

3.

Of all the things John missed since he'd been sober, hangovers was the least of them. Looking down at Helena as she screwed her eyes against the light from the window whose curtains he'd opened moments earlier, sympathy awoke in him. He knew how she felt. But he didn't judge. How could he after his past?

'You need to get up, love,' he said, bending towards her. The smell of alcohol rose up, made him wince. He pulled back the duvet so that it landed in a heap at her feet.

'Bastard,' she whined sleepily, feeling blindly for the duvet and scoffing at the fresh air that now touched her.

'It's already eight-thirty.'

'What?' she squealed, springing upright. 'Why didn't you wake me sooner?' Eyes smudged with last night's mascara struggled to focus. A bitter taste lined her mouth.

As she wilted back to the mattress he let out a laugh. 'I tried to, Helena. You should've heard the things you said. Such filth!' He turned and made his way downstairs.

'Very funny,' she shouted after him, her stomach flexing. Swallowing a mouthful of saliva, she steadied herself, trying to hold down the bile that wanted to pour from her.

Once in the kitchen, John began fixing some breakfast. Upstairs Helena made a desperate run for the toilet and retched noisily, and John realised he didn't miss drinking. Not one bit

By the time the kettle had boiled, she clomped down the stairs and slid onto the stool by the breakfast bar, turning her head from a shaft of sunlight. He put a glass of water in her shaking hands. 'Drink up,' he said, 'or you'll never get going.'

'You're a sadist,' she replied, sipping with her eyes closed. She bobbed to the sound of her pulse in her head, the symphony a dream from which she hadn't yet woken.

'And when you're done with that,' he added, turning from the counter with a cup of tea in one hand, a plate of buttered croissants in the other, 'drink this and eat as many of these as you can. You'll be thankful for them later.' He headed upstairs to look for the ironing board.

She sighed but knew he was right. She certainly wasn't going to argue. She decided she'd sit out her hangover quietly and get to Antonia's as soon as she was able. And there she'd leave John, but only for the morning. She loved him, needed him. Hers was a sonata lost without him. How could she ever have doubted it?

After she'd given up on the tea and made pitiful attempts at a croissant, John reappeared in the kitchen doorway, the ironing board tucked under one arm, her phone, buzzing silently, in the other. 'I don't recognise the number,' he said.

She did, but had never saved it – too scared John would work out whose number it was. And now he'd seen it, she didn't know what to do. She couldn't answer it in front of him, but the longer she waited the more she gave herself away. 'It's Rose,' she lied breathlessly, and instantly wished she'd said any other name. Why make the lie more complicated than it already was?

She slipped from the stool and made for the front room, her heart pounding in her chest. Waited till she knew she was out of earshot before answering. 'I can't talk,' she said before the caller had a chance to say hello. 'I told you not to ring me unless it's

when we'd agreed. I can't believe you did that yesterday after my audition. John was waiting, and what if he'd heard us?'

'I can't help myself,' the voice said.

She could hear he was trying to be flattering; but her thoughts were only with getting caught. 'I can't do this right now,' she whispered. 'Don't...' She trailed off, wondering if she'd already said too much; if John had heard her. She wanted so much to explain everything, how Rose had forced her to face her fears and where those fears had led her; how the symphony of her regrets had brought such clarity. But she couldn't. To voice the words seemed to make them false. 'Don't call me,' she said, and hung up.

She continued pacing, unsure of what to do, how to act – wondering if she was capable of pretending nothing was the matter. She'd always thought herself such an accomplished performer: she'd had to be to succeed as a musician, and those same skills had always helped her act her way out of anything. But since last night, she realised she wasn't so accomplished. How could she face John now?

The phone buzzed again. Staring at it, she listened once more for John's footsteps along the hall. Nothing. Silence surrounded her. If it hadn't been for the phone in her hand and the lingering refrain in her mind, she would've welcomed it.

'Helena?' John called from the kitchen. He didn't sound angry. Not even suspicious.

Creeping from the front room, Helena poked her head round the kitchen door. 'Yes?' She pressed the phone screen into her palm so he wouldn't see it.

'Everything ok with Rose?' he asked without looking up from the shirt sleeve he was struggling to iron.

The phone stopped ringing. For the first time she felt as if the walls had stopped closing in. 'Sure,' she mumbled.

'Really? Just like that?'

'Oh, you know,' she said, turning the phone off and placing it on the counter, 'it's not worth getting into again.'

'I find that hard to believe after the way you two acted last night.'

'John, trust me,' she said, her voice firmer than she intended. 'It's nothing Rose and I weren't able to clear up. Just girl stuff.' She was sure he could tell she was lying, but could think of no other way out. Before he had the chance to press her any further, she lifted the shirt from his hands and reached for the iron. 'Let me,' she said, nudging him out the way. 'It'll be quicker if I do it.'

'Thanks,' he murmured, suspicious of her willingness to take over while still so hungover. He paused, waiting to see if she would say anything more. But she worked at the shirt in silence, and turned to avoid his gaze. Something of the movement reminded him of the previous day when he had picked her up after her audition, the exact way she hid her face from him. It had unsettled him then, and did so now. 'Fine, Helena,' he said. 'I'd better shave.' Leaving her with the shirt, he made his way upstairs.

As she heard the bathroom door close and lock, she knew she'd got away with it. Had managed it. Just.

Helena slid from the car seat and reached in for her handbag stuffed with make-up and headache pills. But as she went to shut the door, she bent in again. Gave John a peck on the cheek and smiled. 'See you at the wedding.'

'See you then,' he said, smiling in return. An unspoken moment passed between them before she turned and walked away.

He watched her scale the steps to Antonia's house, her bag bobbing in one hand, her bridesmaid's dress, wrapped in clear plastic, in the other. Antonia opened the front door and threw him a wave. Her father, Gordon, already dressed in the top hat and tails hired for the occasion, appeared behind her and waved as well. He was already beaming with pride. Waving back, John watched them disappear into the house, wondering if Rose was there already, and how she'd be with Helena. He hadn't believed Helena's explanation about the phone call one bit, and doubted, therefore, that anything had been resolved with Rose either.

The thought running through his head with few answers to calm it, he checked his watch. He was running late, and with the half-hour drive back he knew time would be tight. They still had to get ready and, unlike the bridal party, had to arrive at the church early to check everything was in order. He impatiently drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. A moment later, Richard emerged, dark circles lining his eyes. 'How's the head?' John asked as he approached.

Climbing in, Richard mumbled something under his breath.

John stepped on the accelerator and pulled into the road. 'You know, I still think you should've stayed at my house last night,' John said. 'It's bad luck to see the bride the morning of the wedding.'

'Everyone says that. But I liked the idea of having one last night of debauchery before...' He shrugged furtively. 'Before it becomes legitimate.'

‘So, essentially,’ John smirked, ‘you’re a perv.’

‘I know what I am,’ Richard said indignantly, smirking in return.

They hit the Marsh Road and passed The Lamb Inn where they’d eaten the night before. In the bright morning sun it looked so different. Fields surrounded it, other than where the road wound a path across the featureless marshland. Sheep wandered from spot to spot, munching on tufts of grass. Despite the harsh winter chill, the landscape seemed at rest, as though it was most comfortable when stricken by cold. With the coming spring, it would transform and bloom into life. Wild flowers would adorn its fields. Butterflies would flit from plant to plant. And yet in the depths of midwinter softened only by the unbroken sunlight, it looked anything but desolate.

Earlier that morning, Richard had returned on foot to collect his car. He’d driven as carefully as he could to avoid being picked up; if he’d been caught drunk driving the morning of his wedding there would have been hell to pay. The nerves he’d felt then seemed a distant memory now, replaced by something far more pressing. ‘Do you think I’m doing the right thing?’ he asked suddenly.

John puffed a cigarette alight. ‘You love her, right?’

‘You’re just nervous because you’ve got a big day ahead of you,’ John said. ‘Besides, you’re meant to be shitting it on your wedding day.’

‘Is that supposed to make me feel better?’ The smoke from John’s cigarette caught in Richard’s throat and made him feel like vomiting.

‘Not in the least,’ John chuckled. ‘Just to make you shut the fuck up and stop bothering me. I’ve got my own thoughts to think about.’

‘Ah!’ Richard said. ‘So are you going to do the honourable thing?’

‘With Helena?’ John replied, feigning surprise. ‘Maybe I’m like you. Maybe I like living in sin.’

‘I’m just saying you could do a lot worse.’

‘And why,’ John said, his voice softened by the thought, ‘would I want anyone else?’

For the rest of the journey they didn’t feel the need for words. As they pulled up at John’s house, Richard sighed deeply and slapped his palms on his knees. ‘This is it then!’ he said loudly in a high-pitched voice.

John led him to the front door. ‘Not yet. We’ll go in, put the kettle on and get ready. Your shirt’s all ironed – Helena took over, so don’t worry. It’s a good job. Then we’ll drive to the church and see Reverend Davies. Everything’s in order.’

Richard sighed again, but felt eased. ‘You’re the boss,’ he said, and followed John in. As they entered, John noticed a dark scuff on the carpet and realised, much to his annoyance, that he must’ve had dirt on the hem of his trousers the night before, and that taking his shoes off had been pointless.

They did exactly as John had said. Put the kettle on. Sipped a cup of tea. Dressed in the top hats and tails they’d hired. As ever, Richard wore his effortlessly, a testament to wearing a suit day in, day out for work. John’s suit, cut identically to Richard’s, hung awkwardly from his hulking shoulders. His thick hands, toughened by years of hard labour, poked out from the sleeves as if they didn’t belong there.

As midday approached they made their way to the church. The grounds, desperate for attention, stretched around on all but one side, with the main road along the west wall that kicked up dust onto the church’s stained-glass windows, dulling them. A grey stone arch led to a spire with gargoyles whose grimaces had been weather-beaten to ill-defined smiles on toothless jaws. Inside wooden pews sat side by side, row upon row. The aisle led to a modest but pretty altar covered with gold-trimmed crimson

cloth, with a an eerily-lifelike Christ, his face contorted in the moment of passion, hung on a crucifix above it from chains that looked too thin to support its weight.

In many ways it was not the church Richard and Antonia would have freely chosen; it showed signs of disrepair most turned their noses up at. But Antonia and Rose's parents had been married there many years before and so, despite their reservations, they'd chosen it to honour the memory of the mother for whom Antonia had shed tears for not being there.

Reverend Davies, an affable man in his fifties with smiling eyes and short grey hair parted crookedly, waited to greet them. He oozed the old-school charm of a clergy happily out of touch with modern life. As Richard and John entered, he ran through some of the more laborious details of the day. Where the guests should sit. The order of service. He'd seen grooms wracked with nerves a thousand times, and knew how to ease their discomfort.

After a while the guests began to arrive. Those with cars John waved off towards the car park at the rear. Once parked, they made small talk with Richard and John in the front courtyard and waited to be shown inside. Because of the cold, everyone took their seats to wait in the warm, leaving Richard and John alone like sentries, counting down the seconds.

John could see Richard was working himself into a state. He wrung his hands nervously and sighed deeply when a quiet moment permitted. John made an effort to appear relaxed, realising Richard would be nervous no matter how he acted, but would be a lot better at hiding it if he took the lead. He looked at his watch. 'Not long now,' he said as they finished showing Richard's boss inside.

Richard threw him an awkward glance. 'I know. I just don't like hearing it.'

'You'll be fine.' His phone buzzed in his pocket. 'Helena,' he said, answering it.

Richard watched as John nodded to himself a few times before hanging up. ‘What did she say?’

‘They’re on their way.’

Richard’s face drained of all colour. The shaking in his limbs was noticeable. ‘Oh, God,’ he said.

It struck John how funny Richard was being – he the success, the solicitor used to dealing with murderers, thieves and rapists, their fate in his hands as he stood before judges and magistrates. He couldn’t help but laugh at the thought of Richard acting then as he was now – a bundle of nerves, his face drained of colour. ‘Shut up,’ he chuckled breathlessly. ‘Pull yourself together.’

‘Right, right.’ Richard shifted uneasily in the highly-polished, Italian leather shoes he’d bought especially for the wedding.

Richard’s parents arrived and strode towards them. His father, David, a stout man with greying sideburns and a paunch stuffed into the same dark suit he’d been rolling out since Richard had been born, raised his hands with delight. Trailing behind him was Richard’s mother Angela, a plump woman who’d spent too long in the sun, whose pink dress clashed with her purple shoes. She raised a thin smile, as though the slightest nudge would prompt a fit of tears.

‘My boy!’ David said, embracing his son. ‘How are the nerves?’ He grasped Richard’s shoulders in his stubby hands. ‘I remember when I married your mother.’ His voice was low, conspiratorial, as though Richard was finally joining the exclusive club of men whose freedom had been lost to monogamy. ‘But it all turned out for the best.’ He laughed, his jowls wobbling nearly as much as his belly.

Angela approached and gave him a tight squeeze. 'Richard, you look lovely.' Her voice cracked. A tear teetered on her eyelash. 'Just lovely.' From a pocket she produced a tissue and dabbed the corners of her eyes.

They continued to make small talk until the cold outside gave Angela something else that she could, at any moment, cry about. Wishing Richard and John all the best, they entered the warmth of the church and found their seats.

John's phone buzzed again. Richard watched on as he spoke again to Helena. John hung up and smiled wryly. 'They're round the corner.'

Richard brought a trembling hand to his face. 'Where are the rings?' he stuttered, wracking his brain for where he'd last seen them.

'Don't worry,' John said, patting the breast pocket of his suit. 'Safe and sound.'

Richard's shoulders relaxed and some of the colour returned to his face. 'I guess this is it,' he said. He sounded nervous again, as though John hadn't calmed him at all.

'I'm still waiting on my Dad.'

Richard realised he'd forgotten half the things he'd meant to keep an eye on. 'Shouldn't he have been here by now?'

'Yeah,' John said, and pushed buttons on his phone. A frown crept onto his face. Dialed. Waited. No answer. He hung up the phone. 'I guess he must've left his phone at home.' He knew how unreliable his father could be, especially since the car accident that had claimed John's mother and made his father withdraw into himself, but felt a bitter pang. It was as if his father missing the wedding diminished the happy occasion. More than anything, John wanted to show his father that there was still happiness to be found in the world.

Reverend Davies appeared at the door, a hand resting on his watch. 'Is the bride close by?' He absently tapped the watch face. 'We really should get started as soon as possible.'

'Just waiting on my father,' John said.

Reverend Davies smiled cordially. 'As soon as we can, yes?' His voice wavered erratically between the loudness he needed for his sermons and his natural instinct to whisper. 'It's best to start on the right track.' He disappeared into the church again.

'John?' Richard asked in a thin voice. 'We can't wait all day. We're already running late.' He smiled, but could see John's reluctance to give up on his father.

'I know,' John sighed, his eyes blank. 'I just wanted him here.' His phone buzzed again. Helena. 'Ok,' he murmured. His thumb wavered over the button that would connect her call. 'You'd better go in.'

'Cheer up, mate,' Richard said, his leg jittering as he turned towards the entrance. 'You're not the one about to throw your freedom away.' Laughing nervously, he disappeared inside.

A minute later John hung up the phone, re-entered the church and took his place beside Richard at the altar. Antonia was on her way.

It seemed so strange to be standing in front of all the guests with their eyes fixed on them so keenly, poised with excitement. But both Richard and John knew their focus wouldn't be on them for long. Soon enough, a car pulled up outside.

Richard bobbed nervously. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,' he whispered.

John patted him on the shoulder and smiled. As the organ player took to the keys and began the Wedding March, they turned to face the door. The guests, seated on the left for Antonia, the right for Richard, stood and trained their eyes on the bride's entrance. They held their breath.

Richard's heart pounded in his chest. This was it. He broke into a sweat. His palms were suddenly clammy, and all he wanted to do was wipe them on his jacket. But he didn't want to ruin it. They hung rigidly by his sides, fists clenching and unclenching as he waited for the curtain of light at the door to darken.

Antonia appeared. Her father Gordon held her arm and walked alongside her with a smile as broad as his face. By the look of him, it was a happier day for him than the bride. But nothing could take this moment away from his daughter.

The bridal gown was everything she'd wanted it to be: a slender, flowing white satin dress, plain but for some intricate lacework across the bust. Her shoulders were bare save for two thin straps. A single pearl hung from a delicate gold necklace. She clutched a modest bouquet of white lilies in memory of the mother who'd shared her Christian name with them and had taken the family name in this church. The flowers barely disguised the shaking in her hands. Her veil glistened in the multi-coloured sunlight from the stained-glass windows lining the church, making a kaleidoscope shimmer around her. In its rainbow folds, she was utterly radiant.

The guests gasped. Richard's mother sobbed noisily. Step by step, Antonia's eyes fixed on Richard. In that moment he knew he loved her more than he could put into words. If he'd been asked then, he couldn't have said what anyone else looked like.

As Antonia made her way up the aisle proudly accompanied by her father, Rose appeared behind her. John instantly felt relief wash over him. She'd made it, putting the argument Helena had lied so much about aside to be there for her sister. And she looked beautiful. Her egg-shell blue bridesmaid dress made the most of the straight lines of her body. Her hair was elaborately styled, held in place by a myriad of clips and her sharp cheekbones had been masterfully plumped with rouge. As she walked, her smile met John's. She blushed, and maybe he did in return. He was proud of her.

And then Helena appeared behind Rose. John couldn't take his eyes off her. She seemed to glide. Her blonde hair, curled into beautiful ringlets, framed her features. Her dress emphasised her breasts and the smallness of her waist and her slender fingernails were painted the slightest shade of blue. A picture of elegance, she could have been a model, fit for any bridal magazine cover.

As she neared the altar and took her place next to Rose, it dawned on John. He loved her more than he'd ever thought possible.

She smiled at him and his heart melted.