

1

The first inkling that something was wrong was waking in darkness to find the cat pawing at my face. I must have forgotten to shut the kitchen door last night. Punishment for coming home drunk.

‘Go away,’ I groaned. Delilah mewed and butted me with her head. I tried to bury my face in the pillow but she continued rubbing against my ear, and eventually I rolled over and heartlessly pushed her off the bed.

She thumped to the floor with an indignant little ‘meep’ and I pulled the duvet over my head. But even through the covers I could hear her scratching at the bottom of the door, rattling it in its frame.

The door was closed.

I sat up, my heart suddenly thumping, and Delilah leapt onto my bed with a glad little chirrup. I snatched her to my chest, stilling her movements, listening.

I might well have forgotten to shut the kitchen door, or I could even have knocked it to without closing it properly. But my bedroom door opened outward – a quirk of the weird layout of my flat. There was no way she could have shut herself inside. *Someone* must have closed it.

I sat, frozen, holding Delilah’s warm, panting body against my chest, and trying to listen.

Nothing.

And then, with a gush of relief, it occurred to me – she'd probably been hiding under my bed, and I'd shut her inside with me when I came home. I didn't remember closing my bedroom door, but I might have absent-mindedly swung it shut behind me when I came in. To be honest, everything from the Tube station onwards was a bit of a blur. The headache had started to set in on the journey home and now my panic was wearing off I could feel it starting up again in the base of my skull. I *really* needed to stop drinking mid-week. It had been OK in my twenties, but now I just couldn't shake off the hangovers like I used to.

Delilah began squirming uneasily in my arms, digging her claws into my forearm, and I let her go while I reached for my dressing gown and belted it around me. Then I scooped her up, ready to sling her out into the kitchen.

When I opened the bedroom door, there was a man standing there.

There's no point in wondering what he looked like, because believe me, I went over it about twenty-five times with the police. 'Not even a bit of skin around his wrists?' they kept asking. No, no, and no. He had a hoodie on, and a bandana around his nose and mouth, and everything else was in shadow. Except for his hands.

On these he was wearing latex gloves. It was that detail that scared the shit out of me. Those gloves said, I know what I'm doing. They said, I've come prepared. They said, I might be after more than your money.

We stood there for a long second, facing each other, his shining eyes locked onto mine.

A thousand thoughts raced through my mind: Where the hell was my phone? Why did I drink so much last night? I would have heard him come in if I'd been sober. Oh Christ, I wish Judah was here.

And most of all – those gloves. Oh my God, those gloves. They were so professional. So *clinical*.

I didn't speak. I didn't move. I just stood there, my ratty dressing gown gaping, and shook. Delilah wriggled out of my unresisting hands and shot away up the hallway to the kitchen.

Please, I thought. Please don't hurt me.

Oh God, where was my phone?

Then I saw something in the man's hands. My handbag – my new Burberry handbag, although that detail seemed monumentally unimportant. There was only one thing that mattered about that bag. My mobile was inside.

His eyes crinkled in a way that made me think he might be smiling beneath the bandana, and I felt the blood drain from my head and my fingers, pooling in the core of my body, ready to fight or flee, whichever it had to be.

He took a step forward.

'No . . .' I said. I wanted it to sound like a command, but it came out like a plea, my voice small and squeaky and quavering pathetically with fear: 'N—'

I didn't even get to finish. He slammed the bedroom door in my face, hitting my cheek.

For a long moment I stood, frozen, holding my hand to my face, speechless with the shock and pain. My fingers felt ice-cold, but there was something warm and wet on my face, and it took a moment for me to realise it was blood, that the moulding on the door had cut my cheek.

I wanted to run back to bed, to shove my head under the pillows and cry and cry. But a small ugly voice in my head kept saying, *He's still out there. What if he comes back? What if he comes back for you?*

There was a sound from out in the hall, something falling, and I felt a rush of fear that should have galvanised me, but instead paralysed me. *Don't come back. Don't come back.* I realised I was

holding my breath and I made myself exhale, long and shuddering, and then slowly, slowly I forced my hand out towards the door.

There was another crash in the hallway outside – breaking glass – and with a rush I grabbed the knob and braced myself, my bare toes dug into the old, gappy floorboards, ready to hold the door closed as long as I could. I crouched there, hunched over with my knees to my chest, trying to muffle sobs with my dressing gown, while I listened to him ransacking the flat and hoped to God that Delilah had run into the garden, out of harm's way.

At last, after a long, long time, I heard the front door open and shut. I sat there, crying into my knees, unable to believe he'd really gone. That he wasn't coming back to hurt me. My hands felt numb and painfully stiff, but I didn't dare let go of the handle.

I saw again those strong hands in the pale, latex gloves.

I don't know what would have happened next. Maybe I would have stayed there all night, unable to move. But I heard Delilah outside, mewling and scratching at the other side of the door.

'Delilah,' I said hoarsely. My voice was trembling so much I hardly sounded like myself. 'Oh, Delilah.'

Through the door I heard her purr, the familiar, deep, chain-saw rasp, and it was like a spell had been broken.

I let my cramped fingers loosen from the door knob, flexing them painfully, and then stood up, trying to steady my trembling legs, and turned the door handle.

It turned. In fact it turned too easily, twisting without resistance under my hand, without moving the latch an inch. He'd removed the spindle from the other side.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I was trapped.

2

It took me two hours to prise my way out of my bedroom. I didn't have a landline so I had no way of calling for help, and the window was covered by security bars. I broke my best nail file hammering away at the latch, but at last I got the door open and ventured out into the narrow hallway. There are only three rooms in my flat – kitchen, bedroom and tiny bathroom – and you can pretty much see the full extent of it from outside my bedroom, but I couldn't stop myself from peering into each doorway, even checking the cupboard in the hallway where I keep my hoover. Making sure he was really gone.

My head was pounding and my hands were shaking as I made my way up the steps to my neighbour's front door. I found myself looking over my shoulder into the dark street as I waited for her to answer. It was around 4 a.m., I guessed, and it took a long time and a lot of banging to wake her up. I heard grumbling over the sound of Mrs Johnson's feet clumping down her stairs, and her face when she cracked open the door was a mixture of bleary confusion and fright, but when she saw me huddled on the doorstep in my dressing gown, with blood on my face and hands, her expression changed in an instant and she took off the chain.

'Oh my days! Whatever's happened?'

'I got burgled.'

It was hard to talk. I don't know if it was the chilly autumn air, or the shock, but I had started shivering convulsively and my teeth chattered so hard I had a momentary, horrible image of them shattering in my head. I pushed the thought away.

'You're bleedin!'

 Her face was full of distress. 'Oh, bless my soul, come in, come in.'

She led the way into the paisley-carpeted sitting room of her maisonette, which was small and dark and grimly overheated, but right now felt like a sanctuary.

'Sit down, sit down.' She pointed to a red plush sofa and then went creakily to her knees and began to fiddle with the gas fire. The gas popped and flared, and I felt the heat rise a degree as she got painfully to her feet again. 'I'll make you some hot tea.'

'I'm fine, honestly, Mrs Johnson. Do you think—'

But she was shaking her head sternly. 'There's nothin' to beat hot, sweet tea when you've had a shock.'

So I sat, my shaky hands clasped around my knees, while she rattled around in the tiny kitchen and came back with two mugs on a tray. I reached out for the closest and took a sip, wincing at the heat against the cut on my hand. It was so sweet I could barely taste the dissolving blood in my mouth, which I suppose was a blessing.

Mrs Johnson didn't drink, but just watched me, her forehead wrinkled in distress.

'Did he . . .'

 Her voice faltered. 'Did he *hurt* you?'

I knew what she meant. I shook my head, but I took another scalding sip before I could trust myself to speak.

'No. He didn't touch me. He slammed a door in my face, that's the cut on my cheek. And then I cut my hand trying to get out of the bedroom. He'd locked me in.'

I had a jolting flash of myself battering at the latch with the nail file and a pair of scissors. Judah was always teasing me about using the proper tools for the job – you know, not

unscrewing a plug with the tip of a dinner knife, or prising off a bike tyre using a garden trowel. Only last weekend he'd laughed at my attempt to fix my shower head with duct tape, and spent a whole afternoon painstakingly mending it with epoxy resin. But he was away in the Ukraine and I couldn't think about him right now. If I did, I'd cry, and if I cried now, I might never stop.

'Oh, you poor love.'

I swallowed.

'Mrs Johnson, thank you for the tea – but I really came to ask, can I use your phone? He took my mobile so I've got no way of calling the police.'

'Of course, of course. Drink your tea, and then it's over there.' She indicated a doily-covered side table, with what was probably the last turn-dial phone in London outside an Islington vintage boutique. Obediently I finished my tea and then I picked up the phone. For a moment my finger hovered over the 'nine' but then I sighed. He was gone. What could they reasonably do now? It was no longer an emergency, after all.

Instead, I dialled 101 for non-emergency response, and waited to be put through.

And I sat and thought about the insurance I didn't have, and the reinforced lock I hadn't installed, and the mess tonight had become.

I was still thinking about that hours later, as I watched the emergency locksmith replace the crappy bolt-on latch on my front door with a proper deadlock, and listened to his lecture on home security and the joke that was my back door.

'That panel's nuffing but MDF, love. It'd take one kick to bash it in. Want me to show you?'

'No,' I said hastily. 'No thanks. I'll get it fixed. You don't do doors, do you?'

‘Nah, but I got a mate who does. I’ll give you his number before I go. Meantime, you get your hubby to whack a good piece of eighteen-mill plywood over that panel. You don’t want a repeat of last night.’

‘No,’ I agreed. Understatement of the century.

‘Mate in the police says a quarter of burglaries are repeats. Same guys come back for more.’

‘Great,’ I said thinly. Just what I needed to hear.

‘Eighteen-mill. Want me to write it down for your husband?’

‘No thanks. I’m not married.’ And in spite of my ovaries, I *can* remember a simple, two-digit number.

‘Aaaah, right, gotcha. Well, there you go then,’ he said, as if that proved something. ‘This door frame ain’t nothing to write home about neither. You want one of them London bars to reinforce it. Otherwise you can have the best lock in the business, but if they kick it out the frame you’re back in the same place as before. I got one in the van that might fit. Do you know them things I’m talking about?’

‘I know what they are,’ I said wearily. ‘A piece of metal that goes over the lock, right?’ I suspected he was milking me for all the business he could get, but I didn’t care at this point.

‘Tell you what,’ he stood up, shoving his chisel in his back pocket, ‘I’ll do the London bar, and I’ll chuck in a piece of ply over the back door for free. I got a bit in the van about the right size. Chin up, love. He ain’t getting back in *this* way, at any rate.’

For some reason the words weren’t reassuring.

After he’d gone, I made myself a tea and paced the flat. I felt like Delilah after a tom cat broke in through the cat flap and pissed in the hallway – she had prowled every room for hours, rubbing herself up against bits of furniture, peeing into corners, reclaiming her space.

I didn't go as far as peeing on the bed, but I felt the same sense of space invaded, a need to reclaim what had been violated. *Violated?* said a sarcastic little voice in my head. *Pur-lease, you drama queen.*

But I did feel violated. My little flat felt ruined – soiled and unsafe. Even describing it to the police had felt like an ordeal – yes, I saw the intruder, no, I can't describe him. What was in the bag? Oh, just, you know, my life: money, mobile phone, driver's licence, medication, pretty much everything of use from my mascara right through to my travel card.

The brisk impersonal tone of the police operator's voice still echoed in my head.

'What kind of phone?'

'Nothing valuable,' I said wearily. 'Just an old iPhone. I can't remember the model, but I can find out.'

'Thanks. Anything you can remember in terms of the exact make and serial number might help. And you mentioned medication – what kind, if you don't mind me asking?'

I was instantly on the defensive. 'What's my medical history got to do with this?'

'Nothing.' The operator was patient – irritatingly so. 'It's just some pills have got a street value.'

I knew the anger that flooded through me at his questions was unreasonable – he was only doing his job. But the burglar was the person who'd committed the crime. So why did I feel like I was the one being interrogated?

I was halfway to the living room with my tea when there was a banging at the door – so loud in the silent, echoing flat that I tripped and then froze, half standing, half crouched in the doorway.

I had a horrible, jarring flash of a hooded face, of hands in latex gloves.

It was only when the door thudded again that I looked down and realised that my cup of tea was now lying smashed on the hallway tiles, my feet soaked in rapidly cooling liquid.

The door banged again.

‘Just a minute!’ I yelled, suddenly furious and close to tears. ‘I’m coming! Will you stop banging the bloody door!’

‘Sorry, Miss,’ the policeman said when I finally opened the door. ‘Wasn’t sure if you’d heard.’ And then – seeing the puddle of tea and the smashed shards of my cup – ‘Crikey, what’s been going on here then. Another break-in? Ha ha!’

It was the afternoon by the time the policeman finished taking his report, and when he left I opened up my laptop. It had been in the bedroom with me, and it was the only bit of tech the burglar hadn’t taken. Aside from my work, which was mostly not backed up, it had all my passwords on it, including – and I cringed as I thought about it – a file helpfully named ‘Banking stuff’. I didn’t actually have my pin numbers listed, but pretty much everything else was there.

As the usual deluge of emails dropped into my inbox, I caught sight of one headed ‘Planning on showing up today;)?’ and I realised with a jolt that I’d completely forgotten to contact *Velocity*.

I thought about emailing, but in the end I fetched out the £20 note I kept in the tea caddy for emergency cab money, and walked to the dodgy phone shop at the Tube station. It took some haggling, but eventually the guy sold me a cheap pay-as-you-go plus sim card for £15 and I sat in the café opposite and phoned the assistant features editor, Jenn, who has the desk opposite mine.

I told her what had happened, making it sound funnier and more farcical than it really had been. I dwelt heavily on the image of me chipping away at the lock with a nail file, and didn’t tell her

about the gloves, or the general sense of powerless terror, or the terrifyingly vivid flashbacks that kept ambushing me.

‘Shit!’ Her voice at the end of the crackly line was full of horror. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Yeah, more or less. But I won’t be in today, I’ve got to clear up the flat.’ Although in actual fact it wasn’t that bad. He’d been commendably neat. For, you know, a criminal.

‘God, Lo, you poor thing. Listen, do you want me to get someone else to cover you on this Northern Lights thing?’

For a minute I had no idea what she was talking about – then I remembered. The *Aurora Borealis*: a boutique, super-luxury cruise liner travelling around the Norwegian fjords, and somehow, I still wasn’t quite sure how, I had been lucky enough to snag one of the handful of press passes on its maiden voyage.

It was a huge perk. In spite of working for a travel magazine, my normal beat was cutting and pasting press releases, and finding images for articles sent back from luxury destinations by my boss, Rowan. It was Rowan who had been supposed to go, but unfortunately after saying yes she had discovered that pregnancy didn’t agree with her – hyperemesis, apparently – and the cruise had landed in my lap like a big present, fraught with responsibility and possibilities. It was a vote of confidence giving it to me, when there were more senior people she could have done a favour, and I knew if I played my cards right on this trip it would be a big point in my favour when it came to jockeying for Rowan’s maternity cover, and maybe – just maybe – getting that promotion she’d been promising for the last few years.

It was also this weekend. Sunday, in fact. I’d be leaving in two days.

‘No,’ I said, surprising myself with the firmness in my voice. ‘No, I definitely don’t want to pull out. I’m fine.’

‘Are you sure? What about your passport?’

‘It was in my bedroom, he didn’t find it.’ Thank God.

‘Are you *absolutely* sure?’ she said again, and I could hear the concern in her voice. ‘This is a big deal – not just for you, for the mag, I mean. If you don’t feel up to it, Rowan wouldn’t want you—’

‘I am up to it,’ I said, cutting across her. There was no way I was letting this opportunity slip through my fingers. If I did, it might be the last one I had. ‘I promise. I really want to do this, Jenn.’

‘OK . . .’ she said, almost reluctantly. ‘Well in that case, full steam ahead, eh?’ They sent through a press pack this morning so I’ll courier that across along with your train tickets. I’ve got Rowan’s notes somewhere. I think the main thing is to do a really nice puff piece on the boat, because she’s hoping to get them on board as advertisers, but there should be some interesting people among the other guests, so if you can get anything else done in the way of profiles, so much the better.’

‘Sure.’ I grabbed a pen from the counter of the café and began taking notes on a paper napkin. ‘And remind me what time it leaves?’

‘You’re catching the ten-thirty train from King’s Cross – but I’ll put it all in the press pack.’

‘That’s fine. And thanks, Jenn.’

‘No worries,’ she said. Her voice was a little wistful, and I wondered if she’d been planning to step into the breach herself. ‘Take care, Lo. And bye.’

It was still just about light as I trudged slowly home. My feet hurt, my cheek ached, and I wanted to go home and sink into a long hot bath.

The door of my basement flat was bathed in shadow as it always was, and I thought once again that I must get a security light, if only so that I could see my own keys in my handbag, but even in the dimness I could see the splintered wood around the

lock where he'd forced the Yale. The miracle was that I hadn't heard him. *Well, what do you expect, you were drunk, after all,* said the nasty little voice in my head.

But the new deadlock felt reassuringly solid as it clunked back, and inside I locked it shut again, kicked off my shoes, and walked wearily down the hall to the bathroom, stifling a yawn as I set the taps running and slumped onto the toilet to pull off my tights. Next I began to unbutton my top . . . but then I stopped.

Normally I leave the bathroom door open – it's only me and Delilah, and the walls are prone to damp, being below ground level. I'm also not great with enclosed spaces, and the room feels very small when the window blinds are down. But even though the front door was locked and the new London bar was in place, I still checked the window and closed and locked the bathroom door before I finished peeling off my clothes.

I was tired – God, I was so tired. I had an image of falling asleep in the tub, slipping below the water, Judah finding my naked, bloated body a week later . . . I shook myself. I needed to stop being so bloody dramatic. The tub was barely four foot long. I had trouble enough contorting myself so I could rinse my hair, let alone drown.

The bath was hot enough to make the cut on my cheek sting, and I shut my eyes and tried to imagine myself somewhere else, somewhere quite different from this chilly, claustrophobic little space, far away from sordid, crime-ridden London. Walking on a cool Nordic shore, perhaps, in my ears the soothing sound of the . . . er . . . would it be the Baltic? For a travel journalist I'm worryingly bad at geography.

But unwanted images kept intruding. The locksmith saying 'a quarter of burglaries are repeats'. Me, cowering in my own bedroom, feet braced against the floorboards. The sight of strong hands encased in pale latex, the black hairs just showing through . . .

Shit. *Shit.*

I opened my eyes, but for once the reality check didn't help. Instead I saw the damp bathroom walls looming over me, shutting me in . . .

You're losing it again, my internal voice sniped. *You can feel it, can't you?*

Shut up. Shut up, shut up, shut up. I squeezed my eyes shut again and began to count, deliberately, trying to force the pictures out of my head. *One. Two. Three. Breathe in. Four. Five. Six. Breathe out. One. Two. Three. Breathe in. Four. Five. Six. Breathe out.*

At last the pictures receded, but the bath was spoiled, and the need to get out of the airless little room was suddenly overwhelming. I got up, wrapped a towel around myself and another round my hair, and went into the bedroom, where my laptop was still lying on the bed.

I opened it, fired up Google, and typed: 'What % burglars return'.

A page of links came up and I clicked on one at random and scanned down it until I came to a paragraph that read: 'when burglars return . . . A nationwide survey indicates that, over a twelve-month period, approximately 25–50% of burglaries are repeat incidents; and between 25 and 35% of victims are repeat victims. Figures gathered by UK police forces suggest that 28–51% of repeat burglaries occur within one month, 11–25% within a week.'

Great. So it seemed like my friendly doom-and-gloom merchant, the locksmith, had actually been *understating* the problem, not winding me up – although the maths involved in up to 50% repeat offences but only 35% repeat victims made my head hurt. Either way, I didn't relish the idea of being among their number.

I had promised myself I wouldn't drink that night, so after I had checked the front door, back door, window locks and front

door for the second, or maybe even the third time, and put the pay-as-you-go phone to charge beside my bed, I made myself a cup of chamomile tea.

I took it back through to the bedroom with my laptop, the press file for the trip, and a packet of chocolate digestives. It was only eight o'clock and I hadn't had any supper, but I was suddenly exhausted – too exhausted to cook, too exhausted even to phone for takeaway. I opened up the Nordic cruise press pack, huddled down into my duvet, and waited for sleep to claim me.

Except it didn't. I dunked my way through the whole packet of biscuits and read page after page of facts and figures on the *Aurora*. Just ten luxuriously appointed cabins . . . maximum of twenty passengers . . . hand-picked staff from the world's top hotels and restaurants . . . Even the technical specifications of the boat's draught and tonnage weren't enough to lull me to sleep. I stayed awake, shattered yet somehow wired.

As I lay there in my cocoon I tried not to think about the burglar. I thought, very deliberately, about work, about all the practicalities I had to sort out before Sunday. Pick up my new bank cards. Pack and do my research for the trip. Would I see Jude before I left? He'd be trying my old phone.

I put down the press pack and pulled up my emails.

'Hi love,' I typed, and then I paused and bit the side of my nail. What to say? No point in telling him about the burglary. Not yet. He'd just feel bad about not being here when I needed him. 'I've lost my phone,' I wrote instead. 'Long story, I'll explain when you get back. But if you need me, email, don't text. What's your ETA on Sunday? I'm off to Hull early, for this Nordic thing. Hope we can see each other before I leave – otherwise, see you next weekend? Lo x.'

I pressed send, hoping he didn't wonder what I was doing up and emailing at 12.45 a.m., and then shut down the computer, picked up my book, and tried to read myself to sleep.

It didn't work.

At 3.35 a.m. I staggered through to the kitchen, picked up the bottle of gin, and poured myself the stiffest gin and tonic I could bring myself to drink. I gulped it down like medicine, shuddering at the harsh taste, and then poured a second and drank that too, more slowly this time. I stood for a moment, feeling the alcohol tingling through my veins, relaxing my muscles, damping down my jangled nerves.

I poured the dregs of the gin into the glass and took it back to the bedroom, where I lay down, stiff and anxious, my eyes on the glowing face of the clock, and waited for the alcohol to take effect.

One. Two. Three. Breathe in. Four . . . Five . . . Fi . . .

I don't remember falling asleep, but I must have done. One minute I was looking at the clock with bleary, headache eyes, waiting for it to click over onto 4.44, the next minute I was blinking into Delilah's furry face as she butted her whiskery nose against mine, trying to tell me it was time for breakfast. I groaned. My head ached worse than yesterday – although I wasn't sure if it was my cheek, or another hangover. The last gin and tonic was half full on my bedside table beside the clock. I sniffed it and almost choked. It must have been two-thirds gin. What had I been thinking?

The clock said 6.04, which meant I'd had less than an hour and a half's sleep; but I was awake now, no point in trying to fight it. Instead I got up, pulled back the curtain and peered into the grey dawn, thin fingers of sun trickling into my basement window. The day felt cold and sour, and I shoved my feet into my slippers and shivered as I made my way down the hall to the thermostat, ready to override the automatic timer and start the heating for the day.

It was Saturday, so I didn't have to work, but somehow the admin involved in getting my mobile number assigned to a new phone and my bank cards reissued took up most of the day, and by the evening I was drunk with tiredness.

It felt as bad as the time I'd flown back from Thailand via LA – a series of red-eyes that left me wild with sleep deprivation, and hopelessly disoriented. Somewhere over the Atlantic, I realised that I had gone beyond sleep, that I might as well give up. Back home, I fell into bed like falling into a well, plunging headlong into oblivion, and slept for twenty-two hours, coming up groggy and stiff-limbed to find Judah banging at my door with the Sunday papers.

But this time, my bed was no longer a refuge.

I *had* to get myself together before I left for this trip. It was an unmissable, unrepeatably opportunity to prove myself after ten years at the coal-face of boring cut-and-paste journalism. This was my chance to show I could cut it – that I, like Rowan, could network and schmooze and get *Velocity's* name in there with the high-flyers. And Lord Bullmer, the owner of the *Aurora Borealis*, was a very high-flyer indeed. Just 1 per cent of his advertising budget could keep *Velocity* afloat for months, not to mention all the well-known names in travel and photography who would doubtless have been invited along on this maiden voyage, and whose bylines on our cover would look very nice indeed.

I wasn't about to start the hard sell on Bullmer over dinner – nothing as crude and commercial as that. But if I could get his number on my contacts list and ensure that when I phoned him he took my call . . . well, it would go a long way to finally getting me that promotion.

As I ate supper, mechanically forking frozen pizza into my face until I felt too full to continue, I picked up where I'd left with the press pack, but the words and pictures swam in front

of my eyes, the adjectives blurring into each other: 'boutique . . . glittering . . . luxury . . . hand-crafted . . . artisan . . .'

I let the page drop with a yawn, then looked at my watch and realised it was gone nine. I could go to bed, thank God. As I checked and rechecked the doors and locks, I reflected that the one silver lining to being so shattered was that it couldn't possibly be a repeat of last night. I was so tired that even if a burglar *did* come, I'd probably sleep right through it.

At 10.47 I realised I was wrong.

At 11.23 I started to cry, weakly and stupidly.

Was this it then? Was I never going to sleep again?

I had to sleep. I *had* to. I'd had . . . I counted on my fingers, unable to do the maths in my head. What, less than four hours' sleep in the last three days.

I could *taste* sleep. I could *feel* it, just out of my reach. I had to sleep. I had to. I was going to go crazy if I didn't sleep.

The tears were coming again – I didn't even know what they were. Tears of frustration? Rage, at myself, at the burglar? Or just exhaustion?

I only knew that I couldn't sleep – that it was dangling like an unkept promise just inches away from me. I felt like I was running towards a mirage that kept receding, slipping away faster and faster the more desperately I ran. Or that it was like a fish in water, something I had to catch and hold, but kept slipping through my fingers.

Oh God, I want to sleep . . .

Delilah turned her head towards me, startled. Had I really said it aloud? I couldn't even tell any more. Christ, I was losing it.

A flash of a face – gleaming liquid eyes in the darkness.

I sat up, my heart pounding so hard that I could feel it in the back of my skull.

I had to get away from here.

I got up, stumbling trance-like with exhaustion, and pushed my feet into my shoes and my arms into my coat, over the top of my pyjamas. Then I picked up my bag. If I couldn't sleep, I'd walk. Somewhere. Anywhere.

If sleep wouldn't come to me, then I'd damn well hunt it down myself.

3

The streets at midnight weren't empty, but they weren't the same ones I trod every day on my way to work either.

Between the sulphur yellow pools of street light they were grey and shadowed, and a cold wind blew discarded papers against my legs, leaves and rubbish gusting in the gutters. I should have felt afraid – a thirty-two-year-old woman, clearly wearing pyjamas, wandering the streets in the small hours. But I felt safer out here than I did in my flat. Out here, someone would hear you cry.

I had no plan, no route beyond wandering the streets until I was too tired to stand. Somewhere around Highbury and Islington I realised that it had begun to rain, that it must have started some time back because I was wet through. I stood in my soggy shoes, my exhausted, punch-drunk brain trying to formulate a plan, and almost by themselves my feet began to walk again – not homewards, but south, towards Angel.

I didn't realise where I was going until I was there. Until I was standing beneath the porch of his building, frowning dazedly at the bell panel, where his name was written in his own small, neat handwriting: LEWIS.

He wasn't here. He was away in the Ukraine, not due back until tomorrow. But I had his spare keys in my coat pocket, and I couldn't face the walk back to my flat. *You could get a cab*, carped

the small, snide voice in the back of my head. *It's not the walk you can't face. Coward.*

I shook my head, sending raindrops spattering across the stainless-steel bell panel, and sorted through the bunch of keys until I found the one for the outside door. I slipped inside, into the oppressive warmth of the communal hallway.

Up on the second floor, I let myself cautiously into the flat.

It was completely dark. All the doors were closed, and the entrance hall had no windows.

'Judah?' I called. I was certain he wasn't home, but it wasn't impossible that he'd let a mate crash there, and I didn't want to give anyone a middle-of-the-night heart attack. I knew, all too well, what that felt like. 'Jude, it's just me, Lo.'

But there was no answer. The flat was silent – completely and utterly silent. I opened the door on the left to the kitchen-diner, and tiptoed inside. I didn't switch on the light. I just peeled off my wet clothes, coat, pyjamas and all, and dumped them in the sink.

Then I walked, naked, through to the bedroom, where Judah's wide double bed lay empty in a shaft of moonlight, the grey sheets tumbled as if he'd just that moment got up. I crawled on my hands and knees into the middle of the bed, feeling the lived-in softness of the sheets, and smelling the scent of him, of sweat and aftershave and just – *him*.

I shut my eyes.

One. Two . . .

Sleep crashed over me, claiming me like a wave.

I woke to the sound of a woman screaming, and the feeling of someone on top of me, holding me down, someone grappling with my hands even as I fought.

A hand grabbed at my wrist, the grip far stronger than mine. Blind, mad with panic, I groped in the pitch-black with my free

hand, searching for something, anything, to use as a weapon, and my hand closed over the bedside lamp.

The man's hand was over my mouth now, smothering me, the weight of him choking me, and with all my strength I lifted up the heavy lamp and brought it crashing down.

There was a shout of pain, and through the fog of terror I heard a voice, the words slurred and broken.

'Lo, it's me! It's me, for Christ's sake, stop!'

What?

Oh, God.

My hands were shaking so much that when I tried to find the light, all I did was knock something over.

Beside me I could hear Judah gasping, alongside a bubbling sound that terrified me. Where the hell was the lamp? Then I realised –I'd smashed it into Judah's face.

I stumbled out of bed, my legs shaking, and found the switch by the door. The room was instantly flooded with the unforgiving, bright glare of a dozen halogen spots, each illuminating every detail of the horror show in front of me.

Judah was crouched on the bed holding his face, blood soaking his beard and his chest.

'Oh my God, Jude!' I scrambled across to him, my hands still trembling, and began to grab tissues from the box by the bed. He pressed them to his face. 'Oh, God, what happened? Who was screaming?'

'You!' he groaned. The tissues were already sodden red.

'What?' I was still flooded with adrenaline. I looked confusedly around the room for the woman and the attacker. 'What do you mean?'

'I came home,' he said painfully, his Brooklyn accent blurred through the paper. 'You started screaming, half asleep. So I tried to wake you up and – this.'

'Oh fuck.' I put my hands to my mouth. 'I'm so sorry.'

That screaming – it had been so vivid. Had it really just been me?

He took his hands cautiously away from his mouth. There was something in the wad of scarlet paper, something small and white. It was only when I looked at his face that I realised – one of his teeth was missing.

‘Oh, Jesus.’

He looked at me, blood still dripping slowly from his mouth and his nose.

‘What a welcome home,’ was all he said.

‘I’m sorry.’ I felt tears prick at the back of my throat but I refused to cry in front of the taxi driver. Instead I swallowed against the hard ache. ‘Judah?’

Judah said nothing, he just looked out of the window at the grey dawn that was starting to break over London. It had taken two hours at UCH Accident and Emergency, and then all they’d done was stitch Judah’s lip and refer him to an emergency dentist, who’d shoved the tooth back in place and told him, more or less, to cross his fingers. Apparently the tooth might be saved if it re-rooted. If not, it would be either a bridge, or a dental implant. He shut his eyes tiredly, and I felt my gut twist with remorse.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said again, more desperately this time. ‘I don’t know what else to say.’

‘No, I’m sorry,’ he said wearily. It came out as ‘shorry’, like a drunken Sean Connery impression, the local anaesthetic in his lip making it hard to talk.

‘You? What are you sorry for?’

‘I don’t know. Fucking up. Not being there for you.’

‘The burglar, you mean?’

He nodded. ‘That. But any time, really. I wish I wasn’t away so much.’

I leaned across and he put his arm around me. I rested my head on his shoulder and listened to the slow, steady thud of his heart, reassuringly unhurried in comparison to my own panicky, drumming pulse. Beneath his jacket he was wearing a blood-spattered T-shirt, the fabric soft and worn beneath my cheek. When I breathed in, a long shuddering breath, it smelled of his sweat, and I felt my pulse slow in time with his.

‘You couldn’t have done anything,’ I said into his chest.

He shook his head. ‘I still should have been there.’

It was growing light as we paid off the taxi driver and climbed slowly up the two flights of stairs to his flat. When I looked at my watch I saw that it was nearly six. Shit, I had to be on a train to Hull in a few hours.

Inside, Judah stripped off his clothes and we fell into bed, skin against skin. He pulled me against him, inhaling the scent of my hair as he closed his eyes. I was so tired I could hardly think straight, but instead of lying back and letting sleep claim me, I found myself climbing on top of him, kissing his throat, his belly, the dark stripe of hair that arched to his groin.

‘Lo . . .’ he groaned, and he tried to pull me up towards him to kiss me, but I shook my head.

‘Don’t, your mouth. Just lie back.’

He let his head fall back, his throat arching in the pale strip of dawn that penetrated the curtains.

It was eight days since I’d last seen him. It would be another week until I saw him again. If we didn’t do this now . . .

Afterwards, I lay in his arms waiting for my breathing and heart to steady, and I felt his cheek against mine crinkle in a smile.

‘That’s more like it,’ he said.

‘More like what?’

‘More like the homecoming I was expecting.’

I flinched and he touched my face.

‘Lo, honey, it was a joke.’

‘I know.’

We were both quiet for a long time. I thought he was slipping into sleep, and I shut my own eyes and let the tiredness wash over me, but then I felt his chest lift, and the muscles in his arm tense as he took a deep breath.

‘Lo, I’m not going to ask again, but . . .’

He didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to. I could feel what he wanted to say. It was what he’d said at New Year – he wanted us to move forward. Move in together.

‘Let me think about it,’ I said at last, in a voice that didn’t seem to be mine, a voice that was unusually subdued.

‘That’s what you said months ago.’

‘I’m still thinking.’

‘Well, I’ve made up my mind.’ He touched my chin, pulling my face gently towards his. What I saw there made my heart flip-flop. I reached out for him, but he caught my hand and held it. ‘Lo, stop trying to make this go away. I’ve been really patient, you know I have, but I’m starting to feel like we’re not on the same page.’

I felt my insides flutter with a familiar panic – something between hope and terror.

‘Not on the same page?’ My smile felt forced. ‘Have you been watching *Oprah* again?’

He let go of my hand at that, and something in his face had closed off as he turned away. I bit my lip.

‘Jude—’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Just – no. I wanted to talk about this but you clearly don’t, so – look, I’m tired. It’s nearly morning. Let’s go to sleep.’

‘Jude,’ I said again, pleading this time, hating myself for being such a bitch, hating *him* for pushing me into this.

'I said no,' he said wearily into the pillow. I thought he was talking about our conversation, but then he continued: 'To a job. Back in New York. I turned it down. For you.'

Fuck.