



# Now

Grace is hot. There's the sun, like boiled breath, on the roof of her car but it's more than that. This feeling that from nowhere she's been set on fire from the inside out. Between her breasts a line of sweat is tracking a slow, itchy S, and she wants to jam a hand under the neck of her shirt and wipe it away. It's gridlock, though, and she's hemmed in on all sides, and there's the man in the Audi, whose car window is level with hers. He's staring at her like she's the distraction he needs in this. Screw you, she thinks. Screw you, screw you, screw you.

'If you're feeling hot out there today,' the woman on the radio is saying, 'according to the latest report from climate think tank Autonomy, it's only going to get hotter . . .'

Grace revs the engine to drown out the words and her eyes find the clock on the dashboard: 12:23. Can that be right? She checks her phone on the passenger seat. Shit. She's late. Really late. There's the *Love Island* cake to pick up, the one she's had specially made. The cake she can't afford but is staking everything on. One, two, three, four . . . She begins the CBT count that doesn't work – the half-remembered one from the online course she abandoned after the first few sessions – then takes a deep breath in through her nose. Now her jeans are sticking to her thighs. Grace fiddles with the vents, stabs yet again at

the button for the air-con she knows isn't working. It's the cheap heat in the synthetic fabric that's making it all worse and she spreads her knees as wide as they'll go, trying to get some non-existent air between her legs.

On the passenger seat her phone goes and she starts. Lotte? The thought is automatic, that it might be her. But even as she's leaning across to check she already knows. Instead there's the shock of a jowly face frowning from the screen, and it's a moment before she recognizes herself, understands that Cate is trying to FaceTime her again. Grace shrinks back against the driver's door. She doesn't want to answer, and although she's pretty sure she can't be seen – Lotte has laughed at her about this a hundred times – still she has the sense that her sister is somehow watching her. Grace knows already what Cate is phoning to say: she's left a vomit of messages over the past fortnight that somehow manage to be both compassionate and accusatory. *Mum called me to say she's been trying to get in touch, Grace. She's worried about you. Dad too. It isn't really fair on them to . . . Listen, call me and let me know you're okay. I mean, not okay but . . . We're all worried, Grace . . .*

There's the blast of a horn behind her and she twists in her seat. Like it's aimed at her. The traffic is solid, stretching back as far as she can see along the skinny road that runs from the foot of Muswell Hill all the way to the Emirates Stadium. The kind of road that would be better suited to a sleepy village, or medieval times, but that's clogged chaotically with work vans and city buses and delivery drivers and SUVs. 'Really?' she says, into the void of the car. 'Really, arsehole? You want us to do what exactly?'

The sides of the car are closing in on her and she can smell burned plastic. How are they not moving yet? Sitting here like this it's reminding her of something – a book, a TV show, a screenplay . . . She can't remember. She can barely remember her own name these days. Slumping in the seat, she tries to bring to mind the things she hasn't been able to recall recently. But, of course, she can't. It would almost be funny if it wasn't so terrifying. Like a part of her brain dropped out when she was looking the other way.

Her phone starts to ring again, and someone is leaning into their horn. The man is still staring at her, the heat in the car . . . and something is trapped and buzzing in here with her now. A fat black fly vibrating against the windows. Sweat pops at her temple and she's slapping herself because the fly is dive-bombing her, ricocheting frenetically around the car's interior.

Suddenly a face appears at the rear window of the car in front. A little girl with a grubby doll clutched in her hand is staring at Grace, unsmiling. She can hear the hiccuping beat of a track on the radio, the bone-judder of drilling from the roadworks ahead. And the fly is on her cheek now, on her arm, in her hair, and the traffic still isn't moving, and time is jumping forward in units that aren't as they should be, and she can't be late, not today, there's just no question.

And that's it. She's had it.

Claggy fumes catch in her throat as Grace steps from the car, gripping her phone, and jamming her credit card and a twenty-pound note into her back pocket. It's all she

needs. She doesn't want to lug her bag around in this heat – she's wearing the wrong clothes as it is: too-tight denim that makes her legs feel as if they're melting. Grace slams shut the door, points her key and – *ca-chunk* – the doors are locked. And she's walking away, picking a path along the white lines in the middle of the road, when there's a shout behind her.

'Hey, love. Love! What d'you think you're doing?'

She stops and turns.

It's the man in the Audi. He has his window down and he's raising his voice above the blast of horns starting up. She registers the threat in the pulse of the engines around her, the angry atonal soundscape, but she has the strange sense that she's somewhere beyond it, that it's separate from her.

'You're not seriously . . .' the man is yelling now, gesturing wildly so that she can see the sweat patches under his arms. 'You need to get back in your car! You can't leave it there!'

Grace can taste the metal heat coming off the vehicles wedged either side of her as she smiles at him. With her mouth, not her eyes.

'Deal with it,' she whispers.

# Four months earlier

Northmere Park School  
London N8 6TJ  
nps@haringey.sch.uk

Dear Parent or Carer of Lotte Adams Kerr,

It has come to our attention that Lotte's attendance has dipped below 70 per cent this term and that many of these absences remain 'unauthorized'. This is significantly below the Ofsted targets set out in our school-parent agreement and as such is extremely concerning.

At this worrying level, Lotte's absenteeism will be having a serious impact on their learning and achievements. As you know, research shows that for every nineteen days of school missed, a student can expect to see their GCSE results fall by a grade.

We would like to request you contact the school to make an urgent appointment with Lotte's tutor, as well as their head of year to discuss the matter as soon as possible. At this time no external agencies are involved. However, we do have a duty to report the repeated or prolonged absence of any pupil.

Yours faithfully,

John Power, Head Teacher

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Grace reads the letter twice and still she can't process it. She frowns, checks the envelope. She can only assume there has been an administrative error, that they have sent the letter to the wrong person. Even so, she can feel a tightening in her lungs, as if she can't quite catch a full breath.

'Lotte!' she calls. She knows, though, that her daughter will be in her bedroom with her headphones on, that there's no way she'll hear her. She glances at her laptop on the table. Up on screen there's the shitty Japanese romance she's in the middle of translating – or, rather, that she's in the middle of *not* translating. She doesn't want to think about how far past the deadline she is. She doesn't want to think about what will happen if she doesn't get her act together on this, because she can't afford to mess up the translation-agency work. Quite literally. The laughable amount she earns from her other job – her anything-to-get-her-out-of-the-house job, teaching French to uninterested under-twelves at Stanhope Primary – would barely cover her gas bill.

Grace takes her phone from the side and – because this is the way they do things now – texts her daughter, who is less than ten metres away from where she stands, up a floor, through a couple of walls. Waits. Nothing.

'Lotte!' she tries again, louder this time, and she feels the familiar itch of irritation in her gut. Then she screws up the letter and throws it hard across the room towards the overflow that's pooled around the recycling bin.

Grace knocks but doesn't wait before she enters the room. Lotte is sitting on her bed and immediately slams down the lid of her laptop. Her expression is at once

hostile and vulnerable. She has dyed her hair pink again and it looks so pretty on her, that colour, like spun candy floss, and Grace is struck by how beautiful she has become, her perfect-wild daughter. How, if she could, she would just stand there drinking her in. She's wearing shorts and a green top that's more of a bandage really, barely covering her breasts. Those braless breasts that seem held up by magic. *Aren't you freezing?* Grace wants to ask. Because she has become a cliché. She has become her own mother.

'What?' Lotte says, lifting her headphones from one ear. 'I'm in the middle of something.' And Grace can tell it's taking everything she's got to keep her tone just the right side of politeness. That is, the newly low bar of mutually accepted 'politeness'.

Grace opens her mouth to answer, but finds she has to pause because she feels suddenly as though she may not be able to get the words out without her voice splitting. She skates her eyes around the room, like she's looking for clues. There's the honey and sweat smell of dirty laundry, a knocked-over plant that has spilled most of its earth underneath the window. Posters on the wall of the girl from *Stranger Things*, the guy from *Sherlock*, the bright-painted *matryoshka* in the middle of the bookshelf, a tangle of hoop earrings, and the little brass Buddha on the bedside table. Grace's mind skids from one object to the next as if they might hold the answers to where her baby went. To who this strange new person is.

'What?' Lotte asks again, and she isn't trying to disguise her impatience any more. And then, under her breath, 'Jesus.'



The word winds Grace, just a little, but she lets it go, fixes her eyes on her child's. They have the same eyes, she knows: everyone tells them this. The same deep-set dark blue eyes. Eyes that could undo a person, Ben used to tell her.

'I've had a letter from the school that doesn't make sense,' Grace says.

2002

Sitting there with her fold-out table, pens lined up, she's asking herself why on earth she has come. There's the jump of nerves in her stomach and she feels as if she's back in college. Twenty-eight years old and it's like she's eighteen again. Strung above the stage is a PVC banner, a yellow background dotted with line-drawn illustrations of various global landmarks – the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, St Basil's Cathedral and, picked out in bold green lettering, the words 'Polyglot of the Year 2002'. A geek convention, Marc calls it – *called* it, Grace corrects herself, because he's in the past now; they are no longer together. 'A *genius* convention, I think you'll find,' she'd told him, as she stuck the application form to the fridge, raised her middle finger with her back still to him.

A few seats along from her she sees the man in the black sweater with the holes at the wrists, the one she noticed at Registration. He's younger than her, she guesses, maybe by a couple of years. But he's the only normal person here. As she's thinking this, he leans towards her like somehow she's leaked her train of thought.

'Excuse me, hi . . .'

Up close he has extraordinarily hollow cheeks, and an L-shaped jaw – you could measure a 90-degree angle by

it. His hair is going in several different directions at once, but his brown eyes are on her.

‘Do you have a pen?’ he asks.

Grace looks down at her stash on the fold-out table and wonders for a moment if he’s joking. She has biros in blue, black and red, a set of highlighters and three HB pencils. Suddenly she feels like a ridiculous swot. ‘I do seem to,’ she says. ‘Take your pick.’

He smiles at her, stretches further across the seats and eyes her table. He’s taking his time doing this and again she gets the sense that maybe he’s making fun of her.

‘I’ll go blue Bic,’ he says eventually.

‘The classic.’ She takes it from the desk, hands it to him. ‘I approve.’

He laughs and thanks her. Then he taps the pen twice against the palm of his hand, like he’s testing it. He has beautiful fingers, she notices. Long with square nails cut short.

He leans back in his seat and immediately forward again as though something has spiked his back. ‘I’m Ben, by the way.’

‘Grace.’ She feels the heat rise in her cheeks when she says her name.

A screech of feedback from the sound system saves her. There’s a man on stage now, fiddling with the microphone. He’s deeply tanned in a linen suit and looks like something out of *A Year in Provence*. He taps the mic once, twice, clears his throat.

‘Welcome, all,’ the man says, and presses his palms together in prayer. ‘And congratulations on making it this

far. I'm David Turner and *you* are some of the best linguists in the country.'

Grace glances back at the man in the black jumper. He raises his eyebrows just a little; she opens her eyes too wide in return.

'... which means you've all been selected on the strength of your video-taped entries,' David Turner is saying, 'and I don't mind telling you the standard this year is *sky* high. We've got participants here aged from twenty-three to seventy-four and from all corners of the UK, which I think you'll agree is fantastic. So, okay, there'll be introductory talks this morning and we have some incredibly exciting speakers lined up. The real fun starts this afternoon!' He power-punches the air and laughter scatters the room. 'I know you're all keen to crack on, so it only remains for me to wish you . . .' he pauses and winks. Grace definitely sees him wink '... *bonne chance, buena suerte, viel erfolg, udachi, held og lykke* et cetera, et cetera, et cetera!'

Grace turns to the man in the black jumper and winks stagily. 'Good luck,' she tells him.

'You too.' He winks back, his face straight.

Lunch is served in the cafeteria. It's outside term time and the campus is eerily empty. Grace isn't hungry but opts for a jacket potato the size of a brick and some dying salad, waits for the woman in the queue behind her so that she has someone to sit with. Soon they are surrounded at their canteen table by – well – *geeks*. The talk turns to conjugations and Cyrillic and Klingon and, she can't help herself, she's hoovering it up. She's lost in language but,

even so, she's aware that from time to time the man in the black jumper with the holes in the sleeves is looking her way from across the canteen.

The afternoon passes in a head-rush of linguistic sparring and she's in her element – she's on fire. She's killing it in French, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Dutch. There's pronunciation against the clock – a speed read of a hundred phrases in ten minutes, simultaneous interpretation, and critical discussion of unseen questions with just sixty seconds to respond. They attempt to learn Romanian in an hour. Grace is gone and her brain, her body are channelling the words. She has studied and studied for this. She has put in her ten thousand hours, but it's easy for her. It's as if the words, the sentences, the language structures were there all along, lurking in her cerebral cortex, and she just needed to excavate them. She guesses the same must be true of the other competitors because the man in the linen suit – David – is right: they're all fierce. Every year for the past three she has almost entered the contest, but something always stopped her, a sense that maybe she wouldn't be good enough. She even filled in the forms last year, but in the end didn't send them. Now that she's here, she can't believe she talked herself out of it. And suddenly she wants this. She wants, more than anything, to win.

When she arrives in the student union bar where the prize-giving will be held, he is already seated. It smells of stale smoke and disinfectant, and it's like Pavlov's dogs: Grace immediately wants a drink. She hesitates and the man, Ben, beckons her over, makes room so that she can sit down. Then he takes her blue biro from his pocket and

hands it to her. ‘Thanks,’ he says. ‘My secret charm. *Le Bic bleu . . .*’

‘Ha,’ she says. ‘I hope it worked.’ The pen is warm where it’s been in his hand and she has a sudden urge to bring it to her face, to inhale the place where his fingers have been.

There’s wine on the table and she fills her glass, offers the bottle to him. ‘I feel like we should be drinking snake-bite and black.’

‘Totally. Or warm lager slops.’

Around them the tables are filling. She waves at the recruitment consultant from Cambridge, the one she sat with at lunch. David Turner is setting himself up at the front of the room and there’s a silver trophy on the bar behind him.

‘So how did you go?’ Ben asks.

‘Pretty good, I think,’ she says. ‘You?’

‘Yeah.’ He nods.

‘*Yeah?*’ She laughs. ‘What does that mean?’

‘*O-kaaay . . .* we’re a bit behind time so let’s get started.’ David Turner is raising his voice above the chatter. ‘Thanks again, everyone, for taking part. I’m proud to say . . .’

She’s trying to concentrate on the announcement, but Grace is sure she can feel Ben looking at her, the heat of his stare on the side of her face. She can smell him too, this close to her. A raw white smell that makes her think of winter.

‘. . . and so I’ll jump straight in now with third place.’ David Turner shades his eyes with his hands and looks out into the room. Now he has her attention. Grace holds herself still.

‘Ariel Jones, are you here somewhere?’

They’re facing forward and clapping, both of them, as the slight man with the ill-advised moustache accepts his prize, and maybe it’s the wine that’s gone straight to her head but she has the strange sensation that she has been in this moment before.

‘. . . and our runner up with a score of a hundred and sixty-three and winning a hundred-pound Foyles book token . . .’ David Turner consults his piece of paper ‘. . . is Ben Kerr. Well done!’

The man in the black jumper glances at her as he stands, pulls a fast, surprised face before he moves to the front of the room to accept his prize. There’s a quickening in her that she doesn’t understand. Her palms are throbbing from all the clapping and she’s pleased for him, she is. He seems like a nice guy, but at the same time she doesn’t like to think that he has scored higher than her in this thing. And she has no idea why this matters to her so much, what she’s trying to prove, because it’s just a dumb little competition and . . .

‘. . . taking the title of Polyglot of the Year, with an incredible hundred and sixty-four points – that’s just one point, ladies and gentlemen, separating our winner from our esteemed runner-up . . . it’s Grace Adams. Many, many congratulations, Grace. We salute you!’

It’s a moment before she processes that David Turner has announced her name. Across the student union bar people are swivelling in their seats.

‘Up you come, Grace,’ David Turner calls.

And as she gets to her feet all eyes are on her. Because

she's won, she's bloody well gone and won it. She tries and fails to keep a poker face as she moves towards the bar. This day has filled her up, she realizes. It has made her happy. And it's the first time she's felt this way since Marc – since *she and Marc* – decided they were done. Since long before then, in fact.

Someone hands her a glass of champagne and she's presented with the silver trophy. There's an envelope too, but her hands are full and she can't take it.

'Well, I can tell you,' David Turner flexes the envelope, 'that, courtesy of our great friends at Language Matters, you've won a weekend break for two at the beautiful Kerensa Hotel in Cornwall . . .'

Grace has no idea how long it is before the crowd around her dissipates. She has smiled and smiled and drunk and drunk, and her face is aching with the effort of it all, and suddenly it's just her and the man in the black sweater, holes at the wrists, standing together at the bar.

'I knew it would be you.' He's leaning his body close to hers so that they're almost touching. 'The minute I saw all those pens lined up, like a little stationery army, I knew I'd lost it. A single point, though.' He clicks his tongue. 'Snapping at your heels.'

She pours red wine from a bottle on the bar into her champagne glass. 'And, dammit, if only your prize had been an M&S voucher. You know you need to buy yourself a new jumper, right?'

'Nice one, Grace,' he says.

And there's something in the way he uses her name like that – like he knows her. It makes her stomach go liquid.



‘So a weekend at a chi-chi hotel . . . that’s pretty nice.’

‘Yeah. The thing is I can’t go.’

‘What? Why not?’

‘I have no one to go with.’ Grace sets her glass on the bar. ‘Okay, now I’m hearing how that sounds, but I broke up with my boyfriend a month ago. Everyone else is . . . It’s getting to that age, you know . . .’ She tails off, she doesn’t want to think about it.

‘That sucks, I’m sorry.’

‘Well, yeah.’ She shrugs. ‘Although it would’ve sucked more if we’d stayed together. I don’t want children and it turns out that was a deal-breaker.’ At least, that was what Marc had made out. But thinking back to that awful evening at the Ethiopian restaurant in Kentish Town, Grace knows that had she said she was desperate to start a family that would have been the wrong answer too. *I’m sorry, hon*, he’d told her, as he held her gaze across the small table. *I love you but I don’t think I can do this any more*. He’d said it like he was a vet counselling her to have a sick pet put down. They’d been eating *injera* flatbread with meat stew, and she’d fought the instinct to lean across the table and smear the food across his too-concerned face. Anything to stop the falling-in feeling at her chest.

She’d had a lucky escape, she knows, even if it doesn’t feel that way, because there’d been others while they were living together. She suspects this; she knows it in the root of her. He wasn’t even that careful about it but she chose not to see it. She was addicted to him, stupidly, and in the end he just wasn’t that into her, so that was three years wasted.

Next to her Ben clears his throat.

‘Sorry.’ She blinks. ‘I have absolutely no fucking idea why I just told you that.’

‘It’s been a long day?’ he suggests, and she laughs.

‘It’s been a long day,’ she agrees. ‘And I’m quite drunk.’

‘Who would’ve thought it would be such a rave?’

They look at each other then, and she finds she doesn’t want to look away. There’s an unsteadiness in the air around them. Like the equilibrium has been suddenly knocked out of whack.

‘We could split the prize.’ The words are out of her mouth before her brain has a chance to catch up. ‘I mean, look, there was only one point in it. It was me, but it could’ve been you.’ She takes her envelope from the bar, waves it at him. ‘Do you want to come with me?’

As soon as she’s said it she can’t believe she has. She wants to take it back but at the same time she doesn’t. A part of her is thinking, *Game on.*

The man in the black sweater pulls a hand through his hair, studies her. ‘Okay,’ he says, after a pause. ‘Why not?’

‘Okay,’ she repeats, and she’s nodding, like she’s trying to interpret what he’s just said.

‘I mean, I’d rather take the trophy but if all you’re offering is the other . . .’

And they’re both laughing now at this crazy thing they’re proposing. A fizzing, mad, on-the-edge kind of laughter because the two of them know in that moment that they’ll do it. They know – with the exquisite certainty of a regular verb – that it will happen.

## Now

Grace has the car keys still bunched in her hand, the flame-throwing sun on the back of her neck, when she realizes she'll walk there. There's the growl of the stopped traffic a street away, car horns going like it's carnival day, and the release of just walking, walking on her own two feet after the suffocating fug of the car, is immense. It's liberating. She's cutting through the alleyway between the jerk chicken place and the hardware shop, which will spit her out onto the main drag. Despite the graffiti on the walls, tangled weeds and a musty-sweet smell of scorched piss, she's thinking with a clarity that has evaded her for days, weeks, longer even. She will walk from here to there, to Ben's flat across north London, to deliver the cake to her daughter for her sixteenth birthday. That is what she will do. No problem.

She just needs to pick it up, the two-hundred-pound offering that feels like a bribe. It's the invitation she has not received and she will arrive with it triumphant, as though she is the curse in a twisted fairytale, the bad witch. 'No!' The word bolts from her, there in the alleyway, like she's some crazy woman talking to herself. That is not how it will go. It is an act of love, this cake, and Lotte will see that. She will. And she will forgive her.

## Four months earlier

1.  $(x + 2)(3x - 12) =$

2. Solve for x and y:

$$3x + 7y = 14$$

$$6y - 6x = -19$$

3. Solve for x:

$$24x(14 + 2x) = 45$$

4.  $XXX + L = I$  nearly came just looking at you today . . .

‘Lotte?’

She’s holding the torn-off piece of worksheet as she comes into the bathroom. Lotte is naked in front of the mirror striping deodorant under her arms. Her daughter’s eyes meet hers in the mirror, a question mark in the dip of her eyebrows; her body is perfect, like she’s been freshly sculpted by angels. Grace crumples the note, pushes it into the pocket of her jeans. It isn’t the moment.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, put them away,’ she says instead, her voice all faux-disapproval. ‘Come on, we’ve talked about this. I don’t need it at my age.’ As she approaches Lotte is shaking her head, rolling her eyes at Grace’s reflection.

‘How are they so ridiculously pert?’

‘Stop, *Mother . . .*’

‘Are they even real?’ She makes as if to poke at Lotte’s boob, retracts her finger like it has bounced off. ‘I *mean . . .*’

They are both laughing as Lotte swats her away.

‘Don’t touch me, you crazy woman.’ She’s got her mad face on but her eyes are smiling still. ‘You are so inappropriate. How are you even allowed to be in charge of a class of primary-school kids?’

‘Not in charge, in fact, *so . . .*’ Grace scrunches her lips.

Lotte scoops her towel from the floor, her phone from the sink. ‘Yes. Good,’ she says, as she backs out of the room. ‘Thank God.’

*Don’t go*, Grace thinks, standing there like she’s stranded. There’s the soapy-damp smell of her child’s sublime skin, a buzz in the air where she’s just been.

‘I’m starting the new season of *Parks and Rec* tonight,’ Grace blurts, although she can already hear footsteps receding on the stairs. ‘If you want to watch?’

‘Maybe.’

Grace can tell from Lotte’s voice that she’s distracted, probably back on Instagram already. And she knows that ‘maybe’ means ‘no’. She waits a beat, two. Then there’s the soft click of the bedroom door shutting that feels like a punch.

She takes the note from her pocket, scans the words again. *I nearly came just looking at you today*. It doesn’t lose its ability to shock, this scrap of printout. She has a hard time reconciling the fact that someone has sent this to her daughter, to her fifteen-year-old child. She doesn’t know how to raise it. I was going through your blazer and . . .

*What?* What can she possibly say? I'm worried about you. You know you can talk to me. I feel like there are things you're keeping in, and I don't want to pry but I do want you to know I'm here. She looks at her reflection in the mirror. Yes, all of those things, Grace, she tells herself. But, Christ, it all sounds like something from a bad soap and she is so damn tired. Suddenly something about her face strikes her, and she moves closer to the washbasin so that she can see herself better.

*What the fuck has happened to her lips?*

They are vanishing. She screws her mouth in several different directions. It's like the top part of her upper lip has disappeared. Overnight. So that where it was pink before it is now white, but with the little vertical lip lines still there so that, *abracadabra*, it has become one big wrinkle. But it can't have happened overnight. Can it? In which case how can she not have noticed this before?

A thump of bass starts up, coming through the ceiling from Lotte's room. And standing there, staring at her stupid disappearing mouth, she pictures her daughter there moments ago, considers the fucking terrible timing of it all. How, just at the point that she – that all the mothers – are drying up from the inside out (or from the outside in, who could possibly call it?), the daughters are busting out all over with the exact same firm, ripe potency they are losing. And maybe the worst part is they don't even know it.

And then she's thinking again about the scrawled note, the explicit porny tone of it, and about the letter she's ignored. The letter from school that Lotte agreed didn't

make sense. It's more than a week now since it arrived. There's been a follow-up email too. She will call the school tomorrow, she will. It's just that doing this all herself now, with work and the house and the translation and . . . The guilt starts to creep in. The guilt and also, of course, The Guilt. She snaps the thought shut: she won't go there.

2002

They have arranged to meet on the beach at 7 p.m. He's come on the train because he knows the final third of the journey is supposed to be pretty stunning, but he barely noticed it. He hasn't got past page five of *No Logo*, didn't finish the sandwich he'd bought at Warwick Parkway for lunch, didn't even get the notes for his PhD thesis out of his bag. Images from the convention keep flashing through his mind. Images of her. Hair knotted messily at the crown of her head, her dark jacket rolled up at the sleeves like she meant business. How smart she was, how fierce, how funny, how beautiful. Not raised on gymkhanas and gin cocktails, not written in the code his family would understand. A language nerd like him. But he's asking himself, as he makes his way along the coast road that smells of salt and rubbish and hot stone, whether he will even recognize her when he gets there. He hasn't told anyone he's doing this, not his housemate Isaac, not his brothers, no one. It feels like something he needs to keep private, a mad secret he doesn't want to share.

She's sitting in the sand with her knees drawn up, staring out at the sea. She's the only person on the beach so he knows at once that it's her – the thought passes through his head that really he would have known her anywhere. There's a weird mesmerizing light, a hyper-real glow that's



turning everything pink at the edges. His mouth is dry. He kicks off his trainers, wobbles precariously as he peels the socks from his feet, and he's steeling himself, about to call out to her, when she twists towards him. Her cheeks are flushed and with the sun on her face she looks like that actress, the clever one with the red hair. Julianne Moore.

Dumping his bag in the sand, he walks towards her.

'Oh, hi, you came,' she says, shading her eyes. 'What's your name again?' And she smiles, quick and wide.

'Very droll.'

'Droll.' She nods. 'A good word.'

'A good word,' he agrees, and comes to sit beside her. Not too close.

Instead of asking him how his journey was or making any kind of small-talk, she points to the left of the beach, out towards the horizon. 'Over there. Look,' she says, as though they are midway through a conversation, and he follows her gaze.

It takes him a moment to find it but then he sees what she's seeing – something that looks like it could be a rock or a buoy. It's dark and sleek, bobbing up and down a fair distance out.

'A seal?' he asks. 'A dolphin . . . a *shark*?'

She nudges her elbow into his side. Lightly, so that she almost doesn't touch him. But, still, it's as if she has set an electric pulse running the length of him. 'A surfer, you idiot. He's been out there since before I got here, making it look so damn easy.'

'Do you surf?' he asks, and he feels the awkward shape

of the words on his tongue, his over-enunciation of the too-formal question.

‘I have done. Not for a long time, though.’

She doesn’t elaborate and she doesn’t ask him the question in return. They sit in silence as they stare out to sea. Ben presses his feet into the sand, trying to root himself. There’s the grittiness between his toes, the skip of his chest, and he isn’t sure whether it’s nerves or excitement. He isn’t sure what this is, what the two of them are doing here, why they have come, but he can feel the pull of her next to him. Like their flesh is fused, although they’re inches apart. And he wonders, Is she feeling it too? He would like to reach out and turn her gaze from the sea. He’d like to look into those dark, laughing eyes and ask her what this thing is. He wants to lay himself bare, to strip away the veneer and acknowledge how bizarre it is – the fact they barely know each other and yet they are doing this. He wants to open her up, to gain access to her.

Instead he finds himself asking, ‘Did you check in already?’

‘Yup,’ she says. ‘I booked us in for dinner at nine if that works. Or we could just get chips or . . . Wait.’ She’s up on her haunches, her face a frown, and she’s slanting her upper body forwards, looking down across the beach and out to sea. Her entire countenance has changed.

‘What?’ he says. ‘Grace?’

‘The surfer,’ she murmurs, like she’s talking to herself not him.

Ben follows her line of sight. There’s the grey-green of

the water but he can't see the dark shape against the waves now. He scans the surface waiting for him to re-emerge.

'I don't . . . Something's not right.' In one movement she pushes herself up to standing, takes her phone from her pocket, drops it onto the sand. Then she's running towards the sea, away from him. The sand is thick, like brown sugar, this far back on the beach but she's moving through it like it's been tide-washed. For a moment he sits there, stunned, like what the fuck is going on? Is she mad, this woman he barely knows? But then he gets to his feet, too, because he's looking but still he can't locate the sleek black body in the waves. Everything is pink-filtered, and there's the low stain of evening sunshine that's making him feel it's all unreal, like he's in a film.

By the time he gets there she's cutting a line through the water, out beyond the buoys where the sea is dark and ripple-pitted. He can see the surfer again now, further out and he starts to wade into the sea, taking big strides so that within seconds his jeans are clamped to his legs. The freeze of it makes him gasp and he's keeping on but she's so far away from him already that there's no way, there's just no way. He's up to his waist when he stops. His head is all over the place, he can't think. He needs to call the coastguard, that's what he must do. Heart banging in his throat, he turns.

'We have people on the . . . less than five minutes to get to you.'

Down here on the wet sand there's one bar on his phone and the woman at the other end keeps cutting in and out.

‘Okay,’ he says, although he isn’t really following: he can’t concentrate.

‘Does it look like it could be a riptide?’ the voice at the end of the line asks.

‘I mean, I don’t know,’ he says hopelessly.

‘And can you see them still?’

He can. He can.

‘. . . four minutes away . . . That’s the . . .’ the voice says. ‘Keep them in sight and stay on the line.’

And now that he looks, he thinks that maybe she’s moving closer. He squints. The light is starting to dip and it’s difficult to make out but he thinks that perhaps he can see the surfboard and two figures against it. He covers the mouthpiece with his hand.

‘Grace!’ he shouts. ‘Grace!’

If she hears him there’s nothing. She doesn’t respond.

‘I need to go back in,’ he tells the woman on the phone.

‘. . . more help to us . . . stay on the line . . .’

There’s the sore itch of salt against his thighs and saliva catching against the back of his tongue. He can’t just stand here doing nothing.

‘I’d ask you . . . give it a moment, please, sir.’

A tremor is moving up through him now. The shock of the water, the chill of his fear, because what if something happens to her out there? What would he do? He knows her name, her phone number, a handful of disparate facts about who she is. She speaks five languages, he imagines himself telling a compassionate police officer. Japanese is the one she likes best. She has an ex who dumped her; she doesn’t want children; her favourite

pen is a blue Bic biro. That's pretty much all he's got. He checks the horizon, searching the dark, shifting expanse. Nothing. Who would he even contact as her next of kin? Pushing the thought from his mind, he starts to move once again towards the water because, whatever the woman on the phone is telling him, he wants to get Grace out of there. He needs her to be okay. He wants to have this weekend just as they planned.

And then there's the sound of sirens and Ben turns to see the coastguard driving towards him down the beach. Relief punches him and he throws up his arms, like he's surrendering, starts to wave them dementedly above his head. 'Over here!' he shouts, although they're coming straight for him. 'Quick! Over here!'

They have them out of the water so fast that it's as if there was never any danger at all. The surfer – a woman with brown hair straggling like snakes – is bleeding at the temple but he can see that she's conscious, and they're loading her onto a stretcher, staunching the wound, checking her over for concussion. He watches uselessly while a paramedic takes Grace to one side.

'You can stop waving that bloody piece of tinfoil at me,' he hears her say. 'I was only in there five minutes.'

The paramedic beckons him over, hands him the silver blanket she says she doesn't want. 'You need to get her out of these clothes,' the paramedic tells him, and he lists the symptoms of hypothermia, tells Ben to dial 999 if he has any concerns. And then that's it. The vehicle drives off and they're left alone.

They stand there, shocked. She's in a white shirt that's