

*Also by Jenny Downham:*

Before I Die  
You Against Me  
Unbecoming  
Furious Thing

Let  
the  
Light  
In

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& LOUIS HILL**

**FICKLING**  
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*For Grandad*

# Leah

I check how I look in the bathroom mirror. The flickering lightbulb doesn't help. I run my fingers through my hair and retouch my lip balm, trying to see myself through Alex's eyes. He told me once that I look like the girl in a painting by some Russian artist. He showed me a picture on his phone – she had pale skin, dark hair piled up, a book in her hand. I liked him thinking I looked like a famous painter's muse.

It's true I can look pretty when I try. Tonight, I've used a foundation with tiny sparkles in it. And mascara. It's like putting on a disguise. I almost look sophisticated. It's like there used to be a secret, unnoticed Leah who I hardly dared believe in and now she's come to life. I'm no longer just the boring schoolgirl, the reliable daughter, or the person to turn to when the washing machine breaks. I am so much more. Because of Alex.

I squint at myself in the mirror and imagine his eyes grazing the length of me when we meet in an hour's time.

*You, Leah, are the best secret of my life.*

The spell's broken by Abby battering the bathroom door with her little fists demanding I let her in to pee and further broken by Charlie bolting out of his bedroom when he spots me attempting to sneak downstairs wearing my favourite jacket.

He skids to a halt. 'Where are you going?'

'Study session.'

'Looking like that?'

'Looking good makes me study harder, Charlie.'

'You're wearing make-up.'

I turn on the stairs and flutter my eyelashes for him. 'Got to make the effort for A-levels.'

'What about dinner?'

'Up to you.'

He sighs and plonks himself on the top step. 'What am I supposed to make?'

'You're fifteen, Charlie. Work it out.'

'I'll do it,' Abby says coming out of the bathroom and wiping her wet hands down her jeans. 'I'll do toast.'

'No,' I tell her. 'Charlie's perfectly capable of making food. Plus, you're only seven.'

'And a half.' She sits next to Charlie on the step and grins up at me. 'Can I help though?'

'You can be a team,' I say. 'Charlie will cook and you can assist and the pair of you will hang out having a lovely time together until eight o'clock when, Abby, you'll brush your teeth and go to bed with zero fuss. Charlie will read you a story. Charlie will then do his homework.' I smile at them each in turn. 'Sound doable?'

But I know from the look in Charlie's eyes that he needs more than this. Together, the three of us go into the kitchen. I yank open the fridge and pull out some potatoes. There's a hunk of cheese and a scraping of mayonnaise left in the

jar. I put everything on the table and then check the cupboards and the freezer. No baked beans but there's a couple of inches of sunflower oil in the bottle and there's plenty of frozen sweetcorn. I tell Charlie that it's more energy efficient if he microwaves the potatoes for five minutes, but yummier to then drizzle them with oil and salt and cook in the oven until the skins are nice and crisp.

'You need to keep checking on them though. And don't put the oven too high.'

I send Abby off to inspect the gas and electric meters. She comes skipping back saying both have over a pound on them – they'll be fine for warmth and light until I get back.

'While the food's cooking, ask Mum if she wants some,' I say. 'If she says no, try and get her to drink something at least.'

'Hey,' Abby says, 'maybe she'll get up if she knows you're going out.'

'She's sleepy today, babe. Give her space. Charlie's going to look after you.'

'You know, she was supposed to pick me up from school . . .'

'And she tried.'

Just not hard enough. She probably didn't get beyond crossing the courtyard to the main gate. On days when Mum promises to do Abby's pick-up, me or Charlie always go to the school anyway. Plan B is always required. In fact, it's easier when Mum doesn't try and achieve anything. No one gets disappointed.

‘Right,’ I say, ruffling Abby’s hair. ‘Shall I tell you where I’ve hidden the biscuits?’

Abby grins. ‘Can I have two?’

‘Sure.’

‘Can I play outside?’

‘That’s up to Charlie.’

Charlie simply looks bemused. ‘Am I supposed to wash the potatoes first?’

I put an arm around him and squeeze. ‘Confidence, bro.’

‘Right,’ he says, and I feel his body tensing, ‘well, that’s me screwed then.’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘It’ll be fun,’ Abby says, hopping from one foot to the other. ‘I’ll help. I can do cheese grating.’

‘Fantastic,’ I say. ‘So, can I go now?’

Charlie sighs. ‘If you must.’

I give him another squeeze. ‘You’ll be fine.’

He nudges me off. ‘Just go. Go and study.’

I promise I’ll teach him a proper meal for next time. I should have done it before now, but what with school and Mum and well, the Alex thing – time slips by. I grab my bag and keys, blow them both kisses from the door and try not to let the thought of Charlie’s worried face dampen my mood.

As I make my way along the walkway, down the communal stairs and across the courtyard to the main door and out into the street, I shrug him off. Abby and Mum too. I feel them leave. The weight of responsibility lifting from my shoulders and chest.



Alex messages as I wait for the bus, checking I'm still coming. He reminds me of the rule: *No flirting*. I message back: *Not even a little?* And he messages: *Restrain yourself, woman*. Which makes me laugh out loud. It's amazing how as I get further from my family and closer to Alex, I feel happier and more alive than I've felt all day.

# Charlie

‘Mum?’ I say, softly. ‘Mum, you awake?’

She makes a moaning noise like waking up is the worst idea in the world then flicks her eyes open and straight away shuts them again.

‘Mum?’

‘Gorgeous boy?’ There’s sleep and slowness in her voice.

I step into her bedroom. It’s dark and the air has the weight of a room that’s been occupied too long.

‘I wondered if you wanted something to eat?’

‘Let me look at you.’

‘Shall I turn on the light?’

‘No, no. Leave it.’

She squints at me in the gloom, seems to reassure herself it really is me and then closes her eyes again. Not hungry then.

‘What have you been up to?’ she asks. ‘Drawing?’

‘Not tonight, Mum.’

It was a neighbour who sent her spiralling back to bed this time. Mum was halfway across the courtyard on her way to collect Abby from school when Mrs Shah, the retired woman from three doors down, asked Mum if she was interested in joining the tenants’ association. Don’t people realize

you can't just ambush people and ask them to do stuff? Not everyone wants to be involved.

I perch on the edge of her bed. 'How are you feeling?'

'Just a bit of a headache.'

'You want paracetamol?'

'I'll be fine.'

I wait a few seconds more. 'Um, so you probably heard the smoke alarm go off . . .'

She tenses. 'Is everything OK down there?'

'Nothing to worry about. Leah gave me instructions for jacket potatoes and it didn't go well.' I attempt a chuckle. 'They look like black tennis balls.'

Mum sits up slowly. I've worried her. I didn't mean to do that. She notices a lot even when she's not looking. Like now, for instance, she knows something's up. It's almost like she can hear the tension building in my head.

Block it out, I tell myself, you ruined dinner but you can fix this.

'Is Leah sorting it?'

'She's at study group.'

'Anything else in the cupboard? Soup or beans?'

'Not really. So . . . I was wondering if I could get Abby some chips? I wouldn't need much. Just a couple of quid.'

'Is it dark out?'

'Kind of.'

Mum gazes at me. 'OK, take Abby with you and get the money from the housekeeping tin.'

'It's sort of empty.'

She sighs. 'It'll have to be the rent tin then. Make sure you let Leah know. Top shelf in the lounge behind the clock.'

She snuggles deeper under the duvet. 'You're a good boy, Charlie Marly.'

I don't move. That was Dad's name for me and she hardly ever uses it. That's got to be a sign, right? That she's getting better? But then she asks me to shut the curtains and close the door on the way out.

Guess I got that wrong too.

# Leah

It's exciting crossing the road to the gallery knowing Alex is waiting for me, that we have time together before people arrive. As I push the door and the bell tings, he looks up from the reception desk and grins. 'Hey, you.'

I grin back at him. 'Hey, yourself.'

He looks awesome. He's wearing a moss-coloured shirt I've never seen before and it seems to be reflecting shadows in his eyes because they're greener than usual as he makes his way around the desk towards me. He walks quietly, like he's trying not to disturb someone and yet there's only us and shelves of art materials and low tables stacked with books and paints and pencil sets. He brushes my fingers softly with his as he passes. 'Come see the art,' he says.

'Is that a euphemism?'

'Definitely.'

We're both laughing as we walk away from the shop area to the main exhibition space at the back of the gallery. It's usually gloomy because there are no windows but he's had track lights suspended from the ceiling and they must be on some kind of daylight setting because the new artwork seems to magically glow.

We stand side by side looking at it. I can hear him

breathing. I think of his lungs contracting and expanding and all the little alveoli doing their thing.

‘Honest opinion,’ he says.

Last time I saw these pictures, they were images on his phone or photocopies pinned to the corkboard in his office, but now they’re here in real life, mounted to the walls – over fifty in total, all varying in size. I was here only two days ago and the place is transformed. ‘I love it, Alex. It looks amazing.’

‘I’m not sure any of these artists will leave a footprint in history, but it’s a start.’

‘It’s more than a start. It’s brave. No more framed posters, no more reproductions. You’ve done exactly what you said you would.’

‘Brave or reckless. Either way, I need some wealthy punters to walk through that door tonight.’

I reach out to him – how can I not? – and our hands touch again. ‘They’ll come.’

He gently threads his fingers with mine. ‘Leah?’

A jolt of adrenaline surges through me. ‘Yes?’

‘Thank you for believing in me.’

‘Of course.’

A pause, then, ‘Leah?’

I can hear a smile in his voice. ‘Yes?’

‘You’re beautiful.’

‘You’re not even looking.’

‘You’re emblazoned on my retinas.’

That makes us both chuckle. ‘Come on,’ I say. ‘No flirting, remember? Let’s get started before things fall apart.’

We clear the tables in the shop and stack all the art materials into crates. We are breathless and laughing as we strategize how best to hide the connection between us (no eye contact, strictly no talking) and why it matters (we're too precious for gossip) and what we'll do after the guests have gone (every option involves bare skin and kissing). We fantasize about how many people might come (hundreds) and how many pictures will sell (all of them) and the calibre of artists who will want to show their work here in future (internationally famous ones). Alex takes the crates through to the office while I wipe the surfaces. Together, we move the tables to one side under the bookshelves, creating a space in the middle of the shop for people to hang out and drink. Tonight's a big deal not only because Alex is upgrading the gallery, but also because he's invited other gallerists as well as collectors and apparently, networking is just as important as the art.

We set out glasses and unpack the wine. 'If nobody comes,' he says, 'we can always get extremely drunk.'

'Sounds like a plan.'

But for the first time he looks faintly anxious. He fetches the exhibition catalogues and arranges them in little fanned heaps on the reception desk. He keeps looking out at the street as if hoping a crowd is building. Every time someone walks past the window, he turns reflexively. He fiddles with the glasses, arranging them into groups and then into lines. He turns all the bottles so their labels are facing the room. He decides we need sparkling water and rushes to the

shop over the road. He comes back with the water, a selection of boxed juices, napkins, and for some reason cocktail sticks.

I hold them up to him. ‘What are these for?’

‘I don’t know.’ He runs a hand through his hair. ‘They were cheap and I panicked.’

We smile at one another and there’s the usual mad flickering between us. When we’re in places we can’t touch – like here by the window or when there are customers in the shop – it’s like a spark building to flame.

‘Want to know what I’m thinking?’ he says.

‘I know exactly what you’re thinking, Alex.’

‘Is that so?’

He takes a step towards me, which is dangerous because I want to leap into his arms and I know he wants the exact same thing and we’re both wondering if there’s time to put the closed sign up and quickly throw a blanket down on the floor of his office before anyone arrives.

‘Alex,’ I say, both of us grinning. ‘We’ll have to wait.’

He makes a sound like something small and important broke inside him. ‘Can we though?’

We’re both still smiling as the door eases open and the first guests arrive. I grab a catalogue and turn away as Alex moves to greet them.

Half an hour later, there’s maybe thirty people here. They’re all way older than me and there’s lots of air-kissing and laughter as if everyone is best mates. Alex steers potential clients towards paintings, bigging up the artists, while



I make quiet circuits of the room so I can feed back useful information to him later. So far, it seems, people are only moderately impressed. I also gather that about half a mile away another gallery is hosting an open night and another two galleries beyond that. I loiter by a couple standing in front of a canvas swirled with green paint.

‘So post-modern,’ the woman says.

‘Really?’ the man says. ‘I find it contrived.’

‘Evocative though.’

‘Bit kitsch for me.’ He leans in to read the biography. ‘Never heard of them.’

The woman laughs. ‘I’m not sure you’ll find anyone you’ve heard of here.’

How dare they slag off Alex’s gallery? They might be middle-aged but they’re just like kids on social media – faking opinions, pretending to be cool, hoping no one realizes you’re busking every second.

‘I agree it’s evocative,’ I tell the woman. ‘Isn’t that a great reason to invest though?’

She blinks at me. ‘Do I know you?’

‘I’m just saying – does a picture have to be linked to a famous name to have value?’

‘It helps.’

‘But if you love it – isn’t that all that matters?’

‘Well,’ she says, taking the man’s arm. ‘That’s not a gamble I’m willing to take.’

She steers the man away. I shouldn’t’ve said anything. I probably made it worse. I grab a glass of wine from the

drinks table to calm my nerves. It tastes expensive – nothing like the boxed stuff I’ve had before. Alex had wanted champagne but couldn’t afford it. He’d wanted waiting staff too and canapés. If tonight goes well, he said he’ll have them next time for sure.

I take sips as I move slowly along the wall, pausing at pieces that draw my eye. I try and look like an art connoisseur or someone important from the media. I take photos of the most vibrant pieces. I try not to skim but to observe. I think about how long the artist spent creating each work and honour them with a little of my time. Alex told me once there’s no correct way to look at a picture. ‘Choose something you’d like to own,’ he said. ‘And study it until you feel pulled in.’

I knew what he meant because that’s what Charlie’s drawings do to me sometimes. They make me feel different, the way I might feel listening to music or reading a novel.

Thinking of Charlie makes me feel guilty. I bring up WhatsApp to ask how the cooking’s going, but he’s got a message in first: *Potatoes burned!* I message back: *Bin them* and advise him to have cheese on toast instead. Sometimes, it feels as if I’m spinning plates and the minute I take any time for myself away from home, all the plates start to fall. I wait for him to message back but he doesn’t, so I put my phone away.

And that’s when I glance up and see Alex staring at me. Eye contact is against the rules and yet . . . here we are. He’s standing with a little group by the back wall and it’s like a magnesium flash between us – something dazzling and

iridescent. The people with their glasses of wine and fake smiles and loud opinions on art fade away. It's just me and him and a look between us that says: *It's you.*

There's no way I can go over – those people with him would know how we felt. Even just saying hello or standing in silence next to each other, we'd give the game away. We're just going to have to wait until the evening is over and we can be alone.

I had the same visceral reaction the first time I met him. I came into the gallery one rainy Saturday because Charlie told me they sold art materials and his birthday was coming up. Alex was at reception and when he smiled and said hi, I couldn't speak. I felt hot just looking at him, like an entire bodily blush, which he would surely notice. Instead of asking about materials, I skulked off to look round the gallery, trying to get myself under control. I kept sneaking glances, wondering how any human got to be so gorgeous. When I finally dared to go over and buy a packet of pens, he asked if I'd seen anything I liked and I wanted to shout, 'You!' but instead, I mumbled some rubbish about expressionism, paid for the pens and left.

I went home and googled the gallery. I discovered it had recently opened and the current curator was keen to get the place on the map. There were photos. I stared at his for minutes. He had a degree in Art History from Cambridge, he was twenty-nine and lived in Hoxton with his wife and baby daughter.

His wife!

I remember my breath catching. I remember willing the words to change, for me to have misunderstood. I scrolled up and down, read and reread. But everything stayed the same.

He had a wife. And he had a baby.

I was furious. I also felt stupid. Because I'd barely spoken to him and if he'd been to Cambridge, he was bound to be a snob. He was probably arrogant too – like all the other gentrifiers coming into the area with their independent cafes and bougie gift shops. His gallery used to sell second-hand appliances. Where was everyone supposed to go now to get a cheap fridge or oven?

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I kept looking at his photo on the gallery website. I even dreamed about him. I felt like an addict. When Charlie opened the pens on his birthday, all I could think was, Alex touched those. I rescued the box from the bin and kept it under my pillow.

I went back to the gallery on the pretext of buying a card, but he was talking to a customer and I chickened out – just walked straight by without going in. What was I thinking? He had a wife. He had a *baby*. For days after that, I tried to conjure them whenever I was tempted to see him. I imagined their sweet, heartbroken faces when they found out he was being pursued by an evil schoolgirl.

But temptation got the better of me and only a few days later I found myself pushing the door of the gallery open. He was alone and he remembered me. I told him the pens had been a great success.

He asked me if I was into art like my brother and I said I

was more into English Lit. He asked me which university I'd applied to and I told him Edinburgh. I'd hear back in May, I said, when conditional offers were made. I was going with my best friend, Gunel, I told him – we'd been planning it for years. I loved myself in that moment. The future sounded certain. I didn't mention my grades were slipping or tell him anything about my crazy home life. He didn't need to know any of that.

He made me a coffee and told me about his undergrad days at Cambridge – the sweat-inducing supervisions and the interminable essays, the caffeine-riddled nights, and the worse-for-wear days. He wasn't snobby or arrogant at all. He was funny and kind and seemed genuinely interested in me. Everything I said seemed to land in him.

A week after that I popped in again to say hi. And again, the week after that. That was the week he gave me the acrylic paints for Charlie. 'Late birthday present for your brother,' he said. They were super expensive, so I knew he liked me. Things ramped up after that. I visited whenever I could get away. I felt noticed when I was with him, like the quality of his attention made me more alive. And then came the time I stayed so late that he said he needed to close up and I said that was a shame because I had nowhere else I needed to be and he said well in that case, did I fancy sharing a beer from the fridge in his office?

And now, all these weeks later, we're together – him over there pretending to concentrate on clients, me over here looking at art, and both of us sneaking glances across the room.

# Charlie

‘Why’s the sky never blue at night?’ Abby asks as we cross the courtyard towards the gate.

‘That’s just the way it is.’

‘Is your blue my blue?’

Christ, she’s so much smarter than me. I’m pretty sure philosophers and scientists have pondered if we all perceive colour the same way for hundreds of years, and here’s my sister wondering it alongside them.

She’s dancing in circles next to me now. ‘What’s the meaning of life?’

‘Forty-two,’ I say, not feeling clever enough to come up with anything else.

‘Forty-two?’

‘Yep.’

She considers this as we pass the dustbins and head out the gate. She scrunches her face up and I can almost see the electrical signals firing across her brain. She says, ‘I think it might be tigers.’

Abby loves all animals but tigers are her favourite. When she was younger, she had an imaginary tiger friend who’d walk to school with us. She’d pretend our route was a jungle and we’d find hidden treasure and lost cities and run wild

with our giant feline friend. Abby would go to great lengths to explain tigers won't hurt you if you don't threaten them but that a mother tiger will do anything to protect her cubs.

As we walk, I take her hand and point out that the sky can be grey and purple as well as blue, especially now the sun's disappeared. I try not to think of Mum in bed with the night descending. Or the fact that Leah's only been gone a couple of hours and I've already messed up.

Just before we reach the junction – there by the wall outside the lockups are three people huddled over a phone together. Two guys and a girl. If we keep our heads down, walk quickly, and stay on this side of the road, they might not notice us.

Growing up in London I've learned when to keep a low profile and who you should try to completely avoid. I tend to cast the net wide to include anyone older than me or bigger than me. But I have Abby by my side and she thinks the world is a good place. She calls out hello and waves at them.

'Don't,' I hiss.

'But you know her.'

The three of them turn around to look at us. And yes, Abby's right. Kay Santos goes to my school and hangs around the estate occasionally. I don't know why because she lives over by the canal. We did a heritage project in Geography once and she said the *Rio Amazonas* is a lot more impressive than the dirty water outside her window. Her dad's from Brazil and I'm sure she speaks some Portuguese but

her mum's English and . . . Well, it doesn't actually matter because right now she's standing on a dark street corner with two older guys. The white guy has a buzz cut and is built like a brick shithouse. The other guy is darker skinned like Mrs Shah – thin and lanky. The big guy almost certainly lives at the gym. He's definitely on steroids.

As me and Abby turn left towards the main road, the human pharmacy leans into the other bloke and points at us, which is a terrible sign. Maybe they're drug traffickers? Probably eyeing me up wondering how much cocaine I can fit inside me before they send me to Dubai or Amsterdam on a Ryanair flight. I don't want to be a drugs mule. I have enough trouble taking ibuprofen without gagging.

The massive bloke nods at me as we walk past, like we're friends or colleagues. I nod back, but only out of fear of what he'll do if I ignore him. I've seen *The Godfather*, I know the criminal world is all about respect, and there's no way I'm going to get my head kicked in on a Thursday night, so immediately drop my eyes and don't acknowledge Kay. The tension in my head tightens.

Abby grips my hand as we turn into the main road. She doesn't like busy roads ever since she learned about the numbers of wild animals killed crossing motorways each year. I grip her hand back in solidarity.

We leave Willowbrook estate behind us as we head for the shops. We walk past the tall, three-storey town houses, with their driveways and private gates. Mum says one day we'll live in a house. It'll be empty and clean. There'll be an art



studio for me and a bedroom for each of us. I get so carried away thinking about how amazing that would be that when a car pulls up slowly, I forget the world is a dangerous place. I stop walking and peer at the side window thinking they might want directions.

‘It’s those boys again,’ Abby says.

The Incredible Bulk on the passenger side rolls down the window, leans out and says, ‘What’s your name, mate?’

I try and avoid eye contact. I mumble something close to my name but quietly and to myself. I squeeze Abby’s hand. ‘Come on.’

‘Don’t go,’ he says, ‘I’m just being friendly.’

Friendly? I grip Abby’s hand tighter and start walking again. ‘Don’t look at them,’ I tell her.

‘Why not?’

‘Just don’t. They’re not . . . good people.’

‘They’re bad people?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How do you know?’

We’re walking fast now but the lad at the wheel is driving slowly, just rolling the car down the hill next to us while we’re almost jogging. It’s hard to blank them. This is equal parts terrifying and horribly awkward. Do I honestly think I can just ignore this situation away? I steal a glance. The Bulk grins.

‘Listen,’ he says. ‘You live on Willowbrook, yeah?’

What do you say to make someone lose interest in you? I’ve managed it so far with teachers, friends, people my own

age, and pretty much every girl in school. My superpower would be invisibility. But for some reason, right now, I can't seem to turn it on.

'How long you lived here then?'

I look away, down at my feet. I feel like a clown, like my shoes don't fit and I'll fall if Abby lets go of my hand.

'Hey, girl,' he says to her. 'What's your name?'

Something kicks in. The minute he talks to Abby it's like the adrenaline doubles in my veins and it's easier to stand up straight. 'Look, just . . . just . . .' I'm stuttering but at least some words are coming.

The one in the driving seat laughs at my attempts to get out half a sentence. 'Chill, man.'

'I've just been hearing about your dad,' the big guy says.

I stop and look at him properly for the first time. It's hard to tell his age. Not a teenager, not a man. He's younger up close. Maybe twenty-four. He barely fits in the car he's so big, and the one arm he has resting out the window ripples as he moves it's so packed with muscle.

'What about our dad?' Abby says.

'What happened to him. Was unlucky.'

'It was ages ago,' I say.

'Either way – sorry for your loss.'

I don't say anything and he shrugs. 'I'm Joe,' he says. 'And you know Kay already.'

He flicks a thumb behind him and there's Kay, slumped in the back seat in the dark. I didn't even notice her. Why is she hanging out with these guys? Then I realize – she must

be dating the big guy, Joe. Duh, course she is. Trouble finds trouble.

‘Let’s just go, can we?’ she says.

Joe turns to her. ‘Just getting to know your mates.’

‘They’re not my mates.’

‘Well, that’s not very nice, is it?’ He turns back to us and leans further out the window. ‘Ignore her. You gonna tell me your name, then?’ he says, nodding towards Abby.

She cuddles up next to me and says, ‘I’m Abby.’

Joe chuckles. ‘Course you are.’

‘And he’s Charlie.’

‘Good. Well good to meet you, yeah? Where you off to then?’

‘Shops,’ Abby says. ‘Charlie burned the dinner. But we’ve got two pounds for chips.’

‘Two pounds? I’m sure we can do better than that.’ He reaches into a rucksack under his feet and pulls out a wad of rolled up money. He peels away a twenty-pound note and offers it through the window to me. ‘Get yourself a family bucket – chicken pieces, sides, drink, all that.’

I stare at it. I can’t remember the last time I had a twenty-pound note to myself.

My fingers flicker at my side but I clamp them into a fist, drag myself back to reality and say, ‘No, you don’t have to do that.’

But he ignores me then flaps the money at Abby instead. She grins as she takes it, like he’s her favourite uncle and it’s her birthday.

‘Thank you, Joe,’ she says.

Kay turns and stares out her window, off down the road, refusing to acknowledge us.

‘You’re welcome,’ Joe says to Abby, then turns his eyes to me. ‘Ever need anything, just shout me, yeah?’

They leave in a squeal of tyres, the road marked black and hot behind them.