

Noah Groome is strung out. He can't concentrate, can't think straight. He's overslept this morning, for the 13th time in a row, and now he's running late. 13 times his alarm has failed to wake him, 13 times he has had to leave his room without checking that all is where it should be, as it should be. 13 dog-nights, yipped into shreds.

Everything is off-kilter, out of balance; the scales are tipping, and Noah doesn't have time, can't find time, to set it all to rights.

He's hurrying now, head bent, to get to class.

*Move it.*

A hissing from the Dark. A blur of shadow gathers as Noah tries to get things right.

He stops. Takes a minute he can't afford to breathe in ... 2 3 4 5 and out ... 2 3 4 5.

He needs more time, to call on the 5s to restore order, but there's none to spare. He's *so* late, but he'll slip into the back row as quietly as he can. That's what he always does, that's where he always sits.

Noah is tall. Taller than most of the boys in his class, but he does his best to be unseen. It doesn't work, though. He's the one who:

1. cannot open a door unless he pushes on the handle 5 times (down-up-down-up-down).
2. taps his fingers (1 2 3 4 5) and beats out 5 with his feet.
3. counts under his breath, and sometimes louder than that.
4. takes his pen out of his pocket and puts it back in (and out-in-out) before he can start writing.
5. keeps 5 pebbles in his pocket to run through his fingers like worry beads.

And that's just the start of the 5s.

It's hard for them not to notice him. He can't move without counting under his breath, can't pass a corner without tapping it quickly 5 times.

He's that boy who slips along corridors, a lanky shadow, head down, counting the steps between classrooms. He tries to stay below the radar. He offends no one, but he can't make himself invisible.

Today, Kyle Blake is also late, as are three of his friends, but not because they've been counting the tiles in the boys' washroom, not because they can only step carefully in sets of 5. The smell of nicotine is strong on them and Noah's nostrils flare; his lip pulls back.

'Hey, what's with you, Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh-Noah?' Kyle is almost as tall as Noah, with the pale, etiolated look of a weed that has shot up in the dark. His chin and cheeks are dotted with acne and his blond hair flops over his forehead and falls into his eyes. He jabs Noah in the chest.

All Noah wants is to get to class and not be too late for English, not hear Mrs Simpson ask, Late again, Noah?, but Kyle has chosen this moment to have some fun with him. He steps away, but Kyle is in his path, weaving from side to side as Noah tries to get past him.

'What's the problem, Nuh-nuh-nuh-Noah?' Kyle's friends laugh as he taps Noah on his left arm and then on his right. Noah feels the Dark stir.

*You don't have time for this.*

'Hey, Nuh-Noah?' Kyle's hand moves up to Noah's face, taps him on the cheek—

Noah wants to get away, that's all he wants, that's what he tells Dr Lovelock, six afternoons later: I wanted to get to class, that's why I pushed him.

It's not much of a shove, but Noah keeps his body fighting fit, exercising daily, morning and night (when nothing interrupts his routine, when he has time to make sure everything's as it should be, before he opens the door – down-up-down-up-down – to face a new day).

Kyle goes sprawling and the three boys behind him snigger. Then Kyle is up and leaping onto Noah, grabbing at him, his breath hot and foul in Noah's face.

*There's no time for this.*

That's when Noah twists Kyle's arm up and back.

The sound is a dull pop in the quiet corridor. Kyle wavers, his arm at a weird angle. There's a split second between that and his mouth opening with a howl.

*Now look what you've done.*

Noah steps back, feeling it again: Kyle's arm in his hand, the way his elbow just gave, the sudden yell.

'What's all this racket?'

It's Mr van Blerk, his classroom door open, looking at Kyle, taking in his oddly dangling arm. 'My God, what's happened?'

And then Kyle is jabbing the air with his good hand, pointing. 'Groome,' he pants. 'That bastard's broken my arm.'

Kate had to get out of the house, away from the phone that would ring and tell her what was going to happen next and when and where. *They'll be in touch*, that's what Mr Reynolds said when she was called in to the school to meet the accusing stares of Kyle's parents, Leonie and Buddy Blake. 'We'll be in touch soon, Mrs Groome. The sooner we can get things sorted, the better for all concerned.'

The better for whom? Kate thought as she saw the smug satisfaction on Leonie's face. The better for Leonie, for Buddy Blake, without a doubt. Buddy, one of those men whose nicknames follow them from school and into the golf club and the bar after work. Better for Kyle Blake. And, of course, the better for the school. God forbid that even a whiff of scandal taint those exclusive halls.

But what about the Groomes?

'Perhaps you should keep Noah at home for a few days. Not a formal suspension, mind you. We wouldn't want that on his record, would we?'

'No, no, of course. Of course not,' Kate said, picking up her bag, stumbling to the door. Avoiding Leonie's stare. Not looking at Buddy's face. Wishing Dominic had been able to leave work and come with her.

She's sitting outside a café now, watching the gentle swell of the sea, the holiday makers dipping into the waves and out of the heat. She should move out of the scorching sun, but she can't summon the energy. Her coffee has gone cold, her hands are bunched tight in her lap. Relax, she tells herself. Breathe. Think. Mr Reynolds has set the ball rolling and Kate doesn't know how to stop it.

She and Dominic need to talk. 'Let me get more details, Kate, find out what they plan to do next and then we'll work things out.' That's what he promised her last night.

Kate wishes now that she'd been quicker. Sharper. Replies churning in her head, the put-downs you never think of until it's too late. But what about *your* son, Leonie? Buddy? I hear Kyle and his friends torment my son endlessly.

'Not just Noah, Mom,' Noah's sister, Maddie said the night before, eyes blazing, her small frame bristling with frustration. 'They pick on other kids too.'

So yes, 'What about the bullies in your school, Mr Reynolds?' *That's* what she should have asked.

Too late now. The Blakes are out for blood. They've reported Noah to the police and are even threatening to press charges. Nothing Kate can say about how this is the first time Noah has been involved in an altercation like this is going to make any difference. She feels it in every worrying memory of Noah mumbling under his breath and tapping his fingers. There are the notes sent home from school – 'Noah's constant tardiness disrupts the class'; 'Noah's behaviour is a distraction' – and all the visits they have already made, to the school counsellor, to one therapist after another, the meds they've prescribed, their inability to get to the root of Noah's anxiety, his behaviour.

His medical records will probably be examined for proof of an ongoing 'condition'. For proof of the fact that Noah has a 'problem'.

Kate imagines Leonie Blake nodding sanctimoniously. What she wouldn't give to have Leonie sitting opposite her right now. Or maybe not. One assault against the Blake family is enough.

'Kate?' The voice is familiar, friendly.

Kate looks up. It's Monica Ryan, another wife, another school mother.

'Are you okay?'

Kate wonders if she should ask the same. Monica's hair is uncombed, her pink sweatshirt stained. But before she has time to notice anything further, Monica has sat down.

'You don't mind if I join you, do you?'

Kate can't say no; that she'd rather be left alone, away from the silence of the house, away from the phone waiting to ring to deliver the next instalment of bad news.

Monica catches the waitress's eye. 'Another one for you, Kate?'

All Kate can do is nod, unknot her fingers and lay her hands on the table. Unlike Monica's, they aren't shaking. In fact, everything about Monica looks shaky, grey-skinned and tired. She leans closer and Kate catches a tell-tale whiff. She wonders how much Monica drank the night before, whether she started the day with vodka in her coffee. Or cane. Cane's not supposed to leave a smell, and there isn't one, just a slight sourness.

'I'm so sorry, Kate,' Monica's saying now, and Kate looks up and meets her gaze.

'You're sorry?'

She knows what Monica's talking about, what they're all talking about.

'Someone was saying the Blakes want to take it further.'

'Further?' Kate looks at her blankly.

'Lily said they were talking about it yesterday. All the mothers in the—'

'The car park?' Kate's voice is resigned.

'Are you okay, Kate?' Monica is concerned. 'When Juliet had to go away, it was hard, especially for Lily. She worships her sister. And now it looks like she's going back there. Back to Greenhills.'

Kate isn't listening as Monica talks about Juliet and Lily. She's latched onto two ominous words: Go away. Then she remembers that Monica's daughter had been in some sort of clinic, and more than once.

She knows she should be asking about Juliet, but all she can manage is, 'Go away?'

At the age of twenty-one, Kate found herself engaged to a man fifteen years her senior. His name was Dominic Groome and he was the most fascinating man she had ever met. Handsome – incredibly handsome, her friends said, clustering around her, exclaiming at the ring on her finger, a large solitaire diamond.

They made a striking couple. He was tall, green-eyed, dark-haired, she almost as tall with blonde hair and deep brown eyes. But it wasn't his looks alone that had initially attracted Kate – had first made her want to cross the room and stand near him, get a better look.

What drew her to Dominic was the serious look on his face, as if he was standing alone in the room, that the dozen or so women who were all looking at him, gorging themselves on his beauty, didn't exist, and neither did their husbands in their dark suits and quiet ties with their over-loud talk of mergers and markets.

When one of the women said something to him, he looked at her and smiled, a courteous smile that softened the sharp planes of his cheeks and lit up his green eyes. The woman said something else, touched his arm lightly, and Kate felt jealousy surge hot and strong.

'Who are all these people?' she asked her date, a young man whose hopes included impressing his bosses with his beautiful companion and then plying her with enough alcohol to get her into bed later that evening.

'Let me introduce you,' he said, and started her on a round of the room, taking her further and further away from the tall, quiet man. She met husbands and wives: Jeremy, Leonie, Bart, Isolde, Buddy, Delia, Monica. No names she wanted to remember, certainly no one she wanted to talk to. Kate remembers the women sizing her up and one man holding her fingers too long in a hot hand.

And then her date was propelling her towards the centre of the room. 'This is one of the big guys,' he whispered in her ear. 'And the youngest partner in the company.' He couldn't have sounded more awe-struck if he'd tried.

'Dominic Groome,' her date said, 'I'd like you to meet Kate Cilliers.'

Kate offered him her hand, hoping he'd hold on to it forever.

A brief smile was all she got, a light handshake and a polite greeting. Soon after that, the evening was over for Kate, and for her date too. He was drunk and angered by her insistence on calling a taxi. He was equally insistent that he was fine to drive; his place was just around the corner.

'It's only five minutes away.' He grabbed her hand. 'Come on, Kate. It's really close.'

'No.' She turned away and came face to face with a man in a white shirt and navy tie.

Dominic's voice was quiet as he removed the keys from her date's hand. 'I'll ask security to park your car,' he said. 'You can collect your keys from them in the morning.'

The drunk young man, abashed now, mumbled a thank you and began to weave his way home.

'I hope he'll be all right,' Kate said, although she really couldn't care less.

'He'll be fine.' Dominic said. 'Now, my car's right here. Can I give you a lift?'

This is the part of their story that Kate will always remember clearly.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, please.' Gone was the cautionary voice telling her she didn't even know him, because she did, of course she did.

She'd known him all her life. All he'd needed was to appear, and there he was – her boyfriend to be, her fiancé, her husband and the father of her two children, Noah and Maddie. Her family.