

Chapter One

Lisa opens the front door in a dressing gown. Silky smooth, straight out of a B-movie. A pink-lipstick mouth opens but there's no sound. Bizarre ventriloquism happens when, from someplace inside the house, John's horrible omnipresent voice says, 'Who is it, love?'

Doris hasn't run for years. Never athletic, even as a child. The sight of her best friend's bare feet follows her home to 42 Utkinton Street, to her and John's home.

Inside, she's surprised there aren't dust sheets on the furniture. The clock on the mantelpiece ticks a hollow sound, so she vengefully removes the battery from its insides. Disembowelling it gives her a strange pleasure, but time hasn't stopped soon enough for the empty oven, which she'd switched on hours ago. It has cut out but it's warmed the kitchen up nicely.

She chooses red first, then rosé, then white. She likes the little clouds the red and rosé leave in the glass, streaking the colour a little.

It feels like there should be damp, dirty patches on the wall where stuff like fridges and wardrobes used to be. It annoys her that the furniture is in the same place as if nothing has happened, so she drinks in the bathroom. Sits on the lid of the toilet seat.

Downstairs, John's Christmas present stays unopened beneath the artificial Christmas tree – one they bought in B&Q in a January sale early on in their marriage. Every year John said the tree didn't owe them anything. Her present is just a small box wrapped up nicely because what matters is inside on a cream piece of card which tells him: *We're expecting a baby girl.*

As she listens to herself piss, she sees there's only one toothbrush in the pot in the sink. She thinks she hears a weight on the stairs, a hand turning a door handle, but there isn't. There's only Doris. Doormat Doris. The chanting continues in her head over and over. Through onion tears, she remembers through a gauze sentences, words, promises, as insignificant as the shopping lists and till receipts for the presents in her handbag, the food, the wine she's bought to celebrate the Christmas period. Doormat.

Her voice has walked out and left her too; carried itself down the stairs to someplace else where it might be listened to. 'Your fucking wife! That's who it is, love.' That's what she should have said to John, but she's never been good at thinking of a comeback on the spot. Besides, she has no courage to fight back, to admonish, because she is a damp firework.

If she could speak to them, she would say they have exploded her heart, released firecrackers through her senses. She wishes she could call the police, the ambulance, the fire brigade, to arrest and anaesthetise and waterboard the bastards.

If she screws up one eye, she can see the colour of the glass rolling pin on the bathroom tiles. It's a noisy one because it was expensive, carefully chosen by Doormat with the aid of an assistant in Tesco called Freda who had a nasty twitch in one eye. Freda's twitch got excited when Doris loaded her shopping trolley with twelve bottles of wine, four colours of each hue. She and John used to go on alcohol percentage and special offers but Freda opened her eyes to the aromas and blends and whatnot.

They make her drink. Guzzle until her stomach is a well, so full it begins to pour over the top and trickle down Utkinton Street, a red rivulet, an S shape all the way to the corner shop and back. They still make her drink, sip it if she has to, faces at the bottom of the glass. She keeps drinking, swaying, and they are still watching. Then it is dark, the colour of a drinker's liver.

This hurt is like a lit cigarette dabbed across the ribs. A grenade in her chest. Cock John and Twat Lisa stir cocktails with the linchpin. She breathes air through a damp handkerchief. Delirious, she lies on the cold tiles; sleep wants to take her.

As her mind swims in and out of consciousness, she sees herself driving, rain glistening on the road and smearing the windscreen. She swerves to miss a cat. John is a backseat driver, throwing commands out of his loose mouth, and Lisa's bound hand and foot in the back of the van with the paintbrushes he's left there after a job. She imagines herself driving to the middle of nowhere. No other cars and no other

sound except John asking, asking, 'Where are we? Why are we here? Where are we going?' No one can see them for miles and miles.

The telephone rings in the downstairs kitchen. Doris washes her face in the sink, a vial for her tears. The sound of the water splashing on her skin takes her back to the trip the three of them took to Abersoch beach just a week ago, to the ancient cry of gulls above and their secret white bodies playing tunes in the churlish sky.

They stopped for a packed lunch in a layby just outside Bala. A wedge of cheese, Branston pickle and salad cream, just as John liked. He was wearing one of his best shirts, which fit his once rugby-playing physique rather well. Lately, even on weekends, he has liked to wear a shirt.

The three-hour journey to Abersoch in John's van was worth it when they saw the sea open its arms out wide, without limits. John accelerated at the vision and they let out a loud yell of excitement. Then the road shouted 'ARAF' so he did, and Doris was glad because she was carsick by then and he'd taken the last bend like he was on a racetrack. She'd opened the window and rain gently touched her bare arm like the caress of thin lips.

They could see the sea out of almost every window in the caravan, like a gallery of watercolours. Doris had packed three bags: one for John, one for herself and one for food. Lisa, tottering on her high heels, carried in a sage-green suitcase. Doris hoped she wouldn't be wearing them for the whole holiday, tapping away on the floor like a typist with a deadline when they should be relaxing, switching off from all that.

The walls were thin; they could hear John emptying the bagpipe of his bladder. They shared a look. 'The fish and chips are bound to be good here,' Lisa said from her bedroom with the door wide open. Doris caught a glimpse of her stuffing something black into the top drawer; it must have been underwear because Lisa only wears green or taupe clothes. Gold on very special occasions.

'Let's get some for supper,' John said from the bathroom, then he started singing 'The Reasons I Love You'.

John and Doris were in the largest bedroom because they'd paid for the caravan for a long weekend, then invited Lisa last minute because John said she'd pay for the petrol. Although Doris knew the caravan didn't cost much because it was out of season, she liked Lisa so she didn't grumble. Lisa didn't like sleeping in a bunk bed so she chose the other double room. Doris smiled privately: if she weren't with John, she'd have slept on the top bunk and wished Lisa was on the bottom one.

On the beach, John rolled up his trousers for a dip in the sea, exposing his tender white skin marbled with blue veins, which surprised Doris because he was normally shy about his body. The wind played with the sea, and black slimy seaweed was spewed on the beach as if the sea had eaten too much of it.

Lisa looked for shells and pebbles, then wrote her name in the sand in capital letters, except for the 'i' which was lower case and had a love heart for a dot. Doris watched the clouds move. She would have been happy to stay on the beach and make an omelette later for everyone but John and Lisa had fish and chips on their mind and, even if there had been a vote, she would have been in the minority. That's how it was for her.

John said he was too tired to drive and, because Lisa had hurt the back of her leg doing a yoga pose, Doris was pushed into taking her first driving lesson. Lisa had taken up yoga after her mum passed away. The strain was caused by a cat- or dog-related pose, or something related to an animal – she couldn't remember which. John said he knew a good physio who could sort it out, and laughed like a hyena.

There was a strange smell coming from the engine of the van as Doris drove down a one-way street. 'You need to change gear,' he sniggered, like she was a fool.

Doris fumbled the van into a parking space behind a pub. It was painted a sickly yellow hue. From inside the van, she watched John and Lisa chat and gesture. Her legs had turned to jelly from the drive.

'Two for one on them, love,' an assistant said, wearing a necklace of yellow-and-white beads that reminded Doris of daisies in her mother's back garden.

The traditional sea-side shop sold buckets and spades, surfboards and postcards displayed in holders that made circles on the spot. The blackboard by the door used to say *10% off Snorkels*, but it looked like *Skol* now, which made John laugh. There was a small yellow spade just right for a child's hand that

asked to be picked up. Doris hurriedly put it back, bought a postcard instead – one of the beaches in Abersoch – except the sea shimmered like it was wearing a diamanté dress.

After supper, John wanted a couple of pints in the pub while Lisa and Doris spent a few quid on the arcade machines. Lisa jiggled around to a song someone kept paying for on the juke box. Over and over. Doris never thought for one moment who might be placing their coins in the slot. She started drinking pineapple juice because she was full of gas after all the Coke she'd drunk at the start of the evening. John said she needed the practice, so she'd be driving back to the caravan.

There was a tear in one eye and the smell of white wine on Lisa's breath when she confessed how aggrieved she'd been by her mother's will, which left half of the house to her brother Steve, who hadn't seen his mother in years – years! Oh, the injustice and the betrayal after all that she'd sacrificed for her mother and all that John had done to decorate the house and repair the washing machine and the tumble dryer. She said this was her first holiday in years. After giving her mother bed baths for longer than she cared to remember, Lisa said that the day she passed away was the best and worst day of her life. John and Doris listened like the best counsellors in town. It was late by the time they got back to the caravan and then John was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

'John said I drove home like a dream, bless him. It's not often he compliments me. Night, Lisa.'

Doris was going to tell him about the baby – their first – it being such a romantic spot overlooking the sea, with the stars and a full silver moon, and it being their wedding anniversary. She was going to ask him to walk with her, take a short stroll down to the beach, just the two of them, dip their toes in the water. And then she was going to tell him. He was bound to ask her if she was sure, and she was. A scan showed their little kidney bean. Not even Lisa knew.

John snored – he always did after a lot of ale, so Doris crept into the spare room, climbed onto the top bunk. Next door, Lisa was awake; Doris heard her tapping on her phone. The rain started gently at first then it hammered and rebounded, grazing and bruising the tin roof, making it cry out in metallic-sounding pain. Doris listened hard for a while, wondering if the fish in the sea knew it was raining or were oblivious to what was going on above the line of the sea and sky.

Her bed was warmer now; she felt happy and safe in the warmth, listening to the rain and the wind, with their baby growing inside her. She imagined a skylight for their child so she could see the moon and the stars.

Lisa must have been asleep because the tension had gone out from under the roof. If Lisa were outside in the wind and rain, her unruly red hair would have expanded and ruffled like feathers.

Before breakfast, they walked along the beach. Lisa's name had vanished so she wrote it again. She said the sea looked grey and empty without sailing boats or swimmers. John offered to get in for a swim but she touched him on the arm and said there was no need. He thought the sea looked ravenous, like it wanted to devour anything in its way. Nobody asked what Doris saw in the sea. Now she'd say a mirror.

When they got back to 42 Utkinton Street, the house was cold and damp. John talked about foreign countries – Greece, Spain, Ibiza – where the temperature was so hot you could sit outside in nothing but a T-shirt all night long. He talked about hotels with all-inclusive deals that she'd never heard of before. It was all foreign.

The next morning, Doris was up early. She had the radio on – Christmas songs – while she was washing up. The presenter said snow was forecast for Christmas Eve from around lunchtime. How perfect. But then she heard the front door close.

'John?' she called, then watched him hop in his van, a bag slung on the passenger seat.

Doris wakes up on the bathroom floor; the tiles swim around, so they look prettier than they are. She strokes the wall; it glows with cold. A cluster of toenails and fingernails peek-a-boo behind the toilet, and the scum of congealed skin, hair and snot hide behind the sink. Skin: it's just epidermis and dermis. Did John and Lisa make love in this house? In the caravan? The precision and predictability of the tiles on the floor insult her colliding emotion.

Doris uses the basin to haul her sandbag body up from the bathroom floor, checks she still has a reflection in the mirror. She sits on the toilet with her head in her hands, grime clinging to her clothes and hair, her socks red from the blood and the red wine. Less than a week ago they were in Abersoch together.

Time put on a pair of stilettos then to walk around the house slowly and noisily, hour after hour. Perhaps he'd gone to collect a Christmas present for her? A last-minute purchase? She didn't think to put on the heating just for one. The lounge flickered green and orange from the television hour after hour. The smudgy orange streetlight kept her company through till morning. She tried each seat in the lounge. Much later, she remembered to eat and smiled at the light that popped into the kitchen when the fridge door opened. The turkey was in there, a drawer full of vegetables. Her stomach clenched. She switched on the oven but it didn't work. The morning brought light at least, but nothing else.

The telephone rang but she didn't answer. The message was from Lisa: 'Sorry.'

Lisa must have been cut off. Doris listened to the message again but it didn't make sense. Worried something might be wrong, she called back. There was no answer, so she walked round to Lisa's house wrapped in her favourite yellow scarf.

The streets were deserted. Doris tried not to look into people's houses but so many had gathered around a table by a window that it was hard not to look in. She watched a red-and-gold cracker pulled in two. Did it make a sound?

If only the roof of the caravan had lifted off like a giant's hand opening a tin. The sea and the wind could have poured inside and peered at the three of them in their beds like dolls in a dolls' house – but the dolls were in the wrong beds. Only the stars stare at the bruises on Doris's chest and the hollowed-out body like an avocado without a stone.

John never opened his present, which was just as well because later she found herself on the bathroom floor beside smashed wine bottles and the putrid wine and acid she'd vomited from the very depths of her stomach. Even the tiles in the bathroom were tainted pink; the whole room was like a medieval operating theatre, a bloody chamber, red and rosé ricocheted and pin-balled until the internal explosion, the final unscrewing of a screw top, pop of a cork. Their baby.

She blinks her eyes at the stinging sensation in her mind and body. This time her name is written in the sand with diamonds and gems. She sees her name on a kite flying in the blue sky. She sees John and Lisa walking hand and hand towards the sea and it grabs their ankles, it drags them to their deaths, quietly and purposefully. She wishes she were a fish so she could watch their muddy mouths opening and closing in the green sea, the silt landing on their eyelids, their last words ... sorry. Sorry.

Sick of the sight of her vomit on the bathroom tiles, Doris staggers into the bedroom. She tosses and turns, hour after hour; the memories of John and Lisa and her grow thistles, nestled in overgrown grass threaded with weeds, poisonous wildflowers, leaves throbbing with blood-red veins. The photo album of all her lovely fake memories won't shut. She pleads for a zip to the album, a fusion.

A local paper is pushed through the letterbox. Doris puts it straight in the bin because she is no longer connected with this town, this county or country. This planet. This universe.

Chapter Two

Is she dead skin to them?

Doris spends Christmas Day cleaning the house, starting with the bathroom because she's fixated with the idea of dead skin, the flakes of epidermis and dermis, and the stray hairs from John's full head of hair. Lisa has bouncy, curled hair the colour of temptation. Attempting to erase their footprints in the house takes most of the day. The skin on her hands becomes dry and cracked from the cleaning agents and the water, but at least the falling flakes are from her own skin.

The sun eventually punches a hole through the opaque sky and shines on the view from the window in the lounge: a dividing road edged by pavement, red-brick terraces, mirror images of her marital home. She wonders if others can still see number 42 or whether a giant eraser has rubbed it out and everything inside it, including her, except for a neon sign shouting *NAÏVE. FOOL*. She couldn't possibly set foot outside now: she would be like the emperor in his new clothes. Did Cock and Twat laugh at her all the while?

By four o'clock she's made a funeral pyre of the detritus of their marriage, including pictures of Cock and Twat from a montage of photographs that used to hang in the downstairs loo: so many smiles in so many locations, the three of them, the pair of conspirators right in front of her each and every day as she took a pee.

Ugly thoughts start popping into her head at alarming speed. Were they seeing each other when they went to Bath that time to watch the rugby? Did they have secret kisses when her back was turned in Liverpool at the Albert Dock? Gullible, unsuspecting Doris, all the while her thinking Twat was such a sweet friend to join in with their trips. It never occurred to her to question why it took her husband such a long time to come home after he walked Twat back to her place after a day out or a few drinks at the pub. Never. Or why he could see to the decorating and the jobs at her house but not their own.

If she'd seen it coming, it might not have hurt so much. But the sting of that slap, the shudder from the unexpected sound, it sent her reeling. Worse than that, it made her question everything she had known about him, her best friend and herself. What or who could she trust? The feeling of betrayal, the double-shot, the double-whammy, the Go Large, the dual-approach to devastation, it certainly hit the spot. Husband and friend. Did betrayal get any bigger? Louder?

She finds a small box of matches in the kitchen drawer; she only needs one match because the funeral pyre is flammable with the fake tree and Cock's Christmas present to get it going nicely. Columns of smoke rise from the modest back yard, a taste like locusts spreading out over all the other back yards in this unfashionable part of Shrewsbury.

She tosses in the turkey and veg. Luckily it is late December: too cold to dry the washing. She has forgotten it's Christmas Day when few people would be washing and drying their clothes even in the brightest of sun. She watches the flames and the long sighs of smoke, and she wishes for crackling flames to reach inside their nostrils, brains, to singe her innocent name there forever with a pure blue flame.

Is she so difficult to talk to? After eleven years of marriage, why couldn't John show her the courtesy of explaining why he was leaving her? To just close the door. She shakes her head at the memory of the sound, the emptiness of the hall, then the answer found through the window and later confirmed at Lisa's front door.

Once the bonfire has burnt itself into a smouldering pile of red and grey ashes, Doris pokes at the debris with the pointy end of a wedding umbrella, turns over the charred fragments of her past, like she is burying herself alive. She replaces the montage of photographs with a mirror so she can look at herself while she is on the loo to check she still has a reflection and to see if she can like herself a little bit.

She wishes her knuckles were blue and swollen from punching her cheating husband on his arse and slapping Twat hard across that tasty face of hers. She imagines herself pushing Cock's flabby legs akimbo in a pair of stilettos bought especially for the occasion, like a switchblade, kicking him square between the legs, with Lisa watching on with a cheek full of fire. She imagines sound coming from his cheating mouth like curlicues of smoke – a chalk outline of his body on Twat's carpet.

Having forgotten to eat, her energy is fading now. The darkness outside is a relief. The last thing she does before bed is to arrange objects on the window-ledge in the lounge so passers-by can enjoy them

in the morning: a postcard of Abersoch beach; an avocado stone; a box of matches, and the slop and stink from the bathroom floor in a plastic tub Cock had once eaten his favourite vanilla ice-cream from. It is her post to the outside world, her own kind of oversharing. Who else is there to talk to? Not her mother. Never.

It is a relief when she sleeps so she can stop being her conscious self for a while. Get a rest from being useless and inhabiting the frightened place she's become.

By Boxing Day, she stops consciously waiting. She spends the day reading in the lounge, occasionally looking up through the window to catch a glimpse of a ribbon in a child's hair, the paperboy with his luminous bag, the ones who walk, hold hands and laugh and don't know anything. For a moment she thinks she sees Lisa's red hair, her bouncing curls, but if it is Lisa she doesn't stop.

The bathroom is a room Doris finds herself avoiding as much as possible. No amount of scrubbing the floor can erase the memory of losing her daughter in there, where a horrible nameless baptism of kinds took place.

The buzz of a scooter wakes Doris up to an insatiable hunger which she satisfies with trifle, Quality Streets and ice cream. The telephone rings. She knows it's Mother but she has nothing to say to her, to anyone. Silence has grown around her like a cocoon.

For the next week, flotsam from the outside world – a window cleaner looking for work, local newspapers, junk mail – reminds her of how frightening and thrusting the world outside is. The front door rubs up against the street. Sometimes she hears footsteps so close to the door her heartbeat becomes irregular. Life outside is busy now it's the end of the holidays and folk are full of renewed purpose, New Year resolutions.

She trudges from one end of the day to the next until she opens a book and disappears inside. After the fifth Jenga-style coffee table of books, she sees she needs a place to go. The lounge may cope with another two tables – which she calculates to be around twenty books – but that's only about another month of escapism.