

Hannah

The man who had murdered Hannah's husband was due to arrive at midday.

Half an hour, and her home would no longer be her own.

She'd tried to keep busy all morning – cleaning, washing up, doing laundry – anything to take her mind off what was about to happen. Now though, she found herself adrift, stranded in a corner of the kitchen with nothing to do but wait.

She curled her hands in on themselves, tightening and squeezing. Still, they trembled.

I do not want him here.

The urge to scream was overwhelming.

Slowly, she approached the barred cage now fixed to the wall in the middle of the room. The cell was small, the same footprint as a shopping centre parking space, and yet they'd managed to cram in a bed, basin, screened toilet, cupboard and a table and chair. A hatch and metal drawer through which to exchange food, dirty dishes, commissary items and any post the prisoner might receive had been incorporated into a section to the left of the cell door.

The prisoner.

No one could be sure why he did it – he'd entered a not guilty plea – but the consensus in court was that it had been a mugging gone wrong.

She ran her fingers across the steel bars. A harsh metallic noise ricocheted around the room. Heart jittering, she considered the door. Despite regular practice, she'd yet to master the lock. It was

strange. She was expert at fashioning the tiny sugar-paste flowers and fondant animal figures that sat atop the bespoke cakes she made for a living but this, a key so large it looked like it had been found at the bottom of a prop drawer and a bulky government-issue deadbolt, had her beat. Fear, it turned out, could do that to a person.

She wafted her apron and leaned toward the fan. It was the last week in September but the heat was oppressive, the temperature in the high twenties and set to rise. It had been the same for weeks, London looped into a nightmarish summer that showed no intention of ending any time soon. The cherry blossoms that lined her street had re-bloomed, the flowers pinking their way through crumbly autumn leaves, and everywhere you looked, confused daffodils lurched from the soil.

She steadied her fingers as best she could and grabbed the key. She wanted to try to get it right at least once before the prisoner arrived.

Technically, her ineptitude wasn't a problem. The lock was electromechanical and operated remotely via the device she now had to wear on a rope round her neck. The deadbolt was nothing more than a fail-safe. A backup in the event of a power cut. It didn't matter if it took her two or even ten times to get it right because she would be doing it with the prisoner already secure in his cell. For Hannah though, being able to operate the lock was important. She'd spent time on message boards in preparation for today and one of the things the more experienced Hosts talked about was how critical it was to show the prisoner you were in control right from the off. 'This is your house,' said Malorie21, who'd hosted her burglar in the box room of her 1930s semi for the last nine months, 'your space. Make sure they know it. Take ownership.'

For Hannah ownership meant having the knack. Only she knew how to waggle the handle on the washing machine whenever it refused to open or how long to leave the bathroom tap before it ran hot. She wanted the cell door to be no different.

She lined the key up to the slot and was about to give it another go when she sensed someone behind her.

‘You’ll be quite safe.’

She jumped and the key clattered to the floor.

Mr Dalgleish. Hannah’s Domestic Liaison Officer (DLO). He’d been doing a final survey of the house and must have come back down to the basement without her noticing. Tall with a ‘hup-two’ posture hardwired during his military service, Mr Dalgleish refused to tell Hannah his first name (‘Helps keep things proper’) and was working full time despite being two months into chemotherapy for bowel cancer.

He picked up the key and passed it to her.

‘Just checking,’ she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

He smiled sympathetically as though he knew something about her she had yet to realise, then stopped, noticing the row of sponge cakes on the side. She’d made them the night before.

‘You better not have baked a file into one of those,’ he said, wagging a finger.

‘They’re for a client. A christening,’ said Hannah, so on edge she failed to register the joke. ‘I had to do the bases yesterday otherwise I wouldn’t have enough time to ice.’

‘I was kidding, obviously.’ He sniffed and brushed a piece of lint from his shoulder. ‘You’re the last person who’d want to help him escape.’

Hannah looked again at the cakes, each one sealed inside a glass cloche. She’d agreed to the job because she couldn’t afford to turn down new clients, no matter how inconvenient. John’s

death in service pay had gone toward what had turned out to be his surprisingly large credit card debt and her police widow's pension amounted to eight grand per annum. Not nearly enough to cover the bills, let alone her rent.

Now though she was struck by a horrible thought. Would the prisoner think she'd made the cakes for him, to welcome him? There'd been some Hosts on the message boards who believed wholeheartedly in the merits of the system. They had talked of preparing a special meal for their inmate's first night. A lasagne, a roast chicken. One person had made a strawberry trifle for dessert.

She took the top of her dungarees between her fingers. At least there was no chance of him thinking she'd gone to any effort with her appearance. The denim was frayed, a hole forming in the right knee, her apron raggedy, its blue and white daisy pattern blotched with stains. The rest of her was no better. Her hair was the kind of white blond that emboldened strangers to come up to her on the Tube, cock their head to one side and say, 'Swedish?' but she hadn't felt much like washing it this last week and so today it was more of a dirty straw colour, tied into a lank bun that lolled from side to side. No, she looked quite plain. The only thing of note was her amber pendant – a gift from John – and she'd tucked it out of sight down the front of her vest.

John was always getting her things, whether it be a daisy he'd found growing in a pavement crack on his way home, the underside of its petals tinged pink, a new Thermomix when her old one broke down, or a pain au chocolat, still warm, from the bakery at the bottom of their street. He always said that the manner of giving was worth more than any gift, that – his offerings to her aside – the most generous thing you could give someone

was something they had no idea was a gift in the first place. He was fifteen years older than Hannah and his hair had been thick and white, having gone that way in his twenties, and sometimes when he went without shaving, Hannah would tease that he looked more like Santa Claus than a Met detective.

She felt for the nub of amber beneath her vest. The pendant wasn't to her usual taste; she preferred delicate jewellery – frail strings of gold or thin bracelets of silver, tasselled with tiny charms – but she figured John had chosen it because of the way the stone matched the streak of tannin in her eyes. Like so many objects she'd once paid no mind – the bottle of hot sauce on the top shelf of the fridge that John added to everything from scrambled eggs to shepherd's pie, the Billie Holiday vinyl they'd liked to slow-dance to before bed – the necklace helped her feel as though John was still around, that any minute now he'd walk through the front door and tell her this had all been a terrible mistake.

A beep. Mr Dalglish's phone. He checked the screen.

'Oh.'

He seemed disappointed.

For a moment Hannah was visited by an impossible hope. There'd been a change of plan. The prisoner wouldn't be coming after all.

'Better finish up.' He smiled reluctantly, as though he'd just conceded a point in an argument. 'They're two minutes away.'

A crush of disappointment and then Hannah's head began to ring with the same questions that had haunted her since the guilty verdict.

What if he gets out?

What if he tries to hurt me?

During her Host training Mr Dalglish had reassured her again and again that the system was secure, that the protocols would protect her, that she'd soon relax into it. But Hannah had heard the stories; she knew she couldn't let her guard down, not for one second.

He performed a final lap of the kitchen, checking for objects the prisoner might be able to get at through the bars. His hair was black and dead straight, worn in a dashing Clark Gable side-parting. As he walked he rubbed absent-mindedly at a point just above the nape and a clump came loose and drifted to the floor. The first time Hannah had seen this happen they'd been midway through one of their training sessions. Mr Dalglish's face had crumpled and, after picking it up with a monogrammed handkerchief, he'd told her about his cancer and how he'd decided to continue working during the treatment, partly because he wanted to but also because he needed the money. Then he'd parcelled the hair inside the handkerchief and placed it in his pocket, a look of such naked humiliation on his face that Hannah had had to turn away.

Since then, whenever a tuft fell out Hannah would either pretend not to notice or, if *he* didn't see, she would, with a sideswipe of her foot, discreetly shift the hair out of view. She did this now. Later, when he was gone, she'd sweep it into the bin.

Hannah clocked her wedding rings, still on the side by the sink. She'd taken them off to wash up. She replaced her gold band and was about to put on her engagement ring when she heard the growl of a van pulling up outside.

A thump on the front door.

What if he gets out?

What if he tries to hurt me?

‘Here we go,’ said Mr Dalglish. He grabbed the white oval round his neck, identical to her own. ‘Black button to lock up, red in case he causes you any trouble. Remember, if you press the red one we’ll send someone out to check on you within half an hour.’ He made eye contact and held it. ‘It needs to be second nature, you understand?’

Hannah nodded, then followed him toward the stairs that led from the basement kitchen to the hall. He reached the front door and went to open it but, as usual, the Yale lock refused to play ball. He fudged it twice before Hannah placed a hand on his shoulder.

‘This is my house,’ she said, loud enough for the people on the other side of the door to hear. She stepped forward. ‘Let me.’

The prisoner stood sandwiched between two guards. Hands cuffed behind his back, he kept his head low and his eyes on the ground. Jem Dahlin.

Almost as tall as Mr Dagleish, he had hair the colour of burnt caramel, undercut and textured at the top, a style favoured by the teenage boys that hung around Gospel Oak after school. Clean-shaven throughout the trial, he now sported the beginnings of a beard. The stubble emphasised his already full mouth. Soft and red, his upper lip was shaped like a mountain range, two peaks with a slight dip in the middle.

Once in her custody he would be allowed to wear clothes of his own choosing, but for now he was in the Holding Centre uniform of white T-shirt, grey jogging bottoms and black plimsolls. Holding Centres, secure compounds with locked rooms and guards, housed those on remand. Jem had remained in one since his arrest and then, once the guilty verdict was delivered, for the fortnight it had taken to construct the cell in Hannah's kitchen.

Jem shifted on his feet and Hannah remembered a moment during the trial's closing statements. At the mention of his name he'd shaken his head, it seemed, in denial of the accusation levelled against him. Examined closely though, the action was something else entirely: a reprimand. He was annoyed at himself. But whether he was disappointed for having done what he'd done or because he'd been careless enough to get caught was anyone's guess.

Hannah had expected that, when faced with him up close, she'd have to fight the urge to cower and hide. But looking at his bowed head she felt like she'd been punched in the throat, hit by a flash of anger so quick and fierce it took her breath away.

This person had killed John and all for what, a few quid?

She stepped aside and motioned for them to come in. They blundered by and Hannah tensed, worried they'd knock something from the thin shelf to the right of the door. Lined with pictures and trinkets, it was dominated by a cube of gold and black marble, an award presented to John after he triumphed at a work darts night. They passed by without incident, but as they cleared the coat rack one of the guards brushed against John's mac, still hung where he'd left it.

'Careful.' Her voice thorned the air. She closed the door and went to check on the coat. 'Down the hall,' she said, smoothing out the sleeves. 'Staircase on your left.'

She watched them go and tried to comfort herself with the fact that Jem's stay was temporary. The minute the verdict had come through she'd lodged an appeal requesting he serve his twenty-year sentence not with her but with one of the city's Foster Hosts, people unconnected to the crime who took prisoners into their home for a fee.

To qualify for Foster Host assistance a victim (or the family that survived them) had to prove they were unable to take on the prisoner because of ill health, disability or acute lack of space.

Hannah didn't fit any of the criteria but her lawyer had said that John's service as a police officer would likely see the request signed off without fuss and Jem transferred within a month, two at most. She'd still be required to visit him at the Foster Host

weekly but that would be nothing compared to having to live under the same roof.

Of course she could have just done what so many did and refused to go ahead with the conviction – for there to be a crime there had to be a victim or someone connected to the victim willing to take responsibility – but in the early days of her grief Hannah had been fuelled by a rage and need for justice so visceral that she had given little thought to what it would mean for her in the long term. Then, during the trial, reality had set in and she'd found herself conflicted. She wanted Jem to be punished but was ashamed to admit that she did not want to be the one to bear that burden.

In the kitchen the guards and the prisoner went to wait by the cell. The guards were young, their navy uniforms roomy, like they'd chosen them from a dressing-up box. One wore a gold watch with a scaly dragon carved into the clock face that was either very expensive or very cheap. Too big for him, it slid up and down his arm and when he stood still it slumped heavy against his wrist.

Mr Dalglish got out his tablet and went to the keypad on the wall. Making sure to shield both from view, he brought up two six-digit codes and tapped them in, activating the electric fence at the front and back of the house. All set, he took a seat by the French doors and got to work signing and dating the custodial forms. He seemed in a hurry all of a sudden.

'Tea? Cake?' said Hannah, trying to delay the moment when she and Jem would be left alone. 'Feel free to use the bathroom.'

'Thanks, but we need to get on,' said Mr Dalglish. He nodded at the guards. 'They've got another handover after this and I've got an outside session in Finchley at 2 p.m.'



Through the doors she could hear screams of laughter. Her house backed onto one of Hampstead Heath's ponds and she and many of her neighbours had gardens with steps down to the shore. Ordinarily, there was no way Hannah could have afforded to live here – her neighbours' houses were worth millions – but John's job with the Met meant they qualified for the city's key-worker housing scheme. Some of this housing took the form of new-build flats while others, like this property, were old council stock, grand but shabby and situated on streets that had gentrified around them.

Looking out, she saw a couple from down the road messing around on a rowing boat in the middle of the water. Before, on days like this, she would have left the doors open. The breeze cooled as it passed over the pond and into the kitchen. But since John had died she preferred the house sealed, no matter the weather. She wanted to keep the fragments of him that remained.

One of the guards handed her a large brown paper bag, its top closed with blue and white custody tape.

'His things.'

Jem was allowed a small number of items – books, toiletries, photos – in his cell but the contents of this bag – the clothes he'd been wearing and any objects he had on his person when he'd been arrested – would only be released to him once his sentence was complete. The bag was light but when she placed it on the table something clinked in the bottom. Jem's head shot up. He looked from the paper bag to Hannah, eyes narrowed, as though she'd just trashed something precious. This was the first time he'd looked directly at her. It was like having a torch shone in her face. She turned away, but then she was wired with another shot of rage. *You murdered my husband*, she thought. *When it*



comes to your stuff, I don't give a shit. Staring right at him, she lifted the bag back into the air, as if to reposition it, and this time she made sure to bring it down even harder. There was a splintering crack, like the sound of a mug breaking, and the tinkle of broken pieces settling.

Jem flinched and Mr Dalglish looked up, distracted by the noise. Unable to find an explanation, he was about to return to his paperwork when he clocked something outside.

'Is she OK?' he asked, pointing next door.

Hannah followed his gaze.

An elderly lady wearing a cerise Chanel skirt suit was shouting and swearing while waving a draught excluder toward the branches of a plum tree. Having managed to knock a number of plums to the ground, she then set about weaponising the fruit, hurling them toward the people in the rowing boat. The missiles plopped in the water, well short of their target, but the woman was undeterred and, in search of more ammo, grabbed the draught excluder again and went back to swinging at the tree.

'Pru,' said Hannah, by way of explanation. 'She's harmless.'

Mr Dalglish seemed unconvinced.

'Not all prisons have bars.' He pointed a pen toward the cell door. 'Would you like to do the honours?'

A guard removed Jem's handcuffs and he rubbed at his wrists, soothing the red marks left behind. His hands were strong, the veins and tendons fanning toward his fingers like exposed tree roots.

I am safe, she told herself, *he can't hurt me.*

She pressed the black button on her device and opened the door.

Slowly, Jem stepped inside.



‘Against the wall,’ said Mr Dalglish. His tone was brisk but Hannah had never seen him so relaxed. Following protocol seemed to be a comfort to him, like sliding into a pair of well-worn shoes.

The prisoner did as he was told and went and stood against the wall furthest from the door. He moved with fluidity and held himself with such poise – spine erect, neck elongated, chest and abdomen open – that Hannah was sure he must have once been a dancer.

She pressed the black button for a second time, locking the cell, and Jem nodded respectfully. Now for the fail-safe. She lined the key up next to the hole and was about to put it in when she fumbled. It dropped to the floor, bounced through the bars and skidded across the cell toward the prisoner’s feet.

In one balletic movement he reached down to pick it up, took a step forward and passed it to her. She reached for it without thinking. He flattened his palm against hers, his skin warm, and as he slid his hand away she felt his forefinger press hard against her wrist.

Mr Dalglish was on his feet in an instant.

‘Inmate, step away.’ He placed his thumb over the red button on his device. Hold it down for five seconds and, as well as sounding the alarm, he would administer an electric shock via the corresponding chip in Jem’s spine.

Jem held up his hands, mea culpa, and retook his place by the wall.

Rattled, Hannah began to sweat. She’d failed to react and had left herself vulnerable. Mr Dalglish had been there to back her up, but next time she might not be so lucky.

‘Try again,’ said Mr Dalglish.



She took a breath to compose herself. Through the doors she could see the people in the rowing boat. They'd made it to the other side of the pond. Hopping into the shallows, they dragged the vessel to the shore.

She blocked out Jem as best she could and put the key in the lock. After hooking it up to the right, she waited until it was pushing against the underside of the mechanism and turned. A thunk, the feel of something solid dropping, and it was done. She removed the key and placed it on its hook by the sink.

'The spare?' said Mr Dalglish, nodding at the key.

Hannah picked up an old green and gold Fry's chocolate tin from the windowsill.

'In here.' She gave the tin a shake and the second key clanged inside.

Mr Dalglish nodded his approval, then he signed the last form with a flourish, tugged the paper from the clipboard and handed it to her.

'We'll leave you to it.'

I am safe, Hannah told herself again. *He can't get out.*

She went to see Mr Dalglish and the guards to the door.

Jem stayed where he was by the wall.

His eyes followed her every move.

Hannah should have spent the afternoon icing and decorating the sponge cakes from last night but after the guards and Mr Dalglish had gone, terrified of facing Jem alone, she'd fled to her room. Now, the sun was starting to set, and with time running out (the christening was tomorrow) she had no choice but to return to the kitchen.

She made her way onto the landing and stopped. The house was stifling, and this combined with the hours lying in bed had left her fingers puffy. She pushed her thumb against her wedding rings, trying to relieve the pressure on her swollen flesh, and realised she could only feel her gold band. She looked to check. She was sure she'd put both rings back on after washing up, but maybe she'd got distracted. Her engagement ring, an oval ruby haloed by diamonds, must still be by the sink.

She forced herself down the stairs and made it all the way to the hall before she stopped again. Her body had started to shake. It was as though her blood was moving too fast through her veins, racing around her organs in search of safety.

If she'd had any say in the matter she would have asked for Jem's cell to be constructed in the living room or spare bedroom; both were spaces that she would have been easily able to avoid. But the kitchen. She worked there; she ate there. It was her only access to the back garden. And that, said Mr Dalglish, was the whole point.

When it came to deciding where to install a cell in someone's home the prison service were guided by three things: available space, enough pre-existing plumbing infrastructure to support a toilet and sink and, most important of all, where would have the most foot traffic. The new system took restorative justice to its logical conclusion. They *wanted* to make seeing and talking to Jem unavoidable.

She could call the client, tell them she was sick and wouldn't be able to make their christening cake after all? Or maybe she should return to her room, and sneak back down in the dead of night to do the construction while Jem was asleep?

No. She grabbed her amber pendant for courage. She couldn't disappoint the client, she wouldn't, and working in the middle of the night was a stupid idea. This was her kitchen, her house. Jem was behind bars with no way out. She needed to finish the cake and so she would.

Still shaking, she made her final descent and turned the corner to see Jem standing by his basin in a pair of jeans, top off. He was halfway through a strip wash and his wet skin shone in the evening light. He was strong, his body lean, but there was something about the pouched muscle crowding his upper arms that reminded Hannah of a puppy's belly, vulnerable and pink.

Seeing her, he startled and, after rinsing the last of the soap from his neck, grabbed a towel. Hannah blushed and turned away but not before she saw the ladder of scars on his back, the keloided flesh rumped and thick.

It was even hotter down here, the air treacly, and Hannah realised that although she'd left the fan on, it was useless, pointing as it was away from the cell. She redirected it toward Jem and as the breeze hit his face he closed his eyes.



‘Thank you,’ he said quietly, like he was whispering a secret.

At the sink she searched the area around the taps for her engagement ring but there was no sign of it. Trying not to panic, she checked the other work surfaces and patted the pockets in her dungarees. Had it fallen down the plughole or worse, into the waste disposal?

Since John had died she got upset whenever she misplaced the silliest of things – she’d spent weeks searching for the Paddington Bear travel-card holder he’d got her for Christmas – but if she lost this . . . She didn’t want to finish the thought.

She was about to get down on her hands and knees and scour the floor when she realised she was being watched. She turned round, only for Jem to look away, a moment too late.

She decided to search for the ring again later. If it didn’t turn up she’d call out a plumber. The waste disposal had been playing up for months, gargling and spitting; if her ring had fallen down there hopefully it wouldn’t have got far.

After putting on her daisy apron, she washed her hands and lined up the sponge cakes. The client was a Dartmouth Park couple who’d conceived twin girls after years of trying. Tomorrow they’d christen them at St Michael’s on South Grove.

Hannah had never intended to be a baker. As a teenager she’d harboured dreams of graphic design and after completing her course at Falmouth she’d moved to the city, hoping to find work. But staff jobs were non-existent and the freelance gigs she won were paltry and sporadic. She started temping to make ends meet and at weekends would bake the odd birthday or anniversary cake for friends and family, using her love of design to create fantastical, geometric sponges that she populated with tiny, perfectly sculpted animals and people. Word



spread and soon friends of friends were commissioning her for jobs that grew in size and ambition. She continued temping and kept at it with the cakes until the demand for her work became such that she could quit the office job and make a go of it with the baking full time.

These days she catered for a north London clientele who paid handsomely for her kooky, out-there aesthetic. She averaged two to three cakes a week, more during wedding season, and although she tried to work Monday to Friday only, she often found herself up to her eyes in fondant of a Saturday night.

The Dartmouth Park couple had had their first date at London Zoo and wanted their daughters' cake to be a replica of the famous Lubetkin Pool, decorated with individualised penguin characters. The girls' names – Isla and Florence – would be spelled out on the interlocking spiral ramps. Taking even more care than usual – Hannah knew what it was to long for a child and wanted to make their celebration extra special – she set about cutting the sponge to size, sliced each section in half and layered on the buttercream and strawberry jam filling. This would form the base or swimming pool part of the structure.

As she worked she was aware of Jem behind her, unpacking. He unrolled a poster and began Blu-tacking it to the wall. It was a picture of a thin strip of beach, edged by trees. The sea a clear turquoise. Her jaw clenched. *Don't get too comfortable*, she thought, *you're not going to be here long*.

Again, she sensed Jem's eyes on her and turned round hoping to catch him out, but when she looked she realised he wasn't staring at her but at the sealed paper bag containing his things. She'd yet to lock it away – she planned on storing it in the old



airing cupboard at the top of the stairs; that way it would be secure and out of sight – and had left it on the side next to the bread bin.

Bread.

She'd forgotten to make him lunch.

She made a mental note to be more careful. Prisoner neglect or abuse was a serious offence and, if proven, resulted in a hefty fine.

'You must be starving,' she said, her words high and tight. And then, on reflex, 'Sorry.'

She cringed. Why should she apologise to him for anything?

'It's OK,' he said, looking to the floor. 'Feeding me must have been the last thing on your mind.'

She decided to make pasta and salad and had just set a pan of water to boil when she heard a shriek from outside.

'Your neighbour,' said Jem. He nodded at the French doors. 'She's been out there a while.'

Hannah squinted into the twilight. Pru had changed out of her skirt suit into a bathing costume and cap and was scaling the fence at the bottom of her garden. Teetering on the top slat, she veered wildly back and forth, like a tulip that has grown too tall for its stem.

After plating up one of the cake offcuts Hannah made her way outside. Pru had been a keen swimmer and in her twenties had swum the Channel in a time of fifteen hours and twenty-three minutes. In recent years though she'd lost the ability to tread water, let alone do the front crawl, and so her children – all grown-up and moved away – had built the fence and raised it on both sides to stop her from venturing down the steps.

Hannah approached the barrier that divided their gardens and guided the saucer through the slats. Pru had turned sixty-two in



April but her shoulders were still roped with muscle, her thighs taut and freckled.

'Prudence?'

Pru peered through her glasses at the Heath beyond. The sky was splashed peach and red, the pond carpeted with the thick green algae that ran amok every summer.

'There's someone watching the house.' She scanned the horizon from right to left. 'They were there this afternoon. I've decided to keep an eye out until Ted comes home.'

Hannah looked back toward Pru's open French doors. A picture of Ted, dead these last eight years, sat on the dresser.

'And the swimming costume?'

Pru ignored the question and stuck out her chest, defiant. 'You weren't trying to get over the fence to the water?' she asked gently. Pru tried to climb the barrier on a monthly basis. 'That wasn't what was happening here?'

Nothing.

Hannah decided to try a different tack.

'Victoria sponge with wild strawberry jam,' she said, waving the plate. 'Your favourite.'

Pru lowered her glasses, torn between the cake and maintaining her lookout.

'I saw Ted this morning, on his way to the station,' said Hannah. 'He mentioned something about having to work late.'

Pru let the specs fall against her chest. 'Really?'

'I'm sure he'll be home soon.'

That did it. Knees wobbling, Pru clambered down from her perch and whipped the cake out of Hannah's hand.

'It's getting dark,' said Hannah brightly. 'We should go in.'



Pru walked with her down the garden, Hannah waiting until her neighbour was indoors before venturing into her own kitchen.

At the cooker she turned off the gas and grabbed a sieve.

‘How long has she been like that?’ asked Jem.

‘A while.’ She drained the pasta. ‘Some days are worse than others.’

While she was outside he’d put on a T-shirt and a red and white baseball cap emblazoned with a rooster kneeling down to release what looked like a bowling ball. This plus the haircut made him look younger than his twenty-eight years.

‘It’s cruel, when your brain stops working the way it should.’ His hand went to the spot at the top of his spine where the chip had been implanted. ‘Like you’re walking around in a different world to everyone else.’ He pressed gently against the vertebrae, as if feeling for the device under the skin. ‘Like the rules have changed . . .’

‘But no one thought to tell you,’ said Hannah and Jem nodded and smiled sadly. She flushed and turned toward the counter. The words had come out of her mouth as a reflex – he’d voiced something she’d often ruminated on since Pru’s deterioration – but still, she was annoyed with herself. Agreeing with him felt like a concession of sorts, a weakening, as if she was already starting to forgive what he’d done.

She focused on preparing the food. Once the pasta was ready she divided it and the salad onto two plates. She placed Jem’s portion along with the regulation blunt cutlery onto a tray and passed it to him through the hatch. He could draw his own water from the sink in the cell.



'Smells great.' As he took it from her his eyes slid out of focus, distracted by something over her shoulder. He nodded at the fridge. 'Even Mr Claus makes mistakes,' he said, reading the magnetic letters arranged there. 'Reindeer burgers on me?' He frowned. 'What does that mean?'

Hannah considered telling him the words were a nonsense, but she was sick of playing down her loss in order to make other people more comfortable and anyway, wasn't this the whole point of this terrible situation, for Jem to live and breathe the consequences of his crime?

'It was our thing. John and I, I mean. I bought them to remind myself to buy milk and bread, stuff like that. John had other ideas. Before he left for work he'd often use the letters to leave me a message.' Hannah smiled but in truth the memory was bittersweet. John had left these words as an apology after an argument. 'That's the last thing he spelled out. He wrote it a few weeks before he died.'

She expected Jem to cringe, shamed by this mention of the man he had killed, but instead he nodded slowly, as if to acknowledge her pain, then sat down and began to eat.

Hannah wanted to throw the pasta at him but instead she grabbed her kit bag and, after pricking her finger, she put the strip into the machine and waited. Once she had her reading she calculated the carbs in the food she was about to eat, loaded up the pen with insulin and pushed the front of her dungarees to one side. Lifting her vest, she squidged a section of belly fat together and injected.

All done, she picked up her plate and, holding it close, began shovelling in food. The sooner she was fed the sooner she could get on with the cake and get away from the kitchen, from Jem.

Jem finished eating first. He motioned to the half-completed Lubetkin cake.

‘You’re talented.’

She said nothing, hoping her silence would discourage him, but then a few seconds later he spoke again.

‘Did you train as a baker or teach yourself?’

‘I taught myself,’ she said dully.

‘YouTube? You can learn how to do anything these days.’

She slammed her plate onto the worktop.

‘Stop it.’

Jem jumped and his cutlery fell to the floor.

‘Just making conversation.’

‘Conversation?’ said Hannah as though she was trying to make sense of a word from another language.

‘Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do, get to know each other?’

Not wanting to be around him a moment longer, she gulped the last of her food and covered the cake with foil. She’d get up early, finish the penguin figures then.

‘While you’re here, I’ll treat you with respect, follow the rules, but make no mistake,’ she said, her voice nettled, ‘we aren’t friends and we never will be.’

She was at the foot of the stairs when he replied.

‘I know what they claimed in court, what they decided. But I need you to know. I didn’t do it.’ He said the words slowly, each syllable as deliberate as a high-wire footstep. ‘I didn’t kill your husband.’

She turned to face him. The top right corner of the beach picture had fallen down. It flapped in the breeze.

She marched over to the fan and jabbed the switch, turning it off.

Let him sweat.

Upstairs she sat on the edge of the bed, her blood stilled. She was furious but she was also shocked, surprised at herself, at what she had done.

Being mean had come easily.

She could see how a person might do it again.

The next morning, after delivering the christening cake to the family in Dartmouth Park, Hannah scurried home. Leaving Jem alone for the first time, albeit locked in the cell, had been unnerving – it felt like she'd left the gas on, or a tap running – and she was keen to get back and check all was well.

It had only just gone eleven but the sun was hot, the sky blue, and the streets were full of people and dogs on their way to the Heath. The pavement was sludgy with fallen apples and the fruit foamed in the sun. A pair of dog walkers approached, a couple with a white lurcher in tow. As they passed the woman tripped on a broken paving slab and the man reached to catch her fall. She righted herself quickly but his touch lingered and they paused to smile at each other before carrying on their way.

Hannah felt for the smooth spot on her finger where her engagement ring usually sat. She'd searched for it again this morning, but to no avail. Without it she felt untethered, like the rope connecting her to John was starting to fray.

He'd been gone almost six months and the needlessness of his murder had yet to get any easier to bear. He was a detective sergeant in the Metropolitan Police and the night he died had been so painfully ordinary. He'd gone to enjoy a post-work drink with his partner Rupert on the Kingsland Road and at 8.30 p.m. Rupert had left to go and meet friends in another part of town. John had stayed at the bar and then headed home around 10 p.m. Halfway down Shoreditch High Street he

entered an alley. It was impossible to know if he took a wrong turn and went in there by mistake or if he'd needed to relieve himself before he got on the Tube, but CCTV showed that he was followed into that alley by Jem, who was working as a glass collector in the same bar from which he'd just come.

The theory went that Jem had noticed John drinking heavily and figured he was someone he could hustle without too much resistance – Jem's colleagues had testified to rumours, never proven, that he sometimes stole from inebriated customers – and that when they ended up leaving the bar at around the same time he saw an opportunity. It was thought that Jem entered the alley to try to mug John, that he threatened him with a knife, and that as John was in the process of handing over his possessions he told Jem he was a police officer in the hope he would get scared and run away. Instead Jem had panicked and stabbed John – twice in the stomach, once in the ribcage and twice in the back – as he lay face-down, helpless and bleeding, before fleeing the scene.

The alley was a dead end. CCTV showed that no one else went in or out until the following morning, when John's body was discovered by a passer-by.

Jem had protested his innocence throughout the trial, despite the fact his fingerprints and DNA had been found on the inside and outside of John's wallet and its contents as well as his phone and keyring – and, most damning of all, that his fingerprints had been found on the murder weapon discarded in a nearby commercial waste-bin.

Clearing the Highgate Road, Hannah decided to take a shortcut and, after nipping across the bottom of Parliament Hill, jogged through an alleyway dense with privet.



She was halfway down the street before she realised her mistake.

This route would take her past the house on the corner.

She decided to retrace her steps and go back the long way round. It would add another twenty minutes to her journey but she didn't care; she couldn't face that house, not today. She was about to double back when her phone rang. Aisling. Her best friend.

'Ash.'

'How are you holding up?' Her voice was slow and nasal. The warm weather must have reignited her hayfever; either that or she was getting a cold.

'I'm scared of being in my own home and I hardly slept a wink.' She spoke fast, like she didn't want to dwell on her new reality. 'I got up at the crack of dawn to finish a cake and he was already awake, just sitting there staring.'

'Any news on the Foster Host?'

'I should hear soon.' Hannah took a breath, and when she next spoke her tone was bright. 'What time are you coming over?'

Hannah was forbidden from having visitors until tonight; they had arranged to get together and order takeout.

'About that.' Aisling's words were pinched. It seemed like an effort for her to speak. 'Something's come up. Last-minute booking.' She forced out the last piece of information. 'I need to be in Belgravia by 7 p.m.'

A masseuse, Aisling worked in a physiotherapy clinic two days a week and supplemented her shifts with mobile jobs, dragging her massage table around the city and treating people's aches and pains in the comfort of their own homes.



'Oh.' Hannah scrambled to hide her disappointment. She knew Aisling needed the money and that she wouldn't ditch her unless she really had to. Still, she'd been looking forward to seeing a friendly face. 'You can't reschedule?'

Aisling was the one person Hannah could not do without and, these last six months, had been her rock. At her side when the police knocked on the door with news of John's murder, having arrived by chance half an hour earlier, that's where she'd stayed through the funeral and the trial and all the grey days and nights in between. She'd made sure Hannah had hot food to eat and clean clothes to wear and had come to comfort her in the bleak twilight hours when she thought she would go mad with grief. At a time when everyone else had tiptoed around the topic, scared to say John's name for fear of causing upset, Aisling had made sure to constantly remind her of all the funny, annoying or special things John had ever said or done.

'It's a ninety-minute session and the client pays premium, so . . .'

 Aisling faltered. 'Sorry.'

With curly brown hair and pale skin, Aisling had been born and bred on a sheep farm in New Zealand. The only member of her family to ever leave the province, let alone the country, she'd travelled to the UK with dreams of being a zoologist and ended up in the same Deptford houseshare Hannah was living in then. Aisling had grown up on a diet of meat and boiled vegetables and on her first night, not long after she'd unpacked her things, Hannah had blown her mind by cooking her tortellini with Parmesan sprinkled on top. A week later and Aisling had tried to repay the favour by making a recipe she'd found online: stir-fry with noodles. Hannah had her fork raised, ready to dig in, when Aisling had reached across and, with a proud smile, proceeded to



shower her plate with Parmesan. Hannah had devoured it without comment. They'd been friends ever since.

'What's it like?' – Aisling sniffed – 'having him there?'

'Weird. Everything in the kitchen is the same, except there's now a whacking great cell where the breakfast bar used to be.' She stepped on a particularly gooey bit of rotten apple and almost lost her footing. 'I keep banging my knee against the bars on the way to the fridge.' She grabbed a wall to anchor herself and, looking around, realised she'd forgotten her plan to change course. She now stood opposite the very place she had so wanted to avoid.

The house in question was situated on the corner of Shirlock Road and had a large front garden, lavish even by NW3 standards, bordered by hip-height brick walls that wrapped around the front and side. The square of grass to the right of the front door was dominated by a sycamore tree and underneath it was pitched a two-man dome tent. Khaki with a brown stripe around the bottom, the tent's roof was spattered with white stains, bombardments from the birds above.

'You're sure you'll be OK?' said Aisling, misinterpreting her silence. 'You're not mad?'

In front of the tent was a camping stove and next to it was a plastic table, a bucket containing metal plates and utensils underneath. Hannah was about to scuttle away when a woman emerged from the tent and checked on the kettle. Laurie Simmons. Immaculate in navy capri pants and a white T-shirt, Laurie was a trader who, until she was raped, had lived inside the house with her husband and three boys. She'd chosen to pursue a conviction, rare these days, and, unwilling to live under the same roof as her rapist and unable to get out of her obligation



(she was required by law to reside on the property for the duration of the sentence), when the guilty verdict came through she despatched her family to her in-laws in Crouch End and moved into her front garden. That was four years ago. She'd been there ever since.

Her situation had been covered in depth by the *Ham & High* and had always filled Hannah with horror, but ever since John's murder she'd gone to extreme lengths to avoid the story and the house itself. Laurie's predicament was now a horrible combination of the familiar and the obscene. She found the way the grass and flowers had started to grow up around the tent almost graphic. It was the longevity.

'Hannah?'

Hannah watched as Laurie lifted the kettle off the stove and poured the boiling water into a teapot. Leaving it to brew, she zipped the tent and approached the front door.

'I'll be fine,' said Hannah, unable to take her eyes off Laurie. 'But let's get together soon OK? I need you.'

Standing on the doorstep, head dipped, Laurie reminded Hannah of a high jumper pausing to fortify herself before taking a run-up to the bar. A few moments later and she put the key in the lock. Hannah waited until she was gone and the door closed behind her. Only then did she continue on her way.