

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.