

Prologue

Berlin, 26 December 1969

Froggy was ten years old. Three thousand seven hundred and nine days old, to be precise. And every one of those days he wished desperately that something would change.

Froggy wasn't daft. He knew there were certain cast-iron rules in life, and one of those rules was that wishes don't come true. But, still, he hoped.

It was the second day of the Christmas holidays, late evening. It had snowed, suffocating the whole world beneath a skin of white. Ice crystals glowed under street lamps like phosphorous, and the plain detached house sat awkwardly amongst the bulky blocks of flats.

Froggy, having slunk a little way up the dark staircase, was lying stomach-down on the uncomfortable steps, staring between them down into the living room. Through the window in the door he had a good view of the television.

His parents sat on the sofa further to the right, hidden in the alcove, where they would remain glued for the rest of the evening. Every now and again bluish tendrils of cigarette smoke came floating into view.

After the film came the news. Froggy hated the news. Always the same stilted people talking like machines, interspersed with

nothing but boring pictures. Maybe a few dead bodies, if you were lucky.

Tonight there were no dead bodies.

Tiredness crept into his eyes. He wished he had a button that would fast-forward to the late-night film.

As his eyes closed, he dreamt of Jenny.

She was the same age as him and he dreamt of her often, nearly always the same dream. He went over to her, stretching out his hand, close enough to smell her, wanting to touch her shoulder, wanting her to turn and look at him. But then someone thumped him painfully in the ribs and laughed a mocking laugh.

He opened his eyes with a jolt.

He was still lying on the staircase, the edges of the steps pressing into his ribs. The pyjama sleeve where his head had rested was damp, and out of the corner of his mouth ran a thread of drool.

Had he been . . . asleep?

Cringing, he looked at the television. The news was over. The late-night film was playing.

Oh no! How could he have been so careless? His panicked gaze flew to the alcove, where a slender plume of smoke was drifting out of the corner. He exhaled. They were still sitting there, still rooted to the spot.

Time to get going. Without a sound he tensed his weak muscles and straightened up, but as he did so his eyes happened to fall back on the television, and he froze mid-movement. There was a man on the screen, his entire body wrapped in wide bandages; Froggy couldn't see so much as a centimetre of skin. Very slowly, with hands that were also tightly wrapped, the man undid the bandages from his head.

Mesmerised, Froggy gawped.
Behind the bandages was – nothing.
Nothing at all.
The man was invisible!

Froggy's skin broke into gooseflesh. Suddenly nothing else mattered. The damp pyjama sleeve, the fact that he'd fallen asleep, that he could have been discovered. He had to watch this film.

At the end of the film, he crawled stiffly upstairs, slipping into the cramped confines of his bedroom. The street lamps cast a poisonous light through the window. Exhausted, he went over to his bed – and his blood ran cold.

Someone was sitting there.

A massive figure that reeked of smoke and alcohol. The figure got up from the mattress, a black ghost against the wallpaper, illuminated in yellowish-grey. From its hand dangled a leather belt.

'Your ma saw you on the stairs,' said his father. His voice was heavy and tired, yet clear, even though the stench on his breath suggested he wasn't sober.

Froggy began to shiver.

'Do you have any idea how much worry you cause her by being like this?'

Froggy kept silent. It worried him too. He'd rather not be there at all.

'I could forgive you,' said his father. 'I know where you get it from, after all. But she knows too, you see, and she hates me for it. *Me!* Do you know how much that hurts?'

Froggy bit his lip. Yes! He knew! He hated himself for it too. He'd been trying his whole life to be someone else.

As he took his punishment, he bit down on his tongue. The metallic taste helped him not to scream. He wanted to vanish, to step outside himself, to no be longer there.

His father was puffing with exertion by the time he left. His sweat still hung in the air. Froggy lay face-down on his bed, his back stinging. He felt pathetic, weak. He wanted to crawl into the furthest recess of his soul, to a place where nobody would see him, a place where he could sob his heart out quietly to himself.

He thought longingly of the film he'd just watched. If only he could be invisible, like that man.

Invisible people couldn't make fools of themselves. They couldn't be laughed at. Invisible people couldn't be punished.

The urge overwhelmed him like a swarm of locusts, dark and deafening. If he were invisible, he could do *anything* he liked!

And nobody could stop him.

His religious education teacher popped into his head. She'd told them once about a doctor for madmen. This doctor had found out that people have different creatures inside them. There was the *id*, something a bit like a ravenous animal, then the *superego*, controlling like his mother, and somewhere in between them was you yourself, at least if you were normal.

But if you were like the man in the film, there'd be no more superego. There'd be nobody to tell you what to do.

That must be awesome.

He imagined creeping into Jenny's parents' house and into Jenny's room without her being able to see him. Observing her, watching her get undressed until she was completely naked like the women in Pa's magazines. Or he could trip up Herr Broich, his German teacher. Ideally right next to the kerb. If he knocked

out his front teeth, Broich would finally know what it felt like to have everyone gawping at you all the time.

Slowly he got out of bed, his back one long agonising burn. Going over to the window, he opened it wide. The icy winter air covered his skin like white frost. His breath was foggy.

If I were invisible, he thought, that's all you'd be able to see of me right now.

If I were invisible, I could creep into Ma and Pa's room. I could cut off Pa's balls and stuff them in his yellow gob. Until he choked on them.

And Ma would have to watch. That'd teach her.



Chapter One

Èze, Côte d'Azur, 17 October 2011, 9.55 p.m.

The moment his mobile rang was the moment that all hell broke loose for Jan Floss.

Seventeen minutes earlier he'd been standing absent-mindedly in front of the panoramic window, staring through his own reflection out into the darkness. Four hundred metres beneath him, the sea was churning. The bright blue of the Côte d'Azur had morphed into black lead, and the sky seemed to be flowing directly into the sea.

It had been bucketing down for three days already, and a dank chill atypical of this part of the coast was creeping into his limbs. Bloody heating. Bloody house. How many years had it been since his father was last here? Not since his mother had moved out, and that was when Jan had just turned ten. Twenty-four years, then. No wonder nothing worked in this house any more. What a crazy idea to come here, of all places. Too little heating, too many memories.

For three days the four of them had been living on top of each other in a 120-square-metre holiday home barely a quarter of which was halfway habitable: his parents' bedroom and the large, open-plan living-and-dining space with the panoramic

window. Theo's old childhood bedroom was still locked, as if his ghost had taken up residence behind the door. Jan didn't know where the key was. And even if he did, he couldn't have brought himself to use it.

Greg, Katy and Laura had been unable to stand it any more; they had taken Greg's Jeep and gone shopping in town – to Beaulieu-sur-Mer, not far from Nice.

Jan had decided to stay behind. Swapping thirty square metres of house for four square metres of car? No thanks! Certainly not in this rain. In any case, he couldn't take much more of watching his thirty-seven-year-old sister Katy gaze adoringly at Greg, as if she didn't have a husband or twins back home. Jan didn't care for supermarket shopping anyway. Endless shelving, gaudy products and ceaseless, babbling ads. For years he'd researched that kind of bollocks and its effect on customers. The psychology of instant soup had been his life for far too long.

When Greg and Katy had announced they wanted to go to Beaulieu-sur-Mer, Jan had hoped that Laura would stay. The memory of last night was still quickening his heartbeat. But Laura was evidently suffering from cabin fever too, because she'd stepped into her wellies and left the house with Greg and Katy.

Jan stared through the windowpane. His reflection stood out clearly on the glass, the exhausted face of a thirty-four-year-old loner. His brown eyes were black dots; his dark hair stuck out wildly from his head like the thoughts whirling around in his brain. And then there was the port-wine stain, which spread like a reddish island from his left temple down his cheek to the corner of his mouth. After what happened to Theo it had always seemed to him as though somebody up there had decided to mark him from birth. Look, this boy brings misfortune. Be careful. Avoid him.

When the phone rang, Jan simply reached out, blindly pressed the green button and lifted the device to his ear. Her voice was already fizzing.

‘Hi. It’s Katy. Is Laura with you?’

‘What?’ asked Jan.

‘Am I speaking Spanish? Is Laura with you?’

Jan frowned. ‘Well, she was just sitting next to you in the car, but hang on a minute, I’ll just see if she’s behind the curtains.’ He rustled the fabric loudly. ‘Oops. Nope. Not there.’

‘Ha ha. Very funny, brother dearest.’

‘Garbage in, garbage out,’ said Jan laconically.

‘Eh?’

He sighed. ‘I mean if your question’s rubbish the answer’s going to be rubbish too.’

‘Could you please try to stop being obstructive and answer my question?’

‘I’m not obstructive,’ said Jan, ‘I’m just not at my best right now.’

‘Can you just tell me whether Laura’s with you? Or if she’s called you?’

‘Is she gone, then?’

‘As if off the face of the earth. Otherwise I wouldn’t be asking, would I?’

‘Where are you right now?’

‘At the supermarket.’

‘At *which* supermarket?’

Katy snorted. ‘The *hypermarché*. On the edge of Beaulieu. Where else? Now could you please just answer my question?’

‘You’ve just answered it yourself.’

Katy groaned into the receiver.



‘Katy, please! You set off half an hour ago. It takes ten minutes to get down there. Climbing back up the mountain on foot takes considerably longer. Assuming Laura didn’t leap out of the car mid-journey because she couldn’t bear another second of Greg’s crap, she can’t possibly be here.’

‘Thank you for the brief course in logic, professor! I’m just worried, all right? Laura’s gone and we have no idea why. Look, if she calls you or shows up there, then at least let me know,’ said Katy caustically, before abruptly hanging up.

Jan sighed as the pipes clanked. He was immediately sorry that yet again he hadn’t just let it go. It was always the same. He could never talk to Katy without a thousand tiny devils leaping on his shoulder, making him act like a stubborn teenager instead of a grown man.

He stared out into the rain. The cliff edge, beyond which was a steep drop into the sea, was visible only as a vague, jagged shadow in the dark. He thought of Laura. Her face looked so different from the way it had at school. Fuller. More adult. Not only because she was older – there was something else, too. Something closed that fascinated him. No – that drew him magically in.

Even in school, aged fourteen, Laura’s presence had always got him into trouble. His head grew hot, and he knew only too well that the port-wine stain would be practically glowing. Nonetheless he still sought her out, and at night he had such intense dreams that the next day he averted his gaze in shame whenever their eyes met. He didn’t know how to cope with all those emotions; he felt stupid and somehow guilty, as if what came over him wasn’t normal.

Then, suddenly, Laura hadn’t been there any more, whisked away from one day to the next. Later he found out that she’d



switched schools; to this day he didn't know why. That was the last time he'd seen her – until Katy had suggested this trip to France.

He glanced left towards the narrow road that wound up the slope towards Èze. The water was flowing in broad streams to the car turning bay in front of the house, gathering in large puddles. Disappearing acts seemed to be one of Laura's specialties. But why had she chosen this dump in France, in this weather, in front of a supermarket that was closing in a few minutes' time? He was growing uneasy.

Instinctively he reached for his mobile. He didn't have Laura's number, so he phoned Katy.

The number you are trying to reach is not available, it droned.

Well, that wasn't helpful. What now?

For a moment he felt silly. A grown woman had gone off for a few minutes and already he was in a tailspin. Must be the rain, he thought. Rain like this always makes you crazy.

He closed his eyes and leant his forehead against the glass. It pressed coldly against his skin.

Most likely the three of them were in their Jeep somewhere along the coastal road, on their way back. There were definitely a few places around there with bad phone coverage.

Another ten minutes. Maybe a bit more. That's how long it took to get from the *hypermarché* to the house by car.

That's how long he'd wait.

Chapter Two

Beaulieu-sur-Mer, Côte d'Azur, 17 October, 10.05 p.m.

The taut skin had briefly resisted, then the cannula's sharp, V-shaped point had gone through. Beneath the skin shimmered bluish veins. The thin tube had filled with red. A second artery, one with a small white plastic tap.

Beyond that the tube was still virginal. Transparent.

For as long as he wanted.

He began to shave her. Wet. Some of the white foam dripped onto the steel table. Freshly fallen snow with dark pubic hairs. A moment earlier she'd been resisting. Begging. Shaking. As he'd brought the three-bladed razor near her clitoris, she'd frozen. Now she was only weeping. The salt in her stupid tears was spoiling her complexion. He had to dab them away, as if he didn't already have enough to be getting on with.

The electric fork-lift was ready. For fifty minutes now the first twenty centimetres had been hardening on the bottom of Tub One. It smelled appropriately caustic. The ventilation was working full blast. So was his penis. Every stroke of the razor made it pulse.

She stared at the ceiling and continued to sob.

Princesses don't sob.

Not his ones.

He felt annoyed with her.

Although his penis seemed to like it. He wiped away the mess with the much-too-dark hairs. Climbed onto the steel plate. Stood above her, his member like a revolver. She looked at him, and knew what was about to happen. It had taken a bloody long time. But he was finally there.

He pushed into her and thrust, putting his left hand around her neck and squeezing. No strangulation marks: with his right hand he loosened the small white plastic tap. Blood flowed into both tubes, splashing onto the floor where they ended. She grew paler, and his penis stiffened still further. The stink of chemicals, the metallic scent of blood, his overheated memories – it was all one giant whirl.

Then something burst and began spraying.

He looked up. Fixer was leaking out of the pipes above Tub One, directly into the basin. He leapt to his feet, nearly slipping in the sticky red puddle, and ran over.

But it was already too late.

Fucking hell.

The timing was totally screwed up.

He stared at the defective connector, remembering the salesman who'd palmed the bloody thing off on him. 'Of course it's durable. It's plastic. It lasts for ever.' Fucking moron.

That had been three days ago, in Berlin.

Today he had to admit that without the burst pipe he wouldn't have gone outside. He wouldn't have seen *her*. And then he wouldn't be here: in the rain, in an isolated car park outside a French supermarket.

He could almost smell it. And see it. They were afraid, the tall blond man and the dark-haired woman. The way they edged around the car. Like two stupid flamingos.



Fear enshrouded them like a sweet, heavy miasma of perfume, which he greedily inhaled. For twenty minutes they'd been in this cloud, searching, phoning and getting soaking wet in the rain. Now the pretty, dark-haired one was stuffing her mobile furiously back in her pocket. Her boyfriend, the all-American kid with the ugly tan, didn't look particularly happy either. More like he'd rather be on his surfboard at Venice Beach.

Then he saw *her*.

She came out of the supermarket like it was the most natural thing in the world, as if only a few seconds had gone by. Such grace in her step. The way her long hair swung overwhelmed him, even though she wasn't blonde. Everything about her overwhelmed him. The narrow face with prominent cheekbones, and then those eyes, their high brows giving her a perpetual expression of surprise – eyes that were strangely guarded, as if she were hiding a silent sorrow. Sorrow. Hiding. How well he knew those things! By now they were a part of him. And as for the hair – well, hair could be dyed. Or bleached.

Even in Berlin, catching sight of her by chance on the street as she joined the others with her suitcase, had taken his breath away. He had been on his way to find replacement parts. Instinctively he'd slammed on the brakes and peered through the tinted rear window. If he hadn't known better he'd have sworn there was such a thing as reincarnation, she reminded him of Jenny so much.

As the Jeep Cherokee carrying her and the others set off, he'd had to make a lightning-fast decision – to fly blind. Without a plan, without preparation. He couldn't even clean up first. He had to drop everything or lose her. And losing her wasn't an option. She was too special for that.



So he'd followed her: 1,324 kilometres thus far. He'd used a rest stop on the motorway to switch his plates. He always had one in reserve; he had a back-up for everything.

Once they'd arrived in Èze, the waiting had begun. It had been punishingly hard. Yesterday evening was the first time an opportunity had presented itself: his heart had begun to beat faster as she stepped outside the door and lit a cigarette. He'd raised the weapon, taken aim, strained the sinews in his index finger to the limit – and then, at the last moment, *he* had shown up.

Fucking asshole!

And that birthmark. Dark, violet and ugly.

He'd been hoping the guy would go back inside the house at some point. Instead he'd come on to her. Groped her. Grabbed hold of her.

Forced to watch the two of them, he'd been tormented by the same piercing feeling he'd been tormented by before, back when he was still Froggy – *just Froggy* – and had to put up with the others undressing Jenny with their eyes as she danced.

The telescopic view had brought everything unbearably close. Only when she suddenly froze and gave Herr Birthmark a furious glare in response to something did his spirits briefly lift. Maybe she was telling him to go to hell. Just so long as he pissed off! But instead she left him standing there and disappeared into the house.

Shit.

More waiting, then. More self-restraint.

As far as restraint was concerned, his schooling had been harsh. But here and now, in this car park in front of this supermarket, he could hardly contain himself. He was seized by

arousal, his cock swelling, and a feeling of limitless power and strength flooded through him like hot magma. He stared at her from within his cave under the black hood. The rain-soaked material was cold against his bare scalp.

Keep calm, he admonished himself. Concentrate!

He saw the dark-haired flamingo storm towards the woman, gesticulating wildly. What did flamingo taste like? He wondered whether he'd ever tried it, and what colour it had been. Was it pink?

Now they were getting into the car.

The Cherokee's headlights flared, and as the Jeep turned rapidly they swept over him, like a spotlight grazing a dancer who's still standing in the wings, waiting for his music to begin.

Chapter Three

Beaulieu-sur-Mer, Côte d'Azur, 17 October, 10.07 p.m.

Laura had hardly sat down on the back seat of the Cherokee before Greg trod on the accelerator and turned sharply. She only just managed to pull the door closed with an effort.

'Could you do me a favour and not drive like a teenager on speed?' snapped Laura.

'Sure,' growled Greg, 'if you let us know next time you decide to disappear into the supermarket bathroom for twenty minutes. Just before closing time, as well! We were worried.'

'You think that was fun for me? I didn't have any choice.'

'You didn't have any choice?'

'I'm a woman, for fuck's sake!'

'Oh yeah?' growled Greg. 'And women can't let people know what they're doing?'

Laura rolled her eyes. 'Katy, can you explain it to him please?'

Silently, Katy turned her head aside and looked out of the window.

'Ah, fuck it,' murmured Laura.

She leant forward; rain had run down the collar of her jacket, and now her wet clothing was clinging to her back. Her belly was still acting up, and between her hips and vertebrae shot a



cramping pain. Then there were the headaches and the nausea. She'd had an inkling yesterday that it was that time of the month again, but as always she'd ignored it until it had burst out of her.

To describe her period as a necessary evil would be an understatement. Evil, certainly. But necessary? *Why?* In her first life she'd been too young for children. In her second, too lost and broken.

And now, in her third life?

She didn't even have a partner, let alone somebody she wanted to have a child with. The mere thought of having to take responsibility for a child made her throat tighten; it always reminded her of her childhood, of the oppressive loneliness of that villa in Finkenstrasse, of her father, who was perpetually absent, either on business trips to Vienna or in one of his rooms, always unapproachable. As for her mother . . . well . . .

Better to be properly alone, then. Like now. She had her apartment, her job at Ultimate Action, a sporting events agency, and the rest of the time she kept busy not falling back into old habits. Whichever way you looked at it, she was constantly fleeing from Life Number Two.

She was lucky that Gerald, her boss, still liked her as much as ever, even though she'd persistently ignored his advances.

Laura sighed and looked out of the side window of the Cherokee. Beyond the rivulets of rain, distorted by the headwind, the last houses of Beaulieu whipped by. Her damp back reminded her of last night, of Jan and what had happened outside the house.

She'd had enough and was desperate for some fresh air. She never could stand enclosed spaces. In her jacket pocket she found an open packet of Lucky Strikes put there by a colleague. She was



an occasional smoker, at most, but every once in a while it was the perfect excuse to slip outside for a few moments – especially if the others didn't smoke. Fifteen minutes alone with nothing but a cigarette. That seemed like paradise.

This paradise lasted all of three minutes. She'd been standing outside, her back to the door. Above her loomed the overhanging living room of the house, which was crammed into the upper part of the steep incline like an enormous packet of cigarettes. Water poured from the roof before her gaze, and the end of her cigarette glowed as she drew on it.

In the darkness, to her right, between the trees on the slope, something suddenly caught her eye. Was that a shadow? She squinted, peering into the night. An animal, maybe?

At that moment Jan stepped out behind her, moving silently nearby and gazing at the dark sea and low-hanging clouds. They said nothing, by tacit agreement. The rain pelted down, and the waves broke against the rocks far beneath them.

Flicking her cigarette into the rain, Laura lit a second.

'You don't really smoke, do you?' asked Jan, without taking his eyes off the sea.

'Don't I?'

'No,' said Jan.

Laura blew smoke into the rain and laughed. It sounded surprisingly rough and rather mocking. 'What gave me away, Inspector Floss?'

Jan smiled and shrugged. 'Your posture. The hands . . .'

'I see,' said Laura, 'I'm dealing with an expert. Want one?' She held out the packet.

'Thanks. I don't smoke.'

She looked at him sceptically. 'Like I don't, you mean?'



Shivering, Jan hunched his head between his shoulders. 'I feel more like a coffee right now.'

'Coffee? At *this* hour? I'd be wide awake all night.'

Jan gave a crooked grin. 'It's all a question of practice.'

'Oh yeah? And where do you practise drinking coffee at night?'

'Market research. Or advertising. You start in the morning and keep your caffeine level constant while you work.'

Laura dimly remembered that Jan's and Katy's father had owned an advertising agency. Hence the holiday home on the Côte d'Azur. It was getting a bit run-down now, but at one time it must have cost a small fortune. 'Long days on the job, then?'

Jan nodded. 'Twenty-four/seven. Felt like that, anyway.'

'Nice. Great way to set yourself up for a burn-out.'

'Yep,' said Jan.

'So why do you do it?'

Another crooked smile. 'I don't any more. I'm out. It's over.'

'Aha. Did you jump, or were you . . .?'

'More "or",' said Jan, and fell silent a moment. 'It's a complicated story.'

'I see.' Laura drew on her cigarette. If he didn't want to talk about it, that was fine. After all, she didn't like being interrogated either. Turning the cigarette in her hand, she examined the glowing tip eating through the tobacco.

'My father had a stroke,' said Jan unexpectedly.

'Oh.' The words slipped out. 'I'm so sorry, I—'

'No, no,' Jan hurried to say. 'It's all right, he survived. He's at a really good care home now, the Blankenburg Residence. But I was stupid enough to think he needed my help. So I resigned. I was doing market research, and for eight years I'd had a pretty



decent job as a psychologist at an institute. They were a bit annoyed when I just up and quit.'

'And then?'

'I looked after my father's ad agency.'

'Was it that easy? I thought you were a psychologist.'

'You'll laugh,' said Jan without a trace of humour, 'but I actually studied psychology because I wanted to end up doing something different from my father.'

'Sounds like you didn't always see eye to eye.'

Jan was quiet for a long moment. 'Always demand two hundred per cent, but never be there when you need him. That's my dad.'

Laura said nothing. She knew only too well what Jan meant – and how it felt. Except her father had never demanded anything. He couldn't have cared less about her.

'After university,' continued Jan, 'I started training to be a psychotherapist, and I interned at a day clinic for a year. On only my third day I was supposed to lead a group. Eighteen alcoholics – and I was a trainee without any practical experience. You might as well put a medical student in an operating theatre and ask him to perform open-heart surgery all by himself. Some of my patients were highly aggressive, and they weren't remotely keen to be treated. One of them went nuts and broke my nose. After that I had a bit of a rethink and went into market research. Which is pretty closely connected to advertising, when it comes down to it.'

'Precisely what you didn't want to do.'

'Yeah, well,' Jan shrugged. 'I didn't have anything against advertising in principle. It was more about my father . . .'

'And how did he feel? He must have been pleased when the lost sheep finally returned home.'



‘Nothing pleases my father. Nothing I do, at least.’

‘Maybe he is pleased but he just can’t say it,’ suggested Laura.

Jan laughed bitterly.

‘Got it.’

‘Even if that were true, it wouldn’t make me feel better,’ said Jan. ‘Anyway, as he lay in hospital the agency was spinning out of control. I felt like such an arse just watching as everything went down the drain. So I quit and started running it.’

‘So what’s the problem?’ asked Laura. ‘Did the agency go broke?’

‘Not at all. It’s still going strong.’

‘Sounds like a happy ending.’

‘An ending, yes. Not sure I’d call it happy. He sold the agency as soon as he could. Just like that. Without a word to me. One of the clauses in the contract was that I’d have to leave with immediate effect.’

Laura gazed at him speechlessly.

‘That was six weeks ago. Since then I’ve been a bit of a mess.’

‘Wow,’ said Laura.

Jan took a deep breath and shrugged. ‘Anyway, I badly needed a change of scene. That’s why I’m here.’

Laura nodded, blew a cloud of smoke and wondered why Jan had come to his father’s house, of all places, for his change of scene.

‘What about you?’ asked Jan. ‘How did Katy get you to agree to this trip?’

‘What do you mean?’

Jan threw her a long look. ‘Well, you don’t exactly look overjoyed to be here.’

‘Is that so?’ Laura laughed. A little too shrilly, he thought. ‘What makes you say that?’



Calmly and wordlessly, Jan fixed her with his brown eyes, and suddenly she felt as though he could see straight through her. To a place nobody was allowed to look.

She blew another plume of smoke into the night, watching the raindrops plunge noiselessly through it. The cigarette was burning dark red. She felt on her guard, and cast him a swift and chilly sidelong glance. 'You don't want to know.'

'That bad?'

Worse, she thought. High time for a change of subject. 'Maybe not as bad as your sister's attempts to pair us off.'

Jan laughed. An awkward, embarrassed laugh, thought Laura.

'That's how she is, my big sister. It was like that even before my mother ran off. Do this, Jan, stop that . . . it's not the first time she's tried her hand at matchmaking for me. It's always a bit . . . awkward.'

'Does it work?'

'Does what work?'

'The matchmaking,' asked Laura. 'I mean, um, in general.' She felt like biting her tongue.

Jan considered for a moment. 'I don't do what my sister says. Just on principle.'

'Good,' said Laura. 'So that's sorted.' She flicked the burned-down cigarette butt into the rain, where it traced a red arc and was extinguished in the wet gravel outside the house.

She stared at Jan. The mark on his cheek looked like a dark and ragged lake on some map. Even at school, it had never bothered her. It had attracted her, in fact.

I shouldn't have thrown away the cigarette, she thought. And I'm standing much too close to him.



She felt his gaze. Saw the way it flickered, as if he were as uncertain as she. He should turn around now, she thought, go up the stairs and disappear into the house.

But he stayed. Standing much too close to her. Glancing down between her breasts, where her black gothic cross hung on a thin silver chain she'd stolen from her mother.

When she parted her lips, an electric current crackled between them even before she'd touched his mouth. She knew she tasted of smoke, but it didn't seem to bother him. He was careful, as if unsure, and it made her keener still. She staggered, catching herself on him and feeling rainwater run down her collar. She wanted to laugh but stopped herself – she couldn't help gazing at his lips and kissing him again, much more passionately than she wanted. She remembered how they were, like a flashback: her in the schoolyard aged fourteen, peeping furtively at Jan, her hands sweaty and her heart pounding unbearably quickly. Jan had been so different. Quiet and sensitive. Not constantly beating his chest like the other boys. He was like 'It Could Be Sweet' by Portishead sounded, just as lost, just as melancholy, just as sweet.

The kisses set off a firework in her head, and she grew dizzy. Was that it?

No, it was impossible. Not like this. They were only kisses!

She felt the tips of her breasts, the gooseflesh everywhere. In her back was the familiar nagging pain. Internally she cursed her cycle, but at the same time she was deeply grateful. If it hadn't been her time of the month she would have slept with him then and there, because being with Jan suddenly felt like coming home, although home was not something she'd ever really had. As if it hadn't been just a teenage crush at school. As



if, even then, he'd been the only person who could have understood her. A soulmate.

'I always wanted this, back then,' Jan whispered into her ear.

She pressed herself against him. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'*You* didn't say anything. And suddenly you were gone. Just like that.'

She stiffened in his arms. As if it had been her fault that she'd had to leave. How could he think such a thing?

A bump brought her back to the present. Katy gave an astonished yelp, and Greg braked the Cherokee with a jerk. Behind them a bigger SUV lurched left, moved up beside them and kept pace with them for a moment. At the wheel sat a dark figure which seemed to be glaring accusingly at them through the wet glass – a dangerous move on the increasingly steep coastal road.

'Yeah, yeah, all right,' Greg growled in the driver's direction. 'Chill out.'

The vehicle shifted even closer. 'Get lost,' growled Greg, giving the middle finger with his left hand.

The man – if it was a man – didn't react. For a moment it seemed to Laura that his gaze was fixed exclusively on *her*.

Seconds later the SUV slowed down and fell back.

'Dickhead,' murmured Katy, laying a soothing hand on Greg's arm.

Laura rolled her eyes. Even on the journey over, Katy had taken every opportunity to touch Greg. Her wide, dark eyes were practically burning into him, and she was gradually starting to wonder whether Katy only wanted to pair her off with Jan so that she could get Greg alone.

There was a dull splash as the Cherokee drove through a large puddle and turned onto the D6007, Avenue Bella Vista, towards

Èze. After a few hundred metres the road split and became two lanes. Curving street lamps cast islands of light onto the wet asphalt at regular intervals. To the right, beneath them, the lights of Beaulieu were growing ever smaller. To the left towered walls of rock or wooded slopes that were lost in darkness.

Laura thought of Jan again, and how she'd secretly hoped he would come with them to Beaulieu. Reaching into her jacket pocket, she pulled out her mobile and considered calling him. But the display read *No signal*. Out of the corner of her eye she suddenly registered a beam reflected in the window, then a bulky shadow next to her. The SUV was back, and it evidently wanted to overtake.

'What the hell does *he* want now?' muttered Greg. He must have stepped on the gas, because the Cherokee sped up.

For a long moment it seemed as though the driver of the SUV couldn't decide whether to overtake or go more slowly. Instead, he kept pace with the Cherokee as it accelerated, drawing up beside it. The two vehicles' garish halogen headlamps cut through the rain. The speedometer climbed to eighty, then ninety kilometres per hour.

'Greg . . .' said Katy softly.

Greg just glowered obstinately ahead, his jawbone clearly visible.

For a second Laura was afraid the SUV might force them off the road, over the crash barrier and into the abyss. She craned her neck, trying to make out the driver, who was openly staring straight at her.

That again.

Pressing a few buttons, she activated the video app on her phone and did what usually frightened off most of these dodgy

guys: she raised her camera and filmed the man as ostentatiously as possible. Could he see her, in the dark back seat of the car? Perhaps: the street lamps were casting a pool of light over the two cars every fifty metres.

Then, out of nowhere, there was a sudden flash of light at the edge of the road.

Laura sucked in a sharp breath of air. 'Oh my God,' she murmured faintly. For an instant she thought she'd seen the face of the driver, but it had looked so unreal, so grotesque, that she didn't trust her eyes. She lowered the phone. A chill crept up her spine.

'Well, that's just great,' growled Greg. 'Speed limit's seventy here.'

'So? How quickly were you going?' asked Katy.

'Faster than that, at any rate.'

Laura saw the SUV fall back again. She wanted to turn and reassure herself that it had actually disappeared, but something told her not to, that the strange figure at the wheel might take it as a challenge.

'Did you see that?' she asked.

'Oh yeah, I looked straight into the light and put on a nice smile,' said Greg sarcastically, 'so I can at least get a decent photo.'

'All right,' said Katy. 'We'll share the fine.'

The Cherokee drove through a deep puddle, tossing noisy splashes of water left and right.

Katy squealed and clutched Greg's arm.

Laura groaned with irritation.

Ahead of them the tunnel appeared, and the D6007 was getting increasingly narrow, with only one lane in each direction. All Laura wanted to do was get out of this bloody tin can. If it

hadn't been bucketing down, and if that weird guy hadn't been hanging around, she would have got out and walked.

Next time, she told herself, I'm staying with Jan.

She was annoyed to realise how much she was looking forward to seeing him. Another five minutes, she thought. A few kilometres along the Moyenne coastal road to Èze, and from there a few twists and turns up the steep incline to the house . . .

Then came the tunnel. It opened like a mouth, swallowing the Cherokee into a black, two-hundred-metre long tube of rock.