

Dear Mum,

*I can't believe you did this to us. You always said that
no matter how bad it got we'd have each other.*

You said we'd always be together.

We did everything we had to.

I even kept my mouth shut when I knew I shouldn't.

*And what was it all for? You've thrown us away like
rubbish so that's how they treat us. We've been split up
and I'm not even allowed to see the babies.*

*I can't tell you how much I hate you for what you've
done, and if I ever see you again I'll cut you to pieces.*

Kelsey

PROLOGUE

Grace worried the kitchen surface with the corner of a J-cloth, trying once again to remove a mark made years before by a hot spoon. The phone call had unnerved her and her hands shook. She bent over the cooker and lit another cigarette on the gas ring, hoping it would calm her. It didn't. What she needed was a hit. A £10 bag would do, just enough to put her in a better place, just enough to allow her to explain things properly. To make herself clear. Just one hit to get through this.

She checked her watch. Five past eight. That should give her ten minutes, enough time to race downstairs to the dealer on the ground floor. He charged over the odds but what could you do?

The tap on the door was soft but Grace jumped all the same. No time to get the brown now, this was one conversation she would have to do straight.

She took a last deep drag on the cigarette and answered the door. 'Oh, it's you.'

'Who were you expecting?'

Grace shrugged.

Outside, a dog scratched and barked.

'Get out of it,' Grace yelled.

'It's probably hungry.'

'Aren't they all,' said Grace, and turned on her heels.
'Shut it behind you, it's fucking freezing.'

'Hardly. Are you clucking?'

Grace rubbed her arms, their skin barely able to support the scars that ran like the rungs of a ladder from shoulder to wrist. 'Not really.'

'I thought you'd be back on the gear.'

'Sorry to disappoint you.'

'I don't really care one way or the other.'

Grace sighed and picked up her cigarettes. When this was over she'd have that hit, get completely out of it. She clamped a cigarette between her lips and turned to the cooker. In one sweeping and familiar action she bent over the front gas ring, one hand holding back her hair, the other reaching for the ignition. But before her finger pressed the button she felt the back of her head explode.

Grace was confused. Had she finally got her hit? Funny, she couldn't remember cooking up. She anticipated the melting sensation that the drugs would bring when they moved through her bloodstream.

Instead, the back of her neck felt warm and wet. As dazed as she was, she knew it was blood.

'Why did you . . . '

There was another explosion and everything went black.

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 7 September

Lilly Valentine thumped the photocopier. 'Stupid piece of shit.'

'You'll break that.'

She yanked at the tray where her document was stuck.

Her boss floated to Lilly's side. 'I said you'll . . .'

'It's already sodding broken.'

Rupinder's deft fingers removed the tray in a tinkle of bangles and dislodged the offending piece of paper. 'You're late,' she said.

'I operate on Indian standard time,' Lilly said. 'As you're so fond of telling me.'

Rupinder opened the front door. 'Which is fine in Delhi . . .'

Lilly struggled outside, balancing three files, a mobile phone and her bag. She tossed her head to move the curtain of curls that had fallen into her eyes.

Rupinder shook her head and tucked the loose tendrils behind Lilly's ears. ' . . . but this is Hertfordshire.'

Lilly winked at her boss and stumbled towards her car.

She sped through Harpenden towards Luton. Bespoke shoe shops and upmarket gastro pubs soon gave way to pawnbrokers and kebab shops. The women on the streets no longer carried designer handbags and all-white floral arrangements, instead they pushed double buggies laden with bumper packs of nappies. Further still into the sprawling housing estates of Ring Farm and windows were boarded, overgrown gardens housed old sofas, and cars stood on bricks.

Eventually she pulled into a cul-de-sac overshadowed on three sides by granite tower blocks. Even on glorious days like today, at the height of a summer stretching into autumn, scarcely any sunlight fed through and The Bushes Residential Unit for Young People existed in permanent gloom.

Lilly parked in the shadows and pulled out the relevant file from the pile stacked beside her on the passenger seat.

BRAND, K. – CARE PROCEEDINGS

Kelsey Brand, eldest of four girls. Their mother, a heroin addict who funded her habit by prostitution, and was unable or unwilling to clean up, had finally given up the distracting charade of parenting and placed all four girls in care.

So far so familiar.

Lilly reached for some chocolate. She'd sworn to restrain herself to a bar a day, two in dire emergencies, in an attempt to stop the slide from sexy size

twelve to pleasantly plump. As she bit into her first Twix of the day she smoothed her hands over her hips. Still the right side of curvy. Just.

She skimmed the pages in search of the ETF. Every case had one. An especially awful aspect that lawyers like Lilly looked for. Something to set their client apart, to prevent them from becoming '*just another kid in care*'. Something to remind the professionals that although they dealt with these stories every day of the week they weren't commonplace.

She found it on the last page – her search made easier by the lack of detailed notes – and it was tremendous. An all-singing, all-dancing *Extra Tragedy Factor*. Kelsey Brand, at fourteen years of age, had tried to kill herself by drinking a bottle of bleach.

Lilly closed her eyes and swallowed the chocolate. It stuck in her throat with a peppery sting as she tried not to imagine how Domestos might taste. She pictured herself instead as a corporate lawyer in a smart office overlooking St Paul's Cathedral in the heart of the city. Dressed in a black Armani suit, which fitted snugly but not tightly over her hips, she crossed a plant-filled atrium, her high heels clicking on the marble floor. Tap, tap, tap.

The heels dissolved as Lilly focused on the doughy twelve-year-old who was rapping day-glo talons against the car window.

'You on drugs?'

Lilly ignored her and got out.

'Got any fags?'

'Not for you,' answered Lilly.

The girl spat on the ground, inches from Lilly's feet.

Lilly appraised her with practised cool and nodded at the silver boob tube which threatened to release a small pair of spotty breasts. 'Been auditioning for a porn movie, Charlene?'

'You've got a big mouth.'

'All the better to eat you with, my dear.'

When Lilly got to the door she tossed a packet of Marlboro Lights to the girl.

'You ain't so tough,' Charlene said.

'Wanna bet?'

Lilly stepped inside the unit. It was buzzing. Most of its residents had just returned from their 'morning education session', along with all the pupils that had been excluded from every school in the area. Nearly all the kids in The Bushes went there for a couple of hours a day – if they learned anything it was a bonus. Lilly, who had represented at least half of the young people in The Bushes, was greeted with waves and requests for cash or cigarettes.

'Who're you here for, Miss?'

'Kelsey Brand,' said Lilly.

'Nutter,' came the chorus, and several boys pretended to drink from imaginary bottles.

'Enough of that.'

'She's well weird,' a boy in a baseball cap shouted, his left eye quivering in its socket.

Lilly rubbed his shoulder in long strokes to soothe away both the twitch and the habitual beatings he had suffered at the hands of an alcoholic stepfather, now serving life for setting the boy's mother on fire while she fed their six-week-old baby.

‘We’re all weird here, Jermaine, it’s why we get on so well.’

Despite her bravado Lilly felt trepidation as she passed along the corridor to room twelve. Self-abusers didn’t usually threaten Lilly’s equanimity. Headbangers, cutters, anorexics, Lilly had worked with them all, but drinking bleach was so extreme. The girl must have been in the depths of wretchedness to punish herself like that.

The last kid in room twelve had been Irina, the daughter of a deported asylum-seeker. Attractive and well-educated, she had been easy to place with a middle-class foster family. Lilly fingered the soapstone pin she wore at the back of her lapel. It was smooth and cool to the touch. Irina had given it to Lilly on the final day of the court hearing when she learned she was not being sent back to a village torn apart by civil war.

Would the present occupant be so lucky? There was nothing to be done about Kelsey’s family. If the mother didn’t want her kids then no one could force her to take them back. Getting her out of The Bushes and fostered would be the next best thing, but placements for those fond of cleaning fluid were hard to come by. Lilly would give it her best shot but the question was whether her client would have the stomach for the road ahead.

Lilly knocked three times and waited. She gave the girl sufficient time to hide any contraband and let herself in.

‘Hi there. I’m Lilly Valentine.’

The girl sat on her bed and hugged her knees. Her chin was tucked into her chest and her lank hair, the colour of pee, fell like a greasy mask, obscuring Kelsey’s

face. Her frame was so slight she reminded Lilly of a small bird hiding under her wing.

Lilly smiled and gestured to the bare walls. 'I love what you've done to the place.'

No reaction.

Lilly softened her tone. 'Can I sit down?'

The nod was almost imperceptible but Lilly caught it and sat on the bed next to her client.

'I'm sure someone's told you that social services have applied for a Care Order because your mum can't look after you.'

Kelsey retracted further. It was as if she were trying to implode.

'When we go to court it's my job to tell the judge what you want,' Lilly said.

Kelsey didn't move.

'I have to at least know that you understand what's happening to you,' said Lilly. 'If you can't face going to court that's fine. We can just write it all down in a statement.'

She reached towards her client, slid her fingers under Kelsey's chin and gently lifted her face.

What Lilly saw made her reel. The bleach had burnt off most of the skin from Kelsey's lips and chin and revealed a red-brown layer like days-old meat. Lilly flinched, but forced her gaze to remain on the child's damaged face.

'I can do all the talking, Kelsey.' She swallowed hard. 'But you have to tell me what to say.'

As her eyes locked with Kelsey's, Lilly flinched again. In fifteen years of practice she was unable to remember

the last time she had seen such utter hopelessness.

‘Speak to me, please.’

The noise when it came was somewhere between a choke and a sob. A strangled sound from the depths of Kelsey’s throat. Lilly’s heart beat loud in her chest as she realised her client could not speak.

Lilly shut the door to room twelve and hurried towards the kitchen to make coffee. She could still taste the cold void in Kelsey’s eyes and needed to warm her mouth. Her chest was pounding as she filled the kettle. How the hell was she going to help Kelsey?

She opened the catering-sized tin of instant granules that sat on the otherwise empty and clean work surface. Presumably it was too big to fit in any of the cupboards. When she opened one she couldn’t help but smile. The mugs, although a ragtag band of misfits, stood to military attention. When Lilly removed one, the space it left jarred to such an extent that even Lilly was moved to rearrange the others. In this place of chaos and ripped lives order was paramount; the comfort it gave immeasurable.

Lilly smiled again. It was going to be a hard case but she’d find a way. She always did.

Behind her someone was eating a bowl of cereal. The crunching was deafening. Lilly turned and saw Charlene, Rice Krispies dotting her pubescent cleavage.

‘Don’t you want some milk on those?’ Lilly asked.

‘I’m a vegan,’ answered Charlene.

‘What?’

‘It means I don’t eat animal products.’

‘I know what it means.’

Crunch, crunch.

‘I didn’t know you were into animal rights,’ said Lilly.

‘I’m not. I just like to piss ’em off.’

Lilly chuckled and crossed the hall to the cramped and untidy manager’s office, where a middle-aged black woman was hunched in front of a computer. She was typing laboriously with two fingers.

‘You’re too old for this crap, Miriam,’ the woman said to herself.

‘And I thought you were only twenty-one,’ said Lilly.

Miriam looked up and smiled. ‘How’d you get along with Chatty Cathy?’

‘Laugh a minute,’ said Lilly.

‘Get anything out of her?’ Miriam asked.

‘A bit tricky considering she can’t speak.’

Lilly collapsed in the chair next to Miriam. ‘To be honest I don’t know how I’m going to do this.’

‘She can write stuff down.’

‘I can think of easier ways to work,’ said Lilly.

Miriam shrugged. ‘No one said this job was easy.’

‘True,’ said Lilly. ‘Anyway, I don’t want to push too hard too soon.’

The approval in Miriam’s smile forced Lilly to add, ‘But I’ll have to at some stage.’

Miriam’s smile was intact but the approval had gone. Or at least that was how it seemed to Lilly. ‘She needs time. She hasn’t come to terms with what’s happening to her yet.’

‘Angry?’ Lilly asked.

‘More shocked.’

‘Hasn’t this been on the cards?’

‘No.’ Miriam reached for Lilly’s mug and took a sip. ‘They weren’t exactly the Waltons, but not the Wests either.’

‘Physical abuse? Neglect?’

Miriam gulped loudly. ‘Nothing to interest the *Daily Mail*. Kids fed, clean, went to school mostly. Social worker says it was a watching brief.’

Lilly retrieved her drink and scowled at the bitter dregs. ‘It must have been the gear.’

‘You’d think so, but Kelsey’s adamant her mum had been clean for nearly three months. It doesn’t add up.’

Lilly had been in this game long enough to know that logic and reason didn’t often play a part in her clients’ lives. ‘Who knows what goes through someone’s mind the day they give their children away.’

‘Yes, baby, come to Daddy.’

The girl didn’t move or even register his words.

He raised his voice, his expression firm but cajoling. ‘Pretty baby, come over here.’

Her heavy lids flickered but she remained on the sofa, unable to focus. Although his smile was fixed, the man’s impatience grew visibly and he patted the space on the sofa next to him.

‘I’m waiting,’ he said, though he clearly had no intention of doing so any longer and pulled the girl to him.

He pressed his lips to her ear and sang her name. ‘Tilly, Tilly, Tilly.’

She didn’t answer, didn’t even blink.

He removed her grubby underwear, fumbling on

the frayed lace, and turned her around to front the camera. He stroked the pale contours of her torso, starting at the hip and snaking upwards. Her breasts were not yet developed, just tiny buds.

‘You are so beautiful,’ he cooed.

The girl parted her lips.

‘Tell Daddy what you want him to do.’

The lips parted again and the girl exhaled audibly.

When the man spoke again there was an edge to his voice. ‘Tell Daddy what you like.’

The lips opened yet again and for a second it looked as if the girl might speak. The man held his breath, his anticipation palpable. Instead, a drop of saliva escaped from the girl’s mouth and dribbled down her chin.

‘This is hopeless,’ spat one of the two men watching the video. ‘She’s drugged out of her mind.’

The young man opposite snapped off the television.

‘I need to see some sense of her wanting it,’ the older man said. ‘Or not wanting it, if you get my drift.’

His attempt at inclusion sickened the younger man, and he shuddered. ‘This ain’t what I’m into.’ He gestured to the stack of cassettes beside him. ‘This stuff is just my product, Mr Barrows. Money in the bank, understand?’

‘I do, but you understand this: your “*product*” is not satisfactory, and if you think I will buy inferior goods you really don’t know me.’

Oh I know you. I know you better than you think.

‘I’ve got some more I know you’re gonna like. How about I drop them round tomorrow.’

A spark shone in Barrows’ eyes. ‘Young?’

‘Very.’