



AJ CAMPBELL

# THE PHONE CALL

Sometimes the **guilty** are **innocent**

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# **The Phone Call**

**by AJ Campbell**

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LEAVE WELL ALONE  
DON'T COME LOOKING*

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*For Billy, Edward & Josh.  
I'm forever proud of you.*

## SUNDAY

Waiting for the phone call to arrive, Joey repositions himself on the top bunk. He holds the letter up to the light and scans the details again. Nine days, that's all he's got. Distressing images of the debt enforcement agent's knock at the door, and what this will do to his family, consume his thoughts. This and the car insurance that is soon due for renewal. Turning on his side, he thrusts out his arm and opens his hand. He watches the letter flutter to the floor, berating himself for the council tax arrears.

He rolls onto his back and stares at bumps on the Artex ceiling, leaning his knees this way and that, unable to get comfortable. Stars like fireworks flash in his field of vision, a pulsing pain behind his eyes. He tenses up. One of his relentless migraines is *all* he needs. Reaching over to the clip-on lamp fixed to the bed frame, he switches off the light, praying the looming headache will pass before it gets a hold and makes him feel that his brain will burst out of his head.

The usual evening rumblings float up from downstairs. Everyone is blissfully unaware of the trouble he is in. The phone buzzes. He lifts the screen to see a text from a bloke he knows from the pub. The third message he's received from him in the past week.

*Did you get my texts, Joey? Couldn't ask for that two hundred back I lent you at Christmas, could I?*



It buzzes again. This time it's Becca. Butterflies twitch in his stomach. They always do where she is concerned.

*Come to the pub. People are saying they've not seen you for ages. Bx  
Been busy. Will try. Jx*

He snorts. He's not got enough money to put a tenner of petrol in the car, let alone buy a pint at the pub. He checks for missed calls, although he knows he won't find any. Only two minutes have passed since he last looked. An edgy two minutes as he wills the call to arrive. He wants to get this over with. Another couple of minutes drag by before the ringtone tears through the air like an explosion. Oz's gruff voice comes on the line, relaying the information Joey has been waiting for. 'Meet me in the Coach and Horses car park.'

'Why there?' Joey asks.

'Why not?'

'What time?'

'Six o'clock.'

'And all I've got to do is deliver some documents?'

'That's right.'

'Where to?'

'I'll give you the address later.' There's a pause before Oz adds, 'Do you want the work or not? If you're not up for it, I'll find someone else.' He sounds put out.

'I'll be there.'

'Don't be late.'

Joey switches the light back on, reassuring himself. He will be OK. It'll be a breeze: a quick way to earn extra cash, Oz said, when Joey saw him in the week. Just some out-of-hours deliveries when normal couriers aren't available or are too busy. Or for items that can't wait for the post. Oz is a businessman. He wouldn't be involved in anything dodgy. Would he?

He descends the ladder, jumping from the middle rung, swearing as he lands and then slips on one of his brother Dylan's schoolbooks. Finding a couple of tablets from the top drawer of his chest, he pops them into his mouth, swallowing them down with a gulp from the half-empty bottle of water he picks up from the floor. Hopefully, they will stave off the headache. Throwing on a hoody, he belts down the stairs, giving the last three steps a miss, and landing with a thud. His faithful border terrier is waiting at the bottom as she usually is, wagging her tail furiously. Hope fills

her hazel-coloured eyes. He strokes her head. 'No, Hetty. I took you for a long walk this afternoon.'

Joey pops into the kitchen where Dylan is making an apple crumble and his mum is mixing batter for her stellar Yorkshire puddings. 'Hey, love,' his mum says, with the stare that says she's not really there, but in a land where an extra dose of her strongest painkillers has taken her. Her cheeks are pale as they often are when she has one of her flare-ups. The cold won't be helping. The TV is blaring out from the lounge. One of his mum's romance films is competing with the deafening dance music from his sister Megan's phone. She is posing in front of the screen, contorting her skinny body as she practices for her latest TikTok video. 'You're not going out?' his mum shouts over the din of the mixer, a look of disappointment erasing the smile from her face. More guilt. Smiles from his mum were a thing of the past until only recently. But she has met a new man – the first since his dad died – who seems to have enabled the corners of her mouth to lift again. 'I'm cooking a roast. You know we all eat together on a Sunday.'

'Save me a plate,' he tells her, nodding at the oven encased in tired brown units. 'I'll have it later.' He's got way too much on his mind to think about food.

'Oh, by the way, we've got a problem,' says his mum, switching off the hand mixer and wiping her hands on her apron. 'The boiler's playing up again. There's no hot water. Tank's cold.'

This is all he needs.

'I've had to put the immersion heater on.'

Joey groans. He doesn't need that either – another hike in the monthly energy bill. He glances at his watch. An old Swatch Automatic Chrono that used to be his dad's. He doesn't have time for food and broken appliances. Later. He'll sort it all later. He pecks his mum's cheek. 'Don't worry. I'll call a plumber out.'

'Also, the mortgage is due next week. I'm going to be short by quite a bit. I'm sorry. It's been such a bad few months. I'm starting to feel much better, though. I'm hoping to get some more work soon.'

Joey frowns. 'How short are we?'

'Three hundred.'

'No worries. I'll sort it. I'm off out. See you later.'

Sitting on the bottom stair, Joey is tying the laces of his trainers when Dylan appears. 'Where're you going?' Dylan asks.

‘Out.’

‘Where?’

‘Mind your own.’

‘Are you seeing your girlfriend?’

‘She’s not my girlfriend.’

‘But you wish she was.’

Joey doesn’t defend himself. Dylan knows how he feels about Becca. ‘I’m not seeing her. I’ve got some errands to run.’

‘Take me with you.’ He is wearing his *Please, Joey* face: pleading eyes, a slight frown. The one he often uses to wrap Joey even tighter around his little finger. Not that it’s a conscious ploy to get what he wants. Dylan’s far too nice for that.

‘I can’t.’ Joey shuffles into his coat.

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve got stuff to do. I’ll be back too late. Plus, you’ve got school tomorrow.’

‘So?’

‘So, go and do your homework.’ Joey zips up his coat and opens the front door.

‘What errands?’

Joey steps outside. ‘Never you mind.’ He closes the door, giving it an extra tug as it isn’t shutting properly. Another thing that needs fixing. The cold hits his throat, the wind snatching at him. He climbs into his car. The engine starts on the third attempt, which is not unusual. When he gets some cash together, he needs to get the car looked at. The dashboard reports the temperature has fallen below freezing. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath as he kneads his knuckles together, waiting for the windscreen to clear. Then he shoves the car into gear and hits the accelerator.

Time to get this over with.

The Coach and Horses pub, a sixteenth-century coaching inn with characteristic oak beams and an inviting inglenook fireplace, is where he agreed to meet Oz. It’s a ten-minute drive into town from the village where he lives. On the main road, he gets caught behind a monster of a gritter truck, and the roads are icy in places, which extends the journey to twenty minutes. Spotting Oz’s Audi convertible in the corner of the car park, Joey

pulls up beside him. Oz gets out of the car and walks around to Joey. How he can afford such a nice car is beyond Joey. It's a few years old, but still. He's done well for himself. When the first lockdown started, spotting the perfect business opportunity, Oz went from being an employee of the supermarket where Joey and Becca work to setting up a drinks delivery service: *Ozwald's – Happiness in a bottle!* Expanding to employ two members of staff, Ozwald's has taken off, earning Oz a fair packet judging by the motor he treated himself to as an early Christmas present.

Joey gets out of his car, shivering. He warily eyes the back door of the pub. He doesn't want to be seen by the bloke he owes two hundred quid to, or Becca, for that matter. She will insist he joins her for a pint.

'You're late,' says Oz.

'Sorry. Roads were bad.'

Oz is a formidable guy, standing a good few inches taller than Joey's six-foot frame. Small slits are shaved into the middle of his eyebrows, and he wears a small hoop in his pierced ear. He yanks the hood of his coat and rearranges his beanie. 'Put this postcode into your satnav,' he shouts above the gusty wind.

'I can't. It's broken,' says Joey.

'What's up with it?'

'God knows. I use Google Maps.' Joey reaches into the car and grabs his phone from the holder. 'Fire away.'

Oz gives him an address, then hands him a Jiffy bag.

'Should I be stressing?' Joey asks as he holds the Jiffy bag. 'Coz this sure doesn't feel like a bunch of documents that can't wait for the post.'

'Don't go worrying yourself.'

Joey throws the bag onto the passenger seat of the car. 'What about my payment?' he asks, conscious of the level of petrol left in his tank.

'The man at the garage, CC, will give it to you when you hand the bag over. You'd better get moving. He'll be waiting for you.'

As Oz disappears into the pub, Joey gets back in his car and turns the key in the ignition, but it won't start, not even on the fifth attempt. He thumps his hand on the steering wheel and exhales a large breath. He tries again. Nothing. He'll flood the engine at this rate. When will life start going his way? Some cash, that's all he needs. Picking up the Jiffy bag from the passenger seat, he runs his fingers over the smooth surface. He knows what's inside – knew it as soon as Oz handed it over. Enough to pay off his mountain of debts, getting steeper by the day. He studies the directions on Google Maps. There's just about enough petrol left in the tank to take him there. He tries the engine again. This time, it starts. He breathes a sigh of relief.

Roadworks hamper the route through country roads, and the wind continues with its brutality, rocking the car when he drives through a stretch of open farmland. He zigzags through the twisty lanes, cursing himself for being such an idiot and getting involved in something like this. There has to be a catch. His mum always says there's no such thing as easy money. The amber petrol light on the dashboard is a constant reminder of the gauntlet he is running.

The garage is a small run-down outfit at the end of an otherwise empty lane. A concrete forecourt fronts a tall rectangular workshop with a floor-to-ceiling metal door, which is slightly open. It's the only suggestion of human presence. He parks alongside a beaten-up old Land Rover splattered with mud and slowly lifts the handbrake. He hesitates. It's dark and foreboding, and he can smell grease, even though all the car windows are closed. He'd

had visions of meeting the bloke without even leaving his car. A straight swap through the open window with the engine still running. But this place looks abandoned, not a soul in sight. Has Oz given him the right address? He stares at the metal sign above the door, barely visible in the darkness. He can just about make out the black letters on an aluminium plate: *CC Autos: MOTs & Servicing, Crash repairs, Free estimates*. Joey sits and waits, observing the stack of spare tyres by a large corrugated door.

A sudden banging on the car window startles him. He turns his head to be greeted by two eyes staring intensely at him. They are menacing. His stomach turns. Another knock makes him flinch. He opens the door to a stocky man beckoning him towards a side entrance Joey hadn't spotted. Is this CC? Joey doesn't want to get out. He wants to put the car back in gear and get the hell out of there. It doesn't look like the kind of place he wants to be hanging around. Why did he agree to this? There must be other ways. But he knows there aren't. Not for people like him.

'Are you CC?'

'That's what they call me. You must be Joey. Come with me.'

'Can we do business here?' Joey asks, knowing he sounds pathetic. He's not used to this. This is the kind of shenanigans for TV, not for a nobody like him. He scans the building and surrounding area, his eyes settling on a skip overflowing with junk.

'Don't worry. I don't have any cameras, if that's what you're thinking. Don't want anyone seeing what goes on in this place.' CC gives a raucous laugh. 'Follow me.' His heavy frame proceeds through the door, leaving Joey with no alternative but to grab the Jiffy bag and follow.

Joey's wobbly legs can barely take the weight of his body. Not that there's much of it. School friends hadn't called him Stick for nothing. Inside, it smells metallic and rusty, like the smell of blood. It's freezing cold, even colder than outside, and, apart from a faint light beaming from the back of the workshop that he saw when he arrived, it's dark. He can just about make out a few cars hoisted in the air. CC shouts, 'Hurry up! Chop-chop!' ending the uncomfortable silence.

Joey hastens towards the light, where he finds CC sitting behind a desk signing documents in a fluorescent-lit office that smells of ready meals. He is wearing a suit and tie, albeit not very well. Some people just look scruffy, however hard they try. The blotch of food staining his jacket lapel isn't helping. 'Be with you in a sec.' CC lifts his head and smiles; a brilliant

white-toothed grin that fails to ease Joey's apprehension. Those dark, flat eyes give zero away. A portable heater at the side of the desk throws out fierce heat, but it's still shockingly cold in there, as if they are underground. CC links his hands behind his neck and leans back into a stretch. He nods his head, gesturing towards three stacked tyres. 'Take a seat.'

Joey leans against the tyres, staring around the room. Boxes, containing what looks like car parts, pack the area either side of him. Filing cabinets and a waist-height fridge, with a kettle and a microwave on top, line the wall behind the desk. The fridge door has a large dent in its front as if someone couldn't contain their anger, and above it, hangs a poster titled *Supercars* displaying top-of-the-range Ferraris, Aston Martins, Lamborghinis, and Jaguars.

'What have you got for me, then?' CC says.

Joey relinquishes the Jiffy bag, trying to disguise his shaking hands with exaggerated movements. CC takes the package, stroking his lumberjack beard that's in need of a good trim. A line of grease darkens his fingernails, the pads of his fingers thick and cracked. He smiles again. He seems to smile a lot. Joey is not reassured, but perhaps he is being unfair. CC promptly orders him out of the office with a wave of his rough-skinned hand towards the door. 'Stand out there. I'll call you when I'm ready.'

Joey waits outside, but he can't help craning his neck through the crack of the door. CC carefully opens the Jiffy bag and shakes it, encouraging the release of a dozen or so bound wads of fifty-pound notes. Joey has never seen so much money. What he could do with that lot! CC separates the wads into two neat piles. He nods and slips one pile back into the bag. Slamming his hands on the edge of the desk, he pushes his chair backwards. He picks up the bag and the pile of cash and walks over to the fridge. Joey is mesmerised as he watches CC peel the poster away from the wall to reveal a built-in safe. Tapping eight times on the digital keypad, he opens the door and places the cash and bag inside. He shuts the safe, turns and walks towards the office door.

Joey jolts backwards out of sight.

'Where are you, lad?'

Joey waits for a second and steps forwards. CC nods at him and hands over five tenners. 'All good. You can go,' he says, smiling again.

Joey can't escape quickly enough. Fifty pounds – really? How easy was that? He strides towards the exit; certain CC is watching him. But he daren't

look around. He just wants to get out of there. The adrenaline rush since agreeing to this skulduggery has drained him.

Back in the driver's seat, he tries to start the car, but it's playing stubborn again. The engine turns over. Once, twice, three times. He waits a minute, begging the car to behave. He tries again. Nothing. He lets out a string of expletives. Even after five attempts, all he hears is a clicking sound. 'For God's sake,' Joey cries out, thumping the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. 'Not now. Please, not now.'

CC reappears, knocking on the window. Reluctantly, Joey opens it. 'Got problems there, lad? Sounds like your vintage motor needs some TLC.'

Joey fakes a smile. 'It'll be fine in a bit.'

CC shakes his head as, once again, the engine fails. 'Don't sound fine to me. Been having trouble long?'

Tight-lipped, Joey nods and makes another attempt.

'Shame!' CC bangs on the bonnet of the car. 'Focuses are usually good little runners.'

'Just a bit temperamental at times,' Joey says, unable to keep the dread from his voice. He can feel it in his bones. This is not a place he wants to get stuck. There will be no way to get back, only an Uber, and that will make a hefty dent in the fifty quid he has just earned.

CC bangs on the bonnet again. 'Well, if you need any help, just shout. Happy to oblige.' He saunters off to lock up his garage.

Another three failed attempts, and Joey is getting seriously worried. Sweat continues to trickle down his back. He can't believe this is happening to him. But it is.

'I'll tell you what,' CC calls out. 'Leave it here with me. I'll give it the once-over in the morning.' He walks towards the car. 'Sounds like the alternator to me. I'll have it ready for you tomorrow afternoon. Don't worry, you can trust her with me.'

Joey tries again, glancing from the steering wheel to CC, who is shaking his head. He tries twice more before surrendering.

'Jump in my car. I'll give you a lift home,' CC says.

Joey wavers. He knows it's wrong. This is not someone he should be getting involved with. His mum has always told him that nothing comes for free. But he can't see another option. He closes the window and, with great reluctance, climbs out of the car.

'Hurry up,' says CC. 'I haven't got all night.'



During the ride back to his house, Joey gives directions while CC talks about broken cars and broken families; a daughter he hardly sees, although Joey is not fully listening to the details. He is working out the logistics of getting through tomorrow without a car. He needs to get Dylan to school. His brother used to catch the train with his mate, but on the first day back after the Christmas break, when they left the station, they stopped at the shops to get some snacks, and two thugs mugged them. They stole their phones along with the measly couple of quid Dylan and his mate had in their blazer pockets. Joey has taken the pair of them to school since, and Dylan's mate's mum picks them up, despite Dylan's protests that he would rather continue catching the train.

CC asks questions Joey doesn't want to answer but feels obliged to. This bloke didn't need to help him out, after all. He owes Joey no favours. He could have left him to find his own way home in the dark and freezing cold. CC sympathises when Joey tells him about his dad. 'Lost my dad when I was young too,' he says. 'It's a tough gig.'

'Why are you called CC?' Joey asks to change the conversation. He doesn't want to talk about his dad to this man. It feels morally wrong.

'I don't like my name. Never have done.' He pokes his nose up. 'Cameron Carling. Hate it.' They arrive in a side street adjacent to Joey's house. 'Tell me, lad, are you one to be trusted?'

Why's he asking that? 'I like to think so,' Joey replies. He means it too. Joey Clarke might not be the best timekeeper – life gets in the way – but if you had a spare dollar, you'd put it on him if you were looking for the most trustworthy bet.

'Good. I like people I can trust. I've got another job for you.'

'You're alright, thanks. I just did this as a favour,' Joey says, sensing a deadly sea of danger he has no desire to dive into. He's not that stupid. It's a sea full of violent storms and mortal currents that will separate him from his family.

'Easy deliveries. You could earn yourself a solid little income,' CC says. 'Sounds like you and your family could do with it.'

Joey opens the car door. 'Thanks for the lift and for helping me with my car. What time can I come and pick it up tomorrow?'

'Should be done by four-ish. Give me your phone number. I'll text you when it's done.'

'How much do you think it'll be?'

‘All depends on what we find.’

‘I’ll bring the cash.’ Joey cringes. How is he going to find cash of this kind? He’s got the fifty quid, but he has already spent that in his head. He’s been cornered. He needs his car.

‘Do I look like the type of guy who takes cash?’

For the first time all day, Joey laughs. ‘Yes.’

‘I like your honesty, lad. Cash it is. See you tomorrow.’ CC laughs with a sinister throaty chuckle.

**MONDAY**

Without his car, Joey is late for work. He arrives, panting and nervous that he had to let Dylan catch the bus to school. For the third time in the past week, Joey finds himself having to tell Mr Parasi that he'll skip his morning break to make up for being late. Mr Parasi rolls his deeply set eyes but says nothing. For a boss, he's not bad. They mostly get on well. Joey has worked for him since dropping out of school after his dad died. Big mistake. He knows that now, but at the time, earning money to support the family and look after his mum was far more important than gaining qualifications. And now, of course, there's also the perk that Becca works there part-time, too.

Joey spends the day stacking shelves, as he usually does on a Monday, trying to stifle persistent yawns. He hardly slept all night, wondering how he is going to get the cash to pay for his car. After giving his mum money to buy some food and toiletries from the fifty pounds CC gave him, he's got a little left, but he knows this won't go far. He needs to get some more from somewhere. Paying for his car is the immediate priority, so he can get CC off his back. All his other money worries can wait another day. But, of course, they can't. They plague his thoughts as he mindlessly replenishes empty shelves with tins of baked beans and jars of pasta sauce.

After work, he catches a train and endures the treacherous half hour walk from the village station to CC Autos. Along a fast country road with

blind bends, approaching cars force him up onto the grassy verge for safety at various intervals. Eventually, he navigates the lane to CC's garage.

There is more action taking place than the previous evening. A hum of busyness that fills the air with the strong smell of sweat. Dance music is beating out from a portable speaker placed in the middle of the floor, and two mechanics are busy under the bonnets of beaten-up old motors. They don't even acknowledge Joey. They are too busy having banter at the expense of a young mechanic working beneath a car elevated on a hydraulic lift.

CC appears from between the motors, startling Joey. He is wearing navy overalls today in contrast with the suit and tie from yesterday, but more in keeping with his workers. 'Be careful. That lift's playing up. It's a bit temperamental,' he shouts to the young mechanic. Joey watches CC cackle as he presses a button on a side post. 'Quick, get out of there.' The young mechanic flies to the side, executing a side break fall as the car free falls. A fleeting look of panic crosses CC's face as it smashes on the concrete floor. The noise is deafening. It sounds like an exhaust backfiring or a gun going off. CC says, 'Christ, I didn't mean for it to completely fall.' The other two mechanics roar with laughter. 'You'd better check the suspension.'

Joey throws his hands to the back of his head, cradling his skull in anguish. He doesn't see the funny side of the prank. Not at all. This bloke's a nutter. He spies his car at the side of the workshop, surprised to see it so clean. 'Scrubbed up like a beauty, hasn't she?' CC says, nodding at Joey's silver Ford Focus.

'You cleaned it?'

'Right we did. Never seen such a filthy motor. You can actually tell what colour it is now.' He laughs. 'I thought it was black when you turned up last night.' He turns to his staff. 'Stop messing around. Get on with your work. I do want to go home at some point tonight.' He beckons Joey over to his car. 'When did you last change the oil?'

Joey shrugs, turning his palms upwards. He can't remember. Has he ever changed it?

'More than a few years, by the look of it. Surprised this thing is still running at all. And that it passed its last MOT. Did you get a mate to do it?' He gives another hearty laugh. 'It needed a new alternator and a damn good service. I've never seen such a knackered set of spark plugs!'

CC points at the windscreen. 'It needed some new wipers. I've put half a tank of petrol in it for you too. You were running low. Can't say fairer than that, can you?'

Overcome with nerves, Joey blurts out his predicament. 'I've got a slight problem with the cash. I didn't get to the bank in time. Can I drop it in at the weekend?'

CC twists his lips. 'A bank transfer it'll have to be. That poses a problem, though. I'll have to put it through the books and charge you VAT. That adds another twenty per cent, you know. Never mind. Come into the office with me, and I'll give you my account details. You can transfer it straight over.'

What now? Joey knows exactly what now. He's not stupid. He doesn't want to deliver any more packages. But he doesn't have an option. A drunk driver who drove without insurance and killed his dad stripped that choice from him years ago.

He will be driving his car out of this place.

But he knows he won't be going straight home.

Swallowing hard, he steps towards CC's office to learn where he will be driving his scrubbed-up car when he leaves this hole. 'Let's not beat about the bush, lad.' CC swings the Jiffy bag that Joey brought him yesterday in his hand. 'How about you run a couple of errands for me to settle your bill?'

Joey clenches his fists. Not because he's ready for a fight, but because he knows he is beaten, and he wants to punch himself for having got himself in this situation. He should never have taken that phone call from Oz yesterday. 'Tell me about these errands.'

'There's only two.' CC hands Joey the Jiffy bag with an address scribbled on a Post-it note attached. Joey can guess what's inside; half the cash he delivered yesterday. It feels heavier than it should, or is that his dread and regret wrapped in a bundle of fear that is weighing it down? 'Wait there,' CC says, going behind his desk where he bends to open the bottom drawer and remove a package. Joey can't work out what it is at first, but soon makes out a small black rucksack. The type a woman would use. He gulps. CC writes an address on a compliment slip and hands it to Joey. 'This is the second one. Seven o'clock tonight. Make sure you're there dead on the dot. That's most important.' Joey steps forwards to scan the address. It's in the next town. He doesn't know the street. It's a close, actually.

Regency Close. Number one. Joey glances at his watch and makes a quick calculation. Not long and this will all be over. His heart nosedives to his guts at the thought of his dad being able to see him now.

CC slides the rucksack across the desk. 'Don't be early. Don't be late.'

Joey picks it up, wondering how much cash it contains.

'Call me when you've dropped the rucksack. Then we can call it quits.'

CC pauses before adding, 'If you want to, that is.'

'No problem. Seven on the dot, it is,' Joey says, and, not wanting to spend another moment there, he dashes towards the door and jumps into his car. It starts first time. He can't remember the last time that happened.

CC waves him off, mouthing, 'Don't forget to call.'

Joey can't get out of there fast enough. At least the car is running well. Better than ever. To be fair, the bloke has done a good job. He glances at the fuel level indicator. After he's dropped these bags at the specified addresses, he should have enough petrol to last him until payday. When he gets home tonight, he's going to research part-time jobs. Nothing is stopping him from starting something new this weekend. He'll find something that pays weekly. That's what he needs. Extra weekly income to cover all the incidentals his monthly pay and his mum's benefits can't cover. At least his mum has started to work again. Only a few hours when she is well enough, working for her friend's cleaning company, but it's something. Saying that, with her relapse this week, there's no promise of extra cash anytime soon.

He drives to the first address, a flat in a big modern development overlooking the river in town. He presses the buzzer for flat sixteen, in line with the Post-it note stuck on the bag. In the entry system camera, he can see himself. He quickly looks away and up at the façade of the building. It's the kind of place Joey always had visions of living in when he left home. In the days when ignorance was bliss, and he never considered how he was going to pay for his dreams. He would live there with a girl like Becca and have a job in the City where he had to wear a suit. The corner flats have balconies with tables and chairs and fancy trees in pots. Bay trees, he thinks they're called. Keep dreaming, Joey. Never stop dreaming. He would come home from work on a Friday and pour a beer – a glass of wine for Becca – and they would sit and share the respective accomplishments of their working week as they looked over the river and waited for their Chinese takeaway to arrive.

A male voice interrupts his musings. ‘Come in. Turn right, and I’m last on the left.’

The glass door clicks and buzzes as it opens. Joey rushes in and strides along the dimly lit corridor to where a thirty-something man is waiting. He has quiffed hair and a goatee beard and is dressed in a designer tracksuit. He nods at Joey, takes the Jiffy bag, and quietly shuts the door. Joey stands looking at the polished chrome numbers one and six attached to the door, momentarily dazed. How easy was that? Perhaps he should consider this “delivery service” as a part-time job. No. Think again, Joey. Think again.

One down, one to go.

Then that’s it. He’s finished with this shitshow. He’s not cut out for this.

He has time to spare before he needs to deliver the rucksack to Regency Close. He doesn’t want to waste petrol by going home, so he pulls into a lay-by to wait. He stares at the rucksack on the passenger seat. He wishes he could take the cash and run. But he knows however fast he runs, it will never be fast enough.

His phone rings, making him jump. It’s CC. ‘There’s been a change of plan. You can’t deliver the rucksack until tomorrow night. Same time. Don’t let it out of your sight until then.’

Joey doesn’t like his tone. If he didn’t owe him money, he’d tell him to get stuffed. But then wonders if he would. CC is not the kind of bloke you speak to like that. And to be honest, Joey is not the type to tell anyone to stick it.

Frustrated, Joey drives home. Now he’s got to wait another day for this to be over. All the way, he allows himself to dream about what he could do with the money inside the rucksack. He keeps giving it the side-eye. And whenever he stops at a set of traffic lights, he stares at it until the green light appears in his peripheral vision. He bets there’s enough in there for him to afford a holiday after settling all his debts. Two, in fact. He could take his family on that holiday to Disney. The one his mum had been saving for before his dad died. Her income afforded the family luxuries that his dad’s salary didn’t stretch to. Little did she know that when she started putting two hundred and fifty pounds a month aside to take the family to Disney, she would end up using those hard-earned savings to fork out for her husband’s coffin.

America – a week at Disney – that’s where the four of them would go. And he’d pay for Becca and him to fly to a beach somewhere exotic where

the accommodation comprises thatched huts with a sea view, and waiters serve drinks as you snooze on your sun lounger on the beach.

Keep dreaming, Joey. Never stop dreaming.

Arriving home, he considers leaving the rucksack in his car, but what if it gets broken into? No, he can't leave cash in it. He can't begin to contemplate adding another debt to the burgeoning demands of his outstanding liabilities. He reaches over and picks it up, curious to look inside. Just to see how much is in there. But it would be too tempting. He'd want to run away with the lot of it even more.

'Joey. Help us,' Megan cries out when he opens the door. 'It's freezing.'

Joey pauses at the lounge door, the rucksack on the floor out of sight. Megan and his mum are huddled under a duvet on the sofa.

'Did you get my texts, love?' his mum says. 'The heating's packed up now. Did you arrange for a plumber to come and take a look?'

'I'll sort it now.'

'Go up to the loft, would you, and fetch down that electric heater?'

'Sure.'

'Want me to put your dinner in the microwave?' his mum calls out as he heads for the stairs.

Food is the last thing on his mind. All he wants to do is hide the rucksack and jump in a hot shower. The day's events are all mixed into a rancid stench of perspiration he can't suffer any longer. 'Later, maybe.'

Upstairs, Dylan is in his customary after-school apparel of pyjamas, doing his homework on his bed. Joey slips the rucksack off his shoulder and crouches down to open a drawer. 'What've you got there?' Dylan asks. 'Is that a new rucksack?'

'Never you mind!' Joey snaps and promptly regrets it as he sees the look of hurt on Dylan's face. His brother didn't deserve that. He hasn't done anything wrong. Joey stuffs the rucksack underneath an untidy pile of T-shirts and quickly shuts the drawer.

'What's wrong, Joey?' Dylan asks.

'Nothing, buddy. Why?'

'You've been acting... well weird.'

'What do you mean?' Joey asks, surprised it has been noticeable. He's got the weight of the universe stacked on his shoulders, but that's not for a



twelve-year-old to worry about.

‘Dunno.’ Dylan lifts his shoulders and puffs out his cheeks.

Joey walks over to the bottom bunk and ruffles his brother’s hair. They’ve got the same dirty blond curls that they wear in a ‘woke-up-like-this’ style. On some it may appear scruffy, on them it looks natural. ‘I’m fine. Now, get on with your homework.’

Joey strips out of his clothes, crams them into the laundry basket and grabs a towel from the floor. Hot water and soap will allow temporary relief from his troubles. He feels extra dirty tonight. But when he turns on the tap, cold water sprays over him. He swears, and runs back to the bedroom, pausing at the airing cupboard to switch on the immersion heater. With a towel wrapped around his middle, and another in his hands to dry his hair, he steps into the bedroom to see Dylan kneeling by the chest of drawers, pointing a gun in his direction.

‘What’s this?’ Dylan says. They glare at each other briefly, fear freezing their features into matching expressions.

Joey retreats, clutching the door frame, trying to contain his panic. ‘Put it down. Now. For fuck’s sake, Dylan!’ Joey peeps through the crack in the door to see his brother lower the gun towards the floor. He rushes back into the room. Dylan is speechless, his mouth wide open. Joey drops the towel he was using to dry his hair and rushes to his brother. He can hear their mum calling them. Joey carefully picks up the gun and slowly places it in the drawer.

‘Are you in trouble, Joey?’ Dylan asks, his voice a whisper of disbelief and fright. He turns out his bottom lip and shakes his head.

‘No, buddy. No.’

‘Why’ve you got a gun?’ Dylan asks, his voice louder.

‘It’s not mine.’ What is CC playing at?

‘Whose is it?’

Joey glances at the door. ‘Be quiet.’

‘Tell me.’

‘It’s a long story.’

‘I want to hear it.’

‘Just be quiet, Dylan.’ Joey takes the gun back out of the drawer and places it in the rucksack padded with towels. He’s trying to keep it together while inside he is falling apart.

Dylan lifts a black square of fabric from the floor and hands it to Joey. ‘It was wrapped in this.’ His voice is wavering, as if it can’t decide whether

he is angry or sad.

Joey takes the gun back out of the rucksack. He folds it in the piece of black cloth as if he is a magician trying to make it disappear. No such luck. He bundles it back into the rucksack and buries it under the T-shirts. He slams the drawer shut. He can't believe this is happening. It's like he has fallen asleep and had a nightmare from hell.

Megan barging into the room makes them jump. 'Mum's calling. That new crime drama is starting. You two need to come now.' She pauses at the door, staring at her brothers kneeling on the carpet. 'What're you doing?'

Dylan jumps up. 'Nothing. Get out of here.'

Megan places her hands on her skinny hips. 'What's going on?'

This is all Joey needs. He stands. 'We're coming now. See you down there.' He tries to sound cheery, but he can feel the alarm bell of danger ringing in his voice even if they can't hear it. 'Go.'

Megan huffs and puffs before disappearing. Joey snatches the rucksack, scanning the room for another hiding place. The last thing he needs is his nosy sister finding it. Dylan knowing is bad enough. Peering around the room, he opts for under his pillow.

'I'm scared,' Dylan says.

'Hey, buddy, don't be. I'm taking this to someone tomorrow, and that will be that.'

'Who?'

'Never you mind. But Dylan, you must promise me. Look at me.' Joey grabs his brother's face and cups his chin in his hands. Dylan refuses to look at him. Joey shakes his face into submission. 'You must never tell anyone about this. You hear me? Not a soul.'

Dylan twists his lips into a knot of defiance. Joey shakes Dylan's face again. 'If anyone finds out, I'll be in serious trouble. And I mean, really serious. Promise me.'

'I promise,' Dylan says.

Their mum pops her head around the door. Dylan gives a startled yelp. 'Did you not hear me calling?' she asks, frowning. 'Have you got that heater yet?'

'I'll do it now and bring it straight down,' Joey says.

She eyes them suspiciously before leaving.

'I'll meet you downstairs,' Joey says to Dylan. 'Act normally.'

Joey makes a quick call to a mate he knows from school who he occasionally sees at the pub, Pat the plumber. As he dials the number, he realises he hasn't seen Pat for a while, but then Joey doesn't go to the pub as much as he used to. He can't afford to. Pat agrees to stop by at some point. 'It'll be early morning, though. I'm chocka at the moment.' A feeling of dread about the cost adds to Joey's worries. He ends the call to cries from Megan to hurry up and fetch the heater.

Joey hates going up into the loft. It's crammed to the rafters with all his dad's possessions, which his mum has refused to part with. 'I won't hear of it,' she says on the first of December every year when Joey struggles to work his way through the muddle to drag out the Christmas decorations. Every year he tries to coax her even to begin giving it some thought. But the boxes of clothes, shoes, books, and medals from his dad's achievements in the boxing ring in his younger days remain untouched.

Finding the rod for opening the loft, Joey unhooks the hatch and pulls down the extendable steps. A blast of cold air hits him as he climbs up. He reaches for the light switch, but it's not working. Great! The bulb must have blown. Working his way through the clutter with only the torch from his phone to guide him, he locates the old heater and takes it down to his family.

'What's got into you?' their mum says when Dylan refuses her offer of chocolate while they all watch TV, huddled under duvets because, despite the heater, it's harshly cold. Megan is cuddled up to Joey. She keeps hiding her head behind his shoulder, waiting for the next jump scare. In truth, this episode is a little too gory for her, but she insists on staying to watch with her family. She adores their time together, as they all do.

Dylan huffs and folds his arms across his chest. 'Nothing.'

Joey is watching the TV, but he is not concentrating. He's got enough of his own drama going down. He sympathises with Dylan. His appetite vanished when he saw that gun in his brother's hand. He finds a cheery voice. It's not hard. He's had plenty of practice where his family is concerned. He was the one who got them through the loss of the man they had all loved. The one who kept the wheels of the family moving while the others stood still, unable to go forwards. 'Leave him, Mum. More for us,' Joey says with a fake smile.

His mum raises her eyebrows, looking over the top of her broken glasses. One of the arms is attached to the frame with Sellotape, causing

them to sit wonkily on her head. They've been like that for months now, but they don't have the money to replace them, and as she only uses them to watch TV, it's not been at the top of their list of priorities. As soon as Joey gets some spare cash, he is going to buy her a new pair. Whenever that will be.

After the TV drama ends, his mum ushers Megan and Dylan off to bed and questions Joey. 'What's got into Dylan?' she asks.

'Growing pains,' Joey replies. 'You heard from the new man tonight?' he says, changing the subject. She met Adrian – Ade – at a school reunion. The event had already been cancelled three times because of Covid, and she nearly didn't go this time either. It took all her friends' persuasion, Joey's too, to doll herself up and go along, if only for an hour. But she ended up staying the whole evening, and her phone hasn't stopped beeping since.

She smiles, glancing down at her phone on the edge of the sofa. 'May have had a few texts.'

'He's keen then?'

'He said he'd like to take me out to dinner tomorrow night. Would you mind the kids? Just for a few hours. Assuming I feel better, that is.'

'Sure. No problem.' It's not, either. Joey would do anything to see his mum happy again. He knows she'll never get over what happened to his dad. Who would? When your husband leaves for work one day, never to come home again, and you discover it was someone else's fault, life can never be the same. But he hopes she'll find some level of happiness again. She is only forty-four, after all. But she looks a lot older with her thinning hair and sagging skin from when she shed a ton of weight after her husband's death. They all thought it was due to the tsunami of grief that knocked her sideways and engulfed every cell of her body, and partly, it probably was. But accompanying the grief was unexplained pain that was widespread and cumbersome and had her living on the sofa for the best part of two years until a fibromyalgia diagnosis explained her suffering. A disease that affects her muscles and bones, causes her pain, and robs her of sleep. It all makes her knackered and sees her periodically returning to bed during the day for lengthy periods.

'I need to help a friend with something tomorrow,' he lies. 'So I won't be back until eight.'

'That's fine. I'll tell him not to pick me up until then.'

'When're we going to meet this Ade, then?' Joey asks.

‘Let me get to know him first.’

‘You’ve known him for over thirty years, haven’t you?’

‘Not like this,’ she smiles. ‘I didn’t know him that well when we were at school. He was in a different class and hung out with another gang.’

‘I don’t like this,’ Dylan whispers after Joey pops a couple of ibuprofen and gets into bed.

Joey pretends not to hear. He can’t face his brother. He is trying to hold it together, knowing he is lying beside a weapon. How did he get here? He doesn’t know what to do for the best. If he takes it back to CC, he’ll demand payment for his car. A demand Joey can’t meet. Joey dreads to think how CC will react to that. He has no choice. He must honour this last delivery. Then, he’s made a pact with himself. He will definitely not be doing any more of these jobs. He’ll ask Mr Parasi for more hours at the supermarket. And he’ll get another job. Restaurants are crying out for staff. He could easily juggle a couple of evening and weekend shifts. And he’ll sign up for that evening course Becca has been encouraging him to apply for. ‘It’s never too late,’ she says. ‘Get those A levels you should’ve got when you were at school.’ It had been going so well before he lost his dad. He’d been one of the more diligent pupils. But then he’d lost his mentor, his best friend, his focus, and nothing in life mattered any more. What was the point?

Dylan kicks Joey’s mattress from below with the heel of his foot, like he often does when he wants to be annoying. ‘I don’t like this.’

‘Go to sleep,’ Joey hisses.

‘I can’t.’

Joey rolls over and dangles his head over the top bunk until he can just about make out Dylan’s face in the glow of the light from the moon shining through the gap in the curtains. ‘You’ll have Mum in here.’

‘What’re you really doing with a gun? Are you going to shoot someone?’

‘For God’s sake, what do you take me for?’

‘Then why have you got it? This is not America, Joey. People don’t just have guns.’

‘I didn’t know it was in there.’

‘How can you not know?’

‘I thought it was something else.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Look, I’m delivering it as a favour for someone.’

‘Who?’

‘Just someone.’

‘You’re really frightening me.’

Joey hangs his head back over the top bunk. ‘Not as much as you’re frightening me. Quit the questions and get to sleep. I’m sorting it.’

**TUESDAY**

According to Google Maps, Regency Close is ten miles away in the neighbouring town. But nagging thoughts fly through Joey's mind as he plans his escape from this cage of corruption he has found himself trapped in. Thoughts telling him not to drive the whole way and to consider CCTV. It's everywhere these days. Not that Joey is an expert. But he knows a guy from the pub who owns his own security firm installing CCTV and claims to be a master of his trade. He used to work for the council until he left to set up his own business. He was only twenty at the time. He's a bit of a bragger, which Joey finds irritating, but he still admires him. Why can't he do something like that? Everyone seems to be setting up their own successful business. If only he could do something similar, so he could become financially secure. Joey hasn't seen the guy for ages. He's probably too busy with all the jobs that flow like rapids, filling his diary for months ahead.

Bearing in mind everything he has told Joey about the ways criminals circumvent CCTV – taking back streets and avoiding the dodgy parts of town – Joey plans the trip to Regency Close when sleep refuses to come. He settles for a parking spot down a side road, behind the garages of the row of neighbouring terraced properties. He then commits to memory the twenty-minute route he will walk to Regency Close. Running through the plans in his head one more time allows him to drift off into a fitful slumber.



Joey struggles to wake up and is late for work yet again. Mr Parasi looks at his watch and gives him a straight-lipped smile. He has always had a soft spot for Joey. He knew Joey's dad from years back when he used to deliver fruit and veg to the store. But Joey is pushing his luck. 'You missed the delivery,' says Mr Parasi, running a hand through his short grey hair.

Delivery. It sounds like he shouted that word.

Mr Parasi adjusts his round glasses. 'Ozward's left a drinks delivery. Make a start on that.'

'I'll make up for the time,' Joey says. 'I'll come in tomorrow afternoon on my day off.'

Joey spends the morning stacking shelves in the beverage aisle, trying to stifle persistent yawns. Boxes of fizzy drinks and bottles of still and sparkling water on one side; beer, wine, and spirits on the other. He doesn't even know how much longer he will have this job. Mr Parasi's supermarket is a dying breed, retaining the values of stocking local produce while resisting the constant threat of superstore giants.

Joey often wonders what he'd be doing now if he hadn't lost his dad. Perhaps he would have started university like Becca. His dad had always told him he was cut out to rule the world. Joey wouldn't go that far, but he knows he'd be doing more than stacking shelves and serving grumpy customers in a local supermarket while considering dodgy deliveries to save him having to pay for the bloody car to be fixed. He can't concentrate. A week tomorrow will see the enforcement agents knocking on his door, but for now he has a more pressing problem, and his turning stomach persists in reminding him of Dylan's face when he found him with that gun.

He works through his lunch hour. Despite having skipped breakfast, he knows he won't be able to eat anything, and it will erase the black mark Mr Parasi struck against his name this morning. He takes a quick break to check his phone, only to wish he hadn't. An email from the enforcement agency advising ways to clear debts and reminding him of their approaching visit if he can't pay the money he owes, only depresses him even more. As does a text from CC about not forgetting to call him after he has made the delivery tonight.

The afternoon drags more than the morning. Joey tries his best to forget his troubles and loses himself in scanning items through the till, but it's not

helping. Fears over what the evening has in store for him persistently invade his thoughts. 'Would you stay an extra hour this afternoon?' Mr Parasi asks. 'I need to leave the store for a while.'

'No worries,' Joey replies. The Becca butterflies flutter in his stomach. If he stays an extra hour, he'll get to see her. She's a mature student in her final year at university, studying psychology, although she still lives at home and works the late-afternoon shift on Tuesdays and all day on Saturdays. For this reason, Saturday is his favourite day of the week. That one week she didn't turn up because she had a stomach bug was one of the biggest anticlimaxes of his life. It was that day, around the end of October last year, as he carried a dull ache of disappointment in his slumped shoulders, that he realised how much Becca meant to him. He'd never experienced that feeling before.

Joey introduced her to Mr Parasi when she began looking for a part-time job after starting university. They met in the Coach and Horses pub years ago when Joey was sitting outside on the brick wall where the smokers hang out. She appeared and asked him if she could scrounge a light. It was the moment he finally understood what the phrase "love at first sight" meant. Their friendship ignited from there. Joey would like more. God, would he like more. You bet. She is everything he has ever imagined the perfect girlfriend to be, even if she can be a right old chatterbox at times: kind, witty, and pretty, with bags of zing, and so goddam sexy with that long blond hair, creamy skin and toned body from the running she does. But he has always known his place, and with the demands of his family and life, he hasn't had the strength to be punching above his weight.

They've got much closer lately, though. But he's hesitant to move the relationship to a more intimate level. She is too, he can tell: both of them reluctant to risk losing the precious friendship they have built.

Becca waves and heads towards him at the tills, pushing a trolley of cardboard boxes, her hair tied into two plaits which swing side to side with each step she takes. They fist bump. 'How's life?' she asks.

You don't want to know.

He sighs. 'So-so. How did the move go?'

She opens the boxes and restocks the sweet shelves by the tills. Joey smiles as she jabbers away. 'Chaos, still. I've been helping Mum, but she is still freaking out about all the mess. Dad has gone away for a few days, and she lost it. She said there's still too much unpacking to do for him to go

swanning off to some conference. I can see her point. There're still boxes everywhere, but to be fair to Dad, he has got a business to run. Mum said moving was stressful, but I never realised how much. You'll have to come over when we get straight.'

They're rich, her parents. Well, rich compared to Joey's family. Their old house had a swimming pool. Becca invited him and other friends from the pub to a party there last summer for her parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary celebration, postponed from the previous year because of Covid. There was a marquee with a dance floor, and the whole shebang was teeming with silver balloons. Joey had never seen anything like it, especially the spread on offer. The buffet filled the entire length of one side of the marquee and looked posh enough for a wedding.

Becca helps an elderly woman struggling with an overloaded shopping basket. She's kind like that – always helping shoppers. And she's always got a smile for everyone. 'You OK, Joey?'

'Yeah, why?'

'You look... I don't know... distracted, somehow.'

'I'm fine,' he lies. He's not fine at all.

'How's your mum?' Becca asks Joey after she has packed the woman's shopping into bags and waved her off.

'She's got a new man.'

'New man, eh?'

'I know. First one since my dad died.'

'What's he like?'

Joey shrugs. 'I haven't met him yet.'

'Where did they meet?'

'School reunion.'

'They went to school together? That's kinda sweet.'

'They keep texting each other. I haven't seen her smile like this since Dad died, so I guess it's a good thing for her.'

'I can't imagine my parents with anyone else.'

Joey shrugs. 'It's tough, but I'm happy that she's happy.'

Becca cocks her head and grins at him. 'You know, you really are one of the good guys, Joey Clarke.'

She'd retract that comment if she knew about the mess he has got himself into. He'd love to confide in her. Tell her about his stupidity. She

wouldn't judge him. He knows that. But she's the last person he'd want to disappoint. He's one of the good guys, isn't he?

'Fancy coming to the cinema tonight? Courtney and I are thinking of catching the new Spider-Man movie,' Becca asks, tidying bars of Dairy Milk into a neat row.

Nothing sounds more appealing than a night out with her and Courtney, Becca's childhood friend. Joey likes Courtney. He's known her as long as he's known Becca. She left the area when she finished school to join the army, but a stint in Afghanistan changed her perspective on life, and now she works in a dead-end office job and eats too much cake.

'I can't tonight. Another time, for sure.'

The next hour passes as if it's only a minute. That's the effect she has on him. He is almost able to forget about the gun for a while. Almost.

Faithful Hetty is waiting when Joey arrives home. He can hear her whining, paws scratching at the oversized lounge window of the family's nineteen-seventies three-bedroom house as he walks up the short garden path. She scurries around to the front door to greet him, her tail wagging twenty to the dozen. Joey bends to return her welcome before heading upstairs. Dylan races out of the lounge after him. 'You are definitely getting rid of it tonight, aren't you?' he asks halfway up.

Joey twists around, scowling and slamming a finger against his lips. Dylan jumps onto the same step as Joey. With his thirteenth birthday fast approaching, he has shot up over the past few months. The top of his head now reaches Joey's shoulder, which together with the arrival of facial hair and the deepening of his voice, reminds Joey that his little brother is not so little any more. 'Keep quiet, will you?' Joey whispers.

'Keep quiet about what?' Megan asks, standing at the top of the stairs in her school uniform, her long dirty blond hair scruffy from a day at school. 'What're you two up to?'

Joey reaches the step second from the top. 'Move, Megs.'

'You're acting soooo weird lately.' She slides her legs sideways until one reaches the wall, the other the edge of the banister, ditto with her hands. Providing yet another barrier, a human cross preventing Joey from passing. 'Not until you tell me what's going on.'

Joey is losing his cool. 'Move! Before I get rough.'

She laughs a girly annoying cackle directly in his face. 'Oooohhh. Scared.'

Joey shoves his hands in her armpits and hoists her up. Her legs kick out at him. He extends his arms further and carries her to her room, ignoring her squeals as she wriggles like she is performing for one of her TikTok videos. 'Put me down. You're hurting me,' she says, giggling when he drops her on her bed. 'What is going on?'

He glares at her, surprised at the perception of a mischievous ten-year-old rascal.

Joey leaves home, promising Dylan he will turn this around as quickly as he can. He has a black baseball cap tucked in his coat pocket, and before he left work for the day, he snatched one of Mr Parasi's black masks from his office, thanking the global pandemic for one saving grace.

The temperature has fallen again, and the night sky is a dark, grimy grey, packed with snow waiting to fall. His head is pounding, despite the double dose of ibuprofen he took before leaving. But it hasn't progressed to a migraine. Not yet. He's waiting for it. The bomb that explodes in his head and incapacitates his body for hours. He turns the car heating up to max. At least it's working now. A sliver of fortitude, courtesy of CC. He wills himself to focus on the next hour. Then he will be free to concentrate on solving his other pressing problems.

Despite the hot air blasting out from the heater, he still can't get warm. The dashboard tells him it is one degree. He reaches over to the glove compartment and finds the gloves he keeps in there. The pair made of soft black leather that his dad used to wear in the winter when driving.

The traffic proves slow. Everyone seems to be on the road tonight. Trying to outmanoeuvre the cars in front, Joey attempts an alternative route through a modern housing estate where homes are crammed together with parked cars, making the road barely accessible. He gains little time. Arriving at the side road, he glances around, checking for CCTV. There are no cameras in view, so he finds a parking space between two nondescript SUVs and switches off the engine. It's dark and, apart from the buzz of background traffic, quiet. The slack he's built into the journey allows him to sit for a while, breathing deeply. With his mask covering his face, and the peak of the baseball cap tugged down, he checks his face in the mirror. Mission complete, he is barely recognisable. He pushes the backpack down the front of his coat, close to his chest, and gets out of the car.

It's started to snow. Flakes flurry in the air. He keeps his head down as he navigates the back roads to Regency Close. Not just to keep the snow out of his eyes, but because of something else he heard the guy at the pub say about the behaviour of criminals. Is that what he is now? Joey Clarke: criminal? While lying awake last night, he had considered going to the police and handing over the gun. But what would they say? Where did you get it from? He could always do it anonymously via one of those gun amnesties. There was a surrender scheme last year. Measures to rid the streets of dangerous weapons. From his understanding, he could even earn compensation. How much is a gun like this even worth? But then what? He'd have the likes of CC on his back forever.

He's not cut out for this.

He arrives at a salubrious grassy area opposite the entrance to Regency Close with three minutes to spare and stands behind a large tree. His mum's words whisper like leaves in the wind. "Trouble, Joey. Stay away from trouble."

From what he can gather, the close comprises of only three houses, or mansions in Joey's eyes. He looks at his watch and calculates that if he waits where he is for one minute, by the time he walks over to the close and locates number one, he will be ringing the bell at exactly seven o'clock, as instructed. A couple are walking their dog, which pulls towards the tree opposite the one Joey is standing behind. Joey steps out of view. He can't afford for anyone to see him. The dog stops to poop. The couple argue, something about the woman's mother, before blaming each other for forgetting the poop bags as they search their pockets for a spare. Joey wills them to get a bloody move on. Why oh why here, at this time? As if the world isn't against him enough. 'Here you go,' Joey hears the woman say at last. He waits for the man to clean up the dog's mess before they wander off, still bickering about the woman's mother like a couple of spoilt teenagers.

Joey checks his watch. It's now gone seven o'clock. He's going to be late. He should run. But since he left home this evening, the little voice telling him to play it cool has refused to let up. He crosses the road with his head down and casually strides up to the door of number one Regency Close as if he is visiting a friend.

It's a modern house – double fronted with a door that has frosted glass panels running down the middle. The kind of house Joey can only dream of

owning one day. He removes the rucksack from the front of his coat and rings the bell. It's one of those smart doorbells, but he doesn't feel threatened. He has kept his head down the whole time.

A woman answers, which throws him. He would have placed a bet on it being a man. His jaw drops. What the hell? He holds out the rucksack as if it is a ticking time bomb. The sound of a police siren passing the end of the street alarms them both. Have they come to get him? Joey turns to check, and before he knows it, she has reached out, grabbed the sleeve of his coat, and is ushering him inside as she anxiously peeps down the path. He trips over the threshold and stumbles into the hallway, which is packed with cardboard boxes. The rucksack falls to the wooden floor. She catches his fall and inadvertently knocks the baseball cap off his head. She snaps the mask off his face and says, 'Goodness, Joey! Whatever are you doing here?'



This can't be happening.

But it is.

Becca's mum is standing in front of him. What does *she* want with a gun?

'Mrs Stanley,' Joey says, dumbfounded, his head telling him one thing, his eyes another.

'Maggie, please.' She closes the door and smiles. How can she smile? Joey tries to put two and two together, but seeing Becca's mum, with the slight gap between her two front teeth the same as her daughter, he can't find an answer. 'Is that what I think it is?' She picks up the rucksack and hooks the strap over her forearm. She seems different from when he has met her before. The calm, sophisticated demeanour he recalls so vividly replaced by an agitated countenance. And she is thinner. It doesn't suit her. Her face looks drawn. He wants to question her, but he is stunned into silence and can only nod. 'Stay for a drink,' she says, frenetically unzipping the rucksack and tugging at the toggles.

Joey doesn't know what to do. He's done his bit and delivered the rucksack as ordered. He wants out of there now, fast. But this is Becca's mum. And he has supplied her with a gun. She appears unhinged. The psychotic smile she gave Joey when he arrived remains on her face. Her hands are shaking. Torn, he thinks of Becca. As much as he wants to get the hell away from this grave situation, he can't leave until he understands Maggie's plans for this deadly piece of metal he has delivered to her door. Perhaps he should grab it and run. He doesn't know what to do. He can't

think straight. It's as though he isn't in his body but levitating, watching this ordeal unfold from above.

'You can spare ten minutes, can't you?' She reaches into the rucksack and removes the gun wrapped in fabric. The strong smell of alcohol wafts from her breath. 'A drink. I'll make you a nice drink. Or a sandwich. How about a sandwich?' She whips the fabric away and discards it like a piece of rubbish. She inspects the gun, holding it at different angles, then tosses the rucksack into a walk-in cupboard under the grand staircase. He recognises a blue hoody Becca often wears to work, hanging from a hook. 'Sandwich. Let me make you that sandwich.'

'I really need to get going,' Joey says. She points the gun at him. He steps backwards. 'For God's sake, Maggie. Put that thing down. It's loaded.' He has no idea if it is, but he isn't about to take any chances.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to alarm you,' she says with a giggle. What has got into this woman? Too much alcohol, that's what. She drops her hands by her side, still holding the gun. 'I was just practising.'

'Practising for what?'

She laughs again. 'Don't worry. You're quite safe.'

He can't leave her, can he? Not in this unmoored state. Becca could be in danger, and if anything happened to her, he'd never forgive himself. He needs to call her. Now. Tell her not to come home. He reaches towards his back pocket but remembers he hasn't got his phone. Maggie clasps his wrist. 'Come, come,' she says, her eyes vacant. 'Ten minutes.'

Swaying, she hauls him along the hallway, past unpacked boxes labelled with the names of various rooms. They pass the lounge and several closed doors until they come to the kitchen, where a train of more unopened boxes lines one wall. 'Sit, sit,' she says, her voice rising an octave, sounding like an excited schoolgirl. A wireless speaker on the table delivers a dramatic piece of classical music. She drags the end stool from under the central island unit, which separates the kitchen area of high gloss white units from a matching round table and set of grey leather chairs. Joey does as he is told. He dare not. 'Whisky, wine? What's your poison, Joey?'

He doesn't want a drink. He feels exposed. As if she has made him strip naked and sit there without any clothes. This is beyond weird. 'Water will be fine, thanks.'

'Vodka. I'll get you a vodka. Isn't that what you youngsters drink?'

'I'm driving.'

She yawns and giggles, the same irritating cackle. Stumbling towards the Smeg fridge, she takes out a bottle of fancy water and slides it across the smooth surface towards Joey. 'I'll get you a glass.' She opens a cupboard door.

'No need. I'll drink from the bottle,' Joey says, his eyes scanning the room. It's massive. As big as all the downstairs rooms in his small house put together. It's so clinical, so white, except for the table set for two. A chunky red candle burns in a stainless steel and glass lantern between two red place mats sitting opposite each other, flanked by silver steak knives and forks.

Maggie empties the last of the red wine sitting on the side into her glass. The bottle crashes onto the worktop as she places it beside another full bottle of the same wine. From the other end of the central island, she pulls out a stool from the row of four. She does all this one-handed. In the other hand, she grasps the gun. 'Take your coat and gloves off.'

It's so hot in there, but he doesn't want to take them off. He wants to drink his water and leave. He takes a gulp.

Becca's mum is elegant yet gauche: well-dressed in a white shirt and straight skirt with a slit up the front, yet slurping her wine; a perfectly made-up face, yet slurring her words and gesticulating with flailing hands. 'So how did you manage to get yourself involved in this kind of behaviour?' she asks.

Joey feels more uneasy as each second passes. He doesn't want to talk to her or answer any of her questions. He needs to get the gun off her and get the hell out.

'Do you know why I've got this?' The gun looks so big in her small hand. Its weight causes her wrist to wave around, while the glossed fingernails of her other hand tap the surface of the central island. He shakes his head, not daring to speak. What *do* you say to someone with a loaded gun in their hand? She laughs hysterically, pointing the gun at Joey. 'I'm going to murder Becca's daddy. Bang.'

Maggie adopts a serious face, her glazed eyes penetrating his. Her eyes are a striking blue, like Becca's. 'Do you know how to dispose of a body, Joey?'

Joey feels like she is taunting him. Enough. He slips off the stool. It really is time to go.

She holds her palm out to him. 'Stay there.' A bout of unrestrained laughter vents from her mouth. 'I'm joking!' Joey can see Becca in her features, but it feels so wrong. He can see Becca, but he can see someone else too – someone deranged and unbalanced.

'I've got a plan.' She taps the barrel of the gun against her head. A knowing look furrows her brow.

How did he end up here?

The doorbell rings. Maggie turns and mimics the sound. She stabs her palms towards Joey. 'Don't move.'

She leaves him with his elbows on the central island, head in his hands, and the gun resting by her glass of red wine. So casual, as if it's a bowl of olives. He should get out of there. Go. Now. Take the gun with him. He can't leave it with her. She's going to kill Becca's father, for God's sake. Is she? Is she really? He should grab it and make a run for it – find the back door and scarper. He needs to take control, but he can't think straight. Keeping the gun in his possession is not an option. He can't take it home. It needs to go back to where it came from – back to CC. That's the most logical thing to do. He jumps off the stool and is about to reach for the ugly

piece of metal when he hears the click-clack of her heels tottering down the hallway.

‘Only Amazon,’ she says, dumping three boxes on the kitchen table. ‘What has that daughter of mine ordered now?’ She walks over to him, the reek of alcohol even more acute. She pushes him to sit back down and resumes her spot on her stool. She glugs her wine, kicking her legs back and forth. Her hands are unsteady. She underestimates her aim as she puts the glass back down, and it bangs onto the work surface like the bottle earlier. ‘Whoops,’ she says, mopping up the spilt wine on the sleeve of her white shirt. A dark red smudge stains the silky material.

‘Do you want to know wh— why I’m going to murder my husband?’

So she *does* plan to murder Becca’s dad. No, he doesn’t want to know why, but he guesses he is going to be told. She raps her knuckles against the central island. Joey can do nothing but stare at her. ‘Has Becca told you he’s having an affair?’

Joey shakes his head and mumbles, ‘No.’ That’s the truth. Becca has never said anything negative about her dad other than he’s a bit over-protective.

Sadness casts a shadow over her face as a deep melancholy engulfs her. ‘With his PA. Can you believe that?’ The pearl drop earrings which match her necklace jiggle from side to side as she fiercely shakes her head. ‘It’s broken me.’

Joey doesn’t know what to say.

‘Well, she *was* his PA. That’s what she started as, anyway. But Jessica Samuels is more than that now. She’s the...’ She theatrically casts out an arm. ‘Company Chief Operating Officer. His right-hand woman, as he refers to her, quite indispensable.’ Her eyes glare at the gun. ‘And do you know how long she’s been more than that?’ She doesn’t give Joey a chance to answer. ‘How long my husband has been fucking her behind my back?’ Joey flinches. Maggie is not the type to swear. Not from his experience. On the few occasions he has met her, she has always appeared the quiet sort. The woman who flits around, attending to everyone’s needs. She takes another gulp of wine. ‘You know what makes it worse? I trusted her. When she joined the company, I taught her everything she went on to use against me to steal my life. I thought she was my friend.’

Why’s she telling him all this?

Her features screw up, making her face look twisted. She reminds Joey of someone. He sees Becca in her, but not in the ugliness of this distortion. 'Do you know how it feels to have a friend betray you?'

Joey nods.

'Tell me.'

Joey keeps quiet. He doesn't trust himself to speak. She is so unhinged, he is afraid he'll say the wrong thing, and she'll turn the gun on him.

She repeats herself, her voice more demanding. 'Tell me.' She unscrews the top of the full bottle of wine and refills her glass. His silence seems to steal the memory of her question. 'Has Becca told you about them trying to section me? The two of them want me in the loony bin, so that they can run away together. They've been planning it.'

Joey tries to stay calm, despite his unease. His eyes keep flitting from her to the gun. Can he overpower her – grab the gun from her and make a run for it? He considers it, but he is sitting too far away to just reach out and take it. He's terrified she'll turn it on him. He feels such a wimp, but fear has taken hold. Gripping onto the side of the stool, he braces himself for the right moment to diffuse this situation.

'One night, when they were away on a business trip, I went to the office. Business trip, my arse.' Joey cringes. Hearing her swear still sounds so wrong. 'I found brochures in his office. He'd even gone as far as to make enquiries. He'd made notes all over them with different programmes and their prices. That broke me too.' She absently waves the gun in his direction. 'So, tell me, how long do you think their affair has been going on?'

Joey bites his lip and stares at the floor. He doesn't know what to say, and he doesn't know where to look.

'How long, Joey?' She places the gun on the central island.

He shrugs. His eyes dart to the gun. This is his chance. He goes to get up as she jabs her middle finger inside the trigger guard, spinning the gun in circles, faster and faster. 'Over two years.' The corners of her mouth turn down, and she nods, repeating, 'Two whole years,' so many times, Joey loses count. Her finger continues spinning the gun. Tears start to fall. 'She took my job. She took my husband. She had it all planned. My brother told me, you see. That's how I found out. I didn't believe him at first. But my brother was right. All I needed was the proof. And I got it. Do you know how?'

Joey glances up at her and shakes his head. No more questions, please. He feels like he is back in the police station he ended up in just after his dad died. When the police quizzed him about a robbery involving his so-called mates from the gang he used to hang around with. When he was actually at home looking after his mum. That's when the loss of hope weighed him down. That's when he was betrayed.

She stops spinning the gun and picks it up, increasing Joey's unease to outright panic. Tears gush from her eyes, falling down her flushed face as she waves the gun precariously. 'What do you think I found, Joey?' She points the gun in his direction again.

Is the safety catch on? He can't tell. A whimper escapes his mouth as he leans back on the stool, holding his hands out, ready to protect himself from a bullet. He stares from Maggie to the gun. He can't die now. What about his family? Who will look after them? 'Maggie, please put the gun down. You're making me nervous.' He jumps off the stool, his hands still guarding his body. 'Nothing good can come of that thing going off.'

She's not listening. Her crying becomes hysterical. As if she is spiralling down a well of desperation knowing there is no way out. 'I became that mad paranoid wife you see in films. You know, the one who goes through pockets, snoops on telephone calls, pries through emails. That was me. I found everything I needed. Oh, God,' she wails. She stands and takes two steps backwards. Staring Joey in the eye, she calmly places the gun to her temple and pulls the trigger.

The crack of the revolver reverberates around the large room. The noise is deafening. Joey yells. His hands rush to protect his ears, but not quickly enough. The sound blasts through him, the pain intense. Maggie's body follows the path of the bullet before giving way to gravity and collapsing to the floor. For a split second, she stares at Joey, her eyes full of desperation. But was that before she pulled the trigger, or afterwards knowing she had done a stupid, stupid thing? In all the confusion, Joey doesn't know. A shower of blood splatters the white gloss cabinets and the wall behind her. Like someone has picked up a paintbrush, dipped it in red paint and flicked it at the wall.

He needs to help her. He rushes over to her lifeless form. But then he stops. How could he ever explain this away? To the police, to Becca? He brought her mother the gun that she killed herself with. He smacks his temple with his palms, encasing his head in his hands like a shell of protection from the enormity of the situation he has been dumb enough to get himself into. He whimpers. He can't think straight. He should call her an ambulance. He knows that. But first, he needs to get out of there. What if Becca's dad comes home and finds him there? Or Becca?

Calm down, Joey. Stop panicking. You need to think straight.

But he can't think straight. Who could? This is beyond his comprehension. His head is killing him, and the ringing in his ears from the gunshot is persistent. The only certainty is that he needs to get out of there and call her an ambulance. Fast. Is that the right thing to do? He doesn't know. He's in too much of a state. He stares at the gun. What if Dylan's



fingerprints are still on it? He wiped it, but what if he didn't clean it properly? He doesn't know. Could they trace it back to him? Oh, God, he just doesn't know enough about these things. Not daring to risk it, he grabs a napkin from the table, picks up the gun and shoves it in his coat pocket. He is shaking so hard, he thinks he might be sick. No, Joey. You can't be sick – no more body fluids, please. Calm down. He speaks out loud. 'This is what you're going to do. You're going to take the gun and get back to your car.' The bottle. He can't leave that bottle of water. He grabs it. Was there anything else? He glances around the room before switching off the light and running down the hallway.

But at the front door, he stops and dithers. What if he is seen leaving? He can't risk it. He darts into the lounge, looking for another exit. Patio doors dominate the far end wall. He runs towards them and tries the handle. Of course, they are locked. Nothing is ever that simple. He searches for a key. A small trinket box sits on top of a glass corner unit. For once, he is in luck. He finds a key and tries to put it in the lock, but his shaking hands and gloves are making it too difficult a task. He can't risk taking the gloves off. He pauses for a couple of seconds to calm down before trying again. The key goes in the first time, and he manages to open the door.

He steps outside, but then he remembers. The rucksack. That will have his DNA all over it. And Dylan's. Does it matter? He doesn't know. He steps back inside and charges to the cupboard in the hallway. Bigger than he thought, more of a room. It's probably as big as his sister's bedroom. There's the rucksack. It landed on the top of a wide shoe rack as tall as him. How many shoes does a family of three need? He steps inside to grab it, but stops. Horrified, he hears the front door open. Becca shouts out, 'Mum, did you hear that noise? It sounded just like a gun going off!'

‘Mum, where are you?’ Becca calls out in her light-hearted, carefree manner.

No, no, no. This can’t be happening. Joey crouches behind the shoe rack in the darkness, pressing his body against the wall.

‘Mum. You there?’

He hears Becca’s bag drop to the floor with a thud. She’s walking towards the cupboard. Her footsteps are getting closer. She’ll be able to hear his heartbeat thundering against his chest; he’s sure of it. Stay still; he must stay still. He can see her through the lattice side panel of the shoe rack.

She hooks her coat on the top of the door, craning her neck as if she is trying to look for her mum. She kicks her trainers into the cupboard. They land at Joey’s feet. One of them knocks against the toe of his trainer. It’s so hot in there, stifling, as if he is crouched beside a blazing fire. He can’t bear it. She steps inside the cupboard. This is it. How is he going to explain what has happened? Her mother is dead in the kitchen, and the gun that killed her is in his pocket. A phone rings. For a split second, he thinks it’s his. The panic rushing through him snowballs, until he remembers he intentionally left his phone at home. He didn’t want to be traced to this area.

Becca answers her phone. ‘Hey, Uncle Ronny.’ She stretches over to the top of the shoe rack and grabs a pair of slippers, instinctively, and, lucky for Joey, not looking at what she is doing. She is so close to him that he could reach out and touch her. He holds his breath, scared she’ll hear him breathing. ‘Say that again.’ She tuts, stepping away from the cupboard. ‘I

can't hear you properly... no, sorry, I haven't checked my messages. I've only just got home.' Another tut. 'The line's all crackly. I was meant to go to the cinema with my friend, but we changed our minds.' Joey hears a soft thud as the slippers hit the floor. 'I thought of you.' She laughs. 'I picked up a Subway. One of those Mega Meat wraps we always used to have together. Then I came straight home, but I don't think Mum's here... I don't know where she is. She must've gone out.

'Maybe she's upstairs,' Becca tells him. 'I'll check... No. Dad's not coming home tonight. He had to stay another night at the conference. Something to do with a client meeting... OK. I'll tell her and get her to call you.' There's a pause. 'What was that? I can't hear you properly... What? Are you there?' Becca tuts once more and hangs up. 'Mum, are you in?' she calls as she heads down the hallway towards the kitchen.

And then he hears it.

The piercing scream of the girl he loves. It penetrates him like that bullet through Maggie's head. He wants to go and help her, console her, take her away from the mess for which he is partly to blame. His leg is cramping. He stands up. The pain is intense. He's got to get out of there.

'Ambulance. Help me. I think my mum's been shot. I don't think so. There's no pulse... No. I can't leave her.' Becca's voice echoes down the hallway. 'There's no one else in the house. I don't know. I don't think there is. I won't leave her. I need to help her.'

Joey moves towards the cupboard door. He needs to make a run for it. It's going to be his last chance. What if someone recognises him walking back to his car? This is not an area he knows particularly well, but others will. Panic-stricken, he forces himself to take a deep breath as he tries to decide what to do for the best. Some kind of disguise, that's what he needs. CCTV must have picked him up somewhere on the walk from his car to the house. If not, definitely on the video doorbell, although he doubts he would be recognised with the mask and cap for disguise. But there's always a chance. And with his luck, it's a chance he can't afford to take. He snatches a man's coat from the coat rack, and a pair of trainers from the shoe rack, which must belong to Becca's dad.

Stealthily, he steps outside the cupboard. He's about to dash to the lounge when something catches his eye by the front door. The black piece of cloth the gun was wrapped in. He can't leave it there. He tiptoes over and swipes it up, stuffing it in his pocket with the gun. Becca's despair is

torturing him. 'There's blood everywhere. How long before an ambulance arrives? No, I can't leave her. I won't. I won't.'

They must think the gunman is still in the house. He's got to get out of there. Fast.

Becca continues hysterically, 'I can't wait that long. You have to help me.'

This is hell on earth. He peers around the wall of the hallway, towards the kitchen where she has switched the light on. He can see her kneeling beside her mum, her phone wedged between her shoulder and ear. Will he catch her attention when he passes across to the lounge? Surely she's too engrossed in dealing with her dead mum. He can't afford to wait any longer. An ambulance will arrive any second, and so will the police. He takes a deep breath and zips across the hallway and into the lounge, where he quietly opens the patio door and slips outside into the relief of the cold air.

Not wanting to waste a second, he changes into the trainers and shoves his own into the rucksack. It's a squash, but he can just about do it up. He quickly dons the coat, a hooded parka, over his, zips it up and thrusts the rucksack down the front. From his back pocket, he grabs his black mask, puts it on, and pulls up the hood of the parka.

While he is doing this, he assesses the garden, weighing up his options. A tiled path leads to a back gate. Is that his best bet? He doesn't know. Perhaps the side gate and out through the front would be a better choice? At least he will know where he's going. He berates himself. Not a good idea. This is not the time. He could meet the ambulance. And the police; they will be on their way as well.

Taking the tiled path, he scoots for the gate, slipping in the trainers that are at least a size too big for him. The gate won't open. He fiddles with the stiff bolt, raising the gate with his foot to loosen the casing. Fortunately, it doesn't take long, and he is finally free to return to his car.

But he's not free.

He never will be.

The sight of Becca's mum pulling that trigger and collapsing to the floor, and Becca's piercing screams, will haunt him for the rest of his life.

The gate leads onto a narrow footpath. He can't stop his body shaking. Pausing to take stock, he leans his back against the fence, looking to the sky. Snow is falling. What has he done? He takes deep breaths to steady himself, before setting foot along the path.

Joey doesn't return to his car the way he came. He'd decided to go in a circle, which he is glad about now. He starts walking, constantly telling himself to slow down. People don't walk that fast. Or do they? In such cold weather, wouldn't they be trying to get to their destination as quickly as possible? Someone approaching him calls out. What the hell? Are they calling him? He turns in the opposite direction, willing himself to keep going. Just keep moving, Joey. Just keep moving. He passes a few more people but keeps his eyes to the ground, thankful for the snow.

When Joey reaches the road two down from where he parked his car, he checks for CCTV before slipping into an alleyway, where he stops to change back into his own trainers and remove the parka. He hides the trainers in the parka, which he rolls up and tucks under his arm.

Back in his car, he sits for a minute, trying to absorb the enormity of the last hour. Becca's dad's parka and trainers, and the rucksack, sit on the passenger seat. He takes the gun out of his coat pocket and tries to push it into the pocket of the parka, but it won't go. He removes a hat and a pair of gloves. They must be Becca's dad's too. He shoves them back and tries the other pocket. Apart from a used tissue, it's empty. Joey puts the gun inside. His breathing is fast and shallow, his mind working overtime. He needs to get rid of these. But how? Where? A river. He could fill the pockets with rocks and drop them in the canal. Will it sink? He has no idea. What about the trainers? Perhaps he can burn them. Where? He simply doesn't know. These are not questions he ever thought he'd need to answer.

He wants to get home. But he knows he can't go straight away. He needs to calm down. His mum will know something is wrong. He can't think straight. Becca's screams, looping in his mind, won't allow him to. Neither will the conversation he had with Maggie before she pulled that gun on herself, nor the image of the blood-stained walls, and the brief expression on her face just before the bullet blasted through her skull. Was it a look of regret? Sorrow? Relief? She intended to use the gun on her husband. Did Joey get that right? She wanted to murder her husband. What made her change her mind? So many questions he can't answer.

Becca's dad, Alan, has always seemed a good person. Joey has only met him a few times. When he sometimes drops Becca off at the supermarket, and at the wedding anniversary party they held at their old house last year. That's the first time Joey had spoken with him at length, about football mainly. Becca has mentioned before that she thinks her parents are having a

few problems. Lots of arguments, but she never alluded to the reason behind them. Does she know her dad has been seeing his PA behind her mother's back? Alan doesn't seem to be the type.

The coat, trainers and rucksack on the passenger seat remind him of the mess he is in. They're goading him. It's like they can speak. 'Look what you've done, Joey Clarke. Left a person in need. What kind of human being are you?' He should have come clean and stayed and helped Becca. What is wrong with him? Not only did he leave a dead woman, he left Becca, the woman he has fallen in love with, to deal with it all.

Without warning, the floodgate of regret bursts open. He sits and sobs. He can't control himself. It's unlike him. Joey does not readily cry. Even after his dad died, he contained his grief for the sake of his family. It was months before he shed a tear, and that was in the police station as he protested his innocence for a crime he didn't commit.

Grabbing the Covid mask from the side panel of the car door, he wipes the tears and snot from his face. He's got to calm down and devise a plan. If he panics, he's really going to screw up his life. The gun. He must dispose of the gun. That's got to be his priority, hasn't it? Then he can think of what to do with the coat, trainers, and rucksack. They are bigger and bulkier and will be harder to get rid of.

He starts the engine and manoeuvres out of the parking space. The gun. What to do with the gun? Is the canal a good idea? A nine-mile stretch of water with several entry points from which he could pick up the towpath. He'd have to do it now. It would be too risky trying to dispose of it during the day. But the canals have a reputation after dark, and although it's not the deepest hour of night, he knows from his rebellious days about the drugs and the violence that goes on. The gang he used to hang out with often convened down there. No. Stay calm, Joey. Stay calm. This will take planning. If he hurries, he'll get caught. Then what will happen to his family?

An ambulance flashing its blue lights whizzes past him. Is it heading for Becca's house? It can't be. They would have been there quicker in such an emergency. But maybe they couldn't. He's heard of the difficulties the ambulance service has faced since Covid began. His mum's friend's husband had a heart attack, and they had to wait for an hour and twenty minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Has Becca had to wait all this time on her own with her dead mother? Thinking about her crouched beside her

mum is excruciating. It makes him want to turn the gun on himself. He swings off left into a side road and tries to find a space, but cars line both sides of the road bumper-to-bumper. He can't wait any longer. Putting his foot on the brake, he fumbles for the handle to open the door and vomits across the road.

Hetty is waiting when Joey arrives home. He pushes her away. She stops, a sullen look of disbelief on her cute little face. He bends down and takes her in his arms. 'Sorry, Hetty.' He strokes her neck. 'I'm so sorry.' Voices flow from the lounge, faint against Dua Lipa blaring out from Megan's bedroom. The smell of Chinese food fills the air. His mum never cooks Chinese. He hopes she didn't spend the money he gave her on a takeaway.

His mum steps into the hallway, all dolled up. Her new jeans – her Christmas present from her kids that Joey bought with his credit card – and a pink top, along with a subtle application of blusher and lipstick, make her look the best he has seen her in a long time. He suddenly remembers he promised to sit with the kids while she went out to dinner with Ade.

'Where've you been?' she asks.

'Sorry,' Joey says. A word he has over-used lately.

'I was meant to go out. You said you'd stay with the kids.'

He releases Hetty from his arms and stands up. 'I know. I forgot. I'm so sorry, Mum.' There he goes again. Isn't sorry meant to be the hardest word to say?

'It's fine. We changed our plans. Come and meet Ade.' She grabs the sleeve of his coat. 'I didn't want to leave the kids, so he popped to the Chinese and bought us a takeaway. There's enough for you.'

A feeling of utter dread comes over him. There couldn't be a worse time to meet his mum's new boyfriend. He just wants to carry out the plan he contrived on the journey home. To take the gun up to the loft under the pretext that he wants to get a box of his dad's stuff to look through that he



noticed when he was up there fetching the heater. Not make small talk while he forces down a plate of Singapore noodles and crispy chilli beef. But he has no choice. It would look off for him to ignore her new man. 'Come, come,' she says, tugging on his arm.

When they get into the lounge, Ade stands up from the dining table. His mum introduces them, smiling nervously. Ade nods at Joey. 'Pleased to meet you. Your mum's told me lots about you.' He is tall, unshaven, with asymmetrical eyes, which unnerves Joey. Dylan is sitting at the table beside Ade. He glares at Joey as if he is trying to tell him something.

'Sit, sit, love,' his mum says. 'Take off your coat.'

Joey shakes her off. His coat must stay on. 'You're alright. I'm just popping to the toilet, and I'll be straight back down. Pleased to meet you, Ade,' he says before turning to the door.

'Joey,' his mum calls out, disappointment in her tone.

'Be back in a minute,' he says with a forced lightness in his voice before taking the stairs three at a time to his bedroom, where he shuts the door and slides to the floor. In his safe space, his emotions take over. His whole body shakes. He hugs his knees to his chest, his breaths as deep as the trouble he is in. He shouldn't have agreed to CC's deliveries. He should never have taken that phone call on Sunday night.

He doesn't stay like that for long. Acting quickly is the name of the game. He gets up and paces the room, concocting a revised plan. Taking the gun from his coat pocket, he unwraps it from the napkin. Its metal surface shines in the moonlight. He gave it a quick wipe earlier. After throwing up, he stopped at a garage and bought some cigarettes. He knew he shouldn't. Such an unnecessary expense, but he couldn't calm himself down. He then managed to find a parking space in the adjoining road. A backstreet without any housing, where he smoked two cigarettes, one straight after the other, between wiping Becca's mum's blood off the gun with the gloves he found in the pocket of the parka. He will clean it properly later. For now, he wraps it in a hand towel he finds on the floor and shoves it under the bottom sheet, beneath his pillow.

Calmly, he walks to the bathroom and braces himself against the sink. He looks in the mirror, but not for long. The sight is too ugly. He turns on the tap and splashes cold water onto his face, then cleans his teeth to rid his mouth of the bitter taste of his earlier untimely purge.

A generous platter of Chinese food awaits him when he returns to the lounge. It's a treat, a banquet, compared to the usual one dish each they have on the rare occasion they order a takeaway. Ade is trying to impress. He must really like her. She looks good dressed up. He feels sad but glad. Sad it isn't his dad she's dressing up for, but glad she is finally getting her life back. It's been a long, long time.

Joey examines the leftovers on offer. If he only has a small serving, there will be enough to feed them all tomorrow night.

'Where've you been?' his mum asks, loading his plate with more egg fried rice.

'Popped into the pub. I lost track of time. Sorry.' He jolts out his hand and covers the serving spoon. 'No more for me.'

His mum eyes him suspiciously. Lying has never been his forte. As far as she is concerned, he is as thin as rice paper when it comes to telling her fibs. She can see right through him. When he was a kid, he once feigned sickness because he wanted a day off school. His dad saw right through him too, and Joey never heard the end of it.

His mum gives him the look. The one that tells him they can continue this conversation another time. For now, she wants this to go smoothly.

And it does go smoothly. For a while. Ade seems a decent enough person. He holds a bottle of wine towards Joey. 'Would you like a glass?'

Joey needs to relax. His nerves are shot to fragments. But he must retain a clear head. Wine makes him talk. Too much. 'Not for me, thanks.'

'Look, Joey,' Megan says, refilling her glass from a family-sized bottle of cola. Their mum never buys cola. She detests the stuff. "It rots your teeth and messes with your blood sugars". Megan smiles at her glass of cola, the holy grail of drinks in her world. 'Ade got it for us.'

'Can I pour you a glass of that instead?' Ade asks. Joey accepts. Perhaps it will settle his stomach. Who is he trying to kid? Nothing will settle his stomach until he has sorted out the mess that is causing it to spin three-sixty.

'Which pub do you drink at?' Ade asks.

'The Coach and Horses.'

'I know the one.'

Joey picks up a prawn cracker and places it on his tongue. 'Great Chinese,' he says. 'Which one did you get it from? The Flame Wok or the Noodle House?'

‘The Flame Wok,’ his mum replies. ‘Their noodles are much better. So are their prawn crackers.’

Joey steers the conversation on to matters that will at least allow him to consume a few mouthfuls, trying to ignore Dylan throwing him disconcerting looks. What is wrong with him? ‘What do you do for a living, Ade?’ Joey asks.

Ade fixes his eyes on Joey and says, ‘I’m in the police. I’m a detective.’

Joey stops chewing. The taste of the chilli beef has turned rancid. It's tough to swallow. 'That must be interesting work,' are the words he manages to find. As if this man sitting opposite him can see right through him and up past the ceiling to that gun resting under his pillow.

'It has its moments.'

Joey shuffles in his chair. Heat is blasting through him. It's going to reach his cheeks soon and give him away. A man in Ade's profession must be able to read the signs. Or is the shame of what he's done skyrocketing his paranoia? He wriggles out of his hoody, relieved when Dylan steals the show with his killer line, 'Have you ever seen a dead body, Ade?'

Ade smiles affectionately. 'Some.' He rubs his designer stubble. Or has he just not shaven for days? Joey can't decide.

'Tell us about them,' says Dylan enthusiastically. He's going to be a forensic pathologist when he grows up, he told the family last year after they had finished binge-watching *Silent Witness*.

Joey doesn't want to listen. How can anyone do his job for a living? He saw his first dead body tonight, and it's enough to last him an eternity.

'I can't,' Ade says.

Dylan is persistent. 'Why not?'

'It would be highly unprofessional of me.'

'What do you do all day?' Dylan shovels a spring roll into his mouth.

'Well, you know, we investigate serious crimes like assaults, robberies, burglaries. That sort of thing. We do arrest and interview people, but it's not like the telly would have you think.' He smiles. 'Mostly, it's waiting around

and paperwork. There's lots and lots of paperwork. More than you could ever imagine.'

Dylan taps his chopsticks against his bowl. He looks disappointed that Ade is evidently playing his occupation down, making it less glamorous than Dylan imagines. 'Tell us about the goriest case you've ever worked on.'

'Dylan, quiet, now,' their mum orders. 'And don't tap your chopsticks like that. It's rude.'

'Why's it rude?' Ade asks.

'It's how the homeless ask for food in China and is seen as a sign of disrespect in restaurants.'

Ade nods his head. 'You learn something new every day.'

Dylan repeats his request. 'Go on. Tell us your goriest case.'

'Dylan, I said that's enough.'

Ade touches their mum's hand and smiles, the inquisitive nature of an innocent child appearing to amuse him.

Joey places his chopsticks across the top of his bowl. He can't even pretend he is enjoying this. All he can see is Maggie's blood and particles of her brain in each mouthful of chilli crispy beef.

'You've hardly eaten. What's up with you lately?' his mum asks.

'Just a bit tired, that's all.' Joey stands up, gathers the plates, and stacks them into a pile. 'It's been a busy day. I'm off for a shower.' He needs to get away from there. Away from the detective, who is looking at him as if he is another guilty criminal.

'We've got your favourite ice cream in the freezer,' his mum says. 'We? Ade picked it up when he fetched the Chinese.' She's making them sound like a married couple already.

'You're OK. Save me some for tomorrow.' Joey looks at Dylan and nods in the direction of the kitchen. 'Your turn to wash. I'll dry.' He doesn't wait for his brother to argue. He smiles at Ade and says, 'Nice to meet you. Thank you for dinner. It was delicious, a real treat,' before leaving the table to take the dirty dishes to the kitchen.

Dylan follows him. 'What happened? Where did you put the gun?'

Joey throws him a look of horror. 'Be quiet.'

'They can't hear,' Dylan mouths.

'You're louder than you think. I don't want to talk about it. It's sorted. Done. Over. Come on, buddy. We need to move on.'

Joey lies in bed, the gun beneath his head. He needs to heed the advice he gave his brother earlier: move on. His head feels like it's going to explode, despite the ibuprofen he took before his shower. Explode as that bullet did through Maggie's head. He wants to take the gun up to the loft, along with Becca's dad's parka and trainers and the rucksack, which he transferred to the boot of the car, but Ade is still downstairs. If he tries to take it all up to the loft at this time of night, his mum will wonder what on earth he is up to. And then there's Dylan. Joey can't stomach question time right now. Besides, how will he explain going to fetch the coat, trainers, and rucksack from his car? They are not exactly objects he can shove in his coat pocket.

His phone vibrates on his chest. Texts from CC flood his screen, asking him if the drop off went OK. Joey can't find it in himself to reply. A missed call follows the last text, which Joey listens to as he bites his thumbnail. CC's tone is demanding, asking Joey to call him right away.

Chatter and laughter coast up from the lounge. It's gone ten thirty. Usually, his mum can barely make it past nine without falling asleep. It's as if Ade's company has been drip-feeding her cans of Red Bull. The same sad but glad feeling from earlier drifts over him like a grey cloud. Why can't Ade go now? He's been at theirs long enough. Joey grimaces at his thoughts. He is being unfair.

Dylan's voice drifts up from the bunk below. 'You awake, Joey?'

Joey ignores him and tries to sleep. But he can't. Images of Maggie refuse to leave his mind. It's past midnight when Ade leaves. He hears their distant mumbles of chatter at the front door, saying goodbye. His hands rush to cover his ears.

After switching off his phone, he twists and turns more than the events of his life these past few days. The buzzing in his ears from the gunshot isn't helping; the constant noise reminding him of his sins. He can't stop thinking about Becca. He desperately wants to call her, but he doesn't trust himself. Neither does he want to alert Dylan to what has gone on. He gets up to take another dose of ibuprofen but finds the usual supply he keeps in the top drawer depleted. How did he finish them so quickly? Throwing on his dressing gown, he creeps downstairs, but panic turns him one-eighty at the thought of Dylan finding the gun again. He returns to their room, quietly climbs up to his bunk and slips the gun and his phone into his pockets.

The house is so cold, it's as if someone opened the windows yesterday and forgot to close them before they went to bed. In the kitchen, Hetty greets him. Joey crouches down to stroke her back. His voice quivers. 'What've I done, Hetty?' She rubs her head against his bare leg, giving the unconditional look of love as if to say she doesn't give a damn. The smell of leftover Chinese food triples the queasiness in his stomach. He'd open the window if it wasn't so cold. He fills a pint glass with water, then rummages around in the bits and bobs drawer for his mum's supply of painkillers. He pops two and guzzles the water while looking out of the window to the back garden. His reflection stares back at him as he thinks about Becca's dad's stuff in the boot of his car. He peers at the kitchen clock. It's almost one. Neighbours might still be up. They might see him. He needs to wait a while.

He puts the kettle on and goes to the fridge for milk, but when he lifts the carton, he finds only a smidgeon sloshing around in the bottom. His mum will want that for her tea in the morning. He berates himself for not buying some earlier. Replacing the carton in the fridge, he adds an extra spoonful of sugar to his mug.

In the lounge, he collapses on the sofa and searches for the remote control, which he finds wedged between the middle two cushions. He switches on the TV and turns the volume to low. He lies on the sofa. The gun is digging into his side, not allowing him to forget how it ended up there. Hetty lies on the floor beside him, head resting on her front paws. He removes his phone from his dressing gown pocket and scrolls through his messages. CC seems to have taken the hint. Resting the phone on his chest, he flicks through the TV channels but watches none. The phone rings. It's Becca. His heart pounds. He can't face talking to her. A text arrives, indicating a new voice message. He dials his voicemail and listens to her sob her way through the story of someone shooting her mum.

**WEDNESDAY**

Joey wonders where she is. He doesn't know how these things work. Is she with her mum's body at a mortuary? Or with a friend? Where would she go? What about her dad? He feels like he has been kicked in the guts, the pain intense. The same pain that plagued him for months after his dad died. Helplessness. Emptiness. Numbness.

He wants to call her, console her, tell her everything will be OK, but how can he? Even he is not stupid enough to know nothing will ever be the same again. Not for her, or for him. How can it be?

He stays on the sofa until just before seven, dozing in and out of vivid nightmares involving Maggie. In the last one, he grabs the gun and shoots her. Her body blasts against the kitchen wall, flopping like a rag doll to the cold, tiled floor. A scream of horror wakes him. For a moment, it seems so real he feels dizzy. As if he is standing at the top of a tall building, teetering on the edge. He sits bolt upright as he hears banging at the front door.

Who the hell is that? Visions of opening the door to the police wanting to question him about Maggie flash before his eyes. How did they find out? He jumps off the sofa. He must get to the door before his mum. She'll have one of her turns if she sees the police. He wants to sort this mess. His family doesn't need to be part of it. Stay calm, Joey. Stay calm. They'll sense you're lying. He races towards the door, bracing himself to face the police, but he stops. The gun is in his pocket. He can't answer the door to



the police with a bloody gun in his pocket. He scans the lounge and runs back to the sofa and hides it underneath as they bang at the door again.

They want him.

He's done for.

Joey races out of the room to his mum shouting from the top of the stairs. 'There's someone at the door.' He looks up to see her hurrying down the stairs, her arms wrapped around her body. 'Whoever is it?'

'I'll get it. You go back to bed.' His whole body is shaking as he pulls open the front door, waiting to be handcuffed.

'Thought you were never going to answer.' Pat the plumber marches in with a smile too big for this early in the day and slaps Joey on the shoulder. 'Good to see ya, mate. It's been a while. How ya keeping?'

Joey's stress levels plummet. 'Good to see you too. I forgot you were coming.' He closes the door.

'I said I'd be early!' Pat lowers his tool bag on the floor and rubs his hands together. 'Bit nippy in here! Problem with the heating, I take it.' He has a nervous twitch, which makes his head joggle when he speaks.

'You can say that again. Started with no hot water, and now the heating has packed up.'

Pat's a short guy, like an imp, and looks like he should still be at school, not running his own successful plumbing business. Joey often sees him on TikTok. He's attracted quite a following with his crazy videos where he sings opera out of tune as he advises on how best to unblock toilets and fix leaking taps. He's got oversized ears, something he was teased dreadfully for at school, but now takes the mickey out of them on these videos. 'Where's your boiler?'

Expecting the police and seeing the plumber has disorientated Joey. He nods towards the stairs. 'Up in the bathroom on the right. It's making a strange droning noise. Come with me. I'll show you.'

Pat follows Joey upstairs to the bathroom. 'It's in here.' Joey opens the cupboard to reveal the boiler.

'I'll tell you what. Stick the kettle on, and I'll suss out what's going on.'

'We're out of milk. I'll have to pop out for five minutes.'

'Milk and two sugars. As brown as your nan'd have it.'

Joey dashes downstairs, his heart racing again. He needs to get the gun and find another hiding place. He darts back to the lounge only to see his mum sitting on the sofa fiddling with the remote control. Standing at the

door, he can't see the gun but knows it's by her feet. 'Thank goodness the plumber's here.' She pats the sofa beside her. 'Come and sit with your mum for a minute.'

He hesitates. His phone rings. Leaning against the door frame, he pulls his phone out of his pocket. Becca's name flashes across the screen. He lets it ring.

His mum pats the sofa again. 'What's wrong, Joey? I know you. You're not yourself. Talk to me.'

Where does he even begin?

He doesn't move. 'I'm fine, Mum. Go and make some tea, would you? Pat has his extra strong.'

'We need milk,' she says, standing up. 'I'm going to get the heater. I left it in Megan's room last night. It's too cold down here without it.'

'I'll get some milk,' he calls after her as she leaves the room. He dashes to the sofa to retrieve the gun and slips it into his dressing gown pocket. When he comes back from dropping Dylan at school, he will hide it up in the loft until he can work out how he is going to dispose of it. For now, it's going to have to stay in his bedroom.

He runs upstairs. Dylan is still asleep, despite all the commotion. But then again, Dylan could sleep through an earthquake on school days. He draws the duvet over Dylan's shoulders, guiltily pleased he's asleep. He loves his brother with a passion. But he doesn't want to talk to him at the moment. The cover of the duvet is printed with Spider-Man, but it's so faded that unless you knew, you wouldn't recognise the images of the superhero. It's time he got a new one, but Dylan flatly refuses to part with it. Their dad bought this cover for him shortly before he died. Joey climbs up to his bed and straightens out the duvet, leaving the gun under the pillow, before getting dressed.

Hetty is waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She gives him a look of undeserved desperation and a whimper of hunger. 'Has no one fed you, little lady?' Joey crouches down to stroke her head. 'We can sort that.' Hetty scampers after him to the kitchen where Joey reaches into the dog food bin, only to find a handful of crumbs scattered across the bottom. When did this happen? He knew they were running low, but was planning to buy a new bag of dog food when he got paid next week. He ruffles Hetty's wiry hair. 'Don't worry. I'll sort you.'

Joey swings into a petrol station to pick up some milk and a couple of cans of dog food. As he holds his phone against the payment machine, he prays it will be accepted. He sighs heavily. He's fed up living like this. Working like a slave with only constant debt for a reward. When a ping notifies him his bank has declined the payment, he swears under his breath. He digs into his pocket and pays for the cans out of what little's left from the fifty pounds CC gave him on Monday night. When he gets back home, he puts the kettle on and finds a can opener. Hetty is beside herself. Opening a can of dog food, he empties half into Hetty's bowl. Her nails tap dance on the floor as she runs around in circles of excitement. The chunks are too large. She will struggle to eat them. With a fork, Joey mashes them into manageable pieces, then makes tea for everyone.

Pat is beaver away in the bowels of the boiler when Joey arrives with the tea. 'I was trying to think when I last saw you,' Pat says as he takes the mug from Joey. 'It must be a couple of years. Do you still go down to the Coach and Horses?'

'Now and again. You?'

Pat steps back from the boiler and slurps his tea. 'Sunday evenings.'

Joey nods. He feels spaced out. As if he's not at home talking to Pat but back at Becca's house talking to her mum. 'I rarely go on a Sunday.'

'Work's too busy to go out much more. I've employed another plumber, but that's still not enough. Did you know I have a kiddie now?'

'I did. I was at your head-wetting drinks. Remember?'

'Oh, yes. I do. That was a messy night, wasn't it?' Pat slips his phone out of his pocket and turns the screen towards Joey. 'There she is.' He laughs. 'The biggest time-waster if ever there was,' he says fondly.

Joey looks at the screensaver of the toddler sitting on Pat's lap. It reminds him of Megan when she was that age. Pat places his phone on the window ledge. 'Sorry to say, but your pump has had it, mate. Completely kaput.' Joey's heart sinks. Pat takes another large slurp of tea and rests the mug on the side of the bath. 'Let me show you.' He points to the boiler, explaining returns and flows and cycles.

Joey is attentive. He asks questions, working out if he can fix this himself. Otherwise, where the hell is he going to find the cash to settle yet another unexpected bill? 'See here?' Pat wipes his fingers along the pipe. 'It's leaking water too.'

Joey winces. 'How much is it going to cost?'

‘You’re looking at – a rough guess, of course, I’ll have to check with my stockist – somewhere between one to one-fifty for a reasonable new pump. You can get them cheaper, but I wouldn’t recommend it. You’ll soon be calling me to fix it again.’

‘When can you do it?’

‘Oh, mate. I’m chocka at the moment. Boilers are breaking down all over town. It’s that time of year.’

‘It’s just my mum. She’s not well, and the cold affects her.’

Pat gives a smile of sympathy. ‘Yeah, sure. Sure. I remember. Leave it with me. I’ll make a few calls. See how soon I can pick up a new pump. Someone’s bound to have one in stock. I’ll try and stop by after work and change it for you. It may be late, though.’

‘Today?’

‘I can’t promise, but I’ll try my best. Is someone around all day?’

‘One of us will be.’

‘Handy. I’ll text you if I can fit you in. Sometimes jobs take less time than planned.’ He packs up his tools. ‘And sometimes longer. When did you last have it serviced?’

Joey’s expression tells Pat never. And then it’s as if Pat can see the desperation in his eyes. The pound-sign calculation of how his old school friend will source the money to settle his unforeseen bill. ‘Don’t worry about the labour, mate. I’ll just charge you for the parts. I’ll service it for you too.’

‘That’s good of you. Thanks.’

‘Karma, Joey, karma. I’ll never forget you sticking up for me when we moved to secondary. You telling people not to call me Dumbo. I can laugh now.’ He flaps his big ears. ‘But it really got to me at the time, you know. But you told them what for and got them off my back.’ Pat gives a hearty laugh. ‘You can buy me a beer sometime instead.’

After Joey has seen Pat out, he runs back upstairs to meet Megan at her bedroom door. ‘Joey, can I talk to you?’

‘What’s up?’

She beckons him into her room. ‘I need to ask you something.’

Joey follows her. She has the smallest room in the house, the box room. It’s bitterly cold in there. Her bed runs the length of the far wall under the window, which doesn’t help. Megan steps over to her clothes rail and

removes a folded piece of paper from her cardigan pocket. She bites her bottom lip and hands it to her brother. 'I didn't want to give it to Mum.'

'What's this?' Joey asks, wary.

'Read it.'

Joey scans the words on the paper, advising parents about a weekend trip to Alton Towers planned for the end of the summer term. The year group will be travelling up on a Saturday morning and returning on the Sunday evening. Meals, hotel accommodation, and park entry are included in the cost. Even so, Joey gulps when he sees the amount, and the required deposit of fifty pounds by Friday afternoon. Additional spending money will be discretionary. How much does that mean? He doesn't want her to miss out, but how the hell is he meant to fund this fifty-pound deposit, let alone the balance due at the start of the summer term? He bites his bottom lip as he makes calculations, but the sums are not adding up.

'What do you think?' she asks, her eyes wide and her tone hopeful. 'Can I go?'

Joey can't find the words to tell her he can't possibly afford it. Although she can be an annoying little devil at times, she's a good kid. One Sunday, a few weeks ago, he went to pick her up from a sleepover. The mother invited him into the house, where six girls had claimed the lounge for the night. They were sprawled on blow-up mattresses, picking at popcorn while squealing and shrilling as they shared TikTok videos on their phones. He couldn't help noticing how out of place Megan's handset appeared compared to the other girls' smartphones. And how faded her pyjamas looked next to her friends' fluffy, designer ones.

'Everyone's going.'

'I'll have to see, Megs.'

She flumps onto the bed. The corners of her mouth drop. 'I knew you would say that. It's not fair.'

Joey sits on the bed beside her and slips an arm around her shoulders. 'Hey, turn that frown upside down. I didn't say no, did I? I just need to do the sums. Leave it with me. I'll sort it.'

Her face lights up. 'Really? You think I can go, then?'

'We'll make it happen somehow.'

She punches the air. 'Thank you. Thank you.' She bunches her fists and vigorously shakes them in front of her chest as she gives her brother the biggest of grins. She pecks his cheek. 'I can't wait to tell my friends.'

He slips the piece of paper into his hoody pocket and stands up. 'Come on, time to get dressed. You'll be late for school.'

'Joey?' she calls when he walks to the door.

He turns his head around.

She curls her forefingers and thumbs into the shape of a heart and pumps it against her chest. 'I love you.'

'Love you too, Megs.'

He closes the door. How do schools expect all parents to have this kind of money knocking around?

She's right. It isn't fair. But then, life isn't fair. We all know that.

‘So, what do you think of Ade?’ It’s the tenth or so question Dylan has asked since they began the drive to school. His mate isn’t with them today. He has a dentist appointment and is making his own way in later, much to Joey’s despair. He could have done without the third degree the entire journey.

‘Seems an OK guy.’

‘A detective, though. Does that worry you?’

Joey’s phone rings from its holder. He glances at the screen. His stomach turns. It’s Becca. He can’t talk to her. Not only because Dylan is in the car, but he doesn’t trust himself. The ringtone grates on his threadbare nerves, sounding like a kid learning an out of tune violin. He pictures her holding the phone to her ear, willing him to answer. The call clicks to voicemail.

‘If he makes Mum happy, then I’m happy.’ Joey switches on the radio, blasting the volume to ward off further questions. After he drops Dylan at school, he stops around the corner and waits for a couple of minutes, plucking up the bravery to retrieve Becca’s message. He dials his voicemail. Becca’s desolate voice fills his throat with a thick lump. ‘Joey, please pick up. Please. I need you.’ There’s a pause. Her voice drops to a whisper. ‘Call me when you get this.’

A text pings. It’s Pat.

*Got your pump! Will come at some point today. Will text time. Managed to get a discount. £103. Could you do cash? Pat*

The phone rings again. Becca's name flashes across the screen. The thought of her desperately trying to get hold of him is killing him now, but he still can't face speaking to her. He needs to get home and get the gun up to the loft. He can't concentrate on anything else. She rings off and calls again. He stabs on the answer button. He can't ignore her any more. She breathes the word in his ear. 'Finally.'

He keeps his voice as level as he can manage. 'What's up?'

'Didn't you get my message?'

'No,' he lies, hating himself. 'What message?'

'I'm freaking out here.'

'Calm down. What's happened?'

'I'm at Courtney's place. I need your help.'

'With what? What's happened?'

She is hysterical. 'It's all fucked up.'

'Becca, calm down. Tell me what's happened.'

'Someone has tried to murder my mum. She's in hospital.'

'What?' Joey swallows hard as he calculates the consequences of her outburst. Maggie isn't dead? That can't be true. He saw it for himself. He heard it too. The gun blasting; a shock of red splattered across the walls; Maggie, a heap on the floor, blood seeping from her head. Becca's screams when she arrived home and witnessed the horrific scene. It feels so raw, as if he is still in their house watching it all play out like a horror film you have to stop watching because it's so goddamn real.

'I came home last night and...' her voice breaks, '...I found her on the kitchen floor, blood everywhere.'

There's a pause. He needs to think. Saying the wrong thing could land him in trouble even deeper than he's already in. If Maggie is still alive, surely she'll divulge what really happened? His head spins.

'Are you there, Joey?'

'Yeah. I'm here. God, I'm in shock. Where is she now?'

'In ICU. She's unconscious.'

'Where did they shoot her?' It's a silly question, but it fills the silence.

'In the head. But it looks like it was a bad aim. The bullet only caught the side of her head. The police are waiting for her to wake up to find out exactly what happened. She must've seen the person who did this to her.' Her voice breaks again. 'They wouldn't let me go to hospital with her because of Covid. She's having to go through all of this on her own. I



couldn't do anything to help her. When I phoned for the ambulance, they wanted me to leave her.'

'Why?'

'They thought the gunman might still be in the house. But how could I just leave her alone?'

Joey stares out of the windscreen. Maggie wasn't dead, and he left her to die. What kind of person is he?

'I've got to go to the police station and make a statement.'

'They don't think *you* did it?' How will he get out of that one – someone else blamed for what happened? Surely it won't come to that. Forensics will confirm it was attempted suicide. He knows how these things work. He and his family binge-watched enough police crime dramas during the months of lockdown. They will be able to tell from the blood splatters and the trajectory of the bullet.

'No, no.' She pauses. 'Well, I don't think they do.' She pauses again before adding, 'Surely not?'

'They just need to get your version of events.'

'They wanted to question me last night, but I was too shaken, so I agreed to speak to them this morning. I wasn't allowed to stay at the house. They let me pack a bag, watching me the whole time. I felt like I was a criminal. Then they escorted me out. It's all taped off. The police are all over it. I can't get hold of anyone.' She is hyperventilating.

'Calm down, Bex.'

'I can't calm down. This is hell.'

'Where's your dad?'

'He didn't come home last night. He was meant to, but he's been at a conference, and decided to stay another night. That's why I ended up at Courtney's place. Now I need a lift to the police station. I haven't got my car. There's no way I could drive last night. Then I want to see Mum. Do you think they might let me in if I take a PCR test?'

'I don't know.'

'Can you come and pick me up from Courtney's flat and give me a lift?'

He can't face her, but he can't refuse her either. Not in her time of desperate need. 'Sure.'

'I knew I could rely on you, Joey.'

Joey grimaces at the irony of her words. 'Text me the address. I'll come straight there.'

He doesn't know if he's doing the right thing. He doesn't know anything any more. Should he keep away? But how can he ignore her? He keeps going over everything in his head, feeling sick. As if he is on a boat in waters so stormy, it's unable to dock. Instead, it is being forced further away from the shore with nothing but the sight of deathly waves ahead. If only he hadn't taken that phone call on Sunday. He knew what he was about to embark on was wrong. He's such an idiot.

Courtney lives with two other friends in a block of flats in the same town as Becca's new house. Joey parks up in the visitor's parking bay and calls Becca. 'I'm outside.'

'Come up. I need five minutes. My uncle is on the other line.'

He can't face four freaked-out females, not in the circumstances. 'You're OK. I'll wait here.' He turns on the radio, flicking between stations to distract his mind. Two presenters are discussing the impact of Covid on the nation's mental health. He tries to listen, but his thoughts persist in taking him back to Maggie lying on the floor in her kitchen, blood pooling around her head. A call distracts him. He grimaces to see it's CC. He can't face talking to him. He waits for the call to end. There's no point in antagonising a man like him. The phone pings with a text. There are no prizes for guessing who it's from.

*we need words call me NOW*

He changes the radio station and goes cold as the local news broadcasts the story about the attempted murder of a local woman last night. The police are looking for a gunman. He may be dangerous. The public are urged to be vigilant.

How can this be happening?

Agonising minutes follow as he waits until Becca finally appears with Courtney, both looking like they didn't make it to bed last night. Becca's hair is wet, and she looks as white as the ski coat she is wearing. 'Look after her,' Courtney says to Joey as they exchange looks of *WTF*. Courtney hugs Becca. 'Come and stay here if you need to. Call anytime you want. Even if it's three in the morning.' She caresses Becca's upper arm. 'I'm here for you.'

Becca is carrying a holdall, and a backpack is slung over her shoulder. She walks to the rear of the car and knocks on the boot. Joey is about to

release the lock, then remembers what's inside. What is he thinking? Focus, Joey. Stay focused. He bolts out of the car, tripping over himself in his haste to stop her from opening the boot. 'Here, give those to me. It's full of crap in there. I'll chuck them in the back.'

Her eyebrows are knitted together, the inner corners angled up, as she slips the rucksack off her shoulder and numbly hands it to him together with the holdall. 'Sorry I took so long. I've only just got hold of my uncle, and I had to explain everything to him.'

'No worries.'

'I'm going to his house after I've spoken to the police. I'll stay there until my dad gets back. He's still not answering his phone.'

'Does he know what's happened to your mum?'

She shakes her head. 'No one can get hold of him. I must have tried twenty times.'

'Why didn't he come home?'

'He met some new supplier at the conference. They arranged to have dinner together to discuss a business deal. When I spoke to him yesterday, the line was bad. He said there were terrible snowstorms, and he had crap reception. He must've turned his phone off, or there's just no signal. Anyway, no one can get hold of him. His phone keeps going to voicemail.' Becca throws Joey a look of confusion. 'Which is strange, don't you think? I have no idea where this conference was. The police are tracking him down.' She shrugs. 'Will you take me to my uncle's house after the station?'

'No worries.' Joey opens the car door and tosses her bags on the back seat before climbing in the front beside her. They look at each other, and she bursts into tears. Joey reaches out and draws her towards him, the guilt splintering through him as she sobs in his arms. 'Hey, hey. It's going to be OK.' He holds her tightly, their bodies entwined in a quivering mess. He hopes she doesn't notice he is shaking as much as her.

She draws away. 'We'd better get going.' She waves goodbye to Courtney. 'The police are waiting for me.'

‘I can’t believe what’s happened.’ Becca shakes her head, glancing at her phone. She is on the brink of tears again. ‘This time yesterday, I left home to go to a lecture. And now I’m heading to a police station because someone has come into our house and tried to murder my mum.’

‘I’m so sorry, Bex. You don’t deserve all this. How is she?’

‘Still in a coma. Whoever tried to do this to her didn’t do a very good job.’ Becca stares ahead, biting the corner of her lower lip. ‘Could they think I did it?’

Joey joins the main road. ‘Don’t be stupid. Why would they think that?’

‘Because I was the last person to see her.’

‘But you weren’t there when she—’ He was about to add, ‘shot herself.’ He’s in a precarious situation. ‘Was shot,’ he says. ‘Anyway, you have an alibi, don’t you?’ He is about to say there must have been CCTV at the Subway where she picked up food last night, then realises he is not meant to know this either. ‘You were with Courtney, weren’t you?’

‘We didn’t go out in the end. It all depends on what they find though, doesn’t it? What if forensics discover she was shot only minutes before I came home? What if they can put me there at the time of the crime? You know what’s weird? There’re no signs of a break-in. I spoke to the police about it last night.’ She shakes her head, squinting at her hands clenched into balls as she knocks her knuckles together. ‘They think my mum probably knows who did this to her. She most probably let them in. The frustrating thing is, because we’ve just moved there, our video doorbell

isn't working yet, so there's no footage of anyone who came to the house yesterday.'

Joey stops at a zebra crossing, listening intently. This is good news for him, isn't it?

'It was another job on Dad's list of things to do, but he had to go away on this business trip, so he never got around to it. He bought it last weekend and put it up, but it wasn't working. He's going to kick himself for that. We'd be able to see who came to the house yesterday.'

As a brief rush of relief sweeps through him, Joey finds a frown and another lie. 'That's such a shame.' He winces at the deceit in his voice. He can hear it, even if she can't. 'What about the neighbours?'

'Apparently, the house opposite and to the left has a video doorbell, but they are away on holiday. The police are trying to locate them. There're bushes around their house, so they're not sure if it'll have caught anything. The people in the other house came out when the police and ambulance arrived. They heard the shot but thought little of it. Dimwits. Forensics are at the house. Hopefully, they should shed some more light on it all. It looks like there was an Amazon delivery at some point yesterday. There are parcels on the table, so they're making enquiries to see what time they were delivered and if the delivery person saw or heard anything.'

Joey thinks back to the previous night. That delivery person couldn't have spotted him through the kitchen window, could they? He doesn't think so, but the thought leaves another nagging doubt that, one way or another, he's screwed. 'What happens now?'

'The police said something about checking out local CCTV and making house-to-house enquiries. They'll be checking Mum's phone records and speaking to her friends. Not that she has many friends. She's withdrawn into herself these past few years. But then, haven't a lot of people? I guess I'll get an update this morning. And they need to find my dad.' She taps the edge of her mobile in the palm of her hand before rechecking the screen. Her voice breaks as she turns her head towards Joey. 'You know what's really sad?'

He glances over at her and raises his eyebrows. It's just a fleeting glance. It's too difficult to look her in the eye for long. He turns his attention back to the tail lights of the car in front.

'Mum was expecting Dad home last night. The table was set for two, and she'd taken two steaks out of the freezer. I'd told her I was eating out

after the cinema, so she wasn't expecting me until much later. Thank God Courtney wasn't in the mood for the cinema in the end.' Her voice breaks. 'Mum might be dead now.'

Joey feels like he is existing on another plane. As if someone else has taken over his life to try to make a better job of it, and he is just an onlooker observing the catastrophe as it unfolds.

'It's like she didn't get Dad's message to say he wasn't coming home last night. Then he went AWOL. I can't get hold of Jessica either. She knows his every move.'

'Who's Jessica?' Joey knows exactly who Jessica is, but he needs to play the game.

'Jessica Samuels. She's Dad's assistant. Well, more than an assistant.'

'What do you mean?' Joey asks, thinking he knows what's coming. Does she know about her dad's affair?

'Jessica joined the company a few years ago as Dad's PA. She's lovely. I get on really well with her.' Joey can feel her eyes turn to him. 'There's stuff I haven't told you.'

Joey stops at a set of red lights. He twists his head to look at her. 'What do you mean?'

'My mum's pretty fucked up.'

*You can say that again.*

'You know she used to work in Dad's business?'

Joey nods. He remembers Maggie telling him. 'But she stepped down.'

'How do you know that?'

Careful, Joey. Careful. He stutters. 'You told me.'

'Did I?' She frowns. 'Well, it was a lie. Sorry. I know I shouldn't have lied to you, but I didn't want to talk about it before. Mum used to work full-time in the business. She and Dad were equals. Then three years ago, she had a sort of mini-breakdown for want of a better description. No one knew, apart from Dad and me. She didn't want anyone else knowing. She was still functioning, but it was like she wasn't really with us most of the time. She kind of withdrew from both of us. She started drinking more and more, and hiding it from us. Well, trying to hide it anyway. I only started noticing during lockdown. She used to stash her empties in the garage.'

'You should've told me,' Joey says. 'I tell you about the problems with my mum.'

'I know. But your mum has a real illness.'

*So has yours.*

‘I’ve never appreciated it. The first time I found the empties, I didn’t think too much of it. I was in the garage looking for some windscreen wiper fluid for my car. I knocked the bottle down the back of some boxes. I went to move one, but it was way lighter than I expected, and when I looked, it was full of empty wine and vodka bottles.’ She rambles on, offloading her anxiety. Joey has to concentrate hard to understand her. ‘Because of lockdown, she hadn’t been able to dispose of them. Then, when we started to come out of lockdown, I went to meet some friends, but I wasn’t feeling great, so I came home earlier than expected. I found Mum crashed out on the sofa, holding a bottle of vodka. That’s when the alarm bells rang loud and clear. Things started to add up. I went hunting around the garage and found more boxes of wine. I checked, and they were full, but when I got to the box second from the bottom, it was packed with empty vodka bottles. So was the bottom box.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘Dad was so supportive. He arranged for her to go on holiday with her brother. She’s close to her brother, my Uncle Ronny. Dad doesn’t get on with him. Ronny used to work for him, but they had a massive falling out. Anyway, that’s a story for another time. I would’ve gone with Mum, but it was when I got Covid.’

‘I remember.’

‘Dad booked them into a top hotel in Cornwall. It was while they were away that Jessica started to get more involved in the business. She’s whip-sharp, is Jessica. And quick-witted with it. One of those people it feels good to be around. Do you know what I mean?’

*Like you*, Joey wants to say, but simply nods his agreement.

‘When Mum returned from that holiday, she was more distant than ever. Jessica was working full-time by then. She kind of stepped into Mum’s shoes.’

*In every sense.*

Becca puffs out a large breath, spent after unburdening her family issues. Joey takes her hand. It’s an involuntary movement, but it feels like the right thing to do. It’s soft and feels so small wrapped in his long fingers. Does she know about her dad and Jessica’s affair? He wants to ask her, but knows he can’t. How can he explain how he has come by that information?

Becca gasps.

‘What?’

Her mouth drops open as she looks intently at Joey. ‘Maybe Mum’s having an affair. Perhaps she knew Dad wasn’t coming home, and she knew I wasn’t coming home until late, so she’d invited her lover over for dinner, and it all went horribly wrong.’ She pauses. ‘Or is that a bit far-fetched?’

Joey shrugs, concentrating on the traffic. He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

‘I know. I’m not thinking straight.’ She slips her hand from Joey’s and checks her phone before closing her eyes. ‘I’m so tired.’ She drops her head to her chest. ‘Thanks for listening.’

They drive the rest of the journey to the police station in silence. Joey keeps glancing over at her, unable to believe he has found himself in this situation. As far as he was concerned, Becca had always had the perfect family life: a tight bond, the big house, money, holidays. It just goes to show. All that glitters is certainly not gold.



When they arrive at the police station, Becca lifts her head and rubs her eyes. She looks so tired. As if she hasn't slept for a week. 'Will you come in with me?'

A police station is the last place Joey wants to find himself. He takes her hand again. 'I don't think I'll be allowed. Covid and all that.' He squeezes her fingers. 'I'll hang around for you, though.'

'You're probably right.' Becca leans into him. He slips an arm around her, and without intending to, he kisses her damp hair, inhaling the smell of strawberries and mint. It's the most intimate they've ever been. He closes his eyes. She smells so fresh, like a summer's day. Given different circumstances, he would want to stay like this forever. He pulls away.

'I'm still afraid they think I was the one who tried to kill her,' Becca says.

'They won't.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because it's ridiculous. I know you. You're not a murderer. You'd never do something like that.'

'But they don't know that.'

'Bex, calm down. It'll never come to that.'

'Shall I ask if you can come in with me? They might let you,' Becca repeats.

He doesn't want the police to think he is more than a friend helping a mate with a lift. They'll be wanting one of their little chats with him before

he knows it. ‘You go. They’ll be waiting for you. I’m going to get a coffee. Buzz me when you’ve finished, and I’ll be right back here.’

Joey drives for a few minutes to find a space in a side street where he doesn’t have to pay to park. He then walks back on himself up to the main road and finds a rough-and-ready café full of builders chatting and wolfing down fry-ups. The type of place he wouldn’t go if Becca were with him, but he knows the coffee will be cheap. He should eat, but the smell of greasy food makes him feel sick, as does the thought of his overdraft. Each mouthful will only stick in his throat. He orders a large black coffee, pays, and takes the mug to a corner table where he can turn his back on the hubbub of the noisy diners scoffing down their mid-morning breakfasts.

Taking three sachets from the container in the middle of the Formica table, he tears them open and stirs the sugar into his coffee. His nerves are shredded. Voices pound in his thoughts.

“Come clean, Joey. Come clean. It’s only a matter of time before Maggie wakes up and tells them exactly who delivered the gun she used to shoot herself.”

“But here’s the thing, Joey. There’s a possibility she could die. Then no one need ever know you were part of it all. Well, no one apart from CC, that is. Don’t do anything rash. Think about it.”

He sips his drink. It all feels so wrong: where he is, what he’s done. Knowing Maggie wasn’t dead when he left her last night has magnified his anxiety tenfold. He left a woman to die. What kind of person is he? His mum has always said bad things come in threes. If something wrong or bad has happened twice, there’s sure to be a third event waiting around the corner to trip you up. He has always been a good person. “You’re one of the good guys.” That’s what Becca said. He’s one of the good guys.

She doesn’t know how wrong she is.

His thoughts turn to Ade. Of all the men his mum could have hooked up with, he had to be a copper. He picks up his phone and scrolls through the news, trying to pass the time. A waitress bangs a tray of dirty plates and cutlery on the table. Joey looks up. She reminds him of his mum. Her face is kind but lined, her thinning hair tied back into a taut ponytail. ‘Sorry, love. Didn’t mean to make you jump.’ She sounds like his mum too. ‘You’ve been sitting there a while now.’

Joey turns and glances at the clock on the wall above the counter. She’s right. It’s been over an hour. ‘Sorry,’ he says.

Picking up his empty mug, she jiggles it in front of Joey's face. 'You look like you could do with another one of these. Want me to get you one?' Joey nods. She places the mug on her tray and winks at him. 'Don't tell the others. I don't usually do table service. But you look like you need it.'

Does it show that much?

He picks up his phone and listens to his voicemails. The first one is from CC. 'Joey. What the fuck are you playing at? Why haven't you called me? I need answers. What happened last night? You never called.'

Joey should face him, but he can't. Not at the moment. He needs to think clearly. Should he tell him what really happened? Or should he say he delivered the rucksack as ordered and left straight away? The waitress reappears with his coffee. He digs into his pocket for some coins. 'On the house,' she says, slapping him on the back and walking away. She's kind like his mum too. Her generosity makes him well up. Get a grip, Joey. Get a grip.

While he is sugaring the second mug of coffee, Joey ponders what to do with the coat, trainers, and rucksack still in his car. Perhaps he could dump them at the rubbish tip? He could take them with all the crap stacked in the garden shed that his mum has been asking him to take to the tip for a while. Or maybe he could have a clear-out of his and Dylan's clothes and take it all to one of the many charity shops that line the High Street. Don't be daft, Joey. Becca's dad's clobber will stick out like a sore thumb amongst their shabby stuff. What about waiting until they allow Becca back into her house? He could go over and see her and try to slip them back into the cupboard where he took them from. Now you really are being a muppet, Joey. They need to be disposed of properly. He needs to burn the lot of it. But where can he do that? He considers googling to find out, but what if he ends up being questioned for his part in all of this? He's seen the TV crime dramas. The police take computers and phones and examine your search history. How would it look if they found out he had been exploring ways to burn criminal evidence?

His phone rings. Becca's name flashes across the screen. He answers the call. Her voice sounds faint. 'Can you come and get me? Something terrible has happened.'

'What?'

'I'll tell you when you get here. Be quick.'

'Tell me now.'

‘I can’t.’ She lowers her voice. ‘I can’t stay in this place any longer. I’ll meet you outside.’

Joey gulps down the rest of his coffee and bolts for the door, leaving his dirty mug on the counter and thanking the waitress again. Rain is pouring down, the wind blowing boldly. He wraps his arms around his middle as he strides back to the police station, trying to work out what has happened. Please don’t say they suspect her in all of this. That simply can’t happen. Drops fall from his wet hair and down his face. He can’t remember ever feeling this cold. Becca is suffering. He hates himself. This thought makes up his mind. He is going to walk into the police station and own up to the part he has played in her mother’s shooting.

As he turns the corner and approaches the police station, Joey sees Becca standing under the shelter of a large oak tree. Her phone is pressed to her ear, her blond hair blowing wildly around her head. The wind is creating a tune through the boughs of the tree. It sounds like a sad song he has heard before. He can't remember its name, but it's one he doesn't like. She sees him and ends the call. 'I need to tell you something,' he says, as he runs towards her, catching his breath.

She gets in first. 'They've arrested my dad. They think he did it. They think he shot my mum.'

Joey stops dead. 'What?' He feels the heat of shame surge up his neck and redden his cheeks. This can't be happening.

'We've been assigned a family liaison officer, a FLO they're called. A really nice woman. She told me when I was in there. The man who lives in the house on the corner of our close saw my dad. Last night, around the time my mum was shot. They recognised his coat, of all things.'

'His coat?' Joey repeats, dread tearing through him like the cutting wind.

She shivers and tugs Joey's arm. 'I want to get away from here.'

Glancing from Becca to the police station, he wonders if this can get any worse. The sensible half of him wants to walk up the steps into the station and give himself up. The other half desperately wishes he'd never taken that phone call on Sunday night. It was the biggest mistake of his life. It struck the match that started this brightly burning fire that he has no means of putting out. All he wants is to whisk Becca away to a place where

there are only the two of them. Far away from the trouble he has dumped at her door. He needs time to think. 'The car is parked a few streets away. You stay here and I'll run and get it and come back for you. I'll be quick.'

'I don't want to stay here any longer.' She lifts the hood of her ski jacket over her head. 'I'll come with you.'

They try to talk, but the howling wind cuts through their words, chopping them into an incomprehensible garble. When they reach the car, Joey battles against the wind to open her door for her before running around to the driver's side and jumping in. He starts the engine and blasts the heater, removing his soaking coat and tossing it onto the back seat alongside her bags. Helping Becca out of her ski jacket, he throws it over his shoulder to land with his coat. 'What will happen to your dad now?'

'They went to the conference centre and arrested him. The FLO told me. I got the feeling she told me more than she should. I was a bit... persistent. You know what I can be like. I did badger her for answers. They took all his clothes and belongings for evidence.' She shakes her head, biting her bottom lip.

'Evidence of what?'

'That he did it. That he tried to murder Mum. They'll check for gunpowder residue and blood splatters from the shot, I guess. Now he's back there, at the station, being questioned. I still can't believe this is happening.' Her eyes close momentarily. Her face screws up in pain. Pain he could end if he told the police what he knows. He could free her dad from the shackles of the suspected attempted murder of his wife. Becca opens her eyes and stares at him. 'For fuck's sake, Joey. My dad tried to murder my mum.'

'But he's got an alibi, hasn't he? Didn't he have dinner with that new supplier for his company?'

'It got cancelled. The guy wasn't well.'

'What about the Jessica woman he went to the conference with?'

'They had an early dinner together.'

'The conference centre staff will be able to vouch for that, surely?'

She nods. 'Yep. But they cut the meal short. Jessica wasn't feeling well, apparently, either. They considered coming home, but the snowstorms were so bad that they decided to stay. Plus, Dad thought they might be able to meet with the client this morning. Given the timings, it was possible he

could've driven back, pulled the trigger, and then nipped back to the conference centre.'

'The centre must have CCTV. Surely it would've captured him at some point if he did that?'

'The police are checking it out. And his phone records. But these things take time.'

Joey takes Becca's hand and squeezes it. 'Innocent until proven guilty.'

She takes a while to answer. 'I suppose so.'

'What were you saying about the man and your dad's coat?' Joey winces at his words, knowing that the coat is less than two metres away in the boot of his car.

Becca blows on her hands and holds them in front of the heater. 'I remember Dad telling us he bumped into that man just after we moved in. They laughed because they were wearing the same coat. It's one of those parka coats with a furry hood. They discussed how warm they were and where they both got theirs from. Last night, the man said he was coming home from the pub, and he saw Dad. He wasn't exactly running away from the scene, but he wasn't walking either. I guess that's why they think he left the conference centre, came home, shot her, and headed back there.'

Joey can't believe what he is hearing.

She pauses, shaking her head. 'I refuse to believe he's capable of hurting her. There must be some explanation. But it doesn't look good, does it? Someone was seen wearing his coat, and no one can vouch for him at the time she was shot. The odds are stacked against him.' She shakes her head again. 'It doesn't make sense. He would never hurt her.'

But he has hurt her. He's having an affair. Isn't that up there as one of the worst kinds of hurts? Thoughts of Maggie last night when she told him what her husband was up to torment Joey. Her husband broke her, she'd said.

But that's not enough to blame him for a crime he didn't commit.

Joey switches on the wipers and watches them swipe rain from the windscreen. They're making that nerve-grating noise. CC couldn't have installed these new ones correctly. There's too much tension between the glass and the blade. Too much tension everywhere.

'I don't understand the fact that he called to say he wasn't coming home. But he did, they think.'

Joey looks at her. The pain in her eyes is agonising.

‘He lied.’ She shakes her head. ‘He’s not a liar. It doesn’t make any sense. The police asked me all sorts of questions about him and their marriage. It was horrible.’ She looks up at Joey. ‘My dad tried to murder my mum. How could he? Why would he?’

Joey can’t answer. Well, he could pose a theory. So her dad could run off with his mistress. Joey thinks about how this will all play out. ‘The conference centre *will* have some CCTV. Someone will be able to vouch for him.’

‘What if the snowstorms affected the CCTV? Can the weather do that?’

Joey shrugs. He doesn’t know about these things. ‘I guess it can distort the picture.’

‘Come on, let’s go. I need something to drink.’

‘Want me to pick up a coffee for you?’

She shakes her head. ‘I’ll wait until I get to my uncle’s house.’ She points to her drenched jeans. ‘I want to get out of these.’

Joey listens to Becca as he drives through the wind lashing water across the windscreen. Rain pounds down on the car. It’s so intense, it sounds as if the roof is going to implode. Becca raises her voice to give him directions as she relays the last couple of hours in the police station, where she answered numerous questions about her mum and dad. Guilt pulses through his veins, quickening his heartbeat. Crippling guilt, fear, and resentment all mixed into a blood-red cocktail of toxicity.

‘Slow down here. Take the next turning,’ Becca says when they arrive at her uncle’s road. ‘Down there, that’s it.’ Joey veers off onto what is more of a dirt track than a road and through an arch of trees that stretches down to a desolate pair of houses. He slows to ten miles per hour. His car won’t survive these potholes.

‘It’s a bit out of the way,’ Joey says as he approaches a pair of semi-detached houses at the bottom of the dirt track.

‘I know. He and his wife split up a few years ago. He wanted to keep hold of his business, so this was all he could afford. Where’s his car? It doesn’t look like he’s in. Here, park in front of those bushes. I’ll ring him and see where he is. He can’t have gone far. He knows I’m on my way.’ She makes a call, leaving a message to say she is there. ‘It’s OK. I know where he keeps a spare key.’

‘I’ll be off,’ Joey says. ‘I’ve got some stuff I need to sort out.’ He can’t keep that gun hidden under his pillow any longer.



‘Please stay with me until he gets back. I don’t want to be on my own.’

Unable to resist the desperate look in her eyes, Joey follows her through a side gate and around to the mess of a back garden. Overgrown bushes, plants and weeds blur the edges into a mass of brown and green chaos. It reminds Joey of how his back garden ended up in the years after his dad died. Unlike his mum, who hates gardening, his dad was obsessed with it. Every Sunday morning, he used to get Joey out to help him. It was a weekly bonding session that Joey missed immensely after he was gone. The garden remained abandoned, like this one, until lockdown, when he finally succumbed to his mum’s nagging and got back out there.

‘Here we go,’ Becca says, squatting down and separating the leaves of an ivy bush to reveal a mound of large, multicoloured pebbles. ‘He sorted this for me when I lost the second key he gave me.’ She shifts five or six stones aside, picks one out and turns it upside down to reveal a black plastic cover with a combination lock. She glances up at Joey. ‘Never guess this was here, would you?’

Joey murmurs in agreement.

‘He set this as my date of birth, so I can never forget it.’ Becca twirls the small wheels of the lock. ‘Here we go.’ She opens the cover and removes the key before placing all the stones back where she found them.

She opens the back door, which leads into a small kitchen that smells of fried bacon and cat food. A greasy frying pan sits in the sink, along with a ketchup-smeared plate and a couple of mugs. Becca fills the kettle as a phone pings. ‘Was that mine?’ she says, delving into the pocket of her hoody. She looks at the screen. ‘He’s popped out to pick up some shopping. He’s on his way back.’ Her face scrunches up as she points to her jeans. ‘Make some coffee while I change, would you?’

‘Sure.’

Opening a cupboard, she finds three mugs. She reaches to the back of the worktop and drags a canister and a jar of coffee to the front. ‘Coffee and sugar are in there. Make three, can you? My uncle takes his black no sugar. There should be milk in the fridge. I’ll be back in a tick.’ She picks up her bags and leaves the kitchen.

Joey walks to the fridge, but apart from a box of eggs and a few cans of fizzy drinks, it’s empty. Her uncle must be getting some milk. A noise across the room catches his attention. A jet-black cat jumps onto the table and turns to stare at him. Joey walks over and strokes it. ‘Hey, moggie.’

'You're a cutie.' The cat purrs as Joey runs his hand along its back to the end of its tail. He repeats this action as he glances around the worn furniture. None of it matches. As if the whole room has been fitted out from a charity shop. The old-fashioned sideboard is not level. One of the legs is broken and is propped up with bricks. He stares at a pile of files on the desk next to a laptop. The screensaver depicts a photo of a pretty woman wearing a tan fedora. Her head is cocked to the side, and the palm of her hand is held out beneath her mouth as she blows a kiss to the camera. She looks familiar. He racks his brain. Where has he seen her before? Maybe she's been in the supermarket. The cat meows and nudges Joey's hand with its head. 'I'm in trouble, moggie. Deep, deep trouble, and I don't know what to do.'

He returns to the kettle bubbling its way to boiling point and stares out of the window into the shambles of a garden, a feeling of foreboding rushing through him. Like he is sinking, and he can't stop himself. There's no one to help him either. Where is this all going to end? He unscrews the jar and spoons coffee into the three mugs and sugar into two. He hears a car engine. As he fills the mugs with water, the front door opens, and slams shut. 'Be down in a minute. My friend's in the kitchen making coffee,' Becca shouts from upstairs.

It's the hand that warns him first. The grease-stained fingers wrap around the door to push it open. And then the body appears, and he knows.

'Well, well, well. If it isn't the boy himself.'

Joey blinks, clearing the confusion he thinks is there, but isn't. It's as clear as if it were a summer afternoon, not late morning in the middle of winter. His voice falters. 'CC.'

'That's me,' he growls, strutting towards Joey and dumping a bag of shopping on the worktop. He looks worn out. But then his sister is on life support and a gun he supplied put her there. He mimics Joey's pathetic voice. 'CC.' Taking a carton of milk out of the bag, he bangs it down beside the mugs. 'Best start calling me Ronny,' he says.

Joey looks at him, confused. Ronny? What's with the CC, then? Then it clicks. His real name is Cameron. That's what he told Joey the first time they met. Ronny is short for Cameron. Ronny strides to the other side of the room and swipes a file off the table. Opening the door to a cupboard, he switches on a light. He crouches on all fours and disappears inside. Joey hears his bulky body scraping against the wall and then a buzz and a creaking sound like a metal door being opened. There's a pause and then a bang as if the same door is being shut. His body reverses out of the cupboard. He swears as he stands up and bangs his head on the sloping ceiling. He glares at Joey as he massages his head, still swearing.

Joey feels extremely uncomfortable. What happened to the smiley bloke he met the other night? Joey can't work out if Ronny is surprised to see him there or not. Does he know Becca and he are friends? Joey glances at the door. He doesn't know why. Perhaps he thinks he can make a run for it – sprint to his car and speed off as fast as he can.

‘Don’t even think about leaving,’ Ronny says. He rushes towards Joey and prods him in the chest. ‘You and I need to have words.’ The prods get harder. They hurt. Joey steps backwards. Ronny steps forwards. Joey can feel his breath on his face. The smell is nauseating. ‘Why’ve you been ignoring my calls? And what the fuck happened at my sister’s house last night?’

Does he lie? Tell him he dropped off the rucksack and left? Think, Joey, think.

Bounding into the room, Becca buys him desperately needed time. Her hair is wet, and Joey can smell the familiar scent of strawberries and mint. She bursts into tears when she sees her uncle. Ronny turns to her and offers his open arms.

How can this be happening? How can this man, who he has been unfortunate enough to get himself involved with, be Becca’s uncle?

Ronny pulls Becca’s head into the crook of his arm and strokes her hair. ‘It’ll all be OK, angel.’ He directs a malevolent glare Joey’s way. The sight is sickening. Ronny doesn’t deserve to have her in his arms.

Joey turns away and finishes making the drinks. But he only pours milk into one of the mugs. He’s no longer thirsty. Listening to Becca tell this wrong ‘un about her mum and the allegations against her dad is excruciating. In his haste, he drops the spoon on the floor. He picks it up and slings it in the sink. It lands with a clang. He grabs another one out of the cutlery dryer on the draining board, listening to Becca recount the trauma of the past eighteen hours as he stirs their drinks. ‘Bex, sorry to interrupt, but I need to get going. I’m around later if you need me.’ Joey fishes his keys out of his pocket, hoping she doesn’t notice how much his hands are shaking.

‘At least stay and have your coffee,’ she says.

‘I’m already way late.’ Joey nods at Ronny. ‘Nice to meet you.’ He turns to the back door and opens it, half expecting a pair of hands to pick him up by the scruff of the neck and toss him like a bag of rubbish back into the house, but all he hears is Ronny’s gruff voice.

‘Hey, Joey. I noticed one of the tyres on your car is dodgy. You shouldn’t be driving around with it like that. Let me come out and show you.’

Joey grits his teeth.

‘Be right back,’ Ronny says to Becca, pecks her on the forehead and follows Joey out of the door. ‘I didn’t know you and Becca were such good friends,’ he says when they are through the garden gate. Joey keeps quiet. He is thinking about how much to tell this brute. ‘So come on. I want answers. What really happened to my sister?’

Joey resigns himself to tell the truth. ‘I did exactly what you told me to, but she recognised me. She dragged me into the house like some mad woman. I didn’t know what to do. She was very persuasive. She’d been drinking. Heavily. She could hardly walk straight. One minute she alluded to plans she had for her husband, and not in a good way. Then she turned the gun on herself. She was crazy. What more can I tell you? She shot herself.’ If Ronny won’t believe his words, he’s sure to acknowledge the distress in his voice. ‘If I’d known what was really in that rucksack, I would never have taken it. I thought it was cash. You should’ve told me.’

‘And you just left her to die?’

Ronny’s words sting like the wind slapping violently against Joey’s cheeks. He doesn’t want to talk to this threatening man any more, but the foreboding glare in his evil eyes tells Joey it would be best not to ignore him. ‘I thought she was dead. She fell to the floor like she was. There was a pool of blood under her head and all over the wall. Honestly, she looked dead. I didn’t know what to do.’

‘Where’s the gun?’

‘I took it with me.’

‘Why? Now it’s become a bloody attempted murder hunt. And they’re blaming Alan.’ The corners of his lips twitch. Was that a smirk? He puts his hand over his mouth.

‘I panicked. I thought if I left it there, it could be traced back to me.’ Joey pauses before adding, ‘Or you. So I took it and ran.’

‘Where’s it now?’

‘I got rid of it.’

‘Where?’

‘I took it down to the canal.’ Hold it together, Joey. Hold it together. Don’t start blushing. This is not the time.

‘When?’

‘Last night. Before I went home.’

‘How do you know no one saw you?’

‘I was careful.’

Ronny glares at Joey, stroking his beard. A look that jars every millimetre of Joey's spine like a series of electric shocks. He has the same unnerving look as Maggie had last night. He knew she reminded him of someone. Joey thought it had been Becca. And, partly he was right, but now he can clearly see the sibling similarity. He's about to speak when Becca comes running out of the house. She darts up the path and stops in front of them. 'I've just spoken to Jessica,' she says. 'And guess what?'

'What, angel?' Ronny asks. The sweetness in his voice sounds false.

'He has an alibi.' Becca stands with her arms wrapped around her body, sheltering herself from the howling wind. She leans against the boot of the car. 'The police have questioned Jessica. She went to his room last night to ask him for some paracetamol. Around the time Mum was shot.'

Joey wonders if this is true. Did they go for an early dinner, and then to Alan's room to spend the night together, but can't be seen to admit to that, so she made up this story?

'What about that man you mentioned, who said he saw your dad running away from your house last night?' Ronny asks.

'I guess the police will investigate that further. It must've been another person with the same coat as Dad's. I'm sure I saw his coat in the cupboard yesterday.' She shrugs. 'But I can't be one hundred per cent.' Joey glances at her bottom leaning against the boot of the car. The thought of people searching for a coat that is hidden directly beneath her – a critical piece of evidence in what is thought to be a potential murder enquiry – mortifies him.

'Anyway, Jessica has booked us into a hotel until we can go home. I need to see Dad. Will one of you take me?'

Joey wants to volunteer but knows he has to sort the gun. Besides, he needs breathing space from this airless situation.

'I'll do it,' says Ronny. 'Joey here needs to get to work.'

'Thanks. I'll just get my stuff together.'

'Call me later,' Joey shouts after Becca as she jogs off towards the house. Jumping into his car, he nods at Ronny and starts the engine. Joey is about to drive off when Ronny thumps on the glass. Reluctantly, Joey lowers the window.

'I have another package for you. And don't worry,' he smirks, 'It's not another gun.'

Joey holds his hands up as if in surrender. 'This has freaked me out. I'm done, Ronny. I'm not up for any more.'

Like a red flag to a bull, Joey's words charge Ronny with a burst of anger. 'Yes, you are, Joey.' He glances up at the house. 'I need this done.' He slaps the roof of the car. 'Turn the engine off.'

Joey keeps it running in defiance until Ronny repeats his demand and Joey gives in and takes the key out of the ignition.

'Wait there. I'll be right back.'

Dumbstruck, Joey watches him saunter up the path, his shoulders moving in unison with his stride. What does this animal take him for? Defiance overrides his fear. He waits for Ronny to disappear into the house before restarting the engine and racing off, forgetting all the bumps in the road. In the rear-view mirror, he can see Ronny tearing after him, carrying some Jiffy bags in his hands. The car jolts as Joey hits a pothole, slowing him down. He can't get a puncture now. He drives through the arch of trees, his thoughts on Becca. Should he leave her there with him? The maniac who supplied the gun her mum shot herself with? He wouldn't do anything to harm her, would he? He's heard Becca talk about her Uncle Ronny before. Only in passing. He remembers her telling him only good things about him, gushing almost.

Joey picks up speed, praying his car will survive the appalling state of the road. At the junction with the main road, he is forced to stop and let several cars pass. He taps the steering wheel, willing them to hurry. He's just about to pull out when there is an almighty bang on the boot of his car. He looks in his rear-view mirror, the gleam of the brake lights extending a demon-like glow to Ronny's face. Joey can see the Jiffy bags tucked under his arm, and he is holding the screen of his mobile towards Joey, as if he is trying to show him something. But Joey isn't interested. In a blind panic, he floors the accelerator and tears onto the main road.

An approaching car blares its horn, swerving to miss him. The driver slows down until she is alongside Joey's car, prodding her temple. She mouths, 'Idiot,' before accelerating away. But Joey is past caring. He wants to get away from there. The rain has eased, but the wipers are still on, scraping across the windscreen all the way home.

Pat's Ford Transit is outside his house when he arrives. A blue van with *Pat's Heating and Plumbing* scribed in white down each side. Joey sighs. He should have gone to college and learned a trade when he left school. He might own a van now. One with *Joey's Heating and Plumbing* emblazoned across the sides. Or *Joey The Plumber*, that sounds better. He can picture it parked where Pat's van is. Then he wouldn't be in the dire mess he is in now.

'Good as new,' Pat says, as he drops a wrench into his toolbox. 'Pump is apumping. Water is aflowing. All serviced. Call me with any problems.' He gathers the rubbish from the floor and puts it into a *Plumb City* carrier bag.

The sound of radiators bubbling into action is hot music to Joey's ears. 'Can I transfer the money to your account?' Joey asks, buying some time to garner the funds.

'Yeah, sure. I'll text you an invoice.' Pat stands up. His knee cracks. 'It has to go through the books, I'm afraid, as I'll have to pay my supplier. Otherwise I would've done it for cash.'

'Yeah, sure. Text it over, and I'll sort it.' Who is he trying to kid?



‘I’ll get the invoice to you by the end of the week. If you could settle it straight away, that would help me. Cash flow is a bit tight at the moment. So many people are not paying on time. I’ve got bills outstanding since November, and I’ve got suppliers on my back. And what with the little ’un needing new things all the time. Kids’ shoes, how much do you reckon? Forty blimmin’ quid. *Forty*. Can you believe that? They’re no bigger than my hand.’

‘No worries,’ Joey says, inwardly breathing a sigh of relief. At least he’s got a couple of days to find the funds.

‘When shall we go for that drink, then? It’ll be good to catch up for old times’ sake and all that. If you want to, that is. You don’t have to. I was only joking about you having to buy me a beer.’

‘Of course I want to,’ Joey laughs, giving Pat a friendly slap on the shoulder. ‘I’m really grateful for what you’ve done.’

‘Sunday night?’

‘I’m busy this week. How about next?’

‘Yeah, sure. Sunday evening is my pub night.’ He laughs. ‘The missus lets me off the leash on a Sunday. He stops laughing and frowns. ‘Is everything alright, Joey? You seem troubled. I hope you don’t mind me saying. Have you got money worries?’

Joey inwardly snorts. His searing financial hardship has paled into insignificance since last night. The threat of enforcement agents seems like a party against the threat of going to prison for perverting the course of justice and fleeing the scene of a crime. What else? Firearm offences: possession of a gun. That alone could see him banged up. When you add it all together, though, they’ll throw away the key. He has been such an idiot. When he found out it was a gun and not cash in that rucksack, he should have taken it straight back to Ronny. What had he been thinking? ‘Got a lot on at the moment, that’s all.’

‘Call me anytime, mate. You see these?’ He points to his large ears. ‘They’re big, and they’re ugly, but all the better for listening to you.’

When Pat leaves, his mum appears. ‘Thank God that’s fixed. He’s a nice guy. What are you up to today?’

‘I’ve got some overtime this afternoon.’

‘Have you got a moment to take that heater back up to the loft? We haven’t got room for it down here. I’ve left it up on the landing.’

‘Sure. You’re looking better.’

‘I am. Much better. I’m popping to the shops. I won’t be long. Get a few bits in for dinner tonight with that money you gave me.’ She eyes him suspiciously. ‘Where did you say you got it from?’

‘What’s with all the questions?’ he snaps. He can’t help it. He feels like an elastic band stretched to breaking point. She looks shocked at his outburst. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean that to come out the way it did. I told you, didn’t I? I lent someone down the pub fifty quid at Christmas. He paid it back.’

‘Talking always helps,’ she says as she walks away.

When the front door closes, he sprints upstairs to his bedroom and sits on Dylan’s bed for a few minutes, his head in his hands. He is exhausted, as if he has already run a marathon, and it’s only lunchtime. What is happening to him? He takes deep breaths, willing himself to hold it all together. Nothing stays the same forever.

He’s not cut out for this.

His life is a disaster.

Everyone would be better off without him.

He jumps up, grabs the gun from beneath the pillow and makes for the airing cupboard. Finding the pole in the corner, he lowers the loft hatch and extends the ladder to the floor. Balancing the heater under his arm, he climbs up to the loft. At the top, he switches on the light, but of course, the bulb has blown. He finds the torch on his phone. His eyes scan the space for a suitable hiding place. He dithers. A voice makes him jump.

‘Are you listening to me?’

Joey glances down at his mum at the bottom of the ladder. ‘What did you say?’ The ringing in his ears is affecting his hearing.

‘Be careful up there.’

‘I thought you’d gone to the shops.’

‘It’s raining. I thought I’d wait until it stops.’

He grimaces. He wanted to fetch the coat, trainers, and rucksack from his car and bring them up into the loft, which would buy some time until he worked out what to do with them. At the moment, he doesn’t trust himself to make these kinds of decisions.

‘Leave the heater near the entrance, so it’s in reach if we need it again.’ He wishes she would go away. Her presence is multiplying his angst. ‘That’s it, just at the side there.’

‘There’s not enough room at the side. There’s too much stuff up here.’

‘I know. I need to have a clear-out. I’ve been thinking about tackling it for a while. If I feel up to it, perhaps I’ll make a start at the weekend.’

That’s all he needs. ‘Not without me,’ he shouts down at her. He can’t have her going up there on her own. He clasps the gun in his pocket, weighing him down like the burden of guilt in his soul. He can’t bear it any more. He’s got to get rid of it. ‘You’ll hurt yourself, Mum. Do me a favour. Go and get a light bulb out of that box on the top shelf under the stairs.’

With her out of the way for a couple of minutes, he weaves amongst the clutter into the belly of the loft and replaces the heater in the space where he found it the other day, beside an old suitcase covered in dust. That’ll be a good hiding place. He unzips the top to find it packed with his dad’s old clothes: jumpers, T-shirts, trousers, and underwear. He stares at it all for a while, swallowing the lump growing in the back of his throat for his mum, who hasn’t even been able to throw away his dad’s holey socks and tatty boxers. Removing the gun from his pocket, he thrusts it amongst the clothing, muttering an apology to his dad who will be swearing at him from up above.

‘I’ve got it.’ He turns in fright to see the top half of his mum’s body sticking through the hatch. She is replacing the bulb, providing light to the whole area. ‘Mum, get down.’

‘That’s your dad’s clothes in that case, isn’t it? Bring it down. I’ll go through it. Got to start somewhere. Here, pass it to me.’ She climbs another rung, her legs now coming into view.

Could this get any worse? ‘Not now. I’ll help you at the weekend. I’ve got to get to work.’

‘No. No. Pass that suitcase to me. There should be another one somewhere.’ She points to the area to the left. ‘Over there. I’ve got nothing planned this afternoon. I’m going to sort through them.’ She climbs to the top rung. ‘It’s freezing up here.’

‘Mum, get down. I’ll bring them down later.’

‘Joey Clarke. If you don’t pass them to me, I’m going to come over there and fetch them myself.’ He knows his mum. When not troubled with the debilitating symptoms of her illness, she is a determined and stubborn mule. She’s got that look on her face – glaring eyes, furrowed brow – that tells her son to quit arguing with her. ‘Come on. Pass them over.’ She walks towards him, tripping over the Christmas tree Joey hauled back up into the loft earlier in the month.

She won't take no for an answer. Think, Joey. Think. He stares at the suitcase by his feet containing the gun which blew someone's head off last night wrapped in his late father's clothes. 'Get out of here. You'll do yourself an injury. I'm being serious, Mum. I've already hurt my foot.' He raises his leg to display a fake injury, trying to keep the desperation out of his voice. Before he knows it, she'll be asking him to open the suitcase for her to rummage through. 'Go back down, and I'll pass them to you at the bottom.'

He quietly and slowly lets out a deep sigh as she descends the ladder. He waits, watching until her head disappears out of sight. As quickly as he can, he unzips the case and removes the gun, hiding it in an old lampshade sitting on a pile of boxes. Locating the other suitcase she requested, he takes the two of them to the hatch and hands them down to his mum, waiting at the bottom.

'Thanks, Joey. It's going to be painful, but it's time. Be a love and take them downstairs for me, would you?' She looks up at the loft opening. 'You've left the light on.'

'I know. Go and make some tea, and I'll close up and bring them downstairs.' He nods at the suitcases by his feet.

'On second thoughts, my bedroom will do for now. I don't want to upset the kids if I don't get around to sorting them today.'

'Go and make that tea.'

'Are you trying to get rid of me?' She places her hands on her hips. 'I know you, Joey Clarke. What's going on?'

'I'm fine. Honestly.'

'Haven't I taught you never to lie?'

'Back off, Mum. It's all good.'

She wanders off along the hallway. 'You know where I am if you need to talk.'

He watches until she disappears down the stairs again before climbing back up the ladder to switch off the light. But then he panics. What if she decides to come up later to look through more of his dad's stuff? She could easily find the gun. He needs a more secure hiding place. He takes the gun from the lampshade and wades through the mess until the flooring runs out. He wedges it beneath the floorboard on top of the insulation. She'll never find it there.

Once he has closed the loft hatch, he takes the suitcases to his mum's bedroom. A light room painted custard yellow that Joey decorated for her a few years ago. He thought it might brighten her mood. He places the suitcases beside her wardrobe. He is about to leave the room, but hesitates. At the door, he turns and stares at them. The thought of his dad's clothes stuffed into two suitcases stirs the compartment of grief in his heart that he tries not to disturb these days. Even all these years later, although the rawness has evolved into acceptance, it's still painful. He thinks of Becca and what she must be going through, and what's to come as she navigates life after this trauma, for which he is partly to blame.

‘The fruit and veg aisles need restocking. Start with the potatoes,’ Mr Parasi instructs when Joey arrives at work. He regrets agreeing to this shift. But not a single soul could ever have predicted the turmoil he would find himself in when he offered himself up for these extra hours. Joey follows him out back to the loading bays. ‘Everyone seems to be buying potatoes.’ Joey loads a cage with boxes and spends his shift replenishing the depleted shelves, trying not to think about the deep trouble he is in. But he can’t. His constant anxiety reminds him. So do the constant texts from Ronny telling him he’d better get in touch or else.

When he leaves work, he checks his phone. He ignores more messages from Ronny but sees that Becca has been trying to get hold of him.

*Call me when you can. Bx*

He phones her. She answers straight away. ‘I’m at the hotel Jessica booked into, but Dad’s not here. I thought he’d be back by now. Can you come over? I’m going crazy on my own.’ Joey hesitates. He just wants to get home. Those trainers and the coat in the boot of his car need sorting. He feels like a cat with only one of his nine lives remaining, and he needs to save that for whatever else the coming days may spring on him.

‘Please, Joey.’

‘Which hotel?’

She gives him directions.

He checks the time. ‘I’ll be there as soon as I can.’

‘Meet me in the bar.’

On the way, Joey calls his mum, telling her they should eat without him. He's going to be back late. 'Where're you going?' she asks. He's never out as much as he has been lately. He knows he needs to tell her about Becca's mum. She'll find out sooner or later, if she hasn't already learned it from the local news. She knows he and Becca are friends. And she knows he wishes they could be more than just friends. 'I'll tell you later.'

'You're in trouble, aren't you?'

He doesn't want to stress her. It will only cause a flare-up. 'I'm fine, Mum. Relax.'

'Have you got a girlfriend?' she asks.

She makes it sound like a surprise. He hasn't had many girlfriends and only one serious relationship. In his late teens, he had an intense, year-long romance with a girl he thought he was in love with. But when she was offered a place at uni, things changed. They had got far too serious far too quickly, she said, when they arrived at her digs in Newcastle with his car jam-packed with all her stuff. She needed space, she said. What was that meant to mean? He drove the three hundred odd miles home in total shock and never heard from her again. Only these past few months, as his feelings for Becca have developed, has he realised that the Newcastle girl was just a teenage crush.

'No,' he replies. 'Did you go through the suitcases?'

'I didn't. I couldn't face it. Maybe tomorrow.'

'Don't worry. I'll take them back up to the loft.'

'No need. I'll get to them at some point.'

The hotel where Becca is staying is one of those upmarket boutique places in the heart of town. A grade two listed converted library where the lighting is low, and the reception area smells of the leather of the sofas and wingback chairs. It's situated equidistant from the police station and the hospital, ideal for Becca and her dad's needs. Joey feels awkward as he bypasses the two receptionists and heads along the oak-panelled passageway to the bar, where he finds Becca waiting on a leather sofa nursing a pint of lager. She is pale, and her hair is knotted in a messy pineapple on top of her head. She still looks hot to Joey, though. 'Dad's just got back from the station,' she says.

Joey sits beside her. 'Where is he?'

‘He’s gone to his room. He’s not feeling well. Probably all the stress, or he’s caught that bug Jessica had at the conference. Do you want a drink?’

Joey does. And more than one. He wants to neck ten Jägermeister shots, wash them down with a pint of beer, and forget about life for one night. He eyes the bar apprehensively. Payday is still a few days away, and the price of two pints in a place like this will cost an arm and a leg and deplete what’s left of his cash. Before he can answer, she shuffles forwards until her bottom is perched on the side of the sofa, and picks up her glass from the table. ‘Join me. I don’t want to drink alone.’ She gulps the last of her pint.

‘It’s my turn,’ he says. The least he can do is buy her a drink. If only he could come clean, she wouldn’t be going through half the grief she is having to endure. He grabs her empty glass. ‘Same again?’ But whenever he thinks of owning up to the part he has played in this drama, he sees his family with plates as empty as the glass he is holding. And he can’t do that to them. He knows it’s only a matter of time before Maggie wakes up and reveals all, but as awful as it sounds, he also knows there’s a chance she might not make it.

He waits to be served, studying the vast display of gins on offer behind the long bar. It’s busy, and the bar staff are serving other customers. He glances over at Becca talking on her phone. The frown on her face deepens by the second. Something has happened. Joey feels a familiar cold sweat. Who is she talking to? After what seems like an hour of her nodding and murmuring, although it’s less than a minute, she slides the phone from her ear and stares at the floor.

‘What can I get you?’ a barmaid asks, eyeing Joey up and down.

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ Joey says and heads for Becca. ‘You OK?’ he asks.

She drops her phone in her lap and looks at him in shock. ‘The hospital rang. My mum has had a bleed on the brain. They’re taking her into theatre for surgery.’

Joey drops down and grabs her hand. ‘Bex, I’m so sorry.’

‘I need to tell Dad. I tried to call him, but he didn’t answer. He must’ve fallen asleep.’ She smacks the palms of her hands against her temples and slides them down her cheeks. ‘This is such a nightmare.’

‘What can I do?’ Joey asks.

She stands up and grabs her phone. ‘Find the bastard who did this to her.’



Joey mumbles to himself the entire way home. Words of assurance that everything will be OK ping-ponging with those demanding he give himself up. When he arrives home, he can't believe his eyes. Ade's car is sitting out the front. He slams his fist on the steering wheel and laughs out loud. 'You've got to be kidding me?' he shouts out. He had planned to grab the stuff from the boot and hide it in the loft for the time being. This seems his safest option, doesn't it? He keeps doubting himself.

Laughter greets him as he opens the front door, along with Hetty, wiggling her bottom in delight. His mum yells her usual, 'Evening, love.'

He hangs his coat in the cupboard and crouches to acknowledge Hetty. 'It's true, you know,' he says as he strokes Hetty's wiry fur. 'A dog is a man's best friend.'

In the lounge, the family and Ade are sitting at the dining table playing a game of Monopoly. 'I've got hotels on the purples,' Dylan says, smugness in his voice overshadowing a look of glee in his eyes.

Their mum rolls her eyes. 'And guess who's just landed on them?' she says, pushing a small pile of paper money across the table in Dylan's direction. 'That's me done.'

'You've still got the greens and three stations,' Dylan says.

Their mum laughs. 'Regent Street and Bond Street are mortgaged and with no money, I don't stand a chance.'

'Let's start again, and Joey can play,' Megan says.

'No way. I'm winning.' Dylan looks at Joey and gives him a quick frown, the crease of his brow asking if he's OK.

'But I want Joey to play,' Megan protests.

'You're OK. I'm beat,' Joey says, nodding a hello in Ade's direction.

'There's some chicken casserole in the oven for you,' his mum says. 'Or leftover Chinese.'

'I've eaten,' Joey lies. Again. This is the problem with lies. You tell one, and they keep coming, one after another. You can't stop them. And you need to have such a good memory to not trip over them all. He's starving, but he can't face eating dinner in front of a detective and making polite conversation while trying to fake that all is OK in his world. Besides, he feels a headache from hell is creeping his way.

'Where?'

‘I got a sandwich after work.’

‘A sandwich won’t fill you up. You’re wasting away.’

‘I’m fine,’ he says, leaving them to squabble over their property empires.

After popping a couple of painkillers, he climbs the ladder to his bed. He doesn’t even bother to undress. Overcome with exhaustion, each rung proves a substantial effort. Like he’s climbing a steep mountain with a heavy load on his back. Succumbing to the comfort of his tiny area of privacy, he stretches out his limbs, lifting his knees so his feet can rest on the frame. He checks his phone. There’s another missed call from Ronny, nothing from Becca. He lies in the darkness, trying to silence the nagging voice telling him to give himself up. But there’s too much at stake. His family will never survive without him. And as brutal as it sounds, he’s got a chance of getting away with this.

If Becca’s mum doesn’t pull through.

**THURSDAY**

The alarm clock of hunger wakes Joey. It's so intense, he feels sick. He checks his phone. It's almost six. He lies for a minute until he can no longer stand the emptiness gnawing at him. Or is he a little nervous for what he is about to do? He inches down the ladder from his bed, listening to Dylan's gentle snores. He needs to be quick to get away with this. He rubs his hands down his arms and legs, trying to straighten out yesterday's clothes. As quietly as he can, he kneels on the floor next to Dylan, who is sleeping soundly. He reaches under the bed and slides out an old holdall. He steps over to the radiator under the window and turns the control dial off as part of his plan.

The house is deadly quiet, everyone still fast asleep. He creeps downstairs, avoiding the unpredictable stair third from the bottom. Sometimes it creaks under his weight. All he can think about is toast coated with butter and jam, but he finds the bread bin empty when he gets to the kitchen. He places two Weetabix into a bowl and adds some milk and several spoons of sugar, but when he goes to take a spoonful, his stomach turns. He puts the bowl on the side. Hetty waits at his feet, her head moving from side to side hoping to catch a titbit. 'It's not time for breakfast yet,' he says. He bends and strokes her. 'You need to wait a while, my friend.'

In the understairs cupboard, he finds his Crocs. The ones that were once his dad's that he has refused to let his mum discard despite them having lost

their grip and the left one having a broken strap. As quietly as he can, he slowly picks up his keys from the hall table and slips out of the front door.

The wind whips through him as he negotiates the path to his car. The sun is yet to rise, darkness his welcome friend. In his haste, he almost loses his balance. He steadies himself against the garden fence and uses it to guide him to the gate. A fallen branch snaps underfoot, sounding thunderous in the quietness of the early morning. When he reaches his car, parked out the back of the house, he opens the boot. He glances around, half-expecting to spot his mum watching from her bedroom window. But the house is in blackness. A sudden thought comes to him. What if Ade stayed the night? He didn't even hear Dylan come to bed, so what if Ade never left? Joey didn't notice Ade's car outside the front of the house, but what's to say he didn't move it further up the road? But why would he have done that? Paranoia makes him check his neighbours' windows too, but he can't see a soul. He stuffs the coat, trainers, and rucksack from his car into the holdall, lowers the boot lid and quietly presses it closed.

He checks to see if Ade's car is parked anywhere in the street before going back inside, but he can't see it. The house is still quiet. Kicking his Crocs into the cupboard, he slinks back upstairs, the holdall over his shoulder. Quietly, he opens his mum's bedroom door, double checking she is alone. He finds the rod to open the loft hatch in the airing cupboard and waits until his heart thumping in his ears is the only sound he can hear. When he is sure no one is stirring, he unfolds the stairs to the floor. He climbs up, step by step, inwardly groaning with each scrunch and squeak. He zigzags his way through the disorder to the spot where he hid the gun. But when he reaches beneath the floorboard, it's not there.

He starts to sweat, despite the below zero temperature. This can't be right. He prods and pokes either side of the space. Where is it? Has his mum been in the loft and taken it? Has he got the right spot? Crouching down on all fours, he crawls along the floorboards, edging his hand under each board between the joists as he holds his breath, praying he is mistaken. He was sure it was in the middle somewhere. Only when his touch meets the roughness of the towel does he allow himself to breathe. He catches his breath again when he hears the distinct voice of his mum whispering urgently from below. 'Joey, what *are* you doing up there at this time of the morning?'

‘Coming down,’ he responds. His mum is now climbing the ladder. ‘Stay there. It’s freezing up here.’ With shaking hands, he tries to rip open the zip to the holdall, but it gets caught.

‘What *are* you doing?’ his mum calls up to him.

He panics. The holdall won’t open. He yanks the zip again, and it tears away from the seam. ‘I’m coming,’ he shouts. He stuffs the gun inside the holdall with the coat, trainers, and rucksack. Not having time to do anything else, he shoves it where the rafters meet the floorboards, stuffing it under a layer of insulation. Heading back to the hatch, he coughs with all the dust and microfibres hitting the back of his throat. His heart is still thumping, but he has already planned for interruptions. He tucks the heater under his arm and descends the ladder. ‘There’s something wrong with the radiator in our bedroom.’

Here we go again. More lies.

‘It’s freezing in there.’ He reaches the bottom rung and sighs. ‘I’m going to have to call Pat again to come and have a look.’

His mum takes the heater from him. ‘What’s up with it? It was working fine last night when Dylan came to bed.’

‘I know, but I’m freezing.’

‘Are you coming down with something?’

‘Maybe.’ After sliding the steps back up inside the loft, he picks up the rod that has fallen onto the floor and closes the hatch. He takes the heater from her and goes to his bedroom. At the door, he turns and fakes a smile. She looks at him, then up at the loft and back at him. ‘I wasn’t born yesterday, Joey. I know you’re up to something.’

He nods at the door and lowers his voice. ‘I’m cold. Stop looking for things that aren’t there.’

She walks towards him. ‘I’m worried about you. You’re acting like you did after your dad died. Are you in some kind of trouble?’

He puts his forefinger to his lips. ‘You’ll wake Dylan and Megs. Stop stressing. Go back to bed.’

‘You looked agitated when you came in last night. I didn’t want to say anything in front of everyone. You were as white as a sheet.’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Is it Ade?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The fact that I’ve met someone.’

He shakes his head, creasing his eyebrows. 'No. No. I'm happy for you.'

'You sure? I'd understand if you were finding it difficult.'

'Honestly, I'm fine. Just go back to bed.'

'Where were you last night?'

He hesitates. If there's one person it's hard to hide his troubles from, it's her. She has a way of boring through him until she manages to dig out the information she wants. 'My friend Becca has got some problems. I was with her.'

'What problems?'

He sighs. 'Her mum had a bleed on the brain. She's in hospital having surgery.'

'A stroke?'

'Someone shot her.'

His mum's jaw drops open. 'For goodness' sake. Who?'

Joey shrugs. 'They don't know.'

'Is she conscious?'

'She's been in a coma, and she's still not talking.'

'Why didn't you say anything before?'

He shrugs again.

She tightens the belt of her dressing gown. 'Come on.' Her head tilts sideways, gesturing him towards the stairs. 'Let's put the kettle on.'

He would like nothing more than to vomit the sickening events of his week out to someone. His mum would know what to do. She always does. But he can't burden her with his troubles. It would only make her ill. Besides, he doesn't want to ruin the little bit of happiness she has found. 'You're OK, Mum. I'm going back to bed.' He finds a smile for her. Another fake one.

Joey spends the next hour in bed mindlessly scrolling through his phone. Even the hilarious TikTok videos that usually have him cracking up fail to evoke the smallest of smiles. Dylan is gently snoring below him. He googles *bleed on the brain* again as he did last night to see if he can find any more information. The bleeding kills brain cells. The survival rate is fifty per cent. The majority of survivors experience problems with speech and memory. Uncomfortable and inappropriate thoughts torment him.

What if Maggie never remembers what happened?

What if she dies?

He texts Becca.

*Any news about your mum? Jx*

She immediately replies.

*Surgery went well, apparently. Can you talk? Bx*

*Give me five. Jx*

He heads downstairs and fills the kettle, rubbing his stinging eyes while waiting for it to boil. The surgery went well. Does that mean Maggie will talk now? Will she spill the beans that he was the one who brought her the gun?

Is this the day it's all going to come out?

He pours a cup of coffee, feeling lightheaded. Rummaging around in the biscuit tin, he tuts. Halves of broken digestives are all that remain. He takes a couple and dunks them in his drink. Leaning against the side, he stares at last night's used cups submerged in a sink of dirty water. Just like him – drowning in the murkiness of life created by his own stupidity. He goes to

eat the biscuits but swears when he sees they have broken off into the cup. He picks up the bowl of Weetabix from earlier. It doesn't look at all appealing, but he wolfs it down like a starved animal. Grabbing another couple of biscuits, he takes his coffee to the lounge and calls Becca.

Her voice is a whisper. 'Hang on.' Joey hears her moving about and doors opening and closing. 'Sorry, I was in Dad's room. I've run out of toothpaste, so I went to get some. I'm back in my own now. I've hardly slept all night. There's something on my mind that I need to talk to someone about.'

'Sure.'

'I know this may sound ludicrous, and I haven't told anyone this, but Mum mentioned a while back she thought Dad and Jessica were having an affair. I brushed it off – told her she was being ridiculous. Dad would never do anything like that. I'm sure of it. But what if I'm wrong? Could he and Jessica have planned this so they could do away with Mum and be together? Could Jessica have lied to give him an alibi?'

Joey thinks about what Maggie told him. She was going to use the gun to murder her husband because she thought he was having an affair. Did Ronny put her up to this – supply his sister with a gun to kill her husband?

'Are you there, Joey?'

'Sorry, I was thinking about what you just told me. What about the man who thought he saw your dad that night?'

'The police questioned him again. He's one hundred per cent certain he saw someone wearing the same coat as the one he and Dad both own. But he can't say for sure it was definitely Dad wearing it. Similar height, but it could've been anyone. He didn't see his face as the hood was up, and he was wearing a mask. That's a bit weird, don't you think?'

'What do you mean?'

'A man walking in the street wearing a mask. It just seems odd. I get if it was in a shop, but in the street?'

'People are still wearing masks. We see it in the supermarket, don't we? Are they sure it was a mask? It could've been a snood or a scarf. It is blimmin' cold at the moment.'

'They say "he", but they can't even be sure it was a man. Police are still looking at CCTV and asking locals for any video footage. But nothing. I can't believe my dad would've done this, but things don't add up. And here's another confusing thing. The coat. The police have checked all over



the house, and Dad's office, but it's not there. Which leads them to believe that whoever shot my mum took Dad's coat. It doesn't add up. None of it makes sense.'

Joey goes back upstairs to get dressed. Dylan sits up in bed and stretches his arms above his head. He yawns loudly. 'Mum's worried about you.'

'What do you mean?' Joey asks.

'She's been asking me questions.'

'What about?'

'Where you've been going. You don't usually go out this much. And she's just told me about Becca's mum. Did you have something to do with that?'

Joey stares at him in horror. 'What're you trying to say?'

'You had a gun. You went to take it somewhere. And the same night, someone shot your girlfriend's mum.'

'She's not my girlfriend. And, if you're asking me if I shot Becca's mum, the answer is a big fat NO.' Joey tuts. 'Bloody hell, Dylan. What do you take me for?'

There's a minute or two of silence before Dylan says, 'By the way, I'm going to start taking the bus to school again.'

'Why?'

'I've got to someday, and now's as good a time as any.' He pauses before asking, 'What do you think of Ade?'

'He seems nice. Why?'

'Feels a bit weird. You know, Mum with a boyfriend.'

'She's got a right to be happy. And if he makes her happy, then I like him.'

'I guess so.'

Joey spends the morning stifling yawns as he robotically scans items through the till and packs shopping into bags. The store is rammed today. At lunchtime, he only takes a fifteen-minute break. Mr Parasi offers him a ham and tomato panini. One of several that got crushed when the box they were packed in fell on the floor. 'I can't sell these. Take two, if you want,'

Mr Parasi says. Joey doesn't refuse. He'll put one in the fridge and have it for his lunch tomorrow. While he is biting into the panini, he checks his phone. There are several missed calls from Ronny and a text from Becca asking him to call her.

She answers after a couple of rings. 'Mum's allowed a visitor. Not until late afternoon, though. She's waiting to go for a scan, and then the nurse said she'll call me. Dad's back at the police station.'

'Why?'

'The police have more questions for him. Sorry to be a pain, but will you take me to the hospital?'

'I can't leave work early. It's busy today. Anytime after four should be OK.'

'That's fine.'

'How is she?'

'Out of it, I think. I'm so worried.'

'Do you want me to tell Mr Parasi that you won't be in on Saturday?'

'I don't know. It might be a good distraction.'

'Hang on in there.'

After Joey's quick break, Mr Parasi directs him to restock the freezers. The job Joey hates the most. He'd much rather man the tills. Twenty minutes into stacking boxes of fish fingers and bags of oven fries, a familiar rancid smell wafts over him – the scent of stale bacon and tomatoes. He turns as a hand simultaneously lands on his shoulder with such force, Joey's knees buckle.

'Becca told me I'd find you here.' Ronny laughs. 'That's what happens when you ignore my calls. Not clever.'

Joey picks up another two bags of fries and chucks them in the freezer. How did he extract that information from Becca? He guesses Ronny could have casually asked where her friend worked.

'Do I look like the kind of man who likes being ignored?'

Joey's heart is thundering in his chest. He has never despised a person so much. How does he get away from this man? He's worse than the bad dreams he has about his dad, which also refuse to leave him alone. The ham and tomato panini he ate at lunchtime repeats on him. He can taste the sour tang of rotten tomatoes, just like the smell on this maniac's breath.

'I have some more jobs for you, Joey.'

'Just leave me alone.'

‘You don’t seem to understand.’

‘Understand what?’

‘You work for me now.’

‘The only person I work for is Mr Parasi who owns this shop.’

Ronny casts his arm around the aisle. ‘But this is not a proper job. Becca tells me the pay is a pittance. You’re cut out for more.’

‘At least it’s legal.’

‘Come on, Joey. You know as well as I do that the likes of you and I can only earn a decent income by pushing certain barriers.’

‘I don’t want anything more to do with you.’

He cackles. ‘Is that so?’

Joey feels increasingly uncomfortable. The cold from the freezer is doing nothing to cool the heat rising through his body and spreading up his face. He looks around, deliberating which way to scarper.

‘No you don’t.’ Ronny lays his hand on Joey’s shoulder again, but this time squeezes it so hard, Joey cries out in pain. With the other hand, Ronny presents his phone to his face. ‘You wouldn’t want to end up like this?’

Joey stares at the image. It’s of a man, his face bashed to a pulp. ‘What the hell!’

‘He’s lucky to be alive.’

‘You did this to him?’ Joey can’t believe the image before him.

‘Me?’ Ronny laughs. ‘Do I look like the kind of person to get involved in such games?’ He shakes his head. ‘No, I have far nastier people to take care of such matters. But I do take some enjoyment myself on special occasions.’

Joey balls his fists.

‘I have another certain person to show you.’ Ronny removes his hand from Joey’s shoulder and flicks to another photo on his phone. ‘Here you go. What do you think?’

Joey closes his eyes; he doesn’t want to look, but his curiosity won’t allow them to stay closed. He opens them, blinking to bring the image into focus, before covering the display of oven fries and packets of frozen peas with the contents of his stomach.

Ronny continues his threats. His eyes bore into Joey. 'You go to the police. You know what'll happen.' He pushes the screen of his phone towards Joey's face, showing a picture of Ronny and Dylan. 'And if I catch wind of you repeating this conversation to another person, your brother will be screaming for his mummy.' Ronny looks at the freezer where Joey has been sick. 'That stinks,' he says, screwing up his face. 'Believe me, Joey Clarke. I'm not a man to be messed with.' Ronny gestures inside the freezer. 'Good luck clearing that lot up.' He slaps Joey's shoulder. 'Keep an eye on your phone. I have three deliveries for you tonight. Pick up will be from my garage. You know where to go. I'll ping you a time.' He departs with one last slap on Joey's shoulder, laughing. 'And make sure you brush your teeth.'

Joey watches him walk away. Murderous thoughts rage through him. He braces himself against the freezer, trying to regain his composure. Only twice before has he felt such hatred that he thought he could kill. Once when he saw the picture in the newspaper of the drunk driver who killed his dad. The second time was when he came face to face with that group of scumbags he hung out with shortly after his dad's death, the ones who tried to frame him for the crime they had committed. That was a different kind of anger. It was mixed with hurt. He had thought they were his friends. But this is on a different level.

Ronny has threatened his family.  
And no one does that.

Joey is the type of person who can be manipulated. He knows that. He'd rather a peaceful life than any sort of confrontation. He can be pushed a long way. He's a soft touch.

But when it comes to his family... now that's a different matter.

Mr Parasi appears and escorts him to the staff room. 'I'm so sorry. I'll clear it up,' Joey says, panicking even more, acutely aware he's become a liability this week.

'You'll do nothing of the sort. Go home. Your shift finishes in half an hour anyway.'

He can't afford to leave early. He's already a few hours down this month, and he needs the money to keep the enforcement agents from his door. Not to mention all the other bills rolling in like wrecking balls, demolishing his life. And he still needs to buy Dylan that new phone, especially now he wants to get himself to school. On second thoughts, after Ronny's threats today, Joey needs to continue taking Dylan to school.

'Did that man say something to upset you?'

'What man?'

'I saw a man talking to you. He showed you something on his phone before you were sick. You appeared to know him.'

'Just a customer. He was showing me a joke.' Joey pours a glass of water and gulps it down, followed by a second. 'I feel better now. I'll be fine.'

'Some joke.' Mr Parasi eyes him suspiciously.

'I'll clear that mess up.'

'You need to get home. You're looking pale. And, if you've got a bug, I don't want it passed around the rest of the staff. Do you want me to drive you?'

'I'm fine, honestly.'

Becca calls as he gets into his car to drive home. 'Mum's had her scan. She's conscious. I can go and see her.'

'Is she talking?' Joey asks, thinking he might be sick again.

'I don't know. I thought you'd still be at work. I just left you a message to say I'm going to get an Uber to the hospital.'

He looks at the time. 'I'll take you. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'Thanks. I'd like that.'

Joey finds his mum with Megan singing and dancing to a Justin Bieber song that Megan is playing on her phone. She is trying to choreograph a dance sequence, and they are laughing hysterically because their mum keeps getting the moves wrong. 'No, Mum, the body roll comes after the hip move, not before. Watch me.' He can't remember the last time he saw their mum as happy as she has been this week. Seeing Joey, she stops. 'You carry on,' she says to Megan, breathless. She wipes the thin film of sweat glistening on her forehead.

Megan protests. 'You can't stop now. We've nearly got it.'

'Go and do your homework, and we'll carry on later. I want to talk to your brother.'

Joey clenches his jaw. Why do women always want to talk? The girlfriend he'd had a serious relationship with had been a talker. When they split up, she'd complained he'd never opened up to her. He didn't bother telling her he never felt he could. Not with her, anyway. It's only as his friendship with Becca has deepened over the past few months, and he has begun to talk about his dad to her, that he's realised this talking lark can be a two-way, therapeutic thing. With the right person. 'I'm not stopping. I just came home to grab a few things, and I'm off out.' He heads for the stairs to clean his teeth, ignoring her request to tell her where he's going.

His phone beeps with a message as he pushes a squirt of toothpaste onto the brush. It's from Ronny.

*pick up at garage at 8 don't be late*

He stares at himself in the mirror as the electric toothbrush cleans his teeth. Grey patches darken the skin beneath his eyes. Spots have appeared on his forehead, dotted above his eyebrows, and he needs a shave. His face seems hollow, as if someone has taken a chisel to his cheekbones and not made a great job of it. He debates calling Becca and telling her to book that Uber. But if her mum does say anything to her, he wants to be the person to explain everything before she goes to the police. Because she will have to. He knows that. He must prepare himself for the worst.

When he leaves the bathroom, his mum is standing at her bedroom door, beckoning him to join her. 'What do you want?' he asks, following her into the room. She perches on the end of her bed, holding her phone. 'This email

came today. I didn't want to worry you, but I have to show you. I can't believe it.'

He takes the phone from her and quickly scans the paragraph that explains that the tariff they were on is coming to an end. He stops reading. He already knows what this means. Their monthly energy direct debit will soon be twice the amount it was a year ago.

'What're we going to do?' she says.

He finds a smile to release the strain in her eyes. 'It's fine. I knew this was coming. I've done some extra hours this month, and I'm going to get a part-time job. Don't worry yourself, Mum. I've got it covered.'

He's been meaning to apply for a part-time job since Christmas, but he needs to update his CV first, and write a cover letter. He's never had to write one before. His dad got him the job with Mr Parasi. From the age of fifteen, he worked a couple of hours after school on a Friday, cleaning or stacking shelves. Then, when he turned sixteen, Mr Parasi taught him to work the till, and when he dropped out of school, Mr Parasi took pity on him and took him on full-time. He last updated his CV in January two years ago, in 2020, when he decided a new decade would see a new him, and he uncharacteristically made some new year's resolutions. He was going to quit smoking and get himself back to college. The first, he achieved for a while. A cigarette never touched his lips for three months and three days. But the UK found itself in lockdown and Mr Parasi had him working all hours as people swarmed the supermarket to empty the shelves. Joey and the rest of the team couldn't stack them fast enough, especially the toilet rolls, pasta, and rice. One of the weekend staff – a forty-something woman who worked every Sunday to pay for her eyelash extensions and gel nails – offered him a smoke when their shift was over for the day, and Joey's resolve disappeared along with his hopes to get himself back into education.

'You're such a good boy, Joey. I'm so proud you're my son.'

*Please, Mum. Stop. You don't know how wrong you are.*

'I need to talk to you about something else.' She pats the spot beside her.

Joey grimaces. Please don't say she has been up in the loft.

'I know what's happened to Becca's mum has affected you. How about you talk to Ade? He hasn't got kids of his own, but he's got three teenage nephews, and he volunteers at his local youth club. He's used to talking to kids all the time. And in his job, he's exposed to all sorts of situations.'

Joey can't believe what he is hearing. 'I'm not a kid, Mum.'

'I know. I know. But he might be an impartial ear to listen to you. Guide you.'

'Leave it, will you? My friend's going through a difficult time. I'm trying to support her the best I can. No big deal.'

'But we can help you.'

'I said leave it.' His tone is blunt. 'I don't want to talk to Ade because there's nothing to talk about.'

'He could help you.'

You are frickin' kidding! he wants to shout at her. Instead, he says, 'Please, Mum. My business is my business. Don't go talking to him about me. I mean it.'

Why can't everyone just leave him alone?

On the drive to the hospital, Becca updates him as she stares at the wipers scraping away the rain. 'They're allowing one visitor per patient.'

'How come?'

'Policy changes on the ward. One hour per day. I spoke to Dad, and we decided I was the best person at the moment.' She sighs heavily. 'I'm scared.' Joey looks across at her. Their eyes meet – a union of sadness and fear.

He agrees to wait to take her back to the hotel when her hour with her mum is up. This will allow him to be at Ronny's garage on time. He considers finding some coffee but can't be bothered, so he spends the time flicking through TikTok, trying to find something to make him laugh. After five minutes, he gives up and turns on the car radio instead. The news witters away in the background as he plans his response if her mum can now talk and tells Becca he was the one who brought her the gun that she shot herself with. He feels like a pressure cooker with the gas level jammed on max. It's only a matter of time.

An hour or so later, she appears from around the corner of the building, texting on her phone. When she sees Joey, she shakes her head. He looks away, bracing himself for what's to come. He reaches over and opens the door. 'What did she say?' he asks.



Becca's tears flow freely. Fear remains the overriding emotion for Joey. A soul track is playing on the radio. He switches it off and sits on his shaking hands. Her words emanate in mumbles and stammers. 'Nothing.' She shakes her head. 'Not nothing, exactly. But it's an effort for her to open her mouth. And when she does, what comes out doesn't make sense.' She wipes tears from her face. 'Then when I tried asking her questions, she just stared at me as if she was looking right through me.'

'Oh, Bex. I'm sorry.' He's not. Not fully. He feels for her. Of course he does. He loves her. He knows that. He's known it for a long time. But however cruel it makes him feel, his remorse has an opposing side of relief. It's a double-edged sword.

She lifts her head. 'The nurse said it's early days. Miracles can happen. She said she's seen people recover. But I know her chances aren't high.' She wipes her nose on the sleeve of her ski jacket, snuffling. 'Dad called. He's finished at the police station.'

'That's good news.'

'For now. He's going to the office to meet Jessica. She needs help with some business stuff. He said it'll take his mind off the situation. Apparently, we might be able to go back to the house at the weekend.'

'Have forensics finished, then?'

She shrugs. 'The FLO didn't say. All she said was the police were wrapping up, and we'll be able to go home very soon.' She drops her head to her chest. 'I don't know if I want to go back there. It's all going to remind me of the night I found her and all the mess. The blood.'

Joey squeezes her hand. He empathises. All that blood. ‘You won’t see any of that. They would’ve arranged cleaners. Professionals who do this all the time.’

‘I know. The FLO told me. But still. You know what scares me the most?’

‘What?’

‘What if Dad and Jessica are having an affair, and she did lie to give him an alibi? I hate thinking this way about him. I really do. And I know I keep repeating myself, but it doesn’t make sense.’

Joey feels the unwieldy bag of guilt he has carried around since the shooting getting heavier by the hour. He could free them all from their anguish right now. Go to the police and own up to the lies he has told. ‘Do you really think that?’

‘I don’t know what to think any more. You should be able to trust your parents above everyone else, shouldn’t you? And I feel ashamed for thinking this way, but I can’t help it.’ She playfully hits his shoulder. ‘At least I have you.’

How can she be so wrong?

‘Come in for a while,’ she says when Joey stops opposite the hotel. ‘Have a drink with me.’

‘I can’t. I’ve somewhere I need to be.’

‘Where?’ she says with a hint of, “What is more important than me?” in her voice.

‘I told a friend I’d help them with something,’ Joey says remorsefully. The regret he is having to lie more and more to the important people in his life deepens.

‘Just a quick one? Until Dad gets back from meeting Jessica. He said he won’t be long.’ She looks at him with those eyes. The ones that usually speak calmly but now shout with desperation.

It’s not yet seven o’clock. He still has an hour until he needs to meet Ronny. ‘OK. A quick coffee,’ he says, although he is tempted to ask for something stronger to calm his nerves.

Hotel guests and local drinkers pack the hotel bar. Joey recognises a guy from the Coach and Horses, but in no mood to talk to him, he avoids eye contact. Becca peers around for a seat. ‘Ah, they’re here. I thought they were meeting at the office,’ she says, pointing to a table at the far side of the bar. Joey looks over to see Alan with a woman he guesses must be Jessica.

They are sitting side by side on a leather sofa, concentrating on a laptop with files strewn across the table. He winces. These are not people he wants to spend five seconds with, let alone the half an hour he thought he would be sharing with Becca alone. How can Alan be sitting there with Jessica when his wife is on her death bed?

Becca leads Joey over to them. 'I thought you were meeting at the office,' she says.

They look up in unison. Alan nods hello to Joey and tells him to take a seat in one of the leather chairs on the opposite side of the table. Alan is a handsome man, Joey thinks, lean and toned with a copious head of hair for a man in his fifties. It's chin-length and greasier than Joey remembers, but that was before the poor man was suspected of trying to murder his wife.

Becca bends over to give her dad a peck on the cheek. 'I got your text,' he says to Becca. 'Perhaps they'll let me see her soon.' He looks genuinely upset. Not a man who is meant to be having an affair with the woman with the jaw-length Cleopatra bob sitting beside him. Her hair shines in the brightness of the opulent floor lamps positioned on either side of the sofa. She is different from how Joey imagined. Dressed in leggings and a floaty top, she appears much younger than Becca's mum and dad, and she is wearing a wedding ring. Not something he would typically notice, but, curious, it was the first thing he looked for. Is it possible these two are having an affair? He'd say no. She looks half Alan's age. But who knows? His mum's best friend's husband was having an affair with a colleague twenty years his senior. The most unlikely match, his mum said. But for five years, no one had a clue.

Alan introduces Joey to Jessica. She nods at Joey and smiles, gathering the files. Alan tells Becca to go to the bar and order another round of drinks. 'Not for me,' Jessica says, picking up her glass and finishing the last of what looks like fizzy water.

'How are you, Joey?' Alan asks.

'How are you, more like?' Joey replies, feeling more and more weight added to his bag of guilt. It's getting impossible to carry.

'I've had better weeks, as you can imagine.' He looks half the man Joey remembers. Deflated – as if the events of the past few days have sucked the life out of him. He takes a sip from his pint of Guinness.

'I need to get home to my kids,' Jessica says, her voice clipped. She picks up a nylon case from the sofa and slips her laptop inside. 'I'll deal

with this lot later when they're in bed and touch base with you tomorrow. Good luck.' She touches Alan's arm. Her voice softens. 'Call me if you need anything.'

'Will do,' Alan says. 'Thanks for everything.'

'No problem. Anytime. I'll say goodbye to Becca on my way out.' She turns to Joey. 'Nice to meet you.'

Awkward is an understatement for how Joey feels. He doesn't know what he's going to talk to Alan about, but he is saved by Becca returning to the table and taking Jessica's place. 'They're going to bring the drinks over.' Joey doesn't want to wait. He wants out of there. 'Joey knows everything, Dad,' she says, oblivious to how true her words are.

Joey can't stomach spending another moment with the man whose freedom he holds in his tied hands. 'You two have stuff to talk about.' He stands up. 'I'll catch you later.'

Becca reaches out and grabs his hand. 'You don't need to go.' She turns to Alan. 'Does he, Dad?'

Alan agrees with his daughter. A phone rings. It's Becca's. She picks it up off the table and stares at the screen. 'It's the FLO,' she says, frowning. 'I wonder what she wants. I only spoke to her when I was leaving the hospital.' She takes Joey's hand and tugs at it for him to sit back down, as a waiter arrives with their drinks.

Joey reaches for a spoon and scoops spoonfuls of sugar into his coffee, desperately needing energy. Alan's heavy eyes alternate between Becca and his pint of Guinness, his forehead wrinkled in concern. Joey stirs his drink, watching Becca's knitted brow frown its way through the call with the FLO. 'That sounded ominous,' she says when she ends the call, sitting up straight.

Alan and Joey look at her questioningly.

'The FLO has some important news for us. She's coming here now.'

‘What news?’ Alan asks.

‘She wouldn’t say over the phone. It’s best she delivers it in person, she said. What could it be?’

Joey’s stomach turns. What now? Has he been spotted getting into his car the night Maggie shot herself? ‘Do you think they’ve caught someone?’

‘CCTV could’ve come up with something,’ says Alan. ‘Or perhaps that Amazon delivery man. Or the neighbour’s video doorbell, although I wasn’t holding out much hope for that.’ His hand grips his glass. The whiteness of his knuckles percolates through the redness of his skin. ‘I said, didn’t I? I knew they’d catch whoever did this to her in the end.’

‘She’s coming straight here. She said she won’t be long.’

Joey downs his coffee. It burns his mouth and stings his throat. He can’t be around when the FLO arrives. ‘I’m sorry, but I need to shoot. Call me later.’

The heavy smell of oil fuels Joey’s aggression when he enters Ronny’s garage. Burning hot anger surges through him. A rage so strong, it destroys his rational thinking. He’s never been the aggressive type. Never. His mum has often told him he needs to toughen up. He is too soft. But he wishes he had brought the gun with him. God forgive him, but he would use it now; hold it against Ronny’s head and pull the trigger. He would not aim to kill, though. No, he would make his death slow and painful. Make him suffer. He can’t believe he is having these thoughts. This is not him.

But when push comes to shove, no one threatens Joey's family.  
No one.

A mechanic is still at work under the lambency of overhead lighting, lost underneath a battered BMW hoisted on a lift. A radio beats out the heavy rock music Joey detests. He prefers "mushier" music. He can't help it. It's the way he is. He slips by the mechanic, keeping his eyes on the concrete floor, and makes for the office at the end of the workshop. Ronny is sitting behind his desk, looking no different from when Joey saw him there the other day. Joey is incredulous that he is acting so normally after what he has done to his sister.

'Joey. Glad to see you're on time. I hope you're feeling better now.' Pointing a pen in Joey's direction, he smirks. 'And I hope you've brushed those teeth.' Sardonic amusement glistens in his dark eyes.

Joey can't speak. He has lost complete faith in himself to say the right thing.

Ronny opens a drawer of his desk and produces three white Jiffy bags. The same as Mr Parasi sells in the small stationery section of the supermarket. A fluorescent sticker is attached to each one, detailing a name and address. Ronny arranges the bags in a pile. Pushing them across the desk, he says, 'Deliver them in order. They're all within a mile of each other, so you'll be done in under an hour. Collect the cash. Don't bother counting it. These are regulars. They wouldn't want to find themselves on the wrong side of me.' He chuckles. 'It would ruin their weekend fun.' He then slides a mobile phone across the table. 'Start using this for all future work with me. I've sent a text with its number.' Removing some twenty-pound notes from the same drawer, he tosses them across the desk. 'There you go. This should come in handy for your family troubles. I know how much you struggle.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Most people with a family to look after are struggling at the moment. Text me when you've dropped off the third one.'

Joey sucks in air through his teeth. How dare this man treat him like a grubby doormat he thinks he can walk all over? Clenching his jaw, Joey grabs the cash and envelopes. 'Same time here tomorrow. Bring the cash you've collected tonight. Don't be late.' Joey turns to walk out when Ronny's chilling words freeze him to the spot. Ronny's hand forms the shape of a gun, his ring and little fingers clasped under his thumb, and his

fore and middle fingers pointing in Joey's direction. 'You wouldn't want to let me down, would you? Be such a shame to see your brother hurt.' He jolts his fore and middle fingers into the air as if firing a gun. 'He's too cute, your little brother.'

Joey storms off back to his car. Why isn't that lunatic more worried about his own sister? He is deranged. As if he has no feelings for her. He feels the Jiffy bags stuffed in the pocket of his hoody. He knows what's in them; the powdery substance can be felt through the bubble wrap. He starts the engine, trying to control the inferno of rage scorching his blood. He is now officially the owner of a burner phone. How did his life come to this?

He knows he shouldn't drive with these feelings of rage, but he must get away from this monster who has transformed him from a law-abiding individual to a lowlife drug dealer. He slams his hand on the gear stick and finds reverse. The car screeches backwards. He finds first gear and roars off.

A few minutes later, he parks in a side street to study the addresses. He plugs the first into Google Maps and waits for the monotone voice to deliver the directions. After a fifteen-minute drive, he arrives at a pub on the outskirts of town. He finds a spot in the car park, places the Jiffy bag down the front of his coat and hurries inside, feeling uneasy. This is not how his life was meant to turn out.

It's a typical British boozer with a swirly patterned carpet and a bank of handpumps offering a selection of the finest ales according to the metal sign hanging above. The smell of pub grub permeates the air, and it's bustling with evening drinkers and punters from the lunchtime rush who haven't yet managed to toddle off home. Joey heads to the end of the bar and waits. Shuffling from leg to leg, he glances at the customers lining the bar, wondering if the person he is there to meet is waiting amongst them. A sad-looking chap with a red nose props up the bar beside him. Along from him, two thirty-something women are sharing a bottle of Shiraz, and beside them, a few guys are nursing pints of beer. A loved-up couple with flushed cheeks, who really should get a room, take up the other end of the bar, the seat beside them vacant. No one catches Joey's roaming eye.

Not wanting to waste money buying a drink, he avoids the barmaid. He isn't thirsty anyway. However, he wouldn't say no to a shot of whisky if anyone was offering. Anything to calm him. Instead, he stares at the old black and white photographs that crowd the wall beside him. Pictures of

horses and carts delivering barrels of beer and women in long dresses and bonnets. He spots a policeman wearing a helmet and holding a truncheon, and he quickly turns away.

Inside his coat, the Jiffy bag burns as if it's on fire. He wants to make this quick. Where is this guy? 'Stay away from trouble, Joey,' his mum told him all those years ago, when he went off the rails shortly after they lost his dad, and he nearly ended up with his fingerprints on the national database. 'I can't afford to lose you too.'

A tap on the shoulder startles him. He turns to see a bulky man in his forties, casually dressed in jeans and a checked shirt. 'I think you'll find who you're looking for over there,' the man says, his voice as rough as a dog's. He nods towards the middle of the pub. 'It's a fortieth birthday party. Come with me.'

Joey follows him to a table full of rowdy blokes who have been there since lunchtime judging by the cacophony of slurring banter flitting between them. The table is littered with empty pint glasses and discarded crisp packets. More laughter and obscenities racket between them as someone returns from the bar carrying a tray of tequila shots and a dish of quartered limes. One of the men rocks back on two legs of his chair and turns to Joey. 'You Joey?' Joey nods. 'Go to the toilet and I'll meet you,' the man says with a slur.

Joey finds the gents and pretends to use the urinal, retching at how badly it smells of piss. When the man barges in, Joey reaches into his coat and surrenders the bag.

Nodding at Joey, he snatches the package and belches loudly. He hands Joey a fat roll of notes. 'What're you waiting for? You can get lost now.' He dismisses Joey with a shake of his hand.

The following stop is a large house. Joey swallows hard. Modern and double-fronted, it reminds him of Becca's. A memory he has no desire to revisit. It's too atrocious. Joey gets out of the car and knocks on the door. A woman around the same age as his mum opens it. She is dressed up like his mum was when Ade came around the other night. She's done this before. Many times, by the look of her sallow skin and bulging eyes. She hands Joey a small envelope, which Joey takes in exchange for her allocated Jiffy bag. The look of glee widening her eyes tells Joey she can't wait to get her hands on her weekend treat. With a schoolgirl grin, she opens the bag before Joey has even walked away. 'You're new,' she says. 'What happened



to our usual guy?’ Joey shrugs and bids her goodbye. The less involvement he has with these people, the better.

He drives into town to the third address. A flat in an old, converted house where Joey waits for five minutes for someone to appear at the door. Ruler-thin, the woman is younger than the first two users. Joey wonders if she is that much older than himself. She is wearing a denim miniskirt and a black roll neck jumper. A long string of beads dangles from her neck. She looks Joey up and down. Her red lips form a large smile as she takes her goods and slips him some cash. ‘You look fun.’ She giggles, raising and lowering her eyebrows. ‘Want to join our party?’

Not wishing to offend, he tells her, ‘Maybe another time.’

The woman winks at him. ‘If you change your mind, you know where to find me,’ she says with another wink before closing the door.

Joey finds a laugh for the craziness of the world he has found himself in. He can’t help it. He has been around friends doing drugs at parties, but he has only taken them once. At an obscure dinner party during his days with his ex and her friends from sixth form. Just before she left for university, and they split up. Halfway through the evening, when dinner was over, she shocked him when she produced a bag of white powder. He had never thought her the type. She cleared a space in front of her, rolled back the tablecloth and started cutting the powder into lines on the glass table with an iTunes gift card. He didn’t enjoy the experience. Instead of joining her and her friends, twirling around the lounge in a dancing frenzy for the following few hours, hugging at regular intervals and promising to love each other forever, he sat on the sofa trying to stop the insane paranoia that one of them wanted to murder him.

Before setting off for home, thirsty to know what the police had to say to Becca and her dad, Joey checks his phone. His actual phone, not the cheap piece of trash Ronny presented to him earlier. There are no messages.

He drives haphazardly, on the brink of tears. He can’t go on like this. He needs an escape route from the trouble he has found himself unwillingly trapped in. And he needs it quickly. But for every avenue he explores in his mind, as he weaves and swerves through traffic, he only encounters a truckful of trouble.

Arriving home, he pops his head around the lounge door as he usually does and bids everyone hello. Act normal, Joey. Act normal. 'I saved you some food,' his mum calls from the sofa where she is watching a movie with Dylan and Megan.

'Later.' He rushes upstairs to hide the cash he has collected tonight. He needs an hour in the shower, he feels that dirty. And an hour he would take if it wasn't for the constant threat of rising energy bills hounding his thoughts. Or perhaps he can, now he has an extra income. He can't deny the thought has entered his mind. He earned far more tonight than he gets for a ten-hour shift with Mr Parasi. And it's cash, so the taxman can't even take a share. He tots up how much he could make in a week if Ronny needed his services every night, and he has to admit that the sum is appealing.

But he's not that kind of person. He'd never be able to live with himself, would he? He knows the answer before he has finished asking himself the question.

He feels like he is sinking.

His life is out of control.

In his bedroom, he fans the wad of dirty money. There must be at least a grand there. He shoves it into a plastic shopping bag and tucks it under his pillow. Tomorrow, he will find a more suitable hiding place. He slots the twenties Ronny gave him earlier into his wallet, which he squeezes in his hand. It hasn't felt this full for a long time, he must admit. Even before lockdown, when cash was more widely used. There's something very comforting about the feeling.

Stripping down to his boxers, he heads to take a shower only to meet Megan making a beeline for the bathroom too. 'No,' Joey shouts. 'It's my turn.' He tries to dart in before her, stubbing his toe on the banister.

'Snoozers will be losers,' Megan squeals as she skips into the bathroom. She pops her head around the door. 'That's what you always say to me.' She laughs and sticks her tongue out at him before slamming the door shut.

He could throttle her! He hears his phone ring. He rushes back to his bedroom. It's Becca. 'How did it go?' he says as he answers the call.

She's crying. 'I can't believe it. No one tried to kill my mum. She tried to kill herself.'

Joey has known these are the words he would hear at some point. He just thought it would take a little longer for the police to deliver them.

‘Forensics prove she shot herself.’

‘That’s dreadful news,’ Joey says. Oh, the lies, the lies. They are pouring out of him like the tears pouring out of her.

‘Someone was definitely with her. The person who took the gun. But there’re still so many unanswered questions.’ She pauses. A silence Joey can’t fill. He’s petrified he’ll say the wrong thing. ‘Are you free? Will you come over? Dad has gone to bed. I could do with the company.’

‘Sure,’ he says, without thinking.

‘Joey?’ she says.

‘What?’

‘You’re such a good friend. I love you.’

These are words he has only ever dreamed of hearing. But in the right circumstances. Now they sound all wrong. As if his ears are punishing him for the crimes he has committed. You don’t deserve these words, Joey. You are a lying, deceitful crook. ‘I can be with you in half an hour.’

Dylan is lying on his bed when Joey returns from the shower. ‘Where’ve you been tonight?’ he asks. ‘Mum keeps asking me.’

Holding the edges of the towel, Joey flings it over his shoulders and dries his back. ‘With Becca. She’s pretty cut up about her mum.’

‘What’s the latest?’

‘No one tried to kill her. She tried to kill herself.’  
Dylan’s eyes bulge. ‘Why?’  
Joey shrugs. ‘Who knows?’  
‘There must be a reason.’  
‘Of course there is. They just don’t know what that reason is.’  
‘How do they know?’  
‘What’s with all the questions?’ Joey says, rubbing the towel over his legs.  
‘I want to know.’  
‘The police can prove it.’  
‘How?’  
‘Forensics. The angle of the gun; the splatter of blood, I suppose.’  
‘Is she going to die?’  
‘They don’t know. Are you satisfied now?’  
‘What’s that supposed to mean?’  
‘You asked me if I’d pulled that gun on her.’  
‘I didn’t mean it. You know that.’  
‘You still said it.’  
‘I bet Ade would be interested in all this.’  
Joey stops mid-hop into a pair of boxers. ‘Don’t you dare bring this up. I mean that.’  
‘Why?’  
‘Because I said. Promise me.’  
‘Promise.’  
‘Now get into bed. I’m going back to see Becca.’  
Dylan eyes him suspiciously.

Joey meets Becca where he left her earlier, on the same leather sofa in the hotel bar. She is bent over, scrolling through her phone. She lifts her head as he approaches, as if she can feel the tread of his footsteps. When their eyes meet, her face crumples. He settles into the space beside her and offers up his open arms. She lays her head on his chest, and he holds her until she is ready to talk.

The bar is not as busy as before, but it’s louder. Joey gazes at the crowd, chatting and laughing, indulging themselves in the freedom of their Thursday night like ordinary people: it’s almost Friday, let’s have a drink to

celebrate. When was the last time he went out and enjoyed himself like that? He can't even remember. A waiter appears, and Becca lifts her head. 'Do you want a drink?' she asks Joey. 'Order what you like. My dad started a tab earlier.'

Joey asks for a whisky on the rocks. He finds it a comfort drink. His dad used to drink whisky. He would always let Joey have a sip when his mum wasn't looking. His dad would put his forefinger to his lips and wink at him before telling him never to tell his mum. 'I'll have a vodka,' Becca says, sitting up straight. She looks at Joey. 'I think we could both do with a stiff drink.'

You can say that again.

'Have you eaten?' Becca asks him.

Joey shakes his head. He's not hungry but knows he should eat something.

She glances up at the waiter. 'Are you still serving food?' she asks. 'I had a club sandwich here last night. I'd love another one of those.'

'Not a problem,' the waiter replies.

'Make that two,' Joey says, realising for the first time in forever that he has money in his wallet to order food in a place like this. McDonald's or KFC are his go-tos on the odd occasion he can spare the cash. He has to say. It does feel good. Momentarily. If he doesn't remind himself how he came about the funds. And if he ignores the pang of guilt that the money is spoken for. Buying club sandwiches in a posh hotel won't pay off his debts.

The waiter nods and gathers the empty glasses, crunching them together in a cluster before putting them on his tray. He gives the surface a quick wipe and sets down two fresh disposable coasters. 'Be right with you.'

'How's your mum?' Joey asks.

'Same-ish. I spoke to the ward just before you arrived. She managed a couple of spoonfuls of soup this evening, but she's still spaced out. It's early days, they keep telling me. With this latest news, though, the FLO said they'll get her some psychiatric help. It may help her start talking. I'm going to see her tomorrow. I'll learn more then.'

'I guess they're still looking for someone?'

'They're still gathering evidence and making enquiries.' She shuffles in her seat and crosses her ankle over her opposite knee. 'Get this.' Her eyebrows dip as she relays what the forensics team found in one of the kitchen cupboards – crushed drugs in the pestle and mortar, pounded as fine

as powder. ‘Tests show they were anti-depressants. I’ve also found out the GP first prescribed them to her three years ago. Dad knew about them. But Mum didn’t want me knowing, so they never told me. She had picked up a new prescription the day before and crushed the contents of the whole bottle in that pestle and mortar. What doesn’t make sense though, is why she did that if she planned to shoot herself? Which leads them to believe someone turned up unexpectedly with a gun.’ She shrugs. ‘But the big question is, who?’

‘Do they have any idea?’

‘None at all. Dad can’t explain it. I haven’t got a clue, and neither has Uncle Ronny. My mum hasn’t got many friends, but those she does have don’t know either. Phone records and emails show nothing out of the ordinary.’

The waiter appears and sets two glasses down on the coasters. They pick up their drinks and clink glasses. Joey takes a sip, relishing the fiery warmth as the hot liquid trickles down his throat. He takes another sip.

‘The FLO said we can go back to the house tomorrow. The teams have completed everything they need to.’

‘That’s a good thing, isn’t it?’

‘I’m dreading it. It won’t be the same without Mum there.’

‘How’s your dad coping?’

Becca shrugs. ‘He’s not, really. The FLO asked to speak to me on my own after she told us all of this.’

‘Why?’

‘She asked me more questions about Mum and Dad’s marriage – how they get on, how much time they spend together. Stuff I’ve already told them.’

‘Do they still think your dad has something to do with this, then?’

She raises her shoulders and keeps them hunched to her ears. ‘I’m as confused as them.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘The truth. Everything I know. Why wouldn’t I?’

‘Of course.’

Their club sandwiches arrive. Joey removes the cocktail stick securing the layers of one of the triangles and bites into the sandwich, not realising how hungry he was, until now. It’s such a luxury to be eating food in a place like this. What would it be like to eat like this all the time? With the

freedom of not having to worry about how much it was going to cost or what he'd have to sacrifice to afford such an extravagance. Becca plucks out the cocktail sticks from all four of her triangles and removes the slices of egg. She assembles them back together and nibbles at the edges of one of the triangles. 'What about her brother? You said the other day that he and your dad had a massive falling out. That it was a story for another time. What happened?'

She rolls her eyes and lets out a puff of air. 'I'm not exactly sure, to be honest. He's a private kind of guy, my dad. Uncle Ronny started working for him shortly after Dad set up the business.' She places her uneaten sandwich on the plate and pushes it away. 'One day, Ronny was working for him. The next day, he wasn't.'

'Why?'

'I've never found out the real reason. Dad alluded to him doing something dodgy but has never told me exactly what. Ronny was so resentful. It caused a massive family rift. In Ronny's view, he was a business partner, but Dad had a different perspective. Dad was the one who put up all the capital to start the business before Ronny even came on the scene. He had Ronny on the payroll as an employee. And only for Mum's sake. They lost their parents when they were very young, and they grew up in care. Mum is so protective of him. Uncle Ronny can do nothing wrong in her eyes. Ronny believes if it wasn't for him, the company would never be what it is today. He signed Client Zero.'

'Client Zero?' Joey asks, laying his empty plate on the table, eyeing up Becca's leftovers.

Becca grins. 'It's the name they call their big client. Switchton Limited, they're a big player in the market.' She explains how once Switchton signed up, it supercharged others to follow. Many others. 'They'd been struggling until then, but it all took off once Switchton came on board. According to Uncle Ronny, he slogged for a year massaging the relationship until they signed on the dotted line. Then it all went tits-up for Uncle Ronny. Dad got rid of him, and his wife, my Auntie Erin, left him. They have a daughter – my cousin, Freya. Erin took her to live with her parents. To punish Uncle Ronny, we think. Freya used to go to a private school. When Ronny left the business, he couldn't afford to pay the fees any more. Erin had to get her parents to pay them. She is a bit of a snob. Not that I'd say that to Uncle Ronny. He'd take her back tomorrow. She didn't speak to him for ages after

she left him, and she wouldn't let him see Freya. I was sad about that. She's my only cousin, and we were close when we were kids. Last summer, Erin started letting him see her again. But only because Ronny agreed to start funding Freya's school fees. And he repaid Erin's parents for the fees they had coughed up for in the meantime. Erin told me that was the agreement.'

'His new business must be doing well.'

'It is. He was a mechanic before he worked with Dad. So he bought some premises to start his own business. He buys and sells cars too. Since Covid, the second-hand car market has boomed.'

And the cocaine market, Joey wants to say. 'He must've done something bad for your dad to get rid of him.'

'Ronny got lazy after he signed Client Zero. He thought he'd done his bit, and he wanted a bigger share of the pie, as I understand it. Then he found out that he wasn't actually a partner. He went ballistic. He said he'd trusted Dad.' She shrugs. 'There was more to it than that, but I don't know exactly what. Dad knows how much Mum loves Ronny, so he has always tried to keep the peace for her sake.' She takes a sip of vodka.

'No one else knows this?'

'I don't think anyone does. I heard Uncle Ronny and Dad arguing about it. They don't know I know. It was around the time Mum started to get ill, and Dad didn't want any more stress for her. So he gave Ronny the money to set up on his own and let people believe he had left voluntarily.'

The waiter passes and asks them if they would like another drink. 'Same again,' Becca says.

'Coffee for me, please,' Joey says. 'I'm driving.'

'Stay. I have a super king in my room.' Becca moves her hand across to Joey's knee. They both feel the electricity that bolts through them. He can tell from the shocked way she looks at him. 'I could do with the company.' She looks up at the waiter. 'Make that two.'

This isn't a good idea. Any other time, hearing these inviting words, he would be in heaven. He's thought about sharing her bed on countless occasions. But this is not the time. 'Bring me a black coffee too, please,' he says to the waiter.

'Anyway. Ronny blamed Dad. He said if he hadn't kicked him out of the company, Auntie Erin would still be with him.' Becca shrugs. 'Erin always was a bit of a money-grabber, though. She liked her luxuries. But Ronny can be a tricky character.'



You can say that again.

‘In what way?’

‘Dad says he’s the type of guy who has always had a chip on his shoulder the size of a bag of spuds.’ She laughs. ‘Ronny’s always had a soft spot for me, though, and Mum loves him, so I think it’s a case of put up and shut up. Mum tried to get Dad to persuade Ronny to stay in the company. Dad said he had, but Ronny had made his decision, and he wouldn’t change his mind. It all didn’t stack up. There was more to it than that, but Dad wouldn’t let on. Anyhow, Mum became withdrawn. Dad brought Jessica into the company so Mum could reduce her hours. This must have been around the same time she started on the anti-depressants.’

The waiter arrives with their next round of drinks. Becca clinks her glass against Joey’s, but, still unsure whether another whisky is a good idea, he picks up three sachets of sugar and empties them into his cup of coffee. His mind wanders as he contemplates telling her everything. It would make life so much easier for her, wouldn’t it? Her uncle arranged for a gun to be delivered to her mum, so her mum could murder her dad because he was having an affair with his colleague. It sounds like a scenario from those soap operas his mum loves watching.

Becca picks up his glass and puts it in his hand. ‘Stay,’ she says, her blue eyes like a warm sea he wants to dive into. He can’t resist her. Joey is about to take a sip of whisky when his phone beeps. He picks it up from the table. It’s Dylan.

*Where did you get all that cash stashed under your pillow from?*

Joey stares at the message.

‘What’s wrong?’ Becca asks. ‘It doesn’t look like good news.’

How’s he going to explain this? He slams the glass of whisky on the table. ‘I’m sorry, I can’t stay.’

Here we go again – another need to say sorry.

‘What’s happened?’

He stands up. ‘My mum’s not well.’

Another lie.

‘I need to get home.’

He finds his wallet, plucks out a twenty-pound note and hands it to her, cringing when he remembers who this came from – her uncle.

Becca pushes his offer away. ‘It’s on my dad’s tab.’

He drops the cash on the table and hesitates before leaning over and gently kissing her on the lips. The moment is heady; sheer bliss amongst the mayhem and chaos. It feels so right. But then the lies and deceit come flooding back, and wrongness takes over.

On his way to the car, he calls Dylan. ‘What the hell are you doing going through my stuff? I’ve told you before. It’s private. I don’t go looking through your things.’

‘You’re in trouble, aren’t you?’

‘I’ll explain when I get home. Don’t tell Mum.’

Dylan is lying in bed waiting for him. 'Where've you been?' He produces Ronny's wad of cash from beneath his duvet.

Joey rushes over and tries to grab the money, but Dylan is too quick. He whips it back under the covers. 'No way are you getting this until you tell me where you got it from.'

Joey raises his voice. 'Give it to me, now.'

'You'd better be quiet, or you'll have Mum in here. And what will she have to say about you having this much money hidden in a carrier bag?'

'I'm warning you.'

'About what, exactly?'

Joey perches on the side of the bed. Dylan is not going to budge. 'Hand it over.'

'What if you were me, and you'd found out I was messed up in some serious shit?'

'Enough of the language,' Joey says.

'Would you ignore it? The other night it was a gun. Tonight, it's an unexplained stash of cash.'

Dylan's words are so mature, they stun Joey. It's as if his brother has transformed overnight. He looks and sounds so grown up. The innocent little boy is now a force to be reckoned with. Or has he been this way a while, and Joey hasn't noticed?

'And don't take me for an idiot.' Dylan sits up in bed and leans forwards. He clasps Joey's forearm. 'What's happened? Remember what Mum always says. A problem shared is a problem halved.'

When their dad died, Joey promised his mum she didn't need to worry. He would always be around to look after them all. A solemn promise he has lived his life by. And one he refuses to break. Joey bites his lip, staring at the floor, trying to concoct a story to tell his brother. One that has the chance of a better ending.

'Start at the beginning,' Dylan says.

Joey laces his hands behind his head. 'I didn't want to tell you – it was meant to be a surprise – but I guess I have to now. I've been doing overtime and odd jobs to pay some debts and buy you a new phone and Mum a new pair of glasses. Satisfied?'

**FRIDAY**

Joey tiptoes out of the house and makes his way to work, leaving his family sleeping. It's an inset day for both Dylan and Megan, which gives him the chance to start early.

'This is a first,' Mr Parasi says sarcastically, but smiling his appreciation.

'You don't need to pay me. I'm just making up for the time I've missed this week.'

'Good stuff. You take the till for a few hours. I have paperwork reaching the ceiling to sort out.'

Joey swipes his security card down the side of the till and serves a man wanting to buy a packet of cigarettes. 'Make that two packets,' the man says, coughing. He has a bushy beard, just like Ronny's. Joey shivers. 'Save me coming out again today.'

Joey tries to concentrate on his work, but he can't. Thoughts of Dylan and Becca and what job Ronny has in store for him tonight are wrapped in the fear of Maggie regaining her memory. Then there are the enforcement agents now less than a week away. He's living on a wing and a prayer. He knows it.

During his lunch break, he cadges a cigarette from another worker, Val, who is having a smoke outside the back of the supermarket. 'I thought

you'd given up,' she says, standing. She flicks her cigarette on the floor and stubs it out with a twist of her foot.

'I've got a lot going on. I'll buy you a packet.'

'Probably about time you did,' she laughs as she walks back to work.

Joey likes Val. She has three sons and is always telling him she hopes they turn out just like him.

He wishes everyone would stop saying what a good person he is.

He checks his phone while he sits on the stone wall, puffing away. The smoke hits his lungs, making him giddy. It feels good – a few seconds of release from the grip of his worries. Two texts await him. The first one is an invoice from Pat the plumber. The second is from Becca reporting that they can return to their house. He finds her number and calls her.

'I'm here,' she says. 'It all feels so weird. Like none of this ever happened. Like Mum is going to come home any minute. I don't want to be here.' Joey winces. Her pain is his pain. 'You fancy coming over?'

'I can't until later. I finish at four. I could meet you then. Fancy going for a drink?'

'Could you come and get me? My car is playing up. I couldn't get it to start earlier. I'm not sure if it's because it hasn't been used all week. I need to get my uncle to look at it.'

'Sure.'

Joey kicks the wall. Why did he do that – offer to return to Regency Close?

A text arrives from Ronny on the burner phone. He digs it out of his pocket.

*change of plan. make it eight tonight. at my house*

He kicks the wall again. This can't go on.

When Joey approaches the road leading to Becca's house, he sees her jogging along the pavement, her cheeks flushed, and her blond hair tied in two bunches which protrude from beneath a woolly hat and bounce on her chest. He beeps his horn and pulls up beside her. Breathless, she jumps into the passenger seat. 'You're early.' He's not, but he doesn't correct her. Her flushed cheeks are tear stained. 'I had to get out of there, so I went for a run.' She leans across to peck him on the cheek.

‘That’s understandable.’ Joey shivers from the touch of her lips against his skin, acutely aware their relationship has shifted up a gear. ‘How’s your mum?’ The over-eagerness in his voice makes him wince, but he has to know.

‘The hospital has literally just called. She’s awake and asking for me. Do you mind dropping me there? We could go for a drink afterwards.’

He swallows the lump of fear growing in his throat. ‘Sure.’

‘I need a quick shower. I can’t go for half an hour, anyway. They’ve taken her for an X-ray. They’re worried about her chest now. They think she might have pneumonia. Is this it, do you think?’ Becca says, wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. ‘Is Mum finally going to tell us what happened?’

His hands are shaking so badly, Joey can hardly hold the steering wheel. ‘Let’s hope so.’ He doesn’t know what else to say. Is this it, indeed? His last day of freedom before they lock him up and throw away the key.

‘Thanks for driving me.’ Becca touches Joey’s forearm. ‘I don’t know what I’d have done without you this past week.’

Oh, the irony of her words.

Becca continues. ‘The FLO came around to be with us when we came back to the house.’

‘She’s really supportive, isn’t she?’ Joey says.

Becca nods. ‘She said they’ve managed to speak to a few more of Mum’s friends. But nothing. They all said they hadn’t heard from her for a few weeks, but then we have moved house. Even her closest friend, Mary, said she hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary. They spoke just before we moved. Mary came over to our old house, apparently, and helped Mum pack boxes. She said Mum appeared stressed, but she put that down to the move. Mary couldn’t help on removal day but offered to come around the day after. Mum agreed but turned her down on the day because she had a cough. She was concerned she might have Covid again and didn’t want to risk Mary getting it. Mary’s diabetic.’ Becca sighs heavily. ‘The only people who appear to have seen her in the past week are me, Dad, and Uncle Ronny. And, apart from that guy seeing someone in Dad’s coat, the neighbours saw nothing. They haven’t found anything on CCTV. No one has come forward with any information. Zilch.’ She shakes her head. ‘It seems the only hope we have is that Mum tells us what happened. And hopefully, tonight she’s going to do just that.’

When they arrive at her house, a car is parked in the driveway. Becca frowns. 'That's Jessica's car. What's she doing here?' She releases her seatbelt. 'Come in. I won't be long.'

'You're alright. I'll wait here,' Joey says.

'Come on. I can't leave you sitting out here. It's freezing.'

He hesitates. He has no desire to step inside her house but knows it will look odd if he stays outside. He doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know anything any more. Life has become one big blur of confusion with too many decisions to make. What is Jessica doing there? What if Becca catches her and her dad together? He can't leave her to face this alone.

'Come on,' Becca repeats.

He cautiously follows her into the house where this nightmare began less than a week ago. They enter the hallway still cluttered with unpacked boxes, each one labelled with a room destination. 'I'm home,' she shouts.

'In here,' her dad calls from a room leading off the hallway. Becca pulls Joey towards the kitchen, his stomach whirling at the memory of her mum doing the same. It's freaking him out. She stops at the door of one of the rooms and pushes it open. Her dad and Jessica are sitting at a desk in front of an iMac, holding mugs. The strong smell of coffee fills the air. 'Jessica popped over. We've got a work issue,' Alan says.

'Did you get my text about the hospital? She's asking for me.'

Alan nods.

'She's having some tests,' says Becca.

'I'll take you,' says Alan.

‘It’s OK. Joey’s going to drop me off. You could pick me up, though?’

‘Sure.’

Joey follows Becca into the kitchen. It reeks of disinfectant; or is that his imagination? Sit down, Joey. Sit down before you fall. ‘Drink?’ Becca asks.

He grabs the back of the bar stool. His head is spinning, continuously transporting him from the present to that night and back again. The blood has been cleaned up. So has the table set for two, the wine, the glasses and all clues as to what occurred that night. Everything is gone. If only he could erase it all from his memory so easily.

‘Did you hear me?’ Becca opens the fridge. ‘Do you want a drink?’ The way she turns her head is the same as Maggie did that night. They have the same small hands, their fingernails short and shiny. The similarity is uncanny. It could be Maggie standing there. There’s even a resemblance in their body language. He closes his eyes. Becca says, ‘Water?’ in the same tone as Maggie asked that night, “Whisky, wine? What’s your poison, Joey?”

‘Joey. What *is* wrong with you?’

Her words jolt him from his trance. ‘Sorry, what did you say?’

‘Do you want some water?’ She slides a bottle across the worktop, just as Maggie did the other night. The fancy bottle he took into work and disposed of in one of the large skip containers behind the supermarket, along with the napkin he used to wrap the gun in after Maggie shot herself. She opens another bottle for herself and gulps it down in one. ‘You hungry?’ She opens a cupboard and grabs a packet of biscuits. ‘Help yourself.’ She rolls the packet along the worktop towards him. ‘Make a hot drink if you like. I’ll be back in five mins.’

He opens the packet but stops. The sight of food heightens the nausea he’s been feeling since entering the house. He opens the bottle of water and takes a sip – just like he did the other night – and stares out of the patio doors. Trickles of rain stream down the glass panes. He glances around the kitchen. The boxes lining the wall are still waiting to be unpacked. The ones along the top have been opened. Were they like that the other day? He can’t remember. Parcels of bubble-wrapped items of varying sizes clutter the kitchen table. A pair of silver candlesticks and framed photographs have been unwrapped. No, they definitely weren’t like that the other day. Alan or Becca must have unpacked them. He walks over and studies them. One is of



Alan and Maggie on their wedding day. They look so young. He picks up another of Becca as a goofy kid, and he smiles. Then another of her at her prom looking stunning in an electric blue dress. The colour suits her. It matches her eyes. He realises he has never seen her in a dress or a skirt. Even at her parents' wedding anniversary party she invited him to last year at her old house, she had been wearing a white trouser suit.

He picks up a photo of a group of people at another celebration. He recognises Maggie and Alan. They have their arms around each other while jointly holding a knife and cutting into a large cake in the shape of the number ten. Even then, Becca looked so much like Maggie. He scans the photo and nearly misses him. But there he is, Ronny. He is barely recognisable. The beard is gone, and he looks spruced up in a suit and tie. A smart one with no food stains; he wears it well. Joey stares at him. He has his arm around a woman Joey recognises from the screensaver on the laptop in Ronny's kitchen. The woman blowing the kiss at the camera. It must be Erin. And the girl standing in front of her parents must be Freya, their daughter.

Mumblings from the study drift along the hallway. Joey walks out of the kitchen to hear Jessica and Alan talking. He creeps towards their voices, straining to listen to their conversation. He knows he shouldn't eavesdrop but can't help himself.

'He's acting weird,' Alan says.

Jessica answers. 'In what way?'

'I can't help thinking he's involved somehow.'

Joey's jaw drops. His fear mushrooms into panic. Alan has sussed him out. He edges sideways along the wall closer to the door.

'How?'

'I don't know. Gut feeling. Whenever there's trouble in this family, that man has a part to play.'

Joey starts breathing again. Alan must be talking about Ronny.

'Why did you get rid of him from the company? You've never told me.'

Alan sighs heavily. 'I wanted to protect Maggie. The fewer people who know, the better.'

'If you want to talk about it, I'm listening.' Joey detects a sympathetic note in Jessica's voice. A stark difference from her clipped tone yesterday.

'I've tried to like him over the years, for Maggie's sake. She idolises him. God knows why. Every time I've tried to do good by him, it has

backfired. I only gave him a job to keep her happy. She begged me to let him join the business. I knew it would end in tears. I should've listened to my gut.'

'So, what actually happened?'

Alan sighs again. 'Credit where credit's due, he won us the Switchton contract, which catapulted the business from a struggling start-up to what it is today. I would've got there in the end, just not so quickly. But then I'm not cunning like him.' He hesitates as if he has already said too much.

'You don't have to carry on,' Jessica says.

'I'm fine. He wined and dined the account manager. At first, I was astounded by all the entertainment expenses he submitted. The business couldn't afford it. Ronny told me to relax. He would come good in the end. And he did. I have to give him that, but how he went about it was not good. A year later, Switchton signed. Deal done. Other firms followed. I was impressed. I thought Ronny had finally turned himself around. It was time to celebrate. But it soon became evident, as Switchton signed on the dotted line, he took his foot off the gas. He started showing up late and not at all some days.'

'Why?' Jessica asks.

'In his mind, massaging the relationship with their account manager was his only priority.'

'So you got rid of him?'

'That wasn't the reason. He was a lazy sod; I could just about suffer that, but then I got a call from the CEO of Switchton asking me for an urgent meeting. I said I'd get Ronny to arrange it but was told no. It had to be just the two of us. The CEO wasn't happy, and he didn't hide the fact, either. I went up to his offices in London. And guess what he told me?'

Joey hears three taps on the desk. It sounds like a pen.

'Ronny blackmailed the account manager into getting the contract signed.'

'How did he do that?'

'Ronny took him out one night, got him blind drunk. I remember seeing the expense claim. It was over a grand. When I questioned him, he told me not to worry, it was a celebration of the contract being signed. The company would be going places now, he said. He was right. It all took off from there. I don't know how he did it. The CEO wouldn't say, but Ronny got a piece of information out of the account manager that night. He recorded him

admitting to whatever he did, then threatened to expose him, and the account manager ended up fudging some figures to get the contract signed. And that was just the start. The pair were screwing both our companies, and Maggie turned a blind eye.'

Joey digests this piece of information. So Ronny threatened this guy, just like he threatened him with images of a beaten-up bloke and Dylan. Who else has he done this to? They can't be the only ones.

'The weasel,' Jessica says.

'That's a polite word for him. I've got more suitable ones. The CEO was pleased with the work we'd been doing for Switchton, but we had to make a few changes if we wanted to keep the contract. Their account manager was gone, of course.'

'What happened to him?'

'The CEO never said, other than hinting that he took pity on him but told him he never wanted to see him again. They'd been friends for years.' There's a pause. 'Never mix business with family. Big mistake. We had to renegotiate the contract with them. The CEO stipulated, off the record, that Ronny was to have no more dealings with them. He also suggested I strongly consider his role in our company.'

'That's when you got rid of him?'

'I didn't need persuading after that. The new contract wasn't as profitable, but the fact we still had a relationship with Switchton meant we attracted a lot of other business, so we needed to keep it.'

'What did Maggie say to all of this?'

'As I've said, she knew he was up to something but ignored the extracurricular expense claims and dodgy invoices. It was partly why I had to encourage her to take a less active role in running things.'

'You didn't have it out with her?'

He sighs heavily before continuing. 'There's lots you don't know about Maggie. Lots no one knows. She and Ronny are very close. She worships the ground he walks on, and doesn't he know it. You see, they had a traumatic childhood. Their mother shot their father before turning the gun on herself.'

'Oh my God, that's dreadful. Why?'

'She found out her husband was having an affair with someone he worked with.'

Joey can't believe what he has just heard. History is repeating itself.

'It gets worse,' says Alan.

'How can it get worse than that?'

'Maggie was there. She witnessed it.'

'Oh my God. That's shocking. Poor Maggie. How old was she?'

'Seven. Ronny was four.'

'Did Ronny see it happen too?'

'It was late at night. Ronny was in bed asleep. Maggie had woken up because she heard her parents arguing. It's surprising how much she can remember about that night. She's only ever once talked about it to me. She described it in detail, right down to her mother's nightie embroidered with daisies and her father's blue tie.'

'I've read about this before. People who suffer trauma block it out but can recall the strangest details years later.'

'Maggie kept it hidden for a long time. I always knew she suffered mentally. She had the most terrible mood swings at times, but it wasn't until I arranged for her to see a therapist a few years ago that she started to open up to me. It was part of her recovery – to talk to her family. But she made me promise never to say a word to Becca. I tried to persuade her she should – that it would be for the best – but she refused. It was when it all kicked off with Ronny at work, and I didn't want to upset her any more, so I left it. And it's why I kept all the Switchton business from her. At the time, it seemed the right thing to do. Now I'm not so sure. She says it isn't Ronny's fault he's the way he is. I beg to differ.'

‘What happened to them after their parents died?’

‘They ended up in care.’

‘Did she not get any counselling as a kid?’

‘She did, but she refused to talk about the night it happened. She bottled it up and tried to get on with her life.’

‘I suppose you’ve got to feel a little sympathy for Ronny.’

‘I’ve tried over the years. Believe me, I’ve tried. It’s why I employed him in the first place, and despite everything he did to me – to the company – I still put up the money for him to start his own business. His wife, Erin, left him shortly after I kicked him out.’ He pauses. ‘Sorry, I should say, after he decided he wanted to leave and set up on his own. That’s what I allowed him to tell everyone, for Maggie’s sake. And for Becca’s. It was his choice to leave.’

‘Why did Erin leave him?’

‘Several reasons. She was livid with him for quitting the company. I paid him well. More than he deserved. Ronny said his garage would provide them with the same income, but things didn’t go well for him. His projections were way off. Erin moved back in with her parents. His daughter was in private school, and he couldn’t afford to pay the fees any more. Ronny blamed me.’

There’s silence while they both digest their thoughts until Jessica says, ‘When I started working for you, and Maggie was showing me the ropes, she was always so professional. And kind.’

‘That’s Maggie through and through. One of the kindest people I’ve ever met. That’s why I fell in love with her.’ Alan’s voice breaks. ‘And it’s why I want her to get better.’

‘Do the police know all this?’

‘I told them what happened to their parents. I didn’t see the value in raking up the issues with the business.’

‘So you think Ronny was involved, do you?’

‘Who knows? He’s a rat, but he does love his sister. The police have questioned him. He plays snooker and was down at his club last Tuesday. So as far as they’re concerned, he couldn’t have been here that night.’

‘Life never stops surprising us, does it?’

‘Thanks for listening. And sorry to drag you in on all my worries. I didn’t mean to expose you to all my family issues. But it’s good to talk to someone about it all.’

‘That’s what friends are for.’

Joey steps back from the door, taking a minute to digest what he has just heard. Becca calls out as she descends the stairs. ‘I’m ready.’ Joey darts back to the kitchen and positions himself on the stool where she left him. He hears her stop to talk to her dad. He gulps some water, amazed at how you can learn so much from a brief overheard conversation. One thing’s for sure; that wasn’t the conversation of two people having an affair.

After dropping a melancholy Becca at the hospital, Joey goes home to pick up Ronny’s cash. His stomach is twisted in knots of dread and anger at what he is driving away from and what he is driving to – from the sizzling frying pan into the roaring fire. He has left Becca with her mum, who might now be able to tell her what really happened the night she shot herself, and now he’s off to Ronny’s house to continue his new job as a drug dealer.

As he steps into the house, the smell of his mum’s home-cooked curry hits him. He feels empty from a shortage of sleep and a lack of food but knows he can’t face eating, and he wonders if he will ever sleep soundly again. It’s been five days now. Five days since he took the phone call that has him starring in this horror story. He can feel the stress in the looseness of the waistband of his jeans and the constant headache that refuses to leave him alone. It’s only a matter of time before it turns into a migraine. His mum is dishing out basmati rice. Magic Radio is playing, and the windows are steamed up. ‘Did you not get our texts?’ she asks.

‘Yeah, Joey. We’ve been trying to get you all afternoon,’ Megan pipes up, standing at the cooker, stirring a saucepan of curry with a wooden spoon.

‘What’ve you been up to?’ Dylan asks, his hands dipped in a bowl of sudsy water. He turns from the sink and throws Joey a questioning look.

‘I’ve been at work and then went to see Becca.’

‘How is she?’ his mum asks.

‘OK. I’ve just dropped her off at the hospital. Her mum was asking for her earlier.’

‘That’s a good thing, then?’

‘Sure is,’ says Joey, trying to inject some enthusiasm into his voice. Dylan throws him a look to tell him he sounds fake. ‘I’m going out again in a bit to pick her up.’ Another lie, but he can’t exactly tell the truth.

‘You are staying for dinner,’ his mum says, in the motherly tone that tells him this is an order rather than a question.

‘Sure. But I’ve only got twenty minutes.’

‘I’ve made a vegetable curry.’

‘Yes. It’s Mum’s lovely vegetable curry. How could you possibly refuse?’ says Dylan, holding his stomach and pretending to be sick.

Joey smirks. ‘Great,’ he says, trying again with the enthusiasm thing but failing miserably.

‘Play waiter, love,’ his mum says.

Joey takes the food to the table. He’s suddenly not hungry, but he knows they won’t be happy if he doesn’t join them.

It’s one of those family meals that doesn’t run smoothly. It happens. Joey tries to fake more brightness as they eat. It’s a struggle. He doesn’t like the way his mum keeps looking at him... or is that the paranoia that comes as a by-product of guilt? He tells a joke that makes his family laugh, while inside, he is falling apart. Perhaps he should consider a career in the performing arts?

‘I’m not hungry,’ Dylan says, scraping his fork around the plate, grating on Joey’s ragged nerves. ‘I hate this vegetable shit.’

Their mum taps the table. ‘Dylan Clarke. You know I’ll not have that kind of language in this house. Now eat.’ She tears a naan bread in half and leans over to place it on Dylan’s plate. ‘It’s the same sauce I use for the chicken curry, and you wolf that down without moaning.’

Joey’s phone beeps. He removes it from his jeans pocket. ‘No phones at the table, Joey. You know the rules,’ Megan sings, imitating their mum before she has the chance to berate him. He holds the phone thigh level and glances at a text from Pat the plumber. He reads it in angst.

*How ya doing? Just checking you got my invoice. And let me know when you’re free for that pint. Be good to have a proper catch-up. Pat.*

‘No phones at the table,’ his mum repeats.

Similarly moaning about the food to her brother, Megan reaches for the salt. ‘Put that down. You don’t need it. I put plenty in during cooking.’ Ignoring her mum, Megan sprinkles a helping of salt over her food and knocks over a glass. Orange squash spills across the table and splashes into Megan’s dinner, which has her complaining: that’s it, she can’t possibly eat any more. She and Dylan bicker, and their mum leaves for the kitchen, muttering, ‘Sometimes, I don’t know why I bother.’

Joey grabs his coat and races upstairs. He climbs up to the top bunk to grab the bag of cash. There's a knock at the door, and his mum sticks her head in the room. 'Joey, come and look at this before you go out.'

What now?

Joey follows her into her room. 'You'll be proud of me,' she says. She throws out an arm to present his dad's two suitcases lying open on the bed, empty save a couple of folded items of clothing. 'And look,' she says, pointing to two large, plastic laundry bags full of his dad's neatly packed belongings. 'I've kept a few of my favourite pieces, but this lot can go to charity and the dump. Tomorrow, if I feel up to it, I'll go up to the loft and have a good sort out of his other stuff.'

'Not without me,' Joey says. 'Wait until I can help you.'

'I'll be fine. You'll see.'

'Mum, I'm serious. Don't do it without me. It's chaos up there. There're loose floorboards. I know where they are; you don't. We'll do it together sometime over the weekend, and I'll go to the charity shop and the dump.' He kisses her on the cheek. 'We don't need you hurting yourself.'

'You're a good lad, Joey Clarke.'

He's not. He's a liar and a criminal.

As he walks back to his bedroom, Megan is loitering at the top of the stairs, her cheeks rosy from dinner. 'Joey.'

What now?

She beckons him into her bedroom. 'You haven't forgotten the money for my school trip, have you? It was due in today.'

Joey grits his teeth and lies. 'Of course not. It's on my list of things to do.' He is getting so good at playing this game of deceit – a true champion.

'It was meant to be in this afternoon.'

'I know, but don't worry. It won't make any difference.'

'Don't forget you need to sign the form to give me permission to go. You have to email it back. Or shall I ask Mum?'

'No, I got the email. All sorted.' Their mum is well at the moment. He wants to keep it that way. 'Don't say anything to Mum yet. We'll tell her when I've paid for it.'

'You don't need cash. You have to send the money via ParentPay.'

'I know, Megs. I'll do it in the morning.'

'You need to do it tonight.'

'OK.'



‘When will you do it? I’ll wait up for you.’

‘No need. I’ll sort it.’

‘Love ya, Joey.’ She bounces towards him and pecks him on the cheek.

‘You’re the best big brother in the world.’

He could scream.

Joey swings a right onto the dirt track that leads to Ronny's house, slowing to negotiate the potholes. He doesn't need a flat tyre out there in the dark. The car bumps along, the wheels dipping in and out of the crevices. Rain lashes down on the windscreen, the wiper blades continuing their nerve-grating scraping sound, the wind blowing hard. He parks outside the house, wondering where Ronny will have him heading tonight. A text arrives from Becca, answering the one he sent before he set out:

*Nothing to report. Mum tried to talk to me for a while, but it was all garbled, then she fell asleep for the rest of the time I was there. Going back tomorrow. Bx*

He can breathe for another day.

Climbing out of the car, he grabs the plastic bag containing last night's takings. Ronny opens the door before Joey has the chance to knock. He is wearing a padded coat, his black cat cradled in his arms. 'You're late,' he says, his voice surly. 'I've got stuff to do.' He steps back to let Joey in. 'That for me?' Ronny asks, nodding at the carrier bag Joey is holding. Joey hands it over. The kitchen still smells of bacon and cat food. A frying pan, a plate and a couple of mugs sit on the drainer beside the sink. Joey runs a hand through his wet curls, flicking drops of water onto the tiled floor. Ronny jerks his head, beckoning him to the other side of the room.

Joey follows him. He doesn't want to be there. He wants to be at home with his family, watching a film on the sofa. Like in lockdown when, apart from when he had to go to work, they were all safe together, and every night they would watch films or crime dramas together. Even sitting

through one of his mum's lovey-dovey romcoms is appealing compared to where he is now. Despite money being challenging, there was something comforting about those times. When the likes of Maggie, Ronny, and even Ade were in another world – one he never thought he would ever find himself in.

The cat lurches out of Ronny's arms and saunters over to Joey, purring and wrapping its black tail around his leg. Joey bends to stroke its back. Ronny opens the bag and places the cash on the table next to his laptop. The lid is angled open. The screensaver displays a different photo to the one of his estranged wife blowing a kiss at the camera. Today, there's a picture of her with Ronny and their daughter. He recognises them from the family photo he saw in Becca's kitchen.

Ronny gives Joey a distrustful look. He licks his thumb and counts the notes, his face contorted like an embittered miser. Joey's hatred for him intensifies each time he meets him, despite everything he has learned about his troubled childhood. 'Good.' Ronny shuffles the notes together and shoves them back into the bag. 'All there.' He walks to the cupboard where he put the file the other day and chucks the bag inside.

Joey spies his evening's work waiting on the table – three white Jiffy bags with stickers attached. 'Maggie asked for Becca today,' Ronny says.

'I know.' There's a pause before Joey adds, 'What happens when she starts talking properly?'

'What do you mean?'

Joey tries to keep the sarcasm from his voice. He doesn't want to antagonise him, but there's a hint of derision in his tone. 'When she says it was me who delivered the gun for you. The one she tried to blow her head off with.'

'She won't mention me.'

'Why?'

'I know she won't. She's my sister. She looks out for me.'

'What about me?'

'What about you?'

'What if she says I was the one to deliver it?'

'I have no control over that.'

'Then I'm dead meat.'

'As I said, that's not in my control. I'll talk to her when I'm allowed to see her.'

‘That could be ages. Covid rules won’t allow it.’

‘You know there’s a good chance she won’t remember what happened that night.’

Joey nods. As rotten as it makes him feel, that’s what he’s banking on. He finds some bravery. God knows where from. Probably from the threats to his family this animal has made. ‘If we’re going to be working together, Ronny, you’ve got to trust me. Why did you give her a gun?’ Joey is pushing him too far. This is not a man who likes to be pushed. But Joey needs answers.

Ronny glares at him, his lips twisted to the side. ‘Well, well, well! Would you know it? The boy has got some balls.’

‘She told me she was going to kill her husband. Is that true? She said Alan was having an affair with Jessica.’ Ronny continues glaring, but Joey ignores his threatening look. ‘Did you give her a gun to kill Alan?’

Ronny sighs heavily. ‘Look here. I don’t pay you to ask questions. I pay you to do as you’re told.’ He grabs the three Jiffy bags and stacks them in order. ‘Now take these. Same as last night. Deliver in order. Bring the cash back here at ten o’clock.’ He slams the bags in Joey’s chest and pushes him in the direction of the door. ‘Don’t come any earlier. I won’t be here.’

Joey tucks the bags down the front of his coat and leaves the nauseating smell of bacon and cat food for the welcoming fresh air. He runs to his car, the rain pelting down. He starts the engine and plans his route. Just like last night. And just like many more to come if he doesn’t find a way out of this.

The clientele is much the same as the professionals needing their weekly fix he met last night. Ronny has got himself quite the cushy set-up; dirty money he launders through his garage. These people rely on him. People he’s probably never even met. Joey drives to the posh side of town. Where the houses are spread apart and have gardens with tennis courts.

‘Another new one,’ says the tall guy with a shaved head who is second on the list, as Joey hands him his fix. The guy is dressed in expensive jeans and a quarter-zip jumper under a body warmer with a designer motif.

‘Sorry?’ Joey says, unsure what he means.

‘I get used to one of you, and then a different dude appears.’ The guy tucks his goodies inside his pocket. ‘See you next time.’ He mock salutes Joey, laughing. ‘If you’re still around.’

What’s that supposed to mean? Does Ronny have a plethora of mugs like Joey who he gets to do his dirty work? Innocent people he threatens

with pictures of their families? To force them to be puppets on strings under his control? Joey watches the guy strut back to his apartment block. A block similar to the one Joey delivered the package to the other day. The kind of place with balconies and entry systems he has always dreamed he would live in one day. Now the only place he can see himself living is a prison cell.

Joey knows he can't carry on. This isn't the life he wants. He needs to outsmart Ronny. Get one over on this scumbag who has turned his world one-eighty and stripped him of his integrity. If he lacked the resolve before, the threat to Dylan has given him renewed energy. However, the fear of Maggie remembering what's happened and turning him in to the police is terrifying. It's as if every waking moment is spent with a noose around his neck, waiting for her to relay what happened and open the trap door. The burner phone rings. Joey fishes it out of his pocket and answers Ronny's call. 'You finished?' Ronny shouts over the dull thud of music in the background.

'All done.'

There's a pause as Joey hears a door slam shut and the music fades. 'Good. Listen. I'm tied up with something. I won't make it home. I want you to bring the cash to me here. I'll text you the address. Come straight away. Call me when you get here. Don't keep me waiting.'

Joey starts the engine and waits. The anger bubbling inside him is reaching boiling point. Within a minute, the burner phone beeps with a message telling him where he needs to go. This isn't how it's going to be from now on. Living on a knife's edge at this scumbag's beck and call. No way.

Time to get strong, Joey. Time to get strong.

He drives as ordered, devising a plan. His resolve to change the direction his life is taking gives him some hope. Only a smidgeon, but it's there all the same.

His mind is made up.

This will be the final delivery he ever makes.

Ronny appears less than a minute after Joey pulls up outside an impressive, detached house just off the thoroughfare in a local well-to-do village. Music thumps through the large bay windows, and a group of people are huddled in the large porch area, smoking.

Joey lowers the window as Ronny approaches. The smell of cannabis drifts into the car. Two women totter past in high heels, short skirts, and leather jackets. Ronny looks harassed, his cheeks red and his jaw clenched. He shoves twenty-pound notes in Joey's hand, and Joey passes him the cash he has collected this evening. 'Thanks for coming out this way. Someone was meant to meet me here, but they're running an hour late.'

Did Ronny just thank him? Joey shivers. Gratitude sounds wrong coming from him.

Joey drives straight back to Ronny's house. Terrified, but with a surge of defiance egging him on. He takes the dirt track but doesn't drive all the way to the house. He's not that stupid. When he first made this journey – four days ago, or was it five? – Joey spotted a turning just after where the overgrown branches of the roadside trees formed an arch that stretched down to Ronny's house. He takes this turning now and parks his car out of sight. He switches off the engine and takes some deep breaths of bravery. He has never needed them more.

The rain has eased off, but a stubborn drizzle persists. Joey finds the torch on his phone and lights the path back to the dirt track, trying to dodge the potholes, every one of which has formed a puddle that would be a toddler's dream. He is successful for a while, evading the many pools of water, but inevitably misses his footing and slips. His phone disappears into a puddle. It's pitch dark. He can't see a thing, and all he can hear is the unsettling sounds of night-time wildlife. He plunges his hand into the freezing wetness, fishing around for his phone. He whips it out and frantically rubs it along his thighs. He can't afford for this to conk out on him. The torch lights up, and he continues, hurdling over the puddles and up the dirt track to his destination.

When he reaches Ronny's place, it's in darkness, as is the adjoining house. He takes the path through the side gate and around to the mess of the

back garden. Just as he did with Becca the other day. With only the light from his phone, he retraces her steps and searches for the clearing in the ivy. It takes three attempts at separating the leaves of the overgrown bush and three goes at turning over the pebbles to find the one with the black plastic cover and the combination lock. The one that hides the key to Ronny's back door. He rotates the dials of the lock until they read Becca's date of birth. But when he tries to slide open the plastic covering, it won't budge. This can't be happening! It's taken all his resolve to get to this point. He squints at the code and realises that the last digit is not fully locked into position. Edging it into place, he breathes a sigh of relief, opens the cover, and grabs the key.

He dashes to the back door where he squeezes the rain from the bottom of his sodden jeans. As he opens the door, adrenaline pumps through him. The drug to keep him going. He doesn't turn on the light. He doesn't dare. What if Ronny comes home? One advantage – and, in Joey's eyes, there is only one – of being so isolated is that at least Joey will hear him if he does return. But from what Ronny said at the party, Joey feels he is safe for at least half an hour. He vigorously wipes his feet on the coir doormat, smirking at the inlaid message of "welcome".

He doesn't know what he is looking for, but the crook that Ronny is, he knows he will find something on him. He still can't believe he is there, but sometimes desperation drives you outside your comfort zone. He knows full well that if he doesn't do something now, he will be working for this man for the rest of his life. That's if he doesn't find himself thrown into a cell.

He starts at the table, lifting the lid of the laptop to provide additional light to that of his phone. He bets Ronny has something of interest on there. He tries his luck and taps Becca's name into the password bar. But as usual, luck is not on his side. He tries another couple of possibilities – his wife's name, Erin, then his daughter's, Freya, CC Autos, but none are successful. He tries Becca's birthdate, the same as for the combination lock, but gives up when this doesn't work. There is no time to fiddle around with this.

He turns his search to the paperwork scattered across the table and scans a pile of invoices for CC Autos. New tyres here, new brake pads there. Many invoices are for larger amounts. He fans through them – the sale of cars and the replacement of catalytic converters. Several purchase invoices comprise the rest of the pile. Sometimes, he helps Mr Parasi with his paperwork, sorting through his invoices, mainly on the computer, so he



knows a bit about how businesses work. Why are they all at Ronny's house and not at the workshop? Are these bogus invoices, and he keeps the kosher ones at his office in the garage? Is this evidence of money laundering? He's seen on TV how cash is washed through a supposedly legitimate company. Joey discards the invoices and shines his torch on the other paperwork on the table, but after a quick search, he finds nothing other than stuff relating to the car industry.

He needs to get into the laptop. There's bound to be something in there. Think, Joey. Think. But he can't. This is not his territory. He knows how to access the basics but finds technology a minefield. His brain is mush from the headache that has started to affect his vision, and his legs feel weak, as if they are going to let him down at any moment.

He shines the torch around the room to the cupboard where Ronny threw the bundle of cash. Perhaps there is something in there. He steps towards the door, but the sound of a car engine stops him in his tracks. His heartbeat races. Ronny must have returned early.

Joey hears a car door open and slam shut. This can't be happening. What is Ronny doing back so early? He said he would be at that party for a while. Joey looks towards the kitchen door. He should have locked it, but he wasn't thinking. The plan was to be in and out of there. There's no time to lock it now. Darting into the lounge, he finds the curtains are closed. He crosses the room and makes for the small lobby that leads to the front door. As soon as he hears Ronny open the side gate, he will escape out of the door and make a swift exit. But life never pans out the way you want. Joey should know that by now. Heavy footsteps pound up to the front door. He ducks into the downstairs cloakroom. It stinks of sweat and wet shoes. Joey pushes his body against the wall, bracing himself for the door to open. He hears rapping on the front door. His heart races faster, his head pounds harder. It's as if Ronny knows he is in there and is taunting him, making him pay for thinking he can do one over on him.

The letterbox rattles open, and a package drops to the floor. The heavy footsteps retreat up the path. Joey peers around the cloakroom door to see a large envelope on the floor underneath the letterbox.

Dashing to the lounge, he nudges one of the curtains aside. A man is walking into the next-door garden and up towards the front door. It must be the neighbour. Joey slams his head in his hands, muttering, 'I can't take much more of this.'

He rushes back to the cupboard in the dining area of the kitchen and opens the door. A light comes on automatically. The cupboard is full of crap: a vacuum cleaner and a broom, and shelves housing a box of tools,

lightbulbs, various bottles, and old tins of paint. At the very back sits a large, green metal safe. He wonders what Ronny has stored in there. Crouching down on all fours, he prowls towards the safe like a cat searching for prey. A rack full of coats on the side wall shadows the area. He can't see the digits on the keypad. He reaches into his back pocket and finds the torch on his phone, talking to himself as if he needs a friend. 'Please, God. For once, do right by me. Please help me.' He isn't the religious type. Never has been, but sometimes anything goes when you find yourself in the depths of despair.

The smell of fried bacon hangs in the air from earlier. He holds his breath. His shaking forefinger presses the digits of Becca's birthday into the keypad. It buzzes eight times, but nothing happens. There's no creaking sound like the other day. He wants to die, right there. End it all. Keep going, Joey. Keep trying. Perhaps it's only a shortened version – two digits for the year. He tries again, thoughts of his dad flowing through his head. What is he thinking of Joey right now, looking over him from above?

There's a clicking sound and the door jerks. Joey grabs the handle and pulls. The heavy door creaks fully open. He directs the beam of light from his phone inside to see two sections separated by a shelf. On the top sits bundles of cash, thousands of pounds, and bags of drugs below a pile of files. He slides out the files from the carpeted flooring, intrigued as to what he's going to find. There are about ten of them. Attached to the top left-hand corner of each one with a paperclip is a photograph. He squints at the first one, and his heart sinks to the soles of his trainers as he recognises himself.

He places the pile on the cupboard floor and picks up the first file. His file. He flips open the cover. His name is scribed across the front page in thick black pen. Below is a blown-up version of the photograph attached to the front. It's of him walking out of his house. He turns the page to see the photo Ronny showed him at the supermarket of Dylan leaving school. The one with Ronny in the foreground smiling slyly at the camera. It's date-stamped Tuesday this week. He turns another page to read details about him and his family. Where did Ronny get all this information from? The supermarket where Joey works; the schools Dylan and Megan attend; their address. The following page is empty.

Feeling sick to the core, he picks up the second file and gasps as he sees a photo of another guy he knows from the pub. He opens the file,

processing similar contents about this man, but the last page is far from empty. It's the same photo Ronny showed him on his phone the other day of this poor man from different angles after Ronny, or whoever, had smashed his face to a pulp.

The third file follows a similar pattern, but this one is of Oz. The fourth one is of someone who used to go down the pub. A woman this time. He can't remember her name, but she used to hang out with Becca and dated Oz a few years ago. He hasn't seen her for a while.

More files follow. People Joey doesn't recognise, some beaten up badly. He flicks through them, digesting detailed information about the individuals and their lives. He can't believe what he is seeing. But it's the last file that draws particular attention.

Pins and needles irritate Joey's left foot. He scrambles up, knocking a coat off the rack above. The cupboard's sloping roof doesn't allow him to stand up straight. He stoops, stretching out his calf muscle as best he can in the tight space. He has had enough of clambering around in claustrophobic places. When the prickling pain tingles to numbness, he balances the last file on his bent arm so he can turn the pages and digest the contents. His phone is wedged between his chin and chest, the torch beaming light onto details of Pat the plumber: where he lives, his family, his business. Joey frowns, confused. It's as if Ronny has carried out surveillance on these people. Is this how he gets his kicks? How did Pat get caught up with Ronny? In fact, how did any of these people get involved with him?

Joey's phone buzzes, causing his head to twitch. The phone slips from the grip of his chin and chest and drops to the floor. As he bends to pick it up, he sees a text from Becca.

*Left you a message. Call me when you can. Bx*

He gathers the files together, debating what to do. He must be able to use these to get Ronny off his back. He wants to take them with him, but rain is pelting down outside. Even inside his coat, they will get soaking wet. He takes them to the front of the cupboard, where the light allows him to gather evidence of Ronny's little *enterprise*. Click, click, click, he photographs every page. With ten files, it takes a while. He is nearly at the end when the burner phone buzzes in his back pocket with a text from Ronny.

*what are you doing?*

Joey's stomach loops, spinning out of control. Can Ronny see him? Surely not. He shines the torch around the cupboard. Is there a hidden camera somewhere? He needs to get out of there. Ronny is on his way back. Taking a final snap from the last file, Joey kneels and bangs the edges of the files together against the floor, organising them to sit perfectly on top of each other. He crawls to the safe and replaces them, pausing to gaze at the stack of cash on the top shelf. It takes every inch of what's left of his integrity not to scoop the lot of it up and stuff it in his pockets. He is torn. Joey Clarke is not a thief. He has never stolen anything in his life. Yet he knows Ronny's ill-gotten gains could dig him out of the financial crater he and his family have fallen in. He pushes the door to, only to change his mind. Opening it again, he pockets a band of fifty-pound notes from the top shelf before shutting the door.

Joey peers around the cupboard. Checking everything is as he found it, he switches the light off and closes the door. The place is in darkness once again. He rushes outside into the rain. His nerves get the better of him, and he fumbles to lock the door. The rain is coming down even harder. When the key has turned, he dashes to the opening in the ivy. He replaces the key and drops the pebble amongst the others. Rain is beating down on him, drops of water dripping down his cheeks. He ruffles the ivy to disguise the opening and heads through the gate, following the dirt path to his car.

The jog back seems to take forever. He wills one foot in front of the other as fast as possible but seems to be getting nowhere. His legs are heavy, a weight of exhilaration and fear. The sound of a car engine stops him. He looks ahead, but only blackness meets his gaze. Joey can hear it, though. The vehicle dipping and rising along the uneven road. Ronny is coming for him. His legs are weak. They can't take any more. The noise is coming from behind him. He spins around to headlights approaching from the rear.

He dives towards the hedgerow flanking the road, tripping into an unseen ditch in the undergrowth. He swears with pain as he twists his ankle, stumbling as he tries to keep himself upright. His arms flail. He can't steady himself. He falls, curling up in a ball, breathing into his knees and clutching his ankle as he watches the car pass by. He can just about make out the silhouette of the man from earlier he'd last seen heading into the neighbouring property. The man doesn't see him. Joey doesn't think so anyway.

He keeps his eyes tightly shut, the rain pounding down on him. But visions of his mum, Dylan, and Megan flash before him. They need him. He heaves his weary body up, steadying himself on the bank of the ditch. The headlights are now out of sight. He flounders back to his waiting car, no longer bothering to avoid the puddles. He's past caring. Fearing he might meet Ronny's headlights, all he wants is to get away as quickly as he can.

He staggers the last few painful metres back to his car, which is dutifully waiting to catch him as he collapses onto the front seat. Joey lies across the seats, freezing cold, yet too afraid to switch the engine on. For he knows as soon as he turns the key in the ignition, he needs to be out of there.

He stays put for a few minutes, shivering, willing his ankle to stop throbbing. The pain is excruciating, intense, burning up his leg like fire. Opening the glove compartment, he scrabbles through the handbook, sunglasses, and his dad's gloves, looking for some painkillers, but finds nothing.

He puts his hand in his pocket, feeling for the wodge of cash he stole from the safe. There it is. Despite the guilt he harbours, he knows the relief it will bring in the days ahead as he pays off his immediate debts. Then he'll find a way to sort all the bills that have been flooding in like the rain this past month. This thought gives him the boost to sit up. Wincing with pain, he shuffles onto one buttock and slides his phone from his jeans. There are no new calls or messages. He starts the engine, blasting the heater to get himself warm. His mind is on Becca, but as he drives out of the opening, thoughts of Ronny catching him take over.

He bumps his way up the dirt track as quickly as the car will take him, holding his breath, terrified he will meet Ronny's headlights coming the other way. Only when he reaches the main road does he allow himself to breathe properly. He drives home, the pain from his ankle intensifying every time he presses his foot on the brake. So many thoughts fill his mind, it's spinning faster than the wheels of the car.

The lights are on in the lounge. His mum must still be up. All he wants to do is climb into bed and sleep like the dead, but he knows he can't go inside yet. How would he possibly explain the state he is in? His clothes are soaked through and filthy from trekking along that dirt track and falling in

the ditch; and he is hobbling. He drives off, knowing precisely where he is going.

He parks in a road lined with terraced houses. Stabbing the letter P into his phone, he finds the number and makes the call.

Surprise coats Pat's words. 'Joey! You OK?'

'You know that pint I owe you? Could I buy it for you now?'

'Now? Do you know what time it is?'

'I could drop by your place? I'm not far away.'

'Where are you?'

'Outside, actually.'

'You'd better come in. I think I know what you want to talk about.'



The house is a red brick Victorian two-up, two-down, where Pat lives with his wife, daughter, and black Labrador. When Pat opens the door, his dog bounds down the hallway and hurdles the threshold. It jumps up at Joey, balancing on its hind legs like a kangaroo. It almost knocks him over. ‘Down. Down,’ Pat commands in a hushed voice. He grabs the dog’s bright pink collar and encourages her to get off Joey. ‘Sorry. She’s such a good dog but a nightmare for jumping up at people. She gets too excited.’ Joey waits on the doorstep, his wet clothes clinging to his body. Pat eyes him up and down. ‘Christ, what’s happened to you?’ He opens the door wide. ‘You’d better come in.’

Joey kicks off his sodden trainers and hobbles into the warm hallway in a daze. Pat touches the sleeve of Joey’s drenched coat. ‘Better take that off, mate,’ he says, helping Joey to remove it. ‘I’ll get this on a radiator.’ He pushes a hand into Joey’s lower back and guides him into a small lounge, where a solitary table lamp provides eerily soft lighting. ‘What’s with the limp?’

Joey rolls his eyes. ‘It’s a long story.’

Some comedy show resounds from the TV with laughter inappropriate for the moment. Pat searches for the remote control amongst the magazines, books, hair bands, and chocolate wrappers on the coffee table, and switches it off. The room is packed with photos and pink toys – so much pink everywhere. Pat guides Joey to the fireplace, where waning flames smoulder in a log burner. Moving the fireguard aside, Pat throws a chunky

log into the burner, resuscitating the dying embers. He pats Joey's shoulder. 'Stand here. You'll soon get warm.'

'Couldn't ask for a hot drink, could I?' Joey says, unable to stop himself shivering.

'Yeah, sure. I'll find you some dry clothes and get the kettle on. Strong black coffee with a splash of something stiff, methinks. And it looks like you need some ice for that foot.'

'Where's your wife?' Joey asks.

'In bed. Don't worry.'

Joey reaches his hands towards the burner, soaking up the warmth as the fresh flames crackle and sizzle. He steps closer, too close, but he is used to living on the edge, trying to keep his balance. Pat's dog sits at his feet. Joey stares at the row of framed photographs separated by a candle on a silver dish lining the mantle, scanning the pictures of Pat and his wife and daughter on various occasions: on the beach, at a party, walking their dog in a park. One of them is of Pat and his wife in a photo booth, Pat looking years younger than he does today. They are pulling the strangest of faces and belly laughing. Unrestrained laughter! When did Joey last engage in that? He thinks hard for a moment but can't remember. The other photo sits behind a heart-shaped mount and has a date scribed along the side. Pat with his daughter on the day she was born. A normal existence Joey longs for but fears is far from his reach.

'Here you go. This is the best I could do,' Pat says. 'Change into these, and I'll get those drinks.' He hands Joey a pair of charcoal joggers and a matching sweatshirt. 'Then we can have a chat.'

Joey places his phone on the floor and peels off his soaked socks stuck to his skin, followed by his jeans and boxers. His foot is bruised and purple blotches caused by the cold cover his legs. He steps into the joggers and wrenches them up past the jutting angles of his hip bones. They hang off him. He draws the tie to tighten the waistband, then wriggles out of his hoody and T-shirt and pulls on the sweatshirt. It drowns him.

Pat appears and throws Joey a pack of frozen peas. 'Put this on your foot,' he says. 'I'll be back with the drinks in a mo.' Joey winces as he places the peas on his tender ankle. Pat reappears, carrying two mugs. He passes one to Joey. 'Get this down you, mate. It'll warm your bones.'

Joey takes a sip of the drink; strong coffee and a hint of brandy. It slides down, biting the back of his throat. He takes another sip. Pat nudges an

armchair towards the fire with his foot and directs Joey to take a seat. 'Better try to get these clothes dried off a bit.' Pat arranges Joey's wet clothes over the top of the fireguard. 'That should do the trick.' He sweeps aside the clutter on the coffee table, creating a space for him to sit as close to Joey as possible.

Joey takes another sip of his drink. It tastes good – a moment of solace in the chaos his life has become. 'Sorry to do this to you, but we need to talk.'

'Talk?' Pat frowns, leaning his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands into a tight ball. 'If this is about the money you owe me, Joey, it's fine. I can sub you for a while. You don't need to stress.' Pat's concern for Joey's wellbeing appears to outweigh his cash flow problems.

Joey picks up his phone, searching through the photos until he finds the ones he wants. 'I've got your money, Pat. It's not that.'

Pat looks at him, confused.

Joey turns the screen in Pat's direction: the photo of his dossier compiled by Ronny. Joey leans forwards and cocks his head to look as well. Pat squints at the screen as Joey flicks through the snaps he took earlier: details of Pat's home, business, and family, and a collage of photos of him and his wife and kid.

Abject confusion covers Pat's face. 'I don't understand.'

Joey stares Pat in the eye. 'You're not alone. There are loads like these.'

Pat fidgets on the coffee table, clasping his hands tighter, redness bleeding from his knuckles. 'Where did you get these?' His eyes flit to Joey and then to the carpet, his jaw clenched. He stares back at Joey, all-knowing. 'Ronny Carling.'

Joey snorts and explains how he came about the photos. 'How are you involved with him?'

Pat sits up straight, cradling his knees with his hands. 'Can we trust each other?'

'Absolutely.'

The words spurt out of Pat like the water from the burst pipes he often has to fix. 'Someone down the pub introduced me to Ronny. Becca. You know her. The pretty one with the long blond hair. She sometimes hangs out with the army girl.' He lowers his head and clicks his fingers by his temple. 'What's her name?'

'You mean Courtney.'

‘That’s the one. Becca is Ronny’s niece.’

‘I know. We’re close friends.’

‘A few years back, she told me her uncle was looking for a plumber and asked me if I would be interested in some work. He’d just moved into his house. It was a right dive: no central heating, stinking of damp, décor from the last century, you get the picture. Anyway, he seemed a decent enough man.’ Pat’s voice breaks. ‘At first.’

Joey stares into the fire, contemplating telling Pat about the gun and Maggie. He’d love to blurt it all out to someone who understood, but isn’t it best that the fewer people who know, the better? Maggie might die. She might never remember. No one else ever need know. God, does he hate himself for these thoughts. ‘Carry on.’

‘He agreed to pay me a good price to install central heating throughout. It was when my missus was preggers with our little ’un, and we’d put an offer in on this place. Cash in hand, he told me, which was a bonus. He was cool with me working evenings and weekends, so I fitted it all in around other jobs. I bent over backwards to get it done as quickly as possible for him. And for me. I needed the cash. We got on great during that time. He was easy to please, and we had a laugh. We’d even share a beer some nights when I was there late, which was often. He was pretty cut up about his wife leaving him, and I felt for the guy. She’d taken their daughter to live with her parents. They’d had to sell their house, which is why he’d ended up in that dive. It was all he could afford.’

‘Becca told me he’s recently started seeing his daughter again.’

‘Is that so?’ Pat says, his eyebrows raised.

‘He wants his wife back.’

Pat shakes his head. ‘They’re better off staying with her parents. Anyway, the night I went around to collect the cash it all went pear-shaped. He invited me to have a drink with him. I’d been so stressed out – problems with one job, not being paid for another. My suppliers were threatening to suspend my account. We were close to exchanging contracts on this place.’ His eyes scan the room. ‘I needed the money. Otherwise, we were going to lose it. I couldn’t do that to the missus. She had her heart set on it.’ He shakes his head. ‘She’d even chosen the wallpaper.’

Joey finishes his drink and places it by the foot of the armchair. ‘I think I know what’s coming.’

Pat shakes his head. ‘Oh no, you don’t. You couldn’t possibly know.’

‘We had drinks. I got drunk. And when I say drunk, I mean, completely fuddled, can’t-remember-what-the-hell-happened drunk.’ Pat’s face is pained. ‘I still can’t. I’ve often wondered if he spiked my drink. I woke the following morning on the sofa in his lounge. He was awake, whistling while he cooked breakfast. My head was throbbing. And I mean proper throbbing. And get this, I’d even peed myself.’ He stops talking, looking as if he is about to cry.

Joey gives him an encouraging smile. ‘Keep going, mate.’

Pat stands and steps over to the fireguard, turning Joey’s clothes so the wet side faces the fire. ‘Anyway, he threw me a pair of old jeans and told me to clean myself up and get to the table, teasing me for not being able to take my drink. It’s all such a blur. I couldn’t believe the state I was in. He’d made us bacon sandwiches.’

‘He’s fond of his bacon. His house stinks of it.’

‘I was famished. As if I’d not eaten the evening before. I probably hadn’t. I can’t remember. It was a strange feeling. I was so hungry yet felt as sick as a dog. He was acting strange too. When we’d finished eating, he asked me if I remembered what we’d discussed the previous night. I told him I couldn’t even remember arriving there. To cut a long story short, I’d been moaning about my cash situation all night, so he offered me a job to “run some errands” for him.’ Pat sits back slightly, his eyebrows raised. ‘And, apparently, I’d agreed to it.’ He shrugs. ‘He was setting up a courier business and needed drivers. Just delivering envelopes – legal documents,

that kind of thing. If I'm honest, I had an inkling it was dodgy from the word go, but money was tight. And he was so persuasive.'

'Sounds familiar.'

'It progressed from there. Before I knew it, I had my own set of regulars I was delivering drugs to. The truth is, I got used to the extra money. We moved in here, and then our little 'un came along. Babies are expensive and so much needed doing to this place. I ran up some pretty hefty debts. I told myself I'd give it six months while I got myself back on my feet, and then I'd tell him where to go. That never happened. I now pick up a weekly stash of coke and weed and deliver throughout the week. I hate myself for it.' Pat closes his eyes, wincing. 'Hate myself. But what choice do I have? None now.'

'What do you mean?' Joey asks.

'Did you find anything else with that file?'

Joey shakes his head.

'He has a Dictaphone. It was probably somewhere in the safe with the files.'

Joey thinks back to earlier. He was so agitated he could've missed it. 'I can't remember seeing anything. There were piles of cash. Perhaps it was behind them. What was on it?'

'The bastard set me up. In my drunken stupor, I talked more than I should've.'

'About what?'

'Last year, I'd had enough. But when I tried to quit "running errands", he said I might want to reconsider my position if I wanted to keep my wife and kid. And that's when he produced the Dictaphone and pressed play.'

Joey feels deeply for him. 'What was on it?'

'Let's just say I haven't been honest with the taxman over the years. I've taken far too many cash-in-hand jobs. Everyone does it. But silly me was bragging about it that night. And he has it all on tape. I'd lose everything if it ever got into the wrong hands.' Pat opens his arms wide and peers around the room. 'We'd lose this place for sure. I'd get a criminal record, and I could even get banged up. The missus would never forgive me. You see, when she was a kid, her father ended up in prison for the same thing. Ronny knew that. I told him that night.'

'He is the lowest of the low.'

‘It took me forever to persuade her I spent that night on a mate’s sofa because, of course, the night changed me. She thought I’d done the dirty on her. There’s a small piece of her that still doesn’t trust me. I don’t blame her. I mean, what did it look like? Not only did I not come home, but I didn’t even call to say I was staying out. Then I came home in a state, stinking of booze. There were twelve missed calls from her when I woke up the next morning. She was in a right old funk. I stopped listening when I got to the sixth. Her saying she thought I was dead.’

‘Why didn’t you just tell her?’

‘What, admit you’re a criminal to the woman you love when they’re about to have your baby? For the same reason that destroyed her childhood? I couldn’t do it to her. I thought about it for a while after our little ’un was born, but I’d have to admit to all the lies I’ve told since. And she hates drugs; her brother was a junkie for a while. So that sleazebag’s got me right in his clutches.’

‘I can see the hold he has over you.’

‘I’ve learned to live with the guilt. It’s become part of my life. Not just the way I cooked my books, but the deceit and the lies I’ve told her.’

Now it’s Joey’s turn. His heart has a habit of ruling his head. But it’s as if he’s found an ally. A faithful friend who will understand the anguish he is going through. He spills all about Becca and her messed-up family. Once he starts, he can’t stop. He feels like an over-inflated ball. One that Pat has inserted a needle into and opened the valve, releasing a scintilla of the pressure that’s been building inside him since he took that phone call on Sunday evening. ‘I feel like such an idiot,’ he says. ‘A complete frickin’ idiot.’

Pat reaches out and gently punches Joey’s knee. ‘You’re not alone, mate.’

‘It only started on Sunday, so seemingly innocent, and before I knew it, I’m a frickin’ drug dealer.’

‘Don’t tell me, Becca introduced you to him?’

‘It was through Oz, actually. He offered me a job to deliver a Jiffy bag.’

‘The sleazebag’s got him starting the process now, has he?’

Joey taps through his phone and shows Oz’s dossier to Pat. ‘Looks like Oz is just another victim. I was wary at first, but I’m also strapped for cash. Actually, that’s an understatement. I’m up to my eyeballs in debt. Enforcement agents, council tax arrears, credit card bills. Not to mention all

the household bills.’ He smacks his forehead with the palm of his hand. ‘And the mortgage. We’re already in arrears. We’ll lose our home at this rate. My car’s been playing up, too, and Mum’s been too unwell to work regularly. My sister wants to go to Alton Towers on a school trip. I told her I’d pay for it.’

Pat tuts. ‘He preys on the vulnerable.’

‘Then the bloody boiler went.’

‘Look, Joey. Don’t worry about paying me. I really can sub you for a while.’

‘I’ve been an idiot. I’ve buried my head in the sand. It’s all got out of control.’

‘There are organisations you can turn to, you know. They can help you.’

‘I kept thinking I’d be able to sort it myself, somehow. I didn’t want Mum involved because it stresses her. Her health suffers, and all kinds of problems kick off.’

‘Then you met Ronny.’

‘At first, I thought it could be easy money. Far easier than stacking shelves and serving moaning customers eight hours a day. Ronny was alright to start with. I handed over his package, but when I tried to leave, the car wouldn’t start. The engine kept turning. He was really helpful. Told me to leave it there, and he would get one of his mechanics to fix it the next day. What choice did I have? Anyway, when I went to pick it up, he told me it needed a new alternator. He serviced it and put new wipers on too. He even put petrol in it.’

‘Don’t tell me. You couldn’t afford to pay him, so you delivered more packages for him.’

Joey sighs heavily. ‘It gets worse. Much worse.’



Sparing no details, Joey moves on to Maggie and the gun. 'And to top it all, Mum's gone and got involved with a copper. Talk about walking on eggshells.'

'Jeez, and I thought I had troubles. You're kinda lucky Maggie can't talk.'

'From what she's been through, it's possible she'll never even remember what happened that night.'

'What are the chances of that?'

'Fifty-fifty. The same as the chance she'll never speak again.'

'What did you do with the gun? And the coat and trainers?'

'They're in the loft at home.'

Pat shudders. 'Christ, Joey.'

'I know. I know.' Joey drops his face into his hands. 'I shouldn't have taken them in the first place, but I panicked.' He looks up at Pat. 'I didn't know what else to do with them. With hindsight, I should've taken the gun straight back to Ronny the night Dylan found it. But you never know how you're going to react until you find yourself in a situation like that.'

'I'm drowning in debt. Where was I going to find the money to pay Ronny back for fixing my car? Then, somehow, he got hold of a photo of Dylan. He must've gone to his school and taken it when Dylan came out. He turned up at the supermarket and showed it to me, along with a photo of a guy's mashed-up face. He threatened me and told me I now work for him. Otherwise, Dylan would end up with his face the same. That tipped me over

the edge, and I decided I needed to do something to get away from him.’ Joey pauses. ‘He can mess with me, but not my family.’

‘And there was me thinking you’d come to tell me you didn’t have the money to pay for a lousy boiler pump.’ Pat sits up straight, slides his hands up his legs and puffs his chest out. ‘You know what? I agree. Enough. It’s time to stand up to him. Put an end to all this.’ He is quiet for a moment. ‘It was brave of you to go there tonight. Good on ya. But why didn’t you just take the files?’

‘I thought about it, but it was pouring down. I thought they’d get ruined on the way back to the car. I also needed time to think. I got this text from him while I was there, asking me what I was doing. It freaked me out. I wasn’t thinking straight. I thought there might be a camera hidden somewhere, and he was watching me. I got worried he was on his way home and would catch me. I panicked and left them. Before I came here, I texted him to ask what he meant. He said the message was meant for someone else.’

They sit in silence, watching the flames. Joey is starting to warm up. ‘What do you think? Do we face him together, just the two of us, or do we get the others involved?’

‘You’re on for it, then?’

‘I’ve got to do something. Threatening me is one thing, but threatening my family...’ He shakes his head. ‘No, no one threatens them.’

‘Forget the others. I haven’t got time for his games any more. I’ve got my family to think of too.’

They are both in the same water, just in different boats.

‘I wonder what the guy with the smashed-up face did to deserve such a beating?’ says Joey.

‘Tell Ronny he wanted out?’

They both turn to the door as it opens. A petite woman wearing a pink nightshirt, her long auburn hair messy, appears. ‘Is everything alright?’ She stares from Pat to Joey to the washing hanging in front of the fire.

Pat jumps up and strides towards her. ‘Just helping a mate out, darling. Nothing for you to worry about.’ He mouths to Joey, ‘Be back in a sec,’ and steers his wife out of the room.

Joey looks at all the stuff consuming the length of one wall. Boxes full of soft toys and tons of plastic: a pram, a doll’s house, building blocks, a camera, and a jewellery box. It reminds him of their lounge when Megan

was small and everyone, including himself, spoilt her. His dad died just before she was born, and people's pity came in generous gifts wrapped in pink. Would it make any difference if he had children of his own? Would he still feel such anger if Ronny had threatened one of his kids? He knows it wouldn't.

Family is family.

A throbbing pain circles his head. He should get home to them. Megan and his mum are probably asleep by now, but with everything that has gone on this week, Dylan will probably be waiting for him. He stands and reaches for his jeans. They are still wet but drier than when he arrived. Loosening the tie of Pat's joggers, he slips out of them and into his jeans and pulls on the hoody. The socks are still too wet, so he rolls them up and stuffs them in the pockets of his jeans. Pat reappears. 'Sorry about that,' he says. 'I told her you had woman trouble.' He laughs. 'She said I was a fine one for you to be asking advice from. See what I mean? She still hasn't fully forgiven me for that night.'

'How're we going to play this, then?'

'Every Sunday night, I collect my weekly stash from him. Eight o'clock. The missus thinks it's my pub night, which it kind of is. Not that I drink much any more. I meet the lads down at the Coach and Horses around six and drop by his garage afterwards to collect my weekly supply. I say we confront him then.'

Joey is not so sure. 'Shouldn't we give ourselves more time to plan?'

'Forget it. It's perfect timing. He'll be expecting me.'

'And what exactly are you thinking we do?'

'Shoot him with that gun he got for his sister. Bring it along.'

Joey holds his palms facing Pat. 'Steady on.'

Pat laughs for the first time all evening. 'Of course not. Believe me, I wish I could, but I've got too much to lose. After everything he's done to me, I'll be able to put on a good act, though. I'm going to scare the living daylights out of him. And once he's recovered from the fact that he isn't going to get a bullet in the head, we can threaten him with a little word to his missus. And he'll never see his daughter again.'

'We need to be careful. We don't know what else he has up his sleeve,' says Joey, unsure.

'What do you want? To be living this life in three years' time, like me? That creep has driven me to this. I'm forever looking over my shoulder,

scared to put a foot wrong. Scared I'm going to lose everything.'

Joey knows Pat is right. Otherwise, a tie with Ronny that he can never cut is all he has to look forward to.

Pat twists his lips into a knot of defiance. 'Enough is enough. We need to put a stop to all of this. I take it you've got a burner phone?' Joey nods. 'Give me the number. We don't want messages going between our own phones. I'll contact you tomorrow.'

A phone rings. It's Joey's. Becca's name flashes across the screen. He considers answering the call but lets it go to voicemail. She doesn't leave a message. She calls again. He looks at Pat. 'It's Becca.' It rings off.

'Phone her.'

'I can't right now. I'll call her later.'

Pat chucks another log into the burner, and they briefly discuss their options for dealing with Ronny. Joey has an uncomfortable feeling Pat would go further than him, which heightens his anxiety.

Becca attempts to contact Joey a third time, this time by text. The phone buzzes. Joey reads the message. His jaw falls, relief competing with feelings of sadness and regret.

*Mum died tonight. Bx*

**SATURDAY**

It's gone midnight by the time Joey leaves Pat's house. He calls Becca when he gets into his car. They only speak for a minute. 'She had another bleed on the brain. They couldn't save her. Dad was with her. They let him see her, thank God. I can't believe she's gone.' Her voice is drugged with pain, and a sleeping pill of Maggie's she said she found in her parents' bathroom cabinet.

Joey slides down the seat. When will this nightmare end?

'Come over. Please,' she pleads. 'Dad's still at the hospital. He doesn't want to leave her. I can't get hold of my Uncle Ronny, and I don't want to be on my own.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

He goes home to change first. He can't turn up in wet clothes. The house is quiet, but Dylan is still awake, waiting for him in bed. He bombards Joey with questions like he's a detective. Joey tells him nothing other than Becca's mum has died, and he will be spending the night at her house.

'Shit.'

'Stop swearing.'

After slipping into clean clothes, he heads straight to Becca's. Number One Regency Close, where this horror show began. She answers the door wearing black pyjamas, her eyes red and swollen. 'I can't believe it,' she

says, as he draws her into his arms. He supports her upstairs to her bedroom, her slender body heavy against his. Within five minutes, the sleeping pill appears to transport her into a deep sleep.

Joey endures another sleepless night. Shame and sadness for Becca thwart his attempts to drop off. Counting sheep, concentrating on his breathing, the app his mum recommended – nothing works. The headache that has been following him around like a lost dog all week feeds the nausea of guilt that won't let up either. He spends the time mulling over everything that has happened, staring at the ceiling or propped up on his elbow gazing at Becca sleeping, wishing it could all be different.

At seven o'clock, he finds a pen on her desk and a piece of paper from the printer and writes her a note. There is so much he wants to say but knows he never can. Instead, he tells her how sorry he is for her loss, how he has to work today but can come over after he has finished. He will speak to Mr Parasi to say she won't be in. Anything she needs, he is there for her. He gently nudges her before he leaves. 'Becca, I need to go.' She doesn't stir. He bends and kisses her on the forehead.

When Joey arrives home, spaced out from yet another sleepless night, his family are sitting around the dining table having breakfast. Dylan is spreading butter on a slice of toast, and Megan is pouring milk on her bowl of cereal as they bicker about who had the most homework this weekend.

'What've you done to your foot?' his mum asks, her hands cradling a cup of tea.

'Tripped over a chair in the pub.'

She gives him the look. That one that asks if he thinks she was born yesterday. 'I'm sorry to hear about Becca's mum.'

'What happened to her?' Megan asks.

'She died,' Joey says, unable to make eye contact with his sister.

'I'll make you a cuppa.' His mum gets up and goes to the kitchen.

'Did you pay the deposit for my trip?' Megan asks. Dylan hisses at her to be quiet.

'Sorted,' Joey says, lying. He'll do it later.

'Love ya, Joey.' Megan sticks her tongue out at Dylan, who tells her to grow up.

‘Give it a rest, you two,’ Joey says, before leaving them to finish their breakfast.

The day passes even slower than usual. A Saturday without Becca at work is depressing enough, but knowing what she is going through makes it one hundred times worse. That evening, Joey types an email of apology to Megan’s school office. He is sorry, but he couldn’t get ParentPay to work to send the funds to cover the deposit for Megan’s school trip. He will try again on Monday. Until then, attached is the completed parental consent form for her to attend. This will give him time to get to the bank to pay in some money to get his account out of overdraft. As he presses send, Pat calls. There is an undertone to his voice that Joey has never heard before. ‘I’ve got it all worked out,’ Pat says. ‘Bring the holdall with the stuff that needs disposing of, as well as the gun. I’ve thought of what to do with them. Here’s the plan.’

**SUNDAY**

The day drags. Joey is working overtime as two Sunday staff tested positive for Covid yesterday, and Mr Parasi offered Joey the extra hours. He can't stop looking at his watch as he stacks shelves and serves customers. All he can think about is Becca, and what she must be going through, and how Pat intends for them to deal with Ronny. Becca is with her dad; has been since he came home from the hospital yesterday morning. 'He's in pieces,' she said last night when he called to see how they were. 'And he's angry.'

When the time comes, Joey waits in the turning off the dirt track leading to Ronny's house, just as Pat told him to. His ankle is still hurting, although not nearly as badly as the previous night, and his head is starting to throb. His thumbnails are bitten raw. He never bit his nails before this all kicked off. It's been a week since he made the biggest mistake of his life and took that phone call. A week of utter hell.

Pat's expected call comes through at seven thirty. 'He's at the garage. Time to go.'

'Are you sure?'

'Chill, Joey. He's always there on a Sunday night. Just keep your nerve and follow the plan.'



Joey heads to Ronny's house, unable to fathom how this will all turn out. He wills himself to calm down, but he can't. The holdall containing the gun, trainers, and coat in the boot of the car won't allow him to. He gave the gun another thorough clean when he came home from work, rubbing a cloth over it until his hand ached.

Retrieving the key to Ronny's back door proves as easy as before. And entering his house and opening the safe all seems too straightforward. First, he searches for the Dictaphone Pat was certain must be there somewhere. Behind all the cash stashed on the top shelf, he finds it. Joey presses play. Pat's slurred voice bursts through the silence. He presses stop. He doesn't need to hear this. Stuffing the Dictaphone into his pocket, he checks to see if there is anything else in the safe but only finds the files, cash, and a stash of cocaine. He searches through the files and, following Pat's instructions, removes his and Pat's and replaces the rest in the safe before closing the door.

Stepping out of the cupboard, he walks to the back door. Only then does he commence the video on his phone. The film encompasses walking through Ronny's kitchen, opening the safe showing the cash and cocaine, and removing the eight remaining files. One by one, Joey opens them and films the nitty-gritty of each before ending the film. Mission accomplished: the proof of Ronny's criminal activities on film.

Joey places the files into a plastic wallet he brought along for the task and pushes the door to. He hesitates before opening it again, staring at the piles of cash. Once again, his conscience is hounding him to walk away. But no, this man has wronged him and his family in so many ways. He empties the cash into his pockets. There's enough to share with Pat and for him to make a fresh start. One where he is clear of all debts, where school trips for Megan won't come as such a burden, and he can afford the occasional takeaway for his family. He will buy Dylan that new phone, and his mum some new glasses.

As quickly as he can, given the pain from his ankle, he struggles back to his car. Every step feels like a mile. When he arrives, he dumps the plastic wallet in the boot with the holdall. He calls Pat as he bumps along the dirt track away from Ronny's house towards the main road.

'Did you find the Dictaphone?'

'All sorted,' Joey says. 'It couldn't have gone any smoother.'

‘A car full of evidence. You’d better not get stopped. Drive carefully. I’m here waiting.’

Joey constantly tracks his speed to meet Pat at Ronny’s garage, wincing from the pain in his ankle every time he presses his foot on the brake. He wills himself to think of Becca to distract his mind from the pain, the good times they have enjoyed over the years, before this nightmare began.

As Pat suggested, he parks around the corner in a lightless street where he dons a Covid mask and his baseball cap. He gathers everything from the boot of the car. Keep calm, Joey. Keep calm. It’s all going to plan. It will soon all be over. He hurries to the garage, the piercing pain from his ankle worsening with each step. The holdall is slung over one shoulder, the plastic wallet of files tucked under the other.

He finds Pat waiting in his Ford Transit at the side of the forecourt. Pat leans over to open the door, motioning for Joey to get into the passenger seat. Joey chucks the plastic wallet in the footwell, slips the holdall off his shoulder and climbs in. He hands the Dictaphone to Pat.

‘Mate, you absolute star. Where’s the gun?’

Joey slaps the holdall. ‘In here.’

‘Get it out.’

‘Pat, I don’t like this.’

‘Chill, Joey.’

‘Let’s leave it. I don’t feel comfortable about it coming out. You never know what might happen.’

‘I won’t use it. I promise you.’ Pat is more forceful. His nervous twitch is more pronounced, his head constantly jerking. ‘Get it out.’

Joey unzips the holdall and unwraps the gun. He hands it to Pat and lifts the holdall containing the coat, trainers, and rucksack, into his lap. ‘What’re you going to do with this lot?’

‘My dad lives out in the sticks up in the Fens. He’s a bit of a recluse. We often go and stay with him. He’s always burning stuff. I’ll put all this in his incinerator.’

‘You’d do that for me?’

‘Yeah, for sure. You’re a good guy, Joey. A rare breed. There’s not many like you around.’

Joey scoffs.

Pat turns the gun in his hand, inspecting it.

Images of Maggie waving that thing around flash through Joey's mind. 'Put it down.'

'Stop worrying. I know what I'm doing.' He opens the chamber, checking the gun is loaded, engages the safety catch, then holds it in front of Joey. 'You're dead, Ronny.'

Joey raises his hands. 'No way.'

Pat laughs. 'Calm down. Of course I won't. I hate that man more than I ever thought I could hate anyone, but I'm not a murderer.'

Joey is just a regular guy, not emotionally equipped for this. 'I'm not so sure about this any more.'

'Don't be stupid. We're not backing out now.' Pat's voice is resolute. 'I've suffered that bastard far longer than you have. He's put me through hell these past three years. No more. His time is up.' His hissing voice is venomous. 'Come on. We're going in.'

It smells the same inside. Grease, engine oil, tyre rubber – metallic, like blood. The air is so toxic you could choke on it. And it's cold; cold like Joey has never known it, eating into his bones. Music is playing from a radio between two cars hoisted on a lift. Joey tails Pat. 'Keep with me,' Pat whispers as they walk towards Ronny, working underneath one of the cars. He has his back to them. Joey recognises the car. It's Becca's. He must be fixing it for her. Engrossed in his work, whistling, Ronny doesn't acknowledge them at first. Until Pat speaks authoritatively, pointing the gun in Ronny's direction. 'Unless you want your head blown off, you'd better acknowledge our presence.' Pat kicks a box of tools. Spanners, sockets, and screwdrivers fly across the concrete floor.

Ronny spins around. 'I thought I told you to text me when you arrived?' His thunderous eyes flick from Pat to Joey, to the wallet of files, and finally settle on the gun. 'What's going on?' He glances towards the office at the end of the workshop. He looks at Joey. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Stay where you are.' Pat's bellow echoes around the building. If he feels any nerves, he appears to be keeping them well hidden. His eyes are like bullets, shooting the deadliest of looks. 'This won't take long.' Pat steps towards Ronny, still pointing the gun at him. 'Joey has something to show you.'

Ronny folds his arms across his chest. His jaw is clenched, and his eyes fierce with anger. Or is it panic? Joey shoves his phone in Ronny's line of vision as Pat points the gun at Ronny's head and presses the play button on the video Joey took earlier. 'It all ends here, Ronny,' Pat says as the video

plays. 'You picked on the wrong people. No more. A copy of this video is safely in the cloud. Several people know how to access it. If you ever step near my family, or me, or Joey and his family, ever again, your wife, your daughter and the police will receive a copy, along with this lot.' Pat nods at Joey, who puts the phone in his pocket, opens the plastic wallet, and removes the files.

'All these lives you're ruining. All the threats you've made to get people to do your dirty work. Not to mention the people who've been beaten within an inch of their lives. And how about your sister? Your *sister*? You set her up. And you got an innocent lad like Joey to do all your dirty work. You despicable piece of vermin, preying on the vulnerable. You're a stain on the planet. I'm warning you.' Pat flicks his wrist, jolting the gun still pointing at Ronny's head. 'You contact us again, and your daughter will be seeing this.'

Ronny's face is finally a picture of shock and abhorrence. His jaw is shaking. 'You wouldn't.'

'Try me.' Pat nudges Joey. 'Let's go.' Joey steps back towards the exit. Panicking, he drops the plastic wallet. Pat pushes him. The boldness in his tone is flagging. 'I said go.' Joey bends to pick up the wallet. Pat kicks it aside. 'Leave that. I'll deal with it. Just go home.' He shoves Joey in the direction of the exit.

Joey turns on his heels and races outside, sucking up the pain from his sprained ankle. He hobbles back to his car, alternate steps on tiptoe to ease the pressure on his foot. It's the only way he can manage the pain. Heavy rain is pouring down, but he can feel light at the end of the dark tunnel of doom. It's over. Emotions rush through him. The nightmare he has been living this past week is over. And then he hears it. The distant crack of a gunshot that bursts through his head.

Memories come flooding back. Images of the look in Maggie's eyes as she pulled the trigger. Her blood splattered over her kitchen wall. Becca's scream. Joey can't bear it. His hands rush to cover his ears. It's so unreal, he feels like he is in a cinema, experiencing it all on film. He wants to run to his car. Sprint away from the scene faster than the bullet that has just been fired, but he is stuck to the spot in shock. Keep going, Joey. Just keep going.

Once he is in his car, he calls Pat. It goes to voicemail. He stabs the end call button. His head is throbbing so badly he can barely see straight.

Several more attempts bring no success. He leaves a message saying they need to talk. He drives around aimlessly for what feels like ages. From village to village, he travels through sinuous country lanes. Rain bounces off the windscreen. The howling wind is like a voice of accusation. 'What have you done now, Joey Clarke?'

He told Becca he would call her this evening. But he can't. Not now. Then it occurs to him. The phone. What about Ronny's phone? Stopping in a lay-by, he calls Pat again. He answers straight away. 'What the hell happened?' Joey asks before Pat has the chance to speak.

'What do you mean?'

'Why didn't you answer your phone?'

'I've only just picked up your message.' His voice is shaking. Joey is sure he is lying.

'What happened when I left?'

'I left soon after you.'

'I heard a gunshot on the way back to my car.'

'I didn't hear anything. Must be your head playing games with you.'

'It's not. I heard it. Did you shoot him?'

'Joey, you've got to calm down, mate. You mustn't let this get to you. I left after you and came straight home. It's over. Go home to your family.'

'I know what I heard, Pat. If Ronny's dead, the police will be all over that place when his workers arrive in the morning. They'll be at his home too. We need to go back and get his burner phone. It'll have evidence of contact with me before he gave me mine. We can't be connected with him in any way.'

'Calm down. Stop worrying. I've got his phone and all the files. It's in my van with the holdall. Meet me in the morning at eight, on the corner of Maze Road, and bring your burner. I'm going to take the lot of it up to my dad's place tomorrow. It'll all be gone by this time tomorrow night.'

Joey can't help but feel Pat is hiding something. 'But I heard a gunshot, Pat.'

'You were mistaken. It's over, Joey. He won't come near us ever again.'

## MONDAY

The incident floods the local news by Monday afternoon. Comments inundate a community Facebook page about the catastrophic accident at the local garage the previous night; details of how the man died have not yet been released.

*How sad. I didn't know him. Sending my thoughts to his family.*

*What a dreadful thing to happen.*

*Such a friendly guy. He fixed my car once. R.I.P., Ronny.*

Joey reads them in shock as he sits in his car after work. Does Pat know this? He didn't say anything this morning. Joey had overheard two customers in the supermarket tattling about the unfortunate event, wondering if they were referring to Ronny when they mentioned the death

of a man at a local garage. He has been on edge all day, waiting for Pat to call to say he has been to his dad's place. A call that hasn't arrived, despite Joey leaving him a couple of voicemails.

Joey stares out of the windscreen. Pain shoots through his head. He needs to find some tablets. A couple walk past the car, arm in arm. The woman's head is resting against the man's shoulder, her buttermilk-blond hair bouncing down her back. He thinks of Becca. This news will destroy her. He should call her, but he needs to speak to Pat first to find out precisely what happened the previous night.

Knowing this is not a conversation to have over the phone, Joey heads straight to Pat's place, relieved to see his Ford Transit van parked outside his house. He drives to the next street, Maze Road, and parks up. The same as he did early this morning to meet Pat to hand over the burner phone. He'd handed him a share of the cash from Ronny's safe too. Pat had smiled and said, 'Revenge is sweet.' He appeared off, a bit absent. Joey put it down to the shock of the confrontation the previous night but did wonder if something more sinister had occurred.

Each step to Pat's house is painful. His ankle is not getting any better, and neither is the pain in his head. 'What're you doing here?' Pat says, restraining his dog from jumping up at Joey.

'I've been trying to call you. I need to talk to you.'

'Wait there.' Pat, somewhat reluctantly, disappears. Joey hears him say, 'Fancy walkies?' sending frenzied barks of elation along the hallway. Pat appears with his dog on a lead and joins Joey outside.

'Why haven't you answered my calls?' Joey asks.

Pat appears guarded. He hesitates before speaking. 'I've had a day of it. I was going to, and I kept getting distracted. Let's face it, it's not every day you destroy evidence to cover up a multitude of crimes. Sorry, mate.' He closes the garden gate. 'You've heard about Ronny, I suppose.'

'I found out from the news. Why didn't you call me?'

Pat ignores his question. 'Do you know how he died?'

Joey shakes his head. 'The last I heard, those details had not been released. I assumed he'd been shot.'

'I keep telling you. There was no gunshot. You must've imagined it. That car fell on him.'

'What?'



‘That car he was working on. It fell on him.’ Pat holds his palms up in Joey’s direction. ‘And before you ask. It wasn’t me. Dodgy lift. There’s been a recall from the manufacturer for those lifts he has in his garage. The manufacturer advised they shouldn’t be used until they’re fitted with a rectifying kit.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘Ronny told me a few months back. He ignored that advice. The bastard got what was coming to him. Good riddance,’ says Pat. ‘A monster like him doesn’t deserve to be on this earth. Everything he’s done to me. He’s made our lives hell these past few years. What’re you looking at me like that for?’

‘The man’s *dead*,’ Joey says.

Pat stops in his tracks. ‘You’re too soft, mate. You need to grow a pair. Think about everything he’s done to you. And to all the other people in those files.’

‘Even so.’ Joey grabs Pat’s arm. ‘My ankle is still killing me. I can’t walk far.’

‘Follow me.’ They veer off right along an alley that leads onto a small green. Pat steers him to a bench. The hum from a small electricity substation on the opposite side of the green blights the otherwise peaceful landscape. ‘I took everything to my dad’s place today. The backpack, trainers, coat. They’re all gone. Burnt to ashes.’

‘And the phones?’

‘His, yours, mine, gone. I burnt the sim cards and chucked the handsets in the reservoir at the back of my dad’s place.’

‘What about the files?’

‘Gone too. I didn’t see the point in keeping them.’

‘And the gun?’

‘Stop worrying. We can talk about this when you’ve calmed down.’

‘What if someone saw you?’

‘I’ll take you to visit my dad one day. You can see for yourself. Think of Ronny’s house. Apart from the neighbouring property, it’s pretty secluded, right? My dad’s place is one hundred times more isolated. The nearest person lives at least two miles away. You can stop worrying now. They can’t connect us to him in any way.’

‘This will kill Becca. She loved him.’

Pat’s dog pulls on her lead, tugging at Pat’s hand. ‘I should get going.’ He draws his dog towards his leg and strokes her back. He looks at Joey.

‘Keep in touch, won’t you?’

‘I don’t think I’ll forget you in a hurry.’

Pat laughs. ‘I guess not.’ He pauses. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking. Why don’t you come and work with me?’

‘Me? I haven’t a clue about plumbing.’

‘I could train you. Give you a trade. We could go into business together. If there’s one person in our lives we can both trust now, Joey, it’s each other. I tell you what. We’ll never be without work. Plumbers are in such short supply. I’m crazy busy. The diary is booked until the summer.’

‘Maybe.’

Pat cups his hand over Joey’s shoulder. ‘You look dreadful. Go home and get some rest, mate.’ Pat stands up. ‘It’s all over.’

Joey drives home slowly. The aura has started. The twitch of his right eye that tells him he has passed the point of no return. He must get home. He has about twenty minutes until his body can take no more, and he will have no choice but to lie in the dark and wait for the pain to subside. The recent lack of sleep isn't helping. Pain pulsates through his watery eyes, blurring his vision, and a tightness in his neck spreads up the back of his head, pressing down on his skull. The shrill ring of his phone makes him wince. He glances at the screen. It's Becca. He can't talk to her. The emotional anguish will worsen the unbearable pain.

When he arrives home, he stumbles through the front door. His mum calls out, 'Hello, love.' Hetty is scurrying around his feet. He can't even bend down to greet her. She twirls around, chasing her tail. He can see ten of her. Round and round she spins. He can't look. He staggers along the hallway, throwing a hand against the wall to steady himself. His mum is waiting for him in the lounge. She pats the sofa beside her. 'I want to tell you something.'

'Not now,' Joey says, leaning against the door frame.

'I'm not seeing Ade any more.'

He's confused. Did he hear her right? 'What? Why?'

'It didn't feel right.'

'But I thought you liked him.'

'I did. I do. It's just not the right time for a relationship.'

'Why not?'

'A mother's intuition, Joey. A mother's intuition.'

She knows him so well. Knows that he has got himself involved in something serious, and a cop on the scene is not what her son needs. He's ruined it for her. The chance of happiness she's waited so long for. All because of that bloody phone call. It's destroyed so much for them all. He closes his eyes, the pain intensifying. His head feels like it's on fire. 'Migraine,' he manages to call out as he falls to the floor. Everything goes black.

**TUESDAY**

It's the smell that wakes him – the freshness of strawberries and mint. A cold compress covers his eyes and forehead. Becca is holding his hand, her small fingers wrapped around his. He takes a moment to assess the pain, wondering if he has the strength to remove the compress and open his eyes. He strokes his thumb along the side of her hand. 'How long've you been here?' he asks.

'All night.'

He drags the compress away and opens his eyes. Faint sunlight is shining through the lounge curtains. He squints, wondering if the light will be too much, but it's not. The pain has eased to a dull ache at the back of his neck, signifying he is over the worst.

Becca looks as white as he feels. Her hair is scraped back into a ponytail. 'I'm sorry,' he says.

'For what?'

'I heard about your uncle. I wanted to call you last night, but I must've passed out.' Feeling hot, he throws off the duvet from the top half of his body.

'I know everything,' she says. 'You don't need to hide anything from me any more.'

'What?'

'I was there.'

‘Where?’

‘Sunday night, at the garage. My dad took me to pick up my car. It was so cold, we were in the office, waiting for Ronny to finish fixing it. We heard that box of tools kicked across the floor, and we got up to look at what was going on. We saw Pat hold that gun up to my uncle. We watched it all, heard everything. I wanted to come out to help you, but my dad wouldn’t let me. He said it was too dangerous with a gun involved. He had to hold me back.’

Joey stares at her, wary.

She appears remarkably calm. ‘I know it was you who took that gun to Mum. I know Ronny got you to deliver it. And I know what Ronny did to you and all those people. I heard it all. I feel so guilty and ashamed.’

‘What’ve you got to feel guilty about?’

‘I was the one who introduced Pat to him when he needed a plumber. And I was the one who introduced him to Oz when Oz needed his car fixing. And I told him all about you. I hate him for what he has done to you and all the others.’

‘Ronny’s dead,’ Joey says.

‘I know,’ she says. ‘My dad killed him.’

‘What?’

‘My dad pressed the button that made the lift fall on him.’ Becca picks a feather out of the duvet and stares intently at it. ‘Before Mum died, she managed to tell Dad what happened that night. One minute she was talking, albeit slowly and slurred, and at times, completely incomprehensibly. The next, she was gone. She said Ronny had told her Dad was having an affair with Jessica. He brainwashed her. He’s pure evil. He’d convinced her to drug Dad and then fake his suicide. How did she, or Ronny, ever think she would get away with it?’

Joey lifts her chin, but her eyes stay glued to the feather as she twiddles it in her fingers. ‘He must’ve really hated your dad,’ he says.

‘He did. Dad has told me everything. It’s been a lot to take in, but I’m slowly processing it. Ronny blamed Dad for Erin leaving him. And for him losing his daughter and his home. He hated him so much. He said Dad had it all and had left him with nothing. But Dad did the honourable thing and let him leave the company silently. My uncle’s a sick man. *Was* a sick man.’ There’s no remorse in her voice, just an air of defiance. ‘The world’s a better place without him.’

‘Still, Bex, a man is dead.’

Her eyes flit to meet his. She drops the feather. ‘He wasn’t a man. He was an animal,’ she says bitterly.

‘Did Pat witness all this?’

She nods. ‘We all did. Dad ran out of the office when you left and told me to stay put. Pat panicked when he saw Dad. He told Dad to get away;

otherwise, he was going to shoot. Dad tried to calm it all down and persuaded Pat to put the gun down. It was like Ronny sensed Pat had lost his nerve. I'd never seen him like that. He was snarling like a maniac, calling Pat and Dad all the names under the sun. It was mayhem. They were all shouting at each other. Dad threw his hand out towards the lift button and that was it.' Her face is etched with pain. Joey wants to reach out and hug her. 'My car just fell. It was horrific. I begged Pat not to say anything to you. I needed you to hear all of this from me. He panicked after it happened. But after Dad calmed us down, we all agreed we must move on. Pat doesn't want to be caught up in any of it. And I don't want Dad facing manslaughter charges. I'd lose him too. I couldn't bear it.'

'There'll be an investigation, Becca.'

'Those lifts are dodgy. Ronny knew that. He ignored the manufacturer's recall. I remember him telling us at Christmas. They were the best lifts he'd ever had, he said. The car fell on him. It was an accident. No one can ever prove any of us were there. He doesn't have any CCTV. Now I know why!'

'I heard a gunshot last night, shortly after I left.'

'You must've been mistaken. That gun never went off. I promise you. It must've been the noise of the ramp giving way and the car falling.'

That makes sense. He recalls Ronny pushing the button on his unsuspecting mechanic, and the noise it created. 'How can you be so calm, Bex?'

'Because I have to believe I'm doing the right thing. If I go to the police, I lose my dad. And you. It'll all come out. I'll be left with nothing.'

'The police are still looking for the person who ran off with the gun the night your mum shot herself.'

'We've covered that.'

'What do you mean?'

'We left the gun in Ronny's office. The police will find it. They'll match the bullet and conclude that Ronny took it to my mum that night.'

Joey stares at the window, trying to take it all in. He hopes she is right. 'You thought of everything.'

'I think we did. I hope we did.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Nothing. You don't say anything. You never mention this conversation to anyone. It's all over.' Becca stands up. Her hair is messy, and her clothes are creased from a night sleeping on the floor. 'I should go.' She sits on the



side of the sofa and places her hand on his chest. He guides it up to his face and presses it against his lips.

‘Stay,’ he says.

‘I’ll come back later. I want to make sure Dad’s OK.’ She reaches forwards and kisses him on the lips. He tries to get up. ‘Stay and get some more sleep. I’ll see you later,’ she says. ‘I love you.’

He watches her go. ‘I love you too,’ he says as she leaves the room. She turns and smiles. It suddenly feels cold. He drags the duvet back over his body and listens to her backpack scrape against her jeans as she walks up the hallway and slips out of the front door.

He stares at the ceiling, feeling wiped out. The torment of the past week has drained him. But he hopes Becca’s right, and that it really is all over.

## **FIVE MONTHS LATER**

Joey sips his coconut daiquiri as he watches Becca stroll from the thatched bungalow to their sun loungers. She is wearing a skimpy white bikini, the colour contrast accentuating the healthy glow of her sun-kissed skin. Nothing has ever suited her more. Joey can't help smiling. Even though this is the seventh day in a row he has revelled in this sight. The sun has benefited them both. Joey's previously pasty skin is now glowing a healthy shade of brown. He has filled out these past few months, and it suits him. She tosses a tube of sun cream at him. 'Fancy rubbing some on my back?'

You bet. Joey leaps up from his sunbed.

'Where shall we eat tonight?' Becca asks, lying face down on her towel.

'All sorted,' he says, squirting a dollop of the thick cream into his hand. It smells of mangoes, a heady scent of holidays. 'One of the locals told me about this great restaurant along the coast.' The perfect place for a special occasion, the young Mauritian had told him. 'They do the best squid on the island.'

Joey massages the cream into her back, gazing at the multicoloured parachute flying over the lush, turquoise water. It looks so inviting. He is going to take a swim after this. They have been so lucky with this holiday. Becca's dad booked it for them at Easter. Becca had dropped a stone in weight due to the stress of losing her mum and her final exams

approaching, and Alan said she needed something to look forward to. Joey offered to pay his way, but Alan flatly refused.

The late afternoon heat is getting to him. He wiggles his toes in the fine, silky sand. The waves lap the shore. He could get used to this. Maybe he can. Now that he is debt-free and earning a decent income. He still can't get accustomed to seeing his blue van with *P & J The Plumbers* embossed along the side parked outside his house. There is so much more for him to learn. But with his enthusiasm, Pat's patient teaching, and the fast-track training course he is soon to undertake, it won't be long before he is as proficient as his business partner.

Now all he needs is for Becca to say yes.

Keep dreaming, Joey. Never stop dreaming.

A waiter arrives, dressed in a tropical patterned shirt, khaki shorts and a straw hat. His splayed hand carries a bamboo tray with another coconut daiquiri for Joey and a bottle of water for Becca. 'Here we go, sir,' he says, his smile brimming with zest as he unloads the drinks onto the low table connecting the two sunbeds.

'Thanks,' says Joey, wiping excess cream from his fingers along the side of his towel.

Becca flips her body over and unscrews the top from her bottle of water. 'Not like you to drink in the day.'

She's right. But today, Joey needs a dose of Dutch courage. 'Table's booked for six.'

She glances at her watch. 'It's four now.'

'Better get a move on, then.'

They grab a quick shower and take a taxi to the lantern-lit restaurant that edges a white sandy beach. Becca wanders off to the ladies, and Joey orders a bottle of champagne at the bar, welcoming the gentle breeze that passes through the open space. He pats the side pocket of his military-style shorts. It's still there – the box containing the diamond ring he has saved hard for these past four months. He had a little spare from the money he took from Ronny's safe, but he couldn't use that for this purpose. The diamond is small. But that's OK. Someday soon, he will buy her a bigger one.

When Becca appears, a waiter directs them to the corner table the local man advised Joey to reserve. It's got the best views, he said. The traditional

sega beat of Mauritian music that has grown on them over the past week plays from speakers hidden in the greenery sprawling across the roof of the wooden structure.

‘This is heaven,’ Becca says, twirling a strand of her hair around her finger. ‘Look at that sunset.’ She pulls away her finger, freeing a ringlet of hair. She is wearing a strapless playsuit. Her hair, now bleached to a blondish white, cloaks her slender tanned shoulders.

Joey turns to appreciate the palm trees and the contrasting orange hues of the sun as it wishes them its fond farewell for the day. The stresses and strains of daily living seem a lifetime away.

‘You’re going large. What’s the occasion?’ Becca says when the bottle of champagne and two flute glasses appear.

Joey shrugs. ‘I just fancied a bit of bubbly.’ The waiter pops the cork and fills the glasses.

‘Suits me,’ she says, holding up her glass to clink against his.

‘To us,’ he says.

‘To us,’ she repeats.

He downs his drink in one.

‘Steady on.’ She frowns, her head flicking to the side. ‘You’re acting odd tonight. What’s up?’

Joey can’t contain himself any longer. Digging the small black box out of his pocket, he snaps open the lid. He can’t bring himself to get down on one knee, just in case. There are too many people in the restaurant for such humiliation if he doesn’t get the answer he is hoping for. He presents the ring. ‘Becca, will you marry me?’

She gasps, her eyes wide. Joey waits for her lips to form a smile; any glint of happiness, but there’s none. Instead, a screeching sound rips through him as she pushes her chair away from the table. Her hands fly to cover her lips. He watches in horror as she staggers backwards, steps off the wooden platform to the beach and stumbles away from him.

Joey takes five or so seconds to absorb what has just happened. It’s as if his brain needs this time to process the shock of her reaction. He jumps up and runs after her, past couples sitting on the beach, enjoying the sunset. ‘Bex, I’m sorry!’ he calls. The sand is soft underfoot. It’s like running uphill. He can see her up ahead – a lonely figure in the near distance. ‘Bex, stop. Talk to me.’ When he catches up with her, he tugs her arm, breathless. ‘Bex, just stop.’

She swings around. Grabbing her shoulders, he pulls her towards him, only to be met with resistance. 'I'm sorry, Joey.' She pushes him away with force and drops to the ground on her haunches. She places her elbows on her knees to steady herself.

He crouches in front of her. 'What?' Bewildered, destroyed, different scenarios flash through his mind as fear grips him. The morbid fear that he is losing her. Their relationship is dead.

'I never thought it would come to this.' She sucks her lips inwards. Joey waits for her to carry on, trying to block out the sound of the waves slopping and slurping on the shore and the distant chatter from the restaurant. Her voice is all he wants to hear. And then she hits him with it like a smack around his face. 'There's something you must know.' She hesitates, her bottom lip trembling.

'What?'

'My dad didn't kill my Uncle Ronny. I did.'

Joey shakes his head, trying to process her revelation. 'But you said...'

'If you marry me, you're marrying a murderer. Do you understand that?'

He can't answer her. The processing is taking time. All these months she has lied to him. And what about Pat? He must know this too. 'Why?'

'I was so angry, Joey. Everything he had done to you and my family. What he did to my mum. I hold him entirely responsible for her death. My dad was trying to help her get better, but he told her all those lies about my dad and Jessica. Ronny drove her to do what she did. He was my uncle, for heaven's sake. Family. All my life, he's called me his angel. He was always asking me about my friends at the pub. You know, I told him loads of stuff about most of the people in those files, you included. I know he had a traumatic childhood, but nothing can excuse what he did. He betrayed me. Betrayed us all.'

Joey makes swirly patterns in the sand with his forefinger as he listens to the love of his life defending her act of murder.

'My dad really had to restrain me at the garage that night. He held me so tight I had bruising on my arm the following day. When you left the garage, I managed to get away from him, and I ran out of the office. He tried so hard to stop me. When I got to the lift, I saw red and pushed the button. My car fell on Ronny.'

Joey tries to digest her shocking words. There's a bitter taste to them. Mixed with the alcohol he has consumed, they've turned his stomach. Far

from what he had planned for the evening. ‘Why did you say your dad did it?’

‘He insisted, and I was in such a state, I went along with it. He said if the police ever discovered we were there that night, he would say he pushed the button. He stands by that. I have my life to live, he says. Now that Mum is dead, his is over.’ Her words choke them both.

‘What about Pat?’ Joey asks.

‘We made him swear never to tell you the truth. Don’t be angry with him, Joey. He was as messed up as us by what happened. Believe me, this has been torture for all of us.’

They sit cross-legged opposite each other. Joey picks up fistfuls of sand and trails it through his fingers as he listens to her pour her heart out. She takes his hand in hers and squeezes it hard. With her other hand, she lifts his chin until their eyes meet. ‘Can you forgive me?’ she whispers. ‘If so, my answer is yes.’

This is not the train he was scheduled to take. He has found himself on the wrong platform. He thought his life was going in a different direction – a route of honesty, integrity and doing the right thing. But sometimes plans get derailed, and an unexpected detour is the way to happiness. And that’s what his heart is telling him now.

‘There can never be any more secrets between us. No more lies,’ he says. ‘None. Never.’ They are equals now. Both criminals in their own right. But they will have to find a way to deal with this.

‘Ask me again, Joey.’

He repositions himself on one knee and produces the diamond.

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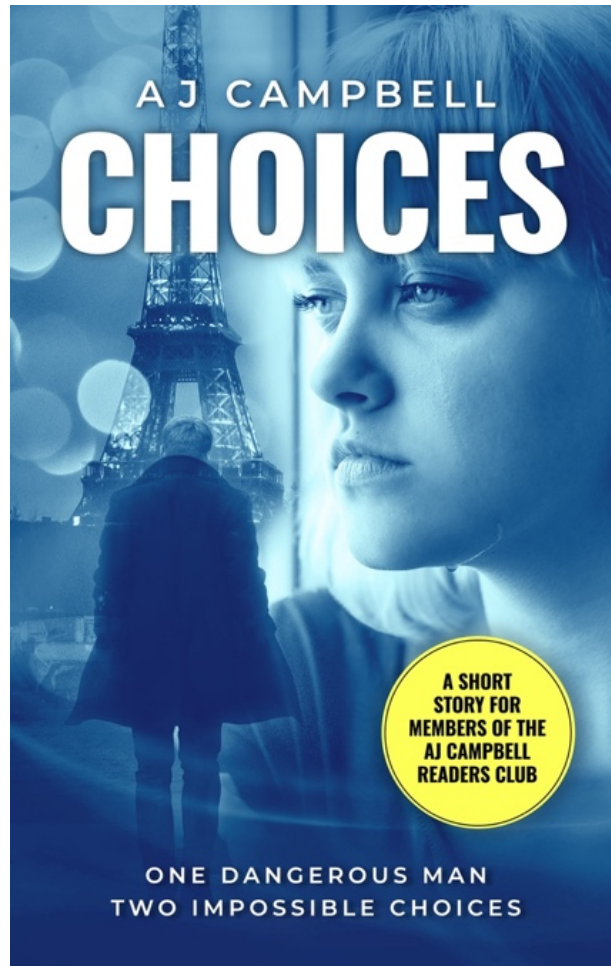
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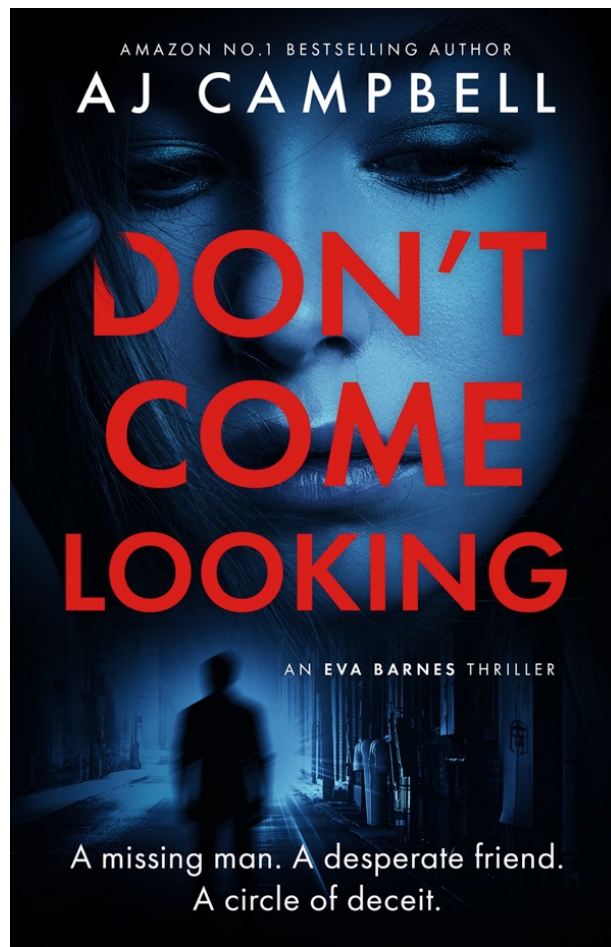
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was preparing to publish my debut novel in 2020, never would I have dreamed that less than two years later, I would be publishing my fourth book. As Joey would say, don't stop dreaming. Never stop dreaming.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



AJ Campbell is the Amazon bestselling author of four psychological suspense novels. She draws inspiration for her writing from many facets of everyday life. The human mind and how different people react to each other and interact in society fascinates her. She loves settling down with a good book and enjoys thought-provoking stories that beg the question – what would I have done in that situation?

AJ lives on the Essex / Hertfordshire border with her husband, sons and cocker spaniel, Max. She enjoys walking Max in the local fields to boost her creativity, and cooking oriental food while sipping a good glass of white wine.



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