

95 REVOLUTIONS
JACK KELLY

To my dad.

PROLOGUE

How the fuck do you properly format a suicide letter? Search engines won't tell you—they swarm your screen with crisis hotlines instead. And it's not like you can ask someone, because the people who've written them don't exactly stick around for encores like jaded rockstars.

I've never written one myself. I've read a lot of them, though. They're all fucking depressing. They're apologetic and dull, and it always baffles me how they read as a cry for help. Talk to someone, for fuck's sake! I mean, if you can. I guess it's not always that easy. Or it is, but it just doesn't seem like it. That's what it was like for Lydia. She didn't have anyone to talk to. Or, at least that's how she felt, I think.

Funny. In a world where the population has doubled in half a century, people seem to be getting lonelier and lonelier. I reckon it's because of the fu—I mustn't ramble. I do that sometimes. But this isn't about me. This is about Lydia Levy and her story.

The story of a girl who very nearly cheated death, and lived to tell the tale. And as with all stories, this one started with a blank page.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BLANK MESSAGE

Lydia perched on her settee, hunched over the coffee table, pen in hand, tapping its nib against the blank page that had been staring back at her for what seemed like an eternity. She didn't know what to write, or even what she wanted to write. Explaining her depression wasn't going to change anything, not now. Her mind was made up. She tapped the pen harder hoping the words would just come to her. But they didn't. She didn't even know who she was writing to. Her mum, maybe, although they hadn't spoken in ages. Perhaps, her secondary school mates who promised to stay in touch but never did? No. Any goodbyes would be immaterial at this point, so what was the point?

Lydia let her pen fall. It bounced off the glass coffee table with a demoralising pang and rolled beneath the settee. Her phone vibrated atop the table, playing *Wake Up Boo* by The Boo Radleys. It wasn't a *beautiful morning*, as the song suggested. It was, in fact, a depressing evening. Lydia shuddered as she grabbed her phone, silencing the alarm as she glanced at the time – 19:27. Lydia stood up and wandered over

to her window, which offered a view of the usually bustling outskirts of Manchester city centre.

Her flat was close enough to city to feel like she was a part of it, but far enough away to avoid the chaos: particularly of university life and the trivial problems that plagued her classmates, whom she avoided as much as possible. No longer concerned with passing her first year, integrating into a new friendship group, or charming anyone into bed on a wild night out, Lydia found solace in her unassuming ground-floor flat.

Lydia watched groups of strangers making their way towards the city centre. Some of them looked a little familiar but she didn't know them. She watched them from the shadows as they strutted down the street. They wore designer clothes and flashy accessories, desperate to tell the tale of a perfect life. Their hair was styled, their makeup immaculate and each of them wore a smile. Their every move seemed carefully choreographed, as if they were backing dancers in a well-rehearsed concert. As much as Lydia loathed them, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. It wasn't their smiles, struts, or style that she envied, but rather the speed and determination with which they marched to wherever they were going—they all had purpose.

She turned back to her living room, spotting her radio—a sleek, retro-inspired boombox adorned with neon-coloured buttons and a shiny chrome finish. She flicked it on. A burst of static shot Lydia in the ears. Unperturbed, she turned the knob to a specific station, and a forgotten ‘90s track by The Bluetones blared from the speakers. Lydia hadn’t forgotten it though. It was *Slight Return*, one of her favourites, although she hadn’t heard it in a while. Taking one final look at the outside world, Lydia clutched the radio and retreated back to the comforting sanctuary of her flat.

Her living space was filled with nostalgic knickknacks of the ‘90s; similar in style to the radio she clutched. Every nook overflowed with relics; a Tamagotchi, a Beanie Baby, a lava lamp, pogs, a stash of VHS tapes and a well-worn cassette tape of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*. Though Lydia was a noughties baby, she had always been captivated by the decade that preceded her.

Lydia vividly remembered an advert from her childhood for the Internet. It didn’t mean much to her as a young girl, but for one reason or another it always stuck with her, particularly as she got older and the world around her changed. The advert’s slogan popped into her head whenever she did the most mundane of

tasks, like brushing her teeth or washing dishes—*the world is at your fingertips*.

Who the fuck wants the world at their fingertips? she often thought. It seemed to Lydia that an ever more connected world was only driving people further apart. Not only that, but if everything the world has to offer was one simple click away, then the thrill of an adventure and the spark of curiosity were being drained from her world. She hated the notion.

As a young girl, she had watched Knebworth 1996 on VHS at least a hundred times, mesmerised by the enigmatic Gallagher brothers who managed to look ten feet tall despite the tiny box of a telly Lydia watched it on. Even with a dodgy Scart cable and a mere 14-inch screen, Lydia didn't need 2000 pixels to recognise the power of 250,000 people singing along to every single word. Now *that* was true connection.

But it seemed to Lydia that those days were gone and they weren't coming back. She was born twenty years too late, and it was shit. But there was nothing she could do about it. Her eyes darted around her flat as she looked at the collection of memorabilia that she had somehow squeezed in every space possible. At one point they made her happy, but they hadn't recently. She liked having them around though—although she

was concerned that when she had killed herself, the house clearers would just toss all of it into a skip.

In the drawers were stacks of *Smash Hits* magazines, on the walls were iconic 90s film posters, but the pièce de résistance was a 1996 limited edition Crosley Cruiser in mustard yellow, signed by Damon Albarn himself. The record player took pride of place in the centre of a five-by-five cube display cabinet, surrounded by twenty-four other cubes brimming with vinyl records. As she wandered over to the cabinet, she couldn't help but caress her fingers on the spines of her records. They felt satisfyingly smooth and slightly dusty. Each record sleeve felt heavy, guarding songs that rarely graced the airwaves or streaming services. But that only made them more special. It made them like secret messages. Secret messages written by poets of the world that had somehow left them behind. Surely, they wouldn't throw them out, not her records—and certainly not her Crosley Cruiser!

Lydia's record collection was meticulously organised, but not in any conventional way. Not alphabetised, and not sorted by year or genre—instead, it was arranged precisely how Lydia had decided, in a system that only she understood. It was as if she had created her own Dewey Decimal System for her cherished music. *OK Computer* by Radiohead was the

eighteenth record in the sixth cube. *Nevermind* by Nirvana was in the thirty-third record in the fifteenth cube. She took immense pride in her collection. She loved every single record in her collection, but she had a particular fondness for the ones inscribed with 'To Lydia, Love Dad x'. She wished he could see her collection now, in all its glory.

She was tempted to play one of her records on her mustard Crosley Cruiser, but she didn't. Instead, she picked up her radio and carried it with her as she walked into the bathroom, which was adjacent to her living room. She applied a touch of makeup, gazing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror as the radio rested against the tap. *Slight Return* began to wistfully near its climax. Lydia sang along the chorus reprise, as she parted her two-toned hair with precision; so that the blonde strands fell perfectly to the left and the brunette to the right. Lydia studied herself in the mirror, observing her features intently the way one does only when they're certain nobody else is watching. She looked deep into her eyes as if she was having a staring contest with herself. Her eyes began to water and she blinked.

Am I really going to do it? she thought. The idea of death terrified her, but so did the idea of living. A few months back she had bought a rope. She had found

it in her favourite nostalgia shop in the city centre, whilst she was looking for albums that she could add to her record collection. It was at the bottom of one of the crates she had been going through. It caught her off guard, and called to her. The idea of suicide came to her in that moment—seemingly out of nowhere, and it seemed to make total sense. Part of her hoped she'd never have to use it, but she bought it anyway, and since then any hope of her life changing had disintegrated and her suicide seemed inevitable. It was the only way she could think to escape her head. But typically, now that she needed the rope, she couldn't find it. But she didn't need it. Not really. There were other ways.

Lydia's ground-floor flat was part of a five-storey building. Her plan was to climb those five stories up to the rooftop, a place where her flatmates rarely ventured, if ever. Once she reached the top all she had to do was jump. At around fourteen feet per floor, those five storeys would be a seventy-foot drop. She wasn't an expert in suicide, but it sounded high enough to do the job. Despite her fear of heights, this method had always seemed the most logical to her, because once that leap was taken, there would be no turning back.

With her hair perfectly parted and makeup applied as though she were joining the rest of the city for a good and proper night out, Lydia looked at her

reflection. Presentable, easily identifiable, provided she didn't land face-first. She spluttered out a weak cough at the thought of impact. She began to hyperventilate. She squeezed her eyes shut and gripped the sink with both of her hands, trying to steady her breathing. After a few deep breaths, she regained her composure. She looked back into the bathroom mirror, looking far less resolute than she had before.

A noise came from the living room. It wasn't a thud or a bang, but something subtle—a faint scratching sound. It was barely audible but Lydia heard it. She was sure of it. She stood like a statue, internally trying to drown out the sound of the radio. She waited for the sound to return, and it did; this time louder. *Perhaps the neighbours are doing something upstairs*, Lydia thought.

Carefully and silently, she reached for the radio, turning the music down as low as possible without switching it off entirely. With the music barely audible, she could hear the scratches and faint tapping of wood much more clearly. It sounded like someone was rummaging through her living room.

She could hear someone breathing, soft and quiet. *Trying to remain unnoticed*, she thought. What did she have to be scared of? Once you overcome the fear of death, it becomes increasingly difficult to be spooked.

She held her breath, and crept towards the bathroom door. With her heart pounding in her chest, she crept closer to the door, her nose nearly brushing the wooden frame. She peeked hesitantly around the door, and suddenly, a loud crash echoed through the room.

Lydia gasped, and retreated a few steps back into the bathroom. The sounds of footsteps scurrying hit Lydia's ears. Whoever was out there wasn't trying to remain quiet, anymore. Lydia couldn't help but notice the cowering reflection of herself in the bathroom mirror. She stood tall and rushed to the bathroom door and flung it open.

'All right, fucker!' she said with authority, as she burst into the living room. Her flat was empty, but the front door was wide open. Footsteps echoed down the corridor outside. She dashed through her front door and peered into the foyer. Empty.

What the fuck? Lydia thought. She realised her hands were trembling. She shook them out and walked back into her flat, closing the door firmly behind her and turning the latch to ensure it was definitely locked. *Odd, I'm sure I locked it,* thought Lydia, *I always lock it.*

Lydia checked the door frame. There were no signs of forced entry—whoever had come in had walked through the front door with ease. Not only had

the intruder entered Lydia's flat effortlessly, but they also seemed to have had little difficulty gaining access to the building, which required a code to enter. A code that only Lydia, her landlord, and her neighbours knew. Lydia shuddered.

Why the fuck would anyone want to break into her flat? She had nothing of significant value to steal—at least nothing valuable to the common burglar. Her TV was like a box, and nobody wanted to an old Tamagotchi badly enough to break the law.

On the floor, a marbled photo frame lay smashed into several jagged pieces.

'For fuck's sake,' Lydia muttered under her breath. She knelt down to assess the extent of the damage. She swept a few of the larger shards beneath the display cabinet with her fingers and lifted the 6x4 photograph that had been completely separated from its frame.

In the photograph Lydia was much younger, arm in arm with her parents. It looked as if they had been on a picturesque staycation in the Lake District, but Lydia couldn't recall any memories from the holiday. All three of them looked happy, with Lydia's dad grinning widely as his family posed for the camera. She flipped over the photograph to reveal an inscription she had never noticed before.

‘Liddy. You’ll always have my love no matter what. And your mother’s too, even if she doesn’t show it sometimes. May God bless you and everything you do in life. We’re so proud. With love, Dad.’

Lydia’s eyes welled up, but she pursed her lips together to suppress any tears. With a resolute sigh, she carefully put away the photograph in a drawer and rose to her feet. She quickly retrieved the radio from her bathroom and brought it into the living room, turning up the volume as she placed it onto the coffee table. A melodic jingle played through the speakers.

‘Sit back and relax with the evening show with Caroline Stone,’ an overly eager man’s voice reverberated from the radio. Lydia slumped deeply into her sofa; her eyes affixed to the radio.

‘Hello everyone, Caroline Stone here, and we’ve got a special show for you tonight. It’s just gone half seven, and we’re already counting down the hours until a new year is upon us. We’re broadcasting live from just outside the nation’s capital, and I’ve got the perfect spot in the studio to watch the cars, coaches, and chaos as everybody makes their way into London.’

As Lydia listened, she couldn’t help but feel a sense of warmth and comfort hearing her mum’s voice. It was silky and soothing. Lydia’s face scrunched up. She felt so far away from her mum. She and her mum

hadn't been on speaking terms since Lydia left for university. Her dad said it was because they were so alike: independent and free-thinking, but stubborn nonetheless. He often joked that neither would extend even the smallest olive twig, let alone the whole branch.

She did miss her mum, but she found solace in being able to hear her voice on the airwaves, even if only intermittently between songs. The first song Caroline played was *Torn* by Natalie Inbruglia, and Lydia couldn't help but smile as the opening acoustic guitar sounded through her flat. It was one of her favourites. She swayed slowly, dancing along to the song whilst lying on her sofa. Rarely, did Lydia dislike her mum's song choices. They were the tunes she had grown up listening to, the vinyl records that her mum and dad had played for her throughout her life—some in the very studio that her mother broadcast from. Some families have games, some have movies—but Lydia's family had music.

'The crowds look, once again, like they'll gather in force to see out the year. Maybe to see the elaborate firework show, or maybe to hear the beautiful chimes of Big Ben roar through the nation's capital. Or perhaps they gather to share the celebration of the new year with as many people as possible, because after all, who wants to be alone on New Year's Eve?'

As Lydia listened to her mum's words she could only imagine if her mum was as lonely as she was tonight. She could see her sat in her cosy, quirky studio surrounded by chaotic piles of records. She used to love digging through her mum's crates, as if they were a treasure trove filled with hidden gems. But she hadn't done that in a long time.

'Well, I'm not sure who wants to, but for the next five hours, I will be alone. But it's going to be fun. I'm going to be taking some calls, playing some great music, and let's see in the New Year togeth—'

Lydia turned the radio off. She placed it on her upright piano. The lid of the piano was closed and had gathered dust. Lydia tapped at the dusty lid. She hadn't played it for at least a month. She hadn't felt like it. Ironically, she chose this flat specifically because of the Chappell upright piano that sat in the living room. She thought for a moment about lifting the lid, tinkering with the keys, filling her flat with music—*her* music—but the urge passed as quickly as it came. Instead, Lydia glanced around her flat as if to say goodbye, then switched off the lights.

She started up the five flights of stairs to the roof. The staircase wound gracefully around the building's walls, forming a spiral that seemed to make the fifth floor look miles away. Her legs felt heavier with each

step she took. She tried to tread quietly, hoping to avoid drawing any attention from the peculiar characters that lived in the building. There was *Cat*, an eccentric woman who seemed to have an ever-growing collection of feline companions. She lived on the second floor but her cats roamed freely from floor to floor. *Peter the Pump*, lived on the third floor. He made fitness YouTube videos at all hours of the day, and always tried to recruit Lydia for a video or two, despite her evident reluctance. Mr Havers lived on the fourth floor, and was the only neighbour she actually knew by name. He was nice but erratic—he never knew what day of the week it was and always looked like he was lost. On the fifth floor was *Mystic Marge*, the self-proclaimed psychic who constantly attempted to predict Lydia's future, usually in the form of boys she would date. *Nice one, Marge but wrong again*. As she ascended to the top floor, she had successfully evaded them all, except for a couple of wandering cats.

Lydia paused for a moment as she rubbed her legs in an attempt to give them new life. She opened the fire door that led to the roof. A ferociously cold gust of wind blasted into Lydia's face. The fire door slammed shut behind her, leaving her alone on the rooftop. She made her way towards the building's ledge, stopping a few footsteps away.

From the top of the block of flats, Manchester was a beautiful sight to behold, particularly tonight. The streets shone below her like a web of glowing, golden ribbons, winding their way through the city like an intricate maze. The air was filled with the sounds of the city; the hum of traffic, excited chatter and the sound of a bass drum in the distance, presumably from one of the city's night clubs eager to get the celebrations underway. The bass drum sounded like a heartbeat, Manchester's heartbeat, but as much as Lydia loved the city she still felt like an outsider. Suspended above the life below, lurking in the shadows, she was a spectator to the beauty and the chaos, but a spectator only. She wouldn't be missed.

She inched closer to the ledge. The wind whipped her two-toned hair around her face. She looked down at the street below, the cold air nipping at her cheeks and making her eyes water. The ground seemed to sway beneath her, urging her to jump. Her foot dangled over the ledge. She thought about a stranger finding her body, a dog walker perhaps or somebody coming back from a night club. She thought about the police officers arriving begrudgingly to the scene, putting up tape to section off the area, as passers-by stretched to get a glimpse. She thought about her mum being called

during her show to be told the news that her daughter had been found dead, sobbing uncontrollably as she...

No. Lydia didn't want to think about any of them. She strained her eyes at the people below. They were all blissfully unaware of Lydia, on their way to parties and night clubs. She wished she was as blissfully unaware as them, instead of trapped in her head. She didn't want to think about them either. It was just her, and she was ready.

'5, 4, 3,'. Her heart steadied as the thought of escape drew near. She was calm, unafraid, and ready to take that final step. '2,1,'. Her foot lifted from the floor. BUZZ! Her phone vibrated in her pocket, startling her back to safer ground.

'Fuck!' she huffed. Lydia took a step forward and began counting down again '5, 4, 3,'. *Who*—before she could finish the thought, Lydia had already pulled out her phone to see what the notification was. It was a text message.

The message simply read, 7, 27. Lydia repeated the numbers aloud as if hearing them would prompt something within her.

'Seven, Twenty-Seven.' Whatever the numbers were, they meant very little to Lydia. She checked to see who it was from but she didn't recognise the number.

She called it and held the phone to her ear. It began to ring. She gulped, unsure what she would say to this person. It continued to ring, but there was no answer. There wasn't even an answering machine message. She searched the number but there were no results. *Odd*, she thought, as she went to put her phone back in her pocket.

The wind suddenly blew a strong gust towards Lydia as if pushing her to the edge. She tried to stand strong, summoning every ounce of willpower to combat its power, but the wind was formidable. Her feet scraped along the floor toward the edge. She dropped to the floor, clawing at the concrete roof top beneath her. Her phone dropped, and trickled towards the ledge. She grasped towards it but her the phone had already begun its descent to the concrete below. She peered over the ledge, watching her phone get further and further away until it completely disappeared. The thought of that being her, falling to her death, invaded her mind. She gagged, as if she was going to be sick. But she wasn't.

The once silent city roared back to life around her; the noise flooding her senses and leaving her feeling trapped within her own thoughts. She blinked sharply, and felt a migraine in her head. She rubbed her temple. *I can't do it*, Lydia thought. She wanted to, but

she just couldn't. She needed an easier way. She needed her rope. But she didn't want to spend her last few hours alive rummaging through her flat. She just wanted it to be over. By midnight, at the very latest!

She stood up and brushed herself off. As much as her mind should have been brainstorming a viable way in which she could kill herself, she couldn't help but think about the text message. 7, 27. It was probably just an error message, or a scam, but she couldn't shake the feeling that the message had arrived at the precise moment she needed it. As if whoever had sent it was watching her. She looked around the rooftop. It was empty. She was sure of it.

CHAPTER TWO

ARRANGEMENT THEORY

Lydia stood outside her favourite nostalgia shop; her nose pressed tightly against the glass window. Tucked away in a quiet alley just off Manchester's main walkway, the nostalgia shop was a treasure trove waiting to be explored. She strained to get a glimpse into the darkness of what treasures the closed shop had in its depths. She could spot some records that she hadn't seen before, but besides that there were no new additions.

Aptly named *The Time Machine*, this hidden gem of a shop had been visited on many Saturday mornings, where Lydia would rummage through old records and peruse forgotten relics—some of which now proudly sat in her flat. It was Lydia's secret refuge in the bustling city, a place where she could lose herself among remnants of the past without the risk of encountering anyone from university.

It wasn't merely the contents of the shop that captivated Lydia—the signs, the layout, and even the entire alley, where the shop was situated, appeared as though they had been frozen in time since the early nineties. Whilst the rest of Manchester had been swept

up into the 21st century, this alley remained hidden; forgotten and untouched by the passage of time. That's why she liked it so much. Standing there, she felt as if she was in the nineties.

Growing up in the noughties, Lydia's parents lovingly shared the decade they cherished with their only child. Her mum would play Oasis and Blur records for Lydia to dance and sing along to before tea. Her dad would organise elaborate movie marathons on the weekends, showcasing some of the best family favourites the nineties had to offer. She began collecting records and VHS tapes at the age of six, and for the next few years she was noticeably disappointed when a relative gifted her a CD or DVD for a birthday or Christmas present. As Lydia grew older, she yearned for more, and her dad and mum were happy to oblige. The music became more obscure as Lydia's knowledge expanded. By age eleven, she knew Elastica's entire discography by heart. By twelve, she had watched *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*, and *Heat* at least three times each. But even with all the music, all the movies and everything else, she wasn't in the nineties. Saturday mornings at the nostalgia shop were as close to the nineties as Lydia could ever get.

Her eyes traced the rows of vintage toys and souvenirs. The reflections of the streetlights danced

across the window, casting a warm glow over her face. Despite the late hour, she didn't seem to notice the cold, her thoughts enveloped in the comforts of a life she could have led. Lydia's eyes fixated on a pile of discarded photographs, their edges worn and some even folded or torn from being placed under books, records, and other miscellaneous items.

Suddenly, one of the books atop the photographs shifted—only an inch or two to the left, but enough for Lydia to notice it. Her eyes widened, unsure of what she thought she had seen. Pressing her nose even closer to the glass, she held her hands to her eyebrows and squinted her eyes, trying to see clearly what might have caused the movement—if it had really happened. As Lydia surveyed the darkness of the enchanting shop, a vintage vase tumbled to the ground, shattering to the floor into a thousand tiny pieces. Lydia didn't move.

From behind the broken vase, a piece of paper floated through the shop, like a feather caught in a gentle breeze. It wasn't a windy night, not at the moment at least—and there certainly wouldn't be any wind inside the closed shop. Lydia's eyes followed the piece of paper as it glided amidst the knick-knacks and twirled through the air before suddenly darting towards her. It came at her like a bullet. It pressed against the glass pane, directly in front of her eyes. She jumped,

taking a step back from the window pane. Her eyes drew towards the paper.

The page was torn and slightly yellowed with age. It had writing on it, but Lydia's eyes felt blurry. She couldn't quite make it out. She took a step closer. It was a page from the Bible. Lydia didn't care much for religion, and had never read the Bible in her life, save for the occasional funeral or school exam. Rows upon rows of text, all meaningless to her, filled the page. She scanned through it until her eyes fell to the bottom of the page—*Book of Proverbs, an Old Testament Book of Wisdom*. Something caught her eye on the page. With a faint pen line, a sentence had been struck through and replaced. Next to the line, handwritten in ink.

'Book of Proverbs 7:27: Her house knows only a way to the grave, a place where Death waits.' Lydia whispered. The words didn't mean much—but the number. The number! There it was, again. She looked around the street, but it was empty. She couldn't shake the feeling that somebody was watching her.

'Hello?' she called out hesitantly. No response. She was alone.

Lydia looked back at the page, racking her brain, trying to solve some meaning behind it. *Was it a secret code? A television channel, perhaps? A phone number,*

perhaps, she thought to herself. She stared at the page as it dropped to the floor with a whimper. From behind where the page had stuck to the glass, a pair of red eyes emerged from the shadows. Lydia screamed and stumbled backwards.

She lost her footing on the kerb and fell bottom-first onto the cobbled stones in the alley. Her hands softened her fall, but she was shaken, more from what she had seen than the fall itself. She looked back at the window of the shop, only to find the familiar vintage antiques and trinkets she was used to seeing. No monsters, ghosts, or demons—just an empty shop.

‘Isn’t that Lydia Levy?’ a voice boomed from several feet away

‘Oh yeah, looks like it,’ said a second voice, higher pitched and now much closer.

Lydia looked up to see two faces she vaguely recognised looming over her. Sarah and Adam were from Lydia’s music composition class. Adam sported a thick, well-groomed beard, a flannel shirt buttoned all the way to the top, thick-rimmed glasses, and a pair of triple black Vans on his feet. Sarah had long, straight hair styled in a messy bun—a few of her hairs fluttered in the gentle city breeze. She wore dangly earrings and a pair of black ankle boots with chunky heels. Both were dressed to impress.

‘What are you doing down there?’ Adam asked, frowning. Sarah offered Lydia her hand. Lydia held it as she stood up. Sarah’s hand felt warm and pleasant. Lydia realised she was still holding onto her hand. She pulled her hand away and offered Sarah an awkward smile.

‘I fell,’ replied Lydia, feeling embarrassed. She couldn’t possibly tell them what she had seen. She didn’t know either of them that well—she was actually surprised that they even knew her name—and the truth was, she wasn’t entirely sure what she had seen. Her mind could have been playing tricks on her. It wouldn’t be the first time. The last thing Lydia needed was for everyone to think she was losing it, especially if a few days later people found out that she had killed herself. That wasn’t a legacy she wanted to leave behind.

‘Where are you guys off to, all dressed up?’ Lydia asked.

‘Mr Chamber’s New Year’s Eve Party,’ answered Sarah. ‘It’s a bit of a weird one, but we thought we might as well make an early appearance before the Heaton Park fireworks. It’s right by it.’

Of course! thought Lydia. Everyone on music comp had been invited to Mr Chamber’s party during the final lecture before the Christmas break. Lydia was invited, too, but had no intention of going. It was bad

enough seeing Mr Chambers in university, let alone out of *working hours*.

‘Oh, is that tonight?’ asked Lydia, trying to seem unbothered.

‘Is the New Year’s Eve party on tonight?’ Adam smirked. Sarah playfully punched him in his stomach which wiped the smirk off his face in a flash.

‘You’re coming too, right?’ asked Sarah, her eyes lingering on Lydia just a little longer than necessary. Lydia hesitated, unsure of what to say. She hadn’t planned on it. In fact, it was probably the last place she wanted to be. But if there were really a demon lurking in the shadows, watching Lydia’s every move, then she didn’t want to be alone. Not just yet. Not until she could make sense of her own plans for the evening.



At the party, Lydia found herself seated on a plush two-seater sofa, wedged snugly in between Sarah and Adam. Mr Chamber’s home was a harmonious blend of modern and traditional design. Rich mahogany floors sprawled throughout the expansive open space, with the living room seamlessly flowing into the lounge and kitchen. Sophisticated artwork adorned the walls—the

kind Lydia knew was high-brow simply because she couldn't make heads or tails of it.

Tactically arranged coffee table books were scattered throughout the home, each more pretentious than the last: *Mozart in Motion*, *Palette Art*, *The Grand Grimoire*, *Chateau Life*. Mr Chamber's home was an image of perfection, reminiscent of a show home or a glimpse into the lives of the well-to-do. It was like a life-sized Cluedo board, and Lydia couldn't help but think a murder would certainly liven up this party.

Lydia looked around the room where everybody seemed eager to see in the new year at a party such as this one, and no one seemed more delighted than the host himself. Lydia watched as Mr Chambers effortlessly mingled with guests. In his fifties, though not obviously so, Mr Chambers was something of a silver fox. His ruggedly handsome face and salt-and-pepper hair only added to his charm. He dressed well, but in a way that suggested he wasn't trying too hard, and he always seemed to have a neat whiskey in hand, as if to punctuate his suave demeanour.

She averted her eyes downward to make sure he didn't see her watching him. If he did, then he might come over and talk to her, and she really didn't want to talk to Mr Chambers. In fact, there was nobody at the party she wanted to talk to, and probably nobody who

cared much about talking to her, but she really didn't want to speak Mr Chambers, under any circumstances.

The atmosphere was lively, and everyone seemed to be soaking it in. Everyone, that is, except for Lydia, Adam, and Sarah —and whilst Lydia wasn't exactly friends with Adam and Sarah, she would rather be sandwiched between them than out fending for herself. Adam and Sarah both stared intently at their phone screens, tapping and swiping, utterly engrossed. Lydia sat with a detached expression as if waiting for a bus. Lydia had never been the type to get lost in her phone like Sarah and Adam, and seemingly everybody else her age. Her mobile wasn't flashy like everyone else's; she didn't need apps, likes, or validation from people she barely knew. To her, it all seemed disingenuous and meaningless. But it was fine. She needed to strategise anyway. She needed a better way to kill herself—jumping off a rooftop was now entirely out of the question. She needed a method that was as simple as it was painless.

'Lydia? Lydia?'

'What?' Lydia replied, now back in the room.

'Drink' Adam asked, tinkling an imaginary glass.

'Oh. No,' said Lydia awkwardly, 'I quit. A few weeks ago, I quit,' she continued, almost nonsensically, but she didn't know what else to say.

‘Has no one ever told you that you’re meant to quit after midnight?’ Adam scoffed. Sarah laughed too, albeit half-heartedly, finally tearing her attention away from her phone. She gave Lydia a playful nudge, as if to remind her that Adam was just joking around. Lydia forced out a smile.

‘Having said that, I might get a head start on my New Year’s resolution early, too.’ said Adam.

‘Oh yeah? What’s your New Year’s resolution?’ asked Sarah.

‘One thousand matches.’

Adam proudly tilted his phone to show Sarah and Lydia the dating app on his screen.

‘God, Adam. I’m surprised your finger hasn’t fallen off,’ scoffed Sarah.

‘At least his wrist is getting a little break,’ said Lydia in a deadpan tone. Sarah laughed, placing her hand on Lydia’s knee as she did so. Adam smirked too.

‘Yeah, yeah. Well, I’m getting a drink.’ Adam rose from the sofa and headed towards the kitchen.

Sarah looked at Lydia. Sarah smiled at her awkwardly. Lydia smiled back, but she couldn’t help but notice that Sarah’s hand remained gently on her knee. Lydia felt hot all of a sudden, as if she were melting. All she could feel was Sarah’s hand on her knee. Lydia felt nervous, but she quite liked it. Sarah

seemed friendly, and she smelled nice—or at least, Lydia thought so.

‘Let’s take a selfie,’ Sarah said enthusiastically, raising her phone and snuggling up to Lydia, who seemingly had no choice but to join in the photo. Lydia was caught off guard but managed to force out a smile as Sarah snapped a few pictures. Sarah pulled back slightly, and Lydia looked around, somewhat embarrassed. Sarah inspected the photos, once again engrossed in her phone. ‘God, I’m so ugly!’

‘What?!’ said Lydia ‘You’re not,’

Lydia thought that Sarah was very attractive, and Lydia suspected that Sarah thought it too. Lydia glanced down at the photo on the phone as Sarah began to edit it with a professional-looking app. She repositioned her eyebrows and added volume to her lips. As Sarah experimented with several filters and effects, Lydia wondered if she had even heard her.

‘I don’t even know if I can post this,’ said Sarah.

‘Are you kidding?’ said Lydia. Sarah finally looked up at her. ‘You’re really pretty, Sarah.’

‘You think so?’ Their eyes locked, and for a moment, it was as if they were the only people at the party. Sarah smiled, and Lydia moved in a little closer. Lydia didn’t know if Sarah was into girls. But she didn’t seem to repel as Lydia wiggled closer—and she

did have her hand on her knee! *Maybe she likes me*, thought Lydia. *Maybe I like her*. Lydia was confused. Only moments ago, she was contemplating the most efficient method of suicide and now she was trying to make out with a girl she hardly knew.

‘Guess who,’ a deep voice interrupted Lydia’s train of thought. A rugged pair of hands covered Sarah’s eyes.

‘Josh!’ Sarah playfully exclaimed, grasping his hands and pulling them away from her face. ‘Lydia, this is my boyfriend, Josh.’ Lydia slumped into the sofa, hoping it would swallow her. Nevertheless, she managed to force a smile as she replied.

‘Nice to meet you,’ said Lydia. Josh was undeniably good-looking and radiated self-assurance. He was tall, and well-defined with a strong jawline and high cheekbones. Sarah’s type was obviously a lot different to Lydia’s. Josh seemed like the type who played rugby or polo, and Lydia couldn’t help but imagine him, six years down the line, in an executive office with a receding hairline. At least that’s what she hoped. ‘I’m just going to see where Adam is with our drinks. I’ll catch up with you two later.’ Lydia pushed herself up off the settee.

Lydia walked through the large house, passing through the guests, briefly hearing snippets of the

mundane conversations that seemed to plague the party. From the opposite end of the room Mr Chambers emerged. Still desperate to avoid him, Lydia stumbled into the opposite direction of the corridor. As she looked back it was clear that he was coming in the same direction. He was coming right towards Lydia. She found a set of sliding doors slightly ajar, camouflaged amongst the bookcases in the hallway. She gently pushed them open to reveal Mr Chamber's study within. The room was dark and completely empty. She stepped inside and closed the doors behind her, leaving them slightly ajar just as she had found them. She hid behind the door as Mr Chambers walked by. She let out a sigh of relief.

The hidden room seemed like a secret sanctuary—a tranquil space where the music from the lounge was barely audible, even with the doors slightly ajar. Mr Chamber's study was an extensive library brimming with books and sheet music from centuries past. Towering shelves held ancient tomes and rare manuscripts, safeguarding a treasure trove of musical knowledge that had been concealed for generations. The air was dense with the musty scent of aged paper and leather-bound volumes.

The only illumination in the room came from a few streetlamps outside, their light filtering through the

windows and casting a warm, inviting glow across the space. As Lydia ventured further in, she chose not to turn on any lights or lamps, even though she knew their locations. Instead, she paused to examine a piece of art nestled in between two towering bookcases.

The image depicted a valiant knight towering above demons and distraught villagers. The title, *Don Giovanni*, was inscribed at the bottom, just above Mozart's name. She let out a small chuckle, before exploring the rest of the room.

In a shadowy corner of the room rested a baby grand piano. It gleamed a stunning black, absorbing the dim light from the street lamps outside. She approached the piano and took a seat on the polished bench. Atop the piano was a half-drunk bottle of whiskey. Hanson's, it read on the label—presumably Mr Chamber's preferred choice of brand. With the lightest of touches, she caressed the ivory keys, producing a soft, secretive sound. She played a brief melancholic melody.

Lydia's gaze fell upon the sheet music resting on the music shelf of the piano. The title on the open page read *Nocturne No. 7 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27*. Lydia wasn't familiar with the piece. She ran her finger along the notes, humming out the tune before placing her fingers on the keys. She began with her left hand, striking a deep C sharp octave, soon joined by a

melodic right hand. But as Lydia focused on the sheet music, she struck a discordant note—a D, to be precise. The unexpected sound brought her to an abrupt halt, and she stared at the title once more: *Nocturne No. 7 in C Sharp Minor, Op. 27*.

That fucking number again, Lydia thought. *7, 27. Why was it following her? One coincidence is a coincidence, two coincidences are a clue, and three coincidences are just plain fucking weird.* As hard as she strained to find an answer, she didn't know what the numbers meant. Tentatively, she resumed playing the nocturne, hoping it might offer some insight into the mystery surrounding the recurring numbers, or perhaps ignite a spark of inspiration. Once again, she started with her left hand, the deep C sharp octaves soon accompanied by a sombre melody.

'Chopin, Nocturne No. 7. I thought I might find you in here.' Lydia slowly lifted her hands from the piano, recognising that all too familiar voice. She turned to see Mr Chambers standing behind her.

Despite his charm and effortless charisma, there was something a little unsettling about Mr Chambers, at least to Lydia. He always seemed to know precisely what to say to get his way, and he wasn't above expressing things he didn't necessarily believe in order to manipulate others. Lydia wanted to tell him to leave

her alone, but she didn't. She could have, but part of her didn't want to. Part of her wanted him to find her at some point. As much as Lydia wanted to avoid him, she didn't dislike Mr Chambers. In fact, he had devoted a lot of time to her and seemed to genuinely like her. Sometimes she felt as though he was the only person who did, herself included.

'It's a lovely piece,' Lydia murmured, still perched on the piano stool.

'You know, it sounds even better with four hands. That's how it was meant to be played when Chopin composed it.' Mr Chambers squeezed himself onto the stool beside Lydia, placing his whiskey glass atop the piano. 'Do you mind? You play what's written.'

Lydia reached across Mr Chambers to play the left hand, her arm brushing against his tight torso. He pushed his body towards the piano, as if it were an excuse to get closer to Lydia. Lydia felt nervous, but she was comfortable. She played the sombre right-hand melody that accompanied the left. Not long after, Mr Chambers joined in with an accompanying tune in the centre of the piano, nestled between Lydia's left and right hands. It sounded nice. It sounded more uplifting with the melody Mr Chambers played. It wasn't a complex melody but it sounded impressive, and even

more so, Mr Chambers played it from memory. His eyes were closed as if he was lost in the beauty of the music. He turned the page as they continued to play in perfect harmony.

They stopped playing. Mr Chambers stroked Lydia's right hand with his own. He looked at her, but she shyly averted her gaze. Lydia checked to see if he was still looking. He was. And soon Lydia felt obliged to look back into his eyes. In that moment, a flurry of emotions coursed through her—a mix of admiration, curiosity, and a subtle hint of apprehension towards Mr Chambers. Her cheeks flushed and her fingers fidgeted ever so slightly. They shared a silent, lingering moment, a moment away from the party, the guests, and everything else happening around them.

Mr Chambers smiled at Lydia and gave her hand a gentle tap as he pulled his own away.

'Very nice. I really do like that one.' he said.

Mr Chambers stood up from the piano, grabbing his whiskey. He glanced at his wristwatch. 'I'm just going to say a few words, but please don't go anywhere. Make yourself comfortable, even,' he said playfully. Lydia nodded as Mr Chambers disappeared through the sliding doors.

Lydia remained seated, but with the sliding doors left open, the sounds of the party filled the room. She

heard the clink of a glass as the music gradually faded out. Lydia stood up from the piano stool and walked to the sliding doors, peering her head out to watch Mr Chambers, who had effortlessly captured the attention of the entire party. The guests all ceased their conversations, turning towards him with eager smiles on their faces.

‘I know there’s still a few hours left before the new year, but I just wanted to say something before I’ve had too many of these,’ Mr Chambers said, gesturing to his drink, ‘and I can’t get my words out.’ The room let out a joyful laugh. ‘Or before you’ve all had too much of whatever you’re drinking and can’t understand me. But that’s how it should be, which is why I thought it best to get this out of the way now. I just wanted to thank you all for coming tonight as we celebrate the next movement, if you will, in all of our lives. Whether that next movement, for many of my students here tonight, is merely the blossoming of an opening motif—or for the likes of myself and a few other faculty members, a brass-filled march towards a rollicking hurrah.’ The faculty members chuckled lightly, as everyone at the party seemingly hung on his every word.

‘New Year always reminds me of a quote from one of my favourite composers, Claude Debussy—a

great man and an even better composer. Debussy said, ‘Works of art make rules and not the other way around.’ So, for my students, not only should you start to believe that one day the people who follow in your footsteps will adhere to the rules you create, but you should also know that to achieve this, you have to be unafraid to break the rules of your predecessors. You must be completely and utterly fearless when it comes to breaking a few rules—especially the fun ones.’ The room let out a wry laugh once more. Lydia poked her head further out from behind the sliding doors.

‘It’s about being unafraid to do something different. It’s about being courageous enough to take a leap without having any idea where you’ll land. It’s about forging a path for yourself, rather than sitting idly by and waiting for the train to whisk you away.’ Lydia felt a smile forming on her face, her lips curling into her cheeks.

‘If you want to sidestep mediocrity, if you want to be truly remarkable, if you want to pass my class, that’s what I urge you to do in the coming year. Thank you, and I hope you all have a fantastic end to the year.’

The room filled with applause and cheers. Lydia, still half tucked in the sliding doors, joined in, clapping her hands together. The guests of the party raised their

glasses in celebration, and faculty members swarmed Mr. Chambers with pats on the back and shoulders.

‘That’s it!’ she whispered. *Waiting for a train to take you there*, Mr Chamber’s words echoing in her mind. If she was unafraid to take the leap, she needed something to summon death to her. She strode past the smiling faces and left the party, knowing exactly where she was going and more importantly, how she was going to kill herself.

CHAPTER THREE

**STRANGERS ON A TRAIN
(PLATFORM)**

The exterior of East Didsbury station loomed like a forgotten relic; its once-bustling platform was now reduced to a ghost of its former self. The station's weathered concrete structure held a certain texture, marked by patches of chipped paint and layers of grime that seemed to whisper tales of the past. Faded posters for concerts been and gone adorned the walls, surrounded by the scrawls of unimaginative graffiti. A handful of aimless souls wandered through the fading evening light. The station had become a sad testament to the transportation chaos that gripped the city, with the majority of trains abruptly cancelled with little or no warning. The remaining few charged through the station with urgency, as if they didn't want to be there, either.

As Lydia walked towards Platform 1, she felt heavy with anticipation. She felt a migraine in the back of her head—only made worse by the loud sounds of trains thundering past. Lydia climbed the grime-streaked staircase, each step feeling like a silent

surrender to the inevitable. She reached the southbound platform.

The platform was desolate, its emptiness marked by a solitary bench and a weary vending machine with an annoyingly loud hum. As Lydia looked around the platform, her gaze fell upon a homeless woman. She wore tattered rags that barely shielded her from the elements—particularly on this cold December evening. Her hair was messy and she looked in dire need of a shower. Her weary eyes fixed on the passing trains, but it was clear she wasn't waiting for one. Lydia couldn't help but feel sorry for the woman. She seemed to have given up. Lydia could relate to the sentiment.

Lydia tried her best to avoid eye contact with the woman, but she couldn't help but stare—wondering perhaps why this woman hadn't jumped in front of a train herself. The tracks were right there. She'd only have to walk a few metres. Lydia felt horrible for even thinking it, but the thought still remained. Was it possible that this woman held out more hope for humanity than Lydia herself did? Lydia was ready to jump. That's why she was at this shithole in the first place. But for a moment, albeit brief, she felt selfish for wanting to kill herself—when this stranger, who seemingly had nothing to live for, still chose to.

Lydia shook her head to escape the thought. Her gaze turned to the electronic notice board, scanning the list of cancellations and delays for any sign of hope. It was New Year's Eve, and if she were to make her escape, it would have to be soon. Lydia looked at the arrivals board: Birmingham New Street – 21:48. Twelve minutes.

The only alternative was a tram stop. Tonight, the trams were operating with a remarkable precision, their punctuality a stark contrast to the disorder of the trains. However, Lydia doubted that a tram could offer the salvation she sought. They don't go fast enough to kill someone on impact. She shuddered at the thought of spending the next few weeks confined to a sterile hospital bed, pissed at a bloody tram for not travelling fast enough to kill her.

Moreover, the tram stops teemed with life—thronged people swarmed the platforms as they went about their New Year's Eve celebrations. The prospect of stage fright paralysed her. The weight of hundreds of eyes scrutinising her every move. She couldn't bear the thought of drawing unwanted attention to herself or, even worse, encountering someone she knew amidst the sea of faces, pleading at her to *change her mind*. Or worse still, Lydia hated the thought that people would be more interested in filming her. The idea that her

suicide would be a Tik Tok live, or a meme, or any viral joke made her feel sick.

In the end, the possibility of being observed by a homeless woman, a janitor, and a few unassuming strangers seemed an acceptable compromise. She could endure their fleeting curiosity; it was a small price to pay for the escape she so desperately craved. And so, with a resolute sigh, Lydia decided that waiting on the desolate platform was not only fine—but it was necessary.

Lydia thought about buying the homeless woman a chocolate bar from the vending machine. She rummaged in her purse for some change. She took out her set of keys to get a better view, when- ‘LET’S FUCKING HAVE IT YER DICKHEAD!’ Lydia turned sharply. Two boisterous teenagers burst onto the scene, their energetic cheering and chanting disrupting the sombre mood.

Lydia couldn’t help but glance at the intruders as they swaggered up the stairs, their youthful exuberance impossible to ignore. Noticing her, one of the teens quickly averted his gaze, while the other fixed her with a confident smirk. Lydia instinctively moved towards the bench, hoping to put some distance between herself and the boys as they sauntered past. She quickly put her

keys into her pocket and tucked away her bag out of sight, beneath the bench.

The two boys were tall, their short, clipped hair and baby-faced features suggesting they were no older than fifteen or sixteen. Dressed in the latest sportswear fashion, they wore hoodies and tracksuit bottoms without coats, seemingly impervious to the biting chill of a Manchester winter. The scent of alcohol clung to them, their inebriation evident in their mischievous grins and demeanour.

The boys seemed eager to cause a commotion, and looked disappointed by the lack of people to witness their antics. One of the boys had ginger hair, and the other was blonde. Blondie seemed to be the leader. He swaggered towards Lydia with confidence, whereas Ginger followed a few feet behind him like an obedient lapdog. Lydia put her head down, her eyes firmly focused on the ground beneath the bench. She could just make out two sets of white trainers in her periphery but they glided on by. When it felt safe again, Lydia looked up, curious to see what they were up to.

‘What a ball, and he’s through on goal with just the keeper to beat!’ Blondie exclaimed theatrically, sending a discarded can skittering across the platform with a well-placed kick. Ginger watched, a smug smirk gracing his face. With a sudden burst of force, Blondie

aimed his next kick at the haggard homeless woman who looked unfazed by Blondie's antics as she nestled against the brick wall.

'He shoots! But it's saved by the goalkeeper!' Blondie shouted as the can struck the homeless woman squarely in the chest, 'Now that's world class.'. Ginger's coy laughter echoed through the air. Both of Lydia's fists clenched tightly. She watched, but she didn't do anything—except silently wish they'd just piss off.

Lydia tried to make eye contact with the homeless woman but the woman looked too deflated to lift her head, let alone plead with the boys to stop. Lydia's legs felt like concrete, as if she had somehow morphed into part of the bench she sat on. Blondie continued to torment the homeless woman, his cruel taunts escalating with each passing moment. Soon, Ginger joined in, boldly snatching her blanket away.

'It's not even cold, you fucking softy,' he sneered, seeking approval from Blondie. Lydia's teeth began to grind together.

'Give it here,' Blondie demanded, his tone assertive. As Ginger's smile faltered, he reluctantly handed over the homeless woman's blanket, his gaze downcast in submission. With the blanket now in his grasp, Blondie shot a devilish smirk towards Ginger

before hurling the homeless woman's blanket onto the train tracks.

'Go get it.' Blondie hissed, leaning down to confront the homeless woman, 'and while you're down there, you may as well wait for the train to come. It's not like you've got anything to live for anyway. It would be a right laugh for us to see you get hit by a train.' He said it quietly and softly but it was just loud enough for Lydia to hear. Her stomach felt funny, and she could only imagine what was going through the homeless woman's mind. She shook her head.

Lydia inched forward, as if ready to stand up, but she couldn't. She looked at the homeless woman, who still wouldn't tilt her neck towards Lydia or the boys. She was frail. She looked like she hadn't had a proper meal or a warm bed in months. But why did it have to be tonight? And what could Lydia realistically do? If things escalated, it would be two against one—and given the lanky physiques of Blondie and Ginger, they would overpower her with ease. The desolate station seemed like the perfect setting for a horror story—one that would end with a news article detailing her assault and subsequent hospitalisation. Lydia didn't want to recover; she wanted out. She tried to avert her eyes, she tried to mind her own business, but she couldn't.

Blondie began pushing the homeless woman, trying to get her to move. That was it.

‘Leave her alone!’ Lydia shouted, rising from the bench. Her strides grew shorter as she drew closer to the boys. Blondie rose to his feet; both he and Ginger took a few paces to confront Lydia, their imposing figures towering over her.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re doing?’ Blondie whispered menacingly. Lydia stood her ground, though she hesitated to meet his eyes. When she finally did, they bore into her like razor-sharp blades.

‘I’ll—I’ll call the police if you two don’t leave right now.’ Lydia stammered, feeling nervous and embarrassed. They knew she was scared; she could tell. It was obvious. Not just to Blondie and Ginger, but even to the homeless woman who Lydia spotted in the corner of her eye watching on in disbelief and awe, as if on the front row at Knebworth ’96. Lydia tapped her pocket, feigning readiness to pull out her phone. *Fuck!* Lydia’s stomach dropped. She didn’t have a phone.

‘If you were going to call the police, you would have rung them already, probably from way back where you were,’ Blondie snapped, ‘No, I don’t think you’re going to call the police. But we’re good lads. We’re going to give you the opportunity to turn around and

fuck off. Now, we don't usually offer this sort of deal on the regular, but I like you. So, go on. Fuck off.'

Lydia and Blondie continued to lock eyes, standing a couple of metres apart, fists clenched and unwilling to make any sudden movements. Lydia thought that to the homeless woman, she and Blondie must look like cowboys in a duel—although the homeless woman didn't look like much of a Clint Eastwood fan. Lydia could make out Ginger from the corner of her eye. He was anxious. His legs were shaking and he didn't know where to put his hands. She looked at him properly. His eyes burned into Lydia, as if silently pleading for Lydia to take Blondie's offer, fearful of what Blondie might do to her if she stayed. Lydia could tell that Ginger wasn't a killer; perhaps Blondie wasn't either.

Blondie slowly moved his hand to his waist. He lifted his hoodie to reveal a nine-inch blade tucked snugly into his tracksuit bottoms. He flashed a menacing smirk at Lydia, who stared at the knife, her reflection shimmering against its cold steel edge. Sure, Lydia had a death wish, but she didn't want to be killed by some random, egomaniacal chav. If she were to exit this world early, it would be by her hand and her hand alone.

Fear coursed through Lydia's veins, but rather than scream she forced out a smile—as wide as she could muster. She remembered seeing it in a cowboy film when she was younger. She couldn't remember much else about the film, but her dad really liked it for some reason. In the film, bandits threatened to kill this cowboy but instead of running or screaming he just laughed. A weird, sort of crazed laugh. A laugh that said; 'Bring it on, you piss-ants.'. The bandits ended up running away themselves, and Lydia hoped the trick might have the same effect on Blondie. It did not.

Blondie took a few steps towards Lydia. Her hand darted towards her back pocket. In a flash, she pulled out a set of keys. A small canister of mace spray hung from the keyring. She aimed it at Blondie like a loaded gun. He halted in his tracks.

'What's that? Your inhaler?' Blondie mocked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Ginger let out a nervous chuckle.

'It's mace,' Lydia replied, her voice steady and firm.

'Do you really think that little thing can stop me from ramming a knife in your throat?' Blondie retorted, his words erasing the smile from Ginger's face. Lydia swallowed hard but held her ground.

‘I’m not sure. But we can find out together if you want?’ said Lydia.

‘Come on, mate. She’s not bloody worth it. Neither of them are.’ Ginger interjected, seemingly desperate to defuse the situation. He walked towards Blondie and subtly tilted his head to the left. Lydia refused to blink. Her eyes began to water. Blondie stared back at her. His gaze shifted from Lydia’s fierce eyes to the small can of mace spray connected to her keys. He smiled menacingly. *Shit*, thought Lydia. She pressed her finger readily against the tab of the mace. Blondie laughed as he placed his hood over the knife. He strode past Lydia towards the exit of the platform. Ginger trailed a few steps behind him, until they both disappeared down the steps.

Lydia let out a massive sigh of relief. Her heart was racing. She tucked her keys and mace into her jacket pocket. The platform was now completely empty, except for her and the homeless woman. The homeless woman gazed at Lydia through tear-filled eyes. Lydia jumped onto the tracks to retrieve the homeless woman’s blanket. It felt odd, being in a space that was typically off-limits and marked by danger. There was a strange allure to it and a hint of excitement tinged inside of Lydia. She had often gazed down at the tracks, imagining herself standing upon them. She’d

done it all of her life, even before the depths of her despair; whenever she was waiting for a train, the intrusive thought always seemed to find a way to the forefront of her mind. She couldn't help it, and by the time she actually got on the train she had forgotten all about it, and the thought never crossed her mind again, until she stood on the platform again.

Now that she was actually on the train tracks, they appeared ordinary and unremarkable—just as she had imagined them to be. Yet, the peculiarity remained. Glancing down the tracks, Lydia felt a subtle yearning for a train to suddenly emerge. She secretly hoped that she wouldn't have enough time to react, to ponder or attempt to evade its path. Maybe then the homeless woman could tell everyone of Lydia's heroics. That way nobody would know she committed suicide. Maybe that would be better. But the train never materialised. Lydia made her way back to the platform, and approached the homeless woman. As she draped the blanket over the shivering woman, she gently rubbed her shoulders.

'Don't get yourself killed for me, dear.' the homeless woman whispered, 'I'm not worth it.'

'You're worth more than the likes of them,' said Lydia, 'You're frozen! Is there anywhere you could stay tonight?'

The homeless woman shivered as she clutched her worn blanket tighter around her body. She managed a weak, yet appreciative smile in Lydia's direction.

'I'll be all right. You've done enough. More than most people would have.'

Lydia reached into the inside pocket of her jacket and pulled out her purse. She took out the five twenty-pound notes in the inner pocket and handed them to the woman. Lydia hadn't used cash in a long time, and she certainly wasn't going to spend them tonight. The homeless woman's eyes lit up.

'I know it's not life-changing,' said Lydia, 'but it might be enough for a night or two. A hot meal, even.' The homeless woman stared at Lydia as if she were on the verge of tears. Lydia could tell that the homeless woman wanted to question Lydia further. Lydia walked away before she could, heading to the platform's edge.

A sultry voice came from the tannoy above. 'Attention passengers, the next train approaching the platform is a direct service to Manchester Piccadilly and will not be stopping at this station. Please ensure you are behind the yellow line for your safety. Thank you for your cooperation.'

This was it; Lydia's. The sound of the approaching train grew louder and more distinct, its hum intensifying. Through the mist, the train's lights

appeared like the sinister eyes of a lurking demon, reminiscent of what Lydia thought she had seen at the nostalgia shop. She scanned the platform once more, ensuring she was alone. She was.

Lydia took a few measured steps toward the yellow line, the train now roaring in her ears, the wind biting at her skin. Her foot crossed the yellow line, her toes hovering precariously over the edge. She was anxious, just as she was atop the building, but this time she was ready. The fear was gone and Lydia felt weightless, her eyes closed tightly.

The train charged closer to Lydia, its thundering presence drowning out all other sounds, the gusts around her nearly hurricane-like.

‘Lydia’ a voice whispered. She couldn’t tell if it were a voice in her head or somebody trying to warrant her attention. She tried to ignore it. ‘Lydia’ the voice cried again. Her eyes shot open.

On the opposite side of the platform a man stood, as if he were simply waiting for his train to commute to work. He was a plump gentleman, perhaps in his mid-forties. He looked harmless, but he stared at Lydia with an awkward, quizzical expression on his face. He attempted a smile, but it was equally awkward. *Who the fu—*

The train zoomed past, thundering through the platform. Lydia jolted backwards. She lost her balance and fell bottom-first onto the platform floor. She tried to scramble to her feet but it was too late. She looked up as the train left the station.

Fuck! she sighed. She could still see the innocuous gentleman through each window of the train, as it zipped by in a blur. He was still staring. He was still smiling. Lydia rose to her feet and dusted herself off. She looked across to the opposite side of the platform, expecting an awkward confrontation with the stranger who had nearly witnessed her jump in front of the speeding train. But the platform was empty. The man, like the train, had vanished as suddenly as he had appeared, *Shit!* she exhaled.

‘Attention passengers. The next incoming train is the service from Liverpool Lime Street and will be terminating here. Please note that due to the holiday season, this will be the last train tonight.’

Lydia couldn’t risk any more interruptions. She was certain that if she hadn’t been interrupted, she would have made the leap. It wasn’t like the rooftop experience. This time, it would have been easier, over more quickly. Lydia jumped down to the tracks and followed them out of the platform, venturing into the darkness of the night. She felt aggrieved that the night

hadn't gone to plan. First her life was a mess, and now her death was becoming one, too. It was fucking annoying. It felt as if she was being pranked and thousands of strangers were watching her, pissing their pants at how pathetic she was.

She walked down the tracks until she found herself in a grassy, remote area—a countryside oasis hidden within the urban landscape of Manchester suburbia. This was it. She was alone. No more distractions. She could hear the train rumble in the distance. She looked down the track. Through the mist she could just about make out the headlights. She laid herself down onto the tracks. *Brilliant*, she thought. Now she wouldn't even have to jump.

Lydia gazed up at the star-filled sky. In spite of her depression, she couldn't help but feel a sense of awe and wonder. The vast expanse of stars seemed to stretch on forever, each one glowing brightly against the dark canvas, and Lydia felt so small and insignificant laying beneath them. She hadn't looked up at the stars in a long time. She did a lot when she was younger. It was the only part of her family staycation in the Lake District that she could still remember, albeit vaguely.

She remembered her dad telling her that stars were secret messages from God. He said that whenever he felt a little depressed, the stars reminded him of the

natural beauty in this world. Lydia wasn't religious, neither was her mum—but her dad was. Particularly towards the end. Lydia didn't believe that stars were messages from God, or that they were reminders of the beauty in the world; she never had—and besides, technically speaking, stars aren't part of this world. But she still liked looking at them. She never corrected her dad, or told him what she really thought about religion, or the stars. If they made him happy, they made her happy. After he died, Lydia remembered looking up at the stars every night for months. Hoping that maybe somehow her dad would send her a secret message. But he never did.

The roar of the train intensified. It sounded like feedback from an amp when an electric guitar gets too close. It scolded Lydia's ears. She clenched her fists, her nails digging deep into her palms. She tilted her neck towards the oncoming train. It was close. It was fast. Her heart pounded in her chest. The track beneath her vibrated, the tremors seeping into her bones.

Lydia glanced back at the stars one last time, knowing that if any secret message were to appear now, it would be too late for her to reply. She looked back at the train. It was closing in on her. She shut her eyes as tightly as she could.

And then everything fell silent, and darkness enveloped her.

It's done, Lydia thought. I'm dead.

'You all right there, love?' shouted a voice. The voice was cheery, with a distinct Northern accent.

Lydia opened her eyes. She was still lying on the tracks amidst the hidden countryside on the outskirts of Manchester. She looked down the track. The train was gone. She looked the other way. It wasn't there either.

'What are you doing down there?'

Lydia pushed herself upright, her heart and head still pounding. She gawked at the man standing before her.

'You!' she snarled. It was the same innocuous looking gentleman that she had seen on the opposite platform. A hundred questions swirled in her mind as she tried to make sense of his sudden appearance. The gentleman was annoyingly upbeat, almost swaying back-and-forth at the same tempo in which Lydia's migraine pulsed against her temple. His eyes crinkled at the corners as he looked at Lydia, who didn't know what to say. He once again offered Lydia an awkward smile. The gentle curve of his lips somehow made Lydia ever more infuriated. She wanted to scream as loud as she could, but she refrained. She didn't speak. She waited for him to say something, or perhaps scurry

away like some unwanted pest in the garden. But he didn't.

Instead, he chuckled. It grated on Lydia's ears. He took a few steps towards Lydia, towering above her as she sat on the tracks. The moon cast a gentle light behind him, turning his face into a dark silhouette against the night sky, as if he were adorned with a halo. Extending a hand to help Lydia to her feet, he introduced himself, his voice warm and cheerful.

'The name's Hugh.'

CHAPTER FOUR

WHO'S HUGH?

Lydia studied the ID card dangling from the Network Rail lanyard around the neck of the man seated opposite her.

‘Your last name is Justhew?’ she asked incredulously.

The gentleman nodded as he glanced around the bustling café. He smacked his lips. ‘Where’s that pint?’

Lydia knocked on the table they were sitting at, drawing Hugh’s attention back to her.

‘So, your name is Hugh Justhew?’ she said. Hugh ignored her. His focus again shifting to the whereabouts of the pint he ordered several minutes ago. ‘What were you doing on the tracks anyway, Hugh Justhew?’

‘Me?’ Hugh exclaimed, taken aback. ‘That’s bloody rich!’ Hugh looked as if he were going to say something to Lydia, but instead he just let out an odd growl. ‘Where’s that bastard pint?’ Hugh rifled off swear words under his breath in his strong Northern accent. The bright purple Network Rail lanyard added a touch of colour to his otherwise monochromatic

outfit. He wore sturdy black boots, black cargo trousers, a black denim jacket over a black knitted jumper. Lydia was fairly certain even his socks and underwear would be black. Yet, despite his choice of clothing, Lydia gathered that Hugh Justhew was totally harmless. It was this that led Lydia to accept his invitation to join him at a nearby café, but only for a quick one. After Hugh found her out on the tracks, Lydia felt she had little ground to refuse his offer.

The café was a stylish and contemporary space, its bright neon lights casting an energetic glow across the room. The expansive windows overlooked the bustling city centre, where patrons could observe strangers as they passed through. Jazz music quietly played in the background, only heightening the stylish ambiance. The air was filled with laughter and animated conversation, as people mingled and enjoyed their drinks at sleek, high-top tables—except for Hugh and Lydia, whose beverages still hadn't arrived.

‘And on the platform. I saw you on the platform too,’ said Lydia. She had encountered Hugh twice tonight. ‘Who are you? Are you following me? What happened to the—’ *Train*, Lydia thought. *Better not ask that*. He'd probably think she was crazy. Maybe she was. Trains don't just disappear.

‘I was just making sure the bloody tracks were safe!’ replied Hugh, ‘It’s a cold night and sometimes they just fucking freeze up on you. I think the more pressing question is what you were doing out on the tracks, young lady?’

The term ‘young lady’ sent shivers down Lydia’s spine, but she supposed it was better than Hugh knowing her name. ‘I think it was fairly obvious what I was doing—or at least what I was trying to do.’

Hugh shrugged his shoulders, seemingly genuinely unsure of what Lydia was implying. He stared at her, leaning forward slightly as if asking her to elaborate. Lydia’s irritation grew at Hugh’s cluelessness. She wasn’t sure if he was playing dumb, or if he just was. She leaned in closer to him.

‘Not that it’s any of your business, but I was trying to kill myself,’ Lydia whispered.

Hugh looked serious for a second, then his face burst into a broad grin. He let out a small chuckle. Hugh’s laughter irritated Lydia. Even his small chuckle was loud and sharp. She grimaced at him with a perplexed expression.

‘Don’t know why you’re whispering, love.’ Hugh laughed, ‘Everybody’s too immersed in their own miserable lives to worry about yours.’ He chuckled even more loudly. Before Lydia could think

of any sort of response, Hugh held out a finger in her face.

‘Here! I’ll prove it to you.’ Hugh declared. He cleared his throat and sat upright in his chair, as if preparing to perform.

‘I can’t stay and chat too long!’ Hugh announced loudly, ensuring that everyone in the café could hear him, though he didn’t address them directly. ‘I’m actually planning to jump off Beetham Tower a bit later.’ He paused, looking around at the people in the café. They ignored him. ‘Yep! That’s right! I’m going to hurl myself off and fall to my gruesome death.’

Lydia sank deeper into her chair, hoping to avoid any strange looks from the patrons. However, they never came. Everyone in the café carried on as normal. Not a single person batted an eyelid. Hugh was right.

‘Yes, my time has come. I’ll commit suicide because nobody ever pays me any attention or cares what I have to s—’

‘—All right, Hugh,’ Lydia interrupted, rolling her eyes and waving her hand towards Hugh, hoping he would shut the fuck up. ‘You’ve made your point!’

So, what? Hugh was right. Perhaps nobody cared, but for Lydia, that was just another reason for Lydia to kill herself. Nobody cared about anybody but themselves anymore. They were selfish and self-

obsessed—especially people Lydia's own age. It seemed like they'd only ever do a good deed if it meant they could get a few more followers. Take the homeless woman at the train station; anyone else would have filmed the entire encounter. They'd have shoved their phone in her face as they handed her the money. They'd treat her like a prop—like some sort of side character.

Everybody these days seems to go about their lives with the illusion that they're the *main character*—whatever the fuck that meant. Lydia never felt like the main character. She was merely a player in other people's stories; her mum's, Mr Chambers', and probably even Hugh's. And in death too—she was sure the news of her suicide would be treated with mere anecdotal interest and nothing more. Hugh continued to grin as he stared at her.

'I really don't know why you're all shy about it now.' he said, 'If a train had come whilst you were lying on the tracks, your face would be plastered across all of tomorrow's newspapers—front page, no doubt. Not to mention the countless posts on social media. And the delays! The delays! They'd have been held up for God knows how many hours!' His annoyance made Lydia smile, temporarily pushing her troubles aside. 'That's a bit selfish if you ask me!'

‘I didn’t,’ replied Lydia, her smile fading slightly. She liked Hugh. She wasn’t sure why, but she did. He was brash, but not in a nasty way—and if nothing else, he seemed genuine; and that seemed to be a surprisingly rare trait to find in people these days.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting’ said the waitress who stopped at their table. ‘Who’s having the Guinness?’ She plonked the frothy Guinness and the Coke down between Lydia and Hugh. Hugh immediately grabbed his pint of Guinness and took a desperate swig, as if he had been craving it all day. Lydia glanced towards the pretty waitress, attempting to catch her attention with a warm smile, but the waitress was too preoccupied to notice.

THUD! Lydia shuddered as Hugh smacked the empty pint glass on the table.

‘Thirsty?’ asked Lydia with a wry smile as she went to pick up her glass. Hugh surveyed the room as if he was ready to order again. Lydia’s gaze dropped to Hugh’s hands. Hugh wore black leather gloves—an odd choice, even with the chill inside the café, but not strange enough for Lydia to question him about it. Perhaps under different circumstances, on another night, she might have.

‘I suppose train delays aren’t too bad. They can be sorted out quickly,’ said Hugh nonchalantly. ‘It’s the

jumpers on motorways that really get to me. So much bloody mess! And the traffic! Fuck me! You can't move for hours sometimes. Don't get why they can't just do it at home in private.'

'Oh, I'm sorry if my suicide would have inconvenienced you,' said Lydia 'But you're right.' She hesitated for a moment, before taking a sip of her Coke. 'You know, I've got a rope at home. I'll take your advice and just top myself when I get back, so I'm out of your hair.'

'Cheers, I appreciate that,' said Hugh. He looked at Lydia as if he was uncertain whether she was joking or not. His brow furrowed a little, and he looked as if he were going to ask something serious.

'It sounds like you're around a lot of suicides, Hugh?' said Lydia.

'I guess you could say that,' he replied.

'Wonder if it has anything to do with your personality,' said Lydia. She sipped her drink with a smug smirk on her face, but it soon faded.

'Why are you doing it anyway? If you're serious.' Hugh asked, 'Why would a young girl with so much of her life ahead of her want to go and throw it all away?'

Lydia continued to sip on her beverage, more out of reluctance to answer Hugh's question than any real thirst.

'This may interest you,' said Hugh. 'I read the other day that five hundred people killed themselves on New Year's Eve, last year. Wonder what it is about the new year that makes people so depressed?' Lydia didn't answer.

'Monotony, I'd guess.' said Hugh, 'Maybe it's the realisation that just because you've got a brand-new calendar, everything is still just as shitty as before—' Hugh interrupted himself. 'Not that I'm saying your life is shitty or anything.' Lydia laughed.

'You're not far off.' said Lydia, 'But, no, I don't think monotony is the reason. I actually believe things change, eventually. But people don't have the heart to wait for it.' Lydia glanced around the café at the patrons, all smiling and laughing with one another, seemingly carefree and upbeat. 'I think the reason people kill themselves on New Year's Eve is that everyone else seems so bloody happy. And when everyone else is happy, and you're not... Well, it just doesn't seem fair.' Lydia looked down at her drink. She twirled her paper straw slowly with her finger. 'And that's when you start feeling really lonely.'

'No friends or family?' Hugh asked.

‘Not any that would care if I died tomorrow,’ replied Lydia.

Hugh looked as if he was going to challenge that notion, but Lydia interrupted him before he could even start.

‘If I did top myself in the privacy of my home, as you so generously and eloquently suggested, I doubt anyone would even notice.’ said Lydia, shifting upright in her chair, ‘Not for a few weeks, anyway. At least!’

‘Something you think about a lot, I take it?’ asked Hugh.

‘Oddly, no. I’ve known for a few months that I was going to kill myself. Since I bought the rope, really,’ said Lydia, still half wondering where it was. ‘Now I just think about other things, like how to format a suicide note or what will be the last song I hear.’ Lydia laughed, as if it were trivial—and as trivial as it was, it was still important to her. ‘I hope it’s something cool. The last song I hear, I mean—just imagine if you just dropped dead in your house or flat or wherever you lived. Six days later, your neighbours realise that they haven’t seen you all week and they start to get a little suspicious. A few more days pass and they start to smell something. The next day, some tosser who works for the council comes to inspect your place. They find your corpse; but not only that ... They look down at

your record player to see that you've been listening to the Steps' greatest hits album.' Lydia grimaced with disgust. Hugh laughed.

'You know, I can think of worse anthems to go out to,' said Hugh. Lydia began to laugh herself. They both stopped laughing and Hugh looked deep into Lydia's eyes, as if he were looking at her soul. She wondered what he was thinking. Maybe Hugh thought she was an idiot for wanting to kill herself, or maybe he didn't think she was serious about it. Or maybe he didn't give two shits.

'Look, I know it's not really my place,' said Hugh, 'but are you sure?'

'Am I sure about what?' Lydia asked.

'About really wanting to kill yourself.'

'Oh, I get it,' Lydia half-snarled. 'This is the part where you try to convince me that life is worth living, and tell me of all the wonderful things I'd be leaving behind.'

'Would it work?' he asked.

Lydia clenched her lips and shook her head.

'I guess I'll leave it then,' said Hugh, before rising to his feet and straightening his jacket. He reached into his pocket and pulled out some cash and put it on the table. He turned to leave.

‘You think I shouldn’t though, don’t you?’ Lydia asked.

‘What does it matter what I think?’ said Hugh. ‘I’m a stranger you met half an hour ago. I shouldn’t be telling you how to live your life. Or, die your death, as it were.’ He glanced around the café. ‘Maybe we’re all trying to kill ourselves anyway. We drink. Cancer. We smoke. Cancer. We use our phones and tiny particles of radiation slowly give us—you guessed it—cancer. Maybe we’re all suicidal; most of us are just blissfully unaware of it.’

‘Well, at least a rope isn’t slow. It doesn’t toy with the idea of death.’ said Lydia, ‘It summons it!’

‘I guess so,’ said Hugh. ‘Anyway, I should really be off. It’s a busy night for me. One of the busiest of the year, actually. But it was really nice meeting you. Maybe I’ll see you around sometime.’ Lydia laughed, catching Hugh off-guard.

‘I wouldn’t count on it,’ she said.

‘Ah, of course!’ said Hugh, ‘Well, I guess just—bye, then.’ Hugh smiled and walked towards the café exit. Lydia watched him disappear into the dark night, unsure where he was going or what he would be doing. But that wasn’t important. She knew what she would be doing, and that was all that mattered. She had to find that fucking rope. She finished her drink.

A hotel shaped building block, a train and now a rope, she thought, giggling inside. At this point, it felt like she was going through Monopoly and Cluedo pieces—desperately trying to find a suitable method of suicide. How long before she was trying to kill herself with a candlestick or a fucking top hat? No, this had to work. It had to!

CHAPTER FIVE

SHELF LIFE

Lydia entered the code to the building foyer secretively, still a little suspicious that somebody or something was watching her. She stepped inside and shut the door behind her. It was much warmer inside than out. The building seemed quiet—perhaps all her neighbours were out partying. She walked to her ground floor flat. The door was marked with 1A, which always seemed a bit odd to Lydia as the ground floor only had one apartment. All the other floors had two apartments, at least.

As she slid in the key to enter her flat, she heard a faint tapping. She turned. Mr Havers, her elderly neighbour, stood in the cold outside trying to get inside. He pushed the buttons on the access pad and pushed the door forward, but it wouldn't open. He tried again but it just didn't work, no matter how hard he tried.

Mr Havers lived in apartment 4A, a few floors above Lydia. Mr Havers was in great shape for his age; he was as skinny as a fretboard, so much so that he looked like he may blow away in the wind if he didn't get inside quick enough. He had a white beard and wore

a long green coat, which didn't seem to match the rest of his outfit.

Lydia scurried to the door. She pulled open the door and held it open for him. He wiped his feet on the carpet as he stumbled in, the cold wind blowing into the building. Lydia shivered as she pushed the door shut.

'Thank you, Lydia.' said Mr Havers, 'I can never use that darned thing.' Mr Havers was trembling a little, perhaps from the cold. He held a large carrier bag, which he placed on the floor. It sat open a little. Lydia peeked inside. The bag was filled with an abundance of snacks; several chocolate bars, pistachio nuts, popcorn. He smiled towards Lydia as he took off his coat.

'Do you need a hand with that, Mr Havers?' asked Lydia.

'No, no, no.' said Mr Havers, 'I've got it.'

He looked down at his coat in his hands, looking a little perplexed. He started to put it back on. 'I'm just going to nip to the corner shop. Do you need anything?' he asked, as his arms slipped through the sleeves of his coat.

'I think you've already been to the corner shop, Mr Havers. This is your bag.' she said, as she picked up the carrier bag and handed it to him. He hesitantly took it. When he opened it, his eyes lit up like a child on Christmas morning.

‘Ah-Ha! All my favourites! How did you know?’. Mr Havers held the bag tightly with a grin on his face. ‘Where are you going? Somewhere nice?’

‘Oh, not really, Mr Havers,’ said Lydia. ‘How about you? Are you doing anything to celebrate New Year?’

‘I’ve not heard you for a while’ said Mr Havers, ‘The piano!’

‘Oh, I guess I’ve just been busy with coursework’ said Lydia, which wasn’t true. ‘If it’s ever too loud please just let me know.’

‘No, no, no! Not at all dear. I love listening to you play. It’s nice being reminded that I’m not alone in this building sometimes.’ They smiled at one another. Mr Havers began walking up the stairs, ‘Seventy-seven!’ he shouted from the tenth or so step. ‘Next year I’ll be seventy-seven!’ He sounded like he didn’t quite believe the notion.

‘Well, you don’t look it, Mr Havers,’ said Lydia, ‘Are you doing anything nice tonight?’

‘Family should be arriving any moment.’ Mr Havers said, with a wide grin ‘Oh, I can’t wait to see them. It’s been far too long.’

‘That sounds lovely. Give them all my best, Mr Havers.’

‘How many times have I told you? Call me Chris.’ said Mr Havers.

‘Sorry. It’s just a habit, I guess’ Lydia replied.

‘How about you, dear? I bet you’ll be doing something exciting tonight!’

‘Good night, Chris.’ said Lydia, smiling. He trundled up the spiral staircase, humming a tune that Lydia didn’t recognise.

I bet you’ll be doing something exciting tonight. Lydia smirked. Well, if you call learning how to tie a noose and quietly killing yourself exciting, then yes—she was in for a riveting evening. She slid her key back into the door of her flat. She entered and closed the door quickly behind her, before any of her other neighbours appeared. She had a quick peer around the room to see if her rope was somewhere glaringly obvious, hoping it may just appear out of nowhere ... no such luck. It seemed wherever she had placed it when she brought it home three months ago was not glaringly obvious—but it was here somewhere amongst her other quirky finds and titbits; it had to be. The question was where?

Lydia searched in every drawer, yanking each one out of its unit to get a better look. She took out all of her clothes from her wardrobe and placed them on the bed, hoping the rope would be tucked away in a nook at the back. She looked under her bed, in the

kitchen cupboards and even crawled behind her record collection. By the time she was finished, her once pristine flat looked as if it had been ransacked by burglars. But she still couldn't find the rope.

She played out the scene in her head, as if she had just come home from *The Time Machine*, having just bought the rope. She walked back into the lobby, and retraced her steps from there. She peered at the shared space where each resident had a personal locker and a small cubbyhole for mail. It wasn't in there—it wouldn't fit. Her neighbours' cubbyholes overflowed with Christmas cards and junk mail, although the distinction between the two blurred in Lydia's mind. She assumed that the majority of her neighbours must have been away for the holidays. She couldn't help but think of the shock that awaited them upon their return, when they discovered the news about the girl downstairs. Lydia didn't know any of them particularly well, and she wondered if they would even care at all—save for the impact it might have on the property value.

Lydia returned to her flat, holding an imaginary rope in her hands.

'Where would I put this rope?' she mumbled.

She stretched on her tiptoes, scanning the top of her cube unit that housed her treasured record collection. All she found was a layer of dust and a few

cobwebs—no rope there. She grumbled in frustration. She checked behind the television. It rested on a small TV stand beneath a framed film poster of *Grosse Pointe Blank*. It wasn't there either.

'Where else?' she asked, looking at the two-dimensional images of John Cusack and Minnie Driver. They both stared at her but neither of them bothered to reply. Lydia leapt over her coffee table, dropping to her hands and knees as she crawled towards the sofa, hoping that the rope would be there.

The space beneath the sofa was dark, but there was a small gap between the floor and the bottom of the sofa; just about big enough to hide under, regardless of whether you were a person or a rope. She waved her arm around, hoping her palm would miraculously collide with a carrier bag, or a cardboard box, or that her fingers would brush against the rough, braided edge of a rope. However, her frantic hand found nothing but empty air.

Lydia sank further to the floor, her face resting against the cold wooden surface, her arm spread out underneath the sofa. Her fingers grazed the pine wood flooring beneath her sofa. She felt a cut in the otherwise smooth surface. It was like a divot or a marking of some sort. She traced it with her fingertip, noticing how it started straight before taking a sudden turn. The

marking continued, smooth for a moment before she felt another indentation adjacent to it, and then another. Lydia jumped back from the floor, knocking the back of her head on the sofa.

‘Fuck!’ she grumbled, rubbing the area she had bumped. She pushed the sofa outward to get a clearer view. It was heavy, but she managed to budge it a little.

As her sofa scraped across the floor, she saw the number seven etched into her floor. Her hands were sore and she panted a little. She inhaled before sliding the sofa along a little further. Next to the seven was a two, and then another seven. Her eyes hovered over the numbers etched into the wood floor: 7-2-7.

‘What the fuck?’ she muttered. The numbers seemed to mock her. All night, they’d been teasing and taunting her. She looked around, but she was still alone. She gulped. As much as the etchings frightened her, she was curious—not only about what they meant, but how they got there and why they were following her. She crouched down and traced her index finger over the numbers. Her finger trembled. The lights flickered. Lydia looked up to the lights which began to strobe like a dance floor. After a couple of flashes, the lights went back to normal, as if nothing had ever happened. But it had. Lydia saw it, and she couldn’t shake the sensation that she was being watched. It was as if someone,

somewhere, somehow, knew precisely what these numbers meant, and what they wanted from her. BANG!

Lydia jumped up. She turned. Something had fallen from the large cube. She turned her head slowly and saw a 12-inch vinyl record sleeve on the floor. She cautiously took a few steps closer. It was *Hello*, by Lionel Richie. It was one that dad had given her, but she never listened to it because it had a big scratch and always jumped back to the intro. Luckily, it was only a Lionel Richie record so she didn't particularly care. The cover was everything that epitomised the eighties; Lionel Richie stood there, wearing a blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves, leaving only one button fastened near his belly button. His shirt was tucked tightly into his denim jeans, adorned with a gleaming belt. Even the fonts looked like something you'd only see forty years ago. The record lay on the floor, face up, as though staring directly at her.

Lydia's hand trembled as she reached out to pick up the vinyl. She scraped it off the floor and placed the record back onto the shelf. But as soon as she did, another record dropped to the floor. This time, it was a vinyl copy of *Hello* by the glam rock band Hello. Lydia's heart pounded in her chest. She picked it up slowly. The cover screamed seventies. Four band

members, three mullets, two plaid shirts and probably only one song worth listening to. She looked around her flat, as if waiting for a monster to emerge from the shadows, but she was still alone. Whoever, or whatever, was manipulating these records seemed intent on greeting Lydia—perhaps with a friendly hello, although there was nothing remotely friendly about the encounter so far. She heard a creak.

‘Is somebody there?’ Lydia whispered. ‘Mum?’ No reply. ‘Dad?’ No reply. The eerie silence of the room only amplified her sense of dread. She glanced around, her eyes scanning every corner, every shadow, searching for any signs of an intruder or a hidden presence. But all she saw were familiar objects in her once-comfortable living room, now transformed into a space of fear and uncertainty.

She looked back at the *Hello* record she held in her hands. Her mouth felt dry. She slid the record back into its rightful place—the eighth record in the fourth block.

‘Hello’ Lydia whispered, her voice feeble and soft.

A glossy, white record slid out from the bottom row, furthest to the right. Lydia’s eyes darted towards it. She couldn’t quite make out the album from the back

cover. She raced towards it. Her fingertips grasped at its edges as she turned it around.

Hi, How are You—a rare gatefold copy of Daniel Johnston’s unfinished album. A small cartoon frog-like creature on the front stared back at her, its expression seemingly laughing at her predicament. Lydia’s hands were shaking, but she couldn’t stop them.

Part of her wanted to drop the record and flee her flat. She could run upstairs to the comforting presence of Mr Havers and his family, or sprint straight out of the front door; not stopping until she reached the bustling city centre. As much as Lydia hated crowds and strangers, there’s safety in numbers if nothing else. Yet, another part of Lydia was exhilarated.

‘Fine. I’m fine,’ said Lydia, ‘Although, there’s a slight chance I’ve gone—’

Another album plummeted from the top row, narrowly missing her head before landing with a thud onto the floor, directly where she stood.

Crazy by Gnarls Barkley.

‘Yeah, exactly. Crazy.’ she said. ‘Is this really happening?’

A record shot out from the unit.

Yes by Yes.

‘Fuck.’ Lydia muttered, ‘This—This is,’

Another record spat out.

Bad by Michael Jackson.

‘Who are you?’ Lydia shouted, trying her best to conceal the fear coursing through her. A record from the centre of the unit slowly inched its way forward. Lydia took a few hesitant steps closer and snatched the album before it could fall to the floor.

Nobody, was scrawled on the cover, in red, bloody letters. It was an album from Chief Keef. She hurled it to the ground.

‘What do you want?’ cried Lydia, her voice tinged with exasperation, her breath catching between each word. Eerie strains of static blared from her ’96 mustard Crosley Cruiser. Lydia covered her ears tightly. The familiar words of Peter Fonda’s sampled voice echoed through her flat.

‘We wanna get loaded. And we wanna have a good time. And that’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna have a good time. We’re gonna have a party!’

The loud horns of Primal Scream’s *Loaded* blasted around Lydia, engulfing her flat in a cacophony of noise. It played at 45RPM, instead of its intended setting of 33. It was faster, higher pitched and now sounded much more ominous than Lydia had recalled. Lydia retreated backwards as the music seemed to get louder and louder. She fell to the ground, landing onto the carving. She crawled towards the power cord and

yanked it out of the wall socket. The music stopped. The lights above her gradually dimmed until a subdued glow remained.

‘Well, what did you do that for?’ a woman’s voice quivered. Lydia tilted her head around slowly.

‘I’m sorry, doll. I had to,’ a man’s voice replied. The television had flickered to life, casting a sinister glow through Lydia’s flat. She didn’t recognise the film on the screen, nor the actors in it. It was black-and-white and looked like an old romance movie. The television began to flip through channels, stopping on random stations.

‘You turned it off!’ shouted an aggravated policeman. The channel flipped again.

‘You’re making me awfully angry,’ said a sadistic-looking housekeeper.

Lydia cowered on the floor behind the sofa, glancing over the cushion to see the television screen. The volume increased gradually and the static from the unused channels filled the room with white noise. Lydia’s eyes darted around the room, searching for the remote control. It rested on the arm of the sofa. Nobody was touching it—yet the television continued to channel surf seemingly by itself. She grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. The room plunged back into darkness.

‘Enough!’ she yelled, rising to her feet, ‘I don’t know who you are or what you want, but this ends now.’

Her words hung in the air, unanswered. The window burst open and a sudden gust of wind blew through the room. The curtains billowed and the record sleeves fluttered. Lydia gasped as the wind whipped around her, tousling her hair and chilling her to the bone. She ran towards the window and shut it tightly. She turned back. *Smash Hits* magazines lay strewn on the floor, their pages spluttering open. Film posters ripped from the walls—fortunately, her framed *Grosse Pointe Blank* poster was safe, but the same couldn’t be said for *Clerks* or *Office Space*. Records from her once meticulous collection spilled from the unit onto the floor. Lydia looked around at the mess with pressed lips and stern eyebrows. The music blared again. The standby light on the Crosley Cruiser flickered to life, and the cacophony of *Screamadelica* trumpeted and bellowed at Lydia.

But—But, I unplugged it, thought Lydia. Her eyes darted to the cord. The cord was still unplugged from the socket, but it somehow still played. Lydia gulped. She rubbed the back of her head. And then the front. Her head felt like it was going to explode. She dropped to the floor; sobbing into her shaky hands.

‘What are you crying for?’ a voice demanded, as the TV flickered to life once again.

‘I think she’s scared,’ another said.

Lydia’s head pounded as the barrage of sound and fury continued, her ears ringing from the onslaught. She felt powerless. She had to get out. She stood up and sprinted towards the door. She could feel the cold sweat on her forehead. She yanked the door open, but it was locked from the other side. She pulled as hard as she could, but she couldn’t force the door open. She ran to the window. She pushed it up, but it wouldn’t budge. Her heart raced even faster.

‘Please!’ she screamed. ‘Mr Havers! Mr Havers! Can you hear me? I need help.’

Her eyes darted around the room, looking for any kind of escape—but there was no way out. She tried again for the door, pulling the handle with as much force as she could muster.

‘You can’t just leave,’ a voice bellowed from the TV screen.

‘Please let me go!’ Lydia cried.

‘Without saying bye, too. Well, gosh darn it!’ another replied.

‘Please!’ she screamed. The music got louder, drowning out the voices from the television. She scraped the door as she fell to the floor.

‘Sorry.’ she said, ‘Just tell me what you want. Just tell me what you want from me, and I’ll do it.’

The music stopped; and the television too. Even the lights got a little brighter. It was as if the supernatural phenomena had given up, or maybe Lydia had pissed it off even more. It was finally silent.

‘What do you fucking want from me?’ Lydia screamed.

A record spat out at Lydia from the top of the shelf. She turned, slowly. She recognised the cover immediately. The Beatles. It was one of the first records her dad made her sit down and listen to, all the way through. She had obliged, as she played with the sleeve. Looking at the four young men standing in semaphore.

‘Help?’ Lydia asked, her throat dry and tingly. ‘You need h—help?’ Lydia felt odd. What had once threatened and tormented her, was now asking for help.

‘What do you need—what help?’ Lydia stammered.

Suddenly, she heard a creak. She turned to her left. The lid of her Chappell piano began to lift, as if by unseen hands. Dust scattered in the air from the lid. The melody began slowly, creeping into the room like a ghostly presence. The keys pressed down by themselves and the notes played aloud. It was *Help*. But

it wasn't pleasant-sounding like the original. It sounded haunting. Lydia gulped.

She couldn't help but hear the lyrics in her mind as the melody played: *I need somebody. Help! Not just anybody. Help! You know I need someone. Help!* She hummed along. Her voice was quiet and filled with trepidation. But she hoped whatever was watching her, whatever was playing, saw it as a sign of her willingness to help. The melody stopped.

'How?' Lydia asked. 'How can I help?'

The television came on once more. Lydia turned to watch. It was another black and white movie. A detective-type, impeccably dressed in a tailored suit, complete with a fedora and a long trench coat, stared at Lydia as if breaking the fourth wall. He had a cigarette perched on his lower lip, and a thick cloud of smoke seemed to float behind him.

'I need your help, kid,' the detective said in his thick New Yorker accent. 'I need you to crack this case. I need you to figure it out for me.'

'Figure what out?' Lydia asked. She crawled towards the etching, staring at it again. 'Seven. Twenty-Seven. This?'

'That's the one, sweetie.' said the detective.

'But! But I don't know what it means!' cried Lydia.

‘You must!’ said the detective.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t.’

‘But you must!’ cried the detective. More characters joined him on screen, all chanting at Lydia. The bickering lovers. The aggravated policeman. The sadistic housekeeper. They all gathered on screen and cried, ‘You must!’ It overwhelmed her. It was like they were surrounding her—like they were towering above her and screaming their chant at her as she sunk further and further into the floor where the markings were etched. She cowered away from the television.

‘I’m sorry!’ she cried. She reached for the remote control, her hand flapping in the air. She grabbed it, and pressed the power button firmly. She looked to the television. The image began to shrink, contracting into a smaller and smaller circle until they all disappeared into a black mirror.

‘Hey! I was watching that!’ a voice bellowed out.

Lydia gasped. She became paralysed with fear, her body stiff and unresponsive. This time, the voice wasn’t coming from the television or the record player. It was coming from her armchair. Somebody was there, Lydia knew it. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t speak, she couldn’t even scream.

CHAPTER SIX

THE UNLIKELY DETECTIVE

‘Fucking love that film, you know. Easily in my top ten,’ the voice said. As Lydia cautiously approached the armchair, she caught a glimpse of the stranger who sat there. It was a man. He leaned back into the armchair nonchalantly, as if he had every right to be in her home. She stood frozen. His eyes were still focused on the television despite nothing playing. Lydia strained to get a better look but his features were obscured by the shadows. And then, just as she was mustering the courage to confront him, he suddenly turned his head, his piercing gaze locking onto hers.

‘Where the fuck’s your rope?’ he asked.

‘Hugh?’ said Lydia. Her dry mouth hung open. Hugh’s innocuous face stared back at Lydia in a blasé fashion. He didn’t get up. His leg was folded over, and his arms were crossed.

‘What the Hell are you doing in my flat?’ shouted Lydia. Hugh chuckled to himself.

‘You’ve not lost your rope, have you, Lydia?’ he asked, rising to his feet. He stretched his legs as he took a look around the flat, callously stamping his black

boots all over the vinyl albums and Smash Hit magazines that were scattered on the floor.

‘What the fuck, Hugh! What’s going on?’ Lydia asked tentatively. ‘Who— Who are you?’ She felt like she was being watched by everybody in the world. As if she were on a reality TV show and everybody was laughing at her, and she couldn’t do anything about it.

‘Wait! You called me Lydia!’ she said, ‘How the fuck do you know my name, Hugh? I didn’t tell you my name.’

‘Oh! Didn’t you?’ said Hugh, still not paying Lydia much attention, as he moved around the flat.

‘Hugh!’ she screamed. He looked at her, dead in the eye with a stern facial expression.

‘Look, I’ve not got all night,’ Hugh replied, ‘It’s the busiest night of the year, and I’d honestly just love to get on—’

‘—Just tell me who you are, and what you’re doing in my flat,’ said Lydia.

‘Who am I?’ laughed Hugh, in a tone suggesting that Lydia should have already pieced everything together. Maybe she had, but she didn’t like the answer. Hugh began gesturing to himself. ‘All black. Busiest night of the year. It’s not clicking for you?’

Lydia shook her head, perhaps too frightened to respond out of fear she’d give the correct answer.

‘I’ll tell you what, and I don’t do this for just any old twat.’ said Hugh, ‘I’ll do my usual look for you.’

Hugh cracked his neck and rolled his eyes back into his skull. His skin turned an ash black colour, and his eyes darkened, becoming pits of emptiness. His trendy black attire suddenly hung off him as if they were rags. His human form started to contort and elongate until Hugh was now nine feet tall, his head almost touching the ceiling as he towered over Lydia. She cowered in his presence with a wide mouth and wider eyes. The sound of bones cracking echoed through the room. Hugh’s once fleshy face turned into an ivory skull, engulfed by a hooded cloak which seemed to materialise out of thin air. With each passing moment, he became more and more the picture of the harbinger of death until it was evident to Lydia the answer to her question. .

‘You’re...’ Lydia stammered. ‘You’re... the angel of Death.’

‘Ding! Ding! Ding!’ shouted Hugh sarcastically, as he started to transform back into his human manifestation.

‘Well, technically I’m not an angel, but you’re in the ballpark,’ he said, turning away from Lydia as if he were a little embarrassed or perhaps just disinterested

in the conversation. ‘That’s a lovely piano. Is that a Chappell? I’ve always wanted to play a Chappell.’

Hugh approached Lydia’s piano and lifted the lid. Hugh caressed the keys with his gloved hands. He sat on the stool and wiggled himself upright, as if he were a concert pianist. He then removed his gloves and threw them atop the piano. His fingers were bony, like that of a skeleton. There was no flesh on them. Lydia shuddered as his long and bony fingers pressed against the keys. He began to play the Funeral March.

‘It was you!’ said Lydia, storming towards the piano. ‘It was you pushing the records out.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Hugh scoffed, as he continued to play.

‘And the TV!’ shouted Lydia. ‘The piano!’

Hugh giggled under his breathe, but caught it just in time—Lydia still noticed though, and it really pissed her off.

‘And the numbers!’ Lydia screamed, ‘All night with those fucking numbers!’

Hugh hit a wrong note. ‘What numbers?’ he grunted.

‘The numbers. Seven. Twenty-Seven.’ she said.

‘Now that actually wasn’t me,’ said Hugh. Lydia grabbed the piano lid, threatening to drop it onto Hugh’s fingers.

‘The fucking numb—’ screamed Lydia.

Hugh pulled his fingers away from the keys.

‘—Lydia, I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ he said, almost with a whimper. Lydia turned and stretched her arms towards the etchings carved onto her wooden floor.

‘The fucking numbers, Hugh!’ Lydia turned, stretching her arms to the etchings carved deep into the floor. ‘You know! The text message! The page in the shop! The sheet music—’

‘—What are you talking about?’ he said. Hugh looked utterly puzzled. His brow furrowed and his mouth hung open slightly, as his body half turned on the piano stool.

‘You’re telling me you’ve never seen these numbers before?’ Lydia asked. Hugh got up from the piano stool and wandered over.

‘No, I haven’t,’ said Hugh, as he knelt down to get a closer look, scrutinising the area as if he were Ace Ventura embarking on a new case. He placed his dry, bony hand on the etching of the first *seven*, caressing it gently.

‘The edges are damp.’ he said, as he rose to his feet. Lydia remained kneeling.

‘And?’ she said.

‘Well, whoever fucking did this, did it tonight!’
Hugh stood up.

‘Oh, come one Hugh! It was you! It had—’

‘—Do you live alone?’ asked Hugh.

‘Yes, why?’ replied Lydia.

‘Just curious, is all,’ replied Hugh, stroking his chin. ‘And you’re absolutely positive that those numbers don’t mean anything to you at all?’ Lydia shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s a date? It would be American formatting. Do you know any yanks? Or maybe it’s an address—coordinates!’ His finger tapped against his chin. ‘No, I think coordinates are usually longer.’

‘Wait a minute!’ he said, staring at Lydia with a raised eyebrow, ‘If this is some sort of trick to cheat death, or to waste my time, to—’

‘It’s not me. I swear it’s not me.’ said Lydia, ‘But if it’s you...’ Lydia stood up and pointed her finger in Hugh’s face. ‘If it’s you! Just get it over with. I’m tired. And I don’t just mean tonight. I mean completely. I just can’t do it anymore. I don’t need to know.’

Hugh looked at Lydia sympathetically.

‘Look, Lydia. I’m ready when you’re ready,’ said Hugh, his voice tinged with disappointment that he couldn’t play detective any longer. He leaned back towards the carving, examining it once more before murmuring, ‘Peculiar, though. But if you don’t care, I

don't care. Just get your rope and I'll be out of your hair.'

'I can't find my rope. It's gone. And I know I had it,' said Lydia, her words barely escaping through her gritted teeth.

'No rope!' exclaimed Hugh. 'She doesn't have a rope. You're very insistent on wasting my time on my busiest night of the year!'

'Can't you just magic one?' asked Lydia.

'Can I just *magic* one? I'm the Grim Reaper, Lydia, not Harry Potter.' Hugh huffed. He reached into the pocket of his black hoody and pulled out his mobile phone. The phone was a typical smart phone with a black case, unsurprisingly. He placed his skeletal finger on the home button, hoping to unlock the device. The phone vibrated. 'Come on, you piece of shit.' He tried again.

'For fuck's sake! Come on you prick!' He tried his other hand. The phone vibrated again. 'I swear to God you Bastard! Fucking fine!' Hugh swiftly transformed his head into that of the stereotypical Grim Reaper. The phone dinged.

'Bastard!' exclaimed Hugh with a triumphant laugh, as he began swiping at his phone

'What are you doing?' asked Lydia nervously.

‘I’m just in a group chat with Santa and the Easter Bunny to see if they have any bright ideas on how I can magic you up a noose. They live for this shit,’ said Hugh, giggling to himself. ‘No, I can’t magic up a rope from thin air, but I can do the next best thing.’ Hugh flashed Lydia the screen. Order confirmation: one rope. Delivery: 1-2 hours.

‘Nobody in their right mind would deliver a rope on New Year’s Eve,’ said Lydia.

‘You want to fucking bet?’ said Hugh. ‘We’ll bet on it. What should we bet?’ Hugh glanced towards Lydia’s Chappell.

‘No!’ Lydia protested, ‘Not my piano!’

‘Well, what else is there?’ Hugh exclaimed as he tried to find a hidden gem amongst Lydia’s possessions. His eyes darted towards the pile of *Smash Hits* magazines, and then to some of the vinyl records on the floor. ‘What a load of shit. No wonder you want to kill yourself.’

‘It’s not shit.’ said Lydia!

‘Of course not,’ said Hugh, ‘But seriously, how are we going to kill two hours in this shithole?’ He wandered back over to the carved code in the floor, as if its mystery still piqued his interest. Maybe it wasn’t Hugh. He seemed more curious about it than Lydia was. She wondered why.

‘We could watch TV,’ said Lydia.

‘Hey, that’s a thought! Put it on channel 727. On the telly,’ said Hugh, facing the television with eagerness. Lydia hesitated for a moment before grabbing the remote. She turned the television on; it was on a static station. She held out the remote with her outstretched arm and pressed the numbers 7, 2, and 7. She waited. She glanced over to Hugh, who was leaning forward with great anticipation. She looked back to the TV. A small text box filled the bottom of the screen, reading *channel not found*. Fuck. She turned to Hugh, who looked disappointed. She turned the TV off and threw the remote control towards it. All of these unanswered questions were starting to royally piss her off.

‘Bugger,’ Hugh muttered. ‘I really thought that might be something.’ What else could we do? No!’ Hugh shot up to his feet. ‘No! What else do you do? If I wasn’t here, what would you be doing, right now?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Lydia.

‘Come on!’ he said.

‘I’d be committing suicide, Hugh.’

‘Okay, not right, right now! Like, on a normal night!’ said Hugh. Lydia’s eyes scanned the room, her gaze landing on the piano.

‘The piano?’ asked Hugh. Lydia shook her head.

‘Maybe, listening to the radio.’ she whispered. Hugh spotted the retro, boombox-inspired radio that sat atop Lydia’s piano. He raced over to it, scooped it up, and placed it firmly in Lydia’s hands.

‘Here!’ said Hugh, ‘Turn it on.’

Lydia twisted the knob to the right. The radio crackled to life, and the volume roared out with her mother’s station.

‘Okay! Let’s have some call-ins! I want to hear what you’re doing tonight. And what your resolutions are for—’ Caroline’s voice boomed from the radio.

‘7-2-7?’ asked Lydia.

Hugh nodded eagerly.

She moved the dial to the correct frequency. She leaned in closer. The radio played a dull hum. Whatever the answer to the puzzle was, it wasn’t on the television, and it wasn’t on the radio. Lydia suddenly had a swift thought—not about the code, but something else. She looked down at Hugh’s bony fingers.

‘What if you just touched me?’ Lydia asked.

‘Look, I’m all for killing a bit of time before this rope arrives, but it just wouldn’t feel right, feeling up a suicidal girl.’

‘No!’ screamed Lydia. ‘Not like that, you idiot!’ Hugh smirked.

‘I meant to kill me. Like, don’t people die when they’re touched by... you?’

‘Oh, you mean the touch of Death,’ said Hugh, a sly grin playing on his face.

Lydia nodded nervously.

‘We could try that, I suppose. Although, I must warn you. Even though it is quick, it’s still extremely painful.’ said Hugh, ‘Are you sure you’re okay with that?’

Lydia nodded again, steeling herself for the inevitable.

Hugh transformed back into the Grim Reaper, his towering figure casting an ominous shadow over Lydia. He took a few steps closer to her. She quivered in fear as he stretched out his bony hand towards her.

‘It’s time,’ he whispered ominously.

Lydia closed her eyes, as tightly as she could. She gulped. She could feel Hugh getting closer. She could feel the touch of Death. This was it. She wondered if there was an afterlife. If there was an angel of Death, then there could be an afterlife—but she hoped that there wasn’t. It was dark. She felt a cold touch on her forehead. It prodded her. And it prodded her again.

She opened her eyes to see Hugh back in his human form, sniggering away as he continued to prod Lydia in the forehead

‘Uh, sorry, Lydia. It seems I’ve misplaced my touch of death. Can you just pretend I did it?’ he said, trying not to laugh. Lydia slapped his hand away and shot him a deathly stare, with no effect. Hugh began to fidget under her gaze, hoping she might crack a smile at any given moment.

‘Yeah, that’s the look I usually get after a good poking,’ he said.

‘God, you really are useless,’ Lydia smirked.

‘That’s what they say too. After the poking.’

‘Can you stop saying the word poking, please?’ said Lydia, with a wry smile, ‘Aren’t you supposed to have a scythe?’

‘I do, but it’s a fucking apple cutter, love,’ Hugh replied nonchalantly. He moved around some more, looking for something to occupy his time. His eyes darted to the records on the floor. ‘*Help!* The fucking Beatles. That was actually one of the first records I ever bought. Of course, mine was on the Apple label. I’m not sure whatever happened to it.’

He glanced at Lydia’s vinyl collection as a whole, each record meticulously placed in square cubes, except for the few on the floor. The colourful spines lined up perfectly against one another. His eyes went wide and he let out a small but noticeable laugh, ‘You’ve got a great-looking collection here!’

‘Thanks,’ murmured Lydia. Hugh stroked the spines of the records. His touch was delicate. It was clear that, like her, he appreciated them as more than just pieces of vinyl enclosed in cheap cardboard sleeves. He looked as if he was trying to read the vertical album titles.

‘You have some great albums.’ said Hugh, ‘But I think *Help* is my favourite.’ He picked the *Help* album from of the floor with his bony fingertips, and slid it into a small gap in the fifth block.

‘No! No! No!’ shouted Lydia, rushing over to him. ‘Sorry, that doesn’t go there!’ She snatched the Beatles’ album from the ninth block and moved it to the fifth block.

‘Sorry,’ said Hugh. ‘I didn’t realise they were in any sort of order.’

‘Well, they are,’ huffed Lydia, somewhat annoyed. Hugh turned his attention back to the record collection.

‘They’re not alphabetical,’ mused Hugh, tapping his chin as if donning his Ace Ventura persona once more. He continued to analyse the records, as if their order held some hidden clue. ‘It’s not genre-specific. It’s not chronological either.’ Lydia shook her head. Hugh looked closer, and harder.

Lydia was certain that he wouldn't be able figure it out. Nobody could. It was her own Dewey Decimel system. It was personal to her, and her alone. Although, she supposed if anyone could figure that out it would probably be an angel of sorts. Hugh tapped his chin harder. Lydia got some sort of twisted enjoyment watching Hugh squirm. It seemed like this was yet another puzzle that he couldn't seem to solve.

'Are you sure they're in a fucking order?' asked Hugh.

'Yes! It's chronological. Well, they're sort of chronological,' Lydia admitted sheepishly. 'It's chronological to me, if that makes sense.'

Hugh looked at the collection with intrigue, nodding along as if he understood completely.

'Of course! That makes sense,' he said. 'And it really is a great collection.' Hugh moved closer to the fifth block, where Lydia had just inserted the Beatles album. He counted along the albums and stopped when he saw the spine.

'Lydia?' he said.

'Yes,' she said, nervously.

'Do you know where you've just put *Help*?' asked Hugh.

‘Right there,’ she replied, shrugging towards the fifth block, which was the furthest block to the right on the top row.

‘It’s the seventeenth record along in the fifth block,’ he said excitedly. Lydia was unsure what Hugh was getting at.

‘1, 2, 3, 4, 5!’ Hugh counted aloud, as he pointed along each block; ‘Top left, that’s number one. Then next to that is two.’

Lydia felt confused. Was she missing something? She was unsure if she was watching Hugh have some sort of breakdown out of boredom, or if she’d met someone with even worse OCD tendencies than her.

‘What are you on about Hugh?’ asked Lydia.

‘*Help!*’ shouted Hugh, ‘It’s the seventeenth record, in the fifth cube, Lydia! Five, seventeen!’

Lydia felt her eyes widened. Her mouth was slightly agape, as if she wanted to speak but words wouldn’t come. Instead, she could only repeat what Hugh had just said.

‘Five. Seventeen,’ she whispered, trembling. She looked down at the carving on the floor.

‘So, if *Help* is... five, seventeen.’ whispered Lydia. ‘What’s seven, twenty-seven?’

Hugh took a step back.

‘I don’t know, Lydia.’ said Hugh, ‘Why don’t you check?’ Lydia moved closer to the record collection. She inhaled.

‘1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7!’ She stopped her hand on the seventh cube, the second leftmost cube on the second row. She flipped through the records in the cube. Her fingers trembled as she moved each one along—stopping abruptly once she reached the twenty-seventh. Her finger was touching its tip as she tried to identify it from the spine, but she couldn’t. There were no words or markings on the spine to offer any sort of clue.

She pulled out the record, hesitantly. It slid out easily. Her heart raced. She held it in her hands, and it soon became clear to Lydia that she had never seen this record before. *How did this get in here*, she thought.

The cover was simple— a white curved hourglass on a deep black background. There was little else to suggest what music was pressed onto the vinyl inside; no title, no band name, artist, track list, record label, or barcode. Nothing. The more Lydia gazed upon it, the more she felt drawn into its depths.

‘Did you put this in here, Hugh?’ she asked.

Instead of a response, there was only silence. Lydia looked up, but Hugh wasn’t there. She looked around her flat, her eyes checking every hiding spot

imaginable—but nobody was there. A chill ran down her spine. She started to wonder if Hugh was real; if any of this was. She wasn't sure, but she didn't care. She couldn't help but think about what she was holding.

Lydia slid the record out of its sleeve, just enough so the vinyl poked out a smidge. She caressed the vinyl with her fingers, wondering what mysteries were etched into her grooves. Her eyes flashed to her record player.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE GROOVES

Lydia had always found solace in her records. She even liked the way old records crackled and popped. That's how she imagined her parents listened to them when they were her age. Each record in her collection held a special meaning to Lydia; or at least they had done at some point in her life. They were gateways to memories, and she knew her collection like a well-studied map. Lydia's eyes fixated on the jet-black cover of the record she held in her hand. Whatever secret track was etched into its grooves, would be the last song Lydia would hear before she died—and that meant something to Lydia.

With a hint of apprehension, she slid the vinyl out of its sleeve and placed it onto her mustard Crosley Cruiser. She lifted the needle and gently set it onto the spinning vinyl. Her heart pounded with anticipation as she leaned in to listen. The initial crackle of static sent a shiver down her spine. She held her breath.

A single note flowed out of the speakers, and Lydia felt a surge of excitement within her. Suddenly, the floor juddered as if struck by a bass drum. The

tremor happened again, but this time it wasn't just the floor. The entire room shook. Her record collection vibrated and hummed, and her hanging *Grosse Pointe Blank* poster jolted off its hook. Lydia stumbled; her arms wavered as she scrambled for something to hold onto. The room started to spin. Her eyes shot down. Her wooden floor slowly started to transform into vinyl. It was etched and grooved, exactly like a record and it moved as if it were on a turntable. Lydia lost her balance. The grooves seemed to swallow her feet. The walls fell backwards. She felt dizzy and disorientated. She shut her eyes. When she opened them, her gaze was still fixed on the floor; but the floor was neither wooden nor vinyl, but a dark black with specks of glitter. The shaking had stopped and Lydia could hear music—but it wasn't coming from the speakers of her mustard Crosley Cruiser. The sound surrounded and engulfed her. Her eyes slowly moved around. She was in a night club. The bass pounded, strobe lights flashed, and the air was thick with the scent of sweat and smoke. She was standing on the dance floor. A sea of bodies moved as one to the beat.

'Hugh?' Lydia shouted. Nobody responded. She looked around to try and find him but he wasn't there. It was just bodies. They seemed infinite. Beside the dance floor, a large bar was lined with young patrons.

Some were laughing and shouting, others looked lost in deep conversation, and some were downing shots. They all looked elated and euphoric.

Lydia thought that maybe this was the afterlife and she was dead, or maybe it was Hell. Lydia felt neither elation nor euphoria, only confusion. She pushed her way through the heavy bodies. They seemed to throng against her, blocking her exit. She pushed all of her weight against them, but she couldn't find a way out.

'Excuse me please' she shouted. The strangers continued to dance. They didn't look at Lydia. Maybe they couldn't see her, or maybe they couldn't hear her over the loud music.

'Excuse me.' she screamed. 'Move!' The music got louder, and Lydia felt her migraine return. She felt her chest tighten and her breathing became rapid and shallow. She tried to gulp but she couldn't. Her throat closed up, and she couldn't breathe. She closed her eyes tightly and held her arms firmly against her body. She pushed her legs forward, feeling the bodies brushing against her arms as she slowly moved forward. She tried her best to breathe normally but she couldn't. Sweat dripped from her brow and she began to shiver and shake. Lydia felt a hand on her shoulder.

‘You’re okay. You’re okay.’ said a soothing voice. ‘Just breathe.’ Lydia didn’t open her eyes. She didn’t want to. She tried to breathe normally; breathing in, and breathing out, slowly at first. After a few normal breaths, Lydia managed to calm down. She opened her eyes and looked at the hand on her shoulder. The hand was dainty, and the fingernails were painted with a sky-blue varnish. She turned around. Her vision was blurry but soon regained focus, revealing a beautiful girl staring at her. Maybe this was the afterlife, Lydia thought to herself.

‘Are you okay?’ said the beautiful girl. Her eyes were wide and alluring. She had a brunette choppy bob with a wispy fringe that gently grazed her forehead, which glimmered with sweat, presumably from dancing. She wore a white tank top, blue mom jeans and vintage pumps. ‘Are you okay?’

Lydia blinked a few times. She gulped and nodded quickly.

‘Here come with me.’ said the beautiful girl, taking Lydia’s hand and leading her away from the dance floor into a quieter alcove. The alcove offered a brief respite from the frenzied atmosphere of the dance floor. A vivid pink neon arrow pointed to a downward staircase. The beautiful girl guided her down the stairs

and soon the pounding bass of the night club faded away.

‘You’ll be better down here,’ said the beautiful girl. The sounds of Britpop echoed from speakers above. It was a bar; a huge, basement bar. A long, winding bar curved around cosy booths and high-top tables which were scattered throughout the room. Some were already occupied by content patrons while others eagerly awaited their turn. Old TVs flickered from brackets which hung randomly from the walls, the closest being the one that hung on the corner of the staircase. Lydia hovered at the bottom of the stairs watching the screen for a moment. On the television a young Damon Albarn moved lively around the stage. His fringe toppled over his eyes which were emboldened with eyeliner. It was the *Top of the Pops* performance of *Country House*, where Blur had beaten Oasis to the number one spot in what the press dubbed *The Battle of Britpop*. She could tell it was that performance from the black Oasis t-shirt that Alex James was wearing and the country farmers in the background playing brass.

‘I remember that!’ said the beautiful girl. ‘I was the only one in my family who wanted Blur to win.’

‘Me too!’ said Lydia. ‘I’m Lydia, by the way.’

‘I’m Eliza,’ said the beautiful girl with wide eyes. ‘Come! You’ll like it down here.’

Eliza moved from the bottom of the stairs further into the spacious basement bar. Lydia followed along as closely as she could. She could smell Eliza’s hair. It smelt like strawberries. A floral tattoo poked out of her tank top covering her lower back. Eliza turned her neck to Lydia. Lydia averted her gaze away from Eliza’s bottom.

Eliza was right. There was something about the basement bar that Lydia liked instantly. It wasn’t like the bars she used to go to with her fake ID back home, nor like the campus parties at university. Everyone seemed totally in the moment. Her eyes flashed around the room. Lydia grinned coyly, noticing there wasn’t a phone in sight. She couldn’t believe it. She looked around the room, surveying every booth and table, trying to find somebody on their phone; somebody swiping away in boredom, somebody taking a photo to post on social media, anything—but, she couldn’t. Lydia chortled quietly, hoping Eliza wouldn’t hear.

‘Johnny! Please can you get a glass of water for my good friend Lydia.’ said Eliza, as they landed at the bar.

‘No problem, Eliza,’ said Johnny. Johnny looked young, possibly in his late teens. He hummed along to

Country House as it played on the television above him. He poured some water into a glass and slid it in Eliza's direction.

'Here. Drink this. It will help,' said Eliza, handing Lydia the glass of water. 'I'll be back in a minute, okay? Don't go anywhere!'

Lydia watched Eliza ascend the staircase. She bounced up the steps with a smile on her face. *Who was this girl?* thought Lydia. Not only was she beautiful, and caring, but she knew her Britpop. Lydia looked down at the glass of water and took a sip. She placed the glass back down on the bar top, smiling at Johnny who returned her smile before going back to cleaning glasses. A subtle ripple disturbed the water in her glass. Lydia's eyes furrowed in curiosity. Tiny waves formed and expanded within the glass. She felt the room judder. She looked around to see if anybody else could feel it. Seemingly, they couldn't. The strangers in the basement bar just chatted away and drank their drinks, as if everything was normal. She turned to Johnny. He was still humming as he polished glasses. The television above his head began to shake. The walls began to swirl.

In an instant, she hurtled through the air and dropped onto the sofa in her living room. Her living room was empty, and the only sound was the soft hum

of her record player. She stood up and looked at the record player. The needle had stopped at the centre of the record.

‘What on Earth...?’, Lydia looked around the room. ‘Hugh. Hugh. Come out here now.’ There was no sign of Hugh.

She rubbed her eyes. She wasn’t sure if she had just simply fallen asleep looking for—no, surely not. Dreams didn’t feel like that. Lydia reached for the remote and turned on the television. The screen flickered to life, casting an eerie glow across the room, as news reporters clambered through the crowds of London.

‘Everybody here is extremely excited for the fireworks!’ She turned the television off, almost as impulsively as she had turned it on, unable to think about anything other than the night club.

She rushed towards the record player. She carefully placed the needle carefully on the record once more and, almost instantaneously, she found herself transported back to the pulsating dance floor. She pushed through the clubbers and made her way to the alcove. She descended the staircase and went to the bar. Eliza wasn’t back yet, and Johnny was deep in conversation with a group of boys. She hovered at the bar.

‘I’m not saying that it’s not a great song, because it is,’ Johnny said with a smirk, ‘But it’s factually incorrect. There aren’t five dimensions, there’s three. There are not six senses, there’s five. And I don’t even know what a firmament is, but I doubt there’s seven of them. It’s like the only thing he got right was the number of planets!’ The group of boys Johnny was talking to, who barely looked old enough to be in the night club, laughed and sipped their bottled beers. ‘And I’m sure Mos Def is a smart guy, but that’s musicians for you. Don’t even get me started on Alanis Morissette’s knowledge of what irony is!’ Johnny continued, as if acting out a well-versed stand-up comedy routine while the patrons chuckled. The group moved to a nearby booth still creasing with laughter. Johnny turned his attention back to Lydia. ‘I take it you want something stronger than water now?’ he said with a grin.

‘What do you recommend?’ asked Lydia.

‘I’ve got you!’ he said with a playful smirk. Johnny danced with his cocktail shaker majestically. He poured out the liquid into a small cocktail glass. It was green and frothy. ‘This is a new one I’m working on.’

‘What’s in it?’ Lydia asked with a hesitant look of repulsion on her face, scowling at the green bubbles.

‘Just try it!’ said Johnny. Lydia took a deep breath and picked up the glass, drinking the liquid in one swift motion. Lydia began coughing.

‘Jesus Christ, Johnny!’ she said, sticking her tongue and pushing it against her bottom lip. Johnny handed Lydia a napkin. Lydia snatched it from him and wiped her mouth as she put the glass down.

‘Shit! Sorry. I’m still working on that one.’

‘What the fuck was that?’ Lydia asked.

‘Oh God! Tequila, spiced rum, sriracha and lime juice. Was it too much?’ asked Johnny, his teeth grinding nervously. Lydia burst out laughing. She nodded. ‘I was going to call it the *Hugo Sanchez*. You know, after the footballer.’

‘It needs some work,’ said Lydia, still laughing.

‘Let me get you something more perfected! A *Ladies choice* cocktail,’ Johnny said. ‘On the house too! Just don’t tell Lester.’ Johnny rubbed his hands together.

‘Who’s Lester?’ asked Lydia. A barrage of knocks echoed down the stairs behind Lydia, which sounded like a hundred feet all racing one another.

‘Speak of the devil,’ said Johnny. He pointed towards the staircase, prompting Lydia to turn around. A man in a navy, pin stripe suit and matching fedora led a crowd of people down the stairs and into the bar

area. They stampeded towards Lydia and Johnny with determination.

‘Yes! Here! By the bar,’ the man commanded.

‘That’s Lester!’ whispered Johnny, leaning towards Lydia. ‘This is his place.’ Johnny snuck away behind the bar as the crowds submerged on the area.

‘Spread out! That’s it!’ Lester instructed. Up close Lydia could see his dark slick hair poking out of the sides of his hat. He blinked with force and precision, and it was if his neck was constantly moving. ‘Where’s my right-hand man?’

A nervous boy with lots of freckles emerged from the group, holding a camera so big that he had to cradle it with both of his hands.

‘There he is! Right let’s get it,’ said Lester. Lester turned to Lydia. He looked her up and down. Lydia gulped, leaning her body against the bar. Lester looked as if he knew she wasn’t meant to be there. Shit! Lydia smiled awkwardly. ‘You should be in the front of the picture, cutie!’

Lydia scurried towards the front of the crowd, standing opposite the nervous boy with the freckles as he pulled the camera to his head.

‘I told you I’d be back,’ a voice said. Lydia looked to her right. Eliza stood next to her, looking as beautiful as she did before; maybe even better. Her face

looked flushed, but in a nice way. Her skin shone. Her lips were wet. She grinned with a wide smile facing the camera. She looked perfect. Out of the periphery of Lydia's gaze the camera flashed.

'Perfect!' exclaimed Lester. 'Right, piss of the lot of you. Have a wicked night!' Lydia blinked, and her eyes widened just in time to see the crowd disperse. Some went up the stairs to the dance floor, and others tucked into the empty tables near the bar. Lester grabbed the freckly boy with the camera, using his fingers to mimic camera shots. Lydia turned back to Eliza who was seemingly the only one to stay.

'Are you feeling better now?' Eliza asked, placing her hand on Lydia's arm.

'Better. Thanks for helping me.' said Lydia. Her palms felt sticky and she rubbed them with her fingers.

'Happy to help,' Eliza said. She looked Lydia up and down. 'Have we met before? Before tonight, I mean.'

'Oh, believe me. If I'd have met you before I'd have remembered,' said Lydia.

Her face dropped. *Why did I say that!* She smiled awkwardly, hoping that Eliza wouldn't think she was a weirdo.

'Is this your first time here,' said Eliza.

Lydia nodded.

‘I thought so. And on New Year’s as well. You’re gonna love it.’

Eliza looked down at her hand, still touching Lydia’s arm. She pulled it away.

‘Sorry,’ said Eliza, as she covered her eyes with her hands and rubbed her lips together.

‘No. It’s fine. Maybe we could...’

‘Eliza! Are you coming or what?’ a voice boomed from the staircase. Eliza looked over, which prompted Lydia to look too. A man in his late twenties, with curtains for hair and a bright orange oversized shirt stood on the first step. His hand pressed against the rail and his head jolted frantically upward, as he gave Eliza a death stare. *Great!* thought Lydia, *another disgruntled boyfriend.* Lydia turned back to Eliza, who looked sheepishly at the man in orange, holding a solitary finger towards him. She turned back to Lydia.

‘Sorry! Lydia. That’s just— what were you saying?’ Lydia looked down to the floor.

‘It doesn’t matter, go,’ said Lydia, forcing out a smile as she looked into Eliza’s eyes. ‘If you have to.’ Eliza smiled back but it faded quickly.

‘Find me later, Lydia. I’d like that,’ Eliza said before trailing towards the man in orange and ascending the staircase. Lydia watched her disappear into the night.

As she turned back to Johnny at the bar, Lydia fell back onto her sofa, exactly how she had the first time—with the same force and in the exact same spot. She looked up to ceiling, wondering if she would see a gateway or a black hole. But she didn't. It was just a ceiling. She raced to the record player, moving the needle to the edge of the record. She dropped the needle and was in the night club once again.

As she weaved through the throngs of moving bodies, she caught a glimpse of Eliza emerging from the bar below. Eliza walked alongside the man in orange towards the dance floor. They were both laughing about something. Lydia danced away out of their direction, heading to the alcove once again. She raced down the steps and to the bar.

'Johnny! I'm ready for that drink,' she said, as her body thrust against the bar. Johnny put down his glass and rag.

'What you having?' asked Johnny.

'You choose. Just not—'

'—Yes, not the *Hugo Sanchez*. I remember. You want something a bit more refined.' he said with a glow. Lydia laughed as she nodded. Johnny began pouring vodka into a shaker, as well as other ingredients Lydia didn't recognise. He moved so quickly that it was hard to keep up.

‘Johnny?’ said Lydia, almost with a hint of trepidation.

‘Uh-huh?’ he replied.

‘Have you ever been in a dream so real, you didn’t know you were dreaming?’

‘You know, people just tend to talk to me about music and movies—’

‘—A dream. A dream so vivid, you felt like it had to be real. Have you ever had one?’ she asked, leaning forward.

Johnny furrowed his brow. ‘Don’t all dreams feel real until you wake up?’ he replied, turning the question back to Lydia, like a well-trained psychiatrist.

‘I suppose so,’ said Lydia, sinking back. Johnny was right—all dreams do feel real until you wake up. Even the impossible scenarios, like flying or being in space. They don’t seem absurd in the slightest until reality sets in.

‘But!’ said Lydia, ‘What if you need to know it’s a dream, even while you’re still in the dream?’ Once again, Johnny took a moment to think.

‘I’m not sure,’ Johnny replied. ‘I guess you could try jumping off a bridge or crashing into something,’ Johnny said, attempting to make light of the situation. ‘*That* would certainly jolt you out of the dream, but you’d have to hope it was just a dream and not reality.’

I always seem to wake up just before the good part when I'm falling in a dream,'

Johnny handed Lydia a cocktail glass. The liquid was a dark shade of red, with a lone cherry floating on the surface. She shrugged. Surely it couldn't be any worse than the first drink. She took a sip.

'Well, that wouldn't work. Because if it was a dream, I'd just wake up—and if it wasn't a dream, that would just be suicide. It's not really a solution,' she said. Lydia licked her lips, swirling the taste around her mouth. She took another sip, this time a bigger one. 'What is this?'

'Do you like it?' asked Johnny. Lydia nodded repeatedly, her bottom lip sticking out slightly.

'That is a *Winona Ryder*,' he said with a playful grin. 'All the cocktails here are named after stars. You know, musicians, actors, even a couple of politicians. A *Winona Ryder* is two shots of vodka, Cherry Squeeze It, Crystal P, and a dash of whiskey—we use Hanson's. Lester swears by it.' Johnny pointed to the bottle of Hanson's on the bar top. The bottle was almost empty, perhaps only enough left for a single shot.

Lydia leaned forward to take a closer look. Hanson's. *Same unique recipe for 100 years. Never changed and never will.* The bottle looked familiar,

although Lydia wasn't a whiskey drinker. She wasn't a big drinker at all, really.

'I'm almost out,' said Johnny, tipping the bottle towards him, before placing it back on the bar top. His eyes moved around the room past Lydia. Lydia turned to see what he was looking at. 'Shit. He's always doing something else.'

'Who?' asked Lydia.

'Lester,' said Johnny, 'I need him to bring me another bottle from the basement.'

Lydia gazed at the drink in her hand, her thoughts still swirling as she struggled to make sense of her surroundings. She took another sip. The taste was sharp. It was distinctive. She held the glass up to her eyes.

'Johnny. Do you think if you had your favourite drink in a dream, it would taste the same as it does in real life?' She looked at Johnny who stroked his chin with a gentle precision.

'I think if the brain is capable of convincing you that a dream is real, then it's also capable of simulating the taste of your favourite gin and tonic.'

Lydia's expression fell.

'But!' Johnny added, 'I suppose if you were to drink something in a dream that you've never had before and then drink it again in the real world, you

could compare the taste and determine if it was a dream or not.'

Lydia perked up. *There's something in that*, she thought.

'Yeah, so if the taste matched how it was in the dream, then it couldn't have been a dream, right? Because how would your brain know what it tasted like?'

'In theory, I suppose that could be possible,' Johnny said.

'Two *Hulk Hogans*, two *Claudia Schiffers* and two *Becks*— the cocktail, not the beer!' a voice shouted from the other side of the bar.

'Duty calls,' said Johnny, smiling at Lydia before he moved closer towards the patron at the other side of the bar.

Lydia was smitten with the idea. The taste test, she thought to herself with delirious enthusiasm. It made sense in theory, and at this point, she was willing to try anything. The only thing left to figure out was what drink she should use.

She scanned the bar looking for something she had never had before. Something with a distinct taste. Something she recognised enough to be able to find it in reality. Something—there it was. Right in front of her sat the bottle of *Hanson's*. *Same unique recipe for*

100 years. Never changed and never will. She grabbed the bottle with both her hands. She unscrewed the top and placed the glass to her lips. She fell. Landing back onto her sofa. With the same force. In the very same spot. Fuck! The bottle of Hanson's was gone and Lydia's mouth felt dry.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TASTE TEST

Lydia made her way from the dance floor to the alcove. People continued to dance and jump amidst the strobes and upbeat music. Lydia stopped to watch them, smiling as she did so. They didn't bother her any more, and she had figured out how to dance through the gaps. She tried to spot Eliza through the crowd but she couldn't see her. It all felt so real. Surely it couldn't have been a dream, but she had to make sure. Still, she couldn't help but wonder why fate had brought her here.

Lydia loathed the idea of fate, destiny or any notion where the end of the journey was somehow predetermined, as if the choices she made were frivolous and meaningless. If it was fate, then it was a sick joke to pull. And if it was her imagination showing her the record, the night club, and Eliza, well then it was nauseating. She raced down the stairs, gliding into the basement bar, her eyes fixated on the bottle of Hanson's sat atop the bar. She picked the bottle up, but it was completely empty.

‘Johnny. I need a shot of Hanson’s. Please!’ she shouted in the direction of Johnny, who was preoccupied—chatting to a group of pretty girls. He spotted her and gestured a singular finger to the group of pretty girls and walked over.

‘We’re out,’ said Johnny. Lydia tilted her head backward in annoyance, piercing her lips tightly. ‘How about a *Tim Roth*? Or I think you’d really like the *Gwen Stefani*!’

‘I thought you said there was another bottle?’ she said.

‘There probably is. In lock up, downstairs.’ said Johnny, bending a little to meet Lydia’s face. ‘But I don’t have the keys. Lester does. And I haven’t seen him.’ Johnny took the empty bottle of Hanson’s and tossed it into the waste bin. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s all right.’ said Lydia, smiling at Johnny. It wasn’t fucking all right. She’d seen people drink Hanson’s before. She knew she could get it, in the *real world*. Her eyes scoured the bar for an alternative. It was pointless. Lydia had never heard of these brands. She supposed she could try her hand at making a *Winona Ryder*. I mean, how hard could it be. Two shots of *vodka*, *Cherry Squeeze It*, *Crystal P* and a dash of *whiskey*, and a *cherry*! Where the fuck would she find all of that? She had never seen *Cherry Squeeze It* in her

life, and she didn't even know what Johnny meant when he said *Crystal P.* No. Making a *Winona Ryder* would prove far too difficult. She looked down at the waste bin where the neck of the Hanson's bottle poked out, as if it were laughing at her. She pushed away from the bar and marched up the stairs to the dance floor.

As Lydia pushed her way through the pulsating crowd, her eyes found Lester. He was still guiding the boy with the camera through shots that he wanted him to take. She marched over.

'Hey Lester!' said Lydia with confidence. Lester turned around, giving Lydia the once over. 'Just talking to Johnny downstairs. It's hectic. And guess what? We're out of Hanson's!' Lester didn't reply. His eyebrows towered upwards, almost pushing the fedora off his head. 'Could we—myself and Johnny, that is, get the key? You know, to get a— another bottle? Please!'

'You work here?' said Lester. He tilted his head to one side and smacked his lips together. Lydia quickly nodded. 'You're busy. I'm busy. Everyone's busy, darling. Just use the cheaper stuff. Nobody's going to care, not tonight.' Lester turned back to the boy with the camera. Lydia heard a slight jingle as he turned swiftly. She looked down to Lester's pinstripe pants, where a set of keys dangled from a chain. They

were unremarkable, really, but to Lydia, they were everything. She needed them.

‘Johnny said...’ Lydia shouted, gulping as she did so. Lester turned around with a sigh. ‘Johnny said you would say that. But he told me to tell you, that it needs to be Hanson’s. You know how seriously he takes his cocktails.’ Lydia rolled her eyes, as if she and Lester had some sort of inside joke relating to Johnny’s attention to detail. Lester didn’t move, or talk. He looked like a statue. He moved his hand slowly towards his keys, but he stopped himself. His hand rose swiftly back to his chest.

‘You tell Johnny that if he’s so desperate for these keys he’s going to have to come and get them himself,’ said Lester.

‘But—’

‘—No buts. Now if you would excuse me.’ Lester turned back to the boy with the camera, guiding him by the shoulder further into the dance floor away from Lydia. The keys jangled as Lydia watched him walk away.

‘Hey, you!’ a sweet voice sounded from behind Lydia. She turned around.

‘Eliza,’ said Lydia. Eliza seemed to get prettier each time Lydia saw her.

‘Everything okay?’ Eliza asked, gesturing towards Lester. Lydia turned around quickly, staring at the keys once more.

‘I need those keys!’ said Lydia, clenching her clammy fists.

‘Ooh! I like it,’ said Eliza, licking her lips and bumping her shoulder into Lydia’s. ‘I’ll tell you what. I’ll distract him, you grab them,’ Eliza said. Lydia laughed, but before Lydia could reply Eliza had already begun marching in the direction of Lester.

‘Eliza! Eliza!’ Lydia shouted. She tried to catch up but Eliza had already grabbed Lester’s attention. Lester looked happy, beaming out a smile. He instructed the photographer to take a picture of him with Eliza on the dance floor. Lester was laughing and posing and—distracted. Completely and utterly distracted. Lydia crept towards them as they posed. She crouched down amidst the sea of bodies, her eyes focused on the keys which hung from the chain of Lester’s pinstripe trousers. Eliza’s mom jeans were bright blue and looked really tight— *the keys*, thought Lydia, *focus on the keys*. The neon lights bounced off the keys creating a kaleidoscope of colours across that shone into her eyes.

There were five keys all attached to a single keyring on Lester’s chain. She slowly moved her hand

towards the keys. Sweat dripped from her brow. She pulled on the keyring, trying to pry them from the chain. Lester's body twitched. Lydia pulled her hand away. She looked up at Lester and Eliza, who posed with silly expressions for another photograph. The camera flashed through the gaps of their bodies. Lydia looked at Eliza who had turned her head slightly. Her eyes caught Lydia's.

'Oh shit!' Eliza said.

'What—' said Lester, turning his body to Eliza. Eliza grabbed his arm and directed his eyes to the boy with the camera.

'I blinked. I definitely blinked,' said Eliza, 'God, I'm so stupid!' Eliza began to cry.

'Don't worry, don't worry. Here let's do another. It's not a problem,' said Lester.

'If you're sure,' said Eliza, as she wiped her dry eyes.

Lydia chuckled silently. She tried to weave the keyring from the chain. Her clammy hands seemed to slip away from the keyring each time she tried to grasp it, but with a big clutch she managed finally to get the keyring around the chain. It was nearly off. The camera flashed once more.

'I really do have to get back to work now,' said Lester. Lester turned his body and Lydia fell backwards

onto the floor. Her fists were clenched, but she hadn't been seen. She watched Lester vanish into the dance floor. As the strobes shone into Lydia's eyes Eliza emerged, offering her a helping hand.

'Did you get it?' asked Eliza, as she lifted Lydia to her feet. Lydia opened her palm. She had the keys. Eliza cheered, grabbing Lydia tightly. Lydia didn't know how to respond. Before Lydia even thought about squeezing back, Eliza took a step back from her. 'Sorry! I don't know—'

'—Thanks, Eliza.' said Lydia, holding the keys triumphantly. 'And before—when we were talking before. I was going to say maybe at some point. I was going to ask if you wanted to dance, a bit later on, or just talk more if you didn't want to dance. Or not, if you don't want to.' Lydia gulped.

'I'd like that.' said Eliza, with a sweet smile. 'What are the keys for anyway?'

Lydia didn't respond. She could feel herself smile awkwardly, as if she was just waiting for her brain to think of something clever to say. But nothing came to her.

'It's fine. Tell me later.' said Eliza, 'When you come find me for a dance.'

Lydia nodded, her face glowing. As much as she didn't want to leave Eliza, she knew there was only a

limited amount of time before Lester realised his keys were missing, or before she plummeted to her sofa. She turned away from Eliza and raced to the alcove, descending the flight of stairs once again. At the bottom of the stairs was a stained wooden door. She pushed it open and descended a narrow stairwell. She could barely hear the music over the sound of her own breathing. At the bottom of the stairs was a big white door, with a keyhole.

Lydia tried the copper key first. She inserted the key into the keyhole of the cellar door and turned it to the left. The lock clicked open. She pushed the door revealing the dark, musty cellar of the night club. She waved her hand in search of a light. As she moved closer into the dark room, her hand found a string. She pulled it, and a lightbulb flickered to life in the centre of the cellar.

The cellar was spacious with four aisles made by shelving units. Dozens of crates, kegs, and boxes of every kind of alcohol imaginable lined the rickety shelves. She took a few steps into the cellar, shutting the door behind her. She scanned the room, her eyes immediately darting from shelf to shelf, searching for a bottle of—

‘Hanson’s,’ she whispered, as if reminding herself of her sole mission. She scoured each shelf, all

filled with alcohol, drinks, and bar snacks unfamiliar to her. ‘Cranberry flavoured vodka. No. El tequila de la parca. No. Crystal T. No.’.

It had to be somewhere. Johnny had told her so, and she believed him. She continued to look, hoping she could find it quickly so she could leave and return Lester’s key somewhere he could find them. *Creak*. She looked over her shoulder at the cellar door and froze. It sounded like someone was there, but no one was.

The cellar’s damp air was heavy. Beads of sweat formed on her brow. Her eyes scanned the labels of each bottle. She stopped.

‘Hanson’s!’ she said, with a celebratory fist pump. It was a dusty, unassuming bottle of Hanson’s, tucked away on the highest shelf, almost hidden from view—but she had managed to spot it. She raced towards it and reached up. She stood on her tiptoes and stretched to get it down. Her fingertips grazed the cool glass as she strained to grab the bottle. With a final push, she managed to wrap her hand around it and she carefully pulled it down from its hiding place. Cradling the precious bottle in her arms, she felt a sense of triumph wash over her.

‘Is somebody down here?’ Lester burst through the cellar door. ‘Johnny?’

Lydia fell backwards into the shadows. She raised a hand to her mouth as she watched Lester through the cracks in the shelving unit. He looked around from the doorway, shaking his head and huffing. Beads of sweat dripped from his brow. He took off his hat and wiped his forehead.

‘Bastard,’ he muttered under his breath. Lester made to leave. Lydia lowered her hand and breathed a silent sigh of relief. She leaned backwards. Her back ever so slightly knocked the shelving unit behind her. *Creak.* Lester turned back to the cellar. Lydia looked up at the shelving unit where a bottle of wine was slowly rolling on its side. It rolled back and forth, gently but menacingly. Each time getting closer to the edge. *Smash!* The bottle crashed down onto a water pipe, breaking into a thousand pieces.

Lydia’s heart dropped. Lester spun around, his eyes falling on Lydia.

‘You!’ he shouted. ‘Put that bottle down now!’

Lester marched towards Lydia. Water leaked from the pipes and began to flood the floor. Lydia’s eyes darted for an escape route, but there wasn’t one. Her bottom was getting soaked from the floor. Lester was close. She looked at the bottle of Hanson’s in her grasp. Fuck it. She snapped the lid of the bottle, her hands trembling as Lester got closer and closer. She

took a swig from the bottle. The whiskey burned her throat and seared her stomach. Lydia coughed and sputtered, trying to clear her throat of the potent liquid, but she swallowed every drop knowing that she needed to remember every detail.

Lester grabbed her arm and lifted her up from the wet floor. She shot Lester an awkward smile.

‘Give me that,’ he said, sternly. ‘And my keys too.’ Lydia handed him the bottle and the keys, trying to focus on the taste in her mouth. It was smoky, woody, and had a slightly sweet aftertaste. *Honey*, she thought.

‘Out,’ said Lester. ‘Now’. He held her by the arm and dragged her through the water to the big white door. He didn’t grab her tightly and, if anything, it helped her balance. Lydia gulped as she watched the water flood the cellar. She thought about apologising, profusely, but she didn’t think it would help. At the stairs a large bouncer wearing a tightly fitted black t-shirt stood shaking his head.

‘Please can you get this one out,’ said Lester, handing over Lydia to the rugged bouncer. Lydia followed the bouncer to the nearest exit, up another flight of stairs through a back corridor. At least she wouldn’t be seen by everyone. The bouncer opened the door and escorted Lydia to the street, not saying a word

or showing any emotion whatsoever. He slammed the door and left Lydia alone.

The air outside was chilly, but refreshing. Lydia could still hear the bass from inside, but not much else. She licked her teeth to savour the unmistakable oak flavour and sour undertones from the swig of Hanson's. Despite the wicked taste that she couldn't shake from her mouth, she smiled, knowing that she had successfully completed part one of her taste test. However, her smile quickly evaporated as her stomach began churning from the awful taste of the drink she had just consumed. She tried to remove the aftertaste by licking her teeth harder, but it didn't help.

She looked at the high street in the distance, her eyes tracing the dilapidated buildings with a sense of familiarity. She couldn't put her finger on why they looked familiar, but she was sure she'd been here before.

She turned back to the night club. The building itself was tall. She glanced up to the rooftop, which seemed far away. The building was made of red brick, but a single brick stood out from the rest. It was a paler shade of red than the rest of the bricks, and there was something on it. She wandered a little closer. On the paler brick was a smiley face. She touched it. It didn't

smudge, but it looked like it had been drawn on with lipstick.

‘That’s my work, you know.’

Lydia turned around.

Eliza stood watching her, a cigarette in one hand and a mischievous grin on her face. Lydia felt a flutter in her chest. Although, she suspected that that could have just been heartburn from the whiskey repeating on her. As Eliza ambled towards her, Lydia couldn’t help but admire the way the dim lighting played off Eliza’s features, casting shadows across her sharp cheekbones and full lips.

‘So beautiful,’ Lydia blurted out. Eliza frowned, then grinned.

‘The art, I mean,’ said Lydia, gesturing her head towards the pale red brick with the smiley face etched on. Eliza let out a coy laugh as her shoulder brushed against Lydia’s.

‘I wouldn’t call it art,’ Eliza replied.

‘Oh, come on!’ Lydia exclaimed. ‘Anything’s art these days. That brick will be worth its weight in gold in fifty years’ time.’

‘So, you’ve been kicked out?’ asked Eliza, with a grin on her face.

‘I’m sure I’ll find a way to get back in.’

‘Good. Because you still owe me a dance.’ Eliza said, playfully nudging Lydia. Lydia looked into Eliza’s eyes, as if they were having a staring contest that Lydia didn’t want to lose. ‘You know, I didn’t take you for such a trouble maker.’

‘You can’t be afraid to break a few rules, Eliza. You’re an artist, you should know that,’ said Lydia.

‘You’re sweet,’ said Eliza, ‘but believe me, that’s not art.’

Eliza grabbed Lydia by the hand and led her into the alleyway running around the side of the building. Lydia trundled behind her with nervous excitement. She could smell Eliza’s hair, again. It smelled like cherries, and vodka. A little like a *Winona Ryder*. Eliza sped ahead and turned the corner, sharply. Eliza stopped next to an old looking car. Her gaze focused on the brick wall on the side of the night club.

‘This is art,’ exclaimed Eliza. ‘This is *real* art.’

Lydia turned her gaze to where Eliza was looking. Painted onto the side of the building directly onto the brick was a gorgeous mural celebrating the nineties. Famous faces and pop-cultural references congregated together to form a collage of nostalgic moments, like footprints in time. Uma Thurman’s face was in the centre, smoking a cigarette with a full fringe like she did on the *Pulp Fiction* poster. Princess Diana

was next to her wearing her off-the-shoulder revenge dress. She looked really pretty. Next to her, were the Gallagher brothers, both in Union Jack attire, looking like they were ready to fight one another. There were so many faces, and together it made the wall look really special. But despite its beauty, Lydia couldn't help but gaze over towards Eliza, who proudly scanned the mural.

'Eliza,' said Lydia, 'Did you do this?'

'Oh, I fucking wish!' said Eliza. 'Nobody knows who did it, well, at least nobody I know.'

Lydia laughed. She felt a funny feeling in her stomach.

Is this happiness? thought Lydia. She wasn't sure, and she couldn't get over the fact that any second she'd be back on her sofa. *And what would Eliza—*

'—So, what do you think?' asked Eliza, interrupting Lydia's train of thoughts.

'It's incredible!' said Lydia. 'It's my favourite decade, the nineties. The movies, the music. Part of me wished it was still like that, you know.'

Eliza laughed gently as she looked into Lydia's eyes.

'But, it's really something. Whoever did it should be really happy with how it's turned out. I mean, it

should be in a gallery, not in a deserted alleyway with an old banger parked right next to it,' said Lydia.

Eliza let out another laugh, this time not as gentle. She shook her head as she looked at Lydia with profound fascination.

'It's only a couple of years old, Victoria Adams! Anyway, I'm getting cold, so I'm going to head back inside. Promise you'll come and find me next time, so I don't have to do all the work!'

'Sure,' said Lydia.

Eliza walked away. As she got to the corner she turned back to Lydia.

'I like you, Lydia. I feel like I've known you for ages. And I don't care how you get back in, but I do want that dance.'

'Definitely,' said Lydia with a glowing smile on her face. Eliza's steps were slow and deliberate as she made her way back to the night club. Lydia followed her around the corner, her eyes tracing her every move. Watching Eliza made Lydia feel fuzzy. She could feel it in her gut. She wanted to grab her and hold her body close to hers. She wanted to kiss her, and tell her all of her secrets—that she transported to the night club. That she met the grim reaper, and that he was a funny guy. And she wanted to tell her how she'd been waiting for Eliza her entire life. But she couldn't tell Eliza any of

those things. She just couldn't. Eliza disappeared into the night club, and Lydia was alone again.

Lydia walked back around the corner to the car.

'A couple of years old?' she muttered to herself. She knelt down next to the number plate. It was an odd number plate: R769 LXR. It *almost* looked personalised, thought Lydia—*but surely a car as old and as shit as this one, wouldn't have a personalised plate.* It most certainly wasn't a couple of years old. Her eyes peered inside through the car window. She could see a newspaper on the seat of the passenger side. She strained her eyes to see the date, but it was dark. She ran round the opposite side and peered inside.

'31st December, 1999,' muttered Lydia. 'No. It can't be—' Lydia fell onto her sofa.

'—It can't be what?' asked Hugh.

CHAPTER NINE

THE MEMORY GAME

‘Time Travel?’ said Hugh. ‘Like in Back to the Future.’ Lydia ran her fingers over the grooves in the record.

‘Yes, but only for a few minutes at a time.’ Lydia was a fan of time travel movies, especially those from the late eighties and nineties. Her absolute favourite was Back to the Future Part 2. Even though it wasn’t a nineties movie, it always felt like one to her. She turned to face Hugh to gauge his reaction. He stood over her, his eyes wandering around the room.

‘I need a drink. I’m going to get a drink. Do you want one?’ said Hugh.

‘Help yourself.’ she said, pointing towards the fridge, hoping a beer would keep Hugh occupied whilst she could think. ‘Time travel’s not real, is it?’

‘How the fuck would I know?’ said Hugh, slamming the fridge door shut.

‘Well, you are the Grim Reaper, Hugh.’

‘Doc! You’re telling me, you built a time machine... out of a vinyl record,’ said Hugh, with the best Michael J Fox impression he could muster. He chuckled to himself as he came back into the living

room, holding a can of cider in his hand. Maybe Hugh was right to mock the idea. As much as Lydia loved *Back to the Future Part 2*, she couldn't help thinking that time travel was an idea that only belonged in Hollywood writers' rooms.

Hugh slumped onto the sofa as Lydia walked away from the record. She paced the floor, watching Hugh, hoping he might interject with something more useful than a bad impression. Lydia didn't hold out much hope of this. He couldn't even open his cider can properly. His bony, skeletal fingers wouldn't grip the tab. *Clink!*

'Will you shut the fuck up?' shouted Lydia. With a triumphant click, Hugh opened the can of cider and took a swig.

'Ahh! That's the fucking stuff.' said Hugh. He shook his hand, noticing that his finger had popped out of its socket. 'Bastard!' he sighed, but he didn't seem to really care. He took another large gulp.

'Do you mind?' snapped Lydia. Sheepishly, Hugh set down the can on the coffee table.

'Look! I don't know what you want me to say. Do I think you've time travelled? Un-fucking-likely.'

Lydia sprang to the door and threw on her coat.

'Where are you going?' asked Hugh.

'I need a drink,' said Lydia.

‘Hey, I thought we were going to wait for the rope?’ said Hugh.

‘You don’t believe me, do you?’

‘Look.’ Sighed Hugh. ‘I’ve seen it before. People going delirious, hallucinating. I think it’s your brain trying to jumpstart the survival instinct.’

‘So, you really think it wasn’t real?’ said Lydia.

‘A magical vinyl that time travels? Probably not, to be honest,’

‘It felt real,’ Lydia insisted.

‘Well, maybe it was then!’ said Hugh. ‘How am I supposed to know?’

‘You’re the Angel of Death, for God’s sake! If anyone’s going to know, it’s you.’

Lydia sat at her piano. She curled her fist into a ball and hit the piano keys as hard as she could. It made an unpleasant and loud sound; she hoped that Mr Havers and his family didn’t hear that. She rested her elbows on the keys and held her head in her hands. ‘You’re right. What am I thinking? How could I think something so impossible—’

‘—I hate that word,’ said Hugh, as he placed his bony fingers on to Lydia’s shoulder. ‘There’s a lot of things I thought were impossible, once upon a time. But then, they happened.’ He sat down beside Lydia, and

began to play a melody. ‘Sure, highly improbable, but not impossible, I suppose.’

‘It felt real, you know. Realer than anything I’ve experienced for a long time,’ said Lydia, her voice shaking.

Tears started to stream down Lydia’s face. Hugh stopped on a pleasant-sounding chord.

‘What chord’s that?’ asked Lydia.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said, looking at the shape of his hands. Lydia sat upright and played the same chord on the octave above.

‘Sometimes,’ said Hugh ‘I play it with this note instead’ Hugh placed his hand on Lydia finger. She felt a strange sensation coursing through her body. Suddenly, she was plunged into a whirlwind of memories.

She had the sensation that she was shooting forward, really fast. It was overwhelming. She couldn’t control what was happening and it felt like she was in a rocket ship, moving a million miles per second. She passed windows that looked like old television screens. On each screen were clips of her life—memories of hers that she vaguely remembered parts of. She clutched her hands to the piano stool but it didn’t help. The memories jumped around from screen to screen; it almost felt as if she were in each one, but only for a

second at a time. But each second was filled with such clarity. She looked at Hugh; his cheeks billowed. Lydia was sure that Hugh could feel it too. Hugh looked to the screens, his mouth hanging open. Suddenly, Lydia felt a jolt. One memory seemed to overshadow all the others, and suddenly she stood in the town centre of Surrey, where she had grown up.



She recognised the shops and the alleys. She turned around to see a quaint radio station, with a large window pane that overlooked the entire street. It was the radio station where her mum worked, and she could see her inside. She had a pair of headphones on, and she span in her wheelie chair as her lips pushed against the microphone.

‘Where the fuck are we?’ asked Hugh.

Lydia turned to see Hugh standing in the middle of the road.

‘Surrey,’ said Lydia. ‘This is where I—’

‘—Is that you?’ said Hugh.

Lydia turned. Hugh was right. It was her. She was a little younger, but not noticeably. Her hair swayed in the wind; it wasn’t two-tone back then, only brunette. She was standing with another girl.

‘Violet!’ Lydia whispered looking at her younger self. She could tell that they couldn’t see her, almost as if she were a ghost. It felt surreal, being able to see herself from this perspective—and Violet, she had all but forgotten about Violet.

‘I’m going to pop in to see my mum. Thanks for walking with me, Violet,’ said Lydia to Violet.

‘It’s fine,’ said Violet, grasping onto Lydia’s hand. Violet was pretty. She always was. She wore a sixth form uniform, as did Lydia, but her skirt was shorter than it should have been and she wore dark make-up on her eyes. They looked at one another, lingering for a moment. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows on the pavement, casting a warm, golden light over them.

Lydia leapt forward to kiss Violet. Violet kissed back, hesitantly at first but she kissed back. It was an awkward, wet kiss that only lasted a couple of seconds.

‘I’ve got to go,’ said Violet. She turned and walked away briskly. Violet was the first girl she’d ever liked. She didn’t even know if she was gay. She didn’t think Violet knew herself. Maybe it was wrong to kiss her, Lydia thought—she still thought it, as she watched it happen, but she couldn’t change that now. Lydia felt disorientated.

‘What’s happening, Hugh?’ asked Lydia.

‘It’s a memory,’ said Hugh.

‘I know, it’s a memory! It’s my fucking memory,’ she snapped. ‘How do you stop it?’

‘I don’t know!’ said Hugh.

Suddenly, Lydia found herself alongside Hugh, inside her mother’s studio. Her mother was peering through the venetian blinds at Lydia and Violet, who still stood outside; their hands playing with one another. Her mother tutted. Lydia glanced to Hugh, but he tried his best to avoid eye contact.

The door burst open, and brunette Lydia walked in, hovering in the doorway. Lydia’s mum tidied some paper, or pretended to, at least. To Lydia it was obvious that she was trying to make it seem like she hadn’t just seen her daughter outside, but she was flustered and her face was scowling.

‘Hey! How was the slot?’ Lydia asked, as she leaned against the doorframe.

‘Good. And college?’ Caroline replied, flatly. ‘Who was that?’

Lydia gulped, almost in unison with her younger self. She hated this memory.

‘Who was who, mum?’ said brunette Lydia, twiddling her thumbs.

‘The girl you were walking here with?’ Caroline asked.

‘Oh! Just a friend from sixth form,’ replied Lydia.

‘You looked like you are maybe more than friends,’ Caroline said, ‘You don’t want everyone thinking you’re a lesbian.’ She laughed as if it were a joke that fell flat.

The silence grew, and although she knew only Hugh could see her, Lydia still felt an awkward sensation.

‘Mum. Maybe you should sit down,’ said Lydia, shutting the door behind her and turning to her mum.

‘No. I’m not going to sit down,’ Caroline replied firmly.

‘For God’s sake, Mum! You know!’ said Lydia, rolling her eyes.

Her mum could be difficult, but usually, it wasn’t aimed at Lydia. Lydia hated coming out to her mum, and having to relive it made it even worse. She never wanted to have to come out. Why did she have to? She’d always just hoped that her mum would get the idea without the need for an actual coming out presentation. But part of Lydia always knew it would be difficult for her mum to accept, despite what she wanted her precious listeners to think. Caroline sat down finally, throwing her hands out as if pleading with her to get it over with.

‘Mum. I’m gay,’ said Lydia.

‘How would you know?’ Caroline muttered, turning away. ‘You’re too young.’

‘I just know, mum. And before you say it’s just a phase, it’s not,’ said Lydia softly, trying to comfort her mum and break the tension that had built up between them. ‘And it’s not a big deal.’

‘Not a big deal?’ said Caroline. ‘It will define you. I know what people are like. The world’s full of bigots and bullies, and if it gets out that you’re gay, you won’t be Lydia Levy anymore. You’ll just be that lesbian girl who lives in Epsom.’ Caroline puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. ‘I just want you to have a normal life. A happy life.’

Lydia watched her younger self curl up, shyly. She wanted to hug her, or tell her to leave, but she couldn’t. She walked towards her mum, looking at her up and down.

‘The only bigoted bully I’ve come across is you,’ Lydia shouted towards her mum, knowing that she couldn’t hear her. ‘Are you worried for me, or are you just worried that even after all the work you’ve done to make a name for yourself, some people will just think of you as that woman with a lesbian daughter?’ She would have loved to have seen her mum’s reaction if

she said that, although it would have probably just added more fuel to the fire.

‘My sexuality won’t define me, Mum.’ said brunette Lydia. It was a diplomatic response. A kind response. Although, her mum didn’t take it as such.

‘It shouldn’t. But it will. It will disqualify you from so many wonderful things that I want you to experience. A family. A career. Happiness. Is it really worth making your life that much harder?’ said Caroline. Maybe she was right, thought Lydia, in some ways—but Lydia would never admit it.

‘Well, it’s my life to live,’ replied Lydia.

‘I just wish you’d told me sooner, Liddy. We could have sorted it out.’

‘It’s that mentality of thinking that there’s something to *fix* that made me not tell you. Even when I wanted to. Even when I needed to, after Dad died.’ Caroline huffed at the mention of her husband. She got up from her chair.

‘If you think my reaction’s bad,’ she said, pointing her finger at herself ‘just imagine what he’d be saying right now.’

‘I don’t have to imagine. Dad knew. I told him,’ said brunette Lydia.

Lydia remembered telling him. It was very different; pleasant even. Caroline slumped down in her

chair. She watched her younger self pace back and forth.

‘You know, unlike you, Dad just wanted me to be happy,’ said Lydia.

Caroline’s eyes welled up, but brunette Lydia didn’t care. Neither did Lydia, as she watched on like a ghost. Her mum deserved it.

‘I think your perception of how happiness works in this world highlights your inexperience of life. I know you think the world has changed. And it has. But it hasn’t. It’s still full of dickheads and idiots who will see your sexuality as a target on your back, and others who will just see you as a box to tick. You’ll lose your identity, and that’s all we’ve got. You’re throwing away opportunities. You’re throwing away normalcy. You’re throwing away happiness. If you wanted to be happy, you wouldn’t be doing this. I, as much as anyone, want you to be happy. As much as your dad did. But to stand there and think that your father would say any differently is wildly inaccurate.’

‘Well, he’s not here, is he?’ brunette Lydia snapped. ‘Because, unfortunately, he had to die instead of you.’



Lydia pulled her hand away from Hugh's. She shot Hugh a look of utter confusion, but more than anything, she was embarrassed. Hugh had now seen her at her most vulnerable, at her fiercest. He had heard her utter the worst thing she had ever said. Hugh avoided Lydia's gaze. He probably thought she was a bitch.

'Sorry,' Hugh quivered. 'I didn't mean to.' Lydia didn't know what to say. She got up from the piano stool and walked away.

'I need a drink,' said Lydia. She opened the door and walked out of the apartment. She left the door open, as an invitation to Hugh to follow. She could hear him scurry behind her, catching up to her as she exited the building.

Despite walking next to her, Hugh didn't say anything. Not a word. He was probably replaying the memory in his head. Lydia was. She kept seeing her mum's face the moment she said it. It was like she broke her heart. It made her feel like shit. Even though she didn't like how her mum reacted, she regretted saying it. Lydia turned the corner sharply, and Hugh trailed behind. The streets were quiet. Lydia liked it when they were quiet.

'Here!' said Lydia, as she stopped outside an off-license. It was closed, and all the lights inside were off.

Lydia tried the handle but the door was locked. ‘I need to see if they have any Hanson’s.’

‘It’s not open,’ said Hugh.

‘I know. We’re going to break in.’ said Lydia, looking at Hugh. Hugh looked sheepish, almost grimacing at the idea.

‘This wasn’t the drink invitation I had in mind, Lydia,’ said Hugh, hesitantly.

Lydia peeked in the window. Nobody was in there. It was dark and motionless. The door had glass windows, and the lock mechanism was the type that you could unlock from the inside. Lydia turned back to Hugh, who stood a few paces back. His neck cranked from left to right as he looked on the street, presumably making sure nobody was coming. Lydia checked too. There was nobody around, but she could hear voices in the distance, probably from the next street.

‘Lydia, I don’t know about this,’ said Hugh, his voice trembling. ‘This doesn’t feel right.’

‘Relax, Hugh. We’re not hurting anyone. And I need it. I need to know about the night club.’

‘I don’t see how it proves anything,’ said Hugh, his eyes still darting around in fear of being seen.

Lydia picked up a rock from the ground. It was weighty, and nestled perfectly in her palm. She turned

to the window. She took a deep breath, and raised her hand.

‘Wait!’ cried Hugh. ‘We can’t just break in. That’s not how things work!’

Lydia hesitated; her hand still poised in the air. She looked at Hugh, his eyes looked desperate.

‘You’re the Grim Reaper, Hugh! You take souls at will, and you’re afraid of breaking a window?’

‘It’s not the same thing,’ said Hugh, shrugging his shoulders.

Lydia smashed the rock into the glass panel of the front door. The glass smashed into a million pieces. No alarms went off and no one seemed to have heard the window smash. Lydia quickly unlocked the door from the inside and slipped in quietly. She turned back to see Hugh following her inside.

As she entered the shop, Lydia attempted to be as inconspicuous as possible—*Crash!* Lydia turned around to see Hugh standing by a pile of knocked over boxes.

‘For fuck’s sake, Hugh.’ said Lydia. Something creaked loudly. Hugh shuddered, giving Lydia a death stare.

‘What was that?’ said Hugh, looking as if he were about to get his scythe out for protection.

‘It’s probably just a mouse, Hugh. Calm down.’

Lydia moved deeper into the dimly lit shop, making her way to the aisle with all the whiskey.

‘Lydia!’ Hugh whispered. She looked down the aisle where Hugh was standing.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I think we should just go,’ said Hugh, his voice quivering.

‘Not without the whiskey!’ said Lydia, as she bent down to see what brands the off-license had. She squinted her eyes trying to read the labels. There was plenty of whiskey but no Hanson’s. ‘It’s not here.’ Lydia kneeled down and moved the bottles on the bottom shelf, hoping that there would be a bottle tucked away somewhere. ‘Fuck!’ she shouted.

Lydia shot to her feet and walked out of the off license.

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Hugh, slightly out of breath as he caught up to her on the street.

‘I know somewhere else that will have it,’ said Lydia.

‘Definitely?’ asked Hugh.

‘Definitely.’

‘It’s not another break-in, is it?’ asked Hugh. Lydia shook her head, laughing. ‘Well, it’s not far, is it? You know it’s my busiest—’

‘—Yes, your busiest night of the year,’ interrupted Lydia with a playful smirk. ‘You mentioned.’ Lydia sighed, before forcing out a fake smile. She hoped Hugh wouldn’t know the difference. ‘We’re actually going to a party, at my lecturer’s.’

‘A party? I haven’t been to a party in a long time,’ said Hugh. ‘And you don’t strike me as a party girl.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t take you for the partying type either,’ said Lydia.

‘And so, our similarities continue to grow,’ said Hugh, smiling at Lydia who had to lift her neck a little to make eye contact with him.

‘Oh, yeah. What similarities?’ asked Lydia.

‘Well, I play the piano. You play the piano,’ said Hugh, rubbing his lips together. ‘You like nineties’ films. I like nineties’ films.’ Lydia’s eyes widened. ‘What else? Your record collection! Don’t get me wrong, it’s very nice. But mine. Well, it’s bigger.’

‘You collect records?’ asked Lydia, now walking a little slower.

‘Oh yeah, since I was your age. Although, I have to say I prefer the seventies to the nineties.’

Lydia gasped, her gaping mouth slowly forming into a wide smile.

‘How can you say that? Oasis. Blur. Bluetones. Verve. And that’s just Britpop. Nirvana! Weezer! Radiohead!’ Lydia cried.

‘Well, I see your Weezer and I raise you Eagles. Their greatest hits and Hotel California are two of the best-selling albums of all time! Led Zeppelin, Bat out of Hell, Darkside of the Moon. All best-sellers. And I’ve not even mentioned David Bowie, Elton John or Queen. Or Fleetwood fucking Mac! It’s a motherfucking landslide—pun intended!’

Lydia laughed, as she looked up at Hugh who had a wry smile on his face. Lydia felt like placing her head on Hugh’s shoulder. But she didn’t.

‘And you weren’t around in the nineties. The memory is much better than it was. Most of it was shitty boybands, and the fucking Spice Girls,’ said Hugh.

‘You see. That’s why you have no friends, Hugh,’ said Lydia, her tongue nearly sticking out of her mouth.

‘Well. I can’t argue with you there,’ said Hugh.

‘I’ll be your friend, Hugh,’ said Lydia. ‘If you want one.’ Hugh smiled towards Lydia but didn’t reply.

Lydia stopped on the street corner. It was busy, and a few house lights shone in the distance, but not too far away. Lydia could see Mr Chambers’ house. His house sat on the corner of Bale Street. It had steps that

lead up to the front door, a feature that none of the other houses on Bale Street could boast. Lydia ran her fingers nervously through her hair and tried to control her breathing, lost in her own thoughts.

‘Making yourself look pretty for your lecturer?’ said Hugh.

‘Shut up,’ said Lydia.

‘Are you close? You and your lecturer?’

‘It’s just a party,’ said Lydia.

‘Classic question dodging. You should go into politics.’

‘I think I’d rather have your job.’

‘A bit suspect coming all this way for a drink, if you ask me! I reckon we’re just here so you can see your crush one last time.’

‘Well, no one fucking asked you, Hugh, did they?’ said Lydia, storming away from Hugh. She walked towards Mr Chambers’ house. She gulped in an attempt to stop herself from crying. She stopped at the crossing, and turned back to Hugh.

‘You know, if you’ve got somewhere more important to be, then just go! I didn’t ask you to be here. I didn’t even ask you to show up tonight,’ she said, with a big huff. Hugh looked cut. A little like Lydia’s mum did when she told her she wished she had died. Lydia shook her head, and turned around. She didn’t have

time for all this drama. She needed to find the Hanson's.

She'd been enjoying Hugh's company, but not now! He didn't get it. He didn't know what it was like to—

'—LYDIA!' Hugh called from behind her. 'WATCH OUT!' Lydia jumped. She turned and saw a double-decker bus headed right for her. It blared its horn, brakes screeching. Lydia froze. This was it. After all of her suicide tempts this was how it ended; hit by a bus like some regular schmuck.

A bony hand yanked her own. Suddenly she was in Mr Chambers' study.



It was weird. There wasn't a party in progress. Lydia looked around the room and saw a girl sitting at the piano, with her back to her. Beige hoodie, bad posture, two-toned hair: it was her—Lydia, sat at the piano, tinkling the keys. She looked around the room for Mr Chambers but she could only see Hugh, who was standing next to her, staring in the direction of the piano. Fuck! Lydia knew this memory. She'd seen it a hundred times. But never this clearly.

'Ah, Hanson's!'

Lydia turned her head and saw Mr Chambers entering the study through the sliding doors, holding a glass of whiskey. He began to rifle through a neatly stacked pile of classical records beside a wooden record player. ‘Are you sure I can’t get you one. The recipe hasn’t changed in 120 years, but then again, why would you change perfection?’

Lydia turned her attention back to the piano, watching herself respond.

‘No, I’m okay. I’ve—I have my sheet music in my bag,’ said Lydia, as she turned on the piano stool.

‘Ah! This is it! This is the one.’ Mr. Chambers removed a record from its sleeve, placing it onto the record player. Lydia was unsure of how to respond or react, not that Mr. Chambers was waiting for a response. He held his ear to the air, listening to the opening sonata of Mozart’s Don Giovanni. He raised his whiskey glass in the air as if conducting an orchestra.

‘Beautiful. Did you know that Mozart supposedly wrote the overture to Don Giovanni on the morning of the opera’s premiere whilst suffering a tremendous hangover?’ said Mr. Chambers. He took a seat on the leather sofa and spread his legs. ‘It’s my favourite opera. Come. Sit.’

Lydia squirmed as she stood next to Hugh. Her younger self stood up from the piano stool and walked towards the sofa. As Lydia watched her sit down, she wished she had just left; but she didn't, it never even crossed her mind. Her younger self did look a little nervous though, despite forcing a smile as she took the seat next to Mr Chambers. Her fingers tapped the armrest, as if playing a melody. Lydia hadn't realised she was doing that until now.

'What's it about? Don Giovanni?' Lydia asked Mr Chambers.

Mr. Chambers pondered for the briefest of moments.

'Oh! Well, great question. It's about a nobleman, Don Giovanni, of course, who is a very beloved and powerful nobleman who has to—are you sure I can't get you something to drink?'

'No, honestly, I'm fine,' said Lydia.

'Not a whiskey drinker?' asked Mr Chambers.

'I've never tried it,' said Lydia.

'Well, you shouldn't be afraid to try new things, Lydia,' said Mr Chambers, looking at her with raised eyebrows. 'And you never know. You might find you like it.'

Mr. Chambers closed his eyes. Lydia wondered if he was captivated by the music or if this was just part

of his act. As Lydia sat next to Mr Chambers, she looked uncomfortable and not at all entranced by the music as Mr Chambers was, or claimed to be. Her fingers clenched and then tapped on the armrest, this time not playing a melody at all.

Lydia turned to Hugh, whose eyes were firmly fixed on the sofa.

‘We need to get out of here, Hugh!’ cried Lydia. Hugh didn’t reply. Lydia turned to him frantically. ‘Please, Hugh! Just stop it.’

‘It doesn’t work that way, Lydia.’ said Hugh, through gritted teeth.

‘Well, I’m not watching it!’ screamed Lydia. She went to move but her legs wouldn’t move. It felt like they were trapped in cement.

‘I’m sorry, Lydia. It will be over soon,’ said Hugh. Lydia bit her lip and closed her eyes, but she could still hear Mr Chambers talking to her younger self clearly.

‘Beautiful, no? Sometimes, to make something great, something new, you’ve got to appreciate the great that’s been done before,’ said Mr Chambers. Lydia could see the moment even with her eyes closed. She opened them and looked at Hugh. His eyes were focused on Mr Chambers, as if he didn’t want to look either Lydia in the eye. Lydia could tell he knew she

was looking at him, but his gaze remained firmly fixed towards the sofa. Lydia turned to watch too, just as Mr Chambers lunged towards Lydia, his lips pursed and eyes shut.

Lydia leaned backward; her eyes wide with shock.

‘What are you doing?’ said Lydia.

‘Oh, come on, Lyddie. Don’t play dumb,’ said Mr Chambers.

‘I’m sorry if I’ve given you the wrong idea, but I’m not interested in you that way,’ said Lydia, shuffling further down the sofa. Mr Chambers swirled his neck as if trying to crack it.

‘Lydia, I’m not a man people say no to. And if you’re more open, you never know, you might learn a thing or two,’ said Mr Chambers. He launched himself at her again. Lydia raised her arms towards his torso, pushing him away.

‘I’m a lesbian. I like girls,’ said Lydia.

‘That’s great. Good for you, sincerely, but I’m not looking for a partner, Lydia. I’ve already got one of those at home. I’m just looking for fun. You like fun, don’t you, Lydia?’ said Mr Chambers. He flashed a grin.

Lydia tried to move her legs again but they still felt trapped. She couldn’t move, and she couldn’t take

her eyes off her younger self. Mr. Chambers placed his hand forcefully on Lydia's knee. Quickly, she brushed his hand away and stood up. Mr. Chambers violently pulled her hair, forcing her back down on to the sofa. Lydia grinded her teeth together as she watched him overpower her.

'I don't know why you're being like this to me, Lydia. I know you're a girl who likes fun. That's what university is all about: fun! So, if you want to stay here, I suggest you be a little more open-minded to new experiences. Particularly, the fun ones! You've earned it.'

Her younger self didn't respond—she wished she had, but she didn't know what she could have said. Looking at her, it was clear she was too scared to do anything; she remembered the feeling. She turned her head to the sliding doors and thought she could have made a run for it. She could have hit him. She could have fought. Sure, he was bigger and stronger, but still, she could have put up a fight. She could have threatened him, changed the subject, repulsed him. Screamed. Kicked. Cried. But she didn't. She didn't do any of those things.

Lydia watched her younger self just sit there silently, staring at Mr Chambers. Mr. Chambers forced himself on her, kissing Lydia's lips and neck and

touching her upper thigh. Lydia watched herself do absolutely fucking nothing.

Lydia closed her eyes as the score of Don Giovanni blared in her ears. She fucking hated it. She heard a thud and opened her eyes, hoping that the memory was over, but it wasn't. She was still there. Mr Chambers pushed Lydia against the wall, grabbing her wrists with one hand as he removed his belt with his other. His trousers dropped to the floor. Lydia couldn't see his face, but she could see her own; she looked weak and pathetic. She couldn't even look at Mr Chambers. She looked away, to the spot where Lydia and Hugh now stood. Lydia turned to Hugh. His tearful eyes dropped to the floor. How embarrassing, thought Lydia.



A blinding light suddenly flooded the room. Lydia's eyes felt like they were on fire. She squinted in pain. A bus horn pierced the air. Suddenly, she found herself on concrete ground. She touched the ground beneath her with her fingers, feeling relieved. The concrete felt cold and harsh, but at least she wasn't in the memory anymore. She looked up at the trees and buildings that

touched the night sky, as her eyes regained their focus.
Hugh's outstretched hand hung in mid-air.

CHAPTER TEN

GOLDEN

Lydia pushed Hugh's hand away, careful to avoid any contact with it. She didn't want any more of her secrets exposed. She rose to her feet and dusted herself off.

'I'm sorry,' said Hugh. 'It just, sort of, happened.'

'Oh, just like how it, *sort of*, happened before!' Lydia exclaimed.

'You were gonna get hit by a fucking bus!' said Hugh.

'Good!' screamed Lydia. Hugh looked sheepish, his eyes glancing back and forth between his feet and at the strangers passing by; but not once at Lydia. Lydia was glad. She couldn't bear to look him in the eye. She was embarrassed. She wondered if Hugh thought she was a coward, too. 'You should have let it hit me!'

'But what about the club?' asked Hugh. He was right. The bastard. Lydia hated reliving the memory of her and Mr Chambers, and worse, she now had to sneak into his house. Lydia screamed. She felt the wrinkles in her forehead touch as she grinded her teeth. She stormed away in the direction of Mr Chambers' house.

She glanced back at Hugh. He stood in the middle of the road watching her, hugging one arm to his body, like he was unsure whether to follow her or not. Lydia turned back to the house. She didn't care what Hugh did. Her strides were long, as she approached the house. Soft, warm lights hung from the porch casting a pleasant glow over the steps. Lydia made her way to the front door and pushed it open gently.

As she took a step inside, she could hear indistinct chatter over orchestral music. The large open space room was emptier than before, but huddles of people still adorned each corner and certain spots in the room, but there was nobody that she recognised. Her eyes glanced over to the sofa where she had sat earlier, half expecting to see Sarah and Adam, but they weren't there. She looked around the room cautiously, forcing through a smile as disguise to fit in—although, nobody else in the room was smiling. She couldn't see Mr Chambers—nor could she see any Hanson's whiskey. She'd hoped that there might have been a bottle lying around somewhere which she could just grab and leave, but she had no such luck. Then she remembered where she had seen a bottle of Hanson's.

Lydia scurried to Mr Chambers' study. She opened the sliding doors quietly and snuck herself inside. There it was. Atop the piano. She walked over

to pick up the bottle, but as she got closer, she realised it was empty. Fuck!

‘Lydia! I was wondering where my favourite girl had got to.’ Lydia’s stomach churned; her heart sank. She turned around slowly. Mr Chambers stood in the doorway, a glass of whiskey in hand. Hanson’s no doubt. ‘I didn’t realise that you were still here.’ Mr Chambers took a few steps towards Lydia. He felt close—too close. Lydia looked down at her legs. They felt like cement.

‘But I’m really glad you are,’ said Mr Chambers. ‘Can I get you a drink?’

‘Hanson’s. If—if you have any?’ Lydia replied.

‘Hanson’s! A girl after my own heart.’ said Mr Chambers with evident delight. He moved his head toward Lydia, his arm grazing her stomach delicately. ‘Shit. All out.’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ whispered Mr Chambers, leaning towards Lydia’s face, practically licking her ear. ‘I’m sure there’s a fresh bottle in the guest bedroom upstairs.’

Lydia could smell the whiskey on him. She closed her mouth and breathed in through her nostrils. *Honey*, she thought, *just like before*. She was desperate to taste Hanson’s. She yearned to know if the taste was the same as before.

‘Maybe we should go upstairs and have a look,’ he purred, his voice low and excited.

Lydia felt a wave of revulsion wash over her. She was desperate. But, not that desperate.

‘There’s no need to open a fresh bottle for me.’ She snatched the glass from Mr Chambers’ hand. ‘I’ll just have a sip of this one if that’s okay?’

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and raised the glass to her lips. The liquid was harsh and smoky, the overpowering burn making her gasp for air. She discerned the oak barrel flavour, reminiscent of the last time. A subtle sweetness emerged before turning sour and lingering on her tongue. A glimmer of hope stirred within her. Perhaps, just perhaps, the night club was not a dream after all.

‘Look at that. All gone,’ said Mr Chambers, his voice sounding dangerous. ‘Let’s crack open that fresh bottle, and just see what happens. We’ll have to be a bit quieter than our last rendezvous, as the wife’s in the lounge with her friends. What do you think?’

Lydia dropped the glass to the floor. She could feel her jaw clenching and veins bursting. ‘Excuse me?’ she spat out.

‘I said, what do you think?’ Mr. Chambers replied, his voice calm and collected.

‘What do I think?’ Lydia fixed Mr. Chambers with a fierce glare. ‘I think you’re a gargantuan prick. Gargantuan, of course, deriving from the Latin Gargantua, which is something I’m sure you know, given how you pretend to be so knowledgeable and to care about art and artistry. But you’re not a fucking artist. And if you were, I suspect the only art you’d ever truly care about would be a self-portrait!’ Mr Chambers’ face dropped. She wasn’t sure if it was the whiskey talking, or if it was just built-up anger, but she couldn’t help herself. Her legs felt lighter, and it was as if she was watching herself—the way she had before, with Hugh. She couldn’t stop herself, and she didn’t want to.

‘And, I think if your wife knew how much of a narcissistic and deplorable twat you really were, she’d leave you in a heartbeat,’ said Lydia. She looked at Mr Chambers who still stood close. His nostrils flared and his eyebrows furrowed. His fists were clenched tightly, and jittered a little by his side. He turned around to the sliding doors again. They were slightly ajar. He turned back to Lydia with a demonic glare.

‘Look here, you little bitch,’ he snarled.

‘You asked me what I thought. Well, that’s it. That’s what I think,’ said Lydia. Mr Chambers blinked. Behind his steely gaze was a scared, little man—and

she wasn't frightened. Not anymore. She knew he wouldn't do anything with people in the house, especially his wife.

'Enjoy the rest of your fucking party, Mr Chambers,' she said, shoving past him and striding towards the sliding doors.

'Oh,' she said, stopping at the door. 'And Hanson's tastes like shit, by the way!' She slid the doors open and walked out, leaving Mr Chambers standing alone in his study. A wide smile stretched across her face as she strode out through the living room. The room was silent. It seemed as though every face was staring at Lydia, but she didn't care. She opened the front door and walked out, shutting it behind her. She breathed in the cold air and exhaled. She spotted Hugh sitting down at a nearby bus stop and made her way towards him.

She couldn't stop smiling. Not only had she told Mr Chambers what she really thought of him, but she had tasted Hanson's—and it was the same! The exact same. Surely, that meant the night club was real, or how else would the whiskey have tasted identical. And if the night club was real, well then so was Eliza. And if Eliza was real...

'Hey!' she said, flashing a smile to Hugh who glanced up.

‘Hey,’ he said. He looked like a toddler who had just been told off. ‘Get a load of this fucking sign.’ Hugh pointed to the advertisement boarding that covered the bus stop. A crudely drawn Grim Reaper stood holding up a bottle of Podum—which looked to be a new flu remedy. Below the picture, a caption in gothic letters read: *For when you feel like Death*. Lydia looked at Hugh, who looked at the sign shaking his head. Lydia sniggered.

‘Well, don’t fucking laugh,’ said Hugh, ‘I’m seriously offended.’

‘It’s the 21st century, Hugh. Everyone’s offended,’ said Lydia. ‘Just roll with it.’

‘Look, about before. I am really sor—’

‘—It’s fine. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. You’d have thought I’d have learnt that by now,’ said Lydia. ‘The truth is I was just embarrassed.’

‘Embarrassed?’ said Hugh, rising to his feet. Lydia turned away, and began walking. She could hear Hugh’s footsteps catching up. ‘Embarrassed?’

‘I just saw him,’ said Lydia to Hugh who was now walking alongside her, his face curled up. Lydia laughed.

‘What’s so funny?’ asked Hugh.

‘I called him a gargantuan prick, or something definitely along those lines. I can’t remember. It was

like something just took a hold of me and I just told him all of these things that I thought about him,' she said, side-eyeing Hugh, discreetly. His snarl had turned into a grin. 'I wish you could have seen his face,' Lydia snapped her hand away from Hugh. 'But not enough for you to actually see it.' She barged into Hugh's shoulder, playfully.

'Yes! Look, it won't happen again. You have my word!' he said. The street lights flickered on Hugh's face as they walked. He looked as if he was deep in thought. 'And good for you! Genuinely. It takes a lot to do that. I take it you didn't get the fucking whiskey, though.'

'I did, actually,' said Lydia. Hugh's whole body turned to Lydia. His eyebrows flew up and his neck moved like a bobble head. Lydia teased him with suspense, her mouth hanging open.

'And?' he shouted.

'It tasted the same!' she screamed.

'So, the night club?' said Hugh.

'Improbable, but not impossible,' Lydia replied. Hugh pounded the air with his fist.

'Fucking get in!' he said. 'I'm rooting for you, you know,'

What did he mean by that, thought Lydia. It dawned on Lydia she was walking the wrong way

home. She was fairly sure that she could cut through Albion Street and end up on the back of Whitworth.

‘You shouldn’t be embarrassed,’ said Hugh. ‘I should have said that before. You know, when you said that you were embarrassed.’

‘I should be embarrassed, Hugh,’ said Lydia. ‘And it doesn’t matter if I should or shouldn’t. I’m embarrassed either way.’

‘Well, you shouldn’t let dickheads, like him, determine your happiness,’ said Hugh.

‘The truth is, I was depressed before that,’ said Lydia, staring at her feet as they cut left onto Albion Street. ‘Mr Chambers was the only person who took any notice of me. And after he raped me, I was sad. Not because I’d been raped, but because he stopped noticing me. How stupid is that?’ Lydia caught Hugh’s reflection in the puddles below. He looked tense.

‘I came to uni thinking I’d meet loads of people like me. That I’d have loads of friends, a girlfriend, too. I thought I’d find a connection, and a purpose—but I didn’t. So, I blamed everyone else: Mr Chambers, my mum, people at uni. But for what! It’s not their fault. The truth is, I don’t have all of those things because I’m not remarkable; not to the people at university, not to my family, not even to Mr Chambers. *I* don’t even think I’m remarkable.’

‘Lydia,’ said Hugh. He stopped and tugged on Lydia’s shoulder. She stopped and turned to face him. Her eyes were watery as she rubbed them with the back of her hand. ‘Lydia. I’ve only known you for a couple of hours, but I think you’re remarkable. And by the sounds of it, what you just did in there was pretty remarkable, too.’ Hugh tilted his neck and carried on walking. Lydia followed alongside him.

‘Oh! And for the record!’ said Hugh, ‘Don Giovanni isn’t an opera about a beloved nobleman. It’s the story of a rapist who finally gets what’s coming to him.’

Lydia sniffed. She could feel a tear rolling down her cheek and her throat felt sore. She looked up at the sky. The drizzle had ceased and there wasn’t a single cloud in the sky.

‘He’ll get what he deserves, and so will you, one day,’ said Hugh, ‘Maybe not tonight, for either of you. But one day.’

‘Do you do this a lot?’ Lydia asked. Hugh shrugged his shoulders. ‘Spend all this time with one person, on a job.’

‘On a job?’ said Hugh.

‘You know, somebody who you’re going to kill,’ said Lydia.

‘I’m not a hitman, for fuck’s sake. I’m a collector of souls,’ replied Hugh.

‘Well, do you ever spend this much time—’

‘—Never,’ Hugh interrupted, a glint in his eye.

Lydia looked up to see the street sign of Whitworth Street. They weren’t far, now. She couldn’t wait to get home. She couldn’t wait to play the record again.

‘Have you always been like this?’ asked Lydia.

‘I’m not sure I should tell you,’ said Hugh.

‘Come on, you can tell me,’ said Lydia, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. ‘We’re friends.’

‘We’re friends?’ Hugh repeated, sounding surprised. ‘I’ve only known you for a couple of hours!’

‘That’s irrelevant,’ replied Lydia, ‘You can’t measure something like friendship with time. And you know my secrets, so it’s only fair I know one of yours!’

‘Fine,’ Hugh conceded, ‘I haven’t always been like this. But it’s been long enough that it feels like I have. Is it my turn to ask a question now?’ Lydia nodded, a warmth spreading in her chest. She hoped that Hugh would ask her about the night club. She wanted to tell him all about it. She wanted to tell him that the night club felt like the first moment of sunshine after a long winter. She knew Hugh would love it. She wondered if she let him play the record, he would see

it too. Maybe he'd know where it was, and how to actually get there!

'Why do you care about whether this night club is real if you plan to kill yourself, anyway?' he asked.

Fuck. It was a good question. And a fair one. Lydia pursed her lips.

'My depression has always felt like a constant swarm following me around. Sometimes in my head. Sometimes in my stomach. But it's always there. Even when I'm having fun, or experiencing joy, or thinking about something else, it's just fucking there.' Lydia grabbed the back of her head. 'In the night club, it wasn't. I didn't feel it following me. It sounds corny, but I just felt wonder and elation, and even butterflies when I was with Eliza, and it just—'

'—Who's Eliza?' Hugh interrupted.

Lydia bit her lip, feeling her cheeks flush.

'A girl I met at the night club,' said Lydia.

'Well, that explains the big grin on your face!' said Hugh.

'I barely even spent two minutes with her!' protested Lydia.

'Ah! A wise person once told me that time is irrelevant when it comes to this sort of thing. Just admit you like her!' said Hugh.

'I don't even know her!' Lydia protested again.

‘But when you were with her, you felt something. You’re not sure what it was. It was ineffable, indescribable, but it made you happy and nervous, nonetheless,’ said Hugh, his entire face grinning.

‘How do you know?’ asked Lydia.

‘It’s like in the old movies. You know what I mean!’ said Hugh, his voice taking on a melodious quality.

‘I assure you I don’t,’ said Lydia.

Hugh chuckled, ‘Well, I guess I’ve seen a lot more of those old romantic movies than you have. Trust me. You had that look people get when they experience something magical, something that ignites a spark within them. It’s beautiful, really.’

A piano melody filled the air, as if it were coming from the sky. Lydia looked around the street, but nobody besides Hugh and herself were there. Hugh’s eyes were closed tightly and he stood like a statue; completely still except for his fingers which gently moved up and down, matching the melody that Lydia could hear.

His fingers stopped, but the piano continued, repeating the same refrain. Hugh swayed his hands as if holding an imaginary bow. A string ensemble joined the melody with powerful, long notes that were filled with incredible vibrato. Hugh’s hand hit the air in

triplets. Lydia heard a hi-hat join the piano and strings. Hugh's arm swayed as if he were a conductor to an invisible orchestra. The music got louder as if a full orchestra was playing from the sky. Lydia looked around, but still nobody was around. She turned back to Hugh. He opened his eyes and shot Lydia a smirk.

'I do love the old movies,' said Hugh. 'You just can't beat the classics.'

'Well, I'm a nineties girl and I beg to differ!' said Lydia.

'Have you heard of Fred Astaire?' asked Hugh. *Who* thought Lydia, but she didn't want to upset Hugh. She shook her head. 'Ginger Rogers? Gene Kelly? Shirly Temple?'

'What, like the drink?' said Lydia.

Hugh shook his head with a look of disbelief. A mischievous twinkle flickered in his eyes. He lifted his arm slowly, and clicked his fingers.

The colours around them drained away in an instant. A gasp escaped from Lydia's lips as she looked at the transformed streets of Manchester. The vibrant hues that once painted the cityscape were replaced by a mesmerising grayscale palette. Lydia blinked, half-expecting to see her surroundings revert to their former vibrancy, but the black and white world remained.

The streets stretched out, and the buildings looked like they had grown. Vintage cars sat in front of shops that she'd never seen before. She drifted towards a VW Beetle for a closer look. Parked on its left was a shiny Ford Mustang, and on the other side was a long, Cadillac Deville. All three cars sat outside Buffum's department store. The building was huge and towered above the rest. In the shop windows were vintage mannequins, each wearing elegant attire; the women in their flowing dresses and stylish sun hats, and the men in their dapper suits.

In the reflection of the window, she saw Hugh approaching from behind. He stood next to her by the window display. She turned to Hugh who was giggling.

'What?' asked Lydia.

Hugh nodded towards the shop window, prompting Lydia to follow his gaze. Inside, the mannequins now stood unclothed. Lydia saw herself in the reflection of the shop window. Her hair had been styled into a bob; her brunette and blonde hairs still perfectly parted on each side. Sparkling diamond earrings glistened from each side of her head. Her eyes drifted downward, revealing an elegant, red ballgown that hugged her figure with silk perfection. Her hand gently caressed her stomach before gliding down to her thighs. She looked back at her reflection, her mouth

slightly agape. The vibrant red lipstick on her lips matched perfectly with the colour of the dress, and the red seemed to pop against the grayscale backdrop that surrounded her. She looked like a movie star. Her attention shifted back to Hugh, who now wore a perfectly fitted, grey belted suit and matching trilby.

‘Are you ready?’ he said.

‘Ready for what?’ asked Lydia, her nostrils flaring. Hugh’s eyes twinkled, his grin stretching from ear to ear. He turned around.

‘Action!’ a voice boomed from behind Lydia. Lydia span around.

A spotlight suddenly beamed into Lydia’s eyes, causing her to raise her arm to her eyes and squint. Her vision soon cleared, revealing an entire film crew gathered on the street corner. Among them sat a slender man with a pencil moustache, perched in a director’s chair, casually holding a black megaphone by his side. Next to him sat a colossal movie camera, equipped with two film reels. Lydia heard the rhythmic sound of tap dancing. She turned to see Hugh, who was gracefully tapping his feet against the ground, his body swaying with the skill and finesse of a professional dancer. He stopped.

‘Now you go!’ shouted Hugh.

‘I can’t dance!’ said Lydia, her cheeks blushing.

‘Come on, just try!’ he said.

‘I really can’t!’ Lydia exclaimed. Hugh chuckled as he clicked his fingers.

Lydia felt her body begin to move by itself. Her legs were shaking. She looked down at her feet which were now tapping the floor in perfect synchronisation to the lively jazz music. She couldn’t take her eyes off them. She didn’t know how Hugh was doing this, but she liked it! Her feet stopped abruptly, only for Hugh to resume dancing himself.

Hugh’s hands nonchalantly rested in his pockets as he bounced off the concrete. His smart dress shoes shuffled and scraped the ground, until, with a surge of electric energy, Lydia felt it again. She propelled into motion, her body flawlessly executing the same routine that Hugh had just performed; her feet gliding and scraping the floor. She flew through the air, almost defying gravity. She laughed in disbelief. She looked at Hugh who was now dancing with her. They danced in unison, perfectly, as if they had rehearsed this routine for years. They both pirouetted into the air, landing perfectly on the beat. Lydia felt her face form into a smile that seemed to touch the diamonds that dangled from her ears. Her feet stopped moving. She rested her hands on her hips and her back arched forward as she panted. She laughed but she was too out of breath to

laugh properly. Hugh somehow looked like he was full of energy.

‘Come on!’ cried Hugh as he darted round the corner with lightning speed. Lydia stood upright and chased after him. As she rounded the corner, Hugh began to cartwheel down the narrow alley, his movements a blur of agility and grace. Lydia tried to keep up with him but she couldn’t. Hugh kicked puddles and swayed his body with the wind. Lydia gasped heavily as she watched him in awe. He turned his head back down the alley towards Lydia. He had a mischievous grin on his face. Lydia gulped. He turned back around and began sprinting down the alley. In one fluid motion, he performed a cartwheel, then another, soaring into the air with a breathtaking spin. He hit the ground.

‘Motherfucker!’ screamed Hugh.

‘Hugh!’ Lydia called. She rushed over to Hugh. His ankle was at ninety degrees from its socket.

‘Bastard! I shouldn’t have done that,’ said Hugh. Lydia squirmed, letting out a little shriek. Hugh grabbed his ankle and popped it back into the socket as if it was a regular occurrence for him. Lydia grimaced turning away, gagging.

‘Oh my God!’ muttered Lydia.

As she looked up, there it was. The mural that Eliza had shown her. It was faded and marked with graffiti, but it was the same one. She was sure of it. She wandered closer to the wall, her hand reaching out to it. She pushed her hand against the brick, tracing her fingers around the wall until her hand met one brick a slightly paler shade of red to the rest.

‘This is it! This is it!’ Lydia exclaimed. ‘Hugh! Get up! This is it!’ She looked back at Hugh, but he’d vanished. ‘Hugh? Hugh...’

A door slammed open.

‘What’s with all the noise?’ a voice boomed. Lydia jumped, turned, and saw someone standing in the doorway of the night club. Her jaw dropped. It was Lester.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DÉJÀ VU

The once-great night club, now run-down, dusty and dingy, seemed to hold onto remnants of its former glory. Lydia's eyes frantically danced around the large space. The worn-out dance floor bore witness to countless nights of revelry. It felt odd moving across it without a mass of bodies blocking her every exit. Lester led her to the alcove, and down the stairs into the basement bar. There it was. The spot she first saw Eliza. Lydia couldn't help but wonder where Eliza was now. She wondered what she would look like after all of these years. Would she have aged like Lester, her once-youthful features marked by the passage of time? If they crossed paths on the street, would Lydia even recognise her?

'Here. Take a seat,' said Lester, as he tucked himself into one of the booths. Lydia sat opposite him. Lydia's eyes looked to the bar which looked exactly the same—even the drinks behind the bar looked untouched. She could almost see Johnny still there shaking cocktails. The room was dim, but Lydia could just about make out the peeling wallpaper and empty

hooks where photographs used to hang. She turned to Lester, who was twiddling his thumbs, staring at Lydia. His left eyebrow arched, but he didn't say anything.

'How long have you been closed for?' asked Lydia.

'Far too long,' replied Lester.

'You should re-open!' exclaimed Lydia.

'It wouldn't bring back the nineties. The world's different now, not necessarily in a bad way, but it all changes too quickly for an old timer like me.'

'How did a place as great as this end up like this?' said Lydia, gesturing at the peeling wallpaper and dusty floor. Lester shrugged his shoulders. 'So what? You come here to commiserate in memory of what was once great?'

'No,' said Lester, shaking his head. 'I come here to celebrate and appreciate what once was. If I didn't miss it, it wouldn't have been great—but it was great, it really was. I wish you could have seen it then, and not like this.'

'I bet you've got a lot of memories,' said Lydia.

'Oh, that's for sure,' said Lester. He looked at Lydia suspiciously. 'Do I know you from somewhere?'

Lydia's heart skipped a beat. *Shit! What if Lester recognised me from earlier in the night,* she thought. Surely not; for Lydia it was a couple of hours, but for

Lester it was a long, long time ago. Lester looked like he had lived a lifetime or two since Lydia saw him last. Deep lines crisscrossed his face, etched there by decades of worry and stress. His once-thick hair was now thin and wispy, clinging desperately to his scalp. The sparkle had faded from his eyes, replaced with a weariness that seemed to seep into his bones. It was as if he had aged twenty years in the blink of an eye. He couldn't possibly remember Lydia.

'I don't think so?' Lydia gulped as she fidgeted backwards in her seat. 'Maybe my mum used to come here!' she said, forcing out a laugh.

'Yeah, maybe,' said Lester. 'What were you saying?'

'I just said that you must have a lot of memories,' said Lydia.

'Who needs memories when you've got photos?'

'Of course! The photos!' she muttered, a bit too loudly. Lester grimaced. Lydia felt dust in her throat. She coughed. Lester got up from his seat and walked over to the bar. Lydia followed him, watching him pour a drink.

'Here,' said Lester, handing her a glass of water. She took the glass and sipped it. 'Look, I'm going to head home.'

‘Can I see the photos?’ asked Lydia, placing the glass on the bar. She held her hands together and held them out in front of Lester. ‘Please!’

Lester sighed and tilted his head backwards.

‘Fine, but then you’re gone.’ Lester began to move around the bar, gesturing at Lydia to follow him. He pushed open the stained wooden door at the bottom of the staircase. He walked down the steps and pulled out a rusty set of keys. They were the same set. He slid the key into the keyhole and unlocked the door. The door creaked open as he pushed it, walking through.

Lydia took a step into the cellar, and her face crinkled up. A wave of odours assaulted her senses. It smelt like something had died. As she walked closer into the cellar, her shoes seemed to stick to the floor. She forcefully lifted them up with each step as she walked closer to the shelving units. The smell only got worse. The beer bottles on the shelves were green and fuzzy. The cider bottles looked black with bits floating inside. Lydia stopped herself from gagging. Thud!

‘There!’ said Lester, throwing a lidless box onto the damp floor. ‘They’re the most recent ones.’ Photographs spilled out.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Lydia moved closer to them, kneeling down to get a good look. ‘There’s so many.’

As Lydia's fingers sifted through the stack of photographs, her eyes were immediately drawn to a photograph that seemed to vividly capture the night club at its peak. In the photograph, a sea of exuberant patrons filled the dance floor. She grabbed another. In this photograph the bar was bustling, adorned with gleaming bottles and a row of bartenders expertly mixing cocktails amidst a backdrop of animated conversations and laughter. Lydia delved deeper into the box, hoping to discover just one photograph amongst the thousands that would prove that she had actually been there.

'Why are you so interested in this place, anyway?' asked Lester. She looked up at him. Lester stood at the door, leaning against the frame, his eyes fixated on Lydia. He rubbed his chin and strained his eyes. Lydia wasn't sure what to say, and part of her still felt weary that Lester might remember her—particularly now that they were in the cellar together.

Lydia frantically swiped each photograph as if she were at a record fair searching for a bargain. Johnny was there! Eliza's friend, too. But Lydia wasn't, and neither was Eliza. Lydia could hear Lester's footsteps walking towards her. She pulled another photograph closer to her face. There was a sea of bodies on the dance floor. Lydia strained her eyes trying to see into

the gaps. *Is that me?* she thought. The image was blurry. She couldn't tell. Lester's frail hand grabbed her wrist. She looked up to see Lester kneeling beside her. He held Lydia's wrist with a tight grip, staring at her face from inches away.

'I need a drink. Do you want something stronger than water?' said Lester, his eyes focused on Lydia's.

'O—Okay,' stammered Lydia. Lester stood up and moved away. She poured out the box onto the sticky floor and moved her hands against the photographs trying to spread them out, looking at each one for a second before moving onto the next. There was no sign of her, or Eliza in any of the photographs. She rested her elbows on the photographs and sunk her head into her hands.

'Ugh! It's been a long time since I've been down here,' shouted Lester. 'A lot of these have gone off.'

'It's okay. I should be getting out of your hair anyway,' Lydia called, as she picked up the photographs and threw them back into the box. She looked around for Lester but he had disappeared down one of the aisles deep into the cellar. She turned for the door and made her way for the exit.

'The good thing about whiskey is it ages instead of spoiling,' said Lester, as he emerged from the shadows. Lydia turned around to see Lester holding a

bottle of whiskey. Hanson's. Lydia's eyes focused on the bottle. She could see that it had been opened, but the liquid was filled to the top. *It couldn't be*, thought Lydia, *the same bottle*. Her stomach sank. As she looked into Lester's sharp eyes, she had the feeling that he knew.

'Time's a funny thing, you know. Who decides what ages and what deteriorates? Not me, that's for sure.' Lester placed the bottle down on a wooden desk that hid behind the cellar door, adjacent to where Lydia was standing. He pulled out two glasses from the desk drawer and poured a little whiskey into each one.

'Wow!' gasped Lydia. Above the desk was a corkboard filled to the brim with photographs and newspaper clippings. *Night Club opens in Manchester* headlined one of the clippings, dated April, 1995. Lester noticed her looking and reached for the draw string light that floated by the corkboard. He pulled it, shining a light onto the photographs.

'Here,' said Lester, handing Lydia the glass of whiskey.

'Thank you,' said Lydia, taking a swig. She grimaced as she swallowed it, but she didn't care about the taste anymore. She couldn't take her eyes off the corkboard—in one of the images Lester stood shaking hands with an important-looking man; they both wore

sharp suits and had serious expressions. Next to that one was Lester and the bar staff. They all held cocktail shakers and smiled. Lydia recognised Johnny, third from the right. Next to that was another newspaper clipping.

‘Night club forced to shut after drug incident.’ Lydia muttered, reading the headline aloud.

‘What a load of shit!’ said Lester, before taking another swig. ‘Like I said, some things age fine, others just get spoiled.’ His eyes twinkled, but his face looked a picture of disappointment. She felt sorry for him. She finished her drink and placed the empty glass onto the desk. As the glass thudded against the wooden desk, Lydia saw it! Her eyes shot open and she leaned closer.

A photo hung from a red drawing pin. It was Eliza! She stood amidst a group of patrons at the bar; her smile radiant, as the patrons playfully jostled for position within the frame. A wry laugh escaped from Lydia’s lips.

‘Something funny?’ asked Lester.

‘Would you m—mind’ asked Lydia, ‘If I looked at that one more closely?’ pointing her finger towards the photograph of herself. Lester furrowed his brow, looking somewhat perplexed, but he nodded and reached for the photograph.

‘This one?’ he asked.

‘Yes, please,’ she said eagerly. He handed her the photograph.

Lydia inspected it carefully. Eliza looked beautiful, more beautiful than she remembered. She traced her eyes along the patrons. They were all strangers that she didn’t recognise; they all smiled for the camera, except for one girl. Lydia! In the photograph Lydia didn’t face the camera like everybody else—she was turned in Eliza’s direction and looked as if the flash had caught her off guard. Lydia’s gaping mouth formed into a wry smile. Proof!

‘New Year’s Eve, 1999. What a night!’ said Lester.

‘It looked incredible, Lester,’ whispered Lydia. ‘It really did.’

‘It was,’ said Lester. Lydia handed him back the photograph. ‘You can hold on to that one.’

Lydia’s smile beamed towards Lester, who mirrored one back.

‘I should get going,’ said Lydia, clutching onto the photograph.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RACING THE REAPER

Lydia stood by the record player in her living room. With the confirmation that both Eliza and the night club were real, Lydia felt nervous. Her fingers trembled as she held the needle in her hand above the record. The record span around. She dropped it but caught it before it hit the record.

‘What am I going to say to her?’ she muttered. Lydia felt heavy, like she had something to lose. Before, the night club felt like a game, but now it felt real—because it was. She took a deep breathe inward and dropped the needle to the vinyl. Suddenly, she found herself immersed in the neon night club once more. The outro of Cornershop’s *Brimful of Asha* blared from the speakers as throngs of bodies jumped in time with the guitars.

‘Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow!’ cried the crowds of dancers, singing along at the top of their voices. Lydia smiled as she watched them.

‘So, you found a way to sneak back in?’ a voice purred in Lydia’s ear. She turned and saw Eliza; with a bright smile on her face.

‘I have my ways,’ said Lydia, ‘And besides, I promised you a dance.’

Piano chords rang out from the speaker to the dance floor. Lydia recognised it instantly—*Praise You* by Fatboy Slim. Lydia gave her hand to Eliza. She grabbed it. Lydia took her to a spot in the middle of the dance floor. The intro was soft and slow. Lydia began to sway, and Eliza joined in her movements. The funky bassline came to a stop and the kick snares sped up. When the piano boomed again everybody began to jump—Eliza and Lydia, too.

Eliza held her eyes closed and moved her neck side to side. Even when she was dancing, she was gorgeous. As the music quietened, Eliza opened her eyes and locked eyes with Lydia. Lydia felt her heart drumming against her chest. She felt her eyelids flutter, and she saw Eliza’s do the same. They were going to kiss—she was sure of it. She smiled, bit her lip, leaned closer to Eliza.

‘Eliza!’

Lydia jumped. Eliza turned.

‘Who’s your friend?’ said a tall boy with curtains for hair and an oversized orange tee. He held a half-drunk beer in one hand and slurred his words. Eliza laughed.

‘This is Lydia,’ said Eliza. She turned to Lydia. ‘Lydia, this is my brother, Andy.’

Lydia nodded towards Andy. The one eye that Andy held open seemed to stare at Lydia.

‘Oh right, Lydia. That’s funny because from where I was standing, I thought my sister was dancing with Peter Schmeichel since you look like a goalie,’ he said.

‘It’s *keeper*, you melon,’ Eliza said, correcting him with a smirk. ‘You’re supposed to say *keeper*, otherwise, it doesn’t make any sense!’

Andy blinked, as if Eliza’s telling off had caused him physical pain. Eliza rolled her eyes, apologetically staring at Lydia. Lydia didn’t mind.

‘Andy’s my older brother, although you wouldn’t think it,’ said Eliza.

‘Are you a goalkeeper because you look like Peter Schmeichel?’ said Andy.

‘I’m not sure it’s much of a compliment telling girls they look like Peter Schmeichel,’ chuckled Lydia. ‘And while I appreciate the attempt, I’m gay.’ Lydia glanced at Eliza, trying to gauge her reaction. She didn’t react. Oh God. What if Eliza wasn’t—

‘I should have known you gays would stick together. Just my fucking luck,’ Andy grumbled,

stumbling away, presumably to find a straight girl to hit on.

‘Drink?’ said Eliza, gesturing towards the bar.

Lydia nodded.

Eliza headed towards the alcove and Lydia followed, squirming through the horde of bodies to keep pace. Lydia couldn’t help but feel relieved knowing that Eliza was gay, too. She had thought she was, but she had been wrong so many times before. Eliza grabbed Lydia’s hand to pull her through the dance floor. Her hand was cold and sticky. It felt nice. Maybe Eliza liked her too. Maybe Eliza—

Lydia tripped amidst the dancing mob, tumbling six feet above her sofa and crashing onto the cloud-like cushions. She looked around the room, disorientated. She quickly got up and raced back to her record player. She lifted the needle and placed it to the end of the record.

She moved from the dance floor towards the alcove. Through the bodies she could see Eliza, who was waiting for her at the top of the stairs. Eliza was spinning around, her neck stretching to find Lydia. She looked confused.

‘I almost lost you in there!’ said Lydia, as she made her way to the alcove. Eliza smiled, but only with

her mouth. Her eyes still looked confused. Lydia grabbed Eliza's hand. 'Should we go get that drink?'

'I have a better idea,' said Eliza. 'Hold on this time.'

Eliza headed past the alcove into a corridor. At the bottom of the corridor was a fire exit. Eliza peeked her head past Lydia's before opening the door. Lydia gulped. She didn't know where Eliza was taking her but it felt dangerous and exciting. Although, she could do without being reprimanded by Lester again. She wasn't sure what the consequences would be if Lester knew she had snuck back in, but it couldn't be good.

Eliza led Lydia up a steel staircase, not saying a word at any point during the ascent up two arduous flights. Lydia's legs still felt lethargic from the tap dancing. She could hear the music, faintly. She recognised Liam Gallagher's voice but she couldn't tell the song. She strained to hear it, but she couldn't. When they reached the top of the stairs another fire exit waited for them. Eliza pushed open the door.

The cold wind blew a gust at Lydia's chest as she followed Eliza out onto the rooftop. Thousands of stars shone brightly against the dark purple sky. The fire door slammed behind them. Lydia clenched her fists, breaking her hand away from Eliza's. They were on the rooftop.

‘I come here to escape sometimes,’ said Eliza, walking to the edge. Lydia took a few steps towards her. She felt her toes curl, as if they were desperately clinging to the concrete floor. Lydia gulped as she hesitantly peeked towards the building’s edge. It was even higher than her flat building! A crowd of people were smoking outside the night club exit below, but from here they looked like ants. Her stomach churned. She took a few short footsteps closer to Eliza—she looked so calm and relaxed. Her eyes glistened as she looked at the city beneath. Lydia wished she was as strong as Eliza.

‘I find there’s a lot more space to dance up here,’ said Eliza, moving her shoulders and waving her arms. She smiled at Lydia, before looking to the floor.

‘I like the view, but I hate heights!’ said Lydia.

‘You really are a posh spice,’ said Eliza with a smile.

‘I am not,’ protested Lydia.

‘You are!’ said Eliza, ‘But don’t worry. I always liked her the best. And I won’t tell anyone. It can be our secret.’

Lydia smiled at Eliza. She noticed the drop again and shuddered.

‘Don’t worry, you’re safe.’ Eliza grabbed Lydia’s hand. ‘Sorry. I wouldn’t have brought you up if I’d known.’

‘I’m glad you did,’ said Lydia. ‘Do you bring lots of people up here?’

‘God, no. Nobody. Not even Andy. Just you.’ said Eliza, smiling. ‘I know we don’t really know each other that well, but there’s something—’

Fuck it. Lydia thrust her lips into Eliza’s and kissed her. The moment their lips met an electric current seemed to surge through Lydia. Eliza’s lips were soft and inviting. Lydia grabbed Eliza’s waist and held it close to hers. Her body was soft and felt like cushions. Lydia opened her eyes; her body pressed against the cushions on her sofa.

‘There’s no way that was enough time!’ Lydia huffed, racing over to the record player. She picked up the needle from the centre of the record, but hesitated before placing it back down into the centre. She began to count the grooves.

‘95 revs,’ she muttered, ‘95 revs at 33rpm. What’s that like, three minutes?’

‘171 seconds,’ a voice boomed. Lydia turned to the piano. Hugh sat by the Chappelle, a couple of cider cans on the piano top. ‘And it’s 33 revolutions and one third per minute. So, 171 seconds.’ Hugh tinkered with

the keys, not playing anything in particular. Lydia bit her lip.

‘How can you make someone fall in love with you in three minutes?’ said Lydia.

‘You can’t *make* anyone fall in love with you,’ said Hugh. ‘Regardless of time.’

‘You know what I mean!’ huffed Lydia.

‘Eliza?’ asked Hugh.

‘Why did I have to meet her like this, Hugh? It’s just so stupid,’ said Lydia. Her throat felt itchy. ‘What if she’s the only way I’ll ever be happy, you know? Maybe if she was—’

‘Right!’ said Hugh, cutting her off. ‘Enough of your problems, my turn. That’s how friendships work, right?’ Hugh span around on the piano stool, clapping his bony hands together. Lydia gulped, shooting Hugh a stern stare with her wet eyes.

‘What problems do you have?’ Lydia cried.

‘I am unable to locate the residence of somebody by the name of Christopher Havers, and I’ve looked absolutely everywhere!’

‘Have you looked in apartment 4A, three above this one? Because that’s where he lives!’ Lydia retorted.

‘This place has an upstairs?’ Hugh asked, sticking out his bottom lip and stroking his chin.

‘Why are you looking for Mr. Havers, anyway?’ asked Lydia. Her mouth dropped. ‘No! No, no, no! You cannot take Mr. Havers!’

‘Just try and stop me,’ Hugh grinned. He backed up, right into the wall, and disappeared through it. Lydia froze. She should’ve guessed the Grim Reaper could walk through walls, but seeing it was no less incredible.

Lydia’s heart raced. She sprinted towards her front door, her right hand shaking as she grasped the door handle with a sweaty grip. She couldn’t let Hugh get to Mr Havers first. She pulled the door open and dove into the foyer.

‘Hugh!’ she called out. She looked to the staircase but she couldn’t see him. ‘Hugh!’

She heard a faint cough coming from above her head. She looked up and saw Hugh, floating in the middle of the spiral staircase. He waved at Lydia with a cheeky smile. Lydia grinded her teeth together and ran up the staircase.

‘You can’t take Mr Havers, Hugh!’ said Lydia, as she made her way to the first floor.

‘Why not?’ asked Hugh.

‘I like Mr. Havers,’ said Lydia.

‘Oh, so nobody you like is allowed to die, is that the new rule?’ Hugh teased.

‘Sure, is that all right?’ said Lydia.

‘I’ll pass it on to HR!’ said Hugh, still ascending through mid-air as if it was light work. ‘No, it’s not all right, Lydia. That’s not how it works,’

Lydia panted as she reached the second floor. Her legs felt heavy but she moved as quickly as she could, almost catching up with Hugh.

‘I just spoke to him! He’s absolutely fine, and he’s only in his sixties!’ Lydia screamed.

Hugh began to speed up. Lydia tried to keep pace but she couldn’t. She looked up and saw Hugh stopping at the floor above; the third floor. She breathed in sharply and sprinted up the stairs, two steps at a time. She made it to the third floor, just in time to see Hugh enter through the door which led to apartment 4A.

‘I said,’ Lydia panted ‘I just spoke to him. He’s fine!’

Lydia managed to grab Hugh’s arm just before he got to the corridor that led to the third-floor flats. She pulled him back onto the landing and held onto him as tightly as she could. Hugh turned to her.

‘He doesn’t die of old age, Lydia,’ said Hugh, ‘He’s going to kill himself.’

Lydia gasped. No! *Mr Havers wouldn’t kill himself*, she thought to herself, *would he?*

Lydia's eyes darted to Mr Haver's door. It was at the opposite end of the corridor to her and Hugh. Hugh's eyes shifted to the door, too, and then back to Lydia.

Lydia pushed him away and sprinted to Mr Haver's flat. Her heart pounded. She moved her sore legs as fast as she could.

'Mr Havers!' she cried. 'Mr Have—'

Something sharp crashed against her foot and she fell onto the floor. Fuck! She looked up as Hugh ran towards the door, carrying his scythe. He turned his head back to Lydia.

'I'm sorry, Lydia,' he said, his face empathetic and sad, 'It's my fucking job.'

Lydia rubbed her lips together. She could taste the dirty carpet. She sighed. She lifted her head to see that Hugh had already made it to the Mr Haver's door. His bony hand reached for the handle. Lydia pushed her arms against the carpet and rose to her feet.

She sprinted down the corridor, but not for Mr Haver's apartment door. She sprinted towards Hugh.

'Ahhhh!' she roared, as she bolted for Hugh. Hugh turned like a deer in headlights. Lydia barged her entire body weight into Hugh. Her folded arms dug into his torso and knocked him off balance. He fell

backwards; his body stumbled and he disappeared through the wall.

‘Fuck.’ muttered Lydia. *What if he—*

Creak! Lydia turned as the door to flat 4A opened slowly. Mr Havers peered his face through the half-open door.

‘Lydia. Is everything okay?’ said Mr Havers. He didn’t look okay. And it was obvious he was by himself.

‘Yes! I just thought I’d come up to see how your new year celebrations are going!’ Lydia replied.

‘That’s very sweet, dear, but you should be out with your friends; people your own age. Not wasting your time on me,’ said Mr Havers.

‘It’s not a waste,’ said Lydia.

‘I appreciate the gesture, Lydia, but I really should get back—’

‘—Back to killing yourself?’ she said.

Mr Havers stared at her, his eyes widening with confusion and apprehension. His mouth hung open, but no words came out, and for a moment, he looked as if he was debating whether to slam the door shut or let her in.

‘How on earth do you know that?’ he said.

‘The Grim Reaper told me,’ said Lydia.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEATH AND TAXES

As Lydia stepped into Mr Havers' flat, she couldn't help but notice the eclectic array of knick-knacks and things that adorned the space. A worn family photograph sat proudly on a small antique table, capturing a younger Mr. Havers surrounded by a smiling wife and two children, a boy and girl. Mr Havers was rather dashing in his younger years, and his wife was stunning. She looked to Mr Havers who had begun tidying the flat, folding his newspapers and putting his chocolate wrappers into his dressing gown pocket. He was a stark contrast to the man in the photograph. A small shelf displayed an array of well-read books. She caressed the spines with her fingers. She couldn't gauge what order they were in, but she liked to think that Mr Havers had organised them in a similar way to her record collection.

'Sorry about the mess,' said Mr Havers. 'I wasn't expecting company.'

'It's fine,' said Lydia.

Her gaze drifted to several glasses of gin scattered across the coffee table. A television was

placed in front of two armchairs that pointed to one another on an angle. One armchair, well-worn and inviting, was clearly Mr Havers' preferred spot—while the other looked untouched, as if it had only just been unwrapped. Mr Havers slumped into his armchair, a shadow of his former self. He swigged back a gin and stared at the television as musicians played some jazzy music on screen.

Lydia gulped. She didn't know what to say. Her past experiences with Mr Havers had always been pleasant, and he was rarely anything but upbeat and chirpy.

'I thought you said your family was coming?' said Lydia.

Mr Havers looked at Lydia but didn't say anything. His lips pursed together and he sighed quietly, to himself. He gestured for Lydia to take a seat in the armchair next to him. Lydia walked over and sat down.

'Well, I'm glad I bought two armchairs now,' said Mr Havers.

'I didn't realise you were all alone, Mr Havers,' said Lydia.

'Please, call me Chris. Nobody does anymore,' he said.

‘Is that why you’re killing yourself?’ Lydia blurted out, ‘I’m sorry. I shouldn’t—’

‘—I wouldn’t expect you to understand. There’s nothing you can say that will make me change my mind, so if you’d just leave me to get on with it,’ said Mr Havers. He brought the glass of gin to his lips and tossed it back. He spluttered out a cough before pouring himself another.

‘How much have you had, Chris?’ asked Lydia.

‘Not enough.’ he said, filling the glass to the brim. ‘I’d offer you some but—’

‘—How are you going to do it?’ she asked. Mr Haver’s fidgeted in his chair. He averted his eyes from Lydia, before taking another swig of gin. ‘Rope?’

Mr Havers choked on his gin.

‘Oh, God no. Do you know how easy that is to get wrong? If you get the wrong thickness of rope, or even tie the wrong knot, you’d just end up with a broken neck. And God knows how hard it would be to kill yourself when you’ve got a broken neck.’

Lydia’s stomach churned at the thought. *Thank fuck she couldn’t find the rope*, she thought.

‘Do you know what fentanyl is?’ Mr Havers said, his voice lowering to a whisper.

Lydia shook her head.

‘Good. You shouldn’t,’ said Mr Havers, ‘It’s a poison, extremely potent even in the smallest dose. If you were to ingest it, you’d be dead within fifteen minutes.’

Lydia looked at the empty glasses sprawled across the coffee table.

‘You haven’t?’ she asked, feeling a knot form in her stomach. Perhaps she was too late and all of this was in vain.

‘No, not yet. I’m a sucker for the fireworks,’ said Mr Havers, gesturing to the TV. ‘But I will. When I’m ready.’

Lydia placed her hand softly on Mr Havers’ knee.

‘I bought a rope,’ said Lydia, ‘That’s how I was going to do it. I still might, I’m not sure.’

She felt a sense of relief wash over her. She wasn’t alone in this, and now, hopefully, Mr Havers knew that he wasn’t, either. Mr Havers gulped. His mouth hung open as he looked at Lydia, perhaps unsure if she was joking.

‘Why would a nice girl like you want to end her life?’ asked Mr Havers. He looked a little heartbroken; perhaps by the thought that somebody so young felt so defeated, or that he hadn’t the slightest inkling that Lydia felt like he did.

‘I asked first, Chris!’ said Lydia. It felt like she was about to cry. She closed her eyes to ward off any tears, forcing through a weak smile.

‘The truth is, Lydia, I feel like I’m just waiting for the bus,’ said Mr Havers, ‘I’ve lived a good life. I married the greatest girl I ever met. Had two beautiful kids. I watched them grow up. I’ve done so many things. I don’t want to get on the bus, but the only thing worse than getting on it, is waiting for it. I’m tired of waiting.’

‘I get it, Mr Havers. I get feeling like you’re waiting. Maybe not for what you’re waiting for, but waiting for a change, at least,’ said Lydia. ‘What about your kids?’

‘We don’t talk anymore,’ said Mr Havers, his eyes looking upward away from Lydia’s. ‘Me and my son had a big argument. I blamed him for something that wasn’t his fault, and we haven’t spoken since. I’m sure he’s living a good life though. He’s happy, and that’s all that matters now. I wouldn’t want to be so selfish to change that. I don’t talk to my daughter much either anymore. I’ve tried, but it’s just too difficult. Families often are.’ He took another swig of gin. ‘We all have our reasons, Lydia. They’re often boring, apparent and meaningless from the outside. But they’re

reasons, nonetheless. What's yours? If you don't mind me asking.'

Lydia looked into Mr Havers' eyes, her heart aching for the pain he was feeling. She had never had this sort of conversation before—not even with Hugh, and especially not with anyone of this world. Perhaps she had found a kindred spirit in Mr Havers. Perhaps he was the only person who could really understand her struggles and fears, and he was only a few stories above her all along. She took a deep breath.

'I feel like the world wouldn't be any different if I weren't a part of it,' said Lydia. 'I feel so small, and so unremarkable, and so insignificant. When I was younger, I had dreams of doing something that mattered. Not of being famous, or rich, but just doing something that made me happy. I thought it was music, but I'm not so sure anymore.' She slumped into the armchair.

'I don't know what my purpose is. The truth is nothing makes me happy anymore, and even if I found something that gave me purpose and meaning, I'll just be denied it. Everyone's scrambling and fighting for their fifteen seconds of fame; as if that's all we're worth now. As if that's all we deserve. I just want to be part of something that lasts longer than a Tik Tok or tweet—

and something that has meaning. But I just don't think that exists anymore.'

Lydia's fingers tapped the arm of the chair.

'The truth is, I'm just a small, insignificant person whose dreams and happiness don't really matter. I'll never change the world and, to be honest, I don't want to change the world; I just want to feel a part of it,' said Lydia, 'But maybe I'm not even remarkable enough for that. Maybe, the only significant thing I can do is kill myself.'

Mr Havers looked at her with gentle eyes.

'Oh, Lydia. You're only young. Believe me, it's a long life. Too bloody long if you ask me. There's plenty of time to be remarkable,' said Mr Havers.

'But what if I never am?' asked Lydia, her voice trembling.

'Well, if you're not, you're not! I don't see what's so important about being remarkable, anyway. I'd much rather be happy than remarkable,' said Mr Havers with a comforting chuckle.

'But what if I'm never happy?'

'What if you are?' Mr Havers said. 'It only takes a moment for everything to fall into shape. I know it seems impossible. A lot of things in my life seemed impossible. Sure, I never got that big break or that winning lottery ticket, but when you surround yourself

with the right people it feels like you have. It feels like you won something. I never felt remarkable myself, but I was to my family. And at one point in my life, I was happy, too.'

'I don't like that word. Impossible,' said Lydia, Hugh's voice ringing in her ears.

Her eyes shot open. Oh God! *Hugh!* She suddenly remembered about Hugh. Surely a four-story fall wouldn't kill the Grim Reaper! Surely, she hadn't killed Death! She rose to her feet, feeling a little anxious.

'Thank you, Chris. For everything,' said Lydia. Mr Havers stood up and walked with Lydia to the front door. He opened the door and smiled at Lydia as she took a step out into the corridor. She turned and lingered. 'You should call your children; I'm sure it would make them happy just to hear from you. And you shouldn't give up on this world quite yet.'

'Neither should you,' said Mr Havers. He smiled as he shut the door. Lydia stood for a moment. She breathed a sigh of relief. She felt hopeful. Maybe she could wait a little longer. If Mr Havers could, she could, too.

Lydia looked at the wall where Hugh had slipped through. She turned and ran down the corridor. She raced down the stairs to the ground floor. Her flat door

was slightly ajar and she could hear Hugh scuffling about inside. She was ready to apologise profusely, hoping Hugh wouldn't be too mad at her. After all, she had just saved Mr Havers, and surely that meant something! She pushed open the door. She froze.

Blondie and Ginger were standing in her living room, rifling through her purses.

'Fucking bitch mustn't carry cash,' Blondie growled, throwing a purse onto the floor.

Lydia held her breath. She looked over her shoulder and began to back away.

'OI!'

She whipped back around. Blondie was pointing at her. Before she could react, Ginger had rushed at her and seized her arm. He yanked her back inside and slammed the door shut.

'Lock it!' barked Blondie.

Ginger obeyed, securing the door with one hand while maintaining his vice-like hold on Lydia with the other.

'Get the fuck out of my flat!' screamed Lydia. 'Hugh! Hugh!' She struggled and clawed to get out of Ginger's grip. He drove her into the sofa. She sank into the cushions as the teens towered over her. Blondie took out his knife. Lydia gulped.

'Take whatever you want,' said Lydia.

‘Not so tough now, are you?’ sneered Blondie. He jabbed the knife towards Lydia’s face. She grimaced, turning and closing her eyes. She could hear the boys laughing.

‘Yeah, not nice being threatened, is it?’ said Ginger. Lydia opened her eyes and gulped.

‘Check the bedroom,’ Blondie ordered. Ginger obliged, scurrying like a rat out of the living room.

‘It’s—It’s in the bedside drawers. The jewellery,’ squeaked Lydia.

She had nothing special, but she hoped two dimwits such as Ginger and Blondie wouldn’t be able to tell the difference between zirconia and diamonds. The sooner they got what they wanted the sooner they would leave. Blondie stared at Lydia with a menacing grin. He kneeled down a little to meet her face-to-face. He drew his knife closer, gently tracing the cold blade against Lydia’s cheek. She clenched her jaw.

‘You’d be quite fit if you weren’t such a bitch,’ he snarled. ‘Maybe this will teach you to mind your fucking business.’

Lydia felt a wave of terror wash over her. She didn’t know what Blondie wanted from her, but she feared it was more than just to take a few pieces of jewellery. It felt personal. Perhaps she had bruised his

ego; touched a nerve. His menacing gaze bore into Lydia, who couldn't help but look back into his eyes.

'I've got it!' called out Ginger, from the bedroom. He appeared at the open door. 'Let's get out of here!' A pillowcase hung by his side, slightly shaking.

'Not yet,' said Blondie, turning his head back to Lydia. He grabbed her hair and threw her to the floor. 'This bitch hasn't learnt her lesson, yet.'

Blondie walked slowly over to Lydia's record collection. He put his knife back into his pants. He turned back to Lydia, who lay quivering on the floor. He picked up her Tamagotchi, giving it a closer inspection.

'What the fuck is this?' he growled. He slammed it down onto the floor and it shattered into pieces. He snatched the Union Jack beanie baby and pulled its head off, before throwing the pieces at Lydia. He licked his lips, looking at the lava lamp. He picked it up with both his hands and smashed it to the ground.

'Fucking hell, George!' cried Ginger. 'All right, let's—let's go!'

'Not fucking yet,' said Blondie, still glaring at Lydia.

Why was this little prick doing this? Just because she wouldn't let him abuse a homeless woman. Maybe

she could fight them. Her eyes darted over to the ginger one. His knees looked weak. They were shaking. He'd probably piss his pants if she—

CRASH! Lydia turned back to Blondie who stood over Lydia's beloved VHS tapes and cassettes. He crushed them with his feet. His eyes looked wild and he frothed at the mouth. He started to laugh. He started pulling Lydia's records out of the unit. Ripping corners. Bending the sleeves. Throwing the broken pieces to the floor. Lydia watched, but she didn't say anything. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. She bit her lip and clenched her fists on the floor. Maybe because that's all she could do.

'Bet it took a long time to get some of these,' howled Blondie. 'A lot of money, too.' He pulled piles of records out and flung them to the floor, trying to break as many as he could with each throw and stamp. The unit now had more gaps than records. The order was fucked. Her collection was ruined.

'George!' cried Ginger. 'Let's fucking go!'

Blondie wiped his salivating mouth. He snarled at Lydia with a demonic stare. He turned around to the collection, presumably to admire the damage he'd caused.

‘And this,’ said Blondie. Lydia tried to see past his body. ‘This! This must mean a lot to you. I mean it’s even signed, by some twat called Damian X!’

Blondie turned around holding Lydia’s mustard Crosley Cruiser. Her eyes shot open.

‘No!’ she cried. ‘Please! Not that!’ She needed that. She could see the record still on top of the player.

Blondie let out a menacing chuckle. He threatened to hurl it towards the floor. Lydia flinched. He laughed again. The little shit! Spit dripped from Lydia’s clenched jaw. As much as she liked Blur and Damon Albarn, in any other circumstance she wouldn’t care if Blondie broke her Crosley Cruiser. But it wasn’t the record player he was threatening to destroy; it was the night club. It was Eliza. It was Lydia’s only chance of being happy.

Blondie hoisted the record player high above his head ready to smash it onto the floor. Lydia jolted upright from the floor and sprinted towards Blondie, her heart pounding with adrenaline. Blondie’s muscular arms flung the record player downward. Lydia pushed her body into Blondie’s and tried to pry the record player out of his grip, but it was too strong. The record player slipped from her grasp, plummeting towards the ground with an echoing thud.

Blondie seized her, his fingers clawing at Lydia's face. As she wrestled with Blondie, she fought not only for an escape but also for a glimpse of her treasured vinyl. Amongst the broken records, ravaged VHS tapes, and mangled cassettes strewn across the floor, the record player lay, seemingly, untouched. Lydia felt the cold tip of Blondie's knife digging into her throat. She tried to wriggle free but his grip was too strong.

'Sometimes, I wish we could all just get along,' said a soothing voice. A dim light cast a glow onto Blondie. Lydia turned to the television which had suddenly come to life. Blondie and Ginger gawked at the television. The lights flickered. Blondie's grip loosened slightly, but Lydia still couldn't escape his grasp.

Lydia noticed in her periphery that the lid of Lydia's Chappell piano slowly began to lift by itself. She saw keys being pushed down. Two notes clashed harshly and echoed eerily. Lydia felt Blondie flinch. His knife trembled against her throat.

'Who's there?' said Blondie, his voice a mixture of fear and fury.

'Let's—Let's go, George.' cried Ginger.

A crash echoed above them. Lydia's eyes shot upward as Blondie cowered, but nothing was above them. The ground began to shake. Some of the records

from the floor began to float back into the record unit, as if being tidied away. Lydia looked to Ginger, who inched closer to the front door. Blondie's feet didn't move and he still held the knife to Lydia's neck.

'What are you doing?' Blondie screamed.

'Nothing! It's not me,' said Lydia.

The door of the flat flung open with a crash.

'Ge-George,' stammered Ginger.

'No!' shouted Blondie.

Ginger darted out of the room, dropping the pillowcase to the floor.

'You fucking pussy,' screamed Blondie. He grabbed Lydia's face, scrunching it with one hand and teasing the knife into her neck with the other. 'You're gonna die, bitch.'

Lydia closed her eyes, tightly. She squirmed in Blondie's grip, tears somehow escaping through her eyelids. Suddenly, she felt weightless. She couldn't feel Blondie's grip, or the knife digging against her throat. Her eyes shot open. She floated high above Blondie; his neck stretched out and his mouth hung open. She was floating six feet from the ground; levitating like a celestial being.

'Get out!' a voice whispered from the darkness. Blondie dropped his knife and backed away from Lydia, but he couldn't take his eyes off her. He turned

and sprinted into the foyer, turning for the exit. The door slammed behind. The lights ceased to flicker. The piano notes stopped. The television turned off. Lydia fell gently to the floor, landing on her hands and knees.

She wiped away her tears and regulated her breaths. She crawled towards her Crosley Cruiser record player, lifting it up to give it a thorough examination. It was a little dinged and beat up, but it was fine—and, more importantly, the record was still fine, too. There were a couple of hairline scratches but that didn't matter. She picked up her record player as she rose to her feet. She treaded carefully over the scattered knick-knacks and records that lay strewn on the floor. She put the record player back in its rightful spot, in the central cube of the record unit.

'Maybe you should have just let them kill me, Hugh,' said Lydia. 'Hugh!' she turned around. 'Hugh?' There was no response. Lydia opened her flat door. She looked out into the corridor. 'Hugh?'

She ventured outside onto the street. *Maybe Hugh was outside? Maybe he was hurt after the fall,* Lydia thought. She looked around the building, but she couldn't see Hugh. She heard a noise from above. Her eyes shot upward. It was dark but she could see a shadow suspended in mid-air, defying the laws of

gravity. She squinted her eyes. It had to be him, it had to be Hugh.

‘Hugh!’ she cried. He didn’t move. Maybe he couldn’t hear her, or maybe he was mad at her, she thought. Lydia moved towards the raised wall that lay next to the path to the building entrance. She stood on the wall and stretched her hand to the ladder that connected to the fire escape. Her fingertips scraped the edge, but it wouldn’t budge. She stood on her tiptoes and grabbed it. It crashed down. She gulped.

‘HUGH!’ she cried, as loud as she possibly could. But Hugh simply continued to ascend.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ she muttered, as she started to climb the ladder. The ladder creaked and wobbled under Lydia’s weight. She pulled herself up to the first floor. She slowly tiptoed to the opposite side where another ladder rested. She pulled it down and climbed up to the second floor. She walked over the rickety metal towards the next ladder. She held the hand rail tightly, telling herself not to look down. Even the rail seemed to wobble.

‘It’s not that high. It’s not that high!’ she chanted under her breath. She glanced back up to where she had seen Hugh, but he wasn’t there anymore. He had vanished. She scrambled up the next ladder, pulling it down with a thud. Lydia’s heart pounded with every

step up. She looked down at the ground—she couldn't help herself. It looked so far away. Her legs wobbled like jelly. Her palms felt sweaty as she gripped on to the creaking metal, and they felt like they were slipping away. She gasped. She clawed herself up as her body lay on the railing. Through the gaps in the metal, she could see the ground, which looked so far away. She couldn't get to her feet, it felt too high and dangerous. She crawled to the wall of the flat building.

She peered into the window, recognising the armchairs and décor instantly. It was Mr Haver's flat. She could hear him sobbing over the sound of the television. Her heart broke as she pulled herself closer to the window. She crouched below the frame, holding the window sill with her fingertips as she looked inside. But it wasn't Mr Havers sobbing. It was Hugh. Lydia strained to see if Mr Havers was okay, but Hugh's body blocked the armchair where Mr Havers sat.

Hugh waved his arm and the TV turned itself off. He held his head in his hands standing in front of Mr Havers. His sobs were low and loud. Lydia's stomach sank as Hugh took a seat next to Mr Havers. Mr Havers was dead. His eyes were open and his body didn't move. His arm hung by the side of the armchair. On the floor a gin glass had tipped onto its side. Lydia's heart ached, and her throat closed-up on her. She

remembered what it had felt like when her dad died. She clenched her eyes shut but she couldn't stop herself from crying. She opened them, unable to look anywhere but at Mr Havers' corpse. He was slumped in his chair as the poison seemingly coursed through his veins, relentlessly. She was too late to save Mr Havers.

Hugh raised his hand and placed it over Mr. Havers' chest. The metal below Lydia creaked loudly. Hugh's eyes shot to the window. Lydia ducked. She gulped before lifting herself back up, and peering inside.

The lights flickered. Hugh's hand hovered above Mr Havers' chest. His hand began to shake and he jolted, as if he were struck by lightning. His bony hand began to glow with an otherworldly light. It shone like an orb in his grasp. The swirling mass of light moved and pulsated. Hugh's hand quivered as he tried to grasp it. He held the light in his hand, and then moved it towards his own chest. The room exploded with an intense light. Lydia cowered away.

She lifted herself up from the harsh metal and looked back into the window. To her dismay, Hugh had vanished, leaving behind only the silent stillness of Mr. Haver's lifeless form. Above him a moth fluttered its wings. It danced around the room bouncing into the light, a little unsure where it wanted to go. It floated

toward Lydia. She lifted the window's latch and pushed the window open, allowing the moth to fly out. It floated past Lydia's ear and vanished into the night sky.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BESIDES...

Lydia delved into the pillowcase of stolen items that the young thugs had attempted to take from her. The cheap jewellery, radio and old laptop were hers, but the gleaming smart phones and gold earrings were not. Nor was the delicate pearl watch, but she tried it on, anyway. She did up the strap and turned her wrist, so she could see the face of the watch. It was gorgeous. Who knew which poor girl they had robbed this from, thought Lydia. Lydia started to think about Mr Havers' kids. She imagined their faces when they heard the news about their dad; how he had committed suicide and died alone. It made her feel sick, and the thought of being the one to tell them made her feel worse.

Her mind drifted to the thought of her own mum hearing the same news. It was a thought she'd had before. She felt a migraine push against her temple. It made her feel shit, but she was ready. If Mr Havers was brave enough, then so was she.

She flipped the dial on the radio that the teens had attempted to take. *Get what you Give* by New Radicals cried out from the speakers. She picked up the broken records from the floor. The sleeves had been thrown,

bent and beat up, but they'd be okay. She gathered in the scattered records: Radiohead, Weezer and Pulp. She remembered hearing them for the first time in her mum's little studio. Everything seemed so much easier then.

‘That was New Radicals with *Get what you Give*. We're thirty minutes away from the New Year and it's been great hearing from some of our listeners about the things that played a big part of their year,’ Caroline's voice echoed through Lydia's flat. ‘Some good moments, some not so good.’

Lydia put the records back into their shelves. She didn't care about the order anymore. She just wanted it to look somewhat normal when whoever found her body looked at them.

‘It's actually had me thinking about mine. I've had a few highlights this year, but to tell you the truth, the highlights have all been clouded by one really bad moment,’ said Caroline. Lydia stopped sorting her records and inched closer to the radio.

‘For those of you who don't know, I'm mum to an eighteen-year-old girl. We lost her dad, my husband, last year,’ Caroline continued. ‘And it was tough. On both of us. But I'm ashamed to say, we had a big falling out this year, and to tell you the truth, it was all my fault.’

Lydia could hear the pain in her mother's voice and felt a pang of guilt in her own chest.

'She came out to me. My daughter bravely told me that she was gay and I, foolishly, reacted in a way that I'm not proud of. My husband and I spent years fighting for gay rights. He always believed that happiness meant being true to oneself, accepting and embracing who you are without reservation—as well as accepting and embracing others. But, in that moment when our daughter opened up to me, I couldn't see beyond the potential challenges she might face because of her sexuality. I let my fear and ignorance overshadow my love for her.'

Lydia slumped into her sofa, clenching her hands together and biting her nails.

'Every day since then, I've lived with regret for how I reacted. Instead of letting that moment bring us closer together, my toxic response drove a wedge between us. I should have been smart enough to tell her what her father would have said—that her happiness is all that matters to us. As parents, you just want your children to have an easy life. You don't want them to feel any pain, because their pain is your pain. Their happiness is your happiness. But I think I failed her. I know I failed her. As a radio DJ, people often think I always know the right thing to say, but as you now

know, that's not always the case.' Her mum paused. Lydia leant forward, towards the radio. Her eyes were wet, and her throat was sore.

'My daughter is gay,' said Caroline. She almost sounded proud. *Was she proud?* Thought Lydia. 'She's gay, but she is also so much more than that. She's brave, clever, beautiful, funny, tenacious, talented, and lots of other things, too. I'm proud of her, just like I know her dad is. And, I want her to know that I love her, no matter what. And I'll make sure next year she knows that. And I just hope she can forgive me.'

Lydia closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. She shot up and rummaged once again through the pillowcase that Ginger had dropped. There were three phones in the bottom of the bag. The first two were locked, but the third wasn't. Lydia dialled a number and held the phone to her ear.

'Please pick up. Please pick up,' she whispered.

'Sorry for the overshare! But I just need— looks like we actually have one more caller,' said Caroline 'Sure, we've got time! You're live on 137.7!'

'It's me, Mum,' said Lydia.

'Lydia?' asked Caroline. Lydia gulped. She felt nervous. 'Did you hear what I just said?'

'I did, Mum,' said Lydia. 'I wish you had said that to me when I told you. But it doesn't matter. I'm

glad you said it now. And I forgive you, Mum. And I'm sorry, too, for what I said—'

'—No, no, no,' Caroline interrupted. 'You have nothing to be sorry for, my love. I was the one who fucked everything up.'

'Can you say 'fuck' on air?' said Lydia.

'Oh, fuck,' said Caroline. Lydia giggled as she wiped the tears from her cheek. 'I love you, Lydia.'

'I love you too, Mum.' said Lydia. She closed her eyes and inhaled. 'Please remember that.'

Lydia hung up. As she put the phone down, she felt a sense of relief wash over her. But it soon vanished. A migraine pulsed against Lydia's forehead. She rubbed her temple but it wouldn't go away. She slammed her fist into the sofa and screamed until her throat couldn't make any more noise. Behind her, the front door squeaked open. Lydia turned and saw Hugh poking his head into the flat.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'No. I'm not okay.' said Lydia. Hugh walked in and took a seat next to Lydia. 'I stood up to Chambers. I made up with my mum. I've seen that I can be happy. I can even be in love. Yet, I still feel it.' Lydia scrunched her hands up and shook them in the air. Her head dropped into her hands, her fingers trying to sooth

her pain. ‘I still fucking feel it. It doesn’t matter what I do, it’s always going to be there.’

‘Lydia, I—’ said Hugh.

‘—Hugh. I’m ready.’ said Lydia.

‘But what about your mother?’ asked Hugh.

‘It was a perfect goodbye—but it doesn’t change anything. I’m ready.’

‘Are you sure?’ Hugh asked, a glimpse of sorrow etched on his face but it passed quickly. ‘What about Eliza?’

‘I can’t keep clinging on. I wanted it to be her so bad. I thought she could save me. But she can’t, Hugh. No one can.’ Lydia whispered. ‘I’ve been waiting for too long. And when it finally came, it was just in an impossible circumstance. And I know you hate that word—’

‘—Sometimes things are impossible,’ said Hugh, his eyes full of tears, ‘That’s life, unfortunately.’

‘God, I’m such a hypocrite. I beg Mr. Havers not to give up, yet here I am.’ She looked up at Hugh. He forced through a smile but it looked weak and fake. ‘What’s death like?’

‘I couldn’t tell you,’ he replied.

‘You don’t know?’ she asked, surprised.

‘Nobody does,’ said Hugh, with a shrug. ‘I’m just the rope guiding you through the tunnel, not the light at

the end of it. You know, for a moment back there I thought you might actually change your mind,’

‘Me too.’

Hugh stood up and walked over to the record player. Lydia wasn’t sure why, but he stroked it. ‘You should go back—just one last time.’

‘No, Hugh I can’t.’

‘Don’t do it for her. Do it for *you*. Your last memory should be a happy one. Even if it is an ephemeral and fleeting moment.’

‘I don’t know if—’

‘—Just enjoy it,’ said Hugh. ‘And whilst you’re there I’ll go get the rope for you—for when you get back. It arrived about an hour ago. Sorry I didn’t tell you. I just— well, you know.’

He pushed the needle to the edge of the record and turned his head back to Lydia, gesturing her over. He plugged the record player in; the standby light burst on. ‘I’ll even tie it to make sure nothing goes wrong. I am kind of an expert.’

‘Okay. Just one more time,’ said Lydia, rising to her feet. She moved over to the record player, smiling at Hugh as she walked past him. He was a good friend. She lifted the needle up. She could feel Hugh’s eyes digging into the back of her head. She inhaled and dropped the needle.

Lydia found herself on the dance floor once again. Nineties music filled the air and everybody sang along, lost in the moment. It was pure euphoria. Lydia didn't believe in Heaven, but if there was one, she hoped it would be a little like this. Her migraine was gone. She glanced down at her new watch, knowing she only had three minutes—a little less, actually.

Lydia moved her way around the dance floor. The crowd was hot and sticky, but Lydia didn't mind. She saw Eliza's floral tattoo poking out of her white tank top. She grabbed her arm. Eliza turned. Her eyes were damp and she looked frightened.

'Eliza, are you okay?' asked Lydia.

'Oh, you found some free time for me?' said Eliza. She sounded pissed off.

'I'm sorry, Eliza,' said Lydia, biting her lip.

'Sorry for leaving, or for leading me on?' said Eliza.

'I haven't led you on,' Lydia touched Eliza's sticky arm with her hand but Eliza pushed it away. 'I wish I—' Lydia didn't know what to say. 'I'm just sorry.'

'That's it, is it?' Eliza said, sniffing. Lydia wanted to grab Eliza and kiss her. She wanted to tell her everything that had happened to her tonight, and how it led her to Eliza. But what would be the point?

Eliza couldn't save her, and she was right—Lydia was just leading her on. She couldn't be with her. Lydia's eyes dug into Eliza's with desperation. Eliza turned to walk away but Lydia grasped her arm.

'Eliza. I've longed all my life to be in a place like this. I've dreamt about it. Drawn pictures of it. Written songs about it. About meeting someone like you,' said Lydia.

'Someone like me?' said Eliza.

'No. Actually. Not someone like you. Just you. I've dreamt about meeting you,' said Lydia, 'for a long time. Not only do you make me happy, but you make me forget that I'm not.'

Eliza stood very still. Lydia wanted to kiss her, but she didn't. She didn't want to lead her on anymore.

'We can't be together though, Eliza. Because I don't belong here. I wish I did, but I don't. And I don't want to try and explain something absurdly impossible that you could never believe. I don't need you to believe me, Eliza. I just want to be happy, for a few moments more.'

Lydia raised her hand out to Eliza hoping she wouldn't leave. Eliza squeezed it tightly with hers. Her smile was bittersweet, but her hand felt nice. She pulled her body closer. As they embraced, they danced, slowly swaying to the dance floor ballad playing. Lydia

wanted to freeze the moment in time, but as she glanced at her watch, she was reminded that her romance with Eliza was fading with every second that passed. She wondered if she squeezed Eliza's body tightly enough, she would return with her.

'Just so you know, you make me feel happy, too,' Eliza said. 'Most of my nights are bad. You were right when you said maybe you're the reason I was smiling so much tonight. I'm usually not.'

'I'm glad I've made you smile. Maybe you'll remember it when you're having a bad night,' said Lydia. 'If it weren't for the bad ones, the good ones wouldn't feel so good.'

'Yeah. And besides,' said Eliza, 'Whatever else happens tonight I'm glad I met you, Lydia.'

Lydia landed back onto her sofa, alone. Her eyes started to bawl but she couldn't stop herself. Hugh was wrong; she shouldn't have gone back. She clenched her fists together. Where the fuck was Hugh, anyway? She looked around her flat. She couldn't see him, nor the rope he had promised her. She threw a cushion at the record player, sinking deep into the sofa.

Besides, whatever else happens tonight, I'm glad I met you. The echoes of Eliza's voice lingered in Lydia's mind.

‘I’m glad I met you too, Eliza,’ she whispered. Lydia shot to her feet and marched towards the record player. ‘Actually, I’m not fucking glad! I should be dead. I shouldn’t be here, anymore.’ She took the record off the player and clenched it in her hands, holding it with her fists as if ready to snap it in half. Her grip was tight, but she couldn’t do it.

Besides. For some reason, that one word stuck in Lydia’s mind. Clawing in her head trying to escape.

‘Besides,’ she said. Her migraine was strong and painful. ‘Besides!’

She stared at the record in her tight grip. Deep into the grooves she could see her own dark reflection staring back.

‘B-Sides!’ she shouted, as she flipped over the record.

‘Oh my God,’ she screamed. A surge of excitement coursed through her. There was a B side! She had to play it—now! She rushed to her Crosley Cruiser and placed the record onto the deck. She pushed the needle to the groove.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MANCHESTER SOUL

Lydia fell. Her feet tried to balance on the uneven cobblestones beneath her but her legs were shaky. She grabbed her knees to make them stop.

‘Where am I?’ she muttered to herself, spinning around. She looked around trying to find her bearings, but they were well and truly lost. She hadn’t been here before; she was sure of it. It was foggy which made it hard to see anything. The moon cast its silvery glow into the fog, the light bouncing off the wet floor into Lydia’s eyes. She squinted and it felt like everything was out of focus. She could hear dogs barking in the distance, but that was the only sign of life. *Why here?* she thought to herself. There had to be a reason.

She turned around to see an old building; not just one, but a row of them. They were shops. It was a high street. She walked down the street hesitantly, half-expecting some nightmarish figure to emerge from the shadows. But it didn’t. Each shopfront was closed, their shutters drawn as if they were guarding secret worlds.

One shop, however, was seemingly open. The lights flickered in the distance. She could see it through the fog.

‘Hello?’ she called. No response.

She hurried her steps until soon she was running towards the light. The sign above her proclaimed its name in bold capitals: ‘Manchester Soul’. It was a record shop. The lights continued to flicker inside. Classic albums from the seventies hung from sheets to form window displays; most of which Lydia recognised but some she did not. She inched closer to the shop, its front door beckoning her to enter.

Come in, we’re open, read the sign which hung on the door. It seemed too inviting and bore the scent of a trap, but Lydia yearned to know what was inside, regardless. She pushed the door open and entered the shop.

‘Hello?’ Lydia’s voice quivered. The floorboards groaned beneath her feet as she ventured into the labyrinthine record sanctuary. No reply came. *Just me then*, Lydia thought. Vinyl records without sleeves lay scattered on the floor. She carefully walked over them as she moved deeper into the shop.

Locating a switch, Lydia flicked it on. The ceiling buzzed as one-by-one the lights cast a warm, yellow glow into the shop. Lydia could see records for

miles. The shop seemed to go on forever and ever. It most definitely didn't seem this big from outside, thought Lydia. The shop's deceptively spacious interior was a maze of vinyl delights; records adorned the walls, bins overflowed, and unsorted sleeves lay hidden beneath tables lining each row. It was a sight daunting even to the most avid of crate diggers. Unearthing a treasure from this disarray would prove a herculean task, one that might take a truffle pig a millennium to accomplish.

She moved to the record bins, instinctively shuffling her fingers through them. Her face scrunched up and her eyes danced with confusion. These weren't records—not records she recognised, anyway. Growing up surrounded by records, Lydia had developed an uncanny ability to identify many a vinyl by its sleeve alone. Sometimes, even just from the top fifth of the sleeve, or the right corner. But these sleeves defied recognition.

She skimmed through the records as quickly as she could, jumping from bin to bin at a pace. They were all the same; a face sketched on a white cover. The faces were different on each sleeve but there were no *real* records anywhere. Lydia picked up a pile and dropped them onto the floor. An assembly of unfamiliar faces peered back at Lydia from the record

covers, each portrait seemingly possessing a life of its own.

She picked one up from the rack and held it to her face for a closer examination. The man was bald and had glasses, wrinkles drew deep lines into his cheeks. She bounced the record in her grip. It felt like an ordinary record, its weight familiar in her hand. She turned it over.

‘Geoffrey Chuck,’ she murmured. The name presumably belonged to the man on the cover. It was etched into the record alongside a date—the third of April, 2002.

Another face caught her eye. The man in the portrait appeared much younger, with flowing black hair and a vibrant smile. She put down the first record, swapping it with her latest find. She flipped it over with speed.

‘Alan Church. The nineteenth of June, 2019.’
Muttered Lydia.

Her eyebrows furrowed with intrigue. She reached her hand into the sleeve. The vinyl felt warm—not like any vinyl she had touched before. As she carefully slid the vinyl out of its sleeve, a harsh white light shone into her eyes. She turned away in pain. Even with her eyes closed she could see the bright light. She carefully and slowly opened one eye to look at the

record. The vinyl seemed to hold a glow unlike anything she had ever witnessed. Not even rare colour variants or limited-edition glow-in-the-dark paints shone *this* bright.

She felt the grooves with her fingers. As she touched them the record seemed to whisper in an angelic manner. Her head drew closer to the record as if it were pulling her in; her eyes were mesmerised and still. She snapped out of it, blinking thrice. Hastily, she slid the vinyl record back into the sleeve.

‘What the fuck.’ she huffed, her eyes already moving to another record. She pulled it out a smidge just to check if the glow was the same. A harsh light peeked out from the sleeve blinding Lydia once more. She squirmed and pushed the vinyl back in.

She noticed a tab separating two records marked with a single letter: C. It appeared that whoever owned these records had, at least at one point, attempted to alphabetise this peculiar assortment. She stopped for a moment. *What if I’m here*, thought Lydia.

She sprinted down the rows in a snake-like pattern, scouring the records in search for more letter tabs. A sea of faces glared at her as she passed but they were a blur. She saw the J tab. And soon after, the K tab. She was close. Her heart pounded in her chest. And there it was. The tab marked L.

Utilising her expertise in the realm of record hunting, Lydia's nimble fingers glided across the vinyl collection, effortlessly sifting through the vast array of records before her. With each touch, her mind etched a mental image of what she was looking for; herself. Only glancing at the top of each record, Lydia thought her two-toned hair would be a distinctive feature that would separate her vinyl from the rest, if it were there at all. Maybe she wouldn't be.

Lydia's fingers froze mid-motion, her breath catching as she gazed down at her own portrait. It was her—undeniably her—but somehow better, more polished. She couldn't recall ever posing for this photograph or having seen it before, and yet, here it was. Her heart thudded in her chest as she lifted the record for a closer examination.

Tentatively, she reached into the sleeve. With her left eye shut and her neck turned at an angle ready to cower, she slowly removed the record. But she didn't need to shy away. The vinyl didn't emit a harsh glow like the others; in fact there was no light at all. The vinyl was dull, a sombre, inky black. The grooves appeared undeveloped and faint.

'Why's mine different?' she said. Her eyebrows sunk with disappointment, sliding the record back into

its sleeve. She flipped it over. It was blank. Lydia shook her head. 'Where's the...'

A piano melody drifted through the air, as if emerging from an adjacent room. She froze, suddenly aware that she was not alone. Lydia walked towards the back room, passing more mysterious records adorned with the faces of strangers, as she clutched her own record. She pulled back the curtain to reveal the back room.

'Hugh?'

Hugh sat at a small upright piano. His fingers danced gracefully over the piano keys. He looked up to Lydia as he stopped playing.

'I wondered when you were going to play the B side, Lydia,' he said, carefully shutting the piano lid. 'You know, I was starting to get scared that you weren't going to.'

'It just never occurred to me,' said Lydia.

'It rarely does,' said Hugh, standing up and taking a step towards Lydia. Lydia took a step backwards, her hands clutching her chest as she held the record. She gulped nervously. Despite her growing fondness for Hugh, she couldn't ignore the fact that he was, after all, the Grim Reaper. Any nefarious intentions wouldn't be out of character, at least according to stereotype.

Lydia held out her record, displaying her find to Hugh—but Hugh seemed unfazed by her discovery.

‘Why is mine different, Hugh?’ she asked. ‘Why is there no date?’

‘There’s no date because you haven’t died yet,’ Hugh replied. Lydia looked at the record again, captivated by her face staring back. She pulled the vinyl out of its sleeve.

‘And the light?’

‘They’re souls. They once belonged to the people on the sleeves, but not anymore. The dates are when I added them to my collection.’ His eyes seem to get wider as he took another step towards Lydia. This time she didn’t flinch.

‘Is that the only one you found?’ he asked.

‘There are thousands!’ she exclaimed, ‘Tens of thousands! It’s the biggest record shop I’ve ever seen!’

A wry smile tugged at the corner of Hugh’s mouth as he guided Lydia back into the main part of the shop.

‘Try closer to four hundred thousand. I used to know the exact number, but not anymore,’ he said, casting a glance around the expansive warehouse of a room. ‘This isn’t a record shop. This is where I keep my collection. And it’s not your typical collection,

either. Each one is a memento of the souls I've taken over the years, pressed onto glorious 180-gram vinyl.'

Hugh smiled, but Lydia could tell, behind the smile, there was pain.

'Each of these records hold a soul?' she asked. Hugh nodded. Lydia's eyes bounced around the room unable to see anything other than records.

'I know. The sheer number of them makes just one seem inconsequential. But they're all important. Every single one contains a life lived by somebody; a memory, a story, a moment in time.' Hugh walked over to the rack and began sifting through a couple. 'The ones in the racks are the special ones. My personal favourites. I know that sounds bad. But that's just how it is after a while.'

Lydia joined him at the rack, glancing down at the thousands of records scattered in piles at their feet, a sea of innocent faces gazing back at them.

'There are so many, it almost feels infinite. Most names and faces, I don't even remember,' he admitted, his voice tinged with a desperate sadness. Lydia placed her hand onto Hugh's arm to comfort him. 'I haven't always been the Angel of Death, you know. This is just from about twenty years of collecting. I dread to think what it would be like after fifty, or a hundred.'

‘It’s a lot of records,’ said Lydia. And it was. And soon she’d be one of them. For some reason, it made her feel less special.

‘Do you think I’ll make the rack?’ said Lydia, jokingly—as if to lighten the mood. Hugh chuckled. He turned to Lydia and pulled her in towards him, giving her a gentle squeeze. She felt safe in his grasp.

‘Have you ever collected anything, Lydia?’ Hugh asked.

She hesitated for a moment. ‘I have my records, and a few knick-knacks and memorabilia, but nothing like this.’

‘Well, Lydia. The thing about collecting—about collecting anything, really, whether it’s stamps, comic books, records, or even knick-knacks—at some point, sooner or later, you lose the desire to amass any more for your collection. I look around at this collection, at *my* collection, and I just think, no more.’

‘No more what?’ asked Lydia, ‘No more being the Grim Reaper?’

‘To be honest with you, Lydia, there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t regret what I do. Sometimes, often actually, I think maybe if I hadn’t done the first...’ Hugh stopped himself and turned his body away.

What was he about to say? thought Lydia.

‘Lydia, I need to show you something,’ he said, his tone suddenly grave.

Hugh guided Lydia gently towards a record rack marked with a H. She followed with apprehension, unsure of what he had to show her. There were countless records filed under H, but Hugh stopped at a specific row before turning to face Lydia.

‘Before I show you, I want you to know something. I haven’t had a friend in twenty years, so I hope this doesn’t make me lose my only one.’

‘It won’t,’ said Lydia.

‘We’ll see,’ said Hugh. ‘It’s the very back one,’

Lydia turned cautiously, her gaze meeting more unfamiliar faces. Slowly she reached for the record at the very back, pressed against the back of the rack. As she pulled it up, she recognised the face on the vinyl sleeve—it was Mr. Havers. His wrinkles weren’t as harsh as she remembered. His grey hair was combed and neat, and he was clean shaven. He looked happy. She hoped he was. She peeked into the sleeve to see his soul glow. She closed it quickly again to stop it from blinding her.

‘It was only about twenty minutes ago,’ said Hugh.

‘It’s okay,’ said Lydia. ‘It was just his time, I guess.’

She turned to Hugh. He looked as if he was holding back tears. Lydia thought about telling him she had seen him take his soul, but she didn't.

'It's not your fault, Hugh. I tried to help him, but I couldn't,' she said.

'It's not your fault either, Lydia. I'm somewhat hopeful he'll be my last. If not, one of the last,' he replied, hesitantly.

Lydia placed the record back in his collection. She turned to Hugh. His eyes were clenched tightly shut.

'The one next to it—that was my first,' said Hugh.

Lydia touched it with her finger. She turned to Hugh. He gritted his teeth and nodded. She yanked the record out, recognising the face on the sleeve immediately.

'Eliza,' Lydia gasped. She clutched the record closer to her face. 'Eliza Havers!'

'I'm sorry Lydia—' said Hugh.

'—Eliza is Mr Havers daughter,' said Lydia, her mouth dry and open. *I don't talk to my daughter much either anymore. I've tried, but it's just too difficult,* thought Lydia, Mr Havers' voice ringing in her ears. Her eyes became very wet and her lip quivered.

'When?' asked Lydia.

‘It was—’ murmured Hugh.

Lydia flipped the record sleeve around. The date was there. The date Eliza died.

‘—December 31st, 1999.’ said Lydia. ‘But, that’s the date I...’ She could feel her migraine pulsating, throbbing against her temple. She clenched her jawbone and rubbed her forehead.

‘Lydia, are you okay?’ said Hugh, reaching out to comfort Lydia. She backed away.

‘She can’t be dead,’ cried Lydia. ‘She can’t.’

‘I’m so sorry, Lydia,’ said Hugh. Lydia shook her head with great ferocity. Tears glided onto her cheeks. ‘Like I said before, the majority of souls that I’ve taken, I can barely remember. But this one—well this is the one I can never forget. No matter how hard I try.’

Lydia sniffed. Her throat hurt. Her head hurt. Her heart ached. Every moment she shared with Eliza flashed in her mind in an instant. She could feel her hand comforting her. She could smell the strawberry in her hair. She could see her beautiful eyes staring at her.

‘How did she die?’ asked Lydia. Part of her didn’t want to know, but its voice was drowned out by her burning desire to know. Hugh stood silent. He rubbed his arm and avoided eye contact. ‘Please, Hugh. I have to know.’

‘I can’t talk about it,’ said Hugh, ‘But I could show you, if you’d like?’

Lydia nodded, wiping the tears from her cold cheek. Hugh took the record out of Lydia’s hand and lead her into the back room.

In the back room, there was a vintage record player. It sat in the corner. It was all black, except for the brass tone arm and horn that towered above the turntable. Hugh removed the record carefully from its sleeve. The vinyl shone a bright, blinding white into the room. Lydia raised her hand over her eyes, peeking through her fingers. Hugh was unaffected by its glow, as he placed it onto the turntable.

‘You’ll need to come closer,’ said Hugh. Lydia stood still. Her legs felt stiff, as if she’d forgotten how to move. The air around her hummed and the light flickered like a strobe. It was if Eliza’s soul was trying to escape from its vinyl prison. ‘Lydia!’

She approached the record player hesitantly. Hugh grabbed Lydia’s arm and placed it onto the record player. He gave her a stern stare and nodded his head.

‘Are you sure?’ he asked.

Lydia nodded.

Hugh lifted the brass tonearm and dropped it onto the record. The entire room turned white. Lydia shut her eyes.



Lydia's eyes fluttered open and she found herself in a restroom. The restroom was spacious, with rows of sinks and a large mirror parallel to a row of stalls. She could hear a bassline throbbing, almost moving the floor beneath her. She tiptoed to the door and peeked out. She realised that she was back in the night club, and beyond the door of the restroom was the dance floor. It was rammed. Through the crowds, she could just about make out Lester as he walked onto the stage. The music cut out.

'We've got ten minutes left! So, let's make this next one count!' Lester shouted, with enthusiasm. The crowd cheered as the opening chords of the Oasis track *Don't Look Back in Anger* rang out loudly through the night club. Suddenly, the door flung open. Eliza stood in front of Lydia. She looked as if she had been crying.

'Eliza?' said Lydia.

Eliza walked through Lydia as the door slammed shut behind her. Lydia turned, her eyes following Eliza, who stood in front of the mirror. Dark mascara streaked down from her eyes to her cheeks, and her wispy fringe was messy. Her nostrils flared and she gasped for air.

'Eliza? What's wrong?' said Lydia.

'She can't hear you,' said Hugh.

Eliza tossed her bag onto the sink and rummaged through it. Lydia tried to take a look into the bag but Eliza's hands moved like a blur. She pulled out a handful of drugs and stared at them inside her palm. They were all different colours. Some of them even looked like candy. Other looked like ones you got at the pharmacy, but Lydia knew they weren't.

'Eliza,' shouted Lydia. She tried to grab the pills off her but her hand passed through Eliza's as if it wasn't there.

Eliza twisted the faucet knob. The water flowed out, splashing against the basin and echoing loudly. Eliza took a deep breath. She started to put pills into her mouth; as many as she could. She lowered her head to the running water and sipped from the tap, swallowing the pills as she did so. A few pills fell out of her mouth into the sink. She scraped them from the basin and pushed them back in. Her mouth moved vigorously as she chewed them with a grimace. Soon all the pills were gone.

Lydia stood silently behind Eliza. Her heart ached completely. She could only watch Eliza, as she stared back at her own reflection. Eliza's clenched fist collided with the mirror's surface, shattering it into a web of fractured glass. Her knuckles started to bleed, and she began to sob uncontrollably.

‘Why are you showing me this, Hugh?’ said Lydia, her teary eyes still fixed on Eliza. ‘I want to go home.’

Eliza’s eyes widened sharply.

‘You idiot! You fucking idiot!’ Eliza screamed.

She turned and bolted, sprinting through Lydia. She rushed into the stall and fell to her knees. She gagged as she pushed her bloody knuckles into the back of her throat. Lydia turned. She wanted to look away but she couldn’t. She was desperate for Eliza to save herself—for her to make herself vomit, and get the drugs out of her system. But she couldn’t. Lydia knew she couldn’t. Eliza’s legs shook violently but soon they stopped moving altogether. Her arms fell limply by her side as her head rested against the toilet bowl. She was gone. The door to the bathroom opened.

Lydia turned around and saw Hugh—a young, fresh-faced Hugh. He entered the bathroom, tentatively. She looked at Hugh—older Hugh, *her* Hugh: he was looking at the floor. She turned back to the younger Hugh. He shuffled into the restroom, looking around nervously.

‘Can you—can he, see us?’ asked Lydia.

‘No,’ said Hugh, shaking his head. ‘God. Look at me.’

Younger Hugh wore a black robe, one much more typical of a Grim Reaper.

‘Hello?’ he whispered, shuffling deeper into the room. He jumped as he saw Eliza’s corpse. His face turned white.

‘Fuck,’ he muttered. ‘Are you all right, love?’

There wasn’t any response. He gulped as he walked towards Eliza’s body. He lifted her up and laid her on her back on the restroom floor.

‘Right, so I put my hand on the chest,’ he muttered to himself, as he put his right hand to her chest. ‘And now what?’

A white glow shone brightly from Eliza’s chest and the entire room turned white.



Lydia jerked her hands away from the record player, sobbing uncontrollably.

‘She wouldn’t commit suicide,’ she cried. ‘She wouldn’t.’

‘I’m so sorry, Lydia,’ said Hugh, ‘I truly am. I think she instantly regretted it, but it was too late.’

‘But she was happy,’ said Lydia, wiping the tears from her cheek. ‘Why are you telling me all of this? Why me? Why now?’

‘I just thought you ought to know,’ said Hugh, taking a step closer to Lydia. ‘You’re my friend.’ He raised his hand to place it on Lydia’s shoulder but she stepped back, her feet crashing into a pile of records which tumbled to the floor.

‘I’m not your fucking friend,’ snapped Lydia.

‘Maybe she just wasn’t happy, Lydia,’ said Hugh, his voice soft and calm. ‘Surely you, of all people, can understand that.’

‘You! You’ve just been fucking with me all night. All fucking night!’ shouted Lydia. ‘Giving me false hope as you slowly wait in the shadows to add me to your collection. Until I’m just another piece of vinyl for you to forget about.’

Lydia backed away from Hugh, walking backward into the main room of the shop, her eyes fixed on Hugh. He followed her.

‘I haven’t given you false hope. I haven’t lied, tricked, or forced your hand in any way. I’ve just tried to show you that hope can exist,’ said Hugh. ‘Hope is so important, because I truly believe there’s happiness out there for you. I couldn’t save her, but I can save you, Lydia. I think you can find your happiness if you just believe it’s possible. That’s why I had to take your rope.’

‘You took my rope?’ Lydia screamed. ‘You really are a coward, Hugh. When or how I die is not up to you.’

‘I had to stop you from making a huge mistake. I didn’t want you to regret it, like Eliza did,’ said Hugh.

‘Do you not get it? We’re not friends. I don’t need you to decide how I live,’ said Lydia.

‘I don’t care how you live, Lydia. I care how you die.’

‘It’s not up to you! It’s up to me. And I’m ready. I was ready five hours ago, and nothing you’ve done has changed my mind. I’m ready now!’ she shouted. ‘Just do it now. Get it over with!’

‘I can’t,’ whispered Hugh, his eyes darting to his collection.

‘Yes! Yes, you can!’ cried Lydia.

‘No. I can’t. Not anymore. I can’t stop you from doing it, Lydia. I don’t have that kind of power, and you’re right—it’s not my decision to make,’ said Hugh. ‘If you truly believe that killing yourself is your only way out, well, that’s for you to decide. But it won’t be me. It won’t be me collecting your soul.’

Lydia felt her face scrunch up like a used piece of a paper. She looked at Hugh who had finally managed to look her back in the eye, although he

looked as if he were going to cry. Lydia clenched her fists, tightly.

‘You’re a fucking coward,’ snarled Lydia.

‘I’m sorry, for everything,’ said Hugh. Then he raised his bony hand and snapped his fingers. In an instant, Lydia found herself back in her living room, alone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PURPOSE

Give a person a purpose and they'll crawl through broken glass with a smile on their face. Lydia couldn't remember where she'd heard that. It was probably the start of a Tik Tok she had scrolled past, but for some reason it was there, in her head. She clutched her forehead, rubbing her temple. Lydia never had a purpose; not really. But, maybe just somehow, her purpose was Eliza. Not just meeting her, or even being with her, but saving her. To Lydia, it didn't matter how the record and Eliza had entered her life—be it through Hugh's intervention, sheer luck, or something beyond her comprehension. What mattered was that the record provided Lydia with an opportunity to save Eliza.

She looked at the photograph she had taken from Lester's wall of memories, clutching it in her shaking hand. Eliza never deserved to die—not for some dumb teenage mistake. Lydia stood up, and then sat back down quickly. She stared at her watch, 23:47.

'We've got ten minutes left! So, let's make this next one count!' Lester's words echoed in her head; she started counting on her fingers.

She knew she only had around three minutes until Eliza entered the bathroom. Meaning, if she put the needle to the groove right now, she'd arrive too early and only have a few seconds to convince Eliza not to kill herself. But if she waited too long, she'd arrive too late and Eliza would already have overdosed.

She didn't know what she was going to say, and she didn't even have time to think of anything now. She hoped that when she saw Eliza, she'd just know what to say. Although, she didn't hold out much hope. She couldn't convince herself not to commit suicide, so why would it be any different with Eliza? Her head throbbed as she watched the *second* hand on the clock tick. She pushed both her hands against her head and squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, she saw the photograph on the floor. Eliza was looking right at her. She scooped it up and shot to her feet. Lydia understood: *this* was her purpose. She rushed over to the record player.

'This is it,' she whispered, as she lowered the needle gently onto the record's groove. She found herself instantaneously transported to the night club. The dance floor was even more packed than during her previous visit. Excited partygoers jostled for prime spots on the dance floor. The strobes flickered violently. Lydia couldn't see past the swarming bodies.

Her legs could barely move as she fought her way through the dense crowd.

‘We’ve got ten minutes left! So, let’s make this next one count!’ Lydia turned her neck swiftly to see Lester’s face in the distance on the stage. *Don’t Look back in Anger* blasted from the speakers. As the crowds shouted out the opening line, Lydia managed to wriggle free from the dance floor into the alcove. She spotted the restrooms and raced towards them.

‘Eliza! Eliza!’ she called out. She pushed the door open but it wouldn’t give. She tried again with more force, but the door refused to budge.

‘We had to lock that one.’

Lydia turned. Johnny appeared at the top of the stairs.

‘Lester said that it’s something to do with the plumbing,’ he shrugged. ‘Typical, ey?’

The water pipe, thought Lydia.

‘You coming?’ Johnny gestured to the dance floor. Lydia shook her head and blinked quickly.

‘No. I’ve really got to—’

‘—When you’ve got to go, you’ve got to go,’ said Johnny, ‘If you’re desperate just go outside!’

Johnny laughed as he disappeared into the dance floor. Lydia looked around, hoping that she might just

spot a glimpse of Eliza, or even a clue to her whereabouts.

‘Where are you, Eliza?’ Lydia muttered to herself. Her fingers tapped against her lips. She grinded her teeth. Aha! The answer struck Lydia like lightning. ‘Outside!’

Lydia sprinted towards the corridor, barging her way past the bodies that spilled over from the dance floor into the alcove. She burst through the fire exit, her heart pounding. She flew up the steel staircase, three steps at a time. She hoped she wasn’t too late. She hoped that Eliza was there. She ran through the other fire exit. The door flung open.

‘Eliza!’ Lydia screamed. There she was. Lydia couldn’t see her face but she could see the floral tattoo poking out of her tank top. She must have been freezing. Her hair blew ferociously in the wind. Lydia scrunched her face up as the cold wind blew against it. She took a few footsteps towards Eliza. Eliza stood on the edge of the rooftop. Her foot hung precariously over the deadly drop. Time seemed to slow down, although Lydia could still feel it moving—fearful she would be flung back home any second.

‘Eliza, don’t do it. Please,’ said Lydia. Eliza twisted her body towards Lydia.

‘You don’t understand, Lydia,’ said Eliza, tears streaming down her cheeks. ‘I have to.’

‘You don’t, Eliza. I promise you don’t. I know it feels like you do,’ said Lydia.

‘Stop!’ screamed Eliza, ‘Stop saying you know how it feels. You don’t—’

‘I was going to jump. A few hours ago. From the roof of my flat building,’ said Lydia. ‘It’s not far from here. A few streets down that way.’ Lydia pointed down the road towards a group of buildings. Eliza turned to look. Lydia inched closer towards her. ‘It was before I came here, before I met you—’

‘Why didn’t you do it?’ asked Eliza. Lydia pursed her lips together.

‘Fear,’ said Lydia. ‘Not of death, or regret. I just couldn’t do it. I wanted to. I really did. But as much as my head was screaming at my legs to jump, they couldn’t. I tried jumping in front of a train. I even bought a rope. But something kept me from doing it.’ Lydia glanced up at the stars that filled the skyline.

‘I don’t believe in a God, or divine intervention and the notion of fate makes me feel nauseous,’ said Lydia, ‘But I’m glad I didn’t die. I needed to meet you, Eliza. Because before I met you, I couldn’t see a way out. I couldn’t see a world where I could be happy, or a world where these fucking voices would get out of

my head. You know, the voices telling us we'd be better off if we just—'

'—Jumped,' said Eliza.

'I don't hear them now. Not when I'm with you, at least. And who knows, maybe there's a world where I can be happy. And a world where you are, too.'

'But they're different worlds, aren't they?' said Eliza.

Lydia gulped. She didn't know how to answer. She knew the answer and so did Eliza. Maybe Eliza didn't want to be saved either. Maybe she was as fucked up as Lydia was. They were both damaged; both ready to die. Lydia thought about jumping with her—but immediately quashed the idea.

'It felt so real,' said Eliza.

'What felt real?' asked Lydia, taking another step towards Eliza.

'All of it. Tonight. You,' said Eliza. 'The kiss.'

'It was real Eliza.'

'You can't be real, Lydia!' snapped Eliza. 'I wish you were. I really do. Then maybe I wouldn't have to jump. But you're not. I'm not a fucking idiot. You're one pill too many, or my survival instinct kicking in. You're my head, creating this perfect girl. Trying to show me a way out.'

‘I’m not perfect, Eliza,’ said Lydia. ‘Really! I’m not special, or remarkable, or anything, really! The only thing I am is real. You’re the perfect one, Eliza. You’re the special one. You’re just lacking a bit of perspective. Sometimes, it’s just hard to see. Especially from up here.’

‘You are remarkable, Lydia,’ Eliza said. ‘And if you are real, I’m sorry.’ Eliza turned to the concrete street below. She leaned forward to jump.

‘I’m from the future,’ Lydia blurted out. It sounded odd to hear those words come out of her mouth; but it was the truth. Eliza turned, her face grimacing.

‘What?’ she said.

‘I can prove it!’ Lydia gulped. ‘The Spice Girls break up. And so do Oasis—and Destiny’s Child, but that actually turns out for the better. And there’s only eight planets! And phones don’t get smaller; they just get bigger. And—’

‘—How am I supposed to know if any of this is true?’ asked Eliza.

‘I don’t know,’ said Lydia. Her throat felt sore and her nose was runny. ‘You’ll just have to stick around a little bit longer. Please!’

Eliza turned back to the ledge. Lydia edged even closer to Eliza. She could now see over the ledge and

down to the street, below. She felt a knot of fear in her stomach. It was so high up. A small crowd gathered outside the entrance to the night club, below them. Lydia could hear them laughing and cheering. They were excited and happy, seemingly clueless that Eliza hung above them threatening to splatter the concrete they stood on.

‘I can’t prove it, Eliza,’ said Lydia, ‘but that doesn’t mean it’s not true.’

Lydia extended her hand to Eliza. It trembled slightly in the air, and it felt heavy. *Please Eliza*, thought Lydia. Eliza’s lips quivered and curled slightly. It was only small, but it was a smile. Eliza took a step towards Lydia and reached for her hand.

‘Wait! I can prove it!’ said Lydia. She moved her hand to her back pocket. She pulled out the photograph. ‘Here! Look at this!’

Lydia held out the photograph to Eliza. Eliza leaned towards the photograph. Suddenly, the wind blew harshly into Lydia. Lydia jolted forwards and the photo escaped from her grasp. It blew in the wind above the building’s edge. Lydia tried to grab it but it was just out of her reach. Eliza turned and stretched towards it. She snatched the photograph, managing to pluck it from the wind. She slipped. Her body fell backwards, tipping over the ledge of the building. Lydia gasped.

She lunged herself towards Eliza. She grabbed her arm and flung her back to the rooftop. Lydia felt weightless. Eliza was on the rooftop but she was looking smaller and smaller.

‘Lydia!’ Eliza screamed out. She looked frightened.

Lydia felt the wind push against her back. She was sailing down the building at speed. She clawed her hand towards Eliza but it was no use; she was going to die. Time seemed to slow down. Her lips quivered and her breaths were short and panicked. She thought in that moment that she would feel relief. But she didn’t. Her eyes locked with Eliza’s, who knelt over the ledge of the building. She wouldn’t look away. Maybe she couldn’t. Eliza was about to watch her die, just as Lydia had seen her die. She knew how horrible it was. She urged her to look away, but she didn’t.

Lydia braced herself for impact. She clenched her body tightly and closed her eyes. She thought her life would flash before her eyes—that’s what they say happens—but it didn’t. A life did flash before her eyes, but it wasn’t hers ... It was Eliza’s; the life Eliza had yet to live.

She thought about her standing on the rooftop. Perhaps a few moments from now. Lydia would be dead, but Eliza wouldn’t be. She’d realise she was

holding a photograph in her hand, and she'd looked at it and she'd see Lydia's face. And she'd laugh. She'd laugh because she realised that Lydia was real. She'd be sad, but she'd still dust herself off and go back to the night club, just in time for Lester to countdown to the new year. She'd shout with the crowd and they'd all sing Auld Lang Syne. Then she'd find Andy and they'd watch the fireworks together, and then they'd go home. And in the morning, Mr Havers would wake her up with a hot breakfast, desperate to hear all about her night. Eliza would tell him about a girl she met. After that, she wouldn't talk about Lydia again. Never again. But she'd think about her. Not always, but sometimes. And whenever she did think of Lydia, she would laugh. And she'd be happy—Lydia liked the idea.

Lydia crashed onto the sofa in her living room. She landed much harder than she had done before. She propelled off the sofa and her body cannoned into the cold, hard floor. She felt a sharp pain in her right hand. She clambered to her knees and looked down at her hand. Blood spilled out from a gash on her palm. She looked at the floor where Blondie's knife lay.

'Fuck!' she screamed out. She clenched the cut with her left hand. She began to laugh. She couldn't help it. She didn't feel the pain in her hand. Perhaps a

little but she was too happy. She was alive—and so was Eliza.

She put her hand against her forehead. Her migraine was gone. She rose to her feet, wincing as she put her weight onto her knees. Nothing was broken, thankfully, but she felt like she had just been hit by a train. She slumped onto her sofa with a sigh of relief.

She felt damaged, but she didn't feel broken. For the first time since her had died, she felt optimistic. She could feel her lips curling into a smile, but it soon vanished. Her eyes shot towards the record. It lay on the record player with the needle at the centre. It suddenly dawned on Lydia that she had to break it. It was far too tempting to go back. The thought of seeing Eliza again—she couldn't. She knew that Eliza had to live her own life, and Lydia wasn't a part of that life, not anymore.

Lydia lifted herself up and moved towards the record player. She lifted the tonearm from the centre and began to place it back on its rest. It hovered over the first groove. Lydia licked her lips. She was tempted to drop it, but she shook her head and placed the tonearm on the rest. She lifted the record off the player, her bloody hands staining the black vinyl. She sat back down on her sofa with the record clutched in her hands.

She held it, ready to snap it in half. Ready to say goodbye to Eliza, for good.

A light hit her eye, sharply, and she squinted. When she opened her eyes, she could see the glare from Blondie's knife shining in her eye. She moved it to the coffee table so it wouldn't shine in her eyes. As she held the knife in her bloodied palm a spark of inspiration coursed through her.

What if, Lydia thought. What if I scratched the record?

The majority of Lydia's record collection was flawless; well until Blondie had his way with it. Her mum was always very OCD about how one should handle a record. Her dad on the other hand was much more cavalier when it came to record collecting. Many of his personal records were scratched and damaged. His Lionel Richie album had a huge scratch and would always jump to the start.

Jumping to the start, thought Lydia. Would that mean Lydia could stay in the night club? It seemed that the only thing thrusting her back on the sofa was the needle reaching the inner groove. If that never happened, she'd stay there. She thought. She hoped.

She wasn't sure whether to try it or not. She had nothing to lose, and she wouldn't even have to see Eliza when she got to the night club. She could just see the

countdown, and hide amongst the bodies on the dance floor, and if she came back after three minutes; well then, she'd break the record. Eliza wouldn't even have to know. She had to try.

She drew Blondie's knife closer to the surface of the record. She pierced the sharp tip of the knife into the vinyl. It felt wicked; like she was breaking all the rules. She moved the knife vigorously before moving it away. She looked at the record. The once pristine vinyl now bore a deep, purposeful gash in the centre of its grooves. It was damaged. Just like Lydia. But it wasn't broken. Maybe it was even better like this—if it worked.

She placed the knife on the sofa. Her smile returned. She was excited. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her legs were no longer sore, and neither was her hand. The adrenaline had pushed out all of it. She raced to the record player and put the vinyl record back on the deck.

'Please work!' she whispered.

She held the tonearm above the record. She braced herself, ready to drop the needle into the groove. She closed her eyes and waited for a moment. She opened them and looked around her living room, wondering if she'd ever return. She was ready. As she dropped the needle she looked to her sofa.

‘Fuck!’ she screamed. It was the knife. Somehow, it had become lodged between the two seat cushions, and was standing upright. The needle slipped from Lydia’s fingers and hit the record.

Lydia found herself once again stood in the middle of the dance floor. The strobes shone brightly into her eyes. The outro of *Don’t Look Back in Anger* blasted into her eardrums. People barged into her as they sang along. She looked at her watch. There was less than three minutes until midnight. She looked around, her mouth dry and her forehead wet with sweat. There was nothing she could do. She held her hand to her stomach, unable to think about anything other than the knife that waited for her.

She looked through the sea of jubilant strangers as they cheered as the chorus repeated. She could see Lester approach the stage. She could see Johnny, too, and even Andy. And Eliza was with them. They swayed with the crowd of dancers. Eliza was smiling. Lydia let out a small smile herself.

Lydia began to sing, as loudly as she could. A group of teenagers embraced her, as if they knew her. Lydia laughed as she sung with them.

‘I don’t think I’ve ever seen this place as packed as it is tonight!’ Lydia looked up to the stage where Lester was standing with a microphone in his hand.

‘You all seem to be having a fantastic time, and I hope that continues into the New Year. We’ve got another minute until the countdown begins.’

Lydia gulped. A minute. She tapped her fingers against her thigh.

‘After the countdown, a few of us are heading down to Heaton Park to catch the fireworks, and you’re all welcome to join us,’ said Lester. ‘Just because the nineties are coming to an end, doesn’t mean the party stops here! I say we groove into the new millennium as we embrace the future with even more electrifying beats and unforgettable nights of revelry. Let’s make memories that will transcend time, for tonight is just the beginning of an epic journey together. So, raise your glasses, your bottles—whatever the fuck you’re drinking!’ The crowd all raised their drinks above their heads. Lydia held her hands to the sky and let out a cheer. ‘Cheers! Now let the countdown begin! Ten!’

The crowd joined him. ‘Nine! Eight!’

Lydia felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned.

‘Lydia?’ said Eliza. She looked confused.

‘Eliza! I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be here,’ said Lydia.

‘What?’ said Eliza.

‘Seven, six, five, four!’ screamed the crowd.

‘I fucked up Eliza! I wanted to stay. I wanted to at least try. But I’m going to die.’

‘I can’t hear you!’ shouted Eliza.

‘I said I’m sorry!’ shouted Lydia. Eliza shook her head and pointed to her ears.

‘Three! Two! One!’

Lydia clenched her fists, tightly. Her hands were shaking.

‘Happy New Year!’ the crowd rejoiced. Eliza kissed Lydia. Her lips were soft and inviting. Lydia closed her eyes. Everything went silent. Her hands stopped shaking and her fists were unclenched. She felt like she was floating. *Am I dead?*

‘Happy New Year, Lydia,’ said Eliza. Auld Lang Syne began to play on the speakers. People cheered and danced, linking arms with one another. Lydia felt disorientated.

‘I’m—I’m staying,’ she whispered.

‘What?’ said Eliza, stroking her hand against Lydia’s arm. Lydia stood braced to the ground. She looked around the night club. Everyone was elated; intoxicated and joyful. None more so than Lydia herself. This was the longest she’d ever been at the night club.

‘I’m staying!’ she shouted.

Eliza grabbed Lydia’s hand and pulled her closer to her. They kissed her passionately. Lydia felt like

she'd died and gone to Heaven! She squeezed Eliza tightly.

'Jesus Christ, get a room, scrubber.'

Lydia leaned back from Eliza. Andy swayed next to Eliza with a smirk on his face. His legs were wobbling a bit and he looked like he might topple any second.

'Are you coming to the—' he said, as he started to make firework noises, waving his hands in the air like an explosion. Eliza grabbed his arms.

'Yeah, I'm coming,' she said, turning to Lydia 'are you coming?'

Lydia nodded.

Eliza grabbed Lydia's hand and they walked off the dance floor towards the main exit. Johnny and Lester were in deep conversation, standing by the door. Lydia kept her head down but she could tell in the corner of her eye that they had both spotted her.

'Happy New Year!' said Eliza, pushing Andy toward the exit. He stumbled outside.

Lydia looked up. Johnny flashed her a smile goodbye. She turned to Lester who shot her a stern glance, but he didn't say anything.

The night time air was chilly. As they made their way outside the night club, Lydia looked up to the rooftop that touched the dark skyline. When she looked

back down, Eliza was looking at her. Her mouth hung open like she wanted to ask her something, but she didn't. If she did, Lydia wouldn't know what to say.

'Race you to Heaton Park!' Andy shouted. He began sprinting down the street, turning at the alley. Eliza let out a laugh.

'Should we—' asked Lydia.

'—He'll be fine,' said Eliza. Eliza put Lydia's hand in hers; their fingers interlocking. Walking by the huge nineties' mural they soon found themselves on a charming cobbled street. They were in the city centre. Lydia could make out some of the streets, but everything looked different. It looked shinier, and cleaner. The warm glow of old street lamps illuminated their path as they passed the rows of storefronts, all now closed for business.

The bright blue signage of the Blockbusters Video express caught Lydia's eye first. Standees for *The Phantom Menace* and *Sleepy Hollow* hid behind the closed doorway. Next to it was a Woolworths, where she could just make out the Pick and Mix section. Across the street was a huge Virgin Megastore. Thousands upon thousands of CDs sat in large display racks.

'So, what else happens years from now?' asked Eliza, half-jokingly.

‘No more spoilers from me. That wouldn’t be fair,’ said Lydia, with a playful smile.

‘Thanks,’ said Eliza, ‘for coming back and for stopping me from making a massive mistake.’

Lydia stopped. Eliza’s words disappeared and Lydia felt a low sounding buzz in her eardrums. It was a record shop, and it looked oh so familiar. Seventies’ classic albums hung from sheets in the window. The sign above read ‘Manchester Soul’.

Come in, we’re open! read the sign on the door. The lights shone brightly from inside. It was the only shop on the street with lights on. Lydia’s mouth gawped open and her lips felt dry.

‘Are you okay, Lydia?’ said Eliza, ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘It’s just, this place! It’s familiar. I’ve been here before,’ said Lydia. A small migraine formed in her forehead. She rubbed her temple.

‘Manchester Soul? I come here all the time.’ Eliza said, as she walked towards the entrance. ‘Weird. It looks open.’

‘Eliza!’ whispered Lydia.

‘Don’t worry, we’ve got time!’ Eliza said, pushing the door open and stepping into the shop. Lydia followed her in, nervously. She stepped into the quaint record shop. Eliza had already begun browsing

through records with carefree delight. Lydia looked around, half-expecting Hugh to emerge from the shadows, tell her off and teleport her home. There was a man at the counter, but it wasn't Hugh. She hadn't seen this man before. He was bald and looked like he was in his fifties or sixties. He wore glasses and remained sitting down, seemingly engrossed in the book he was reading. Lydia attempted to flash him a smile, but he didn't notice her.

She turned to the records in the crates. The layout was almost identical to Hugh's collection. She flicked through the records; Oasis, Blur, Pulp. They were all normal, real records.

Phew! Lydia thought, letting out a sigh of relief. *And all first pressings, too!*

'Are you always open on New Year's Eve?' asked Eliza. Lydia turned to the shopkeeper. He put down his book and removed his glasses.

'Nah,' he said in a thick Mancunian accent. 'Nah, am not. But someone made me a dead good offer to keep the shop open, tonight.'

He rose to his feet and walked towards the centre of the shop. Eliza smiled. Lydia was nervous. 'I take it that one of you two girls is Lydia?'

'I'm—I'm Lydia,' said Lydia, hesitantly.

‘Thank fuck for that!’ said the shopkeeper, ‘About time, been buzzing to go home for the past three hours.’ He walked past Lydia and started digging in one of the crates. He pulled out a record from the pile.

‘Ah-ha!’ he exclaimed. ‘Ee arr, this is for you.’

He handed a record to Lydia. She looked down at it. The sleeve was a fine, marble black. It was the record—the one that appeared in her own collection; the record that brought her here. She let out an audible gasp and her hands quivered as she held it.

‘I don’t have any money,’ said Lydia.

‘Aye! He sorted it proper,’ said the shopkeeper. Lydia gave him a quizzical look. ‘Swear down!’

‘He?’ asked Lydia.

The shopkeeper let a coy smile slip. He turned over the record in Lydia’s hands. On the back cover, there was a note:

*Keep safe and make sure you deliver on time!
From your friend, Hugh.*

Lydia’s eyes welled up, but she managed not to cry.

‘Now, if that’s everything, I’d be proper thankful if I could shut up shop and get home to the family,’ said the shopkeeper.

‘Yes, of course,’ said Lydia. ‘Thank you. So much,’ Lydia turned to the door as the shopkeeper ushered her and Eliza out.

‘If you see him,’ said Lydia, ‘the man who gave you this record—please can you just tell him that I’m sorry.’

The shopkeeper nodded.

She wished she could have told Hugh how sorry and thankful she was herself, but the bittersweet truth was that their paths would probably never cross again. Lydia and Eliza walked out of the record shop and carried on down the high street. Lydia turned back to see the shopkeeper flipping the shop sign from open to closed. Lydia clutched the record in her left hand and held Eliza’s hand with her right.

‘What is it?’ asked Eliza.

‘It’s,’ said Lydia, unsure what to tell Eliza. ‘It’s just...’

A bright brocade exploded in the sky as pretty pink colours filled the night sky.

‘Come on!’ said Eliza, running towards the park entrance, a smile beaming from her face. Lydia raced after her as brilliant bursts of colours filled the air.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE CIRCLE

Lydia was standing in the middle of Heaton Park. The air was crisp and cool, as groups of people emerged from the various entrances and found a spot to stake claim. Some people placed picnic blankets and throws on the ground, whilst others had brought camping chairs with them. Others, Lydia and Eliza included, just stood. Lydia clung to the record tightly. It seemed to hum in her hands, and holding it she felt like she held the holy grail. Fortunately, her grail was disguised. Nobody at the park gave it a second look. They were too excited about the fireworks, despite the earlier start and finish times enforced by the council.

‘Why have you brought that here?’ asked Eliza.

Lydia looked at Eliza. Eliza’s eyes were still wide and alluring, with gentle creases underneath and at the side. When Eliza smiled the faint lines became more apparent, but she still looked as beautiful as the day Lydia had first met her, twenty years ago. Her hair was still brunette but it was a shade or two lighter, and her wispy fringe was long gone. Lydia smiled at her, but kept her lips sealed.

‘You and your bloody secrets!’ said Eliza. ‘Do you want a drink?’

‘A *Winona Ryder*, please,’ said Lydia.

‘Jesus, not had one of those in a long time,’ said Eliza.

‘I’ll have anything,’ said Lydia, ‘I’ve just got to do something.’

‘Something?’ asked Eliza, raising her eyebrows. Lydia’s eyes darted to the record that she held in her hands. ‘Just make sure you’re back before the fireworks start.’

Lydia kissed Eliza on the lips. They were soft and wet. She could have kissed them for longer, but she didn’t.

‘I love you,’ said Lydia, walking away quickly before Eliza could respond.

She walked through the crowds and found the exit to the main road. She turned the corner onto the main street. The streets were busy. A tall gentleman barged her shoulder. She stumbled.

‘Oh God! I’m sorry,’ said the stranger in a deep voice.

Lydia stumbled, turning to the stranger. Only it wasn’t a stranger. He looked familiar. He wore a familiar looking flannel shirt buttoned all the way to the top. His beard was thick, as were the rims of his glasses.

‘Adam!’ exclaimed Lydia. Bafflement washed over Adam’s face as he looked Lydia up and down.

‘Do I know you?’ asked Adam.

‘Probably one of your Tinder matches,’ said the person he was with.

‘Sarah!’ said Lydia, almost instinctively. *Oh, Fuck!* she thought. Sarah shared Adam’s look of befuddlement. ‘Sorry! My fault.’

Lydia started to walk towards the park’s exit.

‘Was that...? No, it couldn’t have been,’ said Sarah.

Once Lydia turned the corner, she couldn’t hear them anymore. She made her way down the street taking large and fast strides. She glanced back, but she was alone. She breathed a sigh of relief, but she felt exhilarated. She couldn’t believe it. *Sarah and Adam!* Lydia let out a wry laugh, as she turned to the street where she used to live.

She saw her old flat building, which she hadn’t seen in twenty years. She’d always made sure that she avoided it whenever she was in the city, just in case. She stood on the road opposite, hiding in the shadows of the trees. She tried to look in the window from a distance but she couldn’t see anything clearly. Her eyes weren’t as good as they used to be. She crossed the road and moved to the window, hovering behind the wall.

She peered inside. The living room light was on, and she could hear music. *Slight Return* by The Bluetones, still one of her favourites but she hadn't heard it in a while! She leaned in closer and she saw Lydia—herself, only twenty years younger.

Her younger self caressed her fingers against her record collection. Her record collection! She forgot how good everything looked. She forgot how good she looked! It was weird, seeing herself. Although, it almost didn't feel like she was looking at herself. Lydia and her younger self were so different, in so many ways. She wished she could tell her that everything would turn out all right in the end. But she couldn't! She had to make sure that whatever happened, under no circumstances, could she be caught by her younger self—or else, the repercussions could be dire. Her younger self made her way from the living room to the bathroom.

Once she was out of sight, Lydia crept towards the building door and attempted to open it, but it remained stubbornly shut. A flicker of red caught her peripheral vision, drawing her attention to the access pad beside the door. *The code*, thought Lydia, *what was the bloody code?* It had slipped from her memory, faded with time. She knew it started with a three. With a hopeful press, her fingers hesitated before tapping

other numbers, as if instinct guided her forgotten knowledge. Suddenly, the light flashed green and the door emitted a buzzing sound. She pushed it open, with a sigh of relief.

She rummaged in her back pocket and pulled out her key. It was rusty and a little withered, but it slid into the keyhole, perfectly. She opened the door quietly and slowly. She was in. She took a few steps into the flat, trying to hold her breath. She didn't know exactly what would happen if her younger self caught her, but judging from the countless time travel movies she had seen, the outcome would not be good. She made sure each step was soft and quiet, until she reached her record collection. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.* Lydia stopped on the seventh block. A light flickered in her eyes from her record player. She gasped when she saw it—its presence suddenly sparked a memory within her. She felt as if she were a teenager again. She felt the record burning in her hand. *What if, I just played it one more time,* she thought to herself. It seemed to beckon her name, teasing and tempting her to go back the night club. *It couldn't hurt, could it?*

She shook her head and reverted her attention to the seventh block. She began flicking through each record in the block as she counted upwards in her head. Each flick made a small noise. It was faint, and barely

noticeable over the music but it was there—and Lydia could sense her younger self catching wind of something going on, as she stood in the bathroom. She remembered being in the bathroom, that night; this night! She remembered hearing the noise and bursting out. Lydia knew she had to be quick.

She rushed to get to the twenty-seventh record but as she rushed, she also became louder. She slid the record into the correct place. From the corner of her eye, she saw her younger self's shadow emerge from the bathroom. She froze. She turned her body to face the door; it was wide open, but it looked too far away. She didn't want to get into race with her younger self. She turned back to the record collection. In one of the blocks sat a framed photograph of her mum and her dad. She hadn't seen it in so long. She still missed her dad, every day. She heard footsteps from the bathroom. She snatched the photo frame and smashed it with force onto the wooden floor. She turned to the bathroom and watched the shadow creep back inside.

She walked slowly to the door, trying not to make any more noise.

'All right fucker!' her younger self shouted.

Lydia leapt to the floor and crawled under the sofa. She put her hand over her mouth to subdue her heavy breathing, but her heart was pounding. She spied

her younger self from underneath the sofa. Her younger self darted to the front door with clenched fists. She looked into the corridor before coming back in, huffing as she shut the door behind her.

She kneeled down to the floor, examining the smashed photograph. She kicked some of the bigger shards underneath the record unit, as she picked up the photograph. Lydia cowered her head into the floorboards, praying that she wouldn't be caught. Suddenly, the sofa creaked and Lydia felt the space between her head and the bottom of the sofa shrink. The radio crackled to life.

'Sit back and relax with the evening show with Caroline Stone.'

It was her mum! She felt a smile form under her palm. She hadn't spoken to her mum in a long time, not properly anyway. Sometimes, she would ring in to her show, pretending to be a super fan just to ask her questions. She had listened to her mum on the radio for the past twenty years. She had heard her talk about her daughter, and her family, and although it was odd, Lydia loved hearing it. It made her see her mum in a different light. She couldn't wait to talk to her again.

'Well, I'm not sure who wants to, but for the next five hours, I will be alone,' said Caroline. 'But it's going to be fun. I'm going to be taking some calls,

playing some great music from a time gone by, and let's see in the new year together.'

The radio was turned off and the sofa raised a little higher. Lydia watched her younger self wander over to the piano, before turning the light off and walking out of her apartment. Lydia breathed a huge sigh of relief.

She slid out from under the sofa, but as she did so something cut into her palm.

'Fuck!' she screamed. It was her bad hand, where she had been cut with Blondie's knife. The mark from Blondie's knife was faint but she still could see it; even after all this time. But she didn't mind it—it reminded her of who she was. She looked down at a shard of glass on the wooden floor. She looked around the room, just to double check that she was alone. She picked up the shard of glass and tried to move the sofa back a little. She bent down to her knees and carved into the wooden floor.

'Seven. Twenty. Seven,' she said, almost laughing. 'That fucking number!'

She slid the sofa back and looked around the room. Everything was perfect. Everything would be perfect. She felt relieved. This night had always been in the back of her mind for the last twenty years. It felt weird that it was finally here, and even weirder that it

was done. The record was delivered, on time; just as Hugh had asked. She smiled as she thought about him.

She opened the door and walked out of the flat, but she hit something, or someone.

‘Watch where you’re fucking going,’ a voice boomed.

Lydia’s eyes shot up. Hugh stood before her, his face plump and healthy, his eyes gleaming with mischief. Hugh smiled, knowingly. He raised a finger to his lips, urging her to stay quiet.

‘Hugh!’ she cried. She put her hands around his finger. It was no longer skeletal. It was fleshy, soft and warm. She looked at Hugh. He didn’t look like the Grim Reaper anymore. He looked human. He looked normal. He looked happy.

‘Did you deliver the record?’ Hugh asked.

‘Hugh, I’m sorry. For everything!’ she cried. ‘And thank you. So, so much. Thank you.’

Hugh placed both of his hands on Lydia’s shoulders.

‘No, Lydia. Thank you,’ he said, a smile creeping onto his face.

Lydia squeezed him tightly. He chuckled, squeezing her back. Her face nuzzled into his cosy chest. Her tears were probably soaking his shirt, but she didn’t care. She was so happy to see him.

‘Do I need to do anything else?’ asked Lydia.

Hugh reached into his pocket and pulled out his mobile phone. He typed something, quickly.

‘And send!’ he said, looking at Lydia with a glow. ‘You don’t need to do anything. I’ll take it from here, Lydia.’ He wrapped his arms around her and they hugged for a moment. ‘Right, you can fuck off now. Before you ruin everything!’

Lydia took a step back. Hugh gestured for her to leave. She didn’t want to leave Hugh, but she knew she had to. As she reached the door, she turned back—but Hugh had gone. She didn’t know where, but she smiled, hoping he had gone somewhere where he’d be happy. Because she was, and so was Eliza; and that was all thanks to Hugh. Lydia knew that, and for that she owed Hugh the world. Hugh deserved to be as happy as she was.

‘Goodbye, Hugh,’ whispered Lydia, as she pushed the door open and ran towards the trees. The wind blew against her cheeks. She felt weightless. She felt as if she didn’t have a worry in the world. She couldn’t stop herself from smiling. She ran all the way to Heaton Park. She snuck up behind Eliza and gave her the tightest hug from behind.

‘Where have you been?’ asked Eliza.

‘Oh, you know, the usual,’ Lydia replied with a playful smirk. ‘Time continuum adventures and all that stuff.’

‘You weren’t away for that long!’ Eliza protested.

‘Ah, Eliza. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you,’ Lydia quipped, a twinkle of mischief gleaming in her eyes. ‘Sometimes all you need is 95 revolutions.’

EPILOGUE

If I'm being honest, I doubt Lydia actually said that. That was never really her style. That's just how I picture it in my head, you know, whenever I think about her. I like imagining that ending. Lydia and Eliza watching the fireworks together, just as they did twenty years earlier on the night they met. It's almost like an ending to an old movie; right before the credits roll. I do like old movies.

The truth is, our hug in the apartment entrance was the last time I ever saw Lydia Levy. After that, I sort of just dissolved. My fleshy fingers went numb and I didn't feel heavy any more. I don't know what ever happened to Lydia, or Eliza, but I do think about them, often. I like to think they grew old together, and had a little family and lived somewhere quiet in the countryside.

From my time as the Grim Reaper, Lydia's story is one of my favourites to tell. The story of the girl who very nearly cheated Death and lived to tell the tale. Nobody cheats death. Not in the end. Not even me, ironically.