yesterday, didn’t I? And before you ask’ – Serena got up and scraped the last two ravioli into the bin – ‘I didn’t pass.’

‘Bad luck.’ Tamsin spoke without a trace of sympathy. ‘What happened?’

‘I ran over a squirrel.’

Tamsin laughed and some tea exploded out through her nose. She wiped her dripping face on her sleeve, still sniggering.

‘It’s not funny.’ Serena looked upset.

‘It is if you have a sense of humour.’

‘I don’t have time for this.’ Serena stalked across the reclaimed flagstones towards the door. ‘I’ve got to practise.’

Tamsin slumped into the chair where her sister had been sitting. In a vase at the centre of the table, six dying tulips formed a histrionic tableau, their heads hanging heavily from the s-bends of their stems. A few petals, faded from red to a weak tea brown, were stuck to the tabletop. From the music room came the sound of Serena warming up her reed in fast, staccato bursts.

Roz tucked her mobile phone into the pocket of her tight black jeans and sat down at the table next to Tamsin. ‘You could try to be a bit nicer to Beanie, Tam. She’s very disappointed. She really needed to pass that test.’

‘No, she didn’t. She lives in London. There are buses and tubes and pavements. She doesn’t *need* to drive.’

Tamsin was aware that this was the conversational equivalent of picking a newly formed scab, but she said it anyway. She scraped at one of the decomposing tulip petals with her thumbnail as she waited for the reply she didn’t want to hear.

‘Bean’s got a lot of touring coming up this summer. You know that.’ Her mother’s voice was maddeningly gentle. ‘Having a car would make her life a lot easier.’

‘Sure. Like it’s not easy enough already,’ said Tamsin, moving her hand out of reach of a solicitous pat.

‘Tammy. Look at me.’ Roz pulled her chair closer to the table. She felt slightly awkward, as she often did when called on to play mother to her eldest daughter. ‘It *is* easier for her. You *know* it’s a specialism, she’s a rare commodity. You’re one of an overwhelming majority. It was always going to be harder for you.’

This was an excuse that had long since lost its power to comfort Tamsin, even though, outwardly, it still made sense. Serena was a baroque musician; she played the recorder and the oboe d’amore. In the tiny, closed world of Early Music, she was a big talent. It was statistically much more difficult to make it as a concert pianist – as Tamsin was trying to do.

The real reason Tamsin wasn't making it, wasn't ever going to make it, was that although she was very good indeed, very good indeed wasn't quite good enough. Serena was more than good enough. She was indisputably the better musician. Roz's attempts to prevent this unacknowledged fact from coming between her two daughters were proving ineffective. Tamsin's envy, once furtive and self-censoring, no longer bothered to conceal itself. Increasingly, Serena felt the weight of this envy and resented it. It was boring for her to have to downplay her successes the whole time. She was sick of being sensitive.

Tamsin rubbed a bit of petal between her thumb and middle finger and flicked it sulkily across the table. 'I don't care if she's got a concert, she can't have the music room all day. I do have work to do too, you know.' She pushed her chair back from the table with some force and stood up, annoyed by her own petulance yet unable to move away from it.

'Tammy—'

But her daughter was already gone. The kitchen door swung slowly shut behind her, muting the sound of Serena's playing.

\* \* \*

Two pints of Foster's, a gin and tonic, the best part of a bottle of wine, a bottle of Beck's, a triple shot of tequila, some more wine, a Jägerbomb, a pint of Stella and a good deal of whisky: it is hardly surprising that the following morning, Chris Kimura remembered very little about his encounter with Tamsin and Callum. In fact, he didn't remember it at all until he was on the train back to Bulford. Chris had spent the night at Edwin's house in Islington, waking early to the aftertaste of the raw onion garnish on one of Pitta the Great's finest doner kebabs. In the bathroom he vomited deliberately and efficiently. Fragments of the night before presented themselves to him as he showered, in no particular order: a taxi ride, a fight outside the kebab shop, Edwin trying to convince everyone to go to Spearmint Rhino, some girls on a bus. Brushing his teeth for the second time, Chris discovered a sadness in himself. He lowered the toothbrush and frowned at his foamy-mouthed reflection for a few moments, trying to locate the origin of this feeling. He spat, rinsed, brushed his teeth again. The onion prevailed.

No one else was up, so Chris let himself out as quietly as he could. He searched his iPod for a song to match the sadness, settling on 'The Boxer' by Simon and Garfunkel, from his playlist 'Bluemood 3'. Despite the title, it was not at all unusual for Chris to listen to this playlist when he was feeling perfectly happy. Chris's favourite songs dealt exclusively with heartbreak and loneliness and futility and loss. Although he had no personal experience of these conditions, the music people wrote about them seemed to him not only the most beautiful, but also the most vital and profound. Learning the piano as a child, he had been fascinated by the minor scales, by the way two simple semitone shifts suffused the dumb bright landscape of the major with a mysterious sorrow. He would practise his minor arpeggios very slowly with his right foot jammed down hard on the sustaining pedal, relishing the sweet ache that swelled at his sternum as the palimpsest of notes gathered and built. Now, at twenty-five, Chris never felt more alive than when a Chopin nocturne or a Coldplay ballad kindled this same unparsable tightness in his chest, full of heft and feeling, signifying *something*.

As the train was pulling out of Waterloo, he remembered talking to an affable man with a Scottish accent, and, much more clearly, that this man was the boyfriend of Tamsin. *Tamsin*. He hadn't recognised her at first. His instinctive reaction, last night and again now, was one of disappointment bordering on distaste. The Tamsin of his memory was otherworldly, sylphlike, radiantly blonde. Now that ideal had been declared invalid by this older girl with darker, coarser hair and large breasts that seemed to pull her shoulders round and down in sad submission to gravity. The lodestar he'd been fixed on for seven years had turned out to be a microlight.

As soon as Chris articulated these thoughts he felt ashamed of them. Then it occurred to him that Tamsin was no longer a girl but a Woman; and, having fitted a word to her new state, Chris found his old admiration returning with fresh force. A Woman. Of *course* that was what she was. He

felt a buzz of contempt for his younger self, obsessing over a teenage girl, unequal, till now, to the fuller, sweeter reality of Woman.

Oddly enough, the fact of her boyfriend concerned him less than the difference in her appearance had done. Chris was so accustomed to the idea of not having Tamsin that her unavailability felt somehow expected. Besides, the boyfriend's presence left him in a position that he immediately appreciated as both noble and poignant. The third Schubert Impromptu came on his headphones, then Jeff Buckley's 'Hallelujah'. By the end of 'Bittersweet Symphony' by the Verve, Chris was resolved: the only decent thing to do was nothing. He wouldn't ask Edwin for Tamsin's number. He would make no attempt to find her on Facebook. He would make the sacrifice, he thought, smiling a bittersweet smile at his own benevolence. He would leave their happiness untainted.

When his phone bleeped with a text message inviting him for supper next weekend, it took him several minutes to work out who 'Callum' was.

\* \* \*

Callum genuinely did want to see Chris again. The guy was smart, and he had plenty to say about the army. Mostly, though, the invitation was a gesture of goodwill towards Tamsin – to show he was sorry for being so suspicious, to prove that he had set aside his insecurity about Chris.

Jealousy is never rational; it zooms in, it enlarges, it distorts. In Callum's case, it focused solely on men that Tamsin had slept with. Occasionally this annoyed Tamsin. She found herself wanting to reason with him, to point out that the men she *hadn't* slept with – the what-ifs – were surely far more of a threat to him than the ones she had tried and rejected.

This, however, would have been cruel, and she knew it. When it came to Callum and sex, any sort of challenge was liable to be read as an attack.

There had been just one, ostensibly definitive discussion between the two of them on the subject of Callum's penis. A bold move on Callum's part, this conversation had taken place nearly three years ago, before they had ever even slept together.

It was their fourth date and they were walking along Grand Union Canal after a chilly picnic lunch on Primrose Hill. Inside a plum-coloured houseboat with apricot detailing, someone was frying onions.

Callum kicked a beech mast. It skittered along the path then dropped, almost noiselessly, into the canal. 'There's something you should know about me.'

'MI6?' Tamsin had joked, laughing at his sudden seriousness. She tried to imitate his accent. 'The neem's Deimpster, Cahllum Deimpster.'

'It's about sex.' Callum was straight-faced.

For a terrible moment, Tamsin wanted to giggle. She blew her nose instead. When she looked at Callum again, the urge had passed. 'Go on,' she said, doing her best to sound soberly mature.

'Well – it's difficult for me. I mean really difficult. Please' – he stopped her question with a look – 'hear me out, okay?'

He assured her that there would be sex, just not much of the traditional penetrative kind. His fingers and tongue, he said with a wry smile, were used to compensating for his incompetent penis. 'And it isn't totally defunct. It works maybe forty per cent of the time. Okay, maybe more like thirty. If only I'd kept the receipt for the damn thing.'

Tamsin understood that he was making a joke, but she couldn't laugh at the bitterness in his voice. Instead, she squeezed his hand and said, gently, 'Doesn't it depend a bit on who you're with? I mean, if you feel comfortable...' Already she was thinking that she would be the one to make the difference.

'Yes, actually.' Callum let out a dry chuckle. 'The more I care about a girl, the less likely it is to work. In fact, you can take it as a definite compliment if my penis hates you.'

Tamsin looked around; there was no one in sight apart from a lone dog-walker, over a hundred yards ahead of them and safely out of earshot. 'So ... can you ... masturbate?' she asked, bringing

out the last word with difficulty. Although she had slept with several people, this was the first time she had talked directly about sex with a man.

Callum nodded. 'That's never been an issue.'

A duck laughed in the distance.

'And can I – can I do that to you?'

'Perhaps. You can try.' He frowned. 'Look, it's the same deal. Sometimes it works. Mostly it doesn't.'

Then he had explained that his problem didn't entail infertility. He wanted her to have all the facts so that she could make an informed decision. 'I'm not asking for any guarantee of commitment or anything like that.' Callum coughed to clear the formality from his voice. 'I just didn't want you to find out and be shocked. And you see, the thing is, my last—' He stopped. He'd promised himself that he wasn't going to go into specifics. 'Some women have been cool with it, but others haven't. It's boring for both of us if you have to make excuses later on to spare my feelings. If you're just not up for it, say now and I'll understand.' He sounded almost angry and he couldn't meet her eyes.

Tamsin was moved by his vulnerability. 'Oh, Callum, don't be ridiculous. Of course, of course I don't mind. Of course it's not a problem.'

(And anyway: what else could she say?)

They had stopped under a bridge, its damp bricks padded with the bright olive velvet of moss. Callum cupped Tamsin's face in his hands. It was a long kiss, fuelled by their relief at reaching the end of a difficult discussion.

\* \* \*

Callum was one of those men who cook competitively, with loud remarks about 'plating up' and the joys of offal. He bought his olive oil in huge square cans and shopped in Borough Market at least once a fortnight. This evening he was doing one of his staple dinner party menus: scallops on a minted pea puree followed by slow-cooked rabbit ragout, with panacotta (*dead simple, actually*) for dessert. When the buzzer buzzed, he was up to his elbows in rabbit, picking through the mess of meat to check for the smaller bones.

'I'll get it,' said Tamsin quickly, even though Callum was already wiping his hands clean.

Tamsin had managed to keep her face neutral when Callum told her he'd invited Chris round for supper. Really, she was terrified – terrified that Chris might recount, as an amusing anecdote, the real story of how they met, and expose her version of their history for a fiction. She needed to tell him not to tell – but she had no idea how to communicate this with Callum in the room. Now she hurried over to answer the door, half-hoping to whisper a warning to Chris before he entered the flat.

'Hi, hello,' said Chris, stepping towards her. He paused, moved his head from left to right like a tennis player waiting to return a serve, coughed twice, then thrust out his hand.

'Hi,' said Tamsin, as they shook. She felt afresh the strangeness of seeing this figure from the almost-forgotten past. Without the makeup and the nurse's outfit, he looked much more like the boy she remembered, although he was older now, with a man's broader frame and a strong neck thickened by exercise. There was something unnatural about his physique, as if his muscles had been inflated very suddenly: Clark Kent transformed into Superman. His T-shirt had clearly been bought for a scrawnier version of himself.

Impossible, she realised, to say anything to Chris now. 'It's, er, nice to see you,' she told him. 'Again.'

Chris nodded fervently. 'I know, it's so weird, it's one of the strangest things that's ever—'

'Come on through, come on through,' she said loudly, desperate to prevent his sentence from heading any further in that particular direction.

'Chris, hi, good to see you again, mate.' Callum waved to them from the little open kitchen, jovial but distracted. 'Tam, I can't find the bloody mint leaves. They're not in the fridge, they should be in the fridge.'

Tamsin stepped over to the fridge and produced the packet of mint, eyebrows arched.

‘God, I hate it when you do that,’ said Callum, coming up behind her and putting his arms round her waist.

Tamsin twisted round in his arms so that she was facing him. ‘It’s because your peripheral vision’s no good.’ Her tone was pertly flirtatious. ‘Men didn’t need it, you see, when they were chasing woolly mammoths.’

Usually, Callum had scant patience with Tamsin’s penchant for evolutionary psychology. But right now they were performing, as couples do in company, a pat double act. Callum tucked his hands up under his armpits and capered like an ape until Tamsin pretended to cuff him round the head.

‘Right,’ he said, turning to Chris. ‘Enough of all that. Let me get you a drink.’

This little routine wasn’t wasted on Chris. He had accepted Callum’s invitation out of a sense of kismet: because he barely remembered giving Callum his number, the text message seemed, somehow, to be a call to destiny, a prompt it would be foolish to ignore. His initial resolution to leave Tamsin and Callum in peace had dissolved in a froth of conjecture (was she unhappy with Callum? was Callum unhappy with her? how had she felt, meeting him again after all those years?). Now he was here and he could see the situation for what it was – domestic bliss – his role was very clear. There were no decisions to make, no moral dilemmas to brood over. He would talk to Callum, eat his supper, adore Tamsin from afar, then go back to barracks life.

What he hadn’t bargained on was liking Callum quite as much as he did. Chris would meet his few non-army friends at the weekends for sixteen hours of expensive hedonism before crawling back to Bulford. In contrast, Callum and his compact little flat were, as Chris pronounced loudly over pudding, ‘the peak of civilisation’. It was all wonderful: Callum’s cooking, the canvas photo prints of Moroccan souks and Scottish islands (all Callum’s own work), the complete set of Loeb classics on the homemade bookshelves, the electric drum kit in the corner of the room on which Callum let him mess about and finally, after much protesting, demonstrated a short but breathtaking burst of eight against nine.

‘Our Callum’s something of a Renaissance man,’ Tamsin remarked, drollery a poor mask for her pride.

Best of all, Callum appeared to be fascinated by Chris. He asked question after question about the army, and actually took out a small notebook when they got started on the history of the machine gun.

‘Can you believe it? Gatling, the guy who was basically responsible for the machine gun mark two – after the Maxim, that is – genuinely thought he was saving lives. One soldier kills a hundred times more people, so you need a hundred times less soldiers. I mean, go figure.’

Tamsin watched them as they talked, feeling relieved that they had not, so far, approached the question of her history with Chris. Yet she was also feeling curiously excluded. She had been dreading conversation about Afghanistan or Iraq, two subjects on which she felt herself to be embarrassingly under-informed. But neither Chris nor Callum seemed interested in what she thought.

‘You think of bullets, you think of bangs, right?’ Chris was saying. ‘S’nothing like that at all. More of a whipcrack sound, a sort of stinging, high-pitched whine, peeow, peeow.’

He had his head dipped low as if he were actually in a trench, sheltering from rifle fire. Callum was leaning back in his chair, legs crossed at the ankle and hands behind his head, nodding slowly with an expression of shrewd attention on his face.

Finally, Callum left to go to the toilet and Tamsin took her chance.

‘Listen,’ she said, keeping her voice low. ‘I hope this doesn’t sound too crazy, but I haven’t actually told Callum that whole thing about how we met. It just seemed ... I told him you used to date a friend of mine, years ago, and that I met you once or twice through her. Shit, this does sound crazy, doesn’t it?’

But to her surprise, Chris was immediately compliant, even grateful, for this alternative version of events. He didn't appear to think it was odd that she hadn't told Callum the real story of how they knew one another.

'God no, of course, that's much better,' he said. 'We met through your friend, perfect. Thanks. Seriously, thanks.' He sounded relieved.

(Chris was embarrassed: by what he now perceived as unforgivable cowardice that day on the tube. It didn't look too hot for Second Lieutenant Kimura to be running away from a suitcase. Tamsin's lie allowed him to save face. Was she just as ashamed, he wondered? Or was it something else she was hiding from Callum? Even as he rejected this interpretation as absurd, he found himself feeling faintly, pleasantly hopeful.)

They finished the meal with port and Stilton. It had been a boozy evening. Halfway through his second glass of port, Chris became almost tearful.

'People, they ask me, they ask me all the time why I joined the army. I wish I could show them this, all this.' He flung his arms open to indicate the room. 'This is my answer. People like you two, all this decency, and culture – this is *exactly* what I'm fighting for. We're fighting the bastards who'll throw acid in the eyes of schoolgirls so that this, this *paradise* – because, for all its faults, the UK really is paradise – this *paradise* that allows people like you guys to just *be*, to do your thing...' He raised his glass in a reverent toast. 'I wish you all the best. I really do.'

Callum reached over to plunge the coffee, hiding a smile at the younger man's emotion.

Later, at the door, Chris kissed Tamsin on both cheeks, then pulled Callum into a backslapping hug. 'Great evening. Pukka scran.'

Callum laughed. 'Pleasure. Like I say, you're welcome any time.'

A door banged somewhere in the flat, making them all start. A moment later, a girl in a pure white towelling dressing gown and fluffy blue slippers appeared in the kitchen and shuffled over to the sink. Long dark hair obscured her face.

'Leah, I'm so sorry – I didn't realise you were here, you should have come out – you could have joined us—' Callum was embarrassed.

Leah produced an apple from the pocket of her dressing gown. 'S'okay, I was sleeping.' She squeezed a generous blob of Fairy Liquid into her palm and began to wash the apple under the tap.

Chris looked at Tamsin, who crossed her eyes and grinned at him. He stifled an urge to laugh. Leah squirted another dose of Fairy Liquid onto her apple. When she put the bottle back down on the kitchen counter, two tiny oily bubbles puffed out, twinkled, burst. They were all watching her.

Callum stepped awkwardly towards her. 'Erm, Chris, this is Leah, my flatmate, Leah, this is Chris, a friend.'

Leah took a clean tea towel from a drawer and dried her apple on it. At last she turned to face them.

'Hello, Chris. Hi, Tamsin.'

She was very beautiful. Her glossy hair hung from a neat centre parting, two straight sheets of onyx that reflected the kitchen lights. Apart from one flat, irregularly shaped mole on her right cheek, her biscuit-coloured skin was blemish-free.

'Uh, hi,' said Chris. 'Actually, I'm just going, but, er, nice to meet you.'

Leah smiled unconvincingly and bit into her apple.

## Five

Like all small, enclosed communities, Denham Hall – where Callum had now been working for nearly a year – had its own mores and cultural codes. At the core of the school's identity was a nostalgia – fiercely subscribed to by most of the pupils – for the rigours of the bad old days. Many children in the top two years remembered the previous headmaster and his deputy speaking Latin together over lunch and in the corridors. Corporal punishment had ceased only when it was made illegal in 1999, a fact often repeated among the pupils with a mixture of horror and pride.

Until quite recently, Denham Hall had been boys-only; even now, boys outnumbered girls in a ratio of 2:1. This discrepancy had two effects. The first was a general feeling, cheerfully shared by both sexes, that boys were standard issue, whereas girls were an anomalous deviation from the norm. The second effect was that each year, the school's position on puberty was determined by the relatively small number of girls in the top forms. If most of these girls had developed discernible breasts, then adulthood was in vogue. But this year, only two out of the twenty-five pupils in the incipient eighth form – boys and girls – had started puberty with any real conviction. There was Des Kapoor, who had an unreliable glitch in his voice and faint inverted commas above the corners of his upper lip; and there was Sophie Witrand, cup size 32A and growing, fast. Neither Des nor Sophie had any social heft. The cool kids in their year-group were Milly Urquhart, Ludo Hall, and little Rhiannon Jenkins – all still small and slim and smooth-skinned, their snub noses only just beginning to morph into more distinctive shapes.

These three set the tone: for now, the currency at Denham Hall was immaturity. The children seemed innately to understand that their un-sprouted bodies were approaching expiry date, and that this made them all the more valuable. Theirs was a clean, clear beauty, crystalline in comparison to the maculate adult world with its coarse dark body hair and pendulous flesh. Menstruation was regarded with particular disgust. Yet paradoxically, the accoutrements of puberty were *de rigueur*: bras were worn, legs were shaved, deodorant ostentatiously applied. The ideal was to display all the sophistication of adolescence, while maintaining the physical purity of childhood. Anyone who actually needed the deodorant would have been 'minging'.

Sophie Witrand, the only person in the whole year who could have done with a bra, was one of the few girls who didn't have one. She had shaved her legs just once, with a razor stolen from her father. The act itself had been executed in the airing cupboard (there was no lock on the Witrands' bathroom door), without shaving foam or even water. Sophie's leg hair was blonde and almost invisible, but once this soft nap had been harvested by the razor's four-blade grille it formed a little heap the colour of silt, dry yet silky when she rubbed it between thumb and forefinger. Her mother, a keen gardener, used the bottom shelf of the airing cupboard to germinate the seeds of delicate plants. Sophie pushed a finger into the gateau-black soil of *verbena bonariensis* and planted her pinchful of evidence. A tray of white Italian sunflowers had just germinated, the tips of the little shoots still hooded by the old humbug-striped seed casings. For a silly second Sophie wondered what her leg hair would look like if it grew. A snatch of Edward Lear came into her head: 'I answered him as I thought good / As many red herrings as grow in the wood.'

Her idea was to replace the razor and tell no one, but two hours later she was down in the kitchen wearing her longest nightie, tremulous yet ready to confess. Sophie was obsessively truthful. When she was younger her parents had imposed a rule to prevent her from tiring herself out by reading late into the night: book closed and lights out at 8 p.m. If Sophie exceeded this deadline by just five minutes, she would lie awake worrying until the guilt grew too great to bear, at which point she would have to get up and go downstairs to admit her transgression to her mother.

Now she sat on her mother's lap and hid her face as she explained what she had done. Mrs Witrand rubbed her daughter's back, alternating strokes with little pats as if she were burping a baby.

She let the theft of the razor pass without comment. Then she took Sophie up to the bathroom and gave her some of her Body Shop moisturiser. She explained how shaving made the hairs grow back thicker, and how – look, see those little white flakes? – Sophie’s skin had already been ravaged by the razor. ‘If you like, I’ll take you to get them waxed, you only have to ask. But I think your legs are just fine. I’d give anything to have lovely soft hair like that again. You do know you can hardly see it, darling?’

Sophie thought of her mother’s legs with their squiggly veins. The backs of her big calves had dimples like sand that had been rained on. Once Sophie had poked one of these strange dents and been surprised to find it firm and unresisting. Mrs Witrand was large but not flabby; her flesh was tightly packed under her skin, as if bursting to get out. Everything about her was slightly oversized, from her size nine feet to the fat brown plait that hung down her back to her waist. Underneath her thick, straight-cut fringe, her pale blue eyes were permanently narrowed by the upward pressure of her glacé cheeks.

Both mother and daughter knew that Sophie would never ask to have her legs waxed. Although no hint of reproach had entered Mrs Witrand’s voice, a judgement had, implicitly, been passed: Sophie’s error was forgiven but not to be repeated. It had been the same when she had mentioned the possibility of a bra. Mrs Witrand was briskly implacable: ‘You don’t need one yet, sweet pea, you’re only twelve. There’ll be plenty of time for all that later.’

\* \* \*

‘Mr Love’s wearing a bra, pass it on!’

Rhiannon Jenkins, nearly thirteen but no bigger than a nine-year-old, short dark hair, a face-full of cappuccino freckles. She was the smallest girl in the class and something of a mascot. Teachers found her faux-naïve manner infuriating; her peers found it hilarious.

Predictably, it was Sophie Witrand who had been left to sit next to Mr Dempster in the double passenger seat at the front of the bus. She squirmed round and squeezed her neck past the headrest, desperate to join in with her classmates’ banter. Callum decided not to comment on her twisted seatbelt.

Next year’s scholarship form at Denham Hall, 8S, were stuck in Friday afternoon traffic on the M25. It was the final day of a week-long summer programme designed to introduce scholarship candidates to real-world applications of subjects they were studying. Parents invariably thought it was a fantastic opportunity. Their children tended to disagree. This week had been the hottest of the year so far and they had spent most of it in a minibus. They were overheated and sticky and sunburnt and fed up.

Today’s itinerary had been Geography (Chichester Harbour) and Latin (Fishbourne Roman Palace). Mr Love the Geography master was melting in the driving seat, sweaty kiss-curls of thin brown hair clinging to his forehead. The front of his pale blue double-cuff shirt was now translucent with sweat. Through the damp cotton, Mr Love’s chest hair did look like a black lace bra.

Callum was wearing Hawaiian board shorts and a tight V-neck T-shirt with the logo ‘NBX Burnout’ – just as open to ridicule, in its way, as Mr Love’s outfit. But 8S had granted Mr Dempster immunity. There was a certain toughness about him that made them wary of taking the piss. He was also going to be their form teacher next year. It was preferable to have him as an ally.

The snickering was getting louder. Callum turned to face the class with one eyebrow raised and his head slightly cocked. Could he have seen it, Mr Love would not have thanked him for this look. But it worked. There was one more titter, and then 8S were silent.

‘Mr Love won’t play our CD, though.’

The speaker sounded aggrieved. Ludo Hall was head of choir; he had tightly waved marmalade hair and a pure treble voice reputed to have made several of the male members of staff weep. Because of this, and in spite of a staffroom mantra ‘not to let Ludo Hall think he’s special’, he was treated, ever so slightly, like a celebrity. Women of all ages responded to his fine, pale features, and Ludo

had already begun to respond to this response. In class he was subtly disruptive, with a keen sense of injustice and a talent for figuring himself as the wronged party when caught.

Callum eyed him evenly then smiled before the boy could see him weighing his decision. ‘Ah, Charles?’ he said, turning back to Mr Love.

The CD was *Loud* by Rihanna, and it kept everyone happy all the way back to Denham Hall. Everyone except for Mr Love (*Sex in the air, I don’t care I love the smell of it*) and Sophie Witrand. Callum watched her with a mixture of pity and interest. She was twisted right round to face the class, trying to sing along with song lyrics she didn’t really know. After five minutes of being ignored she flopped back into her seat. But then she would pick herself up and start again.

During one of her ‘time-outs’, she asked him a question.

‘So the Romans, they didn’t believe in God, did they, sir?’

‘The Romans had lots of gods. You know that, Sophie.’ She was one of the brightest students in the class.

‘No, but not *God* God, like the Christian God – they didn’t even really know about him till the three hundreds ay dee, did they.’

‘Until the fourth century, that’s right. Very good. Emperor?’

‘Emperor Constantine. But, sir...’ Sophie was distracted by a chorus she evidently knew. She wriggled away from their conversation and launched herself back into Rihanna. ‘*Want you to MAKE ME FEEL – like I’m the only girl in the world – like I’m the only one that you’ll ever luh-uv...*’

Back at school, however, she stayed sitting in the bus long after the others had piled out. Callum held the door open for her, but she didn’t budge.

‘Sir, do *you* believe in God?’

‘Whew.’ Callum drummed his fingers on the top of the minibus door, looking up for inspiration. The bright flat blue sky was softer now, tinged with mauve and graduating to a clear eau de Nil at the horizon. ‘Well ... let’s just say, on an evening like this, it’s hard not to feel something, eh?’

She was too intelligent to take this as a yes. Callum felt the reproach in her gaze and found himself apologising.

‘Sorry.’ He glanced at his watch. They were meeting Will for drinks at nine. Chris would be arriving at eight. ‘Sophie, I’m afraid I don’t really have time for this now. Ask me again some other day, I promise I’ll give you a better answer.’

Sophie nodded sadly and got out of the bus, ducking under his arm with a mumbled ‘Bye, sir’.

Her baggy shorts, rumpled from the long bus ride, had ridden up between her bum cheeks; unselfconsciously, she tugged the material free. The evening sun lit the downy hair of her legs in a soft halo. Callum thought of plant stems, brightly outlined by their greenly glowing fibres.

\* \* \*

At ten o’clock that morning, Tamsin had known exactly what she’d be wearing for an evening in the pub with Callum, Will, and various of Will’s cronies: jeans and a T-shirt, minimal makeup. At midday, Callum had texted to say that Chris would be joining them. Now it was 6 p.m. and Tamsin was in her bedroom, deliberating between her two shortest dresses.

Tamsin tugged the dress up over her head and stood in her underwear for a moment, contemplating her near-naked reflection. The stretch marks encircling her breasts glistened silver in the early evening sunlight. She forced herself to think dispassionately about Chris. He was good-looking and intelligent, but then she knew plenty of good-looking, intelligent people. Compared to Callum, he seemed unattractively young. Really, the thrill she felt at the thought of seeing him again made no sense at all.

It didn’t occur to her that just his reappearance might be enough to pique her interest in him. Tamsin prided herself on her pragmatism; unlike Chris, she had no time for fate or destiny or kismet. But coincidence is a powerful aphrodisiac. After their first encounter seven years ago, Tamsin remembered Chris chiefly because of the unusual circumstances in which they met. Then

she forgot him, because he had been uninteresting to her. When she saw him again at Leo's party, there was suddenly a pair of coincidences, mutually amplifying their significance. Then there had been that supper at Callum's, and now here he was again, in town for the weekend, apparently, just wondering what she and Callum were up to, whether he could join them for supper, perhaps even stay the night ... The effect of these repetitions was, subtly but surely, one of emphasis added, *his name in italics in her mind*.

As Tamsin struggled with the zip on dress number two, virtue abruptly won out. She loved Callum, very much: she had no business baring her legs for Chris, or anyone else. In the top left-hand corner of the mirror was a small sticker collection, comprising three holographic hearts in shades of puce, six fuzzy-felt teddy bears, a parakeet and a hamburger, placed there by the eight-year-old Tamsin. For years, Tamsin had barely even noticed the stickers; now, suddenly, she found herself irritated by them. She peeled them all off, crumpled them into a tacky ball, and rubbed ineffectually at their gummy ghosts with spit.

When she went down to the sitting room to say goodbye to her mother, Tamsin was wearing jeans, a plain white collared shirt and just a little more makeup than usual. She walked briskly, as in the wake of a job well done, though in fact the opposite was true: by identifying her attraction and labelling it forbidden, she had only succeeded in augmenting it. (Just as the impulsive, insignificant lie she had told Callum lent her dealings with Chris an element of the clandestine that contributed to his growing mystique.)

'Mummy?'

Roz was absorbed in a text message. At the sound of her name, she started.

'I'm just off. Who's the message from?' Tamsin tried to look but her mother whisked the phone out of sight.

'Oh, no one, it's nothing important.'

As they kissed goodbye, Tamsin felt a surprising heat radiating from her mother's powdered cheek.

\* \* \*

When Tamsin arrived at the Edgware Road flat at seven thirty, Callum wasn't back – but Chris was there, sitting on the sofa, flicking through one of Callum's sketchbooks. He looked up guiltily.

'Sorry – Callum's flatmate, she let me in – I hope it's okay if I—'

'No, of course, it's fine, go ahead. You just – I'll just go and say hi to Leah—' They were both talking too loudly.

'Um, I think she's in the shower.'

'Oh right, cool. Do you, can I get you a drink?'

Tamsin retreated to the kitchen to fetch some beers and to collect her thoughts. She hadn't expected to find herself alone with Chris.

When she returned he held up the sketchbook to show a page featuring four little charcoal drawings of Tamsin sleeping, just a few lines in each, swiftly and skilfully done.

'These ones of you – it is you, isn't it? – they're amazing. This one, here – this one's the best.' Chris pointed to the biggest of the four sketches. The charcoal Tamsin was on her back, her arms thrown up above her head and her eyes lightly closed as if she were resting briefly rather than actually sleeping. Tamsin liked it, too, but she loyally nominated Callum's favourite, a less flattering rendition of her asleep on her side, her lower cheek slightly sagged by gravity.

'And this is all Callum's own work, right?'

'Yup. He paints a little, too, but basically he likes pencil best.'

'Is there anything the guy doesn't do?'

Tamsin smiled. The conversation felt horribly stiff and formal, but Chris's appreciation of Callum was genuine, and it endeared him to her even further.

‘I mean, he could sell these.’ Chris passed his open palm over the sketches very slowly, holding it an inch above the surface. Tamsin was surprised by his hands: they were older than they should be, with dry, split nails and dirt that lay so deep in the seams of his knuckles it looked as if it had been sewn in. Her gaze strayed up his torso to the collar of his shirt (finely woven cotton, with pink-white-blue stripes that reminded her of toothpaste). The top two buttons were undone. There were three soft hairs in the notch at the base of his throat, sweetly exposed.

To quash this alarming thought Tamsin began talking, at speed.

‘He does, actually. Sell them. At his school, he does portraits – from photographs of the children, usually just a simple head-and-shoulders thing, but sometimes he’ll do group ones with siblings, even pets. Personally I think it’s a bit of a waste. But the parents are willing to pay silly money for it, so...’

She trailed off. This wasn’t right at all. She hadn’t meant to criticise Callum to Chris; having done so, she felt guilty of a small betrayal.

They lapsed into silence again. Tamsin took the remote control from the coffee table and fiddled for a while with the black plastic cover of the battery compartment.

‘Listen, I just want to say—’

She looked up, startled by the urgency in Chris’s voice. He was sitting right forward on the edge of the sofa.

‘Last time,’ he went on, ‘when we had supper – I think I might’ve drunk a bit too much – I’m sorry about the speech.’

Tamsin smiled. ‘It’s fine, we were all quite—’

‘To tell the truth I was a bit nervous about meeting you again.’ He paused for a moment as if waiting for permission to continue. Outside in the street, someone honked a car horn once, twice, then a third time, long and loud. The sound bent and died. Tamsin avoided Chris’s gaze but he didn’t seem to notice her discomfort.

‘The thing is...’ he began again, then stopped. He didn’t even know what he was trying to say. That he had been thinking about her for seven years? That he loved her? That he was just glad to see her, and to see her happy? All absurd, Chris thought, blushing to himself as he heard and rejected each of these options.

‘Hello hello!’

Callum was at the door, red-faced from his long ride home. The tangerine sheen of his orange lycra cycling gear was darkly stained with sweat at the crotch and armpits, while a larger stain formed a peninsula tapering from his neckline down to his navel. Tamsin launched herself on him, mindless of the sweat.

\* \* \*

The Duke’s Head was an old South London pub that had recently been subjected to a trendy makeover. Tamsin found herself sitting between Chris and Will on a reclaimed church pew, presided over by a working set of traffic lights. She was horribly conscious of her proximity to Chris. Each time she relaxed, her knee drifted over to touch his thigh. She couldn’t tell whether Chris was aware of this, too, but judging from his awkwardness in Callum’s flat, it seemed likely that he was. Her buttocks ached with the effort of avoiding contact.

Across the table, Leah was looking terrific in a navy-blue bandeau dress and a pair of gold earrings shaped like Celtic knots. Leah rarely drank alcohol; this evening she was sipping grapefruit juice through a straw, carefully preserving the pearly gloss that coated her lips. ‘Mmm, very smart,’ Tamsin had said when Leah emerged from the bedroom in her high heels and immaculate makeup. Not quite a compliment – the implication being that Leah was overdressed for an evening in the pub. Leah had replied, in her habitual tone of sullen apathy, that she was going out later. She always had somewhere else to go on to, though they never met the friends she went with.

Sitting next to Leah were Big Mac (Ollie Macfarlane) and his girlfriend Suze. Big Mac was a consultant at Deloitte. He had a fine bass voice; at Cambridge, he had been a King's choral scholar. His intention had been to work at Deloitte for a few years to build up his savings, then make a go of it as a singer – a plan he talked about with decreasing conviction as each year went by. Big Mac identified as Scottish: despite a fruity Home Counties accent, he wore his kilt more often than Callum did. He was extremely fat and suffered from a minor addiction to cheese-and-onion crisps. Right now he was irritated because the pub only served chilli cashews and wasabi nuts; but also because Suze was making no attempt to disguise her admiration for Second Lieutenant Kimura and his daredevil tales from the Rifles' recent training exercise in the Kenyan wilderness.

'And there it was, right in front of us, the monster itself' – Chris paused for effect; Suze appeared to be holding her breath – 'a zebra, munching on some leaves!'

Apart from Big Mac, everyone laughed. Chris was the man of the moment – a fresh face with an exciting job and a large backlog of anecdotes that nobody had heard before.

'Oh my god, it sounds so frightening!' Suze panted, still recovering from the suspense before the punchline.

Suze was what Will unkindly referred to as a 'stealth moose' – gorgeous from a distance, with her catwalk figure and long blonde hair, but alarmingly ugly up close. She had a bad squint and her features were out-of-focus with the worst acne scars Chris had ever seen. Now she leaned even further across the table towards him, her smallish breasts squeezed awkwardly together by her upper arms. She evidently expected some sort of response, but Chris couldn't think of anything to say. He blinked, uncomfortable under the blaze of her admiration. He was still getting used to the effect of his military persona on some women.

'What about women?' It was as if Will had read his mind. 'Surely certain, how can I put this, *needs* arise?'

Chris nodded. 'Yes, that's a real problem, actually – we had a few days' leave in the local town at the end of the jungle training and the guys had to be given a fairly in-depth refresher session on sexual health. I was worried that the doctor's spiel had been a wee bit too technical for some of the younger guys, so I took a bunch of them aside to paraphrase.' Now Chris adopted a slow, too-loud tone, as if he were talking to someone mentally impaired. 'If you get AIDS, you will die. All the hookers have AIDS. If you don't want AIDS, do not stick any part of your body into any part of their bodies. If you're going to be a real retard about it, though, bag up.'

He chuckled drily. 'One young lad invited me to join him and his friends back at their room for "some fun". Turned out they'd taken my lesson to heart: they'd paid a girl to strip and lie there naked while they all stood round and wanked on her.'

There was a brief silence while everyone decided whether to be interested or shocked or coolly unfazed. Suze was no longer leaning over towards Chris. She glanced round at the others, trying to gauge their reactions.

'And you – what did you do?' demanded Big Mac.

At last Chris heard the personal hostility in Big Mac's tone. 'I went back to my hotel room and watched porn on my laptop,' he said evenly.

'How old were these guys, on average?' Callum asked. It was the first time he'd spoken in a while.

Chris sat a little straighter in his seat, lighting up at the pleasure of talking to Callum. 'Uh, the youngest was about seventeen, oldest mid thirties, I guess. But mostly late teens, early twenties.'

'And how do you feel about these men, these boys, being exposed to that sort of scenario so young?'

This was something Tamsin usually admired about Callum – the interest he took in other people, the quiet, intelligent way he collected information, asking his careful questions, storing up the answers to think about later, at length. He rarely offered personal opinions during casual conversation.

But just now this trait struck Tamsin as bloodless, even a little unfair – as if he were trying to catch Chris out over a subject on which he, Callum, had no real authority.

‘Obviously it’s not ideal. But to be frank, it’s better than the alternative – which is jail, for most of them. Most of these young guys, they’re illiterate, they’ve got problems with money, family problems. The army offers them a way out of all that.’

‘Some people might feel that that’s a rather defeatist position,’ Callum said neutrally. ‘Sorry. I’m playing devil’s advocate. Well, I sort of am.’

‘I disagree. I strongly disagree.’ Chris’s ardour was a sharp contrast to Callum’s coolness. He wasn’t angry, but his dark eyes were big with conviction. ‘I know what I’m saying might not be all that palatable, but at least it’s realistic.’ (Tamsin murmured in automatic approval: ‘realistic’ was something of a trigger-word for her, an uncontested good, regardless of context.) ‘Fact of the matter is that the army educates them, it provides financial guidance, pastoral care ... It isn’t perfect, but it’s by far the best of a pretty shabby set of options. And in the end, when you look at the camaraderie, the sense of purpose, the *brotherhood* – I’m really not exaggerating when I say that joining the army is the best decision that most of these guys will ever make.’ Chris nodded fervently.

Bored, Will waved the debate away. ‘Well, that’s all very Agincourt of you, Chris. But I’m more interested in your cocks. In the jungle, when and where do you masturbate? I want specifics.’

‘Will!’ Tamsin turned on him.

Will feigned hurt. ‘These things are terribly important.’

‘It’s okay, I don’t mind,’ said Chris.

‘That’s not the point.’

Will tapped the tabletop impatiently with the flat of his hand. ‘Come on, Chris, don’t be shy, you’re among friends.’

‘I’m not shy, it’s just...’ Chris looked to Tamsin for consent.

‘Oh, don’t mind her,’ said Will, draping an arm round Tamsin’s shoulders. ‘Tam and I go way back, don’t we?’

Tamsin wriggled out from under his arm. Will was always claiming for them an intimacy that had never existed, and it irked her.

‘Basically,’ Chris began, uncertainly, ‘men will always find a way. Problem with the jungle was that we were all sleeping in hammocks, at fairly close quarters. I suppose after a while it just happens.’

‘So you were effectively jerking off in public,’ said Will.

Chris hesitated before continuing. ‘The, uh, the wanker does his best to be discreet, and everyone else does their best to ignore it. That is, depending on the guy. There was one lad who made a bit of a thing about it. Dave Gaskin – though everyone called him Gashbag. He had, er, some innovative solutions to the problem of waste disposal.’

‘As in – what exactly?’

‘He either rubbed it into his chest – said it was good for the skin – or’ – Chris’s mouth puckered in amused distaste – ‘or he ate the stuff. Sorry, ladies,’ he finished, remembering Tamsin.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Tamsin stiffly.

Chris was embarrassed. ‘Sorry, bit far.’ He stood up, looking flustered. ‘My round, isn’t it? Sorry. Same again? Three Peroni, two Pinot Grigio, and a – a grapefruit juice?’

‘Actually, I’ll just have water,’ said Leah. The background noise forced her to raise her voice. For the first time, Chris heard the gluey consonants of a Birmingham accent lurking behind her carefully clipped speech.

As he queued for drinks, Chris experienced a familiar deflation. He had been riding high on attention all evening, but now he felt sadly empty. Much as he loved performing, these days it so often felt like the only mode available to him. He was always ‘the army guy’. People’s responses were getting boringly predictable. Suze’s adoration, Big Mac’s cynicism, Will’s covert bid to prove that he, too, could be one of the boys – they were such *types*.

Of course he knew he encouraged it. He put himself on display, and by putting himself on display, he fairly volunteered for exclusion. The civilian world was becoming another country. He didn't quite belong here any more – and yet he didn't quite belong in the army, either. He was too sensitive; he could do tough, when it was required, but it was always a bit of an act. Even the cigarettes he smoked after dinner in the mess felt like props. Same as being mixed-race, Chris thought morosely: Japanese in England, English in Japan...

Two boys were blocking his way, leaning on the bar and sipping at their pints of Guinness.

'Excuse me,' Chris said. 'If you wouldn't mind, I think—'

'No, excuse *me*,' said taller boy, boldly impersonating Chris's plummy vowels. 'I am most *terribly* sorry.' He had a tidemark of foam on his upper lip. They shuffled over to make room for Chris, the short one laughing sycophantically at his companion's joke.

No, thought Chris as he ordered, it had not been a good night. He had a growing suspicion that he'd made himself ridiculous to Tamsin in the flat; and just now he had surely offended her with that stupid story about Dave Gaskin.

(As it happened, Tamsin wasn't at all bothered by the talk about masturbation. Her objection to Will's question had been entirely arbitrary, an expression of her general frustration with the evening. For no very good reason, she felt cross, with Callum, with Chris, with herself; so for no very good reason, she got angry with Will.)

'That'll be twenny-six-sixty,' the barman told him.

'Really?' Chris was surprised; he had never been much good with numbers. 'Hang on, I might have to give you most of that in change...'

'London prices, eh?' said the barman, conspiratorially. 'It's the Peroni what does it, that's four pound fifty a pint.'

'Really?' Chris said again, contorting his torso as he strained to access the more remote corners of his jeans pockets.

'You're not from round here, are you?'

'Well, not exactly.' Chris wondered if this was going to be one of those 'No-but-what-country-do-you-*really*-come-from' conversations. 'I'm living near Salisbury at the moment.'

'I knew it!' The barman was triumphant. 'Takes one to know one, but honestly, that haircut – dead giveaway every time. You must be, what, Rifles? or is it Paras? And with a posh voice like that ... Captain?' This last speculation was made entirely without malice or resentment.

'I wish,' Chris grinned. 'Still very much a crow-bag second lieutenant, though.'

Well, you should try being a crow-bag private, *sir*,' joked the barman. 'Fusiliers,' he added, with pride.

Chris looked at the barman more closely. Early forties, certainly no older than forty-five. 'Gulf War?' he asked, holding out a palm-full of coins and notes.

The barman nodded. 'That's right. Best years of my life.'

The two men exchanged a look of perfect understanding. Chris wanted to laugh.

He took the Pinot Grigios and the water back to their table and came back for the three Peronis.

'You know that bird with the black hair, then?' The taller of the two boys was looking at him again.

'What?' It was a moment before Chris understood that he was talking about Leah. 'Oh, yes.'

'She's well fit.'

'She's—' Chris said, then stopped, realising he knew almost nothing about Leah. She was beautiful, certainly, but she also seemed dull and stuck-up.

'How old is she?'

'I don't know. I'll ask her,' Chris told him, amused.

‘We were just discussing phase two of this evening’s revels,’ Will explained when Chris returned. ‘Leah knows some chap who’s DJing at the Hoxton Pony, he can get us free entry. No queuing. You up for it?’

‘Yeah, definitely, count me in.’ Chris slurped at his pint of beer, his good mood returning. ‘Oh, by the way, Leah – you’ve got an admirer over at the bar. Tall boy with the grubby T-shirt. Don’t worry, he is legal. Just.’

For a moment, Leah looked annoyed. Then she realised Chris was joking and her face softened into a brief smile. Her top lip tucked under as the smile widened, revealing a surprising amount of pale pink gum above her teeth.

Suze touched Big Mac’s hand. ‘I’m keen for a bit of dancing,’ she said. ‘That is, if you are, babes?’

Big Mac shook his head. ‘No way. Can’t stand Shoreditch.’

‘I’m coming,’ said Tamsin, brightly. ‘I haven’t been out, as in *out* out, in like forever.’

Callum looked surprised. ‘But you hate clubs.’

‘Who said that?’ Tamsin frowned at him. ‘I hate *some* clubs, not *all* clubs. And I *love* the Hoxton Pony.’ She produced a small hand mirror from her bag and set about checking her makeup, pinching her eyelashes between thumb and forefinger to get rid of any stray clumps of mascara.

‘Sorry, guys, breaking news.’ Will was reading a text message. ‘Have to take a rain check, I’m afraid. I’ve, ah, got to go see a man about a dog.’

‘Booty call?’ asked Big Mac.

Will passed the phone to Big Mac, who read the message, snickered, and passed it back.

Chris did a round-up, ticking off the names on his fingers. ‘So that’s me, Leah, Tamsin – Callum?’

Callum glanced at Tamsin uncertainly, then turned back to Chris. ‘Yeah, sure. Why not?’

‘My friends are waiting for me.’ Leah pushed her glass of water away, untouched. ‘You lot can come if you want, but I have to get going now.’

She sounded as if she were bored by all of them; and this, somehow, commanded a certain power. Everyone, even Will, hurried to finish their drinks.

Callum helped Tamsin into her fitted corduroy jacket. ‘Tam, you quite sure about this? Last time we went clubbing, remember, in Shunt? You said to remind you next time – about how much you hated it.’ He turned her round to face him. ‘So this is me reminding you.’

‘Stop being so patronising,’ Tamsin muttered, shrugging his hands away. She raised her voice. ‘I’m just going to the loo, okay? Meet you all outside in a sec.’

‘Ooh, wait for me, I’m coming too,’ called Suze, rushing to catch up with Tamsin as she picked her way through to the toilets. ‘It’s been such a nice evening, hasn’t it? It’s sooo good to see you all.’ Suze had a tendency to gush when she was nervous, which was almost always the case, especially around other women: she was very aware of her own physical inferiority. ‘And Chris, I mean, it’s just so amazing to have the opportunity to talk to someone like that. He’s just *such* an interesting guy, isn’t he?’

The spotlights in the bathroom were too bright. As the girls entered the two empty toilet stalls, the conversation broke off; they only knew each other slightly, and it seemed a little odd to carry on talking.

Tamsin’s skin was hot, flushed from four big glasses of wine. The toilet seat felt pleasantly cool against her thighs. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and her hands clasped in front of her, waiting. In the other stall Suze’s long stream of piss chirruped and hissed, then shushed itself to a whisper. Rustle of toilet paper, louder rustle of the flush. Tamsin still couldn’t go. She pushed a fist into her bladder and tried to relax. Someone had written ‘I’ll be right back’ in black permanent marker on the toilet-roll dispenser and signed it ‘Godot’.

After a bit Tamsin gave up and joined Suze at the sinks.

‘God. *Please* tell me this is an unflattering mirror,’ Suze grimaced.

‘Yeah, it’s pretty bad,’ said Tamsin, distractedly. She was unhappy with her shirt; it looked frumpy, the fabric stretched awkwardly over her large chest. She undid a button. Now the neckline was just a little too low, exposing the black lace trim of her bra. Tamsin left it undone and reached up to re-do her ponytail. She knew she was behaving badly, but all her former resolve had vanished. Anyway, so what if she only wanted to go to the club because of Chris? That impulse wasn’t wrong in itself; it was only a crime if she acted on it. Which of course she wasn’t going to.

‘And I know I shouldn’t say this,’ Suze went on, as if they’d never stopped talking about Chris, ‘but isn’t he *gorgeous*?’

‘Mmmm,’ said Tamsin. ‘If you like that sort of thing.’

‘You mean Chinesey? But he’s so tall it doesn’t really count, does it?’ Suze rubbed at her eyebrows to clear them of foundation. ‘Do you reckon he and Leah will...?’

‘Probably. After all, that’s what Leah does best, isn’t it?’ Tamsin was shocked by the venom in her own voice. So that was it, she realised. She wanted to go to the club with Chris – but more than that, she didn’t want Chris and Leah going to the club without her. Tamsin pushed the thought all the way to its conclusion: she didn’t want Chris, but she didn’t want anyone else to have him, either. The unfairness of this was obvious. She felt ashamed, contrite.

‘I didn’t mean that, it came out a bit harsher than I meant it. I meant that she’s just so beautiful, any guy would be crazy not to want her.’

‘I know,’ Suze sighed. ‘She’s maybe the most beautiful person I’ve ever met. But you, you’re stunning too, Tamsin.’ Suze gave her reflection a rueful look and smiled, via the mirror, at Tamsin’s guilty face.

\* \* \*

At Waterloo, Tamsin, Callum and Leah waited while Chris topped up his Oyster card. Callum turned his face to his shoulder to hide a yawn.

‘Actually, you know what, I think maybe I won’t come after all,’ Tamsin said suddenly.

Callum laughed. ‘I won’t say I told you so.’

‘Right, all set.’ Chris was back, brandishing his Oyster card.

‘Ah, Chris mate, change of plan,’ Callum explained. ‘Tam and me’re going to call it a night.’

‘Oh, right.’ Chris couldn’t hide his disappointment. ‘Maybe I should just come back with you guys, I won’t be able to get in—’

‘No, no, no problem, you can have Tam’s key. All right, Tam?’

Tamsin dug in her handbag for the key. ‘Here you go.’

Chris looked dubious. ‘I don’t know, I still think it’s simpler if I just come back now...’

‘Well, it’s up to you—’ Callum began.

‘No, Chris should go.’ Tamsin cut in with more force than she’d intended. ‘You go, go and have fun with Leah. Really.’ She gave Chris a significant look, vaguely imagining, in her tipsy state, that he understood the full import of her decision to go straight back to Callum’s.

‘If you’re really sure...’ Chris took the key, somewhat reluctantly, and passed through the barrier to join Leah.

Waiting on the Bakerloo line platform, Tamsin and Callum kissed like teenagers. Tamsin took Callum’s hand and pushed it up under her shirt, onto the skin of her stomach. Usually she disliked public displays of affection, but just now she was conscious of a need to test something, and was relieved when she felt her body responding to Callum’s touch.

‘Nice empty flat, no one to hear us,’ Callum crooned into her ear. ‘Though you do know ... as soon as you’re ready to move in ... Leah’ll go when I say, it could be just the two of us always—’

Tamsin pulled away. ‘We were having such a nice time,’ she said, preparing to mount the podium of their favourite argument; but she was interrupted by a shout from the other end of the platform.

‘Hey there! Tamsin, Callum!’

Bounding towards them with irregular, exhausted strides was a very red-faced Chris.

‘Changed my mind,’ he panted, raising his voice above the incoming train. ‘Whew. Didn’t think I’d catch you, I had to run all the way back up the escalators.’

‘You didn’t have to, we really didn’t mind you going,’ Tamsin told him as they shuffled onto the train.

‘I know, I just somehow didn’t feel like it any more,’ Chris said; and Tamsin experienced a guilty throb of triumph.

‘So what do you think of the American system?’ Callum said to Chris once the doors had closed, continuing an earlier conversation about the pros and cons of six-month deployments.

Tamsin let them talk. Too tired and tipsy to follow the arguments, she stared idly up at a poster informing her she was ‘living proof that posters get read’. She only zoned back into the conversation at Charing Cross, when Callum needed her to remember a name.

‘You know Tam, that little wine bar just above the station here – the one you took me to on our second date.’ He turned to Chris. ‘Sort of a cellar, very dark and atmospheric.’

‘Do you mean Gordon’s?’ Chris asked.

‘Gordon’s, that’s it! So you know it then. Isn’t it fantastic?’

‘Yes, a real gem,’ agreed Chris, with a quick wink at Tamsin. The secret about their long-ago meeting on the tube seemed like a private joke to him now.

Tamsin looked away, feeling sick; but once again, Chris failed to notice her discomfort. He saw only her beauty and her freshness, the satin sheen on her heavy eyelids, the simplicity of her plain white shirt (so much more appealing to him than Leah’s dressed-up look). She hadn’t noticed that one of her buttons had come undone; from his superior vantage point, Chris could see the scalloped edge of her bra. It was his turn to look away. With this girl, even a glimpse of her underwear made him feel guilty. He recalled her squeamishness during the conversation about wanking: it signalled a fundamental purity, the saint-like status she held for him. She and Callum formed the perfect couple, the bond between them inevitable, unshakeable.

Chris smiled fuzzily down at his new friends. ‘I don’t know what you guys are up to,’ he began, ‘but I’ve got a fortnight’s leave coming up, starting Tuesday. I’m with family for the second week, but next week – perhaps I could take you both out to dinner...?’

‘Sorry, we’re going on holiday,’ Tamsin said quickly.

‘Bad timing,’ agreed Callum. ‘Otherwise we’d have loved ... And you know, we still haven’t had that chat about the army, I mean more formally, without assistance from Will.’

Chris and Callum both chuckled.

‘That’s a shame,’ said Chris. ‘I was really—’

‘You’re going to be in London all week – where are you staying?’ Callum interrupted him.

‘Well, Edwin has a house up in Islington, there’s a sofa there, or I might—’

‘No, listen, this is silly, my bed’s going to be empty all week – you might as well keep Tam’s key and use the flat as and when you want it.’

‘Seriously, you mean that?’ Chris stammered.

‘No problem at all,’ Callum smiled. ‘It’s good to have you around, Chris. You’re a great guy.’

Chris looked down at his feet. People often found this disconcerting in Callum: his ability to state personal affection quite candidly, without avoiding eye-contact or employing any self-protective irony. Tamsin thought it the most un-English thing about him, though she didn’t know that it was particularly Scottish, either. When they first met, she had been impressed by this directness; but lately, she had begun to find it embarrassing.

\* \* \*

Back at the flat, Tamsin used the bathroom while Callum helped Chris with the sofa bed. Her first idea was to pretend to be asleep when Callum lay down beside her.

‘Tam?’ he said softly, then went on without waiting for a reply. ‘About earlier ... I’m sorry.’

‘It’s not just that.’ Tamsin sat up in bed, unable, after all, to stay silent. ‘What about Chris?’

‘What *about* Chris?’

‘You’re suddenly so pally. We’ve only just met him.’

‘You knew him before, didn’t you?’ said Callum, reasonably.

‘What? What do you mean?’ Tamsin tripped on the possibility that somehow, Callum had found out the truth about her and Chris. Then she realised what he was referring to. ‘Oh, you mean from College. Well, I didn’t know him very well. You can’t just go offering your flat to people like that.’

‘Actually, I can. It being *my flat*,’ said Callum, injecting the last two words with uncharacteristic bitterness.

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘What’s what supposed to mean?’

‘You know what.’

‘Well, only...’ Callum shrugged unhappily. ‘Only that – sometimes it seems as if you don’t actually *want* to live with me.’

‘*Fuck* that’s unfair. You *know* I do. You know it’s just a question of—’

‘—financial stability,’ Callum finished with her. He sounded very tired.

This was the reason Tamsin always gave: that she wanted to be able to pay her rent without accepting help from either Callum or her father.

‘You know I don’t mind if you can’t always make rent,’ Callum said now. ‘It just seems to me that it’s the perfect way for you to make the, the leap.’

‘*Fuck*,’ Tamsin said again. ‘I’ve heard this so many times, Cal. It’s like being stuck in a fucking feedback loop.’

‘Right.’

Callum shuffled onto his side so that he was facing away from her and reached down for a book. He took *Our Man in Havana* from the top of a precarious pagoda of half-read books and began to read. In this quietly devastating way, he brought the argument to a close.

Tamsin listened to three page turns before she began to cry. Callum put the book down and took her into his arms.

‘I’m sorry,’ she snuffled. ‘I’m so sorry. I know I’m being a bitch, I don’t know why ... I think it’s just ... my period’s on its way, that’s probably...’

‘Ssshhh, ssshhh.’ Callum hooked his leg over her hip and drew her closer to him. ‘I love you.’

## Six

Sophie Witrand was squashed into the back seat of the Fiat Bravo with her brother James and her sister Harriet. Her swollen chest jounced painfully over the potholes of the Cornish back roads. The Witrands were on their way to Penderick Manor, a dilapidated country house about a mile from Padstow where they holidayed every year.

‘Soph? So-oph.’ Six-year-old Harriet waved her chubby hand in front of Sophie’s blank face, just like she’d seen their mother do. ‘Soph, let’s say the car’s a chocolate factory. Here’s where the chocolate gets mixed.’ She reached down between her legs and mimed vigorous stirring. ‘And this is the pipe’ – she made two loose tunnels from her fingers and thumbs and sketched out a pipe leading up to the headrest in front of Sophie – ‘and *here*’s the tap where it comes running out. Mmmm, mmmm, it’s sooo good.’ Harriet turned on an imaginary tap and leaned forward to lap at the chocolate.

Sophie pulled down on her seatbelt, which was digging into the new hard bit underneath her left nipple, and wriggled away from her sister. ‘Mum, Harry won’t sit still. She’s being really annoying.’

‘Darling, she just wants to play with you.’

‘Harriet, quick, there’s a fire at the chocolate factory!’ James yelled, waving his hands to signify flames. ‘Nee-naw nee-naw nee-naw!’

‘Shut your gob, James,’ said Sophie.

‘Sophie!’ Mrs Witrand raised her voice. ‘I’ve told you before, I won’t have you using that unkind expression.’

Harriet started to cry; James’s flailing elbow had caught her on the side of her head.

‘Right!’ shouted Mr Witrand. ‘Sleeping Lions, the lot of you!’

For a moment, Sophie considered objecting to the childishness of this, but the idea of closing her eyes and disappearing from the chaos of siblings and parents was very appealing. She leaned her head against her seatbelt strap and tried to get comfortable.

Next thing she knew, she was being gently shaken awake by her father.

‘Sophie, Sophie, we’re here.’

He was squatting in the gravel driveway outside the West Wing, his face just level with hers. Francis Witrand was tall and lanky with prominent knees. He favoured brown deck shoes without socks, and Aertex polo shirts in navy blue and racing green. His perfectly round, tortoiseshell spectacles never came off, even when he was in the sea.

‘Well, I reckon you won that round,’ he smiled. ‘You didn’t even hear us taking the bags in, did you?’ He helped her gently to her feet. ‘James and Harriet are in the kitchen – I think they’re waiting for you.’

‘Why?’ Sophie was confused. Then she remembered. ‘Oh, that.’ Usually, Sophie led her siblings in an inventory of their favourite things: the big bed in the girls’ room, with the enormous scrolled footboard that made it feel like a ship; a chipped rocking horse with real horse hair in its tail; the old bread oven in the kitchen wall, where James had once hidden during their most epic game of hide-and-seek; the picnic tree, a hollow oak in the garden big enough for all three of them to fit inside.

‘Actually, I think I’d rather just go and unpack,’ Sophie told her father. ‘Tell the others they can do it without me this time.’ She scrunched across the gravel to the house, her puffy nipples chafing from the friction of her T-shirt. It felt hot between her legs, and a little bit itchy.

In the bedroom, she lay down on the big ship-bed and took out her mp3 player. Sophie’s parents disapproved of all pop music except those bands with ‘real musical merit’, which amounted to Sting, Dory Previn and the Beatles. Sophie selected track 09 on *The Best of the Beatles*

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