

# **NIGHT BY NIGHT**

Also by Jack Jordan:

*Anything for Her*  
*My Girl*  
*A Woman Scorned*  
*Before Her Eyes*

# NIGHT

YOU'D BETTER STAY AWAKE

# BY

IF YOU WANT TO STAY ALIVE

# NIGHT

JACK JORDAN



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*For the Finns, the Jays, the Jacks*



# BEFORE







# ONE



Rose lay in bed and counted the seconds passing on the clock. Twilight lit the curtains until the room had a sickly, sepia haze. Of all the hours she lay awake, it was the hour when night turned to dawn that she loathed the most. It reminded her that another night had passed, another day lay before her; for those sixty minutes, she was the loneliest woman in the world.

She loathed their bedroom. So many times she had lain there, watching the night morph into day as the sun blinked awake behind the curtains, reminding her of the empty hours she had spent waiting for it to arrive. She had counted every Artex swirl in the plaster on the ceiling, every petal and leaf on the floral wallpaper, every screw that knitted the bedroom furniture together.

Christian turned in his sleep, nudging her in the ribs with his elbow. She exhaled sharply as bone clipped bone and clamped her eyes shut.

*It's not his fault.*

She sighed, hot and stale in her nostrils, and blinked her eyes open again to take in his sleeping face, and imagined pinching his eyelashes between her fingertips and plucking them until he woke.

It wasn't his fault, she repeated to herself, but it didn't do any good. The better part of her shrank with every sleepless hour. After a restless night, she couldn't stop the hate infiltrating her mind

as she thought of those she loved, had no control over her words as she spoke to them with unjustified rage. She often listened to herself snap at her children, or felt unprovoked tears rolling down her cheeks without any way to stop them. Ten years of insomnia should have been enough, she should have been used to it by now, but every sleepless night felt worse than the last.

She rubbed her face. The flesh of it felt like leftover meat, dry and rubbery. She worked out that she had been awake for over forty-eight hours. Another night of staring up at the ceiling as exhaustion vibrated beneath her skin. Usually she would be allowed a few hours of scattered sleep each night, but every so often she would be kept awake for days, her body and mind running on empty until exhaustion finally dragged her under, no matter the place or time of day. She hadn't fainted in public for a while; she had to be thankful for that.

Christian groaned from behind closed lips, his eyes moving beneath their lids as he dreamt. She watched his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallowed.

She used to think he was beautiful when he slept. His green eyes hidden, dark hair ruffled on the pillow, full lips framed with stubble. But as the number of sleepless nights grew, her admiration turned putrid with jealousy. Her chest burnt with it, rotting her from the inside. She swallowed it down and sighed.

*It's not his fault.*

But it didn't stop her from thinking of jabbing him in the ribs with her fingernail. It wasn't fair that she was awake, resenting every blink and breath, as the rest of the house slept.

She slipped out of bed and stumbled. Small white lights sparked in her vision. She leaned against the bedside table and waited for it to pass before slipping into her dressing gown and closing the door behind her.

The silence of the house taunted her; it was the sound she heard when the rest of the world slept, a piercing ring in her ears that started at ten each evening and screamed through until daybreak.

She crept along the hall, dodging the boards that squeaked, and slipped her head through the doorway to the girls' bedroom.

For identical twins, they couldn't be more different.

Lily was the wild one, her vibrant red hair like a bird's nest on the pillow, with her pale legs sprawled out and the duvet kicked half off the bed.

Violet was asleep on her back, her hair fanned out perfectly as though she hadn't moved an inch since closing her eyes. Her hands were clasped on top of the bedspread and her feet formed one neat mound beneath the sheets.

They were her world, but whenever she looked at them, she couldn't help but think about what she had lost. Her first sleepless night had been after she and Christian returned from the hospital with their newborn twins. She had cradled the girls in the crook of each arm, bobbing them up and down to soothe them back to sleep. Their cries had woken something in her, something that had been dormant her whole life until that first rattling scream. She hadn't just become a mother that day; she had become an insomniac. Motherhood came with a price: it had meant sacrificing her former self.

Rose crept down the stairs, her thirty-five-year-old body aching as though it belonged to a woman twice her age, and stood in the bright kitchen, squinting at the sun's rays reflecting off the marble countertop. She looked out the window at the new day.

The river bustled beneath the morning sun, winking with small bursts of light as the current drew the water under the bridge and through the rest of Rearwood. They had bought the house for the

view, but now all she wanted to do was board up the windows and keep out the day.

She stood silently as the kettle boiled and caught her reflection in the glass of the microwave. The skin around her eyes looked bruised. The rest of her was cadaverously pale and thin on her bones. She had been called beautiful once. However, it turned out there was such a thing as beauty sleep; without it, she was a shell of who she used to be, the light in her eyes blown out.

She made a mug of tea and stepped out onto the porch. The cold morning tightened the pores on her face; the breeze was tainted with the scent of the water, a faint smell of salt from the Thames where the river originated. She sat on the rocking chair and swayed back and forth with her eyes on the river.

Smoking was the one thing she liked about being alone at night and in the dawn, allowing herself this small guilty pleasure, the one thing that was hers. In the day, she had to set a good example for the girls. But at night, she wasn't a wife or a mother; she was a woman marooned on her own deserted island, waiting for the sun to rise.

She took the pack and lighter from her dressing-gown pocket and lit a cigarette hungrily.

They would be awake soon. She longed to end the loneliness of the night, but dreaded having to slip into the facade: attentive mother, loving wife, a mask with a chiselled smile.

She closed her eyes against the wind and breathed in the fresh morning air, mixing with the cigarette smoke drifting up from between her fingers. Her heartbeat calmed as she listened to the quiet rush of the river in the distance, like water trickling in her ears.



*'MUM!'*

Rose jolted awake, knocking over the mug of tea by her feet. The sun was higher in the sky and beaming down on the porch; her chest was a furious pink.

Lily peered down at her slumped in the chair, her young brow creased with disgust.

'You're smoking!'

Rose looked down at the cigarette burnt to the filter between her fingers, then up at her daughter. Tears filled her eyes and blurred her daughter's face, washing the frown away.

*I had finally fallen asleep. Why won't you just let me sleep?*

'Oh, this? I wasn't smoking, darling. I like the smell, that's all. Reminds me of my mum.'

Whenever Rose mentioned her family, she could see her daughters' wonder at the other life she'd had before them. They never had the chance to meet their grandmother. Calling her Grandma wouldn't have meant a thing.

Lily looked her up and down, at the tea running between the cracks in the patio tiles beneath their feet.

'Why are you crying?'

'I'm just tired, that's all.' She wiped away the tears and sat up. 'Where's your dad?'

Rose bent down and placed the mug upright again. She dropped the cigarette end inside.

'Gone. He told us not to wake you.'

*Then why did you?*

She looked out at the bridge, at the cars crossing like ants on a branch, and scanned them for his white four-by-four. She was thankful that he had left her to sleep, but felt a pang in her chest at not being able to say goodbye. Perhaps they still longed for each other after eleven years of marriage. Or maybe it was the guilt she

had for resenting him, scowling at his sleeping face and envying every peaceful breath he took.

‘Isn’t it Sunday?’

‘It’s Monday.’

‘Oh, yes. Bank holiday.’

Her memory dripped in and dried up; it never came in a steady flow. She vaguely remembered Christian telling her about a meeting he had to attend for his latest case for the court date at the end of the week, leaving her to look after the girls again. She could barely string a sentence together, put one foot in front of the other, and still he left her alone with them.

‘It’s our last game of the season today,’ Lily said. ‘Remember?’

‘Huh? Oh, football. Yes, I remember.’

By the look in Lily’s eyes, the lie was clear on her face. The facade was slipping.

‘It’s an away game,’ Lily added.

‘Yes, at the school in Longridge, right?’

‘That was last month. It’s at Fairmount.’

‘Of course. What time is it now?’

Rose tucked her hair behind her ears and pulled at her nightdress where it had bunched around her waist. What must Lily think of her? Was she embarrassed? Ashamed? Scared?

Lily leaned in through the doorway to the kitchen and glanced at the clock on the wall. ‘Seven forty-five.’

‘What time is the game again?’

‘Kick-off at nine.’

Maybe she could ask Heather to take them. The thought of sitting behind the wheel made her stomach lurch. But Heather had given her so many favours and never asked for anything in return. The mothers at the school had to be talking about her by now, absent from games, turning up with her coat inside out or

dressed for summer in the rain, her words slurred as though she had been drinking. Is that what they thought it was? Was she known as the school drunk?

‘Right, right. Best get cracking, then.’

Rose followed Lily into the kitchen where Violet was sitting at the island eating a bowl of cereal.

‘Shall I clean up the tea, Mummy?’ she asked with a mouthful of cereal, her line of sight on the puddle crawling across the tiles.

‘No, darling, you eat. I’ll clean it up later.’ She leaned down and kissed the top of Violet’s head. ‘Have you eaten, Lily?’

Lily shook her head as she climbed up onto the stool beside her sister.

‘What do you want?’

Lily looked at her sister’s bowl. ‘Shreddies.’

As the girls talked, Rose prepared breakfast, wondering how she was going to get through the day. Exhaustion burnt at the backs of her eyes and scratched her skin, as though insects were scurrying beneath. She felt sick with it, shook with it, but she had to be a mother. She had to stop letting them down.

She placed the cereal in front of Lily and turned back to clean up the pieces that had missed the bowl.

‘I asked for Shreddies.’

‘What?’

She eyed the bowl. Rice Krispies bobbed around in the milk.

‘Can’t you just have those?’

Lily glanced at her sister’s breakfast again. ‘But I wanted Shreddies.’

‘Fine.’ Rose dragged the bowl in front of her, her thumb submerged in the milk, splashing it on the granite top. ‘I’ll have it then.’

She looked back at Lily and watched the tears sheen over her daughter’s eyes.

She could feel that her brow was fixed in a frown, her lips pressed into a hard line.

*You're frightening her. You're a bad mother.*

'Lily, I'm sorry. I'm not angry with you, I'm just tired. I'll get you some Shreddies.'

The girls were subdued by her swing in mood, which could change faster than they could blink. She smiled at them both, trying to prove she wasn't a monster, but neither of them would meet her eye.

She slipped into the larder and closed the door behind her to let the sob free, muffled behind her hand. Sometimes she wondered if it would be easier for all of them not to have her there. She whimpered into the palm of her hand until her lips felt hot and swollen. Tears filled the seal of her hand against her face.

After a brief moment, she took a deep breath to compose herself and wiped away the tears.

*Pull yourself together. You'll be home before you know it. You can try to sleep again this afternoon.*

She returned to the kitchen with the box of Shreddies and a forced smile straining her cheeks.

'There,' she said, after she had prepared the cereal and passed Lily the bowl.

She sat opposite them and took a mouthful of her own cereal, soggy now, like frog larvae on her tongue. She managed two mouthfuls before nausea crept up her throat.

The girls took it in turns to glance up at her, eyeing the red blotches on her face. The spoon shook in her hand, spilling cereal back into the bowl until all she got was a small slurp of milk.

*Be good to them. They're the most important things in your life.*



But deep down, in the small burrows of her mind, she knew she was lying. The most important thing in her life was something she could never have. The need for sleep wasn't from the heart, it was from the most archaic part of her brain that controlled her primal need for food, water, shelter and rest. She could lie to herself all she wanted, that her love for her children was the most important part of her, but beneath it the animal inside growled the truth.

*You don't deserve to be a mother*, she thought, before casting her mind back to the small sleep she'd had, just before Lily jolted her awake.



# TWO



Rose couldn't remember driving to the school. One minute they were pulling out of the driveway, the gravel crunching beneath the wheels, and the next they were pulling up in the car park.

Dozens of children and parents escaped SUVs and scrummed together in a hot crowd of bodies heading towards the playing field.

'Mum, there's a stain on my top!'

Rose whipped around and eyed Lily's football shirt.

'No one will notice. Here.' She licked her finger to work out the dried food with it, scratched it with her nail.

'But Violet's top is clean, why isn't mine?'

Tears were forming in her eyes. Her bottom lip began to quiver.

'Don't start, Lily.'

'It's not fair!'

Rose turned back and unfurled a hot sigh into her lap, clutching the steering wheel until her knuckles whitened. Lily whimpered behind her.

*Maybe I can try to sleep here while they play, catch an hour or two. I'll be nicer then. I won't be such a terrible mother.*

'I'm sorry. It'll be clean next time. I must have thought I put both in the wash.'

'You always forget about me,' Lily said, sniffing back tears.

‘I’m sorry, Lily.’

*You’re screwing them up. All they’ll remember of their childhood are your failures.*

Violet sat quietly as she always did, her hands cupped neatly in her lap.

A fist banged against the window. Heather stood on the other side of the glass and burst out laughing when Rose jolted with the impact.

‘Sorry, lovely. Didn’t mean to scare you! Your face!’ She laughed behind the glass, revealing a flash of white teeth. She had taut, ebony skin and long, dark hair that shimmered when the light hit it. Heather Forrest was the epitome of a rested woman; she was everything Rose wasn’t.

Rose glanced at herself in the rear-view mirror. Her damp hair was scraped into a messy bun; she eyed the bruising around her eyes, and spotted a stray Rice Krispie hardened into the fabric of her T-shirt where she had tried to finish off the bowl before running out the door.

‘Wipe your face, Lily,’ she whispered as she scratched off the Rice Krispie and unbuckled her belt.

Rose stepped out of the car and forced a smile.

‘Sorry, I was miles away.’

‘Still not sleeping?’

‘Is it that obvious?’

‘You look fine,’ Heather lied and stroked her arm. Rose’s skin was so tender that Heather’s touch felt as though it singed down to the bone. She forced herself to withstand it and steeled her muscles. ‘You just look tired, that’s all.’

‘I’m fine.’

The girls got out of the car with their football boots tied at the laces and hung around their necks. Lily had wiped the tears

away, but her lip still hung out and she had red blotches beneath her eyes. Violet gave Heather a timid smile, hiding the gap in her teeth behind her lips.

‘What’s up, girls?’

‘Hi,’ they said together.

‘Violet’s upset, I forgot to wash her top.’

‘Lily,’ said Lily. ‘I’m upset, not Violet.’

‘Yes, sorry.’

*Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Shut up, Rose, you sound pathetic.*

‘You look great, Lily love. The boys have run ahead, you might be able to catch them.’

The girls looked up at Rose, who nodded in approval. They scampered off for the field with their boots knocking against their chests.

‘How are you really?’ Heather asked, touching her again.

Tears welled in her eyes.

‘Don’t, Heather,’ she said and covered her face. She turned her back on the parents pulling into the car park and faced the body of the car.

‘Oh, lovey,’ Heather said and placed a hand on her back.

‘I’m sorry. I’m just so tired.’

‘You shouldn’t be driving this exhausted.’

‘What else am I supposed to do?’ she snapped.

Heather’s expression fell.

‘I’m sorry. It’s just. . . the girls shouldn’t be impacted by my failures. I wasn’t going to drive, but I was so tired I forgot to call a taxi. We waited for it for twenty minutes, a cab I hadn’t even booked.’

She laughed at herself, how pathetic she was.

‘You’re not a failure, Rose. Insomnia is an illness.’

‘Well, I feel like I am. I’m always letting them down. I snap at

them all the time, forget things. They must hate me, think I don't love them, when I do, Heather, I really, really do.'

'I know you do, and they do too. Where's Christian?'

'Working,' she said.

'Aren't there any tablets you can take to help?'

'Don't you think I've tried that? I've been prescribed every drug out there. One made me a zombie, another made me vomit for three days straight. The others didn't even make a dent, I just remained awake, stumbling around like a drunk. I've tried everything, Heather.'

'Look, why don't you kip in the car during the game? I can watch the girls and then bring them back with me.'

'I can't ask you to do that. You're always helping me.'

'That's what friends are for, isn't it?'

She glanced at the passenger seat through the window and saw herself there, lying back against the reclined seat. She'd had so many opportunities to sleep last night, but it was now when she needed to stay awake that her body decided to shut down. She shook her head.

'I can't.' She walked round to the boot for her bag and arranged it on her shoulder, the camping chair poking out like a sail mast. 'I'm always letting them down. I need to be here for them.'

'If you're sure. . .'

'I am.' She shut the boot with a bang and locked the car.

The army of parents waited by the pitch, camping chairs arranged, tea poured into mugs from flasks, babies nestled against shoulders and breasts. A group of fathers stood close to the sidelines, huddled together like a third team waiting in the wings. All of the mothers looked pristine. Over thirty of them turned their heads at their arrival, some waving, some simply looking them up and down before turning their

attention back to their children warming up on the pitch.

Rose looked down at the stained tracksuit she had pulled on, the flip-flops slapping against her heels, her naked nails bitten to the quick.

‘Morning, ladies,’ Heather said as she pitched up her chair with the same group they always sat with, six women who slept soundly.

Rose forced a smile in greeting and tried to ignore the women glancing her up and down.

Heather mingled, fitting in with the other mums effortlessly, unlike Rose, who stuck out like the runt of the litter, the pup with the lazy eye or undeveloped leg. She took out the camping chair, which snapped shut the moment she opened it up. She tried again. It snapped shut. The rage swelled in her, tuning out the natter and the whistle from the football coach ushering the children in, until all she could hear was the thump of her heart racing in her ears.

‘Come on, you fucker!’ she said, too loud.

She returned to the sound of gasps.

The mothers were staring at her, eyes wide and brows creased with disgust. The children on the pitch were a huddle of faces looking her way, gasps and giggles erupting in a sudden whoosh. Both of the twins burnt red and turned away.

‘Let me help,’ Heather said, crouching over her. Her sweet perfume filled Rose’s nostrils.

*Heather, you’re perfect. Why can’t I be like you? Like them?*

‘I’m sorry,’ Rose whispered.

‘Hey, it’s probably the most excitement they’ve had all weekend.’

Heather patted the seat and ushered her down by her shoulders, as though she was guiding a stumbling drunk.

‘Let’s get you some tea,’ she said. ‘Adeline, can you spare some?’

‘I only have eucalyptus infusion,’ she said through pursed lips.

‘Laura?’

‘Green tea?’

Rose hated green tea. Laura knew that.

‘It’s okay,’ Rose said. ‘I have a flask of coffee.’

A second whistle blew and the game began as she rummaged around in the bag, filled with used wet wipes, empty chocolate wrappers, her one emergency cigarette crumpled beneath the mess, ground into brown dust and coating everything. She had forgotten the coffee. She could see it now, standing tall on the countertop, the metal flask twinkling in the sun as it poured through the window.

A tear fell into the bag.

*Stop crying. You’re an embarrassment.*

She zipped the bag shut and dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. When she turned around, Heather was smiling, flask in hand.

‘I never forget coffee.’

The other mothers were staring at her, her failures more alluring than the game.

‘You’re a star.’

‘I know,’ Heather said with a wink, pouring the black coffee into Rose’s unwashed mug. Another thing she had forgotten to do.

The game began. Children in yellow shirts ran back and forth, mixing with the opposition dressed in green. The coffee was good, but the mug was as heavy as her eyelids, closing as though they were being stitched together and shutting out the light.

Her head dropped suddenly, and she woke with a gasp. All the mothers were staring at her. She glanced up at Heather from where she had slumped in the chair. Heather mouthed it was okay and gave her a reassuring wink.

Rose turned back to the game, looking for the twins amongst the masses of skin and hair.

Before she knew it, her head dropped again, so hard that



something clicked in her neck. A whimper escaped her lips as she woke.

‘For God’s sake,’ Adeline hissed.

‘Why don’t you go and have a nap in the car?’ Heather whispered, a hand on her arm with that painful touch again, as though she had slipped her fingers beneath the skin and was strumming Rose’s nerves with her fingernails.

‘I’m fine. Sorry. I just need more coffee.’

‘Here.’ Heather topped up her mug.

She breathed in the delicious scent and watched the steam curl up from the mug, but it wasn’t long until her eyelids flickered and her head lowered as though someone was pulling her down by her hair.



‘Mum?’

Rose woke up with a jolt. Cold coffee seeped into her tracksuit bottoms. It had felt like seconds since her last sip of hot coffee, and yet she knew time had passed from the sickness that clung to her. It was almost worse, sleeping so lightly.

Clouds had smothered the sky while she slept, throwing a grey tint on everything she set her eyes on. Mothers had wrapped themselves in cardigans and pashminas and were slowly packing away their things. Heather wasn’t there.

Lily was peering down at her, her cheeks red with shame, mud flicked above her brow and streaked in her hair.

Rose looked down at the brown coffee seeping through her clothes.

‘Shit.’

‘Mum!’

‘Rose, please watch your language,’ Adeline said as she snapped her chair shut. ‘You might raise your children differently to us at home, but here, you need to respect ours.’

Dispersing mothers glared back at her, muttering about her beneath their breaths.

‘I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,’ she said and rubbed her eyes, unknowingly smearing her mascara into black clouds.

Adeline looked her up and down one last time and ushered her children towards the car park.

‘How was the game?’ she asked Lily. ‘Did you win?’

‘You would know if you’d been awake,’ Lily said under her breath.

‘We lost, Mummy,’ Violet said from the other side of the chair. Rose hadn’t even seen her. ‘But it was fun.’

‘You weren’t benched,’ Lily spat.

‘Why were you benched? What happened?’

‘Doesn’t matter.’

Lily slumped off, kicking at the grass until green and brown clumps flew across the turf. Thunder grumbled in the distance.

‘She’ll be okay, Mummy. It was just a tackle.’

‘I’m sorry I’m so crap, Vi,’ Rose said, pulling her in for a hug.

‘You’re not crap.’

‘I love you,’ Rose said and kissed her daughter’s forehead. Lily wouldn’t let her give her affection; all she was allowed was a quick kiss on the forehead before she went to sleep, and that was only on a good day. It had taken some getting used to, feeling her daughter squirm to get out of her embrace and steel against her lips.

‘I love you too,’ Violet said. She licked her fingers and wiped the smudged mascara beneath Rose’s eyes. ‘You have panda eyes.’

‘I must look a right state, huh? You’re probably embarrassed of me.’

‘No, I’m not,’ she said, her voice tinged with the lie.

*Thanks for trying, Vi.*

‘Come on, let’s get you home.’

They headed off for the car to the first flash of lightning, and met Lily there, kicking at the gravel.

Rose waved at Heather who was grappling with her youngest to get him inside her car. Rose had wondered why Heather hadn’t woken her; now she knew. Heather waved back, forming her hand to resemble a phone and putting it to her ear. Rose nodded and unlocked the car. She would call her once she had slept. She was only twenty minutes away from home. A short drive and she would finally be able to close her eyes; she just had to stay alert until then.



# THREE



Rain pummelled against the windscreen. The brake lights from the car in front squirmed on the other side of the water. Rose glanced in the rear-view mirror at the back seats where Lily sulked with her arms crossed and a knitted brow, and Violet hummed along to the song on the radio, kicking the back of the passenger's seat to the beat.

The windows had steamed up and the heat from their bodies filled the car, weighing down her eyelids.

She shook her head roughly and clenched the wheel until her hands felt numb.

*You'll be home soon. Ten minutes and you're home. The girls can crash in front of the TV while you sleep.*

'What time is Daddy home?' Violet asked.

'I'm not sure,' she replied, grateful for the distraction. 'I'll ring him when we're back.'

The car fell quiet again. The song on the radio was slow and smooth, like a lullaby. Rose flicked between the stations, trying to find something with a beat to knock her awake.

'I liked that one!'

'Sorry, Lily, I need something livelier.'

Lily sighed heavily, tightening the knit of her arms. Violet drew hearts in the condensation on the window with the peel of a

satsuma on her lap, the scent staining the air.

The car shuddered as it veered to the right, jutting over the cat's eyes in the middle of the road. An oncoming car honked its horn. She swerved back into the left-hand lane just in time.

'Shit,' she said and clenched the steering wheel until the leather squeaked beneath her palms. She eyed the car behind her in the rear-view mirror.

*Just get over the bridge and you're home.*

'Adeline said you shouldn't swear,' Lily said, after they had all caught their breaths.

*Whose side are you on?*

'Well, Adeline says a lot of things.'

They reached the bridge, its steel beams towering over them like ribs.

The river was dark and grey, reflecting the thick knit of clouds. Even through the metal of the car and the glass of the windows, she was sure she could smell it, the tang of the water ripping through Rearwood from the Thames.

Her eyelids flickered again. She shook her head, stared at the road until her eyes burnt, and lowered the window to feel the cold air against her face. Rain splattered against her cheek.

'It's getting on me!' Lily said behind her.

'Sorry.'

She closed the window and widened her eyes, not daring to blink, powerless as they cranked shut.

She woke to the girls' screaming and the sound of a horn blaring in her skull. She yanked the wheel to the left, missing the oncoming car by an inch, and collided with the side of the bridge.

Metal twisted. The headlights shattered. The car ricocheted off the bridge wall and spun across the road until the steering wheel turned wildly beneath her palms. The tyres screeched against the

tarmac as the car veered head on into the side of the bridge again and thick, black smoke burst through the air vents. The airbag blasted out in a flash of white powder. Rose felt her nose crack, saw her own blood explode from her nostrils.

The side of the bridge split with the impact like parting lips, and spat them out until they were airborne, weightless for mere seconds before the car began to nosedive towards the river. Rose screamed and waited for the blow, her stomach forcing past her lungs and rising to her throat.

The windscreen cracked as the nose of the car hit the water, jolting them forwards. Her body wretched against the belt, cutting into her skin.

The river began to drag the car beneath the surface, creeping over the bonnet and edging up the glass, giving them a glimpse of the dark depths beneath.

‘It’s going to be okay,’ she yelled, quietened by the whine of the sinking car. Glass cracked in the windscreen. Blood dripped from her nose and warmed her lips. ‘I promise it’ll be okay!’

The girls screamed as water poured through the air vents and filled the footwells until brown waves were chopping at Rose’s feet. The radio was silenced with a quick spark and puff of smoke.

Rose fumbled with her seat belt, watching the dark water creep up the glass. Inside, it enveloped her feet and began to spit through the cracks in the windscreen in jet streams, creating new breaks, each larger than the last.

She unclipped the belt and snapped around, wincing from the pain in her neck, and reached for the closest child. Lily was red in the face, tears oozing from her eyes and snot from her nostrils. She had a bloody lip and a welt on her head. She put her hands out and clawed for Rose.

‘We’re going to be all right!’ Rose shouted.

She unclipped the belt and dragged Lily forwards, untangling her small limbs to place her in the passenger seat. The water was so dark that she couldn't see the floor of the car. Lily screamed and dug her nails into Rose's arm until she bled.

'Lily, I need to get Violet!'

But Lily wouldn't listen; she clawed and screamed as the water crept over the edge of the seat and onto her legs. The glass in the windscreen continued to crack as the car sank and bubbles rose behind the glass. Jets of water sprayed at Rose's back, so cold that she flinched with the impact. The water seeped beneath her, numbing the flesh until it felt as though it was curdling the fat in her thighs.

'Come on, Vi,' she said as she leaned towards her and reached out for the belt clip. Violet was stunned, her wide eyes set on her mother's. Her skin was drained of blood and shimmered with tears. Her lips were red and wet. She stared down at the small tooth resting in the palm of her hand, felt the new gap in her mouth with her tongue and winced.

The water lapped around Rose's waist.

'Vi! Look at me!'

She looked up. Tears fell from both eyes.

'My tooth.'

Her voice was so delicate, so innocent, that Rose had to bite back the tears.

'I know, darling, but we have to go!'

She reached for her, fumbling with the seat belt as Lily's fingernails dug into the flesh on her back. She unclipped Violet's belt just as the car jolted, hitting the rocky bed of the river with a booming thud. Violet slammed into the back of the passenger seat just as Rose was pulled under water with the impact and dragged towards the break in the windscreen. Glass bit into the flesh on her



back; her screams were nothing but bubbles of air. Water gushed around her body and forced her back into the car. She instinctively drew a breath and inhaled icy water into her lungs. She clawed wildly until she broke through the surface, hitting her head on the roof with a crack. Water spluttered from her lips and stung her eyes.

‘Violet! Lily!’

She whipped her head around, but saw nothing but the chop of the water as it rose to the roof. The rear windscreen was dark with the water on the other side, waiting to be let in.

She couldn’t see them. The water splashed against her chin as it rose. She took one last desperate breath, just as the water reached the roof.

She thrashed through the murky water and felt a small hand grip hers. She pulled the body to her and arms wrapped around her neck, just as the last of the windscreen shattered and the force dragged them from the car.

The current silenced their screams and ripped them this way and that, desperate to sever them. Rose held on to the small wrist so tightly that she felt bones snap beneath her grasp. The water was so cold that she couldn’t move, couldn’t think.

Suddenly she broke through the surface and gasped in air. Rain pummelled down from the sky and thunder clapped above her head.

The bridge was far away now, rising in and out of view from the choppy water, a gaping hole in the barrier where they had burst through. She spotted the bank and clawed towards it, listening to her daughter’s cry close to her neck.

*Which one have I saved?*

*Which one have I left behind?*

The water stole the power from her legs, whipping them up and dragging her under. The river spat them back up and weeds

tangled around her legs. She clawed her daughter upwards, her eyes curtained with sheets of water so she couldn't see which one. But her child wasn't crying any more. She was silent.

'No!' Rose screamed the word until she heard it echo amongst the trees on the side of the bank.

Rose kicked and kicked, clawed at the weeds with her one free hand, and dug her feet into the mud the second she felt it beneath her. The water broke around her in white sprays. She fought against the current until she breached the river and collapsed on the bank.

She lay there, shaking violently, the chill of the wind catching the water soaked into her hair and clothes. When her eyelids flickered, she forced herself up to a sitting position. She tried to stand but stumbled; it felt as though water had seeped in through her ears and filled her skull.

*You can't give up.*

She dragged her daughter's limp body further away from the river until they were both smeared with mud, and pressed shivering fingers to her neck.

Nothing.

She tried to blink away the water, but all she could see was the blurred silhouette of milky white skin, wet red hair, the yellow football top both of the girls had been wearing.

Rose pumped her daughter's chest, forced breaths through her lips that she couldn't afford to share.

She pumped and exhaled until water spluttered from the child's mouth, followed by a desperate heave for air.

Rose sat up, gasping in the ice-cold air and blinking furiously until her eyes cleared, and saw which daughter she had saved.

Lily was beneath her, shaking violently against the bank, her wild blue eyes locked on Rose's face. Her skin was so pale it was as though the river had drawn all of the blood from her body.

*Violet.*

Rose stumbled to her feet as the sob came, and rushed back towards the river. She felt the water climb up her calves and her thighs, until something caught her from behind. Hands were on her, wrapping around her waist and pinning down her arms, yanking her back towards the bank. A crash of thunder dulled the sound of her screams.

She kicked and thrashed. Flashing blue lights crept up from the town on the other side of the bank, their sirens carried with the wind.

The stranger ignored her screams, her threats, her desperate pleas. Every second she was held back was a second longer that Violet was without air. She turned to bite the stranger's hand, her lips curled back and teeth bared, and came face to face with the stranger, a man with jet-black hair, eyes wide with fear. A dog was barking further up the bank.

'You'll die!' he shouted, his warm breath blasting her face. 'You'll die if you go back in there!'

She couldn't do anything else but scream Violet's name. Tears blurred her eyes as lightning flashed on the surface of the river, the river that had stolen her little girl. The man clamped her against his body until she could feel the nervous rush of his heart. She screamed into his chest and her legs buckled.

*I saved the wrong one, she thought. I saved the wrong one.*