

He's after me.

Prologue

When they got off the bus it was dark and had started raining. He thrust his hands deep into his jean pockets for warmth and watched as the two girls linked arms and, heads down, collars up, dashed straight across the road to the towering warehouse.

They reached the shelter of the lighted entrance and their laughter rang out into the night as they shook their hair free of rain. Recently gutted and converted into apartments, the building was already covered in graffiti.

As the bus pulled away the blonde one turned to watch and spotted him in the gloom of the bus shelter.

"Who's that?" he heard her say.

The small dark one peered at him and he took a step back into the shadows, pulling his hood down low over his face.

"Just some pervert," she said and leaned hard on the buzzer. "Come on. Dad's waiting."

Chapter 1

Upstairs, Dad opens the door to us, beaming from ear to ear, a large glass of wine in his hand.

“Welcome!” he says falsely. “What a night! What can I get you?”

“What are we celebrating?”

“The weekend? Spending it together? You both making it here at last?”

I ignore the last comment and cast a critical eye around. It’s the first time I’ve been here. The apartment, basically the top floor of a dockland warehouse, is bright and overheated after the murky dampness outside. Open-plan, with high brick walls and solid oak floors, the windows stretched from floor to ceiling. It must have cost a lot.

So this is where Dad lives. With Jude, his new girlfriend. Or the child-eating vampire, as Livi prefers to call her.

The child-eater is away for the weekend which is the reason we are here. Livi’s been dying to come for ages, only she won’t if Jude is around. She misses Dad.

I didn’t want to come only I couldn’t think of a good enough reason not to. After all, I’ve got nothing better to do, now that Ben has dumped me.

And as for Dad – well, he broke Mum’s heart. I could’ve killed him. Still could.

“I thought we might order in pizza,” he says. “Unless you’d rather go out?”

“Whatever.” Recognizing I sound about twelve I quickly add. “Pizza’s fine. It’s pissing down outside.”

I sit down on the expensive leather sofa, automatically turning a photograph of Jude, perched proudly on the coffee table beside me, down on its smug, smiling face. Livi ignores him. She’s busy scrolling through her text messages with one hand and flicking through the channels on the gigantic TV screen that takes up nearly the whole of one wall with the other.

“Good.” My father pulls his tie off in relief and pours himself another glass of red.

“Can I have one?” asks Livi, without looking up. Dad stares at her uncertainly.

“She’s joking,” I say.

“No, I’m not.”

He looks embarrassed, caught out, like for a moment he’s forgotten just how old Livi actually is. I’m not surprised, she looks way older than fourteen.

Livi is impulsive. She makes out she doesn’t give a stuff about anything but it’s mostly an act. I care less about what people think than she does. Though I’m pretty quiet on the whole.

“Still waters run deep,” says Mum.

Yeah, right. No one’s ever waded around in mine long enough to find out.

I wish I had more luck with boys. I seem to attract them all right. I’m just not that good at keeping them.

Like that boy on the bus. I mean, it was Livi who caught his eye in the first place, but, I know for a fact it was me he fancied.

Not everyone was impressed when Livi started singing. She got some dirty looks which made her sing even louder, and that’s when he turned around and grinned at us.

He was hot. Well, Livi loves an audience, so when we got up to get off at our stop, she

practically danced her way down the aisle, just to attract his attention. It worked. As we passed, he looked up and I rolled my eyes at him and he laughed out loud.

But then his smile faded and our eyes held and that's when it happened. A charge passed through me, like an electric shock.

I've never felt anything like it before. It was intense.

I've never been in love.

All the boys I've ever been out with saw that. Some I dumped because I got bored. Some dumped me because they got confused. Ben dumped me because I wouldn't put out.

No hard feelings, he said.

No hard feelings, I replied. *Let's stay friends.*

And I meant it. Ego bruised a bit, but heart still intact. I never once thought he was The One. Just a nice boy who got fed up waiting.

Nice. Probably the worst thing you can ever say about someone of the opposite sex.

But the boy on the bus was different.

"Anna?"

Dad's studying the pizza menu, his phone in his hand. "Whatever." There I go again.

"Olivia?"

Livi's phone beeps and she scrolls through to read her text. Her face lights up.

"Nothing for me, Dad, I'm going out."

"What?"

"There's a party. I'll get the bus. I won't be late." She jumps to her feet and grabs her bag.

"You are not going anywhere."

Livi looks at him askance. "What do you mean?"

"It's pitch dark and pouring with rain. You are not going out in this. End of."

Here we go. My little sister's about to kick off because she can't get her own way. I've seen it so many times before and it still does my head in.

"I HATE YOU!" screams Livi. "YOU'VE RUINED MY LIFE!" She dashes into the bedroom and slams the door as hard as she can. From inside comes the sound of angry sobbing.

"Happy days!" says Dad with a grimace and tops up his glass again before slumping down beside me on the sofa. He pats my knee, like I'm his mate, his ally in all this.

Irritated, I get to my feet and walk over to the huge window that stretches from the floor to the ceiling, with views over the docks, and lean my head against its cool surface.

It's like a furnace in here. I don't just mean the heating. Livi with her tantrums. Dad with his menopausal affair. Me, overdosing on hormones, getting the hots for someone I'll never ever see again.

Outside the rain, sleeting off the sea, drums horizontally against the glass. Dad's right, it is a filthy night, who would want to be out in this? Down below, small boats clash together in the harbour and the wind whips litter up into the air to disappear over the wall into the gaping black void of the sea.

A movement in the bus shelter across the road catches my eye and I peer down through

the driving rain, trying to focus on the one lone person in the world mad enough to be waiting for a bus in this weather.

I breathe in sharply as a current courses through my veins. He is looking up at me.

Feet planted squarely, hands in pockets, chest thrust out, from this angle only his chin is visible beneath his hood. But I know he can see me looking down at him. And I know he is watching me.

Suddenly I am aware how totally exposed I am up here at the very top of the building with all the lights blazing behind me. Anyone could see me out there in the darkness, any nutter or drifter or sad, lonely loser.

I step back so he can't see me any more. My heart is thudding.
When I look back, he's gone.

*She'd seen him, he could tell by the way she'd suddenly stepped back from the window.
She was up there in the top flat.
Take your time now, he told himself, don't rush things. You've got all the time in the
world. You're good at waiting.*

Chapter 2

Next morning I wake up on edge.

Literally.

On the edge of the bed, with Livi's gaping, unconscious mouth exhaling stale morning breath in my face.

From the bedroom next door comes Dad's red wine snores. He polished off the first bottle when the pizzas arrived and was well into the second by the time I took myself to bed.

I couldn't sleep. Livi was talking on her phone half the night trying to trace the whereabouts of some kid called Ferret who wasn't answering his phone. Ferret! My sister was sending out a missing persons alert for a boy named after a polecat! Now she was dead to the world, exhausted by her failure to track him down.

I can't imagine what it must be like to care about someone that much.

I shower, dig jeans and various layers out of my bag, and go in search of breakfast. There's not much in the cupboards, but I help myself to Jude's seriously healthy muesli, splash skimmed milk over it and drag a bar stool over to the window to eat it. It's like rabbit food. I can't see my dad eating it.

And then, just to show how little you actually know someone, even if you've lived with them all your life, Dad comes out of his bedroom dressed in running gear. I nearly choke on my dried banana and coconut flakes. He opens the fridge, takes out the orange juice and drinks it straight from the carton.

"Coming for a jog?" he asks.

I stare at him, rendered speechless by the sight of my father in very short shorts with a discernable belly, drinking juice from a box.

"Right then," he says, sounding a bit miffed, "See you in a bit." And then he's gone.

I watch through the window as he re-emerges into the square below and does a few stretches. Then he's off, running across the road towards the harbour.

"What you doing?" My sister, bed-haired and panda-eyed, appears at my elbow.

"Look." We stare down at him together, me still spooning dried fruit and oats into my mouth, Livi in pyjamas, yawning and scratching her armpit as he makes his way along the wharf-side, past the boats moored to the wall.

"What is that all that about?" I ask wonderingly as he disappears from sight.

"It's the child-eating viper. It's got to be. She's told him to get rid of his belly."

"What does she see in him?"

"What does he see in *her*, you mean!" says Livi fiercely and I nod in agreement. But we both know what he sees in her, though we'd never admit it, not even to each other

Livi sniffs. "I meant, by the way, what are you doing today?"

"Don't know. Going into town I guess. Meeting Zoe." The weekend stretches empty before me. I can't bear the thought of hanging round here with nothing to do. "I think I might go home after that."

"Me too. I'm not stopping here if Dad's going to keep me locked up."

"You're not a prisoner!" I laugh, but then I add, "He's not going to like it, you know, if both of us do a runner. He's made plans for us."

“Tough. Wait for me, I won’t be long.”

But my sister takes ages, as usual, on the phone to her mates, changing her arrangements each time she talks to someone new. In the end, I get fed up with hanging about so I scrawl a note to Dad to tell him about the change of plan. I feel a bit mean, walking out on him like that.

Then I remember he walked out on us and I slam the door behind me.

At the bus stop I lean back against the shelter and pull some gum from my pocket. Is this what my life has come to? A whole weekend stretching out before me – acres and acres of emptiness.

“Thanks,” says a voice and I look up in surprise at the hand outstretched before me. My heart misses a beat. It’s him. The boy on the bus.

“Where’s your mate?” he asks. Then he prompts, “Can I have some?”

“Cheek!” I say but drop a piece of gum obediently into his hand.

“Doesn’t always work,” he says.

Close up, he looks about eighteen or nineteen. He’s not bad looking, quite fit, you could say. He’s grinning at me. His teeth are white against his olive skin and slightly crooked which makes him even fitter. His hair is dark – darker than mine, I want to touch it ...

“Where’s your mate?” he repeats. “The crazy one?”

My mate? The penny drops and so do my hopes. It’s Livi he’s after, not me.

“Why?” I say. “You interested?”

“Could be.” He smiles at me lazily, his eyes heavy-lidded. “But not as interested as I am in you.”

I feel myself turning red but then, thank goodness, the bus arrives and he stands back. “After you,” he says and I step up on to the platform and fumble around in my bag for my bus pass and I can’t find it.

The driver is grumpy, impatient, tutting at my slowness, and my face gets hotter and hotter. I root through the contents of my bag, trying not to show my pyjamas, with ever so grown-up jumping sheep on them, and all the rest.

At last he waves me on and I make my way to a seat, my cheeks burning, hoping and dreading at the same time that he will come and sit beside me.

But when I sit down, he’s still standing half-on, half-off the platform, like he’s waiting for someone.

“Get on or get off,” says the bus driver, grumpy old man. “I haven’t got all day.”

“It’s OK, she’s here now ...” he says, and steps back down on to the pavement. But his voice is cut off as the driver closes the doors. Through the window I can see my sister running, full-pelt, towards the bus. Towards him.

As the bus pulls away, Livi comes to a stumbling halt and he throws out his arms to save her.

The last thing I see, as I slump down in my seat, is the pair of them in each other’s arms, making identical, one-fingered gestures of derision at the driver, then laughing hysterically.

I swear under my breath and the woman in front of me turns round and gives me a look of disgust.

At the shopping centre I meet up with Zoe and we go for a coffee. She’s recently been

dumped by Max, a guy from our A Level Sociology class, and she's finding it really hard. We were double-dating, Zoe and Max, Ben and me. Soon after Ben ended it, Max followed suit.

She's going on and on about him, as usual.

"You've got to move on, Zo," I butt in when I get a chance. "Get over it. I have!"

"I can't!" she wails. "I've tried, but it's no good. It's over a month now since we split up and I *still* love him."

She was in much deeper than me. I sigh deeply, trying to show a bit of understanding. "It's six months since my mum and dad split up and she's wrecked."

"Really?" Zoe stares at me. "How does she cope?"

The truth is, my mother doesn't. OK, she functions on an every day level, but that's all she is doing, *functioning*. Since Dad left her for Jude, all the life's seeped out of her. It's like every day she fades away a bit more like an old photograph. I'm afraid one day she'll disappear altogether.

I will *never* let a guy do that to me.

"I read in a magazine once that breaking up is a form of bereavement," says Zoe.

"Really?"

"Yeah, only it's worse in a way. Especially if the corpse is still around, chatting someone else up before your eyes."

We go shopping to cheer ourselves up, trawling in and out of stores. Zoe spends a small fortune on things she'll never use, but my heart's not in it. I don't know what's the matter with me today.

"Isn't that your sister," says Zoe. I follow her eyes and spot Livi, easily identifiable by her cropped, blonde hair and her loud laugh. She's in the middle of a noisy group. I recognize a couple of them from when I was at school. Trouble-makers. At least she's not still with Bus Boy.

Zoe shakes her head in disbelief. "What is she doing with them?"

People are attracted to Livi like bees to a flower. She stands head and shoulders above the rest of the weeds. But the trouble is, she attracts wasps too. There's one buzzing round her now, hands everywhere, touching her every chance he gets ...

Get your hands off my sister! I scream in my head.

"Anna!" Livi sees me and immediately detaches herself from his clutches, bounding over to greet me. I know what she's doing, she doesn't want me to see who she's hanging out with, but it's too late. The boy follows behind, hovering over her like a hornet.

"Who's this? Aren't you going to introduce me?"

Livi looks nervous.

"This is Steven. Ferret, this is my sister, Anna."

So this is the celebrated Ferret. I study him. He's not that tall for a boy, about the same height as her, with fair hair sticking out from beneath a black beanie. You could say he's good looking, but his face is too thin, his nose is too long, and his eyes are just a bit too small for his face.

"Ferret," I say. "Suits you."

The eyes harden. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. It's your name, not mine."

Livi laughs nervously. "His name's Steven Ferris. That's why he's called Ferret."

“Right.”

He stares me out, pale eyes narrowed.

When I drop my gaze he gives a bark of a laugh, like he’s won, and turns away.

I’m furious.

“What are you doing with that?” I hiss. Livi’s face falls.

“Loads of girls like him. He’s dead fit.”

“No he’s not, Liv. You can do so much better than him!”

She shakes her head. “You don’t know him!”

“I don’t want to know him!”

“Get lost!” she says and now *she* turns away.

“Livi! Don’t be daft.”

“Piss off!” she yells at me.

Behind her, her mates burst out into shrieks of laughter.

All except Ferret who stands there staring silently at me, a twisted, malevolent smile on his pale, pinched face.

Sooo, he thinks to himself. He's getting her measure now. She's one of those girls who thinks she knows everything. Thinks she's better than everyone else. Well, you can be too clever for your own good. He could teach her a thing or two. He could show her.

Chapter Three

Confirm.

His profile comes up. I click on the picture to make it bigger and my heart leaps into my mouth.

It's him!

How did he know my name?

A new message has appeared.

The door opens and I nearly jump out of my skin. It's Mum.

"Don't do that!"

"What?"

"Sneak up on me like that!"

"I thought you'd have heard me coming in. Are you all right, Anna?"

"Fine."

"Livi?"

"Fine."

"I'm sorry, darling, I wouldn't have gone out if I'd known you were on your own."

"Mum, I'm fine."

She comes and stands beside me. God she wants to talk. "Decided not to stay at your father's then?"

"No."

Silence as she waits for more. After a while the penny drops. "Are you on Facebook?"

"Yes."

She looks at the screen. I minimize it.

"Who are you talking to?"

"A friend."

She gives up. "Right then, I'm off to bed. Don't stay up all night."

"I won't."

As soon as she's out of the door, I open the screen and click on the message. It says,

Enjoy your chocolate fix?

What chocolate fix?

Suddenly I jump to my feet and grab my bag, pulling out the contents. Phone, wallet, door keys, make-up, hair brush, tissues, chewing-gum, couple of receipts.

And a champagne chocolate heart.

I log on to Facebook chat:

Thanks. How did you get it into my bag?

It's a secret.

How did you know how to reach me?

That's a secret too.

You shouldn't have.

Why not?

You don't know me.

I could get to know you.

Yes you could.

Want to meet up next week?

Yes.

I'll be in touch.

I close down the computer and stare at the chocolate heart. It's tacky and overpriced, but apart from the occasional Valentine card over the years, it's the first time anyone has ever declared their interest in me through a symbol.

My head sees the shiny paper.

My heart sees a dark-haired boy who's watched *When Harry Met Sally* and has worked out a way of getting in touch with me.

That is so romantic.

He felt restless now, bored. He needed to get out for a while, he needed his fix. He was almost out of the door before he remembered to change into dark clothes. You don't want to be seen, he reminded himself. Stay out of sight, be invisible.

It was amazing what you could get up to when no one knew you were there.