

# 1

## *Spring 2013*

Catherine braces herself, but there is nothing left to come up. She grips the cold enamel and raises her head to look in the mirror. The face that looks back at her is not the one she went to bed with. She has seen this face before and hoped never to see it again. She studies herself in this new harsh light and wets a flannel, wiping her mouth then pressing it against her eyes as if she can extinguish the fear in them.

'Are you OK?'

Her husband's voice startles her. She hoped he would stay asleep. Leave her alone.

'Better now,' she lies, switching off the light. Then she lies again. 'Must have been last night's take-away.' She turns to him, a shadow in the dead-hour light.

'Go back to bed. I'm fine,' she whispers. He is more asleep than awake, yet still he reaches out and puts his hand on her shoulder.

'You sure?'

'I'm sure,' she says. All she is sure about is that she needs to be alone.

'Robert. Honestly. I'll be there in a minute.'

His fingers linger on her arm for a moment, then he does as she asks. She waits until she is certain he is asleep before returning to their bedroom.

She looks at it lying there face down and still open where she left it. The book she trusted. Its first few chapters had lulled her into complacency, made her feel at ease with just the hint of a mild thrill to come, a little something to keep her reading, but no clue to what was lying in wait. It beckoned her on, lured her into its pages, further and further until she realized she was trapped. Then words ricocheted around her brain and slammed into her chest, one after another. It was as if a queue of people had jumped in front of a train and she, the helpless driver, was powerless to prevent the fatal collision. It was too late to put the brakes on. There was no going back. Catherine had unwittingly stumbled across herself tucked into the pages of the book.

*Any resemblance to persons living or dead . . .* The disclaimer has a neat, red line through it. A message she failed to notice when she opened the book. There is no mistaking the resemblance to her. She is a key character, a main player. Though the names may have been changed, the details are unmistakable, right down to what she was wearing that afternoon. A chunk of her life she has kept hidden. A secret she has told no one, not even her husband and son – two people who think

they know her better than anyone else. No living soul can have conjured up what Catherine has just read. Yet there it is in printer's ink for anyone to see. She thought she had laid it to rest. That it was finished. But now it has resurfaced. In her bedroom. In her head.

She tries to dislodge it with thoughts of the previous evening. The contentment of settling into their new home: of wine and supper; curling up on the sofa; dozing in front of the TV and then she and Robert melting into bed. A quiet happiness she had taken for granted: but it is too quiet to bring her comfort. She cannot sleep so gets out of bed and goes downstairs.

They still have a downstairs, just about. A maisonette, not a house any more. They moved from the house three weeks ago. Two bedrooms instead of four. Two bedrooms are a better fit for her and Robert. One for them. One spare. They've gone for open-plan too. No doors. They don't need to shut doors now Nicholas has left. She turns on the kitchen light and takes a glass from the cupboard and fills it. No tap. Cool water on command from the new fridge. It's more like a wardrobe than a fridge. Dread slicks her palms. She is hot, almost feverish, and is thankful for the coolness of the newly laid limestone floor. The water helps a little. As she gulps it down she looks out of the vast glass windows running along the back of this new, alien home. Only black out there. Nothing to see. She hasn't got round to blinds yet. She is exposed. Looked at. They can see her, but she can't see them.

## 2

### *Two years earlier*

I did feel sorry about what happened, I really did. He was only a child after all: seven years old. And I was, I suppose, in loco parentis, although I jolly well knew that none of the parents would have wanted me being loco anything. By then I had sunk pretty low: Stephen Brigstocke, the most loathed teacher in the school. Certainly I think the children thought so, and the parents, though not all of them: I hope some of them remembered me from before, when I had taught their older children. Anyway, I wasn't surprised when Justin called me into his office. I'd been waiting for it. It took him rather longer than I'd expected, but that's private schools for you. They are their own little fiefdoms. The parents might think they're in control because they're paying, but of course they're not. I mean, look at me – I was barely interviewed for the job. Justin and I had been at Cambridge together and he knew I needed the money, and I knew he needed a head of English. You see, private schools pay more than state and I had had

years of experience teaching in a state comprehensive. Poor Justin, it must have been very difficult for him to remove me. Awkward, you know. And it was a removal, rather than a sacking. It was decent of him, I appreciate that. I couldn't afford to lose my pension, and I was around retirement age anyway, so he merely hastened the process. In fact, we were both due for retirement but Justin's departure was quite different to mine. I heard that some of the pupils even shed a tear. Not for me though. Well, why should they? I didn't deserve those kinds of tears.

I don't want to give the wrong impression: I'm not a paedophile. I didn't fiddle with the child. I didn't even touch him. No, no, I never, ever touched the children. The thing is, I found them so bloody boring. Is that a terrible thing to say about seven-year-olds? I suppose it is for a teacher. I got sick of reading their tedious stories, which I'm sure some of them laboured over, but even so, it was that sense they had of themselves, that at seven, for crying out loud, they had anything to say that I might be interested in. And then one evening I had just had enough. The catharsis of the red pen no longer worked and when I got to this particular boy's essay, I don't remember his name, I gave him a very detailed critique of why I couldn't really give a shit about his family holiday to southern India where they'd stayed with local villagers. Well, how bloody marvellous for them. Of course it upset him. Of course it did and I'm sorry for that. And of course he told his

parents. I'm not sorry about that. It helped speed up my exit and there's no doubt I needed to go for my own sake as well as theirs.

So there I was, at home with a lot of time on my hands. A retired English teacher from a second-rate private school. A widower. I worry that perhaps I am being too honest – that what I have said so far might be a little off-putting. It might make me appear cruel. And what I did to that boy was cruel, I accept that. But as a rule, I'm not a cruel person. Since Nancy died though, I have allowed things to slide a little. Well, OK, a lot.

It is hard to believe that, once upon a time, I was voted Most Popular Teacher in the Year. Not by the pupils at the private school, but by those at the comprehensive I'd taught at before. And it wasn't a one-off, it happened several years running. One year, I think it was 1982, my wife, Nancy, and I both achieved this prize from our respective schools.

I had followed Nancy into teaching. She had followed our son when he began at infants'. She'd taught the five- to six-year-olds at Jonathan's school and I was assigned the fourteen- to fifteen-year-olds at the comp up the road. I know some teachers find that age group a struggle, but I liked it. Adolescence isn't much fun and so my view was, give the poor buggers a break. I never forced them to read a book if they didn't want to. A story is a story after all. It doesn't just have to be read in a book. A film, a piece of television, a play – there's

still a narrative to follow, interpret, enjoy. Back then I was committed. I cared. But that was then. I'm not a teacher any more. I'm retired. I'm a widower.

# 3

## *Spring 2013*

Catherine stumbles, blaming her high heels, but knowing it's because she's had too much to drink. Robert reaches his hand to grab her elbow, in time to stop her falling backwards down the concrete steps. His other hand turns the key and pushes open the front door, his grip on her arm still firm as he leads her inside. She kicks off her shoes, and tries to inject some dignity into her walk as she heads for the kitchen.

'I'm so proud of you,' he says, coming from behind and folding his arms around her. He kisses the skin where neck curves into shoulder. Her head stretches back.

'Thank you,' she says, closing her eyes. But then this moment of happiness melts away. It is night. They are home. And she doesn't want to go to bed even though she is desperately tired. She knows she won't sleep. Hasn't slept properly for a week. Robert doesn't know this. She pretends all is well, managing to conceal it from him. Pretending to be asleep, lying next to him,

alone in her head. She will have to invent an excuse to explain why she's not going to follow him straight to bed.

'You go up,' she says. 'I'll be there in a minute. I want to check some emails.' She smiles encouragement, but he doesn't need much. He has to be up early the next morning, which is why Catherine appreciates even more the real pleasure he seems to have got from an evening where she has been the centre of attention and he the silent, smiling partner. Not once did he hint that maybe it was time to go. No, he had allowed her to shine and enjoy the moment. Of course, she has done this for him on many occasions; still, Robert had played his part with grace.

'I'll take up some water for you,' he says.

They have just returned from a party, the aftermath of a television awards ceremony. Serious television. No soaps. No drama. Factual. Catherine had won an award for a documentary she had made about the grooming of children for sex. Children who should have been protected but weren't because nobody had cared enough; nobody had taken the trouble to look out for them. The jury had described her film as brave. She had been described as brave. They have no idea. They have no idea what I'm really like. It wasn't bravery. It was single-minded determination. Then again, maybe she had been a little bit brave. Secret filming. Predatory men. Not now though. Not now she is at home. Even with the new blinds, she fears she is being watched.

Her evenings have become a series of distractions to stop herself thinking about the inevitable time when she will be lying in the dark, awake. She has managed to fool Robert, she thinks. Even the sweating, which comes on as bedtime gets closer, she has laughed off as the menopause. She has other signs of that, sure, but not this sweating. Though she had wanted him to go to bed, as soon as he has, she wishes he was with her. She wishes she was brave enough to tell him. She wishes she had been brave enough to tell him back then. But she wasn't. And now it is too late. It was twenty years ago. If she told him now he would never understand. He would be blinded by the fact that, for all this time, she has kept a secret from him. She has withheld something that he would feel he had a right to know. He is *our* son, for Christ's sake, she hears him say.

She doesn't need a fucking book to tell her what happened. She hasn't forgotten any of it. Her son had nearly died. She has been protecting Nicholas all these years. Protecting him from knowing. She has enabled him to live in blissful ignorance. He doesn't know that he almost didn't make it into adulthood. And if he *had* held on to some memory of what happened? Would things be different? Would he be different? Would their relationship be different? But she is absolutely sure that he remembers nothing. At least, nothing that would bring him close to the reality of it. For Nicholas, it is simply an afternoon that has merged in with many others from his childhood. He

might even remember it as a happy one, she thinks.

If Robert had been there, it might have been different. Well of course it would have been different. It wouldn't have happened. Except Robert wasn't there. So she didn't tell him because she didn't need to – he would never find out. And it was better that way. It is better that way.

She opens her laptop and googles the author's name. Almost a ritual, this. She has done it before, hoping there'll be something there. A clue. But there is nothing. Simply a name: *E. J. Preston*. Made up, probably. 'The Perfect Stranger is *E. J. Preston's first and possibly last book.*' No clue as to gender even. Not *his* or *her* first book. It is published by Rhamnousia; when she looked that up it had confirmed what she had already suspected, that the book is self-published. She hadn't known what Rhamnousia meant. Now she does. The goddess of revenge, aka Nemesis.

That's a clue, isn't it? About gender, at least. But that's impossible. It can't be. And no one else knew those details. No one still living. There were others, though – anonymous others. But this has been written by someone who really cares. This is personal. She looks to see if there have been any reviews. There are none. Perhaps she is the only one to have read it. And even if others do, they will never know that she is the woman at its heart. Someone does, though. Someone knows.

How the fuck did this book get into her home? She has no memory of buying it. It just seemed to appear

on the pile of books by her bed. But then everything has been so chaotic with the move. Boxes and boxes full of books still waiting to be unpacked. Perhaps she put it there herself. Took it from a box, attracted to the cover. It could be Robert's. He has countless books she has never read and might not recognize. Books from years ago. She pictures him trawling through Amazon, taking a fancy to the title, to the cover, and ordering it online. A fluke. A sick coincidence.

But what she settles on and begins to believe is that someone else put it there. Someone else came into their home, this place that doesn't yet feel like home. Came into their bedroom. Someone she doesn't know laid the book down on the shelf next to her bed. Carefully. Not disturbing anything. On her side of the bed. Knowing which side she slept on. Making it look as if she had put it there herself. Her thoughts pile up, crashing into each other until they are twisted and jagged. Wine and anxiety, a dangerous combination. She should know by now not to mix her poisons. She grips her aching head. Always aching these days. She closes her eyes and sees the burning white dot of sun on the book's cover. How the fuck did this book get into her home?

## 4

### *Two years earlier*

It had been seven years since Nancy died and yet I still hadn't got round to sorting through her things. Her clothes hung in the wardrobe. Her shoes, her handbags. She had tiny feet. Size three. Her papers, letters, still lay on the desk and in drawers. I liked coming across them. I liked picking up letters to her, even if they were from British Gas. I liked seeing her name and our shared address written down officially. I had no excuse once I'd retired though. Just get on with it, Stephen, she would have said. So I did.

I started with her clothes, unhooking them from hangers, taking them out of drawers, laying them out on the bed, ready for their journey out of the house. All done, I'd thought, until I saw a cardigan that had slipped off its hanger, and was hiding in a corner of the wardrobe. It is the colour of heather. Lots of colours, actually. Blue, pink, purple, grey, but the impression is of heather. We had bought it in Scotland before we were married. Nancy used to wear it like a shawl: the

sleeves, empty of her arms, hanging limply at her sides. I have kept it; I'm holding it now. It is cashmere. The moths have got at it and there is a small hole on the cuff that I can fit my little finger through. She hung on to it for over forty years. It has outlived her and I suspect that it will outlive me too. If I continue to shrink, as I undoubtedly will, then I might soon be able to fit into it.

I remember Nancy wearing it in the middle of the night when she'd get up to feed Jonathan. Her nightgown would be unbuttoned with Jonathan's tiny mouth around her nipple and this cardigan draped around her shoulders, keeping her warm. If she saw me watching from the bed she would smile and I would get up and make tea for us both. She always tried not to wake me, she said she wanted me to sleep and that she didn't mind being up. She was happy. We both were. The joy and surprise of a child delivered in middle age when we had all but given up hope. We didn't bicker about who should get up or who was stealing whose sleep. I'm not going to claim it was fifty-fifty. I would have done more, but the truth is that it was Nancy who Jonathan needed most of, not me.

Even before those midnight feasts, that cardigan was a favourite of hers. She wore it when she was writing: over a summer frock; over a blouse; over her nightdress. I'd glance over from my desk and watch her at hers, striking out at her typewriter, the limp sleeves quivering at her sides. Yes, before we became

teachers Nancy and I were both writers. Nancy stopped soon after Jonathan was born. She said she'd lost her appetite for it, and when Jonathan started at the infants' school she decided to get a job teaching there. But I'm repeating myself.

Neither Nancy nor I had much success as writers, although we both had the odd story published. On reflection, I would say that Nancy had more success than me, yet it was she who insisted I carry on when she gave up. She believed in me. She was so sure that one day it would happen, that I'd break through. Well, maybe she was right. It has always been Nancy's faith which has driven me on. She was the better writer though. I never lost sight of that, even if she didn't acknowledge it. She supported me for years as I produced word after word, chapter after chapter, and one or two books. All rejected. Until, thank God, she finally understood that I didn't want to write any more. I'd had enough. It just felt wrong. It was hard to get her to believe me when I said it was a relief to stop. But I meant it. It was a relief. You see I'd always enjoyed reading far more than writing. To be a writer, to be a good writer, you need courage. You need to be prepared to expose yourself. You must be brave, and I have always been a coward. Nancy was the brave one. So, that's when I started teaching.

It did take courage though to clear out my wife's things. I folded her clothes and put them in carrier bags. Her shoes and handbags I put into boxes that had

once held bottles of wine. No inkling, when that wine came into the house, that the boxes it arrived in would leave containing my dead wife's accessories. It took me a week to pack everything up, longer to remove it from the house.

I couldn't bear to let everything go at once and so I staggered my trips to the charity shop. I got to know the two women at All Aboard quite well. I told them the clothes had belonged to my wife and after that, when I dropped by, they would stop what they were doing and make time for me. If I happened to turn up when they were having coffee, they'd make me a cup too. It became strangely comforting, that shop full of dead people's clothes.

I worried that, once I finished the job of sorting through Nancy's things, I would fall back into the lethargy I'd been in since I'd retired, but I didn't. As sad as it was, I knew I had done something Nancy would have approved of and I made a decision: from then on I would do my utmost to behave in a way that, if Nancy were to walk into the room, she would feel love for me and not shame. She would be my editor, invisible, objective, with my best interests at heart.

One morning, not long after that clear-out period, I was on my way to the Underground station. I had woken with a real sense of purpose: got up, washed, shaved, dressed, breakfasted and was ready to leave the house by nine. I was in a good mood, anticipating a day spent in the British Library. I had been thinking

about writing again. Not fiction; something more solid, factual. Nancy and I had sometimes holidayed on the East Anglian coast and one summer we had rented a Martello tower. I had always wanted to find out more about the place, but every book I'd found on the subject had been so dry, so lifeless. Nancy had tried too, for various birthdays of mine, but all she had come up with were dull volumes full of dates and statistics. Anyway, that's what I settled on as my writing project: I would bring that marvellous place to life. Those walls had been soaked in the breath of others over hundreds of years and I was determined to find out who had spent time there from then until now. So that morning I had set off with quite the spring in my step. And then I saw a ghost.

I didn't have a clear view of her. There were people between us. A woman pushing her child in a pram. Two youths ambling. Smoking. I knew it was her, though. I would know her anywhere. She was walking quickly, with purpose, and I tried to keep up but she was younger than me, her legs stronger, and my heart raced with the effort and I was forced to stop for a moment. The distance between us grew and by the time I was able to move again she had disappeared into the Underground. I followed, fumbling to get through the barrier, fearful that she would get on a train and I would miss her. The stairs were steep, too steep, and I feared I might fall in my rush to join her on the platform. I gripped the rail and cursed my feebleness.

She was still there. I smiled as I walked up to her. I thought she had waited for me. And she turned and looked right at me. There was no smile returning mine. Her expression was anxious, perhaps even scared. Of course it wasn't a ghost. It was a young woman, maybe thirty. She was wearing Nancy's coat, the one I had given to the charity shop. She had the same colour hair as Nancy had had at that age. Or at least, that's what I had seen. When I got up close I realized the colour of this young woman's hair was nothing like Nancy's. Brown yes, but fake, flat, dead-brown. It didn't have the vibrant, living shades of Nancy's hair. I could see that my smile had alarmed her so I turned away, hoping she would understand I hadn't meant any harm, that it was a mistake. When the train came, I let it go and waited for the next one, not wanting her to think I was following her.

I didn't fully recover until halfway through that morning. The quiet of the library, the beauty of the place and the comforting tasks of reading, making notes, making progress got me back to the place I had been when I started my day. By the time I got home in the early evening, I was quite myself again. I'd picked up one of those Marks and Spencer meals as a treat, an easy supper. I opened a bottle of wine, but drank only one glass. I don't drink much these days: I prefer to have control over my thoughts. Too much alcohol sends them haring off in the wrong direction, like out-of-control toddlers.

I was keen to go through my notes before bed, so I went to my desk to make a start. Nancy's papers were still littering the desktop. I flicked through circulars and old bills, knowing already that I'd find nothing of real importance. If there had been, wouldn't it have made its presence felt by now? I tipped the lot into the waste-paper basket, then took my typewriter from the cupboard and set it down in the centre of the cleared desk, ready to start work the following morning.

When Nancy had been writing she had had her own desk, a small oak one which now sits in Jonathan's flat. When she stopped, we agreed that she might as well share mine. She had the right-hand drawers, I the left. She kept her manuscripts in the bottom drawer and although there were others stacked on the bookcase, the three in the desk were the ones she had had most hope for. Even though I knew they were there, it gave me a shock to see them. 'A View of the Sea', 'Out of Winter' and 'A Special Kind of Friend', all unpublished. I picked up 'A Special Kind of Friend' and took it to bed with me.

It must have been nearly forty years since I had read those words. She had written the novel the summer before Jonathan was born. It was as if Nancy was in bed with me. I could hear her voice clearly: Nancy as a young woman, not yet a mother. There was energy in it, fearlessness, and it threw me back to a time when the future had excited us; when things that hadn't happened yet thrilled rather than frightened. I was

happy when I went to sleep that night, appreciating that, even though she was no longer with me, I had been lucky to have had Nancy in my life. We had opened ourselves up to each other. We had shared everything. I thought we knew all there was to know about each other.

# 5

## *Spring 2013*

'Wait – I'll come out with you,' Catherine calls from the top of the stairs.

Robert turns at the front door and looks up at her.

'I'm sorry, sweetheart, did I wake you?'

She knows how hard he had tried not to; he kept his shower short, tiptoed around while dressing. Catherine, however, had been awake the whole time. Lying there. Eyes half closed. Watching him and loving him for being so considerate. She had waited as long as she could. As soon as he left the room she had scrambled out of bed, dressed, then chased down after him. She couldn't be alone yet. Later maybe, but not yet.

She sits on the bottom stair, cramming her feet into trainers.

'I've got a stinker of a head. Best thing to do is get out there and clear it,' she says, tying her laces with shaky fingers. She hears herself, sounding so normal, so plausible. Shaky fingers could be a hangover. She

has taken the week off work to unpack and settle them in – to turn their new place into a home – but this morning she cannot face it. And it's true, she does have a stinker of a head. It has nothing to do with last night's celebrations though.

She sees Robert check his watch. He has to be in early.

'I'll be quick, I'll be quick,' she says, running into the kitchen, filling a bottle of water, grabbing her iPod before running back to him. They slam the door shut, double-lock and walk together to the Tube. She reaches for his hand and holds it, and he looks at her and smiles.

'That was fun last night,' he says. 'Did you get lots of nice emails?'

'A few,' she says, although she hadn't bothered to check. It had been the last thing on her mind. She'll have a look later, when she's home, when her head is clearer. He pecks her on the cheek, tells her he shouldn't be late home, hopes her head feels better and then disappears into the Underground. She turns round as soon as he has gone, sticking in her ear-buds and running up the road. Back the way they'd come, towards the only green space in the area. Her feet slap in time to the music.

She passes the top of their road and keeps going. Her heart is thumping, sweat is already running down between her shoulder blades. She is not fit. She should be doing a fast walk, not a run, but she needs the

discomfort. She reaches the high, wrought-iron gates of the cemetery and runs through. She manages one circuit then stops, panting for breath, bending down and resting her hands on her knees. She should stretch out, but she feels too self-conscious. She is not an athlete, merely a woman on the run.

Keep going, keep going. She straightens up and sets off again, a gentle jog, not punishing, allowing thoughts to stir. As she reaches the halfway point she slows to a walk, keeping it brisk, wanting her heart to stay strong, to keep pumping. Names float out to her from the gravestones: Gladys, Albert, Eleanor, names from long ago of people long dead. But it's the children she notices. The children whose stones she stops to read. The beginnings and ends of their short lives. Doesn't everyone do that? Stop at the graves of the children tucked up for ever in their grassy beds? They take up less space than their grown-up neighbours and yet their presence is impossible to ignore, crying out to be looked at. Please stop for a moment. And she does. And she imagines a stone that could have been there, but isn't.

*Nicholas Ravenscroft*

*Born 14 January 1988, taken from us on 14 August 1993*

*Beloved son of Robert and Catherine*

And she imagines how she would have been the one who would have had to tell Robert that Nicholas had

died. And she hears his questions: Where were you? How could that have happened? How was it possible? And she would have burst open, poured everything out on to him and he would have sunk under the weight of it. She sees him struggle, pushing against it, trying to raise his head above the deluge, gasping for air but never quite getting enough to make a full recovery.

Nicholas didn't die though. He is alive, and she didn't have to tell Robert. They have all survived intact.

## 6

### *Two years earlier*

I woke the morning after reading 'A Special Kind of Friend' refreshed. I was eager to start work and had planned to look through my notes before typing them up. I knew there was some paper in the dresser cupboard: everything seemed to end up either on or in our dresser. I could picture the sheaf of paper sitting beneath the games of Scrabble and backgammon, but when I tried to pull it out, it wouldn't come. It was trapped in the back of the dresser. A panel had been pushed in and I pressed against it, trying to release the paper; still it wouldn't budge. Something was stuck between the dresser and the wall. I put my hand around the back and touched something soft. It was an old handbag of Nancy's: a cunning one that had managed to evade the trip to the charity shop.

I leaned against the wall, stretching my legs in front of me with the handbag on my lap. It was black suede with two pearl drops clasped around each other. I dusted it down and looked inside. There was a set of

keys to Jonathan's flat, a lipstick and a handkerchief still pressed in a square where it had been ironed. I took the top off the lipstick and sniffed it. It had lost its scent yet kept its angled shape from the years it had stroked Nancy's lips. I held the hanky to my nose, and its perfume conjured up memories of evenings at the theatre. What I hadn't expected to find was the yellow envelope of photographs with Kodak in thick black lettering on the front. This was a precious find and I wanted to make an occasion of it.

I made myself some coffee and settled down on the sofa, anticipating a flood of happy memories. I assumed the pictures were holiday snaps. I think I even hoped there might be a few of the Martello tower: that finding the handbag was Nancy's way of helping me on with my project. In a way it was, but not the one I had had in mind that morning.

My head, which had been so clear at the start of the day, felt as if the contents of someone else's had been dumped into it. I could no longer tell which thoughts were mine and which were theirs; which ones were true and which were lies. My coffee had gone cold; the pictures were spread out on my lap. I had expected images I recognized, but I had never seen these pictures before.

She was looking straight into the camera. Flirting? I think so. Yes, she was flirting. They were colour photos. Some were taken on a beach. She was lying there, a smiling sweetheart on holiday in a red bikini.

Her breasts were pushed up as if she was some sort of pin-up girl and she certainly looked as if she thought herself a very desirable woman. Confident. Yes, that's what it was. Sexual confidence. Others were taken in a hotel room. They were shameless. She was shameless. I couldn't look away though. I could not stop looking. I went through them again and again, tormenting myself, and the more I looked, the angrier I became because the more I looked, the more I understood.

What chewed at my heart was that I knew who had taken these pictures. I knew the handsome face behind the camera even though I couldn't find him. I looked and looked, but no matter how many times I went through them, all I could see was his shadow caught on the edge of frame in one shot. I even went through the negatives, holding them up to the light in case there was one of him that hadn't been developed. There were more negatives than prints and I hoped one of these might reveal him, but they were blurred, out of focus, useless.

How could Nancy have brought those photographs into our house? Hiding them from me, allowing them to sit and fester in our home. They must have been there for years. Did she forget about them? Or did she take a risk, knowing that I might come across them one day? But it was too late. By the time I did, she was dead. I would never be able to talk to her about them. She should have destroyed them. If she wasn't going to tell me, she should have destroyed them. Instead she had

left me to find them when I was a pathetic old man; long after the event; long after a time when I could have done anything about it.

One of the things I had most prized about Nancy was her honesty. How many times did she look through those pictures in private? And hide them again? I imagined her waiting for me to go out before looking through them; hiding them when I came home. Every time I took something out of the dresser, every time we played Scrabble, she knew they were there and didn't say a word. I had always trusted her, but now I worried what else she might have hidden.

It is extraordinary how much strength anger gives one. I turned the house upside down searching for more secrets. I attacked our home as if it was the enemy. I went from room to room, ripping, spilling, tipping, making a godawful mess, but I found nothing else. The whole experience left me with the sensation that I had reached down into a blocked drain and was groping around in the sewage trying to clear it. Except there was nothing solid to get hold of. All I felt was soft filth, and it got into my skin and under my fingernails, and its stink invaded my nostrils, clinging to the hairs, soaking up into the tiny blood vessels and polluting my entire system.

# 7

## *Spring 2013*

A speck of dust lands on the pillow. No one else would hear it. Catherine does. She hears everything – her ears are wide open. She sees everything too. Even in the pitch-black. Her eyes have become accustomed to it. If Robert woke now he would be blind; Catherine isn't. She watches his closed eyes: the twitching lids, the flickering lashes, and she wonders what is going on behind them. Is he hiding anything from her? Is he as good at it as she is? He is closer to her than anyone else and yet she has managed, over all these years, to keep him in the dark. It doesn't matter how intimate they are, he just can't see it and she finds that thought frightening. And by keeping everything locked up for so long she has made the secret too big to let out; like a baby that has grown too large to be delivered naturally, it will have to be cut out. The act of keeping the secret a secret has almost become bigger than the secret itself.

Robert rolls on to his back and starts to snore so Catherine gently propels him on to his other side so

his back is to her. Careful not to wake him – she cannot risk a conversation this deep in the night – she moves close enough so she can smell him.

She remembers the moment, twenty years ago, when he put his arm around her and said: ‘Are you OK?’ She was not OK, but she hadn’t wanted him to notice because she couldn’t tell him why and she wasn’t as good then as she is now at covering up. She had said, ‘No, not really,’ and though she had felt tears behind her eyes she stopped them from falling because she knew if they fell they would be followed by a torrent of words. If she had cried she wouldn’t have been able to stop everything else coming out. So she didn’t cry, she made a confession, but it was a false one.

‘I want to go back to work. I feel bad even saying it. I know I’m lucky having a choice to stay home, you’re earning enough for both of us, but . . . I’m lonely. I’m depressed . . .’ It was the beginning of her digging a tunnel of escape from herself – and from Nicholas too. Her son was a constant reminder, though she couldn’t tell Robert that. She couldn’t say that being on her own with Nicholas was sending her mad; that his presence threw up memories she wanted to wipe out.

‘Do you understand?’ she asked. And she remembers looking up into Robert’s eyes and wondering whether he could see through her.

‘Of course I do,’ he said, pulling her close to kiss her. Nevertheless she felt his disappointment. He tried to hide it with his kiss; he tried to cover up his regret

that she had confessed herself unable to be the kind of mother he wanted for their son. He never said this, he never voiced his disappointment, all the same she knew it was there, unspoken, between them.

There was a moment when she nearly told him the truth. Instead she lied again and said that she was going to stay with an old schoolfriend for the weekend. It was a friend he didn't know well, a friend who lived outside London; he would never find out. She told him it was an emergency – that the friend was having a breakdown. She packed a bag and left straight from work on Friday, leaving the new nanny to pick up Nicholas from school and getting away before Robert got home from work. She took a taxi, not the Tube – she didn't want to risk bumping into anyone she knew.

When she came home on Sunday evening, Nicholas was already in bed. Robert told her she looked pale and she said it had been a pretty ghastly weekend and that she was exhausted. That was all true.

'I need an early night, that's all,' she said and immediately changed the subject, asking him about the new nanny.

'Seemed to go well. Nick was in a chirpy mood when I got home on Friday.'

'That's good,' she said.

And the following morning she made sure she was fine. There was a little colour in her cheeks, and she had to get Nick ready for school before going to work so there was no time to talk, for him to notice that she

was distracted. Work too was hectic. She was up to her eyes and that's what she wanted. To be so busy that there was no room left in her head for remembering. And she succeeded in emptying her mind of the past. That was the point. That was what drove her. Now the past has elbowed its way back in, shoving everything else aside – standing there, chest puffed out, demanding her attention.

The book still lies on the table next to the bed. She can't finish reading it. Each time she has tried, she retreats like a coward, re-reading the same words, over and over – trapped in its middle. She peels away from Robert and slides out of bed, picking up the book and creeping downstairs like a burglar.

She thumps it down on the kitchen table and turns her back on it, a feeble act of rebellion. Today is Sunday, a day of rest, but not for her. She makes tea, takes it up to the spare room and sits on the floor. There are five boxes here waiting to be unpacked: two have Nicholas's name on them; three are marked *Spare Room*. She can't remember what's in them. She feels light-headed from lack of sleep and her hands are shaking as she pulls things out, tearing and ripping at newspaper, unwrapping knick-knack after knick-knack, all pointless, useless things. She'd hoped for a clue – a note, an envelope, anything that might be connected to the book and help her trace its route into her home – there is nothing. She tries another box. Book after book after book, which she dumps on the empty shelves, not

bothering to stand them up, allowing them to slip and slide against each other, leaving some to tumble to the floor with a thump.

She eyes Nicholas's boxes. He was supposed to have come a week ago to sort through them but he hadn't, and she had wanted to do it for him, but Robert had stopped her. They were Nick's things, not hers. And Catherine had been frustrated because she damn well knew that Nicholas wouldn't do it properly. And the point was he didn't have a bedroom here any more. What they had now was a spare room. For guests. Nicholas could come over whenever he liked. Of course he could. And if he ever wanted to spend the night, then of course he could do that too. In the spare room. He has his own flat now. Pays his own rent. And that's good. He is twenty-five years old. He has done better than they had ever dared hope. He has a job. A routine. Independence. And that's what Catherine wants for him. A chance to be the best he possibly can be. The rush of thoughts leaves her breathless, as if she has spoken each one out loud.

'Darling?' Robert's voice is gentle, yet still it makes her jump. She looks up at him from her nest of torn newspaper, her hands black from it. It is nine o'clock and she has already been up for four hours. She sees concern on his face. She looks a wreck. At forty-nine, you can't get away with not sleeping and think it won't show. Of course he notices her pale, dark-ringed face.

'I wanted to make a start before Nicholas comes. To

make it easier for him,' she lies, and looks around at the chaos.

'It can wait. There's no rush. Let him do it.' He puts a hand on her shoulder. 'Scrambled eggs?'

She nods. She is starving. She always is now she doesn't sleep. She follows him downstairs and slumps into a chair at the kitchen table, a dead weight in the room.

'Shall I do lunch?' he suggests. Nicholas is coming for Sunday roast and she has bought a chicken.

'No, no, I'd like to,' she says. She knows it will make her feel better if she can play her proper role and disguise herself in the smell of roasting meat juices.

She can see the book at the far end of the kitchen table. She had hoped that removing it from their bedroom would give her some peace. Robert is watching her, nursing questions in his head. Is she depressed? Is it the move? He is about to speak, but Catherine gets in first. She has been nursing her own question, preoccupied, playing with it, and so doesn't notice Robert's intake of breath, his preparation for speech. If she had, she might not have plucked up the courage to ask:

'Is that your book?'

She makes sure her mouth is full so she appears casual as she nods to the end of the table. Robert glances over and reaches for the book, sliding it towards him. He takes a while to answer. When it comes, his answer is dismissive: a shake of the head.

'Any good?' He picks it up, turning it over, reading the blurb on the back.

She swallows. 'Not really. Bit slow.' She watches him turn it over again and look at the cover.

'*The Perfect Stranger*,' he reads. 'What's it about?'

She shrugs. 'Oh, it's nonsense. Weak plot. Implausible.'

And he tosses it aside. Carelessly. No thought. Treating it in a way she wishes she could.

'Why?'

'I thought it might be yours,' she ventures.

'Thanks,' he says, but she misses the smile in his voice.

'I don't remember buying it, that's all. I wondered where it came from . . .' Her voice trails off as she stands and takes her plate to the dishwasher. Robert shrugs at the book, wondering why she's so interested in it, thinking it's merely a diversion from the thing that is really worrying her. He is convinced that she is trying to make conversation and this concerns him. They're not that kind of couple. They don't need to 'make conversation'. They are close – closer now than they've been in years. He recognizes the signs: Catherine at home with too much time on her hands; too much time looking inwards; thinking about herself.

'Cath. You've done a great job on the house – it already feels like home. But I know you too well. You're itching to get back to work, aren't you?'

She looks at him. He honestly believes that.

'I love that you're not a domestic goddess. You should be off making another film, not stuck here, unpacking boxes and dressing the house.'

Her eyes fill with tears, confirmation to Robert that he is right. He is her rock. She lets him believe it. 'You're right, I know I've been distracted—'

He cuts in. 'So go back – there was no need to take two weeks off. Most of it's done anyway and the rest we can do together in the evenings, weekends. There are only a few boxes left. Why not?'

'Yes, why not.' She manages a smile. And then her brain sparks to life. She remembers. She remembers how the book came to be in their home. It's seeing it sitting on the table. An image she remembers. It was soon after they moved. The table had been littered with stuff. A box full of glasses half unpacked, screwed-up scraps of newspaper tickling the book's cover as it sat there patiently, waiting for her to pick it up. A pile of unopened post and a jiffy bag, its grey fluff exposed where she'd ripped it open. And from which she had taken the book. The envelope had been forwarded on to them. She remembers the thick red ink which had crossed out their old address and written on the new. She can feel Robert's eyes on her as she clears away the rest of the breakfast things; her renewed energy confirms to him that he was right. He knows her so well.

Thoughts fizz through her head: the book was sent to their old address, so whoever sent it doesn't know where she is now. They did not come into her home,

into her bedroom. She will telephone the family who moved into their old house. She will ask them not to forward on anything else. It's too much trouble, she'll say. She's happy to come and collect anything. Perhaps she will go further. Perhaps she will say that they've had a couple of nuisance letters, nothing too serious but they'd rather not have anything else forwarded on. And if anyone asks for their address, please would they say that they don't have it? Or their phone number, no they mustn't give out the phone number. She decides all this while kissing Robert on the forehead and going upstairs to have a shower. She will do all this tomorrow though, not today. Today she will concentrate on Nicholas, on her family. On having a proper Sunday together.

## 8

### *Two years earlier*

I hoped that working on a book about eighteenth-century monoliths would keep my head clear – that it would divert my mind from dwelling on Nancy’s betrayal. That’s how I thought of it then. I thought of her secret as a betrayal. I tried not to. I tried very hard to concentrate on writing about the Martello tower. I had propped a photograph of one on the dresser shelf above the collection of postcards Jonathan sent from his travels. It squatted there, lumpen and grey, so I took it down again. How could I concentrate? There was a sliver of metal rattling around in my head. A tiny shaft of silver taunting me from my desktop. Attached to the spare keys to Jonathan’s flat which I had found in Nancy’s bag was another smaller key. Too small for a front door but a key to something else, a key to something that was in his home, not mine. It caught the light and winked at me every time I tried to focus on my work. Who did I think I was? A man with ten-foot walls to protect him from the past? I wasn’t built

like a Martello tower. I was a man with thin, crêpey skin who needed to find out what else his wife might have hidden. I was human, at least. That slip of a key had burned a hole in my head and I knew I wouldn't be able to write anything until I had unlocked its secret.

Jonathan's flat is at the top of a mansion block, pre-war, built in the thirties. There is no lift but someone has thought about those of us who might struggle to reach the top and they have put a chair on each landing. I sat in every one. Onwards and upwards. I dragged myself up the last flight and then looked down, through the beautiful wrought-iron balustrade which curved and fell to the cold stone floor. A softly curving funnel through which a human might swallow-dive, not touching the sides, slipping through until they ended in a bloody mess at the bottom. I had a feeling that I shouldn't have come, that I had no right to intrude. This was Jonathan's place.

The plant outside his front door was dead. It hadn't been watered for some time. I put the key in the lock. There was probably a knack to it, but I didn't have it and it seemed to take for ever to get in, and all the time I was expecting someone to tap me on the shoulder and ask what I was doing there.

Once inside I was struck by the most terrible smell. Putrefying. Something rotten, something dying or dead. I went straight into the kitchen, assuming it must have been in the bin, but that was empty. On the kitchen table was a vase of flowers. Dead, dried,

crisp, just a green line around the vase where the water had once been. I hesitated, not sure it was my place to throw them out. I went into the sitting room and sat on Jonathan's sofa and looked around. I could see the unmistakable signs of femininity. More flowers on the small table by the window. Lifeless, ugly, their parched stems desiccated sticks crying to be put out of their misery. A woman's touch. I left them where they were. I hadn't put them there. They were nothing to do with me.

When I walked into Jonathan's bedroom I gagged from the smell. His bed was unmade, the duvet mused and falling off. The cover was dark blue, the bottom sheet maroon. It reminded me of school uniform: good dark colours that didn't show the dirt. The smell came from the corner near Nancy's desk. I approached it, hand clamped over my nose and mouth, and there it was. A body. Rotting. Neck broken, mouth open, teeth bared, giving off that inside-out stench of putrefaction. I should have known. Death. Always leaving its predatory stench like a lusty tom-cat, long after it has left the scene. I found a plastic bag in the kitchen and, wearing it like a glove, picked up the whole thing, trap and mouse, and disposed of it in the kitchen bin.

I returned to the bedroom and sat at Nancy's desk. It's smaller than mine and the tops of my legs rubbed against its underside. It would have been even more of a squeeze for Jonathan, and I imagined his six-foot frame and his strong legs squished into what had been

his mother's space. I was pleased to see it had been taken care of. No rotting flowers there. No water rings from cups, or glasses of water, just an undisturbed film of dust. There were pieces of paper neatly stacked on it and a photograph of Nancy and me. Mum and Dad. Husband and wife. Two people in love. Two people who were loved.

I clicked the switch on the desk light, but the bulb had gone. And then I began my invasion. I pulled at the first drawer and looked inside: empty, apart from the odd pencil stub and leaky biro. I went through the others and found the same. The last drawer was the smallest. Tucked under the desktop, it ran between the two pedestals, a slender hidey-hole. It was locked. I put in the key, turned it then slid the chair aside and pulled open the drawer. And what an industrious place it was. Pens, pencil sharpener, pencils, a box of paper-clips, three notebooks. They were the type Nancy used: blue-lined reporter's pads, nothing special. She'd always carried one with her when she was writing, filling it with thoughts or sights that struck her, overheard conversations – that sort of thing. I flicked through one, but didn't give it much attention. It was the manuscript underneath the notebooks that interested me. I picked it up. 'Untitled'. Someone else's work, I presumed, because Nancy always came up with her titles first, and it was dated long after I knew she had stopped writing. Was it Jonathan's? I turned the page. But no, this manuscript was dedicated to

Jonathan. He hadn't written it. *To my son, Jonathan*, I read, and then my wife's name typed at the bottom of the page: my wife proclaiming her authorship. A book, written in secret and locked away from my prying eyes.

Sticks and stones, I told myself, yet I feared the words on those pages might actually break me. I wasn't ready for them. There were other objects rattling around in that drawer, cuddling up to my wife's manuscript: a Swiss army knife; a half-empty pack of cigarettes and a can of deodorant with a cheap, erotic name. I grabbed the deodorant and marched around the flat like a crazed pest controller, shooting Wildcat! into the air, covering up the stench of dead animal and everything else that offended my senses. When I was calmer, I put the can back and picked up Nancy's untitled work, holding it against my chest as if it was a small, trembling creature. I shouldn't have taken it, it wasn't mine to take, it was Jonathan's. But I did take it. I left the notebooks and took the manuscript. Jonathan would never know I'd been there, and I promised myself that I would return it as soon as I had read it.

## 9

### *Spring 2013*

'Mum, what do you want me to do with this stuff?'

Catherine finishes her glass of wine and closes her eyes in irritation. Drinking at lunchtime is never a good idea but Robert had opened two bottles of their best wine, and she had been determined to join him and Nicholas in drinking it.

'Just take what you want and I'll sort the rest,' she shouts. Silence. She hears the thump of books and files being dumped on the floor of the spare room. She pushes her chair back, the impatient grind of its legs on the stone setting her teeth on edge.

'Coffee?' she hears Robert call to her retreating back.

Nicholas is sitting on the floor in the same position Catherine had been in at dawn.

'I don't know what to take.' He looks bewildered.

'Take whatever you don't want thrown out. We haven't got the space any more, Nick.' He nods, as if understanding, but she can tell he doesn't quite get it.

'Don't you want any of it?' And she hears the hurt in

his voice. She has done it again. She has hurt him with her impatience and her brisk efficiency.

'Well,' she says gently, sitting down next to him, 'let's see.' She picks up a large manila envelope and peers inside. It's full of Nicholas's primary-school reports, bound together with an elastic band. Should she take one out and read it? Would he like that? Nicholas's school reports had always left her with a sinking feeling. What does it matter now though? He is twenty-five. Maybe now they can laugh about it, and she overcomes her resistance and reads a comment from Miss Charles. How well she remembers the permed head and thin lips of Nicholas's form teacher. It was his last year at primary school and Catherine chooses the comment carefully.

'Nicholas is a popular member of the class, with both sexes,' she smiles, leaving out the end of Miss Charles's sentence: '. . . but he struggles to settle down to his tasks and his work suffers as a result.' For years, always the same story. Disappointing; more effort needed; he struggles to stay focused. Still, at least in those days he had friends. There seem to have been fewer and fewer of them as the years have gone by.

'I'll keep these.' She smiles, gathering up the envelope and hugging the reports to her chest as if she is fond of them. 'How's the flat?'

He shrugs. 'All right.'

'Flatmates OK?'

He shrugs again. 'Bit nerdy.'

‘What, all of them?’

He shrugs again.

‘Oh dear.’ Catherine makes an effort to sound as if she is giving Nicholas the benefit of the doubt, but she imagines his flatmates are bright, engaged, focused. They probably read, and that’s what makes them nerdy in his eyes.

‘They’re all students,’ he says.

‘You’re still enjoying work though?’ She struggles to cover the awkwardness between them.

‘It’s fine.’ He shrugs. ‘You know.’

She doesn’t know. How can she know if he doesn’t tell her? Nicholas is working in the electrical department at John Lewis – it’s not quite what she and Robert had imagined for their son, but considering he left school at sixteen with a handful of GCSEs it seems a godsend. There was a time when they were unable to imagine him ever being able to commit to any kind of job. She remembers how hurt she had been by the phone calls from other mothers, even close friends, who couldn’t wait to tell her about their children’s results, asking the cursory question about Nicholas and all the while knowing damn well he’d be lucky to come away with any passes. It was a long time ago, yet she’s never quite forgiven them. It wasn’t sisterly – it was cruel. Anyway, Nicholas has stuck it out at John Lewis, so there must be something he likes about it.

‘I’ll take this with me,’ he says, and pulls out a mobile. Aeroplanes. Delicately made from balsa wood

and paper, wings a little torn, strings tangled.

'And Sandy?' He shakes his head at the balding dog Catherine holds in her hand. Her turn to be hurt now. She is trying to coax him back to boyhood memories: to the time when he couldn't sleep without his cheek resting on Sandy; when he couldn't sleep without her tucking him in. It's so bloody complicated. She wants him to be a grown-up but she also wants him to remember how much he loved her once. How much he needed her. She is nervous too that he still needs her more than is good for him and it makes her tougher and it makes her relieved, in the end, that he is leaving Sandy behind. She stops at the door and turns to him.

'You do understand, Nick, don't you?'

He has hooked the mobile on the corner of a shelf, and is trying to untangle the strings.

'What?'

'About us moving. You know. We just didn't need such a big place any more.'

He doesn't answer, and she knows she should resist pushing it, yet she can't.

'Don't you want to be independent? We're here if you're ever in real trouble, but it's time, Nick. Isn't it?'

He shrugs. 'If that's what you want to tell yourself, Mum.'

'The match is about to start,' Robert calls from the sitting room and Nicholas brushes past her to join his father, leaving her with the sting of his words.

Catherine returns to the kitchen and pours the rest