

## ON LOW NEWTON BEACH

I'm walking down from the Ship Inn with a silly grin on my face and plenty of warm Lindisfarne Mead sloshing about in my stomach. There's no one on the beach, no clouds between me and the stars, just the sharp smell of kelp and the breeze throwing tiny grains of sand at the bottom of my jeans. It's perfect, meditative. And then her teeth flash in that great black hole of her mouth, and she sucks it all away.

'Champagne bloody Charlie. Ha ha. Can't you see they're laughing at you? Clever bloody Charlie, with his witty little insights and his pathetic twenty-two thousand a year.'

Natasha's marching up towards me, a screeching silhouette against the sea with that long coat flapping, and her hair thrashing in the wind.

'Good old Charlie Marconi, always first at the bar with a twenty in his hand while his kids go dressed like tramps.'

'Alright, Tasha,' I hold out my palms. 'So I stayed for another drink. I'm sorry.'

'You're not just sorry, you're pathetic.'

'Give me a break. It was one drink and I'll be back at work,' I glance at the luminous dial on my watch, 'in nine hours.'

'You call that work? You're hiding, doing a job a monkey could do so you don't have to face the real world.'

'Please, Tash. Look around you.' I wave my hand at the starry sky and draw her beautiful face towards me. 'Can't we just let it go?'

'Coward.'

‘Oh come on, Tash. It doesn’t matter about the money, all that stuff. Not everything needs to be a competition.’

I’m telling her, because that’s what this is all about. Tasha eating away at herself, worrying what they think of her, the MacKenzie’s and the Dalton’s with their shiny cars and Spanish villas. I can see her now, hunched on that bar stool, testing and rehearsing every possible remark until the moment passed, sinking ever deeper into her wide-eyed silence while the rest of us shouted, through the booze and the laughter; anything that came into our heads.

The irony of it is that they think she’s marvellous. Paul Dalton’s practically in love with her, and I can’t help but see why, watching the light spark in her eyes, and the thrust of her cheekbones, even as the poison comes pouring out of her.

‘Life’s not a competition. Well that’s perfect isn’t it? So you can go on taking the easy option, having another drink, being a feeble excuse for a man who doesn’t give a shit about his family.’

‘Tasha, that’s rubbish.’

‘Right, everything I say is rubbish. I’m just the little wife who’s supposed to shut up and let her drunken husband do the talking.’

‘You know I don’t want that. Why do you think I told them about your recital, how brilliant you were?’ I reach out again, touching her cheek, needing her to know that I understand. ‘I was trying to help you, to bring you in.’ I say her name, softer now, meeting her eyes as she steps towards me, reaches up, and knocks my hand away.

‘Patronising bastard.’

‘Jesus Christ, Natasha.’

I feel the dull ache on my wrist and I know there's no point in trying. If I've learnt anything in the last eight years it's that there's nothing I can say that'll make a blind bit of difference, not when she's like this. Don't rise to it, Charlie, I tell myself, just shut up and ride out the storm.

And that's really what I mean to do.

'You're a bloody fool,' she's telling me, 'dragging us up here, spending a fortune we haven't got on that damn cottage. We could have stayed in Newcastle for nothing. But oh no, you had to have your way. "I want to take the boat out" – as if. You haven't been near the bloody thing in three days. Look at it. Look.'

She points up towards the village and I do as I'm told, looking at the outline of the dunes rising like great woolly mammoths against the sky. The boat is there, hidden in the tall grass beside Greeny's clapped-out caravan. I picture myself sailing her now, alone on a close reach with only the sound of the wind, and the cut of the hull through the waves. The peace of it draws me like a dream.

'Three days and you haven't been near that boat. No, let's face facts, you haven't been out all year and you're not about to now.'

She's right. I imagine dragging the trolley down over the sand, and wading out into that freezing water, and I know I don't have the strength.

'You're a bloody fantasist. Walter Mitty. Always dreaming never doing. So intelligent. So well-fucking-read, and so-fucking-what. The same crap job forever, because we both know you're too shit scared to do anything else.'

I grit my teeth and push my hands into my pockets. My right hand closes around a woollen ball. I smile: Penny's mittens. My left hits something harder, a stone, warm and coarse against my palm. I draw it out.

'You don't want a wife, you want a mother to indulge you, to tell you it's the world that's out of step. Well that's not true, Charlie. The world's doing fine. You're the problem.'

The stone is grey now, like everything, but I remember it bulging through Penny's hands in the afternoon sunlight, pink as a baby's cheek, streaked with bloody purple. Rough, but pretty in its way, like Tasha. And bloody too. I laugh and the thread snaps, the torrent of words battering down.

I hear a wave break on the shore. The wind whistles a single note through the dunes, and it begins again.

'Fine. Act like a five year old, and then you wonder why I can't go on.'

But she really can, go on and on.

'Nobody cares anymore, Charlie, not about your half finished degree, or your half written books or your half-arsed life. Don't you get it? Dalton's got his own showroom, even MacKenzie's making twice the money you are, peddling his bloody pensions, and they're all laughing at you. Mr. Smartarse with his big ideas, still on twenty-two piddling grand. They love it.'

My toes clench. It's that repetitive thing that really gets me, winding herself up to this screaming pitch. And beneath all these ugly words there's a sharp and simple truth. Natasha feels pain, so I must be made to suffer. Not just me, but anybody who's stupid, or vulnerable enough to take it.

I see Penny's face turned up towards me, soggy trainers slapping on the road.  
"I'm sorry for making Mum upset." Eight years old, apologising because her mother's a bitch. I hear my own pathetic answer and it sets my head throbbing.

'You've got to make allowances Pen.' Christ.

I listen to the gush of water, try to breath with the rolling rhythm. The sea is black, the stone heavy in my hand. I want to do something physical, hurl it into the water, let it sink like the weight in my stomach.

'I could have finished my training, been a solicitor by now, a partner, living a decent life instead of scrounging for everything, ashamed to show my face.'

'You're right, you're right,' I hold up my hands, forgetting the stone until she starts back away from me, breaking rhythm, finding it.

'I gave it up for you. Dropped out in my final year to have *your* baby because *you* just couldn't stand the thought of an abortion. God, I was only ten weeks gone. People do it every day.'

'Don't, Tasha, please.' But Tasha isn't listening.

I need to act, to break the iron band tightening around my head. Now, it has to be now. I know myself as well as she does, if I put it off it will never happen.

'Okay,' I say, 'Okay, Natasha, that's enough.' Maybe she hears the decision in my voice. She shuts up, looking at me with those pale eyes, mouth closed, a glimpse of how things might have been.

I step towards her, weighing the stone in my hand.

'You think my life's perfect. You think this is my dream come true. Things happen to us all, Tash. We do things for reasons we barely understand and sometimes

they work out and sometimes they don't, but either way we have to live with the consequences.' My hand falls, thinking about my own words and that's all she needs.

'Hah, more excuses. More clever, stupid reasons for not doing anything, for standing still, for wasting time.' She leans in, close enough for me to feel the heat of her breath. 'All because nasty Mummy wasn't nice to poor little Charlie thirty fucking years ago.'

'Shut up, Natasha.'

'And we know why, don't we. Don't we?' A ball of spit lands on my cheek. 'Because you're a fake, Charlie, right to the core.'

Her face looms towards me. I turn away but she hovers at the periphery of my vision, screeching on, endlessly for all eternity, with her hair flailing around her like a nest of snakes. I cannot look. I watch the starlight reflecting on the oily surface of the sea.

'That's why you're so full of shit. Just clever talk, empty plans that never amount to anything. If you're so Goddamn clever why don't you *do* something.'

So I do.

It comes on a swinging loop from somewhere down by my waist. There's a crunch like a boot stamping on gravel. The vibration tingles through my arm, bolting down my spine and bubbling back up.

Blood racing, muscles taut, every nerve in my body is dancing, but my soul is at peace. There are no thoughts. I hear the scream of a dying star and the answering whisper of ghosts in the wind, grains of sand sifted and weighed in God's steady hand, while the reeds sing to each other like the sirens in the sea, and every note is mine to

hear, because she has stopped talking. Natasha has disappeared, and it is glorious to be alive.

The low groan comes from far away, carrying over the waves, drawing me to my knees on the wet sand. Strange, that she's still so close. Her face is white beneath its sheen of make-up, pupils wide with fury. Her lips part. I lower my cheek to hers and listen to the dry clicking in her throat.

'Oh, sweet Jesus Christ.'

My fists clench against her quilted coat.

"What have you done?"

The accusation is shrill and sharp, my mother's screeching voice. I am hiding in the cupboard, wrapped in my father's jacket with the blood running hot from my ear and the terror tight in my stomach and I can not, will not listen. I can not, will not feel.

I watch the spreading stain around Natasha's head as a warm mist rises towards me, filling my nose, my throat. I taste the rich metallic flavour of her blood as it seeps into the sand, and through the lap of the sea and my own panting breath I realise that the clicking has stopped. The light has gone from her staring eyes, and somewhere beneath the horror, another feeling rises in my chest, slipping unwilling through my motionless lips.

'Thank God.'

There's a sob in my voice. This has been coming so long. Since our belated honeymoon on the Costa Brava, the granite cliff-top sweeping down, waves booming on the rocks below. It only needed a little shove. A terrible accident, and I would have been free.

And there were other moments, other places; knives slipping, bodies falling, engines revving. Her at the back of the garage, complaining, moaning; heart and soul sick, leather sole slick, drop the clutch, let it slip, hurtling back, pinning her, crushing her into silence. A dozen times I've tempted myself, then hesitated, and lost. Until now.

Realisation wells inside me and I am on my feet, fists raised, baying a wordless cry to the stars. I am Ali in the eighth in Zaire. Seven years of bouncing on the ropes, dodging and smiling while she pounded away at me, stinging blows to the guts and kidneys, vicious uppercuts to the heart. Seven long years, but I came back in the eighth. Let the world call me what it will, but I know. I have withstood the onslaught and I have conquered.

I lean back, laughing, and hurl the stone in a long spiralling arc, listening to it splash into the sea. It is done, and it is worth it. I am strong as I have ever been. I could dance on this beach until dawn and be happy to pay the price. If I could only stop my chest from heaving, these tears from streaming down my face.

'Tasha. Please.' I fall back to my knees beside her, kissing her neck, her cheeks, her warm, dead lips.

Her eyes watch me, too white, too close, this proof of what I have done. A life extinguished, blood thick as treacle on my hands. There is a name for people like me, and a punishment. I push it from my consciousness, but it will not let me go.

'Murderer,' I croak at the creeping surf, if only to get the word out of my head.

My eyes snap shut, but I cannot hide. I see cameras flashing at thickly barred windows, and my own face, blank and stupid beneath lurid, disjointed headlines: Evil.

Killer. Monster. And my little girls screaming, dragged away from me into faceless, heartless, careless, care.

My breath stops, my lips are numb. That cannot happen. I will not let it. I wipe my sleeve across my face, and the rock falls from my hand, thudding onto Tasha's stomach. I watch the stillness of her body, understanding that I am alone, set free from that bitter screaming thing. And in the peace of the wind and the water, I want her back. I want her desperately, to cradle her head in my arms, to trace the shy curve of her smile while I beg for her forgiveness.

But that cannot be. Natasha is dead, and I have killed her. This is the truth I must face. But it is one truth among many. Another is that if they do not know, then it is not real, not for my babies. And the third truth, the one that really counts, is that without a body there is no murder.

Tasha is lost and she must not be found. There is no choice, no point in delaying. I reach down and pull the rings off her finger, both of them. I take her purse and phone, and her mother's silver cuff bracelet, and I look out into the vast forgiving sea.