

DIE TRYING

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'God does not play dice with the universe'

Albert Einstein

Note to readers:

Thank you for reading this early preview of DIE TRYING. I've been looking forward to sharing this with you for a long time and can't wait to hear your thoughts!

PART ONE

You've got a die. Everyone has a die.

In a dusty drawer full of old batteries, paperclips and instruction manuals for appliances you don't own anymore, or hidden at the bottom of a stationery pot at work. You might wonder how it got there. Leftover from an old board game, perhaps, an old maths set, or a drinking game, the pips starkly playful against the drab minutiae of your life.

Here's the thing: you haven't found it by chance. It's been waiting.

You might pick it up, roll it in your palm. You don't know what it means, so you replace it in the dusty drawer or the stationery pot, unchanged.

But there is another choice. A chance to change your destiny.

Let it fall. You won't be able to resist looking, and then you'll wonder: why this number? Why now?

There's nothing random about it.

1= Connection

2= Do nothing

3= Discomfort

4= Truth

5= Confrontation

6= Wild card

Once a roll is cast, the order must be obeyed. No rerolls for the same question.

You are the die; the die is you.

Play safe.

Chapter One - Adam

I met my wife on the train from Manchester to Bristol. She was sitting in the seat I'd reserved – the one by the window – wedged in place by a stack of bags which took up the entire vacant seat beside her. Normally, I'd keep walking and try to find somewhere else to rest for the next few hours, but having already trudged the length of the carriage to tuts and sighs as I knocked legs and overhanging elbows, I resigned myself to what I thought was the lesser of two evils: confrontation with a stranger.

'Sorry – excuse me. May I sit here?'

She said, 'Yes. Sure!' And then began an awkward production line of bags being passed from her to me to place in the overhead compartments; as all the while I swayed unsteadily towards her armpit, her honey-scented hair, her chest. I tried not to look at her too closely. As soon as I finished and lowered myself into the seat, I realised she was staring at me – or more specifically – the tattoo on my wrist. 'What's that?' she asked. 'Sorry, I know I'm being nosy, but that's – what is it? A shell or something?'

'It's a Fibonacci sequence.'

I've learnt from experience that most people don't like making small talk about Mathematics. They prefer stories. So I told her about how the spiral represented patterns of numbers which could be found everywhere, all over the world: in space, animals, architecture, even art and music. 'And nature. If you look at a sunflower head, how the seeds are all tightly packed together, or the curl of rose petals—'

'Mansplaining much?' she laughed. 'I know what a Fibonacci sequence is.' Then she told me she'd studied Art History at Manchester University and what I had on my wrist was definitely *not* that.

'Ok,' I admitted. 'It isn't. It's actually a lizard's tail.'

She laughed again – harder this time. 'You're fucking with me?'

Fucking. She said fucking.

My body felt too big suddenly, the brush of her arm too close, the smell of her perfume – melon-sweet, a hint of vanilla – too strong. I said she was the first person who'd called me out on it, and observed her properly then: the coral curve of her lips, the playfulness dancing around her eyes, the spidery black-widow lashes which hinted at dangerous promise. I'd intended to get some work done on the train, but she started telling me about her life. She was done with men. Done with being messed about. She was coming down south to see a friend in Wales and take some long-awaited R&R.

'What are you doing, then?' she asked.

'Right now?' I gestured to the closed lid of the laptop in front of me.

'No, in Bristol. That is where you're going, isn't it?'

'Yes, I'm heading home. I was only in Manchester for an IT conference. All very boring.'

'You don't *look* boring.'

What was I supposed to say to that? 'Well,' I managed, eventually. 'I'm not... *all* the time.'

It wasn't supposed to be a joke – although it was a lie, because I am – but she laughed. And then, after clearing the misted-up window with a swipe of her burgundy jumper, she looked at me for a little too long. 'I'm Jemma.'

'I'm Adam.'

By the end of the journey, she'd asked for my number.

'Play again, Daddy!'

'Again?'

'Pleeeasse?'

‘One more time then – *after* I’ve made a cuppa. I’m parched.’

Toby’s hopeful expression dissolves into one of shocked amusement. ‘You parped?’

‘I said parched, not parped.’

My son lets out a squeal of laughter. We’ve played Snakes and Ladders (or Sakes and Ladders, as Toby insists on calling it) three times already and I need to stretch my legs. I leave Toby humming to himself and wander into the kitchen.

We moved here soon after we married, mainly because Jemma’s trademark enthusiasm sold it to me far better than the estate agent ever could. The suited young recruit shuffled behind us in what I presume was uncharacteristic silence as Jemma flounced into every room and furnished it with animation. ‘Oh my God, a *wine* rack! Adam, look at the space under here. Look at the *windows*.’ She touched and stroked random objects – a bedroom radiator, the curve of the porcelain sink, a wooden crest on the bookshelf in the lounge – and proceeded to open and close cupboard doors with all the wonder of a child on Christmas morning.

We put an offer in the following day.

Now, the cupboards are adorned with Toby’s pictures: huge, crude circles with dots for eyes and stalks for limbs, as well as a gold star award from his pre-school for good behaviour and a smear of what I hope is chocolate spread. I give it a quick wipe and run the kettle under the tap. Upstairs, Jemma’s hairdryer roars to life.

‘Snake goes “ssssss”,’ I hear Toby say, in the next room.

I can’t decide whether to cook chicken pasta bake – Toby’s favourite – or wraps for tea. Jemma’s out with friends tonight, so it’ll just be me and...

What *is* that?

I close the fridge door. There it is again; louder this time – a furious buzzing, coming from behind the fruit bowl. A wasp?

‘Mummy,’ Toby calls.

I move the bowl forward. Before I can even wonder what Jemma’s phone is doing there, the screen lights up with a new message:

I’m so hard for you it hurts Xxx

Two messages, in fact, stacked one above the other with a cartoon speech bubble in one corner:

How much longer, sexy? Xxx

There’s an attachment, an image of some sort that thankfully I can’t see. At least, not without unlocking the phone.

The kettle clicks off; the furious bubbling subsides. I rummage in the cupboard and pull out a packet of fusilli. ‘Mummy,’ Toby calls, more insistently this time. ‘Will you come and play with me?’

I push the phone back into its hiding place. ‘I told you Mummy can’t come and play, Tobes. She’s getting ready to go out. I’m just coming.’

Coming.

It’s got to be a wrong number. Or her friends perhaps, messing around. I’ve never quite figured them out, and if I’m being perfectly honest, they terrify me. When Jemma’s with them, her voice rises several octaves as she talks about our sex life, her private parts and Toby’s toilet habits in a singular tone of exaggerated amusement, while the others gawp and gasp and giggle before regaling tales of Rob and Paul’s manhood – or lack of, in Paul’s case. ‘What?’ Jemma laughed once when I had to leave the room. ‘It’s funny.’

It wasn’t funny, though. I pointed out that if *I* were to talk like that with other men, comparing her breast size with that of her friends, she’d rightly see my behaviour as sexist and misogynistic. Not that I have any male friends to talk to. Our neighbourhood is the kind of place where people exchange nothing more than polite pleasantries, and it’s not been as

easy as joining a gym or getting a hobby, or any of that agony-aunt stuff people suggest – I’m often stuck at work until 7 or 8pm, and on the rare occasions when I do get away by five, all I want is to get back home and see my wife and son.

I’m so hard for you it hurts.

No. It’s a mistake; a wrong number. It has to be.

I carry my tea through to the lounge, bumping into Jemma in the hallway. She’s wearing tight black jeans and a patterned black bra, her hair falling in damp waves around her shoulders. Is that fake tan? She doesn’t normally look that bronzed.

‘Have you seen my phone?’

‘Your... yes.’ There are smoky-grey clouds nestled behind her eyelids; an impending storm. I maintain eye contact. ‘In the kitchen. Behind the fruit bowl.’

‘Ok.’

She doesn’t even blink.

Chapter Two

My parents were restless souls. Especially my father. He was always searching for something more, something new, something *better*, I suppose. Mum called it wanderlust, although years later she dropped the ‘wander’ bit and replaced it with something unrepeatable. Every Saturday morning, he’d bounce into my room, commanding me to get up because we were going on a road trip.

This spontaneity was rarely as exciting as it sounds: we moved house thirteen times before my twelfth birthday, and holidays were – as far as I could tell – decided on the flip of a coin or the random stab at a map. A year after I was born, Dad got a work transfer to Sheffield, and no sooner had I completed my first year at primary school than we moved to Uttoxeter, Dudley and then Cardiff.

‘We’ve got each other,’ Mum said cheerfully, when we relocated for the tenth time and I complained that we never lived anywhere long enough to put down roots. ‘You’ll make new friends.’

I didn’t make new friends. I didn’t make any friends. The other children at school had different accents, different hairstyles, different habits. They’d already formed alliances and forged bonds, and I couldn’t see the point in establishing connections with my peers only to be torn away from them again. Instead, I focused on the one thing that remained constant in my life: numbers. I scribbled furiously at sudoku sheets and usually completed Maths challenges long before anyone else had turned the first page. During one pairing-up exercise, I tried explaining my enthusiasm to the boy sitting beside me. ‘Sometimes the answer slowly appears in my head, like joining the dots. I don’t even need to calculate it.’

He didn’t ask to sit by me again.

It wasn't just school that made me feel lonely. Dad wasn't always the carefree, charismatic character you might expect him to be, and I got the sense that Mum and I were never enough for him. Occasionally, his boredom would translate into something manic and unpredictable and he'd play at wrestling, throwing me into the furniture and then pinning me to the floor with the solid mass of his muscular frame until I couldn't breathe. I would feel my eyes bulging from their sockets in terror, and then he'd lower his bony forehead and press it hard against mine, challenging me to tap out. I tried to withstand it, gasping in the sour, stale-coffee odour of his breath for as long as I could bear until a film of stars clouded my vision and then I'd reach out and thump the floor, like a flailing, dying animal. Dad always released his grip immediately then. Sometimes he would make a remark about what a good game it was – particularly if Mum came into the room to see what we were up to – but most of the time he'd just walk away with a triumphant smile.

When we moved to Bristol, Dad had acquired a position in a new company which required him to work longer hours, and the spontaneous weekend road trips slowly fizzled out. I'd joined the local comprehensive school – and even dared hope that, this time, we might be able to stay put for a few years – when Dad started mentioning a work colleague called Kim. He dropped her name into conversation sparingly at first. Kim's performance review was excellent. Kim had some great ideas around the merger. Kim had a bag just like Mum's.

I don't know what happened at the company barbecue. All I remember is Mum coming home in tears. Doors slamming. A charred, acrid smell curling into my throat in folds. An electric toothbrush landing with an inexplicably loud thud at the bottom of the stairs. 'I knew it,' Mum kept saying, in a voice heavy with pain. 'You must have thought I was stupid, but *I knew.*'

Kim was younger – and, I hate to say it, prettier – than Mum, with long dark hair that she continuously stroked and smoothed over one shoulder, as though petting a spaniel. Every Saturday, Dad would pick me up and take me to her house on the outskirts of Bath, where I slept in a tiny room that doubled up as an office, on a blow-up mattress that wheezed and groaned like a bagpipe every time I turned over. I couldn't wait to get home to Mum, even though 'home' was now a flat above a chip shop in Brislington. In a way, this tiny space drew us closer. During the evenings, we'd snuggle on the sofa and watch TV together, and on a Friday night we'd play board games and music to drown out the sound of drunks stumbling outside. Sometimes Mum would dance with me, pressing me to the prickly fabric of her dressing gown while singing Nickelback songs at the top of her voice.

'I love you so much,' she'd say. 'What would I do without you?'

I often wonder where we'd be now, if Mum and Dad were still together. If Mum's spirit wasn't broken by the men that followed. If she hadn't got the job in the charity shop.

If she hadn't brought home the polished-glass die.

Still, it's impossible to see what we set in motion through seemingly random choices. Perhaps everything unfolds exactly as it's supposed to.

That evening, I do what I can to be a good father. I play two more games of Snakes and Ladders, cook Toby's pasta and then, after a quick and messy bath where Toby managed to somehow soak me *and* the floor yet avoid getting a drop of water on his head, put him to bed. I don't mind doing any of this because it's a distraction and a novelty – usually Jemma's the one sorting out the house and seeing to Toby's needs. That might sound sexist, but we talked about all this before Toby was born, and Jemma wanted to be the one to bring him up, not send him to spend his formative years with a weary, overwhelmed childminder. She'd struggled to get work in one of the Bristol museums and, as her temping job didn't earn

anything like as much as mine, it made sense for me to be the one to carry on working full time. But she never seemed happy. When I got home from work, Jemma would complain that she hadn't had any 'me time', that she needed a break, she didn't feel like herself anymore. 'Do you know what it's like to spend the entire day singing nursery rhymes?' she'd spit. And no, of course I didn't, because my day usually comprised of analysing network traffic and fielding sarcastic barbs levelled at me by Spencer, the office prick. So, when Jemma got talking to a mum who tutored at a local college, the seed was sown. She wanted to enrol on a Level 3 course in Sports Massage. She'd be able to work around Toby's school hours when he started school next September, and the extra money would come in handy.

I was baffled. It couldn't be more different as a career choice than Art History. 'You think?' she said. 'You don't think the body is a canvas? I'll be looking at the present and future, instead of the past. And anyway, I won't just be observing; I'll be *interacting*.'

My wife. She has an answer for everything.

Now, with Toby at school three days a week, this is what she does. Painting her nails. Putting her hair up, revealing that luscious expanse of neck. Zipping those black trousers against the gentle curve of her thighs.

Is she happy? Or rather, is she happy with me?

I stroke the plump warmth of Toby's cheek. He's fallen asleep sucking his thumb, and now it falls from the puckered 'o' of his lips.

I creep out of the room and pull the door gently closed behind me. Now what?

I go downstairs and pour myself a glass of water. There *is* more that I can do for my wife. Jemma has been nagging for me for ages to fix the porch light and fill the holes left by the hallway coat hooks. Relationships aren't really all that different from complex networks: you need to understand what's missing in order to troubleshoot arising issues.

I can fix this.

Jemma comes home at midnight. I'm still awake, having ushered Toby back into bed following a nightmare about sharks, and the house feels cold and still. Quiet. I hear the taxi's engine idling through our open bedroom window, the lilting *thanks* of Jemma's goodbye, a slam, the car disappearing up and away from our cul-de-sac. The porch light clicks on; her key scratches noisily against the lock. In a minute she will stumble up the stairs and fit the pieces of her body against the puzzle that is mine, the way she always does when she's had a few drinks.

I am warm now. I wait.

She stays downstairs for what seems like an eternity, on her phone. I can't make out the words, only the low tone of her voice, talking in urgent whispers. And then – eventually – she comes upstairs.

'It was ok,' she says, when I ask her how her night was. After dropping her clothes in a puddle on the floor and slipping into an oversized t-shirt, she doesn't cuddle into me, but shuffles downwards against her pillow in a caterpillar-like manner, yawning theatrically when I lean towards her for a kiss. 'Thought you'd be asleep. I'm knackered.'

I reach out again; she recoils. 'Did you notice that I fixed the porch light?'

'Don't start.'

'What?'

'You were trying to make a thing about how late it is. Just don't start, ok? I'm tired.'

'I'm not making a thing of anything.'

'No, of course you're not. You never do. Just this passive aggressive shit all the time. What do you want – a medal for fixing a stupid light?'

'Why are you being like this?'

'I'm not *being like* anything. If you don't like the way I am, you don't have to stick it.'

She sits up, suddenly. 'Why don't you ever go out or do anything? It's weird.'

I don't reply, even though I could tell her that it's even weirder to hide your phone behind the fruit bowl. Or to get a message saying... No. I won't think about that. I want to tell her that the reason I don't go out with friends is because I chose to live here, with her, hundreds of miles away from mine. That when it comes to a choice between a drink with a bunch of smug arseholes from work or doing nothing on the sofa cuddled up with my wife and son, my family will always win, hands down.

In the end, I say nothing. I don't want to wake Toby up. I don't want a row.

Jemma tugs aggressively at the sheet and then rolls away from me, her body a small island silhouetted beneath the covers. The porch light continues to shine, too brightly, through the thin bedroom curtains.

Chapter Three

The office where I work is a drab grey building, with a revolving door and lifts which never seem to be properly cleaned: the buttons to the third floor bear the ghostly whorls of dozens of fingerprints. I jab at it with my elbow and stare vacantly at the vertical line of the closed doors as the lift begins its ascent. I've been working for Smithson Wealth Management for the past two years and enjoyed it until the reshuffle – or 'streamlining', as our ex-manager put it – just before Christmas, when they replaced almost every member of staff I'd built a rapport with. Now, we're a 'family', according to Seb, the office manager. A family expected to attend bingo once a month, lunch together every Friday and stay on until at least 7pm most evenings.

Jemma, when I first told her this, was furious. 'Family? Tell him to go fuck himself – you've got a family, and you'll leave at 5pm, because you're not paid after that. Jesus.'

How could I say that, when everyone else – mostly unattached, mostly child-free – seemed happy to enjoy the perks of the new management? Not only that, they were fearful of the rumours swirling: that there might be another round of redundancies. I didn't attend bingo or lunch. I tried to compromise on the time I finished work, sliding out at 5.30 or 6pm, and consequently disappointed everyone in the process.

'Fuck me, you look rough,' says Spencer, as I walk in. He's manspreading on the corner of Katya's desk, swinging one leg as though it's a second penis. I move over to my own desk and lay down my briefcase. 'Morning.'

'Hot night with the wife, was it?'

Katya sniggers.

I don't bite. 'Did you get the Actisoft account?'

‘I’ll take that as a yes.’ Spencer laughs and touches Katya’s shoulder before jumping from the desk. ‘Certainly did. I can’t get my shitting laptop to work for long enough to set up the contract our end though – take a look at it for me, would you?’

Spencer may think his balls are bigger than mine just because he’s Seb’s favourite employee, lapping up bingo, free lunches and 8pm finishes like a corporate terrier, but he’s still in here with the rest of us. Sometimes I fantasise about winning the lottery and coming in here the morning after my win, taking a piss all over his desk and watching the hot yellow liquid trace a path through the mess of paperwork, soaking into the components of his laptop. I’ve fantasised about picking up my stuff and walking out too, but now that Toby’s getting older there seem to be no end of additional expenses. Trampolining club. Toys. Dress-up day and summer fete for pre-school. Clothes. Food. More clothes. More food. Not to mention the mortgage and bills.

‘I’ll take a look at it tomorrow, if that’s ok? I’ve got some connectivity issues to sort out with staff who are working from home. They haven’t got—’

‘It needs to be done today, or Seb won’t be happy. We’re talking major impact here.’

Why didn’t you give it to me earlier, then? I sink onto my chair and start setting up my own laptop at the desk beside the window. ‘Bring it over and I’ll do it during lunch.’

‘Thanks.’

Spencer switches his attention back to Katya and I try to zone out her flirtatious titters as his self-obsessed rambling continues. In the kitchen, the microwave pings and a few seconds later, Chloe from HR drifts across the office, carrying a mug of something foul-smelling. I want to focus on work, but my mind keeps pulling me back to Toby. Or more specifically, how Toby pushed me away this morning as I tried to kiss him goodbye. A swirl of sweaty blonde hair, one sticky finger jabbing at the Snakes and Ladders board. *Your turn,*

Mummy. His squeal of macabre delight as Jemma landed on the head of a snake, slithering all the way to the bottom of the board. ‘Bye, then,’ I said to them both. ‘Love you.’

Nothing. Not even a backwards glance.

I spend the next few hours fixing issues and then take a break while running a debug check, watching through the slatted blinds as people scurry about on the pavement outside: a grey-haired man shouting into a mobile phone, the jogger who steps into the road to avoid two women with pushchairs, a couple of men wearing high-viz jackets, laughing at a joke I can’t hear. My feta sandwich tastes of dust. The office is quiet now; most of the others have gone out to lunch. I can’t tell if it’s my nagging headache that’s causing the pain, or my jaw. I must have been grinding my teeth again last night; there was blood on my pillow when I awoke.

I drop the rest of the sandwich in the bin and open up Spencer’s screen.

I try to call Jemma on my way home. She doesn’t pick up. The car has trapped all the heat of the day and the air conditioning seems to be broken; it’s circulating thick, soupy air which rushes out when I open a window. I’m relieved to be getting away from work early for once, but I need to talk to my wife.

I’m sorry, the person you are calling...

Is it my imagination, or does the recorded voice sound more apologetic than usual? I hit the ‘end call’ button on my caller display and swing out of the car park. Perhaps we could get a takeaway. Not that I’m in the mood for one, but it would make Toby happy, as well as giving us a break from cooking. I picture his face, lighting up at the suggestion of ‘getting a Donimoes’. The cheeky clasp of his hands. And then he’ll position himself at the window, firing off a relentless set of questions: *how long ’til the livery man gets here? What is he wearing, Daddy? Shall I give him some of mine?*

It's only when I reach the end of the street that I see another car reversing off our drive. It's a black BMW which emits a throaty growl as it spins around and then accelerates past me, so quickly that I'm almost forced onto the pavement.

'Some idiot almost took me out,' I tell Jemma, when I go indoors. She's standing with her back to me, putting clean plates back into the cupboard. Her hair is tied up in a loose knot and several long dark tendrils have fallen free, clinging alluringly to the narrow ledge of her shoulders. She starts babbling that Toby's upstairs having a nap; he's been a little monkey today, she didn't manage to get anything done. She does this when she's nervous.

Or lying.

I think of the takeaway I'd been planning. The three of us snuggled on the sofa afterwards, watching *Spiderman*, the scent of warm dough still rich in the air. Yet, for some reason, I fuck it all up by asking the question: 'Was that him?'

'Mm?'

A pause, fat and heavy, strains against the brief silence.

And then, from Jemma, a sigh. Not '*who?*' Not the immediate bewildered denial that I was hoping for. She turns around, and her eyes drift to a point somewhere over my right shoulder. 'Oh. Yes.'

I can feel something stretching inside me, like the corners of a mouth pulled too wide. Her slim fingers are still resting gently on one of the plates that were bought for us as a wedding present. She looks so irritatingly beautiful. It dawns on me that the flush of her skin, the endless new clothes she's been buying 'for work', the renewed interest in jogging and healthy eating weren't borne of a desire to 'be a better person' – they were for him. The asshole in the BMW. She turns; moves her fingers to my arm. They feel like spider's legs.

'Ad—'

I pull away. 'I'm going to check on Toby.'

Chapter Four

His name is Dan Bretti.

I don't want to know this, but Jemma tells me anyway. She met him at work when he came in to buy a voucher for his sister. He's ex-forces – of course – with a *huge...* brief pause, as Toby calls for her to tuck him in... collection of photos from the places he's been all over the world. She tells me all this when I'm getting ready for bed. She can't stand the silence or the secrecy anymore, but she didn't want me to find out this way. She feels *terrible*.

'You haven't slept with him.' It comes out as a statement, not a question. When she doesn't reply straightaway, I add a plea. 'Have you?'

'No, of course not!' Jemma half-laughs at the very suggestion. 'Do you know what? I'm actually glad it's all out in the open now – I just hate living like this. Our marriage...' she sighs. 'I'm not happy, Adam.'

I line up my pillow with the headboard. It's part of a bed set she bought online. Red flowers, a tangle of something green. Anything but look at my wife, who is beautiful and hideous all at once, a kind of Cleopatra-Medusa hybrid. My insides have already turned to stone.

'I think... I just *thought* I was,' she goes on. 'We've got so settled, haven't we? Things are stale... everything is just so *dull*, and you know that's not me. We're such different people. And all the stuff I used to do – the holidays, the road trips... I don't know... being fucking spontaneous – I miss that.'

'Life *is* dull most of the time when you've got a mortgage and a small child, Jem. Don't forget your pillow.'

She takes it from my outstretched hand. She's offered to sleep in the spare room tonight, and so she should. I wish I'd asked what had actually happened between them. I want

to know, and yet at the same time, I don't. Who was it that said all truths are half-truths; that all half-truths are lies? My brain is scrambling to fill in the gaps, and right now my head feels like it's Swiss cheese.

'I'm sorry, Adam.'

I pretend to mess with my alarm clock. 'Yeah.'

After she leaves the room, I lower myself onto the bed and fold my legs mechanically beneath the covers. Dan Bretti. I resist googling him, only because seeing his face would make him real. Instead, I try to console myself with the knowledge that it won't last. I'm her anchor, solid and dependable, that's what she told me before we married. The one person who stops her from drifting into dangerous waters.

What has she done? How could she, when we have Toby? When we have *us*.

The grinding will be worse tonight; I can already feel the twitch in my jaw. That's if I sleep at all. My legs have started to jerk of their own accord – I can't get comfortable – and before I know it, I'm half-smothered between Jemma's pillow and my own. My mind is offering me an intimate, private viewing: Jemma's fingers on Dan's body, kissing hungrily. His hands, on her. It's repulsive, and yet... the images send a rush of energy, stinging at my groin. How am I *aroused*?

Disgusting. I am disgusting.

'Alan, isn't it?'

'*Adam*.'

Sebastian Wiggin peers at me. He's in the middle of eating a breakfast baguette which has fallen open in front of him on the desk: the bacon is hanging out like a bleeding tongue against a slush of half-chewed egg.

‘I wondered if I could talk to you. Spencer asked me to take a look at his PC due to performance issues; I’ve performed a clean-up several times. It’s just that I’ve uncovered something, well...’

Sebastian lifts the baguette to his mouth and I wish I’d left the door open. The smell of egg is overpowering.

‘I thought it needed reporting, from an ethical point of view. It appears there have been a number of searches made to websites during work time that are of—’

I break off as Sebastian begins a furious coughing fit that sends particles of meat and egg flying in all directions. He wheezes dramatically, thumps a fist to his fleshy chest and then flaps a hand to indicate that I can carry on.

‘Well, the nature of the content was pornography.’

‘Sorry?’

I didn’t need to open the links to know what Spencer had been looking at: the titles – *Up for Anything*, *Barely Legal* – showed exactly what kind of man he was. The kind who thinks nothing of objectifying other people’s daughters, sisters, mothers, wives. The kind who uses valuable work time to indulge in perverted misogynistic fantasies. ‘Porn.’

‘Oh.’ There’s a long pause. Sebastian seems to be digesting what I’ve just told him, and his mouth twitches into a faint smile. There’s a string of bacon caught between two of his top teeth. ‘Oh dear.’

‘I’ve cleaned his device, although I did keep a print-out of all the websites and the times they were accessed. But I’m not – it’s not my intention to get him into trouble. I just wanted to pass the information on because, well, not only will he keep having technical issues if this isn’t addressed, it just seemed like the right—’

‘Can I have these print-outs, please?’

‘Yes.’

They're in my laptop bag. I tug the four sheets free and pass them over. Sebastian doesn't look at them, but slides them close to the baguette. I feel an overwhelming urge to lean over and throw it in the bin.

'Thank you, Alan,' Sebastian says, crisply.

What did I expect? He was hardly going to reprimand Spencer on the spot, but I'd hoped he might express some concern or suggest a meeting to discuss the company's core values. Namely, integrity.

'Was there anything else?'

A photograph on his desk catches my eye. Sebastian has a young child. How has a man like him kept a family together? My mind slides back to this morning: Toby giving me the run around as I tried to get him dressed; Jemma upstairs on the landing, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she tapped at her phone. The image I'd had as I pulled away, remembering how she used to hold our son up at the window to wave me off to work, and how his legs would thump excitedly against her. This morning, the narrow wooden blinds remained half drawn. There was nobody behind them.

'No.'

'Alright.' Sebastian reaches for the baguette again. 'Send Chloe in, would you?'

Sebastian is positively jovial at the team meeting, showering Spencer with praise for smashing the projected months' sales targets and suggesting that the commission he'll earn on repeat business alone will be enough to pay off a sizeable chunk of his mortgage. There's no mention of his unethical internet searches. Pizza boxes are pushed across the tables, and beside me, Katya keeps topping up her wine glass. Afterwards, when most of my colleagues peel off for an extended lunch at a nearby bar, I log into my laptop and Toby's grinning,

toothy smile appears. He's wearing the t-shirt that one of Jemma's friends bought, that he grew out of in no time at all: *50% Mummy, 50% Daddy*.

0% Dan Brett.

Have I done the right thing in reporting Spencer? Perhaps I over-reacted – Sebastian hardly seemed concerned about Spencer's searches, and now I'm wondering if I'm the bad guy here. The snake. Did I do it because I imagine Dan to be exactly the same kind of arrogant asshole as Spencer? *I'm so hard for you it hurts*.

I open my emails and scan them quickly. There's an invite to a works party in three weeks' time to celebrate fifteen years of Smithson Wealth Management – *respond ASAP please!* – a few programming queries and several spam messages which I delete without opening. And then, without thinking, I log into Facebook. I need to check that the Jemma from before – the Jemma who used to stroke the soft cleft at the back of my neck and say that every bit of me was perfect – was ever real.

I comb through the photos, right back to the early ones of us together. The selfie from the boat at West Country Waterpark, where we're both grinning huge open smiles into the camera; I can still feel the touch of her fingers as she rubbed sun cream into my back. We'd gone to buy ice creams afterwards and I remember thinking how strange it was that she'd ordered vanilla, because she wasn't a vanilla person at all. She was popping candy, cherry fusion, honeycomb flakes and toffee sauce.

I ended up ordering vanilla too.

I scroll down. Jemma in sunglasses and sandals, on Weston-Super-Mare beach. Me, holding a milk-filled bottle towards the open mouth of a goat at the petting zoo. Jemma again, this time sporting a tight black dress and red-and-black wig for Halloween that made her look vamp-like and even more sexy, if such a thing were possible. Whose party was that? Some friend of Jemma's with young children – I can remember them crying upstairs as a violent

beat thumped from a speaker in the cramped kitchen. Jemma had downed shots with the girls as I hovered near the other men, trying and failing to join in with their banter, until someone vomited down my back and we made our exit into the cold night, Jemma clutching and stumbling against me.

It was about three months after that party when she found out she was pregnant. ‘I was so sick, the morning after,’ she reminded me with a groan. ‘The pill doesn’t work if you’re sick. My God, a *baby*. Can you believe that? An actual miniature human. What do I do? We’re not ready to be parents, are we?’

I told her it was her body; she should do whatever felt right. We talked, sometimes late into the night, about different outcomes. Would we regret it if we did? Would we regret it if we didn’t? When she told me she’d made up her mind, it still didn’t feel real – not until we went for the first scan and I saw our son’s oversized head, an arm moving in the blackness of Jemma’s womb. The rushing gallop of his heart.

I cried.

I told myself I would be a better father than mine had ever been. I would be there for my son, every step of the way.

We sped up our wedding plans, and five months into the pregnancy, we became man and wife. For better for worse, in sickness and in health, we would remain faithful to one another.

For as long as we both shall live. Those were our vows; I meant every word.

I still do.

Chapter Five

It occurs to me, after trawling through our Facebook memories, that Jemma and I haven't had a date night for a while. I consider booking The Lofthouse for old times' sake, but when I google the restaurant to make the booking, an epiphany strikes. *Surprise your partner*, the homepage screams.

All of a sudden, it makes sense. This is exactly what Jemma has been asking of me; I just haven't been listening. I need to show her that I'm willing to take myself out of my comfort zone.

I leave The Lofthouse page and spend a few minutes scrolling through activity days that we could do together instead. Bungee jumping is out of the question, but I could probably manage off-road driving, or a Segway. The photos depict smiling couples, armoured in knee pads and helmets, rolling through a sun-dappled forest. It looks ridiculous. Jemma will love it.

This, then. This is the fix.

I run my credit card through the payment page and hit print.

Jemma messages me to let me know that she's taking Toby to a friend's house after work, giving me the chance to tidy the house and put a wash load on. I tell myself I'm not playing music in anticipation of her return but for me alone, smiling to the songs I know she loves. Did I mention she's obsessed with Abba? I can't hear *Dancing Queen* or *The Winner Takes It All* without thinking of the way she danced on our wedding day – arms aloft, face aglow – just like I can't listen to *Green Green Grass* without thinking of Toby singing tunelessly along, over and over again. Sometimes he still asks me to put nursery rhymes on in the car, which fills me with a sense of helpless dread, as though a sharpened hole has opened up inside.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Jemma comes home just after eight. There's a red flush around her slightly swollen mouth and chin, and her hair looks like it's been in one of those fairground candyfloss machines. 'We've been playing, haven't we, Tobe?' she says, by way of explanation.

'Archie's mum gave me fish fingers,' Toby says, wriggling his small body to allow Jemma to free his arms from his light summer jacket. 'I eated them all.'

'Ate,' I correct. 'Good boy.'

I wonder if this is how drug addicts feel when they get a long-awaited fix. The house is suddenly transformed with colour, sound and soul. I feel my nerve endings relax, and turn to Jemma. 'Did you have a good day?'

'Busy,' she says, dropping the keys on the kitchen side and going to open the oven door. She smells musky. Another odour too; sour and slightly sweet. 'What's this?'

'Peri peri chicken. I wasn't sure if you were going to eat while you were out, so...'

'I have.' She slams the oven door closed.

I don't get a chance to show Jemma the tickets until I've bathed Toby and read him a story. When I come back downstairs, I'm careful to close the hallway door behind me – our son is like a bulldog on steroids at bedtime and has a habit of bounding downstairs for hours afterwards – and if things go well, I'm hoping to show her the affection I am sure she feels has been missing from me. Whatever did or didn't happen with Dan Bretti, he was the symptom, not the cause. We won't just wipe the slate clean: we'll strip and revarnish it, paint it in gold.

I can't see Jemma in the kitchen, or the lounge. At first, I think she's gone out, but then I find her in the conservatory, tapping at her phone. The box of Playmobil at her feet is scattered all over the rug beside the coffee table and I feel a fleeting twinge of annoyance – she was supposed to ask Toby to pick that up.

She looks up. 'What?'

'He's in bed.'

I step over the discarded plastic toys to reach the sofa and hold out the folded paper. 'I've got something for you. Well, us. I know you said things have been boring and I'm prepared to try and work things out.'

She puts her phone down. 'You want to do Segway?'

'Not me. *Us*.'

Her laugh isn't cruel, more pitying. 'It's not exactly you, is it? *Or* me.' She laughs again; the paper drifts gently onto the sofa cushion. 'Those things look like Zimmer frames on wheels.'

The tears rise without warning, clouding my vision.

'For fuck's *sake*,' Jemma says. 'Are you seriously crying because I don't want to do a Segway?'

'It's not... I'm *trying*, Jem. You said you weren't happy, you said you wanted to do something spontaneous. I don't want to lose you. Or Toby...' I stand up. A plastic toy bites into my foot. 'Please. I can't... we can work this out. I'll do anything – we can try counselling, or... I don't know – *tell* me! Tell me what I need to do.'

She's turned the music off and it's too quiet; my voice sounds needy and desperate. I had it all ready; our wedding song was on this playlist. Track three – two minutes, fifty-eight seconds. I didn't know how to dance properly so I'd followed her lead, moving across the wood-polished floor and watching the patchwork of coloured lights reflect off the back of her

white dress. She was so close it was as though we were one person. Looking back, it feels like we were in some magical, psychedelic version of Heaven.

I reach for her. ‘Jem...’

I don’t mean to grab her top.

I don’t mean to pull her back.

She stumbles on a piece of upturned Playmobil, clutching wildly at the air as she pirouettes wildly, then falls. Her head hits the coffee table with a crack. A heavy silence follows, and then I’m beside her, scared to touch, frozen speechless by the drops of blood spreading like rose petals across the white Ikea rug.

‘Jem.’ I place my hand on her shoulder. ‘*Jem.*’

She lifts her face. The flesh above her eyebrow is already swelling around the oozing thread of broken skin. ‘I need to get you to hospital. Shit. *Shit.*’

‘What the fuck, Adam?’ Jemma sits up. ‘I’m... look at the rug. Get me a cloth or something.’

I run to the kitchen and dampen a wad of kitchen roll. My hands are shaking so much I drop it into the sink, and that’s when I see that Jemma’s blood is on my hands. What have I done? I do not want to go back into that room – I *cannot* go back – my feet are suddenly immobile, and I feel as if I’m going to be sick. What a piece of shit. My wife has seen straight through me, because there is nothing to see inside. I am not good enough. I have never been enough.

The kitchen roll is still dripping when I return to the lounge. I press it to Jemma’s face and apologise repeatedly before asking if she is able to stand. ‘I need to get you to the hospital. Can you stand? Jem, I’m so sorry - we should probably—’

‘I’m not going to the hospital, Adam. Look, it’s stopping now.’ She lifts the paper away and I can see that she’s right – the blood has dried onto her face; the wound is no longer seeping. It doesn’t look as deep as I first thought.

‘Don’t you think we should at least get it checked out?’

She stands up and moves over to the mirror. ‘You know what? Maybe we should, and I can tell them I “fell into a coffee table”. It’s not going to look good, is it?’

‘I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to. But if you need to be seen...’

We both fall silent. Toby is staring at us through the closed glass door.

He looks terrified.

Chapter Six - Jemma

I watch Toby hang his coat and lunchbox on the peg, then run to join a small red-haired boy at the window where his keyworker – Jenny – is pointing at something outside. There are miniature chairs beside miniature tables, a rainbow-coloured rug in front of a spotless whiteboard, clusters of toys inside plastic trays, coloured letters and drawings tacked onto the display board: *In our class: We make good choices. We are hardworking. We are positive. We are honest.*

Honest. We assured Toby that everything was fine. So, no, we are not honest; not with him or ourselves. I've brought him to preschool early in the hope that I could drop and run, but Margo wants to talk to me. She's the manager, and her short stature and girlish, high-pitched voice fool many into thinking she's a pushover, but they couldn't be more wrong. I've heard the steel in her voice when the children misbehave – it's enough to send chills down *my* spine. Today, she has her dark hair pulled back with a brown scrunchie; a few wiry strands of silver appear to have worked their way loose, and she's talking about how advanced Toby's numerical skills are for his age. 'Remarkably so,' she says. 'It's not just the counting – he can associate and combine numbers in a way that's quite unusual.'

'Wow. That's... really great to hear.'

A queue is forming behind me. I've brushed my hair over the bruise, and attempt a nod while tilting my head at an angle. Could the injury be considered a safeguarding issue even if my child isn't hurt? How do these things work? I imagine Margo or Jenny interrogating Toby, asking whether Daddy hit Mummy. I'm still mortified at them showing me Toby's drawing a few weeks ago – *My Mummy's job* – where he'd depicted me as a stick figure standing beside another stick figure lying naked on a bed, even adding a cartoonish penis and testicles. Margo had laughed, but of course she was curious. I told her I wasn't a sex worker – God, no! – although it was a shame my client yesterday didn't get the memo. He seemed nice

enough at first, folding his t-shirt and jeans neatly onto the stool and talking passionately about his wife and kids until halfway through the massage when he asked if I offered ‘extras’. As if eighteen months of training in soft tissue injury and rehabilitation equalled giving random horny strangers a hand job. I told him to get dressed and get out, then went home feeling disgusted and disappointed. Maybe I would have been kinder to Adam if *that* hadn’t happened, because the accident wasn’t his fault, but sometimes he can be so crushingly intense that I find myself fighting for air. Sometimes, I think that, if I make Adam small, he might let me go. When I tried to break up with him a year ago, his eyes immediately became dark, fluid-filled discs of sorrow. ‘You can’t,’ he said. ‘I can’t live without you. Toby can’t live without me, Jem. I’ll do better.’

And he *did* do better, just like he always does. Buying me gifts, giving me lifts, serving my every need. ‘Mr Perfect’, my little sister Hannah calls him. She’s still in Manchester, close to Mum and Dad and all the friends I left behind when Adam insisted we could offer our son a better standard of life here.

There’s a crick in my neck now. I’m about to straighten – fuck my swollen cut, let them see – when Margo tells me to have a lovely day, and I’m free to go. I hurry back along the corridor, waving hello to some of the mums I would normally stop and chat to, leaving the display of neon-coloured children’s handprints fluttering in my wake. Outside, I collide with Frankie at the corner of the building on the way back to my car. ‘Have you dropped off *already?*’ she says. And then, as the wind makes a mockery of my attempts to hold my hair in place and her son Blake starts tugging at her hand, ‘What happened to your head?’

I hadn’t wanted to see anyone today, but I’ve known Frankie since the boys started at nursery, and she’s the only person I’ve spoken to about Dan. She admitted to having had an affair shortly before splitting with the father of her eldest child, Matty – now a teenager – and I appreciated the way she listened without judgement. *I* would have judged me. I never used

to understand people who had affairs and always wondered why they didn't just leave, but now I can see it's not always as simple as that. Maybe they tried. Maybe they decided to stay for other reasons, nothing to do with love. Maybe they were unable to ignore the chemistry with the one person who made them feel truly alive, truly *seen*. Maybe they couldn't escape the painful knowledge that something was deeply wrong in their marriage.

Frankie tells me to hang on, and I wait in my car until she emerges without Blake ten minutes later, sidestepping the puddles in her heels, long coat flapping in the breeze. She climbs into the passenger seat beside me and glances at the clock on the dash. 'I can't talk for long, I've got work in half an hour,' she says. 'You look really upset. Are you ok? What's going on?'

'It was an accident. Sort of. Adam booked some stupid Segway experience, and I – I don't think he meant to grab me, but I ended up stepping on one of Toby's Playmobil tractors and—what?'

'He *grabbed* you?' She pulls a face which makes me feel the need to defend Adam. What I call 'being nice', Frankie calls *love-bombing*. She rolls her eyes every time we go out for a drink and Adam arrives to pick us up, always earlier than arranged. I always thought it was sweet he cared so much about my safety – previous boyfriends have never been that bothered – but Frankie doesn't see it as sweet, she says it's a violation of my time and privacy. I pull Toby's monster toy from the footwell and throw it into the back, where it lands on his car seat. 'I lost my balance and whacked my head on the table. I just wish Toby hadn't seen. We assured him it was fine, but... well, it's not, is it? It's all such a fucking mess. I've told Adam he can't stay in the house anymore.'

'Bet that went down well.'

'Actually, I think he felt so bad about hurting me that he would have agreed to anything. I've tried to frame it as a great opportunity to test how we feel about each other

during a trial separation, you know? I said it might be fun for Toby to have sleepovers with Daddy every weekend, and we'd both get a bit of space to decide what we want.'

'Jem, you know how he feels. You know what he wants.' Frankie pulls that face again. The one Mum used to pull when I'd forgotten my school lunchbox, or said something moronic. 'You. It's always you.'

'Yeah, I know. Don't make me feel worse.'

'Where's he going to live? With parents, or—'

'No. His mum's dead, he doesn't speak to his dad.' The irony isn't lost on me that his parents split up when his dad cheated, something he's never forgiven him for. 'I don't even know if we can afford to live apart – I'm going to call Citizen's Advice this afternoon. Have you got any rental flats or bedsits that might be worth a look?'

'Yeah, I'm sure we do. I'll send some links when I get into the office.' Frankie tugs at the bottom of her coat, where it's trapped in the door, and I catch a burst of Chanel perfume. She glances at the clock again. 'Sorry, I'm going to have to go. Are you working today?'

'No, day off. I desperately want to see Dan, but not looking like this. And I think it's important to sort things out between me and Adam first.'

She says she'll call me later and gets out of the car, and I try to put all thoughts of Dan out of my head on the drive home. His face. His body. The roughness of his palm, scraping up and down my naked shoulder, bringing me to life.

A fucking mess.

Toby; that's who I should be thinking of. His World Book Day costume, paying for the *Wild Things* visit, ordering a new preschool sweatshirt, because I somehow managed to shrink his current one in the wash and his spare has gone the same way as odd socks and lost change.

I unlock the front door and swat a damp cloth around the kitchen surfaces. While I'm unloading the dishwasher, a new Facebook notification pops up from my sister, Hannah. She's shared a picture of her and Mum in the garden with Dad. *To one of the strongest men I know. Happy birthday, Dad!*

He looks so tired. Tired, brown as he ever was – Dad loves sitting out in the sun – yet somehow reduced, like a teabag with all the liquid squeezed out. A generous smattering of sugar on top, because Dad has never lost his hair, not a single strand, despite his cancer diagnosis two years ago. Two pelvic operations have left him with a limp, reliant on a cane for walking anywhere further than the top of the street.

And I'm not there for his birthday.

I should have ignored Adam's protestations and taken Toby out of preschool for a few days to go up to Manchester. What harm would it have done? I feel heavy under the weight of Adam's piety. *He can't miss preschool Jem, it'll set a precedent.*

A precedent. A fucking precedent.

In the lounge, there's the unmistakeable trace of a dark spot on the rug where Adam had scrubbed and scrubbed at my blood last night, far longer than he needed to.

It's going to take forever to dry.

Chapter Seven - Adam

Over the next few weeks, Jemma spends most of her free time talking to her friend Frankie and googling rental properties on my behalf. I've been trying to avoid the subject, skimming conversations with the lightest of touch, hoping that her enthusiasm for our separation will fade along with her yellowing bruise.

It doesn't. If anything, she's more passionate than I've seen her for a long time, thrusting her phone under my nose and describing grey tomb-like bedsits as 'cute', 'cosy', 'quirky'.

In other words, you couldn't swing a limbless cat in them. Not only that, they're expensive. We just about make ends meet now – how could we possibly afford to pay a mortgage *and* rent on a grubby little broom cupboard?

Jemma assures me she's looked into it and the extra help she'd get from the government as a single mother will cover the bills. 'It's a trial separation,' she reminds me. 'We both need to sort our heads out. You'll still be able to come back in the evenings and give Toby his bath and bedtime story.'

'What about...?' I can't bring myself to say his name. *Dan Bretti*. 'Him. I don't want you to see him. I don't want him in our house.'

'Ok,' she says. 'Fair donuts.'

We're sitting side by side on the sofa and, even though her cut has now faded to a silvery underscore, I can't look at her. I'm such a fucking idiot. A fool. I've told Jemma what happened was an accident, it will never happen again, and there's so much more I want to say, but a voice keeps reminding me that I don't deserve to stay.

I am ugly and inadequate. I am a nobody.

Yet there's a powerful sensation, like pain, spreading across my ribs. I can't help it. I have to ask the question.

‘What if I say no? What if I refuse to leave?’

‘I’d make your life fucking intolerable,’ she says. And then she laughs, to make out she is joking.

I know my wife. She isn’t.

We’ve told Toby that I’ll be going on an adventure for a little while. Jemma even manages to get Toby excited, deploying her used-car sales technique as effectively on him as she did with me: ‘Just think, Tobes. You won’t just have one house, you’ll have two! It’ll be so cool – you and Daddy can have sleepovers together.’

Now, standing in the kitchen of the cramped rental bedsit, the only thing that seems cool is the draught coming through the rusted hinge of the second-floor window. Without Jemma here, the place looks drab, uninspiring and absurdly small. A room which once would have served as a lounge or dining room is split squarely in two, with the kitchen taking up one half, living room the other. I dump the last box onto the mouse-grey carpet beside the two small settees. Am I really doing the right thing? It doesn’t feel like it. I’m not just talking about the time we’ve shared together, but our future, which previously I’d been able to envisage, clear as the tattoo on my wrist. Jemma and I with another child – the sibling that Toby keeps begging us for. The two of us; older, greying, arms intertwined on the deck of a ship, watching the setting sun. All of Toby’s milestones and achievements – dropping him off for his first day at school, watching him run like a wild dog on sports day, cheering him, consoling him, loving him, even sharing a first pint as he turns eighteen – are now shrouded in mist, vague and unclear.

How can it be this easy for things to fall apart?

There’s something arresting about silence, bordering almost on the malevolent, when you’re not used to it. Our home is characterised by noise: the tumble and thump of the clothes

in the washing machine, Jemma's ringtone chiming, Toby singing along to the *Racers* theme tune, the thud and clatter of doors being closed, cutlery laid, plugs being pulled from sockets. Without Jemma, without Toby, who am I? Am I even really here?

I step around the boxes and move to the window. The curtains are white with pale grey streaks – the colour of pigeon shit – and smell faintly of mildew. Outside, on the other side of the car park, an empty Tesco bag flutters against the gutter.

It's not for long. My tongue probes at the flap of bitten skin inside my cheek. I'm about to turn away from the window when an old couple come into view. They are holding hands, moving slowly across the car park before disappearing around the row of garages on the other side. I wonder if they have ever fought, physically. I wonder if either of them has ever cheated.

It's a funny word, cheat. As though love is a game.

Perhaps it is.

And then I see the ladybird, climbing up the inside of the glass: red, shiny as wet paint, with three black spots on each wing. I wonder if I brought it in with me, or whether it came in through the window. There was an article I read a few years ago about a species of aggressive ladybirds that had swarmed the U.K. and – astonishingly – carried sexually transmitted diseases, threatening our native species. I can still remember the conversation I'd had with Jemma about it. '*Seriously?*' she said. 'That's too funny. Promiscuous ladybirds? Must be nature's way of warning us not to fuck around.'

Seems ironic I should think of that now.

I spend the early part of the evening unpacking my few meagre belongings, hanging up my clothes in the wardrobe and watching crap on TV. At 6pm, I call Jemma. She doesn't pick up.

I wonder if she's in the bath. We used to share baths, in the early days. She'd wrap her painted toes around my shoulders, giggling, as my back rubbed against the cold taps.

There's no bath in the flat, so I take a shower instead. I allow some of the hot water to trickle in between my parted lips and imagine Jemma soaping my chest, moving down lower, giggling as our naked bodies slip and slide against the glass. Yes. Yes, Jemma.

But when I open my eyes, all I can see is mould stippling the grouting, like dozens of tiny black pips. I keep rinsing myself, rinsing and rinsing until the water has taken away my shame, sluicing it down the plughole.

It's getting dark now; I can hear cars revving in the distance, the occasional police siren, music from one of the nearby flats. People will be getting ready to go out to bars and clubs, hook up for casual sex, or wind down for the weekend with a takeaway or video game. I don't want to do any of those things. I towel myself dry, change into fresh boxers and a t-shirt and try Jemma's mobile again. It's engaged.

I wait a few minutes, thinking she might be trying to get through. It's something that used to happen all the time when we first got together. 'How spooky,' she'll say, when we finally connect with each other. 'We must have literally been thinking the same thing!'

She doesn't, though. My phone remains silent.

I get up again, peer out at the darkening sky. One of the streetlights is flickering, periodically illuminating a dark shape sticking out from the side of the garages. It looks like it could be human, but upon closer inspection appears to be nothing more than a rusted bike beside a couple of binbags disgorging their contents. A lamp goes on in a flat on the other side of the car park. A woman in a dressing gown appears, opens her fridge and removes a bottle of wine. The light clicks off again.

Is Jemma on the phone to Dan Bretti?

I wonder if she's reaching for a bottle as she talks, preparing for a cosy night in without me. What will they talk about? She gets loose-tongued when she drinks, and horny. Or at least, she used to.

Dan Bretti. All of this started with Dan fucking Bretti. Jemma has not been herself since she met him. Neither have I.

In the mirror, my skin looks pale. Dark eyes, strawberry-blond hair just like my half-Scottish mother's – or rose-gold, as Jemma flatteringly calls it – a body I've always thought of as muscular, especially during my twenties, now slightly on the heavy side. How big is Dan? I picture him as a Goliath, or a Wolverine perhaps: huge, all-powerful, other-worldly.

I vowed I wouldn't do this. I am not that kind of man – jealous and bitter – but when I return to my laptop in the living room, I find myself wondering whether to set up a fake Facebook account to find Dan Bretti, although it might be easier to try and log into Jemma's profile; Jemma uses the same password for everything, despite me telling her how unsafe it is. But logging into her account would be inappropriate, wouldn't it? A breach of trust.

Despite everything she's done to me.

I try a google search instead – Dan Bretti – and it presents me with over 100,000 hits, although, on closer inspection, many of them are Daniel *Brett*. He could be a player at Bedminster Down Football Club, who earned a brief mention in The Gazette Series two years ago, or one of several results on LinkedIn. I click on a couple of matches on Facebook where I can only see limited information without logging in. The first has a profile picture of two men in wedding suits, their arms clasped around one another. Not them.

The second is a bald-headed man wearing sunglasses, holding a small brown dog in his arms. It could be him. It could also be the one with two laughing boys for a profile picture, or the one holding a giant spliff to his lips, eyes wide with exhibitionist anticipation. It could be the man kissing the mouth of a dark-haired woman.

I'm getting nowhere.

In any case, what does it matter? They haven't slept together. And Dan Bretti didn't hurt Jemma, did he? That was me.

I'm so hard for you it hurts.

My fingers begin tapping a four-bar rhythm against the window.

I don't even realise I'm doing it until I see a dog walker look up and then hurry away, into the night.

Chapter Eight

When Jemma opens the door to me the following afternoon, she's wearing the cream top she knows I love, accompanied by a ton of make-up.

'I thought I saw your car,' she says. 'Toby's been so excited.'

I open my mouth to speak, and inhale a mouthful of perfume. Black Opium. The scent she was wearing when we first met. 'Are you ok to drop me off in town on the way to yours?' she asks over her shoulder. 'I'm just getting ready to go out with the girls for dinner and was going to get a taxi, but...'

I follow her inside, into the lounge. 'When? Now?'

Our conversation is aborted by Toby, who barrels into me with a cry of delight. 'Oops,' he says, stepping back as I recoil from the impact to my groin. 'Sorry, Daddy. Sorry.'

'It's ok,' I gasp. 'Don't worry. Have you been a good boy at preschool today?'

He nods furiously. 'Yes. Jackson didn't share and then he hit Livia over the head and got told off.'

'That wasn't very nice.'

'Give me ten minutes,' Jemma says. 'I'm just going to change my shoes.'

'Daddy?'

'Yes?'

'Can I see your new house?'

'Soon. We just need to wait for Mummy first.' I glance up at Jemma. Is this effort for me, or her friends? I should have tried harder. Aftershave. That quarter-zipped polo shirt that she always used to run her fingers inside, turning me into liquid and solid all at once. I watch her leave the room, and then turn back to Toby. 'Shall we bring a game?'

'What game?' Toby is sitting on my lap now, pressing a toy car into my neck.

'Snakes and Ladders?'

‘Yes!’

‘We can play it when we get back to the flat, if you like.’

‘Ok, Daddy.’ He tips his head back so that I can see the small white studs of his teeth. I love my son’s laugh. It sounds like the popping of bubble wrap.

‘Go and get it then, silly.’

‘No, you’re silly.’ Toby repeatedly pokes a finger into my cheek until I ask him to stop. It feels strange that this is my house, but – for the time being – not my home. We’ve moved the coffee table to the corner, and although I can no longer still see any trace of Jemma’s blood on the rug beside me, I know the ghost of her DNA is there somewhere, twisted into the fibres. I can’t be in here without thinking about what happened and every time I do, my stomach stiffens, as though bracing itself for impact. Toby learnt to crawl on this carpet.

He comes back with the game.

He pushes his car in a wild circuit around the rug, before flipping it onto its roof.

‘Crash.’

He breaks my heart, by doing nothing at all.

‘You look nice,’ I tell Jemma, on the way into town. Being this close to her makes me feel nervous and slightly bilious, as though I’m coming down with something.

In the back seat, a trumpet sounds from Toby’s iPad. Jemma flips down the passenger mirror and runs a finger over her teeth. ‘Thanks. Turn that down, Tobe.’

‘So, is it just you and Steph meeting tonight?’

‘I don’t know. A few others might come and join us.’ She snaps the visor back up.

‘You should go out sometime.’

‘I’ve actually been invited out on Saturday, but it’s only a work do.’

‘Oh?’

‘And it’s fancy dress.’

Jemma tilts her head and laughs. The gold necklace glitters around her throat. ‘You *have* to do that. It sounds amazing.’

‘What’s fancy dess?’ Toby asks.

‘It’s like dressing up, for adults,’ Jemma says. ‘It’s fun.’

‘I thought you didn’t like me doing things like that,’ I say, as if I’d entertain the idea.

‘No, why wouldn’t I? You absolutely should. Get out there, live a little. God, it’s busy for a Thursday,’ Jemma remarks, her eyes scanning the bars and restaurants as we pass. She’s right; people are sitting at outside tables, walking arm in arm along the pavement, spilling across the courtyard in a wash of colour. I indicate and pull into the dropoff zone before the traffic lights.

‘Is Frankie meeting you here?’ I ask. ‘I can wait.’

Jemma unclips her seatbelt. ‘No, it’s ok – she’s inside.’ She opens the car door to kiss Toby goodbye, and reality rushes in: the sound of car engines, chatter and music, a stink of spices and hot fat. ‘Thanks. Bye. Bye, Tobe. Love you!’

I want to tell her to be careful, to make sure she keeps her drinks close and to call me for a lift at the end of the night, but she moves around a group of twenty-somethings and quickly becomes swallowed in the throng of bodies. Dressing up for adults. For a mad moment, I imagine stamping on the pedal and towards the crowd. *Here, I’m being adventurous. Is this what you want?*

I wouldn’t do that, you understand. I’m not a violent man. I’m not crazy.

Although sometimes I wonder how much I really know myself at all.

Chapter Nine

There's an old bike tyre in the overgrown patch of grass on the way into the estate. Toby stares at it as we drive past. 'What's that?'

'A tyre.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Maybe the owner doesn't want it anymore.'

'Why not?'

'I don't know. Maybe it's got a puncture.'

'What's a puncher?'

The questions keep coming, even after I park up and get him out of the car.

'What's that?'

'Somebody's doorbell. Don't touch.'

'S broken.' Toby peers at the Sellotape-covered unit hanging loosely from the side of the flat. 'What's that man doing?'

'Fixing his car. Look, my flat isn't here – it's on the other side. Come on.' I turn around and beg silently that he won't make any further observations.

'Why's his bum out?'

'He...' I lower my voice to a whisper. 'His trousers are just falling down a bit, that's all.'

Toby wants to play out here. He wants to know who the barking dog belongs to. He wants to know why there is a lady sitting outside her house with no shoes on. I push the key in the lock and encourage him inside, up the stairs.

'Smells funny,' Toby says.

His rucksack thumps against my leg as I follow him up. It's a relief to get inside and finally lock the door behind us. I was worried that things might be awkward here without

Jemma, but maybe my son has inherited his mother's sense of optimism because – apart from a comment that the bedsit is small – he takes it all in without complaint. The plastic pot plant on the kitchen windowsill is pretty. The blow-up mattress on the floor beside my bed is *brilliant*.

Yet still I can't shake the shame. I've failed him.

I make Toby a cup of squash and eventually we settle down on the sofa with the bag of popcorn I bought on the way into town. As Spiderman swings across the TV screen, my mind drifts back to Jemma. What is she doing right now? Is she drunk? With alcohol – as with everything else in her life – there are no half-measures. What's her motto again?

Go hard or go home.

I hope she goes home. Or more specifically, I hope she calls me for a lift home. Maybe she'll ask me to come in, because she's too inebriated to look after Toby. On the day I moved out, I asked her if she still loved me. She said I had given her Toby, and she would always love me for that. *Soul mates*, I thought. We were meant to be together; this was a test of our relationship, that was all. We had both failed. I told her I would always be there for her, and I hope she remembers that tonight. She'll tell me this was all a mistake; she can't live without me. I look down at our son, our perfect son, fidgeting on the sofa. I remind myself that I'm doing this for him.

For all of us.

After the film, Toby becomes tired and restless, jumping on the blow-up mattress, poking his finger in a hole in the wall and opening and closing the main door. I check my phone, alarmed to see it's gone eight. Still nothing from Jemma. I turn to ask Toby if he wants a bedtime drink before his story, but he's gone. I find him in the bedroom, rummaging through one of the boxes I haven't yet had time to open.

‘Can I do some colouring?’ he says, holding up a pile of paperwork.

‘Toby, don’t just— what is that?’

A handful of payslips from past jobs, the lease agreement on the one-bedroomed flat I rented in Little Stoke after leaving university, old bank statements going back to 2015. All from my pre-Jemma days – she must have pulled it from the loft. ‘I’ll get you some paper you can draw on quickly, ok? It’s nearly bedtime.’

When I come back, Toby is leaning so far into the box his head and upper body have disappeared. The cardboard is crushed, sagging in on itself. And before he straightens, I remember what’s in there. A small pearlescent box I thought I’d left behind.

‘Toby—’

‘Look!’

He’s removed the die and is holding it in his palm as if it’s a tiny planet, his mouth agape. It’s hard to describe the beauty of it – solid glass, surprisingly heavy, roughly three times the size of a standard die. On sunny days, it used to scatter light across the room and I would sometimes see a wedge of rainbow-coloured light projected onto the chair or splayed across a corner. Darkness told a different story. When Mum first brought it home from the charity shop where she worked, she said she ~~didn’t know why, she~~ ‘just had to have it’. As if the decision wasn’t her own.

‘Can I play with it?’ Toby says.

‘No. I just found some paper and pens, Tobe. That’s what you asked for.’

‘But I want to *play* with it.’

‘Well, you can’t. Because it’s—’ I have to stop myself from snatching it from his hand and saying the word. *Dangerous*.

Toby stares at me, upset by the raised pitch of my voice. *Don't you cry*, I think. *Don't start demanding to go home*. I can imagine Jemma's voice: 'Oh Adam, please. Are you seriously telling me you couldn't deal with a tantrum? Not even for one night?'

Toby raises his fist to his face in a valiant attempt to remain brave. Four. He's only four. A bitter, soapy regret pools in my mouth. Is it really dangerous? What happened before...

I can't think about that.

'Why don't we have a quick game of Snakes and Ladders?' I offer instead. 'Fifteen minutes, then bed. Let's—'

Toby's not giving up the die that easily. He nods, keeping it gripped in his tightly curled fist. I collect his rucksack from the lounge and when I return with the board game, finally, he puts it down. I shake the counters from their plastic housing. 'Red or green?'

'Green.'

'Ok. I'll be red.'

We play using the cheap plastic die from the box, and Toby makes me smile by cupping and thrusting it either side of his face, like a cocktail shaker. 'One, two, three.'

'You're beating me! Pass the die, then.'

'It's *dice*, Daddy. Die is when you fall down dead.'

I force myself to focus on Toby, not the glass die beside him. *Dead*. 'Die is singular. One die, two dice.'

'We got two dice,' he says. 'See?'

'Don't...ok, give that to me, please. Now.' I take the glass die and put it behind the clock on the bedside cabinet, out of sight. Toby sucks in his cheeks, then slaps a hand to his mouth when its plastic counterpart lands on six. 'Uh-oh.'

I've come across this snake before. I slide down the patchwork body, back to number seven. It's 9pm now, and when I tell him we need to stop, he complains that we haven't finished. It isn't fair, he doesn't want to go to bed.

He looks just like his mum when he's angry. And, just like I always do with Jemma, I relent. He can roll one more time and, if it's evens, we'll play for five more minutes. If it's odds, we have to stop now.

To Toby's delight, he rolls a four. *Truth*. I banish the thought, and we play on. This time he climbs another ladder, storming sixteen spaces ahead. I miss a turn. On the second roll, I gain five spaces only to be returned to the head of the snake. I slide down with an exaggerated groan. 'Not my lucky day, is it?'

Toby laughs at that, as though it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. And as we're packing the game away, I think: this will be ok. We'll be ok.

It's only for a few months, after all.

'Daddy?' Toby says a few minutes later, while I'm squirting toothpaste onto his brush. 'I don't want you to live here forever.'

'I won't,' I tell him. 'I'll be home with you and Mummy soon, I promise.'

I wake at 2am with a start. Toby must have crawled into bed with me during the night; his sweaty head is pressed against my chest, one bent knee pushed into my groin and Monster taking over half my pillow. I ease myself back and reach for my phone.

Nothing.

I messaged Jemma last night with a photo of our sleeping son accompanied by the caption: *Got him to bed without a fuss! X*

Why hasn't she replied?

Beside me, Toby sighs. It's too hot in the bed, but I can't bring myself to climb out. Instead, I lie still, poking my tongue into the hole in my cheek where the pain from the bite is still fresh. A separation, Jemma had called it – I hadn't really examined the words before. Like oil and water. Or eggs. She is the yolk; I am the albumen.

I cannot sleep. Not now.

I'm about to put my phone back on the bedside cabinet when I see the die, peeping at me from behind the clock. Three black spots.

I stare at it for a while, listening to the irregular hiss of my son's breathing, thinking about Will and our college days, the games we used to play. I can still see Will's mouth, a tunnel of surprise. 'Man, this is crazy. Are we in control of the dice, or are the dice in control of us?'

There is a truth, knocking at the base of my skull, trying to get in. I usher it away. *You are not welcome.*

Outside, a siren screams.