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# THE WRECKAGE OF US

DAN MALAKIN



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For Regine

# PROLOGUE

The Forest of Bowland before dawn is as dark and endless as a nightmare. For two days, a large portion of the Greater Manchester Police force have been reaching deep into its three hundred square miles, hunting with dogs and drones, calling her name.

Astrid Webb. Thirty-two years old, five foot seven, slim build, blonde hair. Missing since Saturday 4 November, at approximately ten forty-five in the morning, when her car was found crashed on the B6243 near Dutton, blood splattered over the steering wheel, the dashboard, across the windscreen.

The search is getting fractious. Yesterday there was a switch to move the teams east towards Bleasdale – greeted on the ground with shakes of the head and mutters that those in charge don't know what they're doing. Most of the orange-waistcoated officers spread between the ghostly trees, their radio static mixing with the squawking birds, already suspect this effort will be for nothing. Mrs Webb won't be the first to vanish into the forest, never to be seen again.

Every hour that passes the pressure continues to grow. Journalists' vans are camped by the striped tape cutting off the country lane where her car was found. Social media ghouls, enticed by conspiracy theories, are lurking in the local area,

harassing officers for titbits of information. Top brass want results, and they're getting nothing but bad headlines for these hundreds of hours of effort; a balance must be struck between hunting for one person and helping all those relying on the police service. Some are clamouring for the search to be pared back.

Finally, a call over the radio. They've found a body.

Detective Inspector Ronson and Detective Sergeant Maxwell drive there in grim silence as the charcoal sky grows lighter by degrees. It's so far from the crash site it takes twenty minutes and a further half-hour crossing marshy fields before they locate the dense copse of trees. They find a police dog handler there, gripping the lead of a panting German shepherd, and nearby a young community support officer is covering his face, taking deep quivery breaths, the puddle of vomit beside him misting in the cold air.

Ronson crouches to examine the body. It never gets easier. You'd think it would, but it doesn't. For days he's been parroting the party line – that they might find her, that she could be hurt, disorientated, wandering through the forest tired and scared and still alive, but he knew from the start this was not the case. The truth is clear from the raw pulp of burgundy meat and bone where her head should have been, the clumps of dirty blonde hair still attached to the shards of her skull, shattered like gory pottery. Beneath her pretty dress, her body pulses with maggots and worms.

The person who murdered Astrid Webb didn't just want to kill her.

They wanted to destroy her.

# PART I



# BRYAN

SATURDAY 4 NOVEMBER, 11.48 A.M.,  
THE DAY OF THE CRASH

Bryan Webb's swerving his bike round the potholes in the crumbling road leading to their cottage when he sees the police car parked out front. His legs go weak and he stumbles to a stop, twisting his feet to detach the cleats, ending perhaps the most ungainly dismount of all time by leaving the carbon fibre frame to crash horrifically to the ground. He clatters as best he can in his cycling shoes to the young constable about to ring the doorbell. From his forlorn expression Bryan can tell it's bad news.

For twenty-five years he served in the police force, mostly as a station sergeant in Manchester. People think the worst part of the job is dealing with scrotes effing and jeffing, kicking over chairs and acting up, but that was nothing compared to the endless procession of grief: sobbing mums, agonised dads, kids whose lives will never be the same again. Whole families destroyed by an officer waiting at your front door.

Now it's his turn.

'Mr Webb?' the constable asks.

Bryan nods breathlessly, wiping his sweat with a Lycra sleeve.

‘It’s your wife. I’m sorry to say we’ve found her car. There’s been an incident.’

The words arrive at his brain but make no sense. Something about Astrid’s car? He glances around to where her black Clio usually sits unused – she doesn’t leave the house much – and notices it’s not there. She didn’t say she was going out when he left.

Bryan realises the constable said *incident*, not accident, and feels a chill deep in his gut. ‘Oh my God – is she okay?’

‘Her car’s been found.’

‘Where is she?’

‘I’m sorry sir, we don’t know yet.’ He gestures to the door. ‘Should we step inside?’

‘Was there a crash?’

‘A family liaison officer is on their way. Why don’t we put the kettle—’

‘I don’t want a bloody cup of tea. I want to find out what’s happened to my wife!’

The constable isn’t sure what to do. He’s been given a job and it’s not going right, but Bryan doesn’t care. He stomps back to get his bike, noting with dismay the scratches along the frame, and shoves it inside.

‘Are you going to drive me?’ he says. ‘Or do I have to find it on my own?’

They head east out of the village. Soon they’re flanked by fields. Grazing cattle, drystone walls, Pendle Hill rising in the distance. Why would Astrid even be coming this way? At

a pinch she might nip to the shops, though that's unlikely as she would've asked him to pick up what she needed on his ride – even then she'd go to the Spar in Northcote, not deep into farming country . Nothing about this makes sense, no matter which way he slices it.

By the time they arrive at the police cordon he's wrung his hands so hard his fingers feel like claws. He gets out and hurries the rest of the way on foot. Her car's skidded off the side of the road, the front bumper thrust into a hedgerow. A white-suited forensics officer is in the front, leaning over the driver's seat to take a sample. Bryan sees the splatter of red on the windscreen and wails.

Blood. *Astrid's* blood.

The constable tries to lead him back 'This is why we say—'

Bryan pulls away from him. 'Back off, I can handle it. Who's the SIO here?'

There's not much of a set-up yet. No large-scale map of the area propped on a stand, no sergeant beside it, drawing lines and doling out orders. In the distance is the steady throb of an approaching helicopter.

'The senior investigating officer,' Bryan says, giving his best *are you deaf or are you stupid* glare. He may not have been on duty for a few years, but he still knows the right tone to put the fear into even the hardest plod. 'Hurry up, son. I've got some information about my wife that might help.'

Bryan's first impression of the SIO is that he's scruffy. Detectives don't need to dress in a dinner suit, but tuck your shirt in, comb your hair. Look presentable to the public.

‘Detective Inspector Gabriel Ronson, CID,’ the man says, steepling his fingers beneath his chin, unshaved for at least three days. ‘I’m so sorry this is happening, Mr Webb. It must be terrible for you, just terrible. Please, could you step this way?’

He leads Bryan past the large blue tent they’re putting up to the back of a police van. It’s reinforced inside, the window to the driver’s cabin heavily meshed. Black vinyl benches run down either side. They sit opposite each other.

Ronson has a kind face beneath his ruffled grey hair, and when he smiles it seems genuine. It’s enough to make Bryan forgive what he assumes is a thin spill of coffee on his tie.

‘My wife isn’t well,’ he blurts out. While waiting, he’d tried to think of a discreet way to explain about her illness – Astrid hates people knowing what she goes through. That wasn’t one of them. ‘She gets migraines, nausea, back spasms. She’s been depressed. I— I’m worried . . . I . . .’

‘Take your time.’

He’s worried he missed something is the truth. These last few weeks he’s been so caught up with the Foundation, preparing for their government meeting next week. The signs have been there though. Great flashing neon ones. How could he just ignore them?

‘She was detained in Manchester,’ he says, unable to meet the detective’s eye. ‘A few weeks ago.’

‘What for?’

‘Causing a disturbance, apparently – I wasn’t there. I had to pick her up from the station.’

‘Is she on any medication?’

Bryan nods.

‘Would she have taken any medication today?’

‘This morning, at nine.’

‘Painkillers?’

‘Others, too – antidepressants, anti-anxiety. Some for the side effects.’

‘Does she often drive on her medication?’

‘She really doesn’t go out very much.’

Ronson nods, makes a thinking noise. Pulls out an A5 notebook held shut with a thick band of elastic and so dog-eared it’s twice as thick in the top corner. He licks his finger and flicks through it. ‘You said to my colleague before that you weren’t sure where your wife was going.’

‘That’s right.’

‘No friends in the direction she was heading?’

Bryan shakes his head.

The detective scribbles something on the pad. ‘And you were out when she left?’

‘On the bike.’

‘Where’d you go?’

The question catches him off guard – this morning feels as far away as nursery school. Ronson tilts his head, hand on his chin, finger crooked below his lips.

‘Longridge Fell,’ Bryan says.

‘You don’t seem sure.’

‘Sorry, I drew a blank for a second.’

‘Were you on your own?’

‘I generally go for a ride every Saturday morning.’

‘And the officer was already at your home when you got back.’

Bryan nods again, but carefully now. His heart is pounding. His mouth is dry. He knows what’s going on here. Ronson is sizing him up, calculating the timings, doing the miles per

hour maths. He's thinking, *Could he have done her in and made it back in time?*

Usually if someone's missing you don't have to look much further than the spouse, the boyfriend, the secret lover. As her husband, he's the bullseye in their sights. Especially with no alibi.

Whatever he does next feels charged. If he bursts into tears, if he swears that he would never hurt his wife, anything at all could be seen as a sign of guilt. It seems so cruel that he's got to worry about this while dealing with what surely must be the worst moment of his life.

A clatter outside makes them both turn. Someone has dropped a bundle of rakes by the tent. When Ronson looks back, the suspicion seems gone from his face.

'Let me help you look,' Bryan says. 'I've got experience—'

'Sergeant, right? Denton station.' Ronson lifts an eyebrow. 'Tell me, why'd you leave the job?'

Bryan shrugs helplessly. 'I guess I fell in love.'

'Well, Sarge,' Ronson says, his expression sympathetic enough to fill Bryan with relief, 'I'll tell you what you no doubt would have told a worried husband in my situation – please, leave the search to us. The last thing we need is you getting lost as well.'

'That's my wife out there.'

The detective pushes his palm like it's on a brake. 'Please, Mr Webb. You used to be with the police, but you're not any more.'

Suspicion. Bryan senses it again. Or is he being paranoid? Ronson wouldn't be the first cop to give him grief for handing in his warrant card – some serving officers are like that. Even though he did the full stint, to some of them once you're an ex, you're an ex. You're out of the club. It's not like that with everyone, but more than you'd think.

Either way, he doesn't want to get on Ronson's bad side. He's the one running the case. He says who's a suspect and who's not. A detective takes a dislike to you, they think it's their gut talking, then you're fighting *against* the evidence.

Bryan lifts his hands in surrender. 'There's got to be something I can do to help.'

'Go home, Mr Webb. Try to stay calm. As soon as we find anything, we'll be in touch.'

They get out of the van. It's busier now, a makeshift hub for the search teams. Beside them comes a loud *fzzzz* that makes both of them flinch – a drone lifts off the ground, moves steadily up to head height, then speeds into the distance.

'Still not used to those things,' says the detective wryly.

Bryan's pleased for the opportunity to bond. 'They're alien to me too.'

On the way back to the car, he pauses by the large map of the area now set up at the entrance to the tent. It's been annotated with all the search areas. They're only going on foot a few miles in each direction, focusing especially on the north of the crash site, deeper into the forest. That makes sense if they think Astrid had an accident and stumbled from the car, otherwise they'd be able to pick her up in a field from overhead, but it's clear from the various roadblocks and checkpoints marking the routes in the other directions that the detective suspects something altogether more sinister.

Once Bryan's in the back of the police car, Ronson ducks his head by the door. 'You must be shocked by all of this. It's a horrible situation, awful, but we'll do our best. I can promise you that.'

'Thank you,' Bryan replies, but when he looks out of the rear

window as they're driving away, he sees the detective watching the car. Watching him. Wondering if he's the kind of man who'd murder his wife.



## 2

# BRYAN

SATURDAY 4 NOVEMBER, 2.35 P.M.

Where was Astrid going?

Of all the questions clamouring for attention as the constable drives Bryan home, that's the one shouting the loudest. To visit someone? But who? She hasn't made any new friends that he knows of since they moved up here. Because she fancied a drive? Even on a sunny day he struggles to get her out of the house, and this morning was as gloomy as it comes.

Could she have had another funny turn? Like that disturbance in Manchester, or last week when he got home from work – she'd blacked out after having a shower and only come to in the trees behind the house, wearing nothing but her undies. In a proper state. Didn't know what was going on. Most likely it's happened again, except this time instead of going for a wander she got behind the steering wheel.

Back at the cottage, the officer comes inside to get a DNA sample. They go up to the bathroom, and with relief Bryan sees her toothbrush is still there. The tiny white pots of whatever it is she rubs on her face remain clustered in the corner of the windowsill.

On the drive, his mind spinning in all directions, he'd considered the possibility that she'd left him. He's not such a fool as to think she's satisfied with their life in the countryside, at least not yet. *If you can't be happy here*, he'd say to her, *then where can you be?* She'd smirk at that, claiming he'd been brainwashed by the garden centre brigade, but he knew she was disappointed. Like him, she thought moving out here would finally snap her out of her sadness.

Instead Dinckley turned out to simply be the latest place for her to feel that way.

They've only lived here a couple of years, coming in the hope it might help Astrid recover from her worsening illness, away from the noise and pollution of the city, and it's as quaint a place as you can get. Picture-book charming, with the village green, the duck pond, the thatched roof cottages. Yes, it's slow-paced, and the biggest scandal is usually nothing more exciting than the pub running out of dry roasted peanuts, at least until today, but it's calm and peaceful and it honestly puzzles him how she doesn't wake every morning and see the sheep grazing out the front window and feel overcome with contentment.

A terrible thought comes to him as the constable bags her toothbrush and some used cleansing pads from the pedal bin. Perhaps his wife was more unhappy than he realised.

Bryan has never been one to mind being alone but when the constable leaves, the reality of being here, just him and the million unanswered questions in his brain, is enough to send him batty. He tears around the house, looking for clues to where she might have gone. Maybe she left him a note? She has a tendency to overuse Post-its, and those sticky yellow squares containing her small angular writing are always stuck to the

fridge, beside the kettle, or in the downstairs computer nook where she works. All are bare.

He sits down in front of the computer and shakes the mouse. The Windows login page appears. They call this Astrid's computer, but that's more because he's got the laptop and prefers to get out of the house to work – he shares an office with a local solicitor on Brownhill high street. He enters the password and the screen unlocks to her Outlook page. The sight of over fifty unread emails, going back to Wednesday, is shocking. No one is more passionate about the work they do at the Foundation than his wife.

Yet another sign he missed.

Keen for the distraction, he scans the emails. He dashes out a reply to the personal safety instructor they have lined up for Monday with the address where she'll be teaching, then a more measured response to Weston Timber, a potential corporate sponsor. As he's typing, he spots the open web browser at the bottom of the screen.

Was she looking at something before she left? Breath catching, he clicks on it, but it's only [rainradar.co.uk](http://rainradar.co.uk). Astrid is more British than most when it comes to watching the weather – he swears she spends half her time transfixed by those blue pixels sweeping across the map. He often jokes the Met Office should probably call her for the latest fluctuations in atmospheric pressure.

He checks the address bar to see what else she's been looking at. Nothing there. Strange. He clicks the gear icon in the top corner and squints down the menu to find the History page. Except for the rain-checking website, it comes up blank.

He sits back, neck prickling, goosebumps like scalpels. Why

on earth would Astrid clear her web history? When did she even start doing that? Is there a setting that does it automatically when the page closes? He tries it now, shutting and re-opening the browser, checking the History page. The rain website is still there. She must have done it right before she—

The doorbell goes. He races to open it, praying it's her. Instead, it's Meera and the Carpenters, Lionel and Denise, their closest neighbours.

'Oh, hi,' Bryan says, wishing he'd taken a second to look through the peephole. It's too late now to shut the door in their faces.

'You poor thing,' Meera says, taking his arm and turning him back inside. She's a couple of years older than him, early fifties perhaps, cardamom-scented and ample inside pastel-coloured knitwear.

The Carpenters follow, Lionel sombrely carrying a foil-topped casserole dish which, Bryan knows by the aroma, contains the same Irish stew they bring to all the village pot-lucks. Even though nothing is further from his mind than food, it's a kind thought. He thanks them as he takes the dish, the ceramic still warm, and puts it on the counter.

'Have you heard anything?' Meera asks.

He can't help noticing the dusty blush on her cheeks, the fresh pink gloss on her lips. If his wife were here now her eyes would be rolling so fast she'd have to run to catch them. She thinks Meera has a thing for him, and maybe she's right. They often laugh about it.

'I was at the crash site—'

Meera interrupts: 'You were with her?'

This is probably already prime village gossip, so he wants to

pick his words carefully, lest they're twisted in the retelling. No doubt there'll be at least a few people thinking he's done something awful to his wife. Maybe even someone he's shared a pint with at the pub, or played cricket with during the summer.

'The police were here when I got home from my ride,' Bryan says. 'I went with them.'

Meera squeezes his arm. 'I'm sure they'll find her.'

He moves to the kettle, forcing her to let go. 'How did you hear about it?'

'Local radio,' Lionel replies. Then shaking his head, 'Bad news.'

'Terrible,' Denise confirms.

They're harmless, the Carpenters, but quiet. The kind of people that only ever make up the numbers in a conversation. Bryan doesn't mind too much, but Astrid finds them hard work. Nothing has her reaching for a *no* more readily than when he says they're having people over for drinks.

While the kettle boils, Bryan busies himself playing host. Cups, milk, sugar, sweetener for Lionel, and do they have any more of those chocolate chip biscuits? But his hands are jittery, and he fumbles a cup. It falls onto the counter and the handle breaks off.

He sweeps the pieces into his palm. *What if Astrid tried to kill herself?*

Five years ago, when they got together, she was close to her lowest point. All along he thought he could help her – he's certainly tried hard enough. But what if . . . he sees her swerving into the hedgerow, eyes red-rimmed but blank with resignation, her head slamming off the steering wheel.

*What if it wasn't enough?*

He knows she's thought about it. They've been to joint therapy sessions where she opened up about her suicide ideation. He hoped that with her medication, with the important work they do at the Foundation, with the security and stability of their home – all perhaps a touch dull at times, he's the first to concede that, but maybe not a bad thing considering what she's been through – with all that, he hoped she would find enough in life not just to endure it, but to enjoy it too.

Meera lays a hand on his shoulder. 'It's not even dark yet,' she says. 'There is still so much time.'

Bryan remembers her new doorbell, the kind that takes videos. Wasn't she always complaining about it recording every time a car goes past? Her cottage is at the top of the lane leading to theirs – could she have recorded Astrid's car leaving this morning?

'I'm so sorry,' Meera replies when he asks her about it. 'My son came round only a few days ago to fix it. He changed the settings so now it doesn't work at all!'

He gets back to the drinks, mind firing back through events of the day so far, holding every memory up to the light – what did Astrid say when he took her breakfast? Was there anything he missed? Any clue to where she might have been going? When he turns back with the teas, he sees their furrowed brows and glum mouths and wants to scream. Instead he asks Lionel about his recent success – his landscape shot of the early-morning mist rising from the Ribble to partially obscure the stone bridges in the background came third in a national photography competition. All week it's been the top news story on the village WhatsApp group.

'Pleased with that one,' he says.

‘Me too,’ Denise chirps in, unhelpfully.

Bryan nods like he’s supposed to, his smile rigid. Astrid’s missing. *Missing*. What’s he doing standing here, making small talk with the neighbours? He saw this kind of thing for years in his old job, people in this situation. It didn’t look pleasant then, and it doesn’t feel pleasant now. It’s like he’s frozen. Like he’s trapped in headlights. Like he’s powerless to stop something dark and vast hurtling towards him.

‘Excuse me,’ he says, stepping around the Carpenters to get to the utility room. He closes the door and leans against it, the lights off, happy to stay in the dark and shut out the world. Sod politeness. Sod all of them. He pulls out his phone and rings Inspector Ronson. It goes to voicemail. He leaves a message saying to call, please call, let him know what’s happening.

The constable gave him a card for the family liaison officer. Maybe they’ll have some details. Bryan finds it in his back pocket, flicks on the light. At the same time, he notices it’s weirdly chilly – they dry clothes in this room, so it’s usually the warmest in the house. Now it’s colder than the kitchen.

It looks as though the floor is wet. He realises it’s not water, but glass. Jagged chunks of it are spread over the terracotta tiles. The back door has been smashed.

In the frame, caught on the end of a jagged shard, is a scrap of his wife’s blue dress.

## ASTRID

SUNDAY 29 OCTOBER, 10.14 P.M.,  
SIX DAYS BEFORE THE CRASH

Prawn and harissa spaghetti for dinner. Two games of whist and a round of cribbage. *Countryfile*, *Dispatches* ('Undercover Ambulance: NHS in Chaos'), and to round out the torture an old episode of *Midsomer Murders* they'd seen before. Then, finally, thank everything holy, bed.

Astrid shuffles upstairs. Eyes drooping (just in case), she cleans her teeth, scoops and spreads her creams. When Bryan comes up, she makes her voice spacey and mumbles, 'G'night.'

'Night, love,' he replies.

She closes the door to her bedroom and listens while his electric toothbrush hums, while he coughs and hacks and spits into the sink (sounding, as always, like he's swearing in some guttural language), while he takes his final marathon piss of the night, which tails into a Morse code of drips and splashes that seems to go on for ever. One final *hwuf-wuf* clear of the throat and he's off, clicking the bathroom light, plodding down the landing. Quietly closing his door.

Astrid's always been jealous of her husband's ability to sleep.



It comes to him as readily as a loyal dog. For her, however, sleep is like a mouse – seemingly innocent, but cunning, annoying, and with the capacity to chew through her internal wires if she doesn't manage to catch it. She gives him another ten minutes, then eases down the handle. Creeps out of the room. Pauses at the top of the stairs.

It's quiet, but that's not unusual. Bryan doesn't snore. The only way you know he's asleep is by being close to him and hearing the texture of his breaths change; go longer, deeper. She's not slept in the main bedroom for months now. Even before the drama of the last couple of weeks she'd resigned herself to the chilly little front room, with its dewy windows, its yellowed wallpaper, the radiator that clunks and clanks sporadically through the night like a lost Aphex Twin track. It meant she could get up and down (and up and down some more) as many times as her insomnia dictated without waking him. Who knew it would have the bonus of allowing her to sneak around unseen?

Astrid drifts downstairs. She knows every creak of the staircase, and reaches the bottom without making a sound. The door to the storeroom, or the Palace of Failure as she calls it (to herself, of course; Bryan would not approve of the negativity), is already ajar. She slips inside.

She pauses to inhale the soothing aromas. Floral chamomile and fruity citrus and at the pungent end a top note of liquorice. Mixing herbal teas started as a hobby, something to both pass the time and indulge her love of them. And perhaps it could have worked as a business, if she were different, and her husband were different, and the entire world were different. Now the boxes of loose teas are stacked beside the boxes of cotton

rope for her (failed) macramé therapy business, the crates of multicoloured gemstone nuggets for her (failed) bracelet business, and the rest of her Bryan-inspired attempts to bring money into the house.

*Money.*

She tries not to think about it.

Bryan never comes into this room, which makes it perfect for hiding things. She glides in the dark to the right stack, eases the top box to the floor, then opens the flap of the one below. A waft of star anise hits her nose. She slides her hand down the side of the bags, alert to any crinkle of plastic, until her fingertips touch the phone hidden in the bottom corner.

Back into the hallway. Through the kitchen, the utility room, to the back door. She turns the key in increments, the pressure of the lock building, until the faint click as it falls away. Pulling up to avoid the wood sticking at the bottom, she tugs the door open. Then she's outside, embraced by the night, the chilly air, the darkness. A week ago if someone had shown her a snapshot of this moment she would have declared them certifiable – standing in the back garden with just a cardigan over her pyjamas, the temperature no more than ten degrees. As a child, proud of her Nordic roots (despite her mother) she'd never minded the cold, but as her health plummeted she'd grown to loathe it. These last few years, she tramped around the house in a hat and scarf unless the thermometer topped twenty. Now look at her.

The garden is open to the trees beyond. She creeps between them, stepping over roots and fallen branches, the moonlight enough to guide her. Bryan doesn't know about the air-raid shelter. Rather than exploring his own back yard, he prefers

grand hikes, expeditions to new places. She only discovered it by accident last year, tiredly tripping over what she later realised was a periscope, finding the entrance hatch submerged in shrubbery. Inside is a domed corridor, stretching about six metres, the floor messy with twigs and rusted beer cans. Graffiti tags cover the walls, and while not pervasive, there's a definite tang to the musty air from years of accumulated piss.

Sitting on the concrete lip, fingers stiff from the cold, Astrid turns on the phone. All the messages are there. She flicks through them, suddenly nervous, unsure. What if it's all a lie? Or a trap? And here she is stepping straight into it. They've had threats to the Foundation before this – abusive men have gone to prison because of their work.

Is it too late to call? She takes a chance, and once they're talking her anxiety melts away.

'I thought you might be asleep,' Astrid says. 'You're an early riser, right?'

'I'm very much a creature of the night,' he replies. 'Usually, I'm waking up about now.'

'You hide your fangs well for a vampire.'

'I'm only an emotional vampire. Here to suck your remorse away.'

Astrid laughs. 'You're weird.'

'Takes weird to know weird.'

So much has changed in the last week. Not least the rediscovery of herself as a sexual creature. Even now, uncomfortable on the rigid concrete lip, her bum rapidly becoming ice, itchy tingles are springing to life in places she'd long given up as being for functional use.

They chat some more, but there's a disturbance at the other

end of the line. He says he'll see her soon then hangs up. It's enough to quieten her fears, to remind her that she's doing the right thing.

All she can do now is wait.

At eight forty-five the next morning, so accurate to the second you could plan a prison breakout by it, Bryan edges backwards into her bedroom with the tray. On it is her usual breakfast of tasteless oat things (no butter, can't be too careful with lactose!), apple slices, a cluster of grapes still on the stem, two mugs of tea, a glass of water, and of course the Lilac Monster: a pill box the size of an iPad. Four times a day, seven days a week, she raids those tiny compartments for relief.

'Morning, love,' he says, placing the tray on her lap. He retrieves one of the mugs and falls back into the chair next to the bed, all in one smooth machine movement. 'Status report?'

She forces a wan smile. 'Sporadic showers. A cold front came in from the east.'

'The Beast from the East,' he says, but he's distracted. He's barely looking at her as he puts his mug on the floor and fishes his phone from the pocket of his grey moleskin trousers. 'That stupid woman better confirm today.'

'It's never easy,' she replies, squeezing her forehead, jaw crunched in supposed pain, hoping to pass their fifteen minutes together without giving anything away before he sallies off to save the world. Thankfully he's so wrapped up with the upcoming government meeting that his police radar might not be pipping so loud.

He stops scrolling. 'Listen to this. *So lovely to talk yesterday,*

*will get straight on to E.B. to organise the meeting.* Guess when that was sent? Last Tuesday! Six days ago.'

'Sounds stressful.' She sways her head, eyes slipping shut, as though she may faint.

'Kept me on that bloody video call for nearly an hour. An hour! Looking at her stupid old face and listening to her prattle on about her church social club. Like I give two hoots about their themed curry evenings, or their *fascinating* talks from the Wildlife Conservation Society . . . Am I boring you?'

She thought she was getting away with it. Cracking an eyelid, she sees his upright posture, his alert gaze.

'Sorry,' she says. 'I'm still not feeling too good.'

'You're looking better. Got some colour in your cheeks.' She's been struck down with flu all week (so he thinks). When he leans forward to rest the back of his fingers on her forehead, she clenches to stop herself jerking away. 'A bit hot, but I think the fever's gone.'

'I'm definitely on the mend.'

'You haven't touched your breakfast.'

Despite her churning stomach, she takes a bite of apple. 'You were saying about the meeting . . .'

'What's going on, Astrid?'

Her mouth freezes mid-chew. Does he know? Or can he simply sense something is wrong from the vein throbbing in her forehead? *Act normal!* But how can she, after what she's found out? How can anything be normal again?

She finishes her mouthful, sips her water. Manages to say, 'I don't know what you mean.'

'Has something happened?'

'Like what?'

‘You seem . . . off.’

‘I’m just tired.’

‘You’re always tired.’

‘Sorry, I’m listening now. I promise.’

‘Why aren’t you interested in this?’

‘I didn’t sleep well.’

‘You never sleep well.’

She makes a show of sitting forward, blinking herself awake.  
‘Call her back today. I’m sure it’s just slipped her mind.’

A long pause. Bryan holding her under his microscope stare. When they first got together, she marvelled at how all he had to do was turn his lean face towards an underling at the station and they’d spring to attention. His ability to get things done (well, one Niall-shaped thing in particular) was what made him so attractive. That and his thighs.

‘I thought you were passionate about this,’ he says, sighing, shaking his head as he looks away. ‘I thought you cared about women who’ve been through the same thing as you.’

Could she be wrong? Is she being duped into destroying her own marriage by someone she barely knows? These last few days, as she’s come out the other side, her head has been clearer than she can remember. It all seems to make so much sense.

But doesn’t everyone feel that way when they’re being scammed?

‘I’m sorry,’ she says. ‘I promise I’ll—’

‘All right, forget it. If you *are* feeling better, maybe you can get on top of the house.’

‘You might have to hold the ladder.’

He snorts a single, seemingly unwilling laugh. ‘The towels need doing. And let’s get the windows open in here.’

‘Yes, Sarge,’ she says, throwing up a salute.

This time his chuckle sounds genuine. ‘At ease, officer.’

Soon it’s nine o’clock, time to cycle to the office, but she can tell he’s still unsure. To hurry him along she takes her pills, hands him the tray, and swings her legs off the bed like she’s ready to take on anything. It takes all she can muster to keep her smile relaxed as he kisses her goodbye.

After he slams the front door, she looks out the window and watches as he swerves around the potholes, racing up to the main road. She looks over the green fields, the higgledy-piggledy stone walls, that famous hill in the distance the name of which she can never remember, the top already white with snow.

*God, I hate it here.*

She spits her pills into a tissue. Not long now.

## CELINE

She needs to relax. Seth will hate it if he gets here and she's all manic. Instead Celine's up again to check her face and tease her hair and straighten her dress and sip her vodka Coke and light up the rollie gone cold in the ashtray, wishing for probably the billionth time in the last hour that she hadn't been such a gannet and saved a bit of 'the good stuff', as he called it, so she could've sprinkled some into her ciggie and been much calmer than she's feeling now, which is not calm at all, thanks for asking.

Smoking gives her something to do for oh about twenty seconds then she's off again. Stirring the saucepan on the hot plate, adjusting the cutlery on the table, straightening the photo album they're going to look through after dinner, arranging the wildflowers in the tall glass in the centre. Does everything look okay? Classy? Literally, that was what she searched for online. *How to plan a classy date*. Not that Seth asked her to do this, but she's scared he's losing interest in her, that he thinks she's a silly little girl, that he's going to go back to the cottage, back to that woman, because what other explanation can there be? At the start of summer, when they first got together, he called her all the time. They'd sit up half the night, just by candlelight, staring into each other's eyes. *I'm yours and you're mine*, he'd say to her. *I'm totally addicted to you*.



Roll forward to late autumn and it feels like she barely sees him; when she rings, he's always 'up to his neck' in work. After the disaster last weekend – the screaming bust up when they got back from the party – she needs to do something to put things right. To show him she's not just a silly little teenager.

To prove she's mature enough to be with him, so he chooses her instead.

Celine glances at the travel clock on the nightstand. 8.47 p.m. *Ugh*. He said he'd be here at half seven. She wrings her hands, rolls another ciggie, forces herself to take a small sip of her vodka Coke, not the big glug she wants.

What if he's been in an accident? She imagines Seth checking his watch, realising he's late and rushing across a busy road, a car skidding to avoid him, but it's too late; she can almost hear the screaming ambulance, the clattering stretcher, the paramedics arguing whether it's safe to move him.

At the table, desperate to see his face, she flips open the photo album. She thought it was a bit cheesy when he first gave it her, like, isn't that what your grandparents do? But he's older than her – he's just turned thirty – so she assumed it was something you do at that age. Now it's her favourite thing ever. Sometimes she'll happily flip through it for the whole night.

Celine starts at the beginning, forcing herself to pause and take in their journey together. It's amazing how she always looks better in the pictures when she's with him. On her own she just sees her bit of a belly, which she hates no matter how often he calls it cute, or that her hair's dull; it's better now she's lightened it. He prefers it that way.

She turns to her favourite picture of him. He's leaning towards the camera in some swish bar, glass of fizz in his hand,

his curly black hair falling cutely over his forehead, with that look, the one that makes her calves stiffen just thinking about it. She could die he's so fucking fit. *Please don't let him be hurt. Please don't—*

A scrape of metal by the door. His key! She jumps up from the mattress, smoothing her dress, her hair, furious with herself for being so dishevelled. So much for looking classy.

Seth doesn't even manage to say hello before she launches herself at him. He grabs her smoothly round the waist, kissing her in mid-air. She wraps her arms and legs around him; he pushes her against the wall, grappling one-handed with his belt, kicking off his work trousers.

'No knickers,' he says, pushing into her. 'Dirty girl.'

Afterwards Celine asks if he wants to sit at the table to have dinner, but he says he's too tired. Can they chill in bed? He's got a new film for them to watch. *Your Final End*. Korean, super bloody. She tries to hide her disappointment, which only makes him laugh.

'Come here, sourpuss,' he says, crouching by his bag. He digs around inside, brings out a battered tobacco tin, and takes out a plastic baggie half full of a cream-coloured powder. 'Got you some of the good stuff. There's quite a bit there, so don't go nuts on it, okay?'

She holds up three fingers, Girl Guide style. 'I promise that I will do my best.'

They settle on the bed and he puts on the film. He's shown her how to do bumps, but even though it hits her stronger she doesn't like how it burns her nose. Instead, she rolls a new cig,

fingers quivering so much she can barely get the miniature spoon he gave her into the baggie, let alone sprinkle the powder over the tobacco without dumping it onto her lap. The first drag feels like a long, glorious sigh of relief.

Soon she's drifting. On the screen someone's getting taken out. A shot to the back of the head, his body slumping to the ground. *Gangland style*, Seth said, or maybe she imagined it; maybe he said it when they were watching a similar film, a similar killing.

It's a bit weird, she can see that, having a shag then watching people being murdered, but she supposes that's what binds them together. That's what makes them dark stars. Twin souls drawn to each other in this horribly cruel world. Like that poem he wrote for her; she'd memorised every word.

*Two dark stars dance and spin,  
Together they burn bright, defying time,  
For ever they swirl and twirl,  
Lovers enfolded in an eternal sky.*

What would she do if she lost Seth? If he chose that blonde woman in the cottage instead of her? All told, things were pretty grim when she ran away from home. She got the job at the pub and met a few people, but it didn't really start turning around until she met him. He helped her find this flat, which while *petite*, okay, one room, is enough for them; he borrowed his mate's van and drove her to a dead cheap charity shop that sold furniture so she could get a nightstand and a clothes rail. Add to that the stuff she's found in the market – the vintage gilt-edged mirror, the amazing mannequin jewellery stand –

string the lot in fairy lights and yes, it's still in a dingy block in Ardwick, but once you're inside it's proper nice.

He's nudging her. 'Hey? Earth to Celine. What's that smell?'

She shakes her head to clear the fog. Something's burning – dinner! She staggers from her bed to the kitchenette; her eyes aren't working right and ghost auras surround everything. *Oh no!* The pan is still on the hotplate. She'd left it on low to keep it warm.

Thankfully it's only the bottom that's burned. She spoons it into two bowls and brings it over to the bed. Seth pauses the film to light a Silk Cut; he leans forward to look at the food.

'What's that?'

'It's fancy,' she says, offering one of the bowls. 'M&S.'

He takes a drag and grimaces. 'Looks like you dug it up from outside.'

'It's that beef thing you got in the French restaurant, remember? Beef bunions, or something.' When she said that over dinner he laughed. This time he frowns, not mean, mostly disappointed and only a little amused, like he's wondering why he's with someone not even grown up enough to make him a nice meal after he's been working all day.

'Put them down,' he says, 'and look at me.'

Celine places the bowls on the table and turns back to him, but it's hard to meet his eye without crying. *Bet she knows how to cook.*

He slides to the edge of the bed, and lifts a hand to her. 'I don't come here for the food.'

She steps towards him, takes his hand. 'What do you come here for?'

'You,' he says, pulling her onto him.

They start kissing, slow, gentle, his hand cupping her cheek. She feels dreamy as he lowers her down.

‘You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen,’ he whispers close to her ear. ‘I don’t think there’s another girl in the world as beautiful as you.’

All doubts are gone. It’s just the two of them, how it’s meant to be. As he kisses down her belly, she recites the poem to herself. *Two dark stars dance and spin*— His head settles between her legs and she gasps, the first waves of pleasure quick to crest.

A ringing phone snaps her out of it. Seth looks around, finds it on the floor, stares hazily at the screen.

‘Sorry,’ he says, getting up. ‘Bloody work. Won’t be a minute.’

Celine goes cold. Her head is instantly clear. Seth grabs the lilac throw he bought for her at House of Fraser and excuses himself to the bathroom.

*Don’t move*, she tells herself. *Stay where you are*. But her bad self is twitching, electrifying her limbs to life, like Frankenstein’s monster. *I will never forgive you if you ruin this for me!*

Too late.

She creeps to the bathroom door, presses her ear to the wood. His voice is muffled, she can’t make out the words, but his tone is too honeyed; it’s the same voice he uses when he wants her to try something new in bed. She strains to hear. Surely he wouldn’t take a call from her while he’s here?

His voice is suddenly closer. ‘Won’t be long. I promise.’

Celine pivots on her heel, but she’s half-cut and stumbles, banging her shin on the nightstand and landing on her knees.

‘Useless bunch,’ he says, coming out. ‘Don’t know what they’d do without me.’ He sees her on the floor. ‘What’s going on here?’

*Won’t be long. I promise.*

It must be her.

He's not smiling now. 'What were you doing, Celine?'

'I—I remembered I didn't have a shower after work, and—'

'You were listening?'

Her heart's pounding high in her throat; she's imploring herself to keep her mouth shut. 'Who were you talking to?'

The muscles around his eyes tighten. She may be young, but she knows a lie when one's coming. She's seen enough of them in her time.

'One of the lads needed to check something,' he says.

'You said you won't be long.'

'I was talking about his shift. I told him it won't be long until he's finished.'

She nods, but she's trying to remember the tone of his voice when he said it, to see if what he's saying now makes sense.

'That's how it is, eh?' Seth stabs at his phone. 'Got to prove to you I'm not a liar.'

Celine scrambles to her feet, feeling ridiculous in her dress, a child playing adult. Has she learned nothing since the party?

'Don't,' she moans, trying to drag his hand from the keypad, desperate to wind time back so she won't be able to ruin yet another night. 'I believe you.'

The call goes through. Seth puts the phone on speaker. 'Phil? It's me.'

'Evening.' Phil's voice is so rough it's more of a growl.

She grabs again for his phone, to end the call, the horror, and get him back to the safe ground of the bed. He shoves her away and jabs a finger. Stay.

'Sorry to do this,' Seth says, eyes coldly locked on hers. 'Got someone here who thinks you might be my piece on the side.'

Phil laughs. 'You're a bit flat-chested for me, mate.'

‘Did you just call me about work?’

‘All fixed, thanks to your help.’

Seth lifts his eyebrows to ask if she’s satisfied.

‘Yes – yes,’ Celine says, reaching for him. ‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.’

Seth finishes the call, but when they kiss she can tell things aren’t right. She pushes him back on the pillow, straddles his waist, licks her lips like they do in the pornos they watch.

‘You know what,’ he says, sliding her off. ‘I’m knackered. Think I’m going to head home, get some kip.’

‘But I’ve not seen you all week.’

‘I’m tired, Celine. I’ve had a killer day and I don’t have the energy for your paranoia right now.’

He’s going to *her*. She knows he is. He said that once men get horny there’s no stopping them, they’ve got to have it; if he’s not going to have it here, he’s going to get it there.

‘Please,’ she says, scrambling to her feet. ‘Don’t leave me.’

‘Look at yourself. Look how you’re acting.’

He grabs his trousers from the floor, but she gets there at the same time, holding onto one of the legs.

‘Don’t go,’ she says. ‘I won’t do it again.’

‘Come on, that’s enough.’

‘I love you so much.’

Seth crouches to her. He takes her hands in his and says, ‘All I want is to love you, Celine. But you make it so hard for me.’ He leans forward, lays a tender kiss on her lips. ‘Don’t stay up too late.’

She’s able to hold back the tears until he’s gone, promising to call tomorrow, although he’s on shift again next week so he might not be able to see her until Thursday at the earliest. As

soon as the door shuts, she allows the first sob to escape. The tears come so hard the world looks fractured. She lurches to the bathroom, holds onto the sink, sees her streaked, blotchy face.

*Look at you. No wonder he left.*

She shouldn't have said anything about the call. She should have kept her head together, played along, made it so good for him here that he didn't *want* to leave. Instead, she's driving him away.

If he dumps her, it'll be no one's fault but her own.

She's not supposed to have any knives. Seth said he'd kill her if he found her with any, but these last few weeks her head's been so in the bin that she found herself in the army surplus shop. She found herself checking out the blades, buying one. Stashing it in a secret place here at the flat.

To win Seth for herself, she needs to be decisive. She needs to be like he was with that young bloke who tried to chat her up in the bar. Show no mercy.

*Anyone wants him, they've got to come through me first.*



