

After signing the paperwork and taking back his keys, wallet and watch, he was free to leave.

It was early. Out in the street, bin men emptied waste into the back of a lorry stinking of rot and grime. One of them banged the side and the truck moved on. 'Alright, mate?' he said. Luke squinted into the sunlight and didn't answer. He must look rough as hell, his face a mess and blood on his clothes.

From a café came the smell of fresh coffee and the sound of a soul singer's mournful song. The leather armchairs and newspapers looked good, and he'd have liked to sit there for a while enjoying a coffee and thinking about nothing, but he didn't want music that dragged him under, not today. He walked along a street flanked by expensive cars and houses of clean brown brick. Sunlight bounced from polished glass. Leaning out of a window, a woman rested her chin on her hands and smiled a small and private smile as if her day could be anything she wanted it to be.

If only this was the sort of empty, happy day where nothing much seemed to matter, and Zoë was waiting for him. She'd be wearing one of those silky tops that caught the shape of her breasts, and her dress would sway against her delicate hips as she walked. If Amber and Min were there, they'd play games together, perhaps the one with the animal noises where they honked like geese or gobbled like turkeys and the girls laughed themselves sick. Later, he'd cook supper for Zoë. She'd sit on a high stool by the counter, her hair pinned up showing the pale nape of her neck, and sip wine while he worked, talking about the girls as if they were his and making plans for the weekend when they were next with Jason. She'd tell him about a book she was reading and show him a dress she liked in a magazine. It'd look beautiful on her, of course it would, but she'd already know that. Afterwards, bed. Sweet Jesus, the things she did to him. He supposed all that was finished now.

He ached all over. His plan was to get home, have a shower, fall into bed. From a newsagent's he bought a bottle of water and drank it while he waited for the bus, watching

passers-by getting on with their lives. School kids stood in huddles; some half-asleep, others prattling about. People gave him a wide berth on the pavement; he touched his swollen face with his fingers, but it made the pain worse. Taking his phone from his pocket he saw a text from Zoë. ‘What have you done?’ It wasn’t a question, she knew what he’d bloody well done. *It’ll be his word against yours*, the interviewing officer had said. Jason had money and football fame, a TV face, and Luke was nobody.

When the bus came, he sat at the back where he wouldn’t have to talk to anyone or explain the state he was in. His hand throbbed hotly – he couldn’t bend two of his fingers – but when he tried to piece together what had happened, it was a blur. The police had said Jason was in a critical condition and asked him what he had to say about that. ‘No comment,’ he’d said, because the duty solicitor told him not to incriminate himself.

Back at the flat, he switched on the TV to shut out the panic thumping in his ears and the sound of Jason’s head hitting the concrete, and winced at his reflection in the bathroom mirror – his left eye was puffy and purplish red, the cut on his lip was bleeding again. He’d have to call the factory and say he wasn’t well; besides, he was too shaky to handle a knife. Derek would likely make more of it, the little prick, given half the chance. After making the call, he lay on his bed. He wanted to see Zoë so badly, or phone just to hear her voice, but the idea she might hate him was too much. His thoughts began to drift, sleep overtook him, and when he woke the light had gone from the sky. He didn’t want to face the darkness, not tonight, and he turned on the lamp by the bed and let it burn until morning.

He’d been with Zoë for the best part of a year and her part of London was familiar now. There was the park bench where they sat when the girls played on the swings, the restaurant where the two of them had gone for a meal one night, a strange evening which ended in a row when he’d asked for gravy with his steak. He could never match Zoë’s upbringing or

education, the books she'd read. He knew about ordinary, practical things that weren't important to her.

Stone steps led up to her front door. It seemed odd that the fight had happened only thirty-six hours before; it felt like an aged thing he'd always known. It was here he'd called 999, and Zoë after that – *Come quick!* he remembered shouting into the phone while he crouched over Jason, slapping his face and saying his name – then time stretched and shrank. A blue shriek of sirens, the sound of ambulance doors whacking back, Jason stretchered away by paramedics whose briskness made everything seem more real, and then cold metal was clamped around his wrists while Zoë looked on, her hand covering her mouth with the horror of it all. A darker patch of pavement marked the spot; she must have had to clean it up herself and he closed his eyes against the image. He knocked on the door, a four-rap tune they'd know as his that now sounded too cheerful. It was stupid to want everything the same.

The door opened and seeing him, Zoë hesitated. 'You'd better come in,' she said, then walked away, and he was left standing there while the girls stood beaming at him and for a terrible second, he thought he was going to cry. Their legs were bare beneath their small, frilly skirts, and their t-shirt tops were decorated with hearts and stars. 'It's the little pixies,' he said, and rubbed their shiny hair.

Amber sucked her thumb.

'Your face looks funny,' said Min.

He was about to say he was attacked by a monster, but he didn't want to frighten her so he said, 'I walked into a lamppost,' striking his forehead with the palm of his hand and going cross-eyed, and the sound of her laughter was pure joy.

The house smelled of lilies and the perfumed candles Zoë liked. An abstract picture hung on the wall. So often he'd stood in front of it, seeing different things at different times; today, it was no more than splattered paint. Stepping forward, his foot knocked against a toy

he hadn't seen, sending it skittering across the polished floor, and the sound made him shudder. 'You should clear these up,' he said, more sharply than he meant to, and Amber's face reddened.

In the kitchen, Zoë stood with her back to him. She wore a jumper which looked too big on her and a short, dark skirt. Her hair slipped over her shoulders like a pouring of gloss black paint and he felt his heart contract. Min wrapped her thin arms around him and chanted his name. 'Lukeypookeynookkeynooks,' she said. 'Lukeynookkeynoo.'

Amber watched him. He smiled at her but she didn't smile back.

'Our Daddy isn't very well,' Min said.

Zoë turned. 'Girls, why don't you go and watch TV and give us a moment.' They darted from the room. On the wooden floor, the soles of their feet made light sticking sounds. She glanced at Luke's swollen eye. 'You look awful,' she said, filling the kettle. Her hands were shaking; she fumbled with the teabags. He was glad she was feeling it, too. 'How long did they keep you in? Just the night?'

'Long enough. They've charged me with GBH.'

She squeezed her eyes shut and pinched the bridge of her nose. 'You were supposed to be looking after the girls.'

'He went ballistic. Christ, Zoë, you have no idea.'

She exploded towards him and he took a step back, thinking for a moment she'd hit him. 'It's YOU who has no idea.' She was standing close to him and he could hear the heave of her breathe. 'You nearly *killed* my husband.'

'Ex-husband.'

'Whatever, Luke. Don't try and be clever.'

He pushed his hands into his pockets, straightened his stiff arms. The kettle boiled and she made tea for them both, splashing in the milk and handing him his mug in a way that seemed defiant. At the table they sat a chair apart.

‘I’ve seen how you can be about small things, the temper waiting to come out.’

‘It wasn’t small.’

She was silent for a while. ‘I shouldn’t have left you alone with the girls. I was wrong to trust you.’

‘Please,’ he said.

‘The children could lose their father.’

Luke covered his face with his hands. Murder, manslaughter – his solicitor had said to hope for the best.

The girls’ lunch plates were by the sink: golden fishfinger crumbs, a scattering of peas. He wanted to forget the time she’d set a place for him with tiny cutlery and a pink, plastic plate, the girls shrieking with laughter as he ate the food daintily, dabbing at the puddle of ketchup and saying, *Thank you, Mrs Perry, very nice, Mrs Perry*. From the other room came gibberish sounds of a cartoon; they’d be curled into the sofa, hugging cushions and sucking their thumbs.

‘I’m praying he pulls through.’ Her voice sounded tired and scratched. ‘He didn’t deserve this.’

‘What should I have done?’ he said, pounding his fist on the tabletop and making her flinch. He’d never harmed her and never would, she must know that. Trying to speak calmly, he said, ‘You told me you were terrified of what he might do.’

‘People say things, Luke—’

‘For God’s sake, Zoë, I wanted to protect you and the girls.’ He drew back in his chair. Took a breath. ‘Are they alright?’

‘As well as they can be. I’ve told them he’s not very well and has gone away until he’s better, so they don’t have to see the mess he’s in.’

On the table, beside scattered crayons and felt tips, one of the girls had drawn a card: big petalled flowers and a smiling sun, pink capital letters saying *Daddy and Get Well Soon*. ‘What did you say had happened?’

‘Don’t start, Luke. How I deal with this is up to me.’

He drank his tea through his cut lip, tried to ignore the throb of it.

In the garden, a squirrel hopped across the lawn, ran up the bird-table and down the other side, leaving the wire-feeder swinging. The girls came in for a drink and Zoë took a carton of orange juice from the fridge and poured them both a cup. Amber looked like she’d been crying, her lashes wet and spiked. Zoë kissed the top of her head. ‘You alright, sweetie?’ she said softly. Amber nuzzled into her and let herself be stroked.

Min said to Luke, ‘We’re going to the seaside.’ She held her cup in both hands and took loud breaths between sips.

‘I’m going to wear my dress with the daisies,’ said Amber, cheerful again.

The juice had left her with an orange moustache, and he was about to wipe it for her but stopped himself. ‘That sounds just the thing.’ There was an ache in the back of his throat.

‘I’ve got a spotty bikini,’ said Min. ‘James and Sissy are coming, and we’re going to have fish and chips every day!’

Zoë smiled. ‘I didn’t say *every* day.’

The girls finished their drinks and went back to the other room. She rinsed the cups and sat back down.

‘Is Amber okay?’

‘How d’you mean?’ she said, looking away.

‘She seems upset.’

‘She’s upset about her dad. She’s a softie, you know what she’s like. She and Jase are very close.’

‘*Jase?*’

‘Oh, fuck off, Luke.’

He touched his lip, saw it was bleeding again, dabbed at it with his sleeve. ‘Is that why you’re going away?’

‘I need time to think. What if he doesn’t recover?’ she said, throwing up her hands. ‘Everything’s in his name. I don’t even know if I’ll have a roof over my head this time next week. I don’t know anything anymore.’ She massaged her brow. ‘I’ll have to look for some work.’

‘I could go to prison.’

‘It won’t come to that. He’ll probably screw you for money, that’s how he works. He’ll want his pound of flesh.’

For a moment he couldn’t speak. ‘It’ll be easy for him to ruin me.’

‘You’ll have to wait and see.’

Luke thought of Jason coming into the house, reeking of booze, the frenzy of him, and a wave of bitterness washed through him like bile. ‘My solicitor said you’d need to back me. If you could explain that—’

‘I’m not explaining anything. I’ve said I don’t want to get involved.’

He stared at his calloused palms. A burst of laughter came from the other room and the sound lingered. ‘There’s nobody else I can ask.’ Zoë sighed heavily, but he pressed on.

‘None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for you. For us.’

‘You think I care about that right now?’

‘Have you even tried to see it my way? Can’t you be sorry for a minute?’

‘I am sorry. Sorry I got involved with you in the first place.’

‘We were good together, you said so yourself.’ He touched her hand, but she pulled it away as if she’d been stung.

‘I thought I wanted a piece of rough until you behaved like one.’

He forced himself to look at her.

‘You don’t get it, do you?’ she said.

In the hallway, visions of the fight flashed through his mind like shards of a bad dream. Zoë stood by the open door with her arms folded.

‘What about my things?’

‘You can come back for them another time.’

He left the house in silence and heard the door close behind him. He realised he hadn’t said goodbye to Amber and Min and hoped they were distracted by the TV or the excitement of their trip to the seaside not to mind. He started walking and didn’t look back.

He was glad to be away from their talk of holidays and friends he’d never heard of and the fun they’d have. His life would never be like theirs. Jason and Zoë didn’t care about others, they had no idea about a hard day’s work or what it was like having to prove yourself time and again; he’d mixed with the wrong type. He wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of going back for his things, he could buy razors and boxers and phone chargers anywhere. Even if Jason recovered and the charges were dropped, Zoë wanted nothing more to do with him and the girls would forget him. He shut his eyes, tried to loathe her, but all he saw was the way she looked at him with a twitch of a smile as if to say, *I can’t resist you*.

All evening he sat on the sofa, staring at the wall and forgetting to eat, going through it again and again. If he went to prison he’d lose everything, all hopes for his future wrecked. His day became nothing, light turned to dark, and when he went to bed, it took him ages to get to sleep.