

A high-angle photograph of a person sitting on a teal folding chair in a room with several other empty teal folding chairs. The person is wearing blue jeans and white sneakers. The floor is dark wood. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

You thought your darkest secret was safe.
You were wrong.

who did you tell?



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Just because you imagine yourself doing something and enjoy the way it makes you feel, doesn't mean you actually want to do it. It doesn't mean you're going to do it. Of course not. Because sometimes the very opposite is true and something you never in a million years could imagine yourself doing is done in the blink of an eye and changes your life for ever.

So if, in my head, I'm grabbing a handful of her braids and slamming her head into a brick wall till her skull's smashed in, it doesn't mean that that's what I'll do. It doesn't make me a bad person just thinking about it. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's normal to have the odd violent fantasy about someone you hate so much every muscle in your body contracts when you think of them. I mean, everybody does it sometimes, don't they? Don't they?

Seven slams, if you're interested. That's how many it takes till her braids run red.

PART ONE

I

I smell him first, or rather the aftershave he used to wear. Joint by Roccobarocco. A 90s vintage scent – masculine and woody. A discontinued line.

I spin round, but no one's there. Only a girl in a puffa jacket squatting to tie her laces. I almost trip over her. Then I see him, sprinting towards the sea, the furry flaps of his trapper hat flying in the breeze like a spaniel's ears. Simon.

My knees give way. I stare after him, but he's disappeared into the night. That's if he was ever there in the first place. Maybe it's all in my head. A hallucination. I've had a few of those in the past.

Whatever it was, I scurry home. A small, frightened creature, suddenly afraid of the dark. Afraid of *him*.

Mum pounces on me like a sniffer dog the second I walk through the door.

'Where've you been? I've been worried sick.' Her fingers dig into my arms and I have to shake her off.

'It's only ten o'clock, Mum. You can't keep doing this. You've got to trust me.'

The snort is out before she has a chance to think better of it. 'Trust? You're talking to me about trust?'

She crumples on to the bottom stair with her head in her hands, and something inside me crumples too. I kneel down beside her and bury my head in her lap.

'Sorry.' My voice is muffled in the folds of her dressing gown and the years roll away. I'm in my first year of secondary school and someone has upset me. Mum is telling me to rise above it.

Now, as then, she rubs her hand in a circle between my shoulders.

'I just don't understand why you have to walk when it's so late,' she says, and I want to explain that if I have to come home and sit in this dreary little cottage night after night without drinking, my head will explode. I want to tell her that I walk to stay alive, that I have to keep on the move, doing things, going places, even when I've nothing to do and nowhere to go. Especially then. But all I can do is shed hot, silent tears into her lap.

It's been five months since I woke up in hospital, Mum standing at the foot of my bed with 'That Look' on her face. A fortnight since my spell in rehab came to an end. It was she who suggested this arrangement. If she hadn't, I might have been forced to ask, wouldn't have had the luxury of indignation.

'Move in with *you*? In Flinstead? You've got to be joking.'

Simon and I had laughed about the place on the few occasions it cropped up in conversation. Said the day we ended up somewhere like Flinstead was the day we gave up on life. It's got this reputation as being somewhere you go to die. Like Eastbourne, only smaller and with nothing to do of an evening.

'What are your other options?' Mum said. That must have been the moment she decided to adopt the dispassionate tone of a counsellor. She's been using it ever since, when she can remember. Open questions. No hint of disapproval. I'm not

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fooled for a second. It's just another of her strategies. All that anger and frustration, all that *disappointment* – it's still seething beneath the surface, ready to boil up and spit in my face like hot fat.

It's gone midnight now. I'm lying in bed, curled on my side, facing the window. My braids feel tight and itchy and I have a sudden urge to unpick them all, but they cost so much to put in, money I can ill afford, and besides, it'll take ages. I don't have the energy for it.

A sliver of moonlight seeps in through the gap in the curtains. I roll on to my other side and hug my knees against my chest, finally allowing myself to think of Simon. My mouth goes dry. There's a strange whooshing noise in my ears and a prickling behind my cheekbones. It couldn't have been him earlier. It was just my mind playing tricks on me.

We met in a bar. Where else? One of those cavernous London pubs with panelled wood walls and massive mirrors etched with the names of beers. Packed to the rafters on a Friday night, but depressing and sepulchral at four fifteen on a Tuesday afternoon. Was it a Tuesday? I don't really remember. Back then, the days were all pretty much the same. They are now, of course, only in a different way.

I just walked right up to where he was sitting and told him he had an interestingly shaped head. That's what drink does. *Did*. Gave me the gall to approach complete strangers, to bypass all the meaningless chit-chat and get straight to the point. Whatever point my fucked-up head was currently obsessing over. I thought I was being witty and flirtatious.

'No, Astrid. You're being foul and warped and ugly. Drink isn't your friend. It's your enemy. Your poison. Can't you see what it's doing to you?' Jane's words ring in my head. Jane, who

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was supposed to be my friend. My ally. I'd lost her by then, the latest in a long line of friends and acquaintances who couldn't hack it any more.

Then I met Simon and none of it mattered. We drank cider till the men-in-suits brigade swaggered in and we slunk off back to his place. A dingy bedsit on Anglesey Road in Woolwich. His sheets were rank, but I didn't care. He already had a girlfriend, but I didn't care about that either. We weren't just a couple of drunks hitting it off; we were kindred spirits. Soul-mates. Two sides of the same coin.

Must have been a bad penny, then, says that little voice in my head. The one that sounds just like Mum.

He can't have come back. He just can't.

The next morning I get dressed quickly, determined to put last night out of my mind. I loop my key chain round my neck and go downstairs. It's still early but Mum's beaten me to it, as usual.

'There's a banana needs eating,' she says. 'If you want that with some toast.'

'Not that black spotty thing that's been mouldering in the fruit bowl all week?'

She picks it up and gives it a squeeze. 'Nothing wrong with it.'

'You eat it, then. Toast will be fine.'

'There's always porridge,' she says. 'I could make you some if you like.'

'I don't like porridge, I've told you.'

I take the last sachet from the box of green tea and pluck my favourite mug from the mug-tree. The one that says: *I don't like morning people. Or mornings. Or people.* It's one of the few things I haven't lost or broken over the years.

Mum sighs. 'Oh, Hilly, it doesn't have to be like this.'

I rip the sachet too fast and tea-leaf dust spills all over the counter.

'Mum, I haven't been called Hilary in over seventeen years.'

She touches my arm. 'Sorry, darling. Sometimes it just slips

out.' She opens the cupboard above my head and draws out another box of green tea. 'Here, I noticed you were running low so I picked some up.'

With the flat of one hand, I sweep the spilt tea leaves into the cupped palm of the other. It's gone everywhere, but I'm glad of the distraction. It's something to focus on, something other than the horrible clogged sensation at the back of my throat. The one I always get when she does something kind.

'Thanks, Mum.'

Hilary. It comes from the Latin *hilarus*, which means 'cheerful'. Mum said she and Dad chose it from the *Pan Book of Girls' Names*. They opened that treasure trove of possibilities and stuck a pin on a page to give them the title of my life. I'm assuming, of course, that if the pin had impaled itself on Beryl or Mildred, they might have tried again. But Mum *liked* the name Hilary. 'As a baby, you had a very sunny disposition,' she once told me, a wistful look in her eyes.

I've since worked out that I was born on a Wednesday, so what chance did I have? Woe is my default. Anyway, Hilary sounds like something out of the 50s. Head girl at a posh boarding school in Surrey. Captain of the hockey team. All-round jolly good sport. *By George, Hillers, you are a good egg!*

'Astrid' was the perfect antidote to all that, the antithesis of everything I was running away from. It's a rebellious, rock-and-roll kind of name that carries a hint of the stars, a wildness. There was Astrid Kirchherr, the woman who photographed The Beatles in Hamburg, and Astrid Proll, an early member of the Baader-Meinhof gang. Then there's Astrid Lindgren, author of the super-strong and thrillingly outrageous Pippi Longstocking stories. The list goes on. Queens and princesses. Sculptors and shot-putters. Skiers and porn stars. Troubled fictional protagonists. The name means 'divine strength'.

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Changing my name changed *me*. It made me visible. Gave me the balls to get wrecked with the bad girls on Peckham Common. To suck Danny Harrison's cock in a mausoleum in Nunhead Cemetery. To get my nose pierced and a tattoo of a flame snaking up my inner thigh. Sunny disposition, my arse.

The tide is way out this morning, beyond the metal markers, and it's warm enough to believe that summer's on its way. I take my trainers off and walk barefoot on the flat, wet sand, dangling them by the laces. I've counted five small jellyfish, like transparent fried eggs, before I see the guy in the wetsuit clambering over the slimy spit of algae-covered rock. The same guy I've seen swimming from here for the last two weeks. The one who's nodded at me and said hello a couple of times. It's what people do in Flinstead. For someone who's spent most of their life in London, it takes a bit of getting used to.

'There's a whole ecosystem right here,' he says, as if we're in the middle of a conversation. 'Sea squirts, limpets, barnacles. An-en-om-es too.' His teeth flash white against his tanned face. 'I have to really concentrate to say that,' he says.

My laugh peals out before I can rein it in. Too loud. Too eager. *Shut up, Astrid.*

He jumps on to the sand. Pale, blond hairs curl at his ankles, where the legs of his wetsuit end, but they don't extend to the tops of his feet, which are smooth and golden brown with evenly spaced toes.

'Are you local?' he says.

I hesitate. 'Not really – well, kind of. For now, anyway.'

We're walking towards the sea, squelching through shallow pools left by the retreating tide. 'I'm between jobs at the moment,' he says.

'Me too. I'm keeping an eye on my mum.' A gull screeches overhead – a harsh, mocking sound. 'She's . . . a bit depressed.'

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Guilt snakes through me. I can hardly tell him the truth. Someone like him – so healthy, so *wholesome* – he'd run a mile. And I don't want him to. Not yet.

We've reached the water's edge.

'Listen,' he says. 'If you fancy a coffee some time . . .'

'Yeah, sure.' It's just his way of ending the conversation. If he meant it, he'd suggest a time. A place.

He turns away and strides into the water. I don't know whether I'm disappointed or relieved. Relieved, I think. The last thing I need is the complication of a new relationship.

'Eleven o'clock tomorrow all right for you?' he calls over his shoulder. 'In the Fisherman's Shack on Flinstead Road?'

Nervous laughter bubbles up at the back of my throat. I feel sick. 'Okay. See you then.'

I watch as he commits his body to the cold and pushes off into a front crawl. It's remarkable, the distance he's already covered, the relentless rhythm of his strokes. It takes courage to head straight for the horizon. I nearly drowned once, doing that. Got caught in a rip current. I screw my eyes shut and clench my knuckles, trying to block out the memory of my panic, the sour burn of seawater at the back of my nose and throat.

And that's when it happens. The unmistakable scent of Simon's aftershave in my nostrils. Just like last night. My eyes snap open, but by the time I've registered it it's gone, carried away by the breeze. I twist my head over my shoulder, bracing myself for what I might see: the old donkey jacket, the faded jeans, the rage in his eyes. But apart from a smattering of early-morning dog-walkers and a jogger with earplugs, there's no one else about. No one who looks remotely like the kind of person who'd be wearing Joint at half past eight in the morning. Or smoking one.

My gaze returns to the sea. Wetsuit Guy seems to have disappeared. Maybe I imagined him too.

Oh shit. I need a drink.

By the time I arrive at AA, I'm wired. All I've done since this morning is drink endless cups of coffee and smoke myself stupid. I've also been researching barnacles. Apparently, they exude an adhesive-type substance that binds them to hard surfaces and cements them in place. It's similar to the clotting mechanism in blood. I need facts like this to occupy my mind. To fill up the spaces where the bad stuff clings on. Anything to quell the compulsion to drink.

And now I'm here, hugging my chest to keep my heart from exploding. It's the first meeting I've been to since coming out of rehab. Mum's been on at me to go for days.

I take the chair nearest the door and do that thing I used to do on the Underground. Quick, furtive glances at the other passengers. Just to get a sense of them. The cross section of people in the vestry of Flinstead parish church on this chilly May evening is, in fact, remarkably similar to that of a London Underground carriage. I just wish I could get off at the next stop.

A woman with peroxide hair and a ravaged face gives me a knowing smile. The crowns on her front teeth are so old they're black at the gum line. She looks like she's in her sixties, but

dresses younger, probably is. Drink ages a person. She's wearing tight black jeans, a grey vest over a black T-shirt and one of those long, shapeless cardigans, which trails over the tops of her ankle boots. Every time she shifts position I catch a whiff of stale cigarettes. Do I smell like that too? God, I hope not.

'Is it your first time?' says a cultured voice to my left. Its owner wears an expensive-looking charcoal-grey suit and polished brogues. He has the air of someone distinguished. A lawyer or consultant, perhaps. It's a great leveller, this addiction of ours.

'First time *here*, yes.' My voice is hoarse from too much smoking and there's an annoying twitch in my left eyelid.

He nods politely, and I sense that he's holding back another question. I'm glad. I'm not here for the small talk.

More people drift in and take their seats. A gaunt-looking woman with bulging eyes and long, fidgety fingers sits opposite me. Her eyes veer in their sockets like pale-blue marbles. Every so often they settle on me, before spinning off in another direction. I stare at my knees. When I look up, I find her watching me. And she isn't the only one. I'm clearly this evening's main attraction. A youngish man with bad acne keeps looking at me too.

This is unbearable. I could be out of that door and back home in ten minutes. Except then Mum will know I didn't come and I have to prove to her that, this time, I'll do it. This time, I'll quit for good. It's my last chance – she's left me in no doubt about that.

A noticeboard with AA literature pinned all over it has been propped on a table against the wall, no doubt so it can be whisked out of sight when the mother-and-toddler group takes over in the morning. My gaze drifts over the neatly typed list of the Twelve Steps, not that I need to read them again. After three months of rehab and daily meetings I could probably recite them by heart. Actually working them, step by step, is a different matter.

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I can just about get my head round the first one and admit that for most of the time I'm powerless over alcohol, that my life has become unmanageable. But the next two are pretty major stumbling blocks: believing that a power greater than myself can restore me to sanity and, here's the killer: turning my will and my life over to the care of God. I mean, I know they say it doesn't have to be the old-man-in-the-sky kind of God, it can be anything I feel comfortable with – the cosmos, the power of the group itself even – but it's hard to get down on your knees and pray to the collective wisdom of a random bunch of drunks.

I close my eyes. The room has that old-church smell: stale and musty. It prompts a memory I thought I'd forgotten. A Sunday-school classroom. Being shown how to write a capital 'G' for 'God' and pressing down on the paper so hard my pencil broke. Even as a small child, something inside me resisted the notion of a higher power.

Someone to my right clears his throat. He looks like the sort of man who might play the church organ or organize the local Neighbourhood Watch. Dull and worthy. He looks like my old physics teacher, Mr Staines. Semen Staines, we used to call him, poor bugger.

'Good evening, everyone,' he says, his voice as watery and colourless as the rest of him. 'My name is David and I'm an alcoholic.'

And so it begins.

David is in the middle of the usual preamble when the door bursts open and a latecomer hurtles through. A tall, middle-aged woman in a beige raincoat and red court shoes. Her messy hair is shoulder-length, mousy-coloured.

'Sorry,' she says, her face flushing as red as her shoes. Her flesh-coloured tights have gone all bobby round the ankles.

I give her a small smile. She looks so vulnerable, standing

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there in front of us all, and I can't help noticing that tremble in her hands. I bet she's still drinking. Poor woman. She looks like she'd rather be anywhere but here. I know just how she feels.

After the meeting, people drink coffee and chat. Some of them hug each other. The peroxide woman with grey skin – Rosie, eight years sober, AA evangelist – tries to hug the woman with red shoes, who clearly doesn't want to be hugged. I've met Rosie's type before. Homing in on the newbies. Oh, God, now she's heading straight for me. I hold out my hand instead and the woman with red shoes rolls her eyes at me over Rosie's shoulder. I can't reciprocate, not without Rosie cottoning on, but I think she can tell from the way I look back at her that we're on the same wavelength about inappropriate hugging.

When Rosie finally slinks off to accost someone else, the man in the suit gestures at me with a cup. He's standing next to the man with acne, who's now openly staring at me. I shake my head. I have to get out of here. Now. But as I turn towards the door I bump straight into the woman with red shoes. We both say sorry at the same time.

'My fault,' she says, flustered. 'I wasn't looking where I was going.'

Her voice is soft, tremulous, and though I haven't come here to make friends I feel as if I ought to encourage her. Reaching out more, helping others – that's how this whole fellowship thing is meant to work. *Be nice, Astrid. Be nice.*

'See you next week?' I say.

'Maybe.' Her eyes glisten with tears. She rushes to the door and stumbles out into the corridor, her exit as sudden and clumsy as her entrance.

I imagine her running all the way home, then opening a bottle of red wine and drinking the lot. Opening another. I pack the thought away before it takes hold.

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Outside, wind hurls itself from the sea end of Flinstead Road. I tug my coat across my chest and walk straight into it, chin pressed down, the musty smell in my nostrils blown clean away.

The street is deserted. Out of season, Flinstead is dead after nine o'clock. Actually, that's a lie – it's dead after eight. When I pass the alleyway that leads to the little cluster of overpriced boutiques, the ones only the tourists go in, I stop and stare into the shadows. This was the exact spot where I saw Simon last night. In the daylight, it looks enticing, with its coral-painted walls and that glimpse of courtyard at the end, the metal bistro tables and chairs, the hanging baskets. Now, it looks like the kind of place a girl might get strangled.

I walk straight down it and sit on one of the chairs, the cold of the metal burning into the backs of my thighs. It's a matter of pride. To prove to myself that I'm not scared. That I don't believe for one second that it was really him.

Once, I would have said he wasn't spiteful enough to come back. But that was before.

I've lost count of the number of times I've killed her. The number of ways.

Yesterday, it went like this: we were standing on the pier at Mist-den Sands and I just pushed her in. She was wearing those stupid Doc Martens she clumps about in and, what with them and her big, heavy coat, she couldn't keep afloat. I stood there, watching as she thrashed about, and waited for her to sink. Her braids spread out on the water like long fingers of seaweed.

The last thing I saw were those little blue beads at the ends, bobbing on the surface like fishing floats.

It was too easy, though. Too clean. I prefer it when there's blood.

I've passed the Fisherman's Shack almost every day since I arrived, but I've never been inside before this morning. I see at once what I've been missing. Creaky old floorboards and mismatched tables and chairs. Vintage, but only because they've been here for years. They haven't been specially 'sourced' or painted in Farrow and Ball and roughed up with a sanding block. And, most impressively, they just serve coffee (instant or filter, not a macchiato or ristretto in sight), tea, Fanta or Coke. Egg-and-bacon butties. Toasted teacakes.

It's an inspired choice. I love it.

The barista has arms like Bluto. The devil in me wants to ask for a skinny latte, just to see his face, but I order a filter coffee, black, and take it over to a table in the window. I'm ten minutes late and he's not here, which either means he isn't coming or he couldn't be bothered to wait. I don't even know his name. For all his chatter on the beach yesterday, he forgot to introduce himself.

I rub a circle in the steamed-up window and watch the good folk of Flinthead go about their usual business. Coming out of shops with papers tucked under their arms, waving to someone

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on the other side of the street or nodding their endless hellos. Sometimes I think it's like *The Truman Show* and all I've got to do is find the perimeter of the set and break out through the papery screen to the real world on the other side. The messy, chaotic world of noise and pain and sharp-faced strangers who look straight through you.

Then I see her, the hugger from AA. Rosie, or whatever her name is. She's wearing another of those long, trailing cardigans, only this one is black, and she's dragging a rotating card stand out of the Oxfam shop. After she's wrestled it over the step and wheeled it into position in front of the window she swivels her head round and looks straight at me, almost as if she's sensed me watching her. For one awful second I think she's going to wave, but then she turns away and goes back into the shop.

My shoulders soften. There's no way she could have recognized me from this distance and, even if she did, there's an unspoken rule at AA that we don't acknowledge each other in public, especially in a town this size.

A girl in a puffa jacket emerges from the newsagent's. She's tucking into a huge block of chocolate, biting straight into it as if it's nothing more than a snack-sized bar. My mouth waters. If Wetsuit Guy doesn't turn up soon, I'm going to buy some chocolate too.

I watch as she positions herself in front of the card stand, spinning it listlessly. Something about her looks familiar, but before I can work out what it is, she disappears into the charity shop.

I turn away and stare into my coffee. Why am I still hanging around in here, waiting for some fitness fanatic to show up? I might just as well finish this and go.

A door at the back, which has the word 'Toilet' written on a piece of card strung round the handle, opens with a loud squeak, and there he is. For some stupid reason, I hadn't imagined him

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in anything other than a wetsuit but, of course, he's fully clothed. Faded jeans and a pale-green rugby shirt. Blond, tousled hair. He's even more good-looking than I remember.

'You're here,' he says, grinning.

For one awkward moment I think he's going to kiss me, but at the last minute he offers me his hand.

'I'm Josh, by the way.'

'Astrid.'

'Cool.' He nods at my coffee. 'Can I get you something to eat with that?'

I could murder an egg-and-bacon buttie but have visions of egg yolk sliding down my chin. It's not a great look for a first date. If that's what this is. Dating hasn't been part of my repertoire for ages. In fact, I'm not sure it ever was. Falling into bed, rat-arsed, with complete strangers is my usual *modus operandi*.

'A toasted teacake, maybe?' Christ, did I really say that? It sounds like something my Great Aunt Dorothy would order.

'Toasted teacake coming up,' he says, and saunters over to the counter, reaching in his back pocket for some money.

'One toasted teacake, one egg-and-bacon buttie and a cup of tea, please, Bob,' he says.

Bob nods and sets to work. I'm studying the back of Josh's head – the way his hair curls over his collar – when an involuntary shudder travels the length of my spine. I don't have to look out the window to tell that I'm being watched, and I instinctively know that, this time, it's not Rosie.

Josh pulls out the chair in front of me and it scrapes against the floor. 'Are you okay?'

I swivel my eyes to the right. There's no one there. Of course there isn't. *Get a grip, Astrid. It's not him.*

'Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine.'

Josh glances out of the window and frowns. Then he turns his attention back to me.

'So how long will you be staying with your mum?'

'Until she gets better, I suppose.' There's just the faintest sensation of warmth in my cheeks.

'What do you do?' he says. 'For a living, I mean.'

My brain goes into overdrive. *Breathe.*

Josh screws up his face. 'Sorry. That's a really annoying question. I sound like some tosser at a dinner party.'

I smile. 'I trained in scenic design. I work freelance.'

What I don't tell him is that the last job I had that was anything remotely to do with design was over seven years ago. I had a reputation for turning up for work late, still pissed from the night before. A walking health-and-safety hazard. A useless drunk. Since then it's been a series of low-paid, temporary or zero-hours contracts. Boring clerical positions, supermarket work, that kind of thing. For the last year it's been nothing at all.

I take a mouthful of coffee and scald the roof of my mouth.

Josh blows across the top of his drink, like I should have done. 'I work in a university,' he says. 'Student services. At least, I will do, from the end of August. I was made redundant from my last job.'

'Oh, sorry to hear that.'

'Don't be. I hated it. Anyway, it's worked out pretty well. My dad's bought a big old place overlooking the backwaters. So I'm staying here for the rest of the summer to help him out with the refurbishment.'

He's looking right at me now. 'So what made you want to be a set designer?'

Now this I don't even have to think about. 'I love painting on a big scale,' I tell him. 'Climbing on scaffold towers and transforming a plain old backdrop into a forest, or an ocean, or a busy street. Mixing the colours and textures together, flicking paint on to the canvas and getting my hands and clothes covered

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in it too. Makes me feel like I'm part of the painting, actually *inside* it – do you know what I mean?'

I haven't talked about any of this for ages, haven't even thought about it, to be honest. But now that I am, it's all coming back to me. The passion I felt before it all went wrong. Maybe if I hadn't been hell-bent on self-sabotage, I could have been on my way to being a respected set designer by now, or at least in regular work with good production companies.

Josh is nodding at me and smiling.

'It gets your adrenalin pumping too. Especially when you're working so high up. You've got to know what you're doing. And there's something really special about working in a theatre late at night. The atmosphere, you know? Eerie and dark. Echoes bouncing off the empty auditorium. Always a broken light flickering somewhere in the darkness.'

I stop. He must think I'm mad, rattling on like this.

He leans back in his chair. 'I don't think I've ever seen someone so in love with what they do,' he says. 'Your face is completely transformed when you're talking about it.'

I look down, embarrassed.

'Actually,' he says, 'I might pick your painterly brain, if you don't mind.'

I give him a quizzical look.

'There's this weird little room in the middle of my dad's house that hardly gets any light. He's thought about knocking it through into the two adjoining rooms but there's something about it he likes, and I know what he means. It's like a secret chamber.'

He pauses while Bob brings the buttie and teacake over and we move our cups aside to make more space.

'He's got this idea of getting someone to paint a window on one of the walls. You know, one of those realistic ones that looks like it's opening on to a beautiful garden, or something.'

'A trompe l'œil.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'A *trompe l'œil*. It's French for "deceive the eye". A painting that tricks you into seeing it as a three-dimensional solid form. It's all about illusionism and forced perspective.'

'You see?' Josh says. 'You know about these things. Why don't you come and have a look, see what you think?' He winks. One casual movement of an eye and there's a strange fluttering sensation behind my breastbone. Between my thighs. I glance out of the window.

'Seriously, you don't have to if you're too busy, but it'd be good to have your input, and Dad's great. You'll love him.' He blushes then. This six-foot-something blond Adonis actually blushes. 'And it'd be really nice to see you again.'

I wipe the palms of my hands on my jeans under the table. This is crazy. I've only known this guy five minutes and already he wants me to meet his dad. I was with Simon for almost three years and I never met a single one of his relatives. He'd lost touch with them all by then. It's hardly surprising, in the circumstances. I doubt Mum and I would still be talking if I hadn't agreed to rehab.

'Okay, then.' The words fly out before I can change my mind.