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Nikki Smith studied English Literature at Birmingham University, before pursuing a career in finance. Following a ‘now or never’ moment, she applied for a Curtis Brown Creative course where she started writing her first novel, *All In Her Head*. She lives near Guildford with her husband, two daughters and a cat who thinks she’s a dog.

Also by Nikki Smith

All In Her Head

LOOK
WHAT YOU
MADE
ME DO

NIKKI SMITH



ORION

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For my parents

‘Hell is empty and all the devils are here.’

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

Prologue

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Paul notices it first. I'm too busy darting from one room to another trying to find her, anxiety expanding in my chest like a balloon, making it hard to breathe. She isn't in the kitchen or the lounge. Or behind the sofa in the snug, although, with the various toys lying discarded on the floor and felt-tip pens and colouring books littering every surface, I have to look twice to double check. I run upstairs, two at a time, my heart pumping, and throw open her bedroom door. The room is empty. Dropping down on my hands and knees, I peer under her bed.

'Livvi?' My voice wavers and I clear my throat. There's no answer and nothing to see on the cream carpet apart from a thin layer of dust, the grey fluff forming thick circles round the bottom of each wooden leg, as if attracted by a magnet. I stand up and wince, biting my lip as a burning pain shoots through my toe. I've caught it on the edge of her chest of drawers. Cursing, I hobble into Grace's room, pulling open her white-painted wardrobe doors covered in half-torn Disney *Frozen* stickers that she's tried to peel off now she's outgrown them. The rows of clothes hang

motionless, no pairs of small legs protruding underneath.

‘Livvi? It’s Mummy,’ I shout into the silence, trying to ignore the throbbing in my foot. ‘You need to come out if you’re hiding. I promise I won’t be cross.’ I listen intently, praying for the sound of a creaking floorboard, a muffled giggle, footsteps scuttling across the carpet. Nothing.

Our bedroom is at the other end of the hall where our duck-egg-blue throw lies undisturbed on top of the duvet, in exactly the same position I’d left it this morning. There’s no sign of any obvious tell-tale lumps that I pretend not to spot during one of our games of hide-and-seek. Oh God, where is she? Our wardrobe is locked. The bathroom’s empty. I wince as I swallow the metallic taste where I’ve bitten the inside of my cheek, running back down the stairs to the kitchen.

‘She’s not upstairs. I’ve searched everywhere,’ I say. Paul glances over my shoulder whilst I’m speaking, staring out through the patio doors across our lawn. He’s not listening to me. I grab his arm to get his attention, wondering if he can feel the same ice-cold fingers that are squeezing my lungs, the same weight that has sunk to the bottom of my stomach like an anchor, preventing me from moving. ‘What are you looking at?’ I ask, trying not to shout. ‘We’ve already checked outside.’ I can’t keep the edge of hysteria out of my voice as I pull on the sleeve of his shirt, urging him to do something, anything, to find her. He shakes my hand off roughly, pushing me aside as he twists the door handle and realises it’s locked, his gaze still fixed on the bottom of the garden.

‘What? What is it?’ I screw up my eyes against the brightness and blink away the tears that blur my vision. ‘She’s not

out there, Paul.’ Two swings dangle limply beneath a metal frame and the trampoline is empty, the canvas mat stretched tight, waiting expectantly for the next jumper.

‘Get out of the way,’ he yells. I stagger backwards, shocked by his unexpected aggression. ‘Are you blind, Jo?’ He jabs his finger repeatedly towards the end of the garden as he struggles to get the key off its hook on the wall and into the lock. I can’t see what he’s pointing at. ‘There!’ he shouts. ‘Look!’ I can hear the panic in his voice as he fights to open the door. At first all I can discern through the faint patterns of small handprints smeared on the pane of glass is his office at the end of the garden, the timber structure silhouetted against the evening sun. He finally manages to turn the key before I notice the faint haze around the bottom of the building that is spreading slowly across the grass. It drifts in swirls and the smell hits me the moment Paul flings open the patio door. Smoke.

‘Have you searched in there?’ He glances at me and I don’t need to answer. He sprints across the lawn, screaming her name, as I sink down onto the tiled floor, unable to move as I watch the flames appear. Their red and orange tongues are initially hesitant, contemplating the taste, but once they realise it’s a meal to be savoured, they rise up and devour the whole building in a matter of minutes.

One Month Earlier

FRIDAY

Jo

I stand up in the front pew of the crematorium for my father's funeral, one hand using the Order of Service as a fan, the other by my side holding a damp, screwed-up tissue. The rest of the congregation copy me; a hundred pieces of white card flapping ineffectually in the heat like faded butterflies' wings. I stuff the tissue in my pocket, focusing on the hymn my mother has chosen, the organ playing in time with the beats of air against my face, anything to distract me from the stares of the people in the pew behind that attach themselves to the back of my head. They hang heavily in my hair and I run my fingers through it in the hope it will disentangle them, the knots catching at the ends of the brown strands. I wish they'd find someone else to look at; I don't deserve their sympathy.

My mother is sandwiched on my right between my sister Caroline and me, her lips pursed, staring dry-eyed at my father's coffin. Paul stands awkwardly to my left, his new, one-size-too-large black suit jacket that he purchased specially for the occasion making him seem even paler than he already is. I'm glad we didn't bring the girls. I don't want them to see me like this, fragile with grief, the mask I'm wearing

threatening to crack at any moment. We'd said Livvi, not yet eight, was too young and although Grace is three years older and we'd asked her if she'd wanted to come, she'd refused, saying she didn't want to see the coffin. Part of me wondered if that had just been an excuse. She's been avoiding Caroline ever since Dad died and I can't blame her after their last encounter. I reach for Paul's hand as the hymn finishes but he moves it away, wiping a few beads of sweat off his face. A small shiver runs across my skin, despite the temperature.

Paul takes a deep breath and follows Rob out of the pew to stand at the lectern. My mother had asked them both to speak; she hadn't trusted Caroline or myself not to breakdown mid-sentence. I'd agreed; I know how much she hates displays of emotion. She had insisted my brother-in-law go first and I hadn't objected. My sister isn't holding any balls of sodden tissues; she's not at all flustered. Her hands are folded gently on top of her delicately crossed knees and after glancing down at her skirt, I make a futile effort to smooth the creases out of mine, the thin fabric sticking to my legs in the heat. Her lips move imperceptibly as Rob begins to talk and I realise she's mouthing his speech. I wonder if she wrote it. I doubt it. Rob is a natural orator, playing with words like a teacher handing out sweets to a class; offering them up to the congregation who swallow them greedily, their eyes fixed on him. Caroline nods in agreement as he finishes and I feel a flash of envy at the ease with which he completes the task. Her smile fades as she looks at Paul. She knows it's his turn next.

I pick at a small piece of skin next to my thumbnail, willing him to get through it. His face is chalk-white as he steps

forward to take the microphone, Rob standing obtusely in his way. He hates having to speak in public, but I wonder if that's the only reason for his nerves. He's been distracted recently and I can't blame him; so have I. He coughs and the sound reverberates loudly in the silence, making a few of the mourners jump. My mother's eyes close briefly, failing to hide her disappointment and, for a moment, I wish he'd refused to do it, that he'd left it to Rob. Caroline's lips twitch. Don't mess this up, please don't mess this up. I repeat the words in my head like a mantra.

He fumbles in his pocket and for one horrible second, I think he's forgotten to bring it, but then he takes out a piece of paper which rustles as he unfolds it, the sound echoing uncomfortably in the silence as he stares out over the sea of pale faces in front of him. Caroline raises an eyebrow. Rob hadn't needed any notes to read from. Paul glances at me and I nod, hoping the movement will propel him into action. He looks down at what he's written, takes a deep breath, and begins his eulogy. It's not long, certainly nothing like the monologue Rob delivered, but he manages to get through it and I sense a ripple of support, or perhaps relief, amongst the other mourners as he follows Rob back to our pew. My mother looks at me, her expression unreadable. Her eyes linger on my creased skirt and I hold in my stomach; a long-held habit I can't seem to break. I smooth out the material again, the perspiration from my hand leaving a damp patch on the silk. She's still watching. I wonder if she can see straight through my skin to the writhing ball of guilt that is growing multiple shoots, each one making a desperate bid to reach the surface where they'll be visible to everyone.

Paul sits back down next to me with a jolt, tripping over Caroline's bag, which is lying on the floor in front of her seat.

'You did great,' I whisper. He smiles, but his hands tremble as he holds the Order of Service. My mother notices it too. I put my fingers over his to shield him from her gaze and this time he doesn't move away.

Caroline walks next to me as we head out of the crematorium after the service. I take a deep breath of fresh air, needing to push the lifelessness of the room we've been sitting in out of my body, squinting as I look upwards. My father had adored days like this. A clear blue sky with no clouds to spoil the view; a mini heatwave for June. He was only sixty-nine.

'At least now things can start getting back to normal,' Caroline says, fishing in her bag for her sunglasses. I can't bring myself to reply as I watch my mother, her smile unwavering, greet the mourners as they leave the building. 'It was a nice service,' she continues, putting the shades over her eyes. 'The flowers were beautiful. I ordered them from that new shop near the office. They do great hand-tied bouquets if you ever need one.'

I nod, biting back my desire to tell her I don't give a shit about the bloody flowers.

'Rob's speech was impressive,' I say in an effort to change the subject.

'It was, wasn't it?' she says. 'We wanted to try and make it memorable.'

I nod again, watching my mother embrace the owner of the local golf club for a fraction longer than necessary. If Caroline had helped to write it, she'd managed to include a list of all Dad's achievements but the words hadn't encompassed

the personality of the man who had spent his last few weeks attached to various items of medical paraphernalia, making my daughters giggle right up until his final few days. I remind myself she didn't know him like I did. Four years older than me, she was already a teenager, desperate to get out of the house, when he'd started to spend more time in it.

The last trickle of mourners dries up and Rob shakes the vicar's hand to say goodbye, grasping it firmly between his own, pumping it forcefully up and down. The movement sparks a distant memory and I'm conscious of a tingling sensation on my skin.

Rob ushers my mother down the path. 'Ready?' Caroline asks her.

She nods. 'Let's get this over with.' I wish we didn't have to go with them but we don't have a choice. I hesitate instinctively, waiting for my mother to walk ahead, resuming our natural family order as we file towards the waiting car, my mother next to Caroline at the front, me at the back. When I'd been growing up, I'd used to wonder whether I'd been adopted as she'd always favoured my sister over me. I'd found baby photos of us both in a drawer along with our birth certificates which had discounted this theory, but there had been something in her eyes when she'd been holding Caroline that had been missing in the pictures with me. A brightness in her face, as if she had been lit up from the inside. I had flicked through all the pages in the album, twice, desperate to find one of me with her where she'd looked like that, but there hadn't been a single one.

As the driver pulls out of the car park, Rob stares at my sister.

NIKKI SMITH

‘What is it?’ she asks.

‘Your mascara’s smudged.’

She pulls her compact out of her bag and examines herself in the mirror, wiping underneath one eye with a tissue. ‘Better?’

He nods, barely glancing at her as she snaps the lid shut and puts it away. His fingers tap his knee impatiently. For once, he doesn’t seem to know what to say.

‘I hope they’ve switched the air conditioning on at the hotel,’ my mother says. ‘I couldn’t breathe in the crematorium.’

I can’t bring myself to look at her, glancing at my watch instead. Three o’clock. The girls will be finishing school. I’m overwhelmed by a sudden urge to hear their voices and touch their skin, to bury myself in their warmth and push death away into the distance. I get out my phone and type a message to Anna.

Hope you’re still on for pickup and girls are OK. Should be home by 7ish. xx

It vibrates on my lap a few seconds later.

All good and no need to rush. Girls will be fine here, don’t worry. Hope it all goes as well as these things can. A xx

Caroline looks at me. ‘Everything OK?’

‘Yes, just checking a friend is collecting the girls from school for me.’

She smiles. ‘It’s tricky to manage all the logistics, isn’t it?’ I force myself to smile back. As if she’d know. She’d never had

to juggle work and childcare when Adam had been growing up; my mother had acted as her full-time Nanny. The same role had been available when I'd had Grace, but my mother had refused, citing the travelling distance to our old house as impractical. She was right, but still only ever visited for short occasions, never staying over, claiming she didn't want to interrupt my routine.

Caroline opens the window and Rob frowns and shuts it again, his knuckles white as he presses the button, and I feel a stab of guilt. This isn't her fault. I just want this day to be over. We sit together in an awkward silence, the rhythmic ticking of the taxi indicator counting down the seconds until we can get out. I contemplate reaching for Paul's hand again and then change my mind, unsure whether I'm offering comfort, or taking it; knowing I don't warrant the latter.

The car pulls up outside the hotel; apparently an old coaching inn that once provided the stage for Lady Hamilton and Lord Nelson's affair, the old red bricks now barely visible, covered in ivy. The concierge ushers us into the private room my mother booked for the occasion. I head for the table where the drinks have been laid out, pick up a flute of champagne and swallow it down in a couple of large mouthfuls, desperate for the alcohol to hit my bloodstream. Paul comes over, noting my empty glass as he opens a bottle of beer.

'At least you ordered a lot of booze,' he says.

I nod, picking up another drink, raising it towards the bottle in his hand. 'Yes. We're going to need it. The crematorium was packed. Here's to Dad.'

He smiles. ‘To your dad.’ He leans down, murmuring quietly in my ear, ‘Who’d have hated that service, and would know how much I need this beer.’

I press my cheek against his, a brief moment of connection that has been lacking in our lives recently. ‘I’d better go and thank people for coming,’ I say, trying to fit one of the canapes into my mouth without spilling any of it down my top, gathering up the courage to mingle. I catch my mother watching me from the other side of the room and feel every centimetre of progress the smoked salmon and cucumber makes as it slides slowly down my throat, sitting like a stone in the bottom of my stomach.

The noise of a glass being repeatedly tapped with a spoon provides a welcome interruption to conversations I find exhausting. Caroline is standing in the middle of the room and a hush descends as everyone looks in her direction.

‘I wanted to say a big thank-you to all of you for making the effort to come today. I know how much Dad would have appreciated it. He was an amazing husband to my mum, a wonderful father to me and Jo, and we were lucky to have him.’

And grandfather, I mutter to myself. I notice she doesn’t mention that.

‘I’m sure he’d be delighted if he could see us all here, and I can assure you he wouldn’t want any of this food to go to waste, so please make sure you don’t hold back, and I’d like everyone to raise a toast. To my father, Thomas. We’ll miss you.’

I glance around. I can’t see Paul, but then I notice the door opening and he comes back into the room. Caroline

has made her speech without him even being here. She walks over, holding her glass of orange juice.

‘We’re going to make a move soon,’ she says.

‘Already?’ I ask.

‘Yes. Rob’s ordered a cab. You can stay on,’ she adds. I bite back a retort that I’m not asking for her permission. I’m not sure why she wants to rush off, it’s not as if she’s got anything to get back for. Adam’s away. He’d only left to go travelling a couple of weeks ago, delaying his trip as long as he could until after Dad had died. Caroline had told me he was in Bali but she hasn’t mentioned him today and it’s always difficult to get any information about Adam out of Rob. He hadn’t even gone to the airport to see him off.

‘Mum said she’s arranged a meeting next week with the solicitor,’ Caroline says.

‘What for?’ I reply.

‘Something about Dad’s will, I think. I thought you knew.’

I stare at her. ‘She hasn’t mentioned it.’

‘Hasn’t she?’ Caroline’s cheeks are flushed. Up until a few weeks ago, we’d been getting on better than we had done for years, taking tiny steps to rebuild the relationship my mother had taken pleasure in driving apart; one that had remained firmly at arm’s length, consisting of polite Christmas and birthday cards until I’d moved back here from Bristol three years ago following Dad’s request to help with the business. But the last time we’d spoken properly had been when Dad was still alive – the fragile threads we’d hesitantly woven together had ripped apart, and now I feel like I did as a teenager; having to pretend she’s not lying to me, when we both know differently. She scans the room, waiting for Rob

to notice her and he inclines his head towards the door. He can't wait to get away.

Perhaps I'm being too harsh. None of us want to be here and everyone deals with grief in different ways – I know that better than anyone. Rob had only visited Dad once in those final days, stumbling out of the makeshift bedroom we'd constructed in the sitting room, his face an ashen-grey colour, walking straight past Paul and me without a word. No doctor's warning can prepare you for the sight of someone dying when you're confronted with it face to face. The waxy pallor of translucent skin stretched tightly over a heap of bones. Rob's probably still in denial. Looking at him now, as he ushers Caroline out of the room, I wouldn't be able to tell he's just lost his father-in-law. But then I know how difficult it is to be sure what Rob's really thinking.

I listen to a few of the guests swapping anecdotes about Dad, the three glasses of champagne I've drunk helping me to pretend they aren't talking about my father, burying my grief temporarily behind a hazy fog, almost bearable, thinking about how we need to get back to let Buddy out or he'll end up chewing the furniture. I put my empty glass down on the table, shaking my head as a waitress holds out a plate full of sausage rolls, and head out of the room to find the concierge.

Rob and Caroline are waiting at the entrance to reception. Rob has his back to me but it looks like they're arguing. He's leaning towards her, his face a couple of inches away from hers. She spots me approaching and steps backwards, her features rearranging themselves into the composed expression I'm more familiar with.

'Everything OK?' I ask, staring at her.

‘Fine,’ Rob replies, smiling. ‘Our taxi’s just a bit late.’

‘It should be here any minute though,’ Caroline says quickly.

‘I’ll let Mum know you’re leaving, shall I?’ I ask, hoping it’ll prick her conscience.

‘She already knows,’ my sister replies. ‘We’re taking her with us – she’s just nipped to the Ladies.’

I wonder if my mother had asked to stay at theirs. She hadn’t taken me up on my offer to come back with Paul and me. She appears out of the cloakroom and I can see she’s reapplied her lipstick, the bright red colour bleeding into the fine lines along her top lip. The fact she hasn’t outlined them in pencil first is the only sign that everything isn’t exactly as it should be, the one oversight in her otherwise immaculate appearance. Rob reaches for Caroline’s hand as I turn to go. I can’t be sure if I imagine a momentary hesitation before she takes it, but there’s no mistaking the look he gives me as I walk off down the corridor.

It makes my skin prickle; a reminder of what he’s capable of.

SATURDAY

Caroline

Cleaning the kitchen takes me the entire afternoon. I remove all the jars from the cupboard very carefully, lining them up on the side of the counter so I can remember their original order, before wiping the rings of sticky residue off the wood and putting them all back. One centimetre too far the left or right could result in an immeasurably different outcome to my evening. My hands shake as I move the mint sauce, trying not to think about the significance of every decision or I won't do anything at all and he'll come home before I've finished. And I know how much Rob hates it if I leave anything unfinished.

I make sure I get the cloth into every crevice, into all the tight corners and plastic trays of the fridge door. The water in the sink turns an unpleasant brown colour as I wring out the damp material over and over again. I've done everywhere; the tops of the picture frames, the edge of the cupboard door that houses the bin, behind the pot we use to hold the washing-up brushes on the kitchen windowsill.

It helps keep my mind off the funeral. Off my sister. It hadn't been enough for her to have had Dad's almost

undivided attention at the office for the past few years since moving back from Bristol. In the last couple of weeks she'd barely moved from the chair beside his bed, as if her presence at the critical moment would in some way erase all the years she hadn't been there. I'd felt like an intruder when I'd gone around to visit, my attempts at conversation stilted. I'd desperately wanted him to say something so I knew he understood. That he cared as much for me as he did for her. But he hadn't. She hadn't given him the chance. And now he's gone.

I'm sweating once I've finished and open the window to let in some air as I watch the dirty water drain away down the plughole, wiping round the inside of the whole sink with kitchen roll to make sure there aren't any smears left.

The house is always so quiet without Rob here. A silence that descends the moment he walks out of the front door, as if the whole building has let out its breath in a sigh of relief. I sink into its softness, knowing it won't last. As the length of his absence increases, the atmosphere gradually tightens with expectation, until I feel it as a physical pain that squeezes my head, making it throb in anticipation.

Once the radio pips beep for the hourly news, the time he's due back, my level of adrenaline is so high that my hands shake and I have to stop myself retching at the inevitable sound of his footsteps outside the front door. I have eleven seconds to compose myself whilst he gets his keys out of his jacket pocket, lets himself inside and takes off his shoes before walking into the kitchen to check on me. He expects his cup of tea to be waiting for him by the time he comes back from washing his hands in the cloakroom; a routine he

follows religiously. I breathe slowly, in through my nose for three and out through my mouth for five, so that when he reappears and I pass him his favourite blue mug with one small spoonful of sugar, *can't you ever fucking get it right*, the trembling in my hands has stopped enough for him not to notice it.

He glances at the letters I've left in a neat pile on the counter, all addressed to him, frowning at a couple without opening them. I wait until he's finished his drink, trying to judge what kind of a mood he's in before I ask him anything. His eyes flicker over the pristine granite surfaces, never quite meeting my own, and I steel myself, waiting to see if I've passed his inspection.

He goes upstairs, taking the letters with him. It's a few minutes' respite from the hours I must sit through until I can go to bed, hoping he'll stay in the sitting room watching TV. The alternative is that he follows me up and that's always so much worse. Those memories take longer to fade than the bruises. I stay quite still, listening to the sounds that tell me what he's doing as clearly as if I was standing in the room with him. The soft thud of his trousers dropping onto the floor, the squeak of our wardrobe door as he opens it to reach inside for a hanger on which to put his jacket. The bang as he slams it shut. The creak of the floorboard by the side of his bed as he sits down to read the post. I've learned to recognise them all over the years as sounds don't allow him to hide things in the same way as he does with words. Nothing can disguise the noise of a door being shut. Especially when your fingers are trapped in the frame.

I double check the kitchen table is laid properly; all the

condiments set out exactly how he likes them, including the tomato ketchup that he insists smothering over whatever I cook. I loathe the stuff; it's too sweet for my taste. And then I hear his footsteps as he walks across the landing and back down the stairs. My body tenses, an unconscious movement, one of the only things I have left to shield myself against whatever will come next.

'Your mum gone?' he asks. I nod. 'When's the meeting with the solicitor?'

'Tuesday.'

He runs his forefinger across the counter, inspecting it for dust.

'She's going to tell Jo?' he asks. I nod. 'If you get what it's worth, it'll be more than enough to finance the site development. Maybe even another one I'm looking at as well. What's for dinner?' he asks.

'Lasagne.' He stares at me and I add, 'The one from Delia that you like.' He looks at the table, checking to see if he can find anything missing. 'Do you want some salad?' I ask.

He shakes his head. 'What time did your mum leave?'

'After lunch.'

'What have you done since she left?'

'Put some washing on. Cleaned the kitchen.'

He runs his finger under the tap and wipes it on a tea towel. 'I've spent the best part of a day of what's supposed to be my weekend in the office with fucking morons, trying to sort out something they should have dealt with yesterday. That's what happens if I take a day off.' I swallow and don't speak, letting my thoughts run through my head like water, small streams that flow in endless circles, never joining together

with others to make a coherent conversation. ‘Anyone call?’ he asks casually.

I shake my head. ‘No.’ He picks up my phone off the side of the counter and keys in the digits of my pin, scrolling through my recent call history. He’ll only find his number. I don’t look at him as I put on the oven gloves to take the dinner out of the oven.

‘You’re sure?’ he asks, I know he’s watching me; I can feel my skin burn and have to hope that the blast of heat as I open the oven door will hide the flush that spreads across my face. I focus on not dropping the heavy dish as I put it down on the chopping board.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘Quite sure. No one’s called; I’ve been on my own since Mum left.’

He doesn’t reply, disappearing out of the room as I carefully cut him a portion of the steaming food, trying to keep the segment intact as I take it out of the china container, wiping the side of his plate to clean up the small trail of sauce that’s dripped over the edge. I carry both plates onto the table and sit down, the familiar noise of our home phone in the study bleeping as he presses 1471 to listen to the last number that was dialled. I know he’ll be checking the call history by scrolling through the numbers on the screen but I’m not stupid enough to use it. I only made that mistake once. He comes back into the kitchen and his mobile buzzes. He takes it out of his pocket and glances at the message before he sits down, smiling. I contract the muscles around my mouth so I look like I’m smiling too. He squeezes out a large globule of tomato ketchup and spreads it across the top of his lasagne. I don’t let him see me wince, the sickly sweet smell making me nauseous.

‘Do you want a glass of wine?’ he asks. I try not to let the surprise show on my face. I can’t remember the last time we had a drink together. Years ago we used to sit on the sofa, my legs across his lap, a couple of glasses of Shiraz on the table in front of us, him telling me his plans for the business whilst I resisted the urge to reach out and touch his face, needing to feel his skin with my fingers to believe he was actually sitting beside me.

‘Sure,’ I say. ‘I think there’s white or red in the rack. Which do you fancy?’

‘Red,’ he replies. I get up and bring back a bottle of Montepulciano and the corkscrew. He waves me away as I attempt to open it.

‘I’ll do it.’ I put a couple of wine glasses on the table as he pours a small amount into the bottom of each glass. ‘To us,’ he says as he raises his towards mine. They clink as they meet and I wonder if he can hear my brain frantically flicking through various possibilities as to what could have happened to have put him in this mood.

‘To us,’ I say, as he picks up his fork.

‘I think I’ve sorted the planning permission for that new plot,’ he says. ‘Haven’t got it in writing yet but I’m pretty sure the Council are going to support it.’ I nod, and he frowns, mid-mouthful.

‘What have you put in this?’ he asks.

I pause. ‘Nothing . . . just the usual. Mince, onion, tomatoes . . . why?’

‘What cheese sauce did you use? Was it out of a jar?’ I shake my head. ‘It tastes vile. How hard can it be to make a decent sauce?’ I don’t answer and keep very still, staring at

the loose threads on the edge of the tablecloth. He lowers his cutlery onto his plate. 'I can't eat this. Clearly. I'll have to get myself something else that's actually edible.'

'Do you want me to . . .?' I go to get up but he grabs my hand.

'Sit down.' I sit. I've learned by now there is nothing I can do to stop him once he's started. I focus on trying not to let the terror that's twisting my insides show on my face. He looks at me, staring into my eyes, searching for the fear that he swallows greedily, feeding what is an inexhaustible appetite.

'There's no point wasting it,' he says, picking up his plate and sliding the contents onto mine. 'You can have it.'

'I don't . . .'

He stares at me. 'You will eat it. And you will finish every mouthful.' He picks up his glass as he pushes back his chair and stands up, hesitating for a fraction of a second before he takes mine as well and pours the remaining red liquid from both down the sink, the droplets splashing up the sides of the white porcelain like blood.

He leans against the sink at one end of the kitchen, his arms folded, waiting for me to finish what's on my plate. His body is so rigid I can almost see the anger flowing just below the surface of his skin, about to break through at any moment. I close my eyes as I swallow each mouthful, trying not to breathe through my nose so I don't taste the ketchup that snakes in crimson trails through each forkful. My stomach protests and for a moment I think I might be sick, but I keep eating until there's nothing left, and he uncrosses his arms, the muscle in his jaw flickering. I put my cutlery on the plate

and carry it across the room to stack it in the dishwasher but my fork slides off, clattering against the tiles. I wince as I pick it up and get a glass out of the cupboard to gulp some water to get rid of the taste of ketchup.

‘You missed a bit,’ he says, bending down. He wipes the tile with his finger and steps towards me, holding it out, a couple of pieces of mince half-buried in a globule of cheese sauce. I open my mouth obediently, swallowing the tiny mouthful, my eyes bright, ignoring the greasy smear on the floor.

‘Look what you made me do,’ he says, putting his arms round my waist. ‘I don’t like getting cross. I look forward to eating something nice when I get in. I was hoping we could make a bit more of an effort now it’s just the two of us here. And if the meeting with the solicitor goes well, it’ll mean you won’t have to work anymore. I can take care of both of us. I do love you, you know.’ I feel his body tense, waiting for me to respond. He nuzzles his head into the back of my neck as I rinse out the glass, placing it carefully upside down on the draining board, wondering what Adam might be doing at this moment and whether the pain in my stomach is as a result of what I’ve eaten, or because I miss my son. I force myself to relax into Rob’s arms, hoping my softness is infectious, that I can use it to mould him into how he used to be.

‘I love you too,’ I say, no longer sure if I’m lying to him or to myself. I still catch the occasional glimpse of the man I married, fleeting moments that I cling on to, folding them away in my head like tissue paper, fragile layers that tear into tiny pieces when I try to remember them. I promised I’d never leave him. Until death do us part. That was the deal.

You don't know I'm watching you. Or perhaps you do and you're just pretending not to notice. Or maybe, to you, I'm simply invisible. One of those people whose name you ask and they reply, but, in the same breath, tell you that you've already met. And you nod vigorously, unsure who is most embarrassed, pretending that of course you remember, and at the same time running through the occasion mentioned over and over again in your head. You wonder if I've dyed my hair, or had it cut, as you can't picture me ever being there at all. You can't remember us ever having had a conversation and want to ask me what it was about; whether we were both part of a larger group and I contributed the odd snippet from the sidelines, in which case you could perhaps understand why my presence is now a blank, or whether we talked for a while, one-on-one. And if it was the latter, you want to know what I said, but even if I repeated it, I suspect the words would slide out as a murky shade of beige, so unremarkable and inoffensive that they'd cancel themselves out, swallowed up by something far more colourful that attracted your attention. I can already tell you're the kind of person who is always looking to find the next new and exciting thing and I've decided that's going to be me.