

‘Refreshingly original and laugh-out-loud funny.

This is a superb debut’

**Clare Mackintosh, author of *The Last Party***

‘Delightfully shocking and irreverently funny, this is a pitch-black comedy horror with a heart... of stone. Roll-up for your one-way ticket to the warped world of a glamorous psychopath and her relentless succession of hapless victims. *You’d Look Better as a Ghost* is the darkest debut you’ll read all year’

**Janice Hallett, author of *The Appeal***

‘I was utterly hooked. Joanna Wallace’s prose is scalpel-sharp, with one-liners that made me howl. Claire is a serial killer you can’t help but love, while wondering if she could ever truly love you back... (picture *Fleabag*, but she’s a blood-splattered psychopath wielding a hammer).

I doubt I’ll read a more original thriller this year’

**Jack Jordan, author of *Do No Harm***

‘Monstrous and full of dark comedy and absolutely brilliant observations. Wonderful – everyone must read it’

**Catherine Cooper, author of *The Chalet***

‘Droll and deadly – a dazzling debut by Joanna Wallace. Imagine if Eleanor Oliphant was completely murderous and laugh-out-loud funny. It’s not often you’re rooting for a serial killer to succeed, let alone hoping for a sequel’

**D.V. Bishop, author of *City of Vengeance***

‘I absolutely loved this book. The combination of dark themes and black comedy is spot on’

**Emma Curtis, author of *One Little Mistake***

‘Keeps you guessing at every razor-sharp turn.

Witty, entertaining, clever and audacious, if Bret Easton Ellis ever went to grief counselling, this would be just the kind of brilliant book he’d write’

**Philippa East, author of *Little White Lies***

‘Wallace has the knack of spinning a bloody good yarn with gallons of humour, all with the deftest of touch.

A true marvel from start to finish’

**Jonathan Whitelaw, author of  
*The Bingo Hall Detectives***

‘This serial killer is deliciously dark with a sense of humour to die for, but is there more to Claire than her terrible past and bloodthirsty present? Joanna Wallace has created a multi-layered character who charms you even as you witness her crimes. An impressive debut’

**Alice Clark-Platts, author of  
*The Flower Girls***

‘A terrific debut and a really exciting new voice – if *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* had a baby with *Killing Eve*, it would be something like this’

**Tariq Ashkanani, author of  
*Welcome to Cooper***

**YOU'D  
LOOK  
BETTER  
AS A  
GHOST**

**JOANNA  
WALLACE**



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*For my dad*

# Then

*Half the people crammed into the hall have left their umbrellas at the back, by the door. The other half have closed their umbrellas and placed them at their feet. The people who left them by the door are settling into their seats, distracted. How do they know their out-of-sight umbrellas are safe, won't be stolen? Or forgotten? Maybe they shouldn't have left them at the door. Maybe they should have kept their umbrellas with them.*

*The woman seated in the middle of the front row puts her umbrella on the empty chair to her right. Whenever anyone approaches and asks whether the seat is taken, she smiles apologetically and tells them it is. The people unsettled by her seductive beauty look irritated when she says this. Everyone else stares transfixed. Music starts to play as the door at the back of the hall closes. Anyone still standing trips over umbrellas to find a seat. The show is about to begin.*

*The little children are dressed as mice. With cardboard ears*

*attached to headbands, whiskers drawn across faces and long tails sewn onto leotards, they scamper across the stage and the audience claps. When one of the performers, a little girl, accidentally steps on the tail of the child in front, the audience laughs. When the tiny offender stops to pick up the tail, the audience cheers. When she taps the shoulder of the child ahead of her to return the missing tail, the hall explodes into applause, obliterating the best attempts of the thunder outside. By the time the children scurry off stage, all those umbrellas placed by feet are the forgotten ones – crushed under the weight of a standing ovation.*

*At the end of the show, the woman sitting in the middle of the front row retrieves her umbrella from the empty chair to her right and her daughter from the stage. As they hurry back towards the car, the little girl jumps over puddles as her mother smiles at every person they pass. ‘Wasn’t it a wonderful show,’ the woman says to all the other parents hurrying through the rain towards their cars. ‘Didn’t the children do well.’ Women smile uncomfortably when she speaks to them. Men just stare.*

*They drive out of the car park and the little girl watches the wipers move across the windscreen as they head towards home. Moving back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until they don’t. The rain doesn’t stop but the windscreen wipers do. It’s difficult to see the world outside but the little girl knows this isn’t home. The woman switches off the ignition and turns towards her daughter.*

*‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ she asks.*

*The little girl turns away and stares at each raindrop hitting the windscreen. Each one so free. Free to fall. Free to be.*

*The mother grabs the child’s face. ‘Don’t you dare look away from me. I’m talking to you.’ Her fingers are strong, her nails*

*sharp. The little girl struggles to breathe. 'All you had to do was be dainty.' The woman tightens her grip. 'That's what you're supposed to be. A dainty, delicate little girl. How the fuck did someone like me give birth to someone like you? How dare you embarrass me like that? Stepping on that fucking tail. Clumsy bitch. Everyone will be talking about you now. Talking about how useless and clumsy you are. And do you know what happens to useless, clumsy little girls?'*

*'No,' whispers the child.*

*'You will,' says the woman, slapping the child across her face. The car starts and the windscreen wipers start moving. Back and forth, keeping pace with her rage, back and forth, drawn-on whiskers and tears, back and forth, and that storm – it patiently watches.*



# 1

She looks about the same age as me, early thirties, and she's piling the plates precariously. I wonder whether she's in a rush or just enjoys the excitement of seeing how many she can stack before they fall. There are nine plates piled on the tray with a selection of cutlery on top. She turns towards the kitchen and hesitates. She's spotted another plate. Surely not. She reaches for the tenth plate and balances it on top of the cutlery. I take a sip of red wine and look away from the waitress. The serious-looking men in serious black suits are standing seriously too close and staring at me. Are they waiting for me to talk?

'Claire,' one of them says, 'like I was saying, I'm so sorry about your dad. He was a good man. One of the best.'

One of the best? What a curious accolade. Out of how many? The whole world? This room?

'He was such a lovely man,' someone else is saying

now. Another solo voice emerging from a chorus of gentle agreement. They look like a depressed choir, all these men who used to work with my dad. The choir that charisma forgot.

‘Always so calm,’ continues the soloist. ‘In fact, do you know something, Claire? I can’t ever remember a time when I saw your dad rattled. Not once! In all the years I knew him, he never got rattled. No matter what was going on, he was always so calm.’

‘You’re so right!’ someone else is saying now. ‘He never got rattled, did he? It was extraordinary, now I think about it. I never saw him rattled. Not ever.’

I stand here, watching their mouths move, and wonder about all the funerals in the history of the world. All the funerals that have happened since the beginning of time. How many billions of funerals must there have been? Hundreds of billions? Thousands of billions? Trillions? How many billions in a trillion? And has there ever been a funeral, I wonder, since records began, that has seen such a peculiar overuse of the word ‘rattled’?

‘I remember one time, must be thirty years ago now,’ says another voice, ‘me and your dad, we were working together on this huge project and, let me tell you, the deadlines were unbelievable! Everyone – well, almost everyone – was panicking. The boss was panicking, the client was panicking, and I don’t mind telling you, I was the most nervous of wrecks! But your dad, Claire, he wasn’t one bit rattled. Nothing ever seemed to rattle him.’

Maybe if the funeral was for a rattled young mother who died saving her infant from a rattling rattlesnake armed

only with the child's rattle, maybe then I could understand the word 'rattled' featuring so heavily in post-burial banter. Maybe.

'He was an extraordinary man,' says a different voice. 'Always so quiet. Peaceful.'

The total opposite of the crash of crockery that now hits the floor. Everyone turns towards the waitress, who is almost at the kitchen door but not quite. That tenth plate, poised somewhere between precarious and reckless, lies smashed on the ground, together with the other nine. The waitress is on her knees, picking up broken pieces of crockery, when another appears with a dustpan and brush. They begin to giggle, shoulders shaking. Then, remembering the occasion, they become quiet and respectful again. But it's all an act. I know it is. As soon as they disappear into the kitchen their laughter will erupt.

'And how are you coping, Claire?' one of the men is asking me now. 'It must be difficult for you, with no other family to support you through this difficult time.'

I open my mouth to answer and then I hear my phone buzz. 'Excuse me,' I say, retrieving it from my bag. 'I'd better check this.' Staring at the screen, I see it immediately. New email alert. It's here. Finally. The news I've been waiting for. Taking a deep breath, I open the message.

Dear Claire,

Thank you for entering the Keiver Emerging Artist Prize. My colleague, Hannah, and I thought your entry was extremely interesting and we are thrilled to offer you a place on the shortlist . . .

‘Is everything OK, Claire?’

I look up from my phone. They’re still staring at me.

‘Yes, everything’s fine,’ I say, dropping my phone back into my bag. ‘It’s good news, actually. Really good news.’

‘Oh?’ The chorus of men quickly rearrange their expressions.

‘I entered one of my paintings into an art competition a while ago. I’ve just heard that my entry’s been shortlisted.’

‘That’s fantastic!’ chants the choir in unison. ‘Well done, you!’

‘Can I ask you something, Claire?’ ventures the latest solitary voice. ‘What does it mean? To be shortlisted.’

‘It means that my painting has made it into the top ten,’ I explain. ‘Only the top ten pieces of work are shortlisted.’

‘Out of how many?’

‘Hundreds.’

‘Wow! That’s totally awesome,’ says a distinguished-looking man who looks and sounds like he doesn’t say, ‘Wow! That’s totally awesome’ all that often. ‘Your father was always talking about how talented you are,’ he continues. ‘He used to say that he could see, right from when you were a small child, how brilliant you were at art.’

I smile, which immediately feels weird. It’s been a while since my face has been troubled with a smile. Then I think I’d better say something, as it’s starting to hurt, cracking my face like concrete drying.

‘I remember when he gave me my first sketchbook,’ I say, moving the glass towards my mouth. ‘I was dressed as a mouse at the time.’

All their eyes are upon me. Suddenly I’m the choirmaster.

‘Dad gave it to me on my fourth birthday. I’d been in a dance recital and when I got home, he was there with my cake. There was the biggest thunderstorm that day, I remember that.’

That and more. Dad losing that famous calm of his when he realised he’d missed the performance: ‘But it was in my diary for tomorrow. You told me it was tomorrow!’ Rare that he ever challenged her. Mum then got one of her bad heads. She went up to bed and I opened my presents downstairs with Dad. And there it was. My first ever sketchbook.

‘Is that when your love of art started?’ one of the men asks, as I pause to sip my wine.

‘I think so.’ They wait for more. I don’t give it.

‘You probably don’t remember much from when you were four.’ What is it with these men? What’s wrong with standing in silence?

‘I remember everything.’

All of it. The unwrapping of the sketchbook, how I grabbed a pencil straightaway. And typical Dad, once I’d finished, declaring my work a masterpiece. He said we should drive it to one of those fancy art galleries in town. We both laughed at that . . .

‘Claire, are you OK?’

‘I just remembered something about the competition. There’s going to be an exhibition of the shortlisted work. My painting’s going to be displayed in a gallery.’

‘Wow! That’s totally awesome,’ says the distinguished-looking man again, proving he still can’t deliver that line, but his perseverance? Totally distinguished.

‘Thanks,’ I say, taking another sip of wine, followed by

another and another, until I'm not sure this constitutes sipping. 'I just wish Dad was still alive to see it.'

Another pause while they remember why they're here. And why that quiet, peaceful man they used to work with isn't.

A clearing of the throat. 'I bet he's so proud of you, Claire. And you'll always have your memories . . .'

'Thank you,' I say, taking another mouthful of wine. It's true. I'll always have my memories. Especially my favourite from that day, one I haven't shared. It happened after the sketchbook and the laughter. We'd just finished our second slice of cake and Dad was washing up plates at the kitchen sink when he told me to go upstairs and get ready for bed.

'Don't wake your mother,' he said as I jumped down from the table. 'Best be as quiet as a mouse.'

I was standing on the stairs when the crash of glass made him run from the kitchen. 'What happened?' he asked. 'What was that noise?'

'It was an accident,' I replied. A framed photograph of my mother lay at my feet, the glass broken.

'Don't worry,' he whispered, glancing nervously towards the top of the stairs. 'I'll clean it up. Just tread carefully and go quietly up to bed.'

'I'M SORRY!' I shouted then, as loud as my four-year-old voice would allow. 'IT WAS AN ACCIDENT.'

'Sshhh,' he hissed, panicking. 'I told you. Quiet as a mouse!'

'Not all mice are dainty and delicate,' I said, turning towards my mother who'd just appeared at the top of the

stairs. ‘Some of them are useless and clumsy.’ And raising my foot, I slammed it down onto the image of her face, splitting the glass across that pouting smile. And that’s when it happened, just before I scampered up the stairs towards bed. That’s when I saw the flicker. Somewhere in her eyes between indifference and the arrival of rage, existing for less than a moment. But it was there. It was real. It was fear. And it was enough.

‘I’m so sorry for your loss.’

I look up from where I’m refilling my own glass from one of the bottles on the table against the wall. The plate-smashing waitress is standing in front of me, not meeting my eye. She’s holding a tray of empty glasses.

‘And I’m sorry for all that noise earlier, breaking those plates . . . And for the giggling. We weren’t being rude, it was just a nervous thing, you know?’

‘Yes, I know,’ I say. ‘It’s fine, I understand.’ Which is true. I do. What I don’t understand is why she’s still standing there. I hope she’s not going to say sorry again. All this apologising is getting embarrassing. It was less awkward when she was smashing plates.

She meets my eyes. Hers are a washed-out blue. ‘I understand what you’re going through,’ she says, readjusting her grip on the tray. ‘When I lost my mum, everyone said waves would hit me out of nowhere. You know . . . grief. And they were right. A big one would get me, and I’d think, Mum’s gone forever, she’s never coming back. And that’s when it would drag me right down, the feeling – like I was going to drown . . .’

Her voice melts away. Each thought starts to freeze, jagged icicles forming inside my mind. I think about the comfort of the Keiver Emerging Artist Prize. If I think about the exhibition, I don't have to think about Dad. Gone forever. All alone inside that small, cold box in the ground. Dad always hated the cold. He always hated being alone, and he'd never been keen on confined spaces.

She shivers now, the plate-smashing waitress, almost as though reading my thoughts, and the empty glasses on her tray wobble, clinking together. She closes her eyes. Does that work, I wonder. As a strategy for dealing with life when things start to go wrong. Maybe if I close my eyes, all of this will disappear. Maybe when I open them, I'll be back at home, working on my painting. Dad will be sitting in his armchair, sipping whisky, and I'll feel safe. At peace. I open my eyes. The waitress is still standing there. So are the empty glasses, intact. She looks relieved. At least the eye-closing strategy worked for one of us.

Suddenly I'm exhausted, and my head is starting to hurt. The waitress stifles a yawn. She's had enough of this function. So have I. It's been a long day and I'm feeling a little . . . rattled. I turn and walk towards the door.

This morning, the morning after the funeral, I'm sitting in Dad's armchair, drinking tea, eating buttery toast and sketching ideas for my new painting when another email arrives.



Dear Claire,

I am terribly sorry, but I emailed you in error with an offer of a place on the shortlist yesterday. I'm ashamed to say that the message was meant for another applicant called Claire and I clicked on your email address by mistake. I am so sorry . . .

Carefully placing my tea and toast onto the coffee table, I read the rest of the message. It goes on to tell me that I shouldn't give up and that I should apply for other competitions in the future and that's when I notice my hand. Tense with the effort of gripping, encasing the arm of the chair. Staring at the email, I hold my breath as each word develops its own weaponry, moves from the screen and hovers before my eyes. Taunting me, mocking me, before fading into a place inside a fancy gallery that was never there. Somewhere my painting will never hang. And now the images appear. It's Dad. Lying alone in a box in the ground. Has he begun to rot? When will the worms start to eat him? I can't hold my breath any longer, but I'm far too scared to exhale. I grip the armchair tighter. The armchair where he used to sit. Where is he? Where has he gone? He has to be somewhere. I focus on the darkness rushing towards me. Is this what she meant? Precarious piler of plates. Is this what it feels like to drown?

## 2

When I exhale and the next breath is there, I run to the bathroom cabinet and empty every bottle of pills. There's enough here, I'm sure of it. Enough to transport my ears to his voice. And I need to hear his voice so much it hurts. I phone his number and a recorded message tells me it's not possible to connect my call at the moment and that I should try again later. This calms me down a little. The recorded message sounds so certain, so trustworthy. Maybe if I do what it says, maybe if I try again later, Dad will pick up the phone. The calm is illusory, dissipates as soon as the images reappear. Dad in the ground, lying alone in a small, cold box. I pick up a handful of pills, lift them to my mouth. Can I do this? Should I do this? I scatter the pills onto the floor and put my hands to my head. Try to squeeze the images out. How do I escape my mind?

I run downstairs and jump onto the treadmill in the corner of my living room. Maybe if I sprint as fast as I can for as long as I can, I will outrun all thought. Leave everything far, far behind. I run and I run and at the end, I'm exactly where I started. Desperate to hear his voice. Racing back up to the bathroom, I scramble on the floor to collect up each pill. But when I stand and stare at my reflection in the mirror, I wonder what Dad will say when I see him. Will he be angry at me for ending my life? I don't want to make him angry. Hasn't he been through enough?

In any event, none of this is my fault. I'm beginning to see that now. All I did was enter a competition. The mistake wasn't mine. Dropping the pills onto the floor again, I reread the email.

Once again, I am terribly, terribly sorry for my mistake.

Yours,

Lucas Kane

Lucas Kane. A man so sorry for his mistake. Terribly, terribly so. I wonder whether that's true.

In the photograph I find of him on the internet, Lucas looks underwhelming and self-satisfied. Not sorry at all. But that doesn't mean he *isn't* sorry. He may be terribly, terribly sorry. And terribly, terribly unphotogenic. Photographs on the internet are about as trustworthy as that recorded message on Dad's phone. If I want to know for certain whether Lucas Kane is sorry, I need to find him and ask him. But first I need to decide. Do I want to know

for certain whether Lucas Kane is sorry? Or do I want to forget about him and cram those pills into my mouth?

I decide to find out more about Lucas. It takes seconds on Google to discover he works in London. I live near London. Never takes me long to drive in.

Within a couple of hours, I'm parking my car around the corner from his office. I get out of my car and wait. It's perfect, the street opposite Lucas's office. The perfect place to pretend to be someone I'm not. I can be a person waiting patiently at a bus stop. Or a window shopper, never enticed quite enough to step inside. By six o'clock in the evening, I'm one of those people you see sitting on benches, lost in thought and with nowhere to be. And that's when I see Lucas Kane for the first time. I realise the photograph on the internet is unkind. In real life, he's surprisingly attractive, and I only recognise him when I hear someone shout his name. Someone else is waiting for Lucas Kane.

A skinny man, slouching in the smokers' area outside Lucas's office. He probably works there too. Dressed all in black, with a dour expression and the whitest of skin, he has the look of a reluctant vampire who's just learnt to day-walk but would much rather be asleep in a coffin. Taking a long drag on his cigarette, Vampire Smoker calls out again, 'Lucas!'

In contrast, Lucas looks like an ambassador of sunshine sent to welcome Vampire Smoker into the light. His body is toned, his skin is tanned, his smile is wide. And judging from the intricate pattern on that zany, designer-looking shirt,

self-confidence isn't a problem. As he exits the office and heads towards the smoker, I stand up from the bench and walk closer. From directly across the road, I stare at Lucas Kane in real life, and within moments I know. He doesn't look sorry.

Lucas swings his briefcase and talks nonstop as he and his friend amble along the street. I cross the road and follow. When the two men walk into a bar, my skin burns. Did Lucas just mention my name? I'm sure I heard him mention my name. What is he saying about me? Talking about my painting? Commenting on my lack of talent? Is that why he's laughing?

Vampire Smoker goes to the bar while Lucas finds them somewhere to sit. I buy myself a drink and settle into a seat nearby. Lucas removes a newspaper from his briefcase and flicks through it. His friend places drinks on the table. As Lucas points out something hilarious in the newspaper, he still doesn't look sorry. He sips his pint and talks to his friend and sips his pint and glances in my direction. His eyes meet mine. I don't look away.

When they've finished their drinks, Vampire Smoker leaves the bar to disappear into the night, but Lucas loiters behind. He glances at me again and makes his approach.

'Hi,' he says. 'Can I buy you a drink?'

'Sure,' I reply. He returns from the bar, passes me my drink and pulls up a chair. I turn towards him and study his face. He looks about forty, with nice eyes, nice smile and cheekbones high enough to reach his self-esteem. All good. Sometimes I like conventional.

'So, what's your name?' he asks, and I'm impressed. It's valiant, his attempt to contain that leer.

‘I’m Claire.’

‘Claire? You don’t look like a Claire.’ His phone starts to ring. He ignores it.

‘What does a Claire look like?’ I ask.

‘Hmmm,’ he says, taking a swig of his drink. ‘I guess I always imagined Claire being a dowdy kind of a person. A librarian, maybe. You know the type, an enthusiastic lover of tweed.’ This makes me laugh and he laughs too, his eyes sparkling as he leans forward in his chair. ‘Claire’s the kind of person who goes to planning application meetings for fun.’

I lean forward too, allowing my short dress to rise further up my thighs.

‘And?’ I say, drawing his eyes back up to mine.

‘And what?’ He is distracted, confused.

‘What does librarian Claire do at these planning application meetings?’

‘She sits at the back and makes notes.’

I reach across the table for my drink, brush my hand against his, let it linger.

‘She’s a plain Jane,’ he adds, losing all control of that leer. ‘The total opposite of you.’

‘Surely plain Jane already has a name,’ I say. ‘Why would she be called Claire?’

‘Good point.’ His smile and leer, by now, are expertly fused. ‘I’m Lucas.’

‘I know.’

‘What do you mean, you know?’

‘You look like a Lucas.’

‘What does a Lucas look like?’ he asks, as his phone rings

again. He glances at it this time before placing it back on the table, unanswered.

‘Lucas is pretentious and arrogant.’ I pause to take a sip of my drink. ‘You know the type. Always veering the wrong side of smug. He works in the art world because he likes being around those with talent. Ever hopeful a little will rub off on him.’

‘Wow,’ he says.

‘Wow, what?’

‘That’s freaky.’

‘Freakily accurate?’

‘Well . . .’

‘You *are* pretentious and arrogant?’

‘No.’

‘Just completely devoid of talent, then?’

‘No! Not at all. But I do work in art.’

‘I know. I entered a competition you helped organise . . .’ but he’s not listening any more. His phone is ringing again and this time he’s staring at it. Distracted. Irritated.

‘I’m so sorry, Claire,’ he says, shifting away from me in his chair. ‘I’m going to have to take this. Hello,’ he mumbles into the phone, addressing the female voice at the end of the line. ‘Yes, I know . . . I’m sorry . . . I couldn’t get to the phone. No, listen . . . I’m not going to make it tonight. I know what we agreed but something’s come up and I need to work late. I’m terribly, terribly sorry . . . I’m not sure how long . . . hours probably. Look, I’ll call you tomorrow, OK? Bye.’

Switching his phone off, he places it onto the table and takes a swig of his drink. ‘Now, where were we?’ he asks, smiling.

‘Was that true?’ I ask.

‘What?’

‘What you just said.’

‘What do you mean? When?’

‘Just now. What you just said to that woman on the phone. I mean, obviously you lied to her about where you are, but when you said you were terribly, terribly sorry. Tell me, was that true?’

‘Look,’ he says, leaning towards me, ‘it’s not what you think. She’s not my wife, or my girlfriend,’ he adds, reaching out tentatively to take hold of my hand. ‘I don’t have either of those. That woman is nobody important. I’ll admit we had loose plans to meet up later this evening but that was before—’

‘Before what?’

‘Before a stunning blonde called Claire,’ he says, pulling me gently towards him, ‘who doesn’t look anything like a Claire, stepped into my life.’ He’s leaning closer to me now, reaching out to touch my face. I breathe in his aftershave. Citrus. He smells good. And now he’s looking into my eyes and telling me I’m beautiful, and that’s when I notice something unexpected about Lucas. Something about the way he makes me feel. It’s strange, this feeling. Nothing like I thought it would be. I expected to feel repulsed by him. And angry. But I don’t. Sitting here with him now, looking into his eyes, I see the flickers of hope and it makes me excited. Fully alive. With my heart beating faster, I move my face closer. Close my eyes and we kiss.

He buys me another drink and tells me stories about himself that meander for ages around the point. Stories that



really make him laugh. He speaks with a London accent but not an interesting one, just off-centre on the scale between aristocrat and cockney. I try a couple of times to tell him about the art competition, but when he isn't talking about himself, Lucas is leaning forward to kiss me.

'Let's go back to your place now,' he says, as soon as I finish my drink, and I smile, my agreement immediate. Lucas likes being in control, and I like it too. I like his hand on my waist, guiding me. I like his voice in my ear, telling me all the things he wants to do with me. Stepping outside the bar, he pulls me towards him. One long, frenzied kiss before we start walking. No ambling any more: Lucas is in a hurry. I have to quicken my pace to keep up. When he asks for directions to my car, I love the urgency in his voice.

As I drive, he reaches across from the passenger seat, touches my face and my neck, tells me my skin is so soft. Whenever I stop at traffic lights, he shifts in his seat so he can kiss me. With his hand on my thigh, I don't like to mention the art competition. It seems crass to talk of his emails. We've moved far beyond that now. When we get back to my house, we stumble, kissing, through the front door, both of us desperate to get up the stairs. I lead him into my bedroom and that's when he becomes different, suddenly happy to let me take control. Pushing him onto the bed, I take my time as I start to undress him. Keep my eyes locked onto his, there's no need to rush. Once he's naked, I tell him to lie on my bed and be patient. I gather a selection of silk scarves. Choosing one, I tie his left hand tightly to my bed, and he smiles. He says he likes this, so I tie his other hand, just as tight.

‘Don’t forget my ankles,’ he adds, urgency returning. I do love that urgency in his voice. Once he’s tied up beneath me, I tell him again that he needs to be patient. I’m going to take my time now. I like taking my time. He’s so excited and so am I. And so quiet. No more stories. Just the heaviness of anticipation in each laboured breath. I look at him lying there, so obedient and patient. Smile as I slowly run my fingers through my hair. ‘What the . . . ?’ he stammers as the blonde wig drops to the bed and onto the floor. He’s staring, open-mouthed, as I shake out my long, dark hair.

‘Why were you wearing a wig?’ He sounds breathless. ‘You’re even more fit as a brunette.’

‘Sssshhh.’ I place a finger to my lips, signalling silence. ‘From now on, I’ll let you know when you have permission to talk.’ He nods in agreement as I slowly start removing my clothing. Both of us are smiling as I drop my dress to the floor. Leaning towards Lucas, I cover his face in gentle kisses. Breathe in the scent of citrus as I whisper gently, so gently into his ear: ‘How are you feeling?’

This is it. All he has to do is say, ‘sorry’. That’s the only word I need to hear. But Lucas Kane isn’t sorry. I’ve known that from the moment I read his email. So terribly, terribly insincere. When he sees the knife, he starts shouting but never once do I hear the word ‘sorry’. I sit back and watch him wriggle. All that naked flesh. So pathetic and desperate to break free. He wriggles like a worm. A stupid, wriggling worm, and suddenly I think about the worms in the ground. When will they get to Dad?

I slice the knife into Lucas’s belly, he screams, and my mind accelerates. Look at that! It *is* possible to outrun

thought. Leave everything far, far behind. Removing the knife, I ask him to tell me one of his stories. Tell him I'll untie him if he makes me laugh. He's crying now, which I don't think will help his chances, and as soon as he starts talking, it's obvious – even he doesn't find himself funny any more. Demanding silence, I slice the knife into his flesh and tell him he needs to be patient. I'm going to take my time now. I like taking my time. And that's when I notice it – his shirt, zany and designer-looking – screwed up in a ball on my bedroom floor. Such an intricate pattern on such a bold fashion choice. Such a perfect opportunity to try some new art.

His blood seeps eagerly as my knife gets to work, little red pools charting my progress, allowing thought to run free. It seems happy, his blood, to escape the routines of the mundane. Rushing excitedly from his body towards the unknown. Warm and sticky, it smells of possibility and sugar, congealing like toffee on apples, all the fun of the fair. And underneath the sweetness, that aroma of citrus lurks. Hijacked by the meaty stench of his fear.

It's exhausting and exhilarating, carving intricate patterns into skin – a canvas that is already fading. His translucency mesmerises me, I can see straight through him, to the bloodied sheet he's lying on. I continue my work, pausing briefly to ask him questions. Watch intrigued as he transforms sobbing screams into words. Enhanced by terror, every utterance from his mouth sounds urgent. I do love that urgency in his voice. Loosening the restraints on his wrists, I stare deep into his eyes, so excited to see it. That beautiful dying flicker of hope. And that's when I

retighten the restraints and plunge the knife deeper. Not deep enough to end his life yet, just enough to extinguish that hope. Lucas screams and closes his eyes. Opens them immediately upon my command, and I smile, enjoying my favourite part of the process. The part when I know they're going to die soon. The part when I can anticipate every moment of their deaths. The part when I already see them as ghosts.

Afterwards, I stand in the shower, close my eyes and think back to the silence that only exists beneath screams. So uncluttered, I live for that silence, allowing stillness to invade my mind. No images of Dad rotting in the ground, nobody looking at me – expecting me to be someone I'm not. I open my eyes and notice the mud from my garden swirling around the plughole along with his blood. It's got to make a difference, the lack of a coffin. Nothing between Lucas Kane and the worms. Stepping out of the shower, my foot feels them immediately. The pills still strewn over the floor. Imagine if I'd swallowed them and never again savoured that silence and stillness of mind. Clearing a line of steam from the mirror, I stare into my eyes and note the exhilaration. There's no anger there any more. Deep down in his resting place, I honestly believe Lucas Kane is sorry now. Terribly, terribly so.

# 3

It's three weeks since Dad's funeral and my migraines are getting worse. The pain behind my eyes only used to bother me during thunderstorms, but lately it can strike at any time and be quite debilitating. I spoke about it with my GP, hoping for a magical prescription. Instead, he looked at me solemnly, drummed the tips of his fingers together and told me that sometimes it's good to think outside the box.

Convinced of a link between my headaches and Dad dying, the doctor suggested a bereavement counselling group. Why struggle with bereavement alone when you can grapple with grief in a group, he asked. At first, I hated the idea. If I wanted to surround myself with needy, self-pitying morons wittering on about their feelings, I'd join Facebook.

Funnily enough, after ten minutes at the first group session, I've decided there's a possibility I might enjoy it. Being around all this raw emotion is exhilarating. Grief