

DON'T

ONE STOLEN BABY

YOU

TWO DESPERATE STRANGERS

CRY

ONE NIGHT OF TERROR

CASS GREEN

Sunday Times top ten bestselling author

Cass Green

**Don't You Cry: The gripping
new psychological thriller
from the bestselling author
of In a Cottage in a Wood**

«HarperCollins»

Green C.

Don't You Cry: The gripping new psychological thriller from the bestselling author of *In a Cottage in a Wood* / C. Green — «HarperCollins»,

One stolen baby. Two desperate strangers. One night of terror. The USA Today and Sunday Times top ten bestselling author returns with a dark and twisty psychological thriller. She saved your life. When Nina almost dies during a disastrous blind date, her life is saved by a waitress called Angel. But later that evening, Nina is surprised by a knock on the door. It's Angel – and she's pointing a gun at her. Now she'll make you pay. Minutes later, Angel's younger brother Lucas turns up, covered in blood shielding a stolen newborn baby in his arms. Nina is about to endure the longest night of her life – a night that will be filled with terror and lead her to take risks she would never have believed herself capable of...

Содержание

Copyright	6
Dedication	7
1	9
2	14
3	16
4	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	20

DON'T YOU CRY

CASS GREEN



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Dedication

Readers: I'm so grateful to each and every one of you.

[Table of Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1: Nina](#)

[Chapter 2: Angel](#)

[Chapter 3: Nina](#)

[Chapter 4: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 5: Nina](#)

[Chapter 6: Nina](#)

[Chapter 7: Nina](#)

[Chapter 8: Angel](#)

[Chapter 9: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 10: Nina](#)

[Chapter 11: Nina](#)

[Chapter 12: Angel](#)

[Chapter 13: Nina](#)

[Chapter 14: Nina](#)

[Chapter 15: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 16: Nina](#)

[Chapter 17: Nina](#)

[Chapter 18: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 19: Nina](#)

[Chapter 20: Angel](#)

[Chapter 21: Nina](#)

[Chapter 22: Nina](#)

[Chapter 23: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 24: Nina](#)

[Chapter 25: Angel](#)

[Chapter 26: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 27: Nina](#)

[Chapter 28: Angel](#)

[Chapter 29: Nina](#)

[Chapter 30: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 31: Nina](#)

[Chapter 32: Angel](#)

[Chapter 33: Nina](#)

[Chapter 34: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 35: Nina](#)

[Chapter 36: Angel](#)

[Chapter 37: Nina](#)

[Chapter 38: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 39: Angel](#)

[Chapter 40: Nina](#)

[Chapter 41: Angel](#)

[Chapter 42: Nina](#)

[Chapter 43: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 44: Angel](#)

[Chapter 45: Nina](#)

[Chapter 46: Nina](#)

[Chapter 47: Nina](#)

[Chapter 48: Nina](#)

[Chapter 49: Angel](#)

[Chapter 50: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 51: Nina](#)

[Chapter 52: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 53: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 54: Nina](#)

[Chapter 55: Angel](#)

[Chapter 56: Nina](#)

[Chapter 57: Nick](#)

[Chapter 58: Nina](#)

[Chapter 59: Angel](#)

[Chapter 60: Nina](#)

[Chapter 61: Lucas](#)

[Chapter 62: Nina](#)

[Acknowledgements:](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Cass Green](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

1

Nina

The sun still blasts through the restaurant windows at seven pm, showcasing dust on the red plastic table cloths and monochrome movie stars on the walls. Even Sophia Loren is looking the worse for wear as she smiles down on my table-for-two, her picture yellowing and wrinkled in the unforgiving light. Two large ceiling fans churn the soupy air, bringing no relief.

The initial, barbecue-novelty of this heatwave has long passed and most of the passers-by now share the same shiny, bad-tempered patina. There's a fraught, irritable energy in the heavy air. Earlier, on the bus into town, a young woman had unleashed a barrage of swearing at an old man she accused of hogging all the space on their double seat. Physical contact with strangers is even less welcome than it ever was.

I pluck at my neckline to let in some air; sweat is gathering under the seams of my bra. Because I've been living in vest tops, baggy old shorts and flip-flops after work lately, I feel imprisoned by this outfit. I don't even like this dress that much, nor the sandals that supposedly go with it, which seem to be made mainly from barbed wire and sandpaper.

I bought the shoes and the dress from a shop I normally avoid because it's so expensive, deciding I needed to be bolder, braver, in my wardrobe choices.

Making any kind of decisions the day after your husband of fifteen years moves out of the family home and in with his new, younger partner, isn't, it transpires, the brightest idea.

I picture her; reasonable, smiling Laura with her huge, moist eyes and her, 'I really hope we can become friends, Nina.'

Friends.

Ian posted a picture on Facebook today; the two of them looking tanned and happy outside a pub. Laura's face was turned to him like a heliotrope seeking sunshine. He seems to have dropped ten years in that picture and it stung, I can tell you. If that wasn't bad enough, Carmen, my supposed best friend, had liked the post. It was as though she'd forgotten all that stuff about being 'better off without him'. Forgotten about my broken heart.

So, I'd bashed out a furious private message to her. She'd claimed it was 'difficult' because we all 'went back a long way' and a load of other rubbish that finally made me snap. I'm pretending not to see the missed calls and four texts she has sent since then.

It's fair to say that it has been a shitty day.

I usually love this time of year. The thought of six weeks away from the comprehensive where I work as an English teacher should be something to relish. All those weeks without lesson planning, marking and having to mop up hormonal teenage angst. Lots of time to hang out at home. The extended summer holiday usually includes some lesson planning and a couple of meetings, but for now it stretches ahead of me. That is the problem, in a nutshell.

Last night, my twelve-year-old son, Sam, went off to stay with Ian and Laura before travelling with them to visit Laura's parents, who live in Provence. I've seen the pictures of where they're going. It's all turquoise shutters and tumbling wisteria. Idyllic. There's even a small pool. But the icing on the cake is the resident dog, a shaggy-haired golden retriever. Sam has always wanted a dog but Ian's allergy to pets meant it was a no-go. I can't help enjoying the thought of Ian spending the whole holiday sneezing. Maybe I'll get the biggest, hairiest dog I can find while they're away. That'll show him.

I pretended to be excited for Sam, however hard it was to mould my mouth and face into the required shapes for a response. I want him to have a lovely time. Of *course* I do, but the idea of rattling around the house on my own, picturing them all together as they amble down sun-sparkled lanes surrounded by lavender fields, causes a panicky emptiness to swell inside my chest.

Must snap out of this. I take a swig of my tepid white wine and blink hard. I wish I had thought to bring something to read, or at least my iPad. I'd been watching something on Netflix in the bath, and I left it on the side. Ian disapproved of this and now I do it as often as possible in a pathetic act of rebellion.

I look around the restaurant.

There aren't many other customers. Whether it's because it is still early, or there is no air conditioning here, it is hard to say. A couple with two small children stoically attempt to eat with one hand each, while simultaneously pushing rising offspring back into highchairs, wiping mouths and occasionally tapping at their phone screens with the other. I remember those days all too well, but how quickly they go. People told me this but I didn't really believe it then.

I still think a Starbucks might have been a better choice for this blind date, or whatever it is. When he suggested this unprepossessing family Italian restaurant, Gioli's, it had thrown me a bit. Feels like more of a commitment; harder to make a getaway anyway, should the need arise. But Carmen is always telling me to be bolder, to 'get back out there again,' and so I agreed. The man I'm meeting, Carl, is an acquaintance of Stella at work, who assured me he was a) clean b) not mad c) quite good looking, in that order. The order of importance might have been different twenty years ago.

My attention is drawn now to the back of the restaurant, where the manager, a rotund moustachioed man, is having an intense conversation with a waitress who appears to have just arrived. She is tying an apron around her narrow waist, and looking sourly over his comb-over'd head. Taller than him by several inches, she is willow-thin, with jet-black hair only a few midnight degrees up from natural judging by the Celtic paleness of her skin. Her hair is tied up in a tumbling ponytail. Her large features and smokily made-up eyes remind me a little of Amy Winehouse.

As the manager turns away, grim-faced, I shoot her a tentative smile of sympathy. The young woman lifts her fingers and makes a shooting gesture at her own head, which makes me laugh out loud.

The restaurant door flies open then and a man enters with much bustle and energy, carrying one of those foldable bikes. He manoeuvres it past a table, catching a chair that almost clatters over. I hear a murmured grumble.

He's tall, balding, slim. Not bad looking. Carl, I'm sure of it. I offer a smile but he regards me with a furrowed brow. Like I haven't quite matched up to expectations. Something deflates inside me.

'Are you Nina?' His voice is a little curt. He still isn't smiling.

'Yes,' I reply, feeling my own friendly expression sliding off my face. He bobs his head in greeting and begins fussing with the folded bike, trying to wedge it next to the table up against the wall. This all seems to take an age and he looks increasingly annoyed.

I'm starting to squirm a little in my seat by the time he finally does look up. He manages a brief smile, warming his eyes for a moment like a light flicking on and then off again.

'Sorry,' he says. 'You must think I'm rude. I'm Carl.' He holds out his hand and I'm aware that mine is a little damp in his oddly dry one.

'That's dedication,' I say with a grin, 'cycling in this heat. I almost melt in a puddle just walking anywhere!'

The frown's back. Maybe I've said the wrong thing, or the thought of me sweating is repulsive to him. He picks up the menu and says, rather abruptly, 'So. Are we eating?'

No, we bloody aren't, I think, *not if you're going to be like this*. But he's calling Amy Winehouse over and within seconds he has ordered a chicken salad and a Diet Coke.

My eyes dart to my glass of white wine and I take a large, defiant sip.

'Anything for you?' the waitress asks quietly, her voice deep and soft. She has a bumpy rash of spots around her chin smeared in concealer. She looks like she needs to eat more fruit and vegetables. A plastic name badge says 'Angel' on the breast of her white shirt.

What a pretty, unusual name.

Carl is tapping the Fitbit on his wrist and staring into its face greedily. Heaven knows when he finds time to go walking, what with all that cycling.

This isn't going to work. But I'm too well brought up to simply get up and leave. On any other day, I'd have probably made a plan for Carmen to ring with a fake emergency. That was out, obviously. I'm just going to have to deal with this on my own. I'm not staying much longer, that's for sure.

'Just some olives, thanks,' I say. 'And a tap water. With ice.'

Carl looks at me curiously.

'Ate earlier,' I lie. I'll finish my disappointing glass of wine, eat the olives and then pretend I've had a text calling me away. Decision made, I feel myself relax slightly.

As the waitress writes down our order, I spot what look like fingerprint bruises circling her delicate wrist, but it's just a glimpse. She moves and a trio of cheap metal bangles cover the spot with a tinkling sound.

'So, Nina,' says Carl, pulling my attention back, 'you aren't a cyclist then?'

'No,' I say, 'well, not unless you count using an exercise bike once, before guiltily stuffing it in the garage.'

He regards me blankly.

'You're keen then?' I say, a bit weakly.

Oh yes. He is.

He proceeds to talk at length about the cycling club that saved him from a serious bout of depression. He tells me how many 'Ks' he does every weekend and about his plans to enter some race or other in the summer. I tune out and finish my wine miserably, while surreptitiously dragging my handbag onto my lap in readiness to receive the fake text.

He doesn't even stop talking when the food arrives. I drain the glass of water then robotically pop olives into my mouth, waiting for the best moment to pretend my phone is vibrating.

'You should try it,' he's saying now. 'Literally saved my life.'

'Yep. You said.'

He stares at me then, an odd expression on his face. His cheeks redden a little.

The next thing he says is in a lower tone and I don't catch it at first.

'I'm sorry?' I say, sliding the last olive into my mouth.

He clears his throat.

'I'm not very good at this sort of thing,' he says, sotto voce, 'but do you want to come back? For sex?'

I stare at him for a couple of seconds, unable to believe what I just heard. His cheeks are now flaming. A mental picture of him attempting to peel off Lycra shorts in a seductive manner comes into my mind and a surge of hysterical laughter rises in my throat. I inhale sharply and the olive shoots backwards, covering my windpipe. I try to cough it away but my throat just spasms uselessly, silently, failing to budge it. The olive is a solid mass at the back of my throat. There's a split second of disbelief before I accept that I'm choking. My pulse thunders in my head and there's a whooshing in my ears.

I can't breathe ... I can't breathe.

'I don't think it was that funny,' says Carl, his face sour now. He doesn't understand that I'm dying, I'm actually dying *right here*, in this shitty restaurant.

Slapping my hands against the table, I stagger to my feet, panic blooming in hot waves as my body strains for air. I try thumping my own chest but nothing changes, nothing shifts. The olive feels vast in my throat as my lungs strain and pull uselessly and my face is wet with tears.

Carl's mouth opens and closes, fish-like, his shocked eyes wide.

Why isn't he helping me? *Why isn't anyone helping me?*

My vision begins to smear, the floor shifting under me. My mind blooms bright with Sam's face and I strive even harder to make the air come. But it's no good.

I'm going to die.

And then arms encircle my body from behind. It feels unbearable to be touched and my panic ratchets higher and higher again. Then a hard fist under my diaphragm jerks upwards – *again – again* – *again* – and the olive shoots out of my mouth onto the table, where it sits, glistening with spit.

Air rushes into my lungs. I start to sob uncontrollable tears of relief. I can't stop them.

There's a hot hand on the bare flesh of my arm and I'm looking into the face of the waitress, who says, 'You're OK, you're OK.'

It takes me a few moments to find my voice and then I manage to croak, 'Thank you, thank you so much.' It's the strangest feeling but, in that brief moment, I love this waitress a tiny bit.

I wish I could stop crying but I can't. Carl stands awkwardly in front of me, arms dangling by his sides, and the other diners stare as one.

Thank God, I'm finally out of that place and on the way home.

I pretend to root in my handbag to avoid the curious eyes of the cab driver framed in the rear-view mirror. I know I look a state, with eye make-up migrating down my cheeks and skin all blotchy from crying.

Every time I think about how it felt, my eyes well up again. The precise texture and taste of the terror keeps coming back to me in waves. It was all-encompassing; a drenching horror I'd only ever experienced in my worst nightmares.

I have never come close to dying before, not really. I was in a car accident when I was a teenager, when a boyfriend misjudged a bend and wrote off his car. But all I got was a bit of whiplash.

This was the most frightening thing I have ever experienced, worse than the most intense bits of childbirth when I thought nothing could be as bad. Or the time when I lost Sam at the Natural History Museum for twenty whole minutes until there was an announcement calling for me. I'd thought then that it was the most intense terror I'd ever experienced, but it was nothing like the feeling that I was about to die.

For a moment, standing in that crummy restaurant, I really thought my life was over. I'll never forget that hot panic and the desperate fight for air, not for the rest of my suddenly-precious life. Oh, here we go again. I swipe my nose with a piece of kitchen towel I find in my handbag. So humiliating too. For this intimate thing to happen, being reduced to my basest self, with all those strangers.

Carl ... well, I hadn't been wrong about him. After a lukewarm, 'Alright now?' he had lingered awkwardly as I sat down again and attempted to get myself together.

Perhaps he felt slighted. His bald offer of sex having, after all, almost killed me. Hopefully he'll sharpen up his chat-up lines before his next date, unless I've frightened him off for life.

This, almost, is enough to make me smile inwardly.

The life-saving waitress had been monosyllabic, as if what she'd done was no big deal. Afterwards, she just asked me if I wanted a cab and, gratefully, I'd accepted, hoping there wouldn't be a long wait. We'd quickly split the bill; Carl throwing down more than enough in his hurry to get away. After he had gone, I had sat there, deflated and wrung out, gazing out at the street and wishing I'd never come out tonight.

When the cabbie arrived, I asked him to wait a minute and hurried to the far end of the restaurant where the waitress was talking to another, older woman who had just arrived. They both regarded me curiously as I approached.

'I'm sorry. Excuse me,' I said. 'I just want to thank you again. You saved my life!'

The waitress hadn't replied. Flustered, I hurried on. 'I wish I could repay you in some way. Look, let me give you something. An extra tip.'

I found myself thrusting a twenty-pound note at her. The waitress looked up sharply, a little suspicious, almost as though she was being tricked in some way.

She took it with only a small nod of thanks.

Just before I left, vowing to never come back to this restaurant, I reached out and touched her thin, pale wrist.

'Your name is apt,' I said. 'I can never thank you enough.'

I sniff now and the taxi driver eyes me again.

Please don't make conversation.

I hadn't been able to face the bus. My car is in the garage and, even though it feels extravagant to get a taxi all the way out of town to mine, I just want to be home so I can close the door on this terrible evening.

More than anything, I want to grab hold of Sam and squeeze him for all he's worth. But that's not going to be possible.

What a disastrous day. I can't wait for it to be over.

2 Angel

Angel's phone buzzes like an angry insect against her thigh. Over and over again. Text after text. They just keep coming, each one a variation on the same pattern.

Im sorry babe. Can we talk l8r?

i luv u. u know that right???????

Pls?

Get bck here Ffs.

U R actually fcking with me now.

I luv u???

It's embarrassing.

Even though she has always communicated with him in the same language, it isn't a novelty any more. Pathetic, that he can't write properly, or use punctuation. He's not fourteen. He's a thirty-year-old manager of a pub.

It used to be a strange kind of draw, that he hadn't had the same sort of schooling as her – had any kind of schooling, probably. Once she teased him about his lack of education and he hadn't liked it one bit.

She rubs her wrist and winces, thinking about earlier.

She didn't know why she always did it. Picked fights. She simply couldn't help it sometimes. Had always been that way. When she was small and The Bastard was in one of those volcanic moods, when you could see the fury building up heat inside him, she hadn't made herself smaller and quieter, like her brother had. No, she had made herself even more of an irritant, added more friction to the situation, even though she knew what would follow.

They'd had a perfectly decent evening, by any normal person's standards. But maybe that was the issue.

Time was, they'd party until six am then sleep into the afternoon, only waking to eat, fuck and smoke. Lately though, Leon had been saying stuff like 'Maybe we should stay in and have a quiet night' or complaining about being tired all the time, or too broke to go out.

Last night they'd spent the whole evening watching telly with ready meals on their laps. Angel could feel something bitter fermenting inside her. She'd barely spoken all evening and Leon had kept asking her if she was alright. Eventually, getting no real response, he'd gone into a sulk and slunk off to bed early. Angel had finished another bottle of wine, alone, barely taking in what she was watching on the television.

This morning she had woken with a feeling of clarity, despite her clanging head.

She'd looked around at the bedroom, and suddenly hated the smelly sheets and lack of proper curtains. The overflowing ashtray next to the bed and the sticky glasses and mugs crowding the bedside table. It had turned the dial on her hangover, making it more technicolour and nauseating.

Angel had watched Leon slide out of bed and pat his naked belly in a self-satisfied way. She'd hated him then. So, she'd picked a fight – hard to even remember what it was about, but it didn't really matter because it had quickly escalated. She'd thrown some stuff and tried to scratch his face. He'd twisted her arm behind her back and called her a mad bitch. He'd looked like he wanted to cry as he said it. Idiot. Then he had stormed off to work.

She feels strangely cleansed now. It's over. He can go ahead and burn her stuff if he wants to. She's got what she needs right now in her rucksack.

Before she had left though, some strange impulse had driven her to do one last thing.

Leon was vain about his looks. He spent a lot of money on shirts, lining them up in the wardrobe by colour, so they ranged from white through the pinks and purples to blues and patterned varieties at the other end. Before she left the flat for good, she found herself with a pair of scissors in her hand.

Snip, snip, snip.

It felt good.

For a little while, anyway.

Angel pushes the memory away.

She'll get to the end of this shift, pick up her pay for the week and then Ron, with his manure breath and his clammy little roving hands, can go fuck himself. He won't even know until Saturday, because she has a day off tomorrow. And then she'll get on a bus and go away for a bit.

Scotland, she thinks, picturing the landscape of watery green mountains and lacy mist. The air is cleaner there. It will sort of scour her on the inside. She can start again, and leave all her mistakes behind her. A fresh start.

Lucas comes into her mind then; a cloud across her positive thoughts. She'd like to see him properly before she leaves. Make things right.

She never really meant what she'd said to him. There was no need for him to cut her off like this. She's been trying to catch up with him for weeks and he never responds to her texts, WhatsApps or calls.

Well, if he's going to be like that, she doesn't have time for it.

This, rather than anything else, is what drags at her now. He doesn't really need her any more. When they were small they'd clung to each other like the inhabitants of a sinking lifeboat but maybe those days have gone.

That's a good thing.

It is.

Angel idly watches the choking woman fussing about getting her stuff together, flashing small grateful smiles her way. She's glad she could help. Learned how to do the Heimlich Manoeuvre years ago, when she'd thought about being a nurse. Never had to do it before though. The woman looks beleaguered, and almost blurry at the edges, like she is trying not to take up any room in the world. She's actually really pretty, with those big brown eyes and curly auburn hair. Bit frumpy, maybe. She definitely has potential, but it's her expression that's off-putting. Mouth turned down. Sad eyes. It's depressing, looking at her.

Angel doesn't want to end up like that.

It's definitely time to make some changes.

3

Nina

People say two things about where I live: 'What a great house' and, 'How do you stand living next to *that*?' Not necessarily in that order.

I live at the far end of a country road that runs parallel to a stretch of dual carriageway on the outskirts of the city of Redholt. The road has an unusual name, Four Hays, which often confuses people because it sounds like a house, not a street name. There are only two properties – mine and my immediate neighbour's, which has been empty and for sale since my elderly neighbour died six months ago. The main road makes it feel less isolated, but we still don't let Sam walk home alone.

When we first moved in, I thought I might never get used to the constant traffic, which throbs and pulses all day and all night. Now, I barely register the sound of the cars and lorries that thunder past twenty-four hours a day.

Proximity to the road was one of the reasons we could afford to buy this in the first place, one of a pair of red-brick semi-detached cottages, originally designed for railway workers. The railway line running towards the back of the property is now defunct, only a small portion remaining at the bottom of the steep bank that borders our back garden.

Inside the house I gratefully kick off the offensive shoes and peel off the dress, pulling on a shapeless vest top and a loose skirt. I examine the sore, red patches on my heels glumly and for a moment contemplate what it would have been like if I had taken Carl up on his offer. It hadn't felt like much of a compliment, considering he hadn't shown the slightest sign of being attracted to me before this outburst. Maybe he thought I looked desperate.

Grimacing at the prospect of revealing my overweight forty-five-year-old body to a fitness evangelist like him, I go into the kitchen, hesitating only a moment before opening the fridge and eyeing the bottle of white wine in there.

When Sam is around and I'm ferrying him to swimming, judo and Scouts, I barely touch a drop of alcohol on weeknights. But on these evenings when I'm alone in the house, it's too easy to numb myself with a glass of something. I'll stop next week. Designate week-nights as alcohol-free nights. Maybe I'll even invest in a Fitbit like Carl and try not to be a boring git about it.

I take the wine and my laptop outside to the patio chairs and make myself comfortable there.

The evening sun is kinder now, the brutal intensity of the day finally having burned itself out. I breathe in the sweet air, scented with the jasmine creeper that Ian had diligently trained up a trellis on the back wall. The low droning mumble of bees in the plant is soothing.

Then I turn on my laptop.

It's impossible to resist. In seconds, I'm back on Laura's Facebook page, looking at the smiling couple. I almost relish the pain it brings. This is what masochism is, I'm sure, but I can't stop myself from scrolling through Laura-related posts. I seem to be making a habit of this self-destructive behaviour.

It feels like they have everything to look forward to.

Ian has told me that she wants kids.

The other day, I somehow found myself mournfully looking through Sam's old baby clothes in the attic. Pathetic, really.

I'm not friends with Laura on Facebook – even I'm not that much of a mug – but she hasn't made much effort to keep her profile private. She is an enthusiastic selfie-taker, and her timeline is packed with images of her and various friends gurning into the lens against a variety of backdrops. She's ten years younger than me and Ian, whose birth dates are only a few months apart, and has some sort of job in marketing for a sports clothing chain.

I scroll to a picture of Laura and Ian at a skating rink with a group of other people who are clearly Laura's friends. Ian looks a bit sheepish. Skating, for heaven's sake ...

Then I click on the photo to enlarge it, studying my husband's familiar face.

Ian used to claim that I was 'at least two leagues' above him when we were young. His mates would tease him he had struck lucky. Pretty ironic.

Something seems to have shifted now we are middle-aged. All I can see is the weight that clings to me now; the wrinkles and the sagging bits. He, on the other hand, has grown into his age. His short grey hair suits him, more than it ever did when he was young and strawberry blond. He's comfortable in his skin, the angular gangliness of youth replaced by a sturdier build.

The gym membership had been one of the changes he made after his mid-life epiphany, or whatever it was. I get to the swimming pool now and then but that's about it. I know I should do more. Would it have made a difference, if I had joined him at the gym? Or had he been unhappy for years? These are the questions that plague me in the middle of the night. Trying to find the piece of thread that came loose and unravelled a whole life.

Was it as obvious as last year, when Ian had a semi-breakdown? Or earlier?

Ian's depression was precipitated by the death of his long-time boss and friend, Adam, whose cancer took only weeks from diagnosis to his death. Ian works for a medical software company that sells packages to the NHS and other healthcare providers and he and Adam had worked together for over ten years. I never got on that well with Adam's wife, who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of a 1950s housewife manual. She was one of those competitive mothers, always banging on about tutors and violin lessons and asking my advice 'as a professional' about whether the expensive school their child attended was basically ruining him for life. We didn't tend to socialize as a foursome much, but Ian took Adam's death very hard. After he had lost weight and not slept well for several weeks, I suggested he try some counselling.

It had worked, at least in terms of helping him get through his depression. Unfortunately, it also prompted him to decide that his life was too short to – what was it again? – 'Waste it in a marriage that isn't working any more.'

I genuinely never saw this coming. When he said it, I actually burst out laughing. It sounded so fake. So staged. Not like the things people really say. Married people. Friends.

Maybe that was the trouble. OK, so we spent a fair bit of time apart, and we didn't have sex that often any more. But wasn't that like most marriages, when people had been together half their lives? Well, clearly it was more. I hadn't realized the cracks were signs of serious stress until the marriage broke in two.

Oh damn it, here I go again. My eyes are leaking all on their own, without any warning that it was about to happen. Was this what Ian was like, privately, in that dark time? Maybe I'm having a breakdown too.

I picture Sam, my quiet, serious boy, lying in his unfamiliar bedroom. He had been quietly fretting in his usual way about the upcoming holiday. Even with the promise of access to a dog, he'd been worried. It had taken some gentle cajoling to get him to talk, then I'd been able to reassure him that the boat wouldn't sink, and that Laura's parents wouldn't force him to eat frogs' legs. He's always been a worrier, ever since he was a tiny boy who would stand watchfully at the playground while others climbed like happy monkeys. For a hot, shameful moment, I hope he will be too upset to go tomorrow and that Ian will bring him home.

This feels like a new low.

My arms prickle now and I look up, aware suddenly I've been out here for some time. The air feels alive with the prospect of rain. The setting sun has disappeared behind a dark band of gathering cloud. For a moment, I contemplate stripping all my clothes off and standing in the coming rain to feel the cool freshness on my skin. It would be wonderful after all the nights I've spent lately, twisting in sweaty sheets.

I could do it if I wanted, too. The house next door has been empty and for sale since my elderly neighbour died. No one would see me. Isn't this the sort of thing I should be relishing now I'm alone? Dancing naked in the rain? Not giving a shit?

But I'm already starting to feel a little cold, so I gather up my things.

I'm stepping through the back door as the first fat drops begin to fall, releasing the sharp smell of ozone, hot brick and parched earth.

Inside, I tip the last of the wine into my glass before curling onto the sofa and turning on Netflix on the telly. There's a trashy American comedy I've become mildly addicted to.

We used to Hoover up all the crime series and Scandinavian dramas but now, alone in the house, stories about murder are less appealing. There are enough shadows in real life.

It feels like this is yet another thing that has been taken from me. Ian is no doubt enjoying 'educating' Laura, whose tastes had previously, he once let slip, extended only to reality TV and soaps.

Without even knowing I've slept, I'm somehow being pulled awake. Groggy and confused, I squint at the clock on the mantelpiece and see it is two am.

For a moment, I think I'm hearing the sound of thunder.

Then I realize someone's hammering on my front door.

4 Lucas

Rain dashes into his eyes and mingles with tears and blood, stinging his cheeks and dripping off his chin. The burden he carries seems to be getting heavier by the minute. Sometimes, though, he imagines there isn't anything there at all and his chest swells with panic. This doesn't make any sense. But he stops and checks anyway, peering awkwardly inside the neck of the coat that's sucking in water like a sponge and making him move twice as slowly as usual.

Reaching a brightly lit mini roundabout he stops, disorientated, and has a moment of confusion about which way to go. Right? No, left. It's left here. He's sure of it.

He hurries on but this place is not designed for pedestrians. He is forced to huddle at the side of the slip road, his stomach swooping as a car blares an angry horn, and then he reaches the narrow grass verge. Lucas stumbles along next to the main road, cars roaring past, so close he could stretch out his fingers and lose an arm.

But he welcomes the terror, the biting cold and the pains in his face and ribs. These sensations are too powerful to allow contemplation to creep in. He almost wants to keep moving forever but the tiredness is getting to him now. For a second he pictures himself taking two steps to the right and stopping it all, but he knows he can't do it. And it's not just about him, is it?

Not far now. But what will happen when he gets there? Lucas stops for a moment, breathing hard.

This whole thing is a terrible idea.

But it's the only one he has right now so he stumbles onwards.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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