

CHEEK

Cheek

The Opening Chapters

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prologue

If Wes had been half the reprobate that Gabrielle's father thought he was, he'd have never signed the prenup. He'd have told the old bastard to shove it up his arse. Or he'd have shoved it up there himself. He'd have fucked off to Vegas with Gabi – having enthusiastically impregnated her first – then left her weeping at the altar while he drove into the desert with her two teenage bridesmaids, never to be seen again.

Of course, if Gabi's dad *hadn't* mistaken Wes for a card-carrying libertine – largely thanks to his fondness for cheroots, cashmere socks and the *Racing Post* – then marriage wouldn't have been on the cards at all. Gabi wouldn't have

given him a second glance, let alone a blow job at the Freshers' Ball, if she hadn't spotted the long-term father-offending potential in his excitingly sallow complexion and archly cocked eyebrow.

It made no difference that the eyebrow in question had only been archly cocked at the state of the medical school's *vol-au-vents*, or that Wes's sallow complexion was largely the consequence of seven nicotine-deprived hours on the National Express down from Whitby – without them, the eighteen year old Yorkshireman wouldn't have stood a chance. And without them, a month before his twenty-fifth birthday, he wouldn't have found himself ineptly directing the garrulous Nigerian minicab driver towards his new marital home in Sefton Street, Putney, SW15.

'Which house, my friend?'

Wes manoeuvred his angular frame into the

gap between the front seats and pushed a tangle of matted hair from his eyes. The foppish quiff that Gabrielle had insisted he should cultivate for their wedding hadn't been treated kindly by the relentless maritime winds of the Seychelles, and fell back across his face like the distended innards of a party popper. 'Sorry, Abiola?'

'Which house?' The minicab driver – who'd introduced himself at Heathrow with the words 'Call me Abiola', and repeated them until Wes had begun doing so – drummed his fingers lightly on the steering wheel. 'Where'd you *live*, my friend?'

Wes glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping Gabrielle, curled cat-like in the far corner of the back seat – a position she'd assumed after shrugging off her seatbelt at the Chiswick roundabout; a position she'd steadfastly refused to abandon, despite the Mondeo's shagged-out suspension and the agonised squealing of its fan belt. She stirred ominously as the car pulled into Sefton Street and a tiny frown

flitted across her features – a frown that didn't invite further disturbance.

'My friend – hello? Hello? Which *house*, please?'

'I'm not a hundred per cent sure,' Wes admitted, his eyes flicking nervously left and right at the cars and houses gently rolling past, like some surreal version of the *Generation Game* conveyor belt. 'I don't really live there yet.' He leaned forwards conspiratorially and lowered his voice. 'The house is a wedding present, actually. I've only ever seen a photo of the place.'

The driver said nothing, but his anxious grin suggested that a swift detour via the lunatic asylum might now be a serious possibility. Wes sighed inwardly – the kind of sigh he'd perfected over the previous six years – and glanced once again at Gabi's sleeping form, which appeared to be exuding an indefinable grumpiness in all directions. *The lunatic asylum*. Incarceration in a padded cell would, at least, be *simpler* than life with Gabi. There'd be fewer opportunities to

indulge his fondness for the gee-gees, of course, but at least he could talk shop with the prettier nurses. *Mm. Nurses.*

'Maybe the missus knows where you live, yes?'

Wes frowned. Abiola might just as well have recommended that Wes should consult his fairy godmother, for all the sense he was making. *His missus? Who?* And then – slowly, through a thick fug of jetlag and sleep deprivation – awareness dawned. *The honeymoon in the Seychelles. The church. The engagement. All that business with the cake and the speeches and the vicar.* 'Oh, yes. My wife.' Wes glanced once more at his sleeping bride, but still made no attempt to wake her. Waking her before arrival at their destination, Wes knew, would undoubtedly precipitate a mammoth sulk. Gabi was very much like Bob Dylan or a doner kebab in this respect – predictable, yet somehow utterly unfathomable. 'It's possible, isn't it?'

'I think you should ask her.'

Wes dropped back into his seat and rummaged deep in his trouser pocket. He was about to suggest tossing a five rupee coin to decide who should rouse the slumbering Gabrielle, when an all-too-familiar figure on the pavement ahead caught his eye. He shivered in spite of the unforgiving midday sunshine and the Mondeo's risible attempt at air-conditioning. 'I don't think we'll need to.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Which house, then?'

The one with the certifiable nutter standing outside it, Wes thought, eyeing the slightly-built, Barbour-jacketed bloke peering down the street over half-moon spectacles. 'The one with the elderly gent standing outside it,' he said. 'Pull up behind the blue Merc.'

'S-Class. Nice, nice,' murmured Abiola approvingly, swerving to a halt three inches behind the pristine Mercedes. 'Five and a half litre V12. Nought to sixty in under five seconds.'

Wes managed to restrain himself for a whole half second before he spoke. 'V6, actually.'

'What?'

'That's only the V6.' Wes allowed a guilty eye to rest momentarily on the gleaming bodywork. It was a car he'd only seen in the brochure, but here – elegantly slumming it at the kerbside – it looked even more preposterously magisterial than on paper. He quietly cleared his throat, attempting to adopt an airy tone. For someone who'd spent most of his adult life struggling to overcome a propensity to sound like a youthful Alan Bennett, it wasn't an easy adjustment. 'I wanted Periclase green metallic, but Gabi simply insisted on Tansanite blue.'

Abiola swivelled in his seat and fixed his passenger with a keen eye. 'That's *your car*, my friend?'

'Uh-huh. Well, sort of.'

'Wedding present?'

'Mm.' Emboldened by steady rhythm of Gabi's gentle snoring, Wes leaned forwards

conspiratorially. 'That guy over there's my father-in-law. Dr Claude Aloysius Wynstanley. Famous surgeon. Old money.'

Abiola's eyes narrowed on the famous surgeon. 'It is not easy, being married to a rich man's daughter,' he solemnly declared. 'She will have high expectations, my friend.'

'Actually, my wife's the breadwinner. Career girl. Dr Gabrielle Araminta Wynstanley. Orthopaedics registrar.'

Smirking wickedly, Abiola nodded first at the Mercedes and then at Gabrielle, his eye lingering a second longer than necessary on the soft curve of her upper thigh. Then he turned and winked at Wes. '*Nice package*,' he whispered.

'I know.'

'Are we there yet?'

The two men jumped guiltily at the sound of Gabi's voice, the genial African being the first to regain some semblance of his former composure. 'Certainly, madam,' he purred, sliding out of the driver's seat and opening the

passenger door with as much flourish as its rusting hinges would allow. '*Home sweet home.*'

Wes watched mutely as Abiola ferried the last of the suitcases into the hallway. Having already been abandoned by Gabrielle (who'd breezed wordlessly into the house some minutes earlier), he now found himself facing the prospect of an even more traumatic desertion. Admittedly, the minicab driver had openly leched over his wife's bottom – and charged an eye-watering fee for doing so – but somehow, Wes felt that they'd really *bonded* in the dying moments of their acquaintance. He couldn't believe that his new friend intended to leave him in the clutches of his father-in-law, anyway.

Tête-à-têtes with the elder Dr Wynstanley were something Wes had come to dread. A sort of tweedy home counties Ghurkha, Wynstanley possessed the kind of piercing intellect that was designed to mentally debilitate its victims by

mere dote of proximity. Two or three minutes' exposure was sufficient to have you scurrying up the nearest lamp post like an under-evolved simian, and at least five had elapsed before Wynstanley broke his silence.

'This place is Gabrielle's. Always will be,' the elder Dr Wynstanley quietly intoned, his eye flicking from the departing Mondeo's exhaust fumes to the house behind him.

'Okay.'

Wynstanley seized Wes's unresisting hand and pressed a sizeable bunch of keys hard into the palm. 'So's the car. And the day Gabrielle tells me she's divorcing you – *and she will* – I'll be changing the locks faster than you can say 'daughter-defiling pervert'. Understand?'

Glancing from Wynstanley's gnarled visage to his own Liberty print shirt, Wes was tempted to ask which one of them the good doctor considered to be the 'daughter-defiling pervert', but busied himself instead by fingering the thrillingly unfamiliar contours of his new car

keys. He cleared his throat. 'Look, Dr Wynstanley. I know we haven't always seen eye to eye, over the years. But now Gabi and me are married, maybe it's time to make a fresh start.' Transferring the keys to the safety of his trouser pocket, he extended a hand to the elderly physician. 'And now we're family, I don't want you to be a stranger, eh?'

For a second, Wes's words hung in the torpid south London air. Then Wynstanley's face broke into a rictus of loathing. 'Fuck off, you smug little turd,' he snarled, turning on his heel. 'I'll be back when my daughter finally sees sense and throws your worthless carcass out. *And not a day before.*'

'Daddy's quite insane, you know,' Gabi observed later that evening, cutting herself a second line of post-honeymoon cocaine. 'He actually asked me if I planned abandoning my career to have babies – as he was walking me up the aisle. I think he'd

have had me sterilised if I'd said yes.'

Or had me castrated, Wes reflected, improvising a miniature sandwich with a fragment of discarded Roquefort and the last of the Waitrose blinis.

Old Wynstanley could've done it, too. He'd been deftly lopping off people's unwanted extremities for decades, up in his Harley Street consulting rooms – and there'd been a mad glint in his eye, the last time Wes had seen him dismembering the Christmas goose. 'I tried telling him – *you haven't lost a daughter but gained a son.* He said he was going to dissect my ignorant northern brain and find out what made me talk such cock.'

'He loathes the fact that you've got the balls to stand up to him.' Gabi smiled, fingering a tingling septum and nuzzling her way further beneath her husband's unresisting arm. Wes breathed a silent sigh of relief, grateful that Gabi hadn't accompanied the word 'balls' with an affectionate squeeze of his testicles, as she

usually did – seemingly oblivious, despite her medical training, of quite how much it hurt. 'Anyway, *you'll* show him. When you're a brilliant surgeon.' She grunted contentedly to herself. 'Then he'll hate you even more.'

It was probably a good job that most of Gabi's aromatherapy candles had been extinguished, otherwise she'd have seen the expression of rank incredulity on her husband's face. No matter how many times she mentioned it, Gabi's 'brilliant surgeon' scenario had always seemed absurdly far-fetched to Wes.

Not that he didn't *look* the part. He'd possessed an unnerving aura of intelligence since childhood – lean and bookish, with piercing blue eyes and abundant blond hair. A rudderless meander through medical school had proved just how deceptive appearances could be, however – and now only Gabi still spoke of Wes's future surgical career with any real conviction.

Suddenly melancholy, Wes found himself stretching for the silver toot box. Coke wasn't

really his drug of choice, but Gabrielle could become tiresome company when she snorted alone, and a little nasal stimulation could usually be relied on to ameliorate his bleaker moments. He deftly shaped a line of cocaine into a tiny caricature of Gabi's father, hoovered up his handiwork and lay back on the floor cushion, his heart racing.

'Better?' asked Gabi, returning from the kitchen with a tub of Häagen Dazs, and dropping lightly into Wes's lap.

'Better.'

Somehow, though, Wes wasn't sure. In the two minutes since Gabi had embarked on her foraging expedition, familiar tremors of seismic activity had started emerging from the synaptic earthquake in his brain, but something – something he couldn't put his finger on – was wrong. His eyes darted around the darkened room, performing a lightning inventory of its contents – the Josef Hoffmann sofas, the Bang & Olufsen TV, the mountain of unopened wedding

presents beneath the large bay window. *Was something missing?* Suddenly, Wes knew. 'We should have friends over. Phone everyone. Have a house-warming.'

'When?'

'Right now. Tonight.'

Gabi's spoon circled the rim of the Häagen Dazs tub, producing a delicate rosebud of ice cream that she admired for a moment before popping in her mouth. 'I don't think so, Wes. My friends actually have *lives*. They're not seventeen years old any more. They need more than five minutes' notice if you want to see them.'

'What about my friends, then?'

'You haven't got any friends, sweetheart.' She smiled and leaned forward as if to kiss Wes, but drew away at the last moment and tapped him gently on the nose with her spoon instead. It was cold. 'Sorry to announce this, but you're a bit of a lone wolf. It's one of the reasons I like you.'

'I've got lots of friends. Loads.' *Friends from the pub. Friends from the bookies – the*

ones who call me 'Doc'. Friends like Abiola.

'Not the kind of friends you could invite home.'

Wes's mind raced, desperate not to be so easily outmanoeuvred. 'Tim's housebroken.'

'Tim lives in Barcelona.'

'Lenny. Lenny Jones.'

'Lenny lives in Whitby. And *he* couldn't even be bothered to buy us anything off the wedding list.'

'Jeremy, then.'

For a moment, Gabi's eyes scanned Wes's face, trying to work out whether he was deliberately trying to ruin her evening. Then she smiled. 'Perhaps not.'

Uncharacteristically voluble from the cocaine, Wes pressed on. 'He's calmed down a lot since he started living with Lisa. He doesn't call himself the Shagfinder General any more. He's stopped smoking. And he hasn't been arrested in over six months...'

Taking his face between her hands, Gabi

silenced her husband with a kiss. 'No, Wes. Jeremy Sykes isn't welcome in our home.' She kissed him again, longer this time. 'Seriously. I feel the same way about Jeremy as my father feels about you – understand?'

Wes lay back on his floor cushion and tried not to enjoy the sensation of Gabi's tongue as it deftly sought out his own. It depressed him when she spoke to him like that. *Understand? Capish? Comprendre?* She never used to talk that way – not when they'd been at university, sharing a damp maisonette in Dollis Hill, eating out of pizza boxes and making love on the sofa. And although Wes understood that the marriage register he'd signed a fortnight earlier had been a contract of incomprehensible complexity, he'd never thought that the 'forsaking all others' bit would include his old school friend Jeremy.

If only Jez had married Gabs instead, he mused. Then I'd be able to see both of them. But, given a toss-up between the two of them... well, there'd been no competition. He'd chosen Gabi.

He'd chosen a charming house in Putney and an S-class Mercedes in Tansanite blue. He'd chosen several years of amply-funded prevarication on a Josef Hoffmann sofa, watching endless repeats of *Lovejoy* on an outsize Bang & Olufsen plasma screen. He'd chosen Waitrose blinis and fine wines and month-long holidays in Tuscany. And all he had to do in return was persuade his father-in-law that he was the bastard lovechild of Keith Richards and Che Guevara. He shook his head in the darkness. *Nice package.*

Of course, if Gabi *had* married Jeremy... well, Jeremy wouldn't have had to pretend to be the son-in-law from hell. Aye – no doubt about it, Jeremy was *genuine* father-in-law offending material. Everyone-offending material, actually. *Aye – if she'd married Jeremy, Gabi wouldn't have to tell her dad made-up tales about body piercings and crack-smoking parties, or turning the house into a refuge for battered lesbians.* Wes glanced down at the top of his wife's head, suddenly aware that her left hand had quietly

begun unzipping his flies. 'Maybe your dad will grow to respect me, now I've married his only daughter. Maybe he'll come to cherish my company, to savour my finer qualities, that sort of thing.'

'I hope not,' Gabi snorted. 'It's not likely, anyway. He thinks you're a mentally subnormal northern oik. And a socialist. And the ruination of all womankind.'

Wes rolled his eyes in the half-light. Perhaps, now they were married, the time had finally come to drop the tedious charade of rebelliousness that Gabi had so clearly enjoyed in the early stages of their relationship. Yes – maybe it was time to reveal his true colours. He squirmed against the floor cushion, scouring his brain for the best words with which to unveil The Real Wes. None, alas, sprang to mind. 'But I read the *Times*,' he eventually muttered. 'I've got shares in Glaxo. Granddad was a Rotarian.'

'You read the *Angling Times*, sweetie. And your grandfather was a Rotarian in *Whitby*.'

Gabrielle finished removing Wes's trousers and flung them over her shoulder. 'Whitby doesn't count.'

It was true, Wes reflected. Whitby certainly hadn't counted at the wedding reception. All his friends from home – Jeremy, Lakey-Boy, Jonesy, Robbie Treu, Tim – had been given a table so far from the rest of the party, they were virtually in the kitchens. It might have been for the best, though. If they'd been any nearer the top table, they might have caught old Wynstanley's quip about being 'besieged by the fucking Vikings,' or his devastating remarks regarding Dave the barman's generous gift of an antique fish slice.

At the time, Gabi had sneered almost as much as her father. Now, though, she was holding the fish slice lightly between her thumb and forefinger, allowing the soft-edged blade to pivot gently up and down. 'I've just worked out what we can use this for.'

'What?'

'*You're* a naughty boy.' Gabi bit her lip.

'Can't you guess?'

A moment later, Gabi's trembling fingers were wrestling with her own trousers.

'No, Gabs. Please. Not that. I've only just finished my supper. I'm stuffed. Not now.'

Gabi pressed the handle of the fish slice into Wes's hand. 'Yes.'

It was only the thought of Gabi's father that made him go through with it, though – specifically, the thought of him bursting through the door and catching them *in flagrante delicto* with Lancashire hotpot smeared up his daughter's forearms. *The old bastard would probably have a coronary, Wes reflected. Then drop dead, with any luck.*

Thoughts regarding Dr Wynstanley Snr had always troubled Wes during intimate moments with Gabi, however. Any lass who insists on being vigorously spanked for the duration of coitus is bound to get you asking questions about

unhealthy formative influences. *That's a girl with unresolved issues*, Wes ruminated, trying to disregard the crisp report of a sterling silver fish slice slapping a reddened buttock. *That's the girl I married. The girl I married – whose arse I'm now tenderising with Dave the barman's fish slice. Oh God.*

'Why've you stopped?' gasped Gabi, straining to catch Wes's eye over her shoulder.

'I can't do it.' Wes straightened up – as much as he could, anyway, given the tender nature of the conjunction with his new missus. He gently laid the fish slice across the top of the ice cream tub.

A note of panic entered Gabi's voice. *'Pick it up.'*

'I can't. It's daft. Anyway, it's got Häagen Dazs on it, now.'

'Just *do* it, Wes.'

'I feel ridiculous.' He leaned over Gabi, spoonwise, and brushed away some of the moist hair that had fallen in tangles around her face.

What better time could there be to unburden himself than now, when he was ensconced deep inside his wife? Yes – this was the moment to reveal The Real Wes – the lazy, spineless, selfish Wes. The unambitious Wes. The Wes who had no real intention of getting a 'proper' job, anyway – and certainly not a job in medicine – and didn't want to play *Last Tango In Putney* with Gabi every Friday night for the next thirty years. He gave a little thrust from the hips, buying time while he thought about the best way to express his anxieties. *Sans* fish slice, Gabi didn't respond. 'Look, don't you feel a bit daft, getting your backside tanned every time we do it? You can barely sit down afterwards.'

'Don't *stop*, Wes, for Christ's sake.' She sounded almost hysterical, now.

'I'll carry on with this' – Wes gave Gabi's behind another encouraging nudge from the hips – 'but I'm not slapping anything while I'm doing it. Not now we're married. It'd make me a wife-beater.'

Gabi leant forwards on to her elbows, inadvertently raising her buttocks towards Wes. He could feel the heat rising off the two reddened patches. It didn't help. 'You won't do it?'

'Not like that, no.'

For a moment, they remained conjoined. Then Gabrielle eased herself forwards, causing Wes to slip out from behind her. 'Then there's no *point*, is there?'

Wes's next two thoughts weren't his most noble, he later reflected. Glancing down at his freshly exposed erection, unexpectedly cooled by the draught from under the door, he briefly lamented not having waited until he'd ejaculated before broaching the touchy subject of Gabi's troubling sexual proclivities. *Another fifteen seconds would've done the trick.*

His second thought was more comforting. *I'll bung the fish slice on Ebay. Then I'll use the cash to take Gabi somewhere nice for dinner, a few drinks, and back here for a shag. A normal shag. We're married, now – we'll be doing it all*

the time. He pulled on his underpants and wandered into the kitchen in search of a snack, only glancing upward at the sound of a bedroom door being slammed shut.

At least I hope we will.

six months later...

1

**an uncomplicated,
woman-free evening
at the brick**

Before embarking on the familiar trek over Putney Bridge, Jeremy paused to fire up a fresh Consulate. For such an evangelical non-smoker, he'd been getting through an embarrassing number of ciggies recently – often lighting them, as he did now, from the smouldering tips of their predecessors. His Zippo would've been out of the question, of course – partly because of the stiff breeze that was flicking white horses across the surface of the gunmetal Thames, but mostly

because his beloved lighter was currently residing in the People's Republic Of China.

Jeremy sighed and pressed on towards Putney. It was parky weather, even for an autumn evening – the sort of weather he normally despised. Any meteorological conditions that made lasses wrap themselves up like badly-lagged boilers could never be a good thing, he'd always reasoned – until he'd started seeing Lisa, that is. Lisa, who'd positively encouraged a bit of recreational unwrapping when she got home from long days at the office. *Ah, Lisa*. Such had been her profound influence on his life, that even now – *even when she was on the other side of the planet* – a pang of guilt and a faint stirring of lust accompanied every illicit drag on his cigarette. His *menthol* cigarette. *Ugh*.

There were certain compensations to the inclement weather, of course. Summer – the endless, blistering summer – had been hell. It was the first time Jeremy could remember when he'd felt morally obliged to abstain from staring

openly at girls' breasts. The first time he'd refrained from sidling up to them and attempting to procure a phone number. The first summer he could remember when he hadn't shagged, oooh, at least two or three different lasses a week.

He drew to a halt, suddenly short of breath. Two or three lasses... *a week*. Leaning against the stone wall, Jeremy flicked his half-smoked tab into the Thames, remembering the instant he did so that none of its colleagues remained in the packet. *Bollocks*. He hunched his shoulders against the wind and resumed his trek over Putney Bridge. *No smokes 'til the Bricklayer's, then*.

Of course, if Wes hadn't been such an idle bastard, they could've met at some mutually convenient 'halfway' pub. Somewhere north of the river. Somewhere noisy and beer-sodden in the West End, perhaps – or one of those City pubs where giggling office girls smoked Silk Cut and necked Bacardi Breezers after work. Jeremy didn't belong in pubs like that any more, though

– gazing unapologetically at the tight skirts and black stockinged legs, as the swelter of the bar caused jackets to be discarded and the top buttons of blouses to open... *No, no, no*. That was his life *before* Lisa. The bad old days. *The bad old Jeremy*.

Aye – maybe it was for the best that he'd given in to Wes's remorseless whingeing, and agreed to make the Bricklayer's Arms their regular fortnightly meet. *The Brick – a proper blokes' boozier*. Decent Yorkshire ale and a highly stimulating range of crisps and peanut options. That's all Jeremy craved, now he'd allowed Lisa to turn his life around – not meaningless sexual congress with an endless parade of willing, nubile young females. *Take those two lasses at the bus stop, for instance. The cheeky-looking ones with the naughty smiles and let's-fool-around hair-dos*. Even if they'd offered themselves to him – *right then, right there* – he wouldn't be interested. Even if they dragged him back to their south London love cave for some

manner of unspeakable shagathon – *girl/girl, Jez/girl, girl/Jez/girl, girl/girl/Jez/landlady, girl/spliff/Jez/Hollyoaks/girl/landlady* – he'd politely but firmly turn them down. Eventually.

It's no picnic, this monogamy lark, he reflected, averting his eyes from the bus stop's forbidden fruit. Monogamy was okay for the likes of Tim and Wes, of course – but *they'd* never been known from Hartlepool to Scarborough as The Shagfinder General. *They'd* never juggled the attentions of bored shop girls, gap-year backpackers and sexually-frustrated cinema usherettes. Tim and Wes were one-woman men. Wes was even *married* – six months, now. Jeremy shivered again, fighting an urge to defensively cup his testicles. Dr Byron Wesley – *married*. And he hadn't even got Gabi up the duff.

Up the duff – oh God. Jeremy's hand shot instinctively into his cigarette pocket. Finding nothing, it remained there, clenched into an empty, impotent fist. *Up the duff. In the family*

way. Pregnant. Jeremy swallowed hard, trying to stop the thought unravelling in his mind like a badly-manhandled rubber johnny. Well, there's no point dwelling on it now, he thought. Not if she's told me not to call. Not if she's gone all the way to Shanghai to avoid seeing me. Jeremy blinked away the tiny fragment of grit that'd somehow managed to inveigle its way beyond his fringe – the fringe that had grown increasingly Chewbacca-ish in Lisa's absence. She needs time to think, that's all. Just like I did. Time to see I've changed.

Clearly, an uncomplicated, woman-free evening at the Brick with Wes was just what Jeremy's troubled psyche required. That was one of Wes's few redeeming qualities – his refusal to discuss the joys of married life while down the pub. Come to think of it, since he'd got hitched, Wes had a habit of neatly sidestepping pretty much *all* Gabi-related questions, and Jeremy couldn't remember clapping eyes on the lass since the moment she'd hoyed a glass of vintage

Pommery in her dad's face at the wedding reception. *A good night.*

You couldn't deny that Wes had changed in the six months since he'd got spliced, though – and not necessarily for the better. He still pranced around like a cross between Top Cat and Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, of course – but with noticeably less spring in his step than before. And while he still enjoyed the gee-gees as much as he used to, there'd been less bragging about big wins and hot tips these last few months. And as for the lad's *hair...*

Jeremy blinked hard at the thought, rounding the corner of Waterman Street on sightless autopilot. *Aaah – Wes's hair.* At school, Wes's mam had been the only mother in Whitby to let her son spend Bad Hair Days tucked up in bed with toast soldiers, the *Woman's Realm* and a bottle of L'Oreal Lusterizer hot oil treatment. And the only time Jeremy could remember Wes losing his façade of studied nonchalance was when Lenny Jones had managed to catapult a

half-chewed mouthful of Curley-Wurley into his barnet during double Geography. These last few months, though – well, you could've hidden half a sweet shop in Wes's tangled mane and he wouldn't have noticed.

And it was the same story with the lad's clothes. When he'd been a penniless medical student, Wes had always made a point of emerging from his Dollis Hill bedsit looking like a latter-day Beau Brummel. And while he still wouldn't darken the bookie's doorstep in anything less than a Gieves & Hawkes two-piece, there was something indefinable about the Wes's appearance these days that was more 'pedestrian' than 'popinjay'.

Of course, Jeremy had initially applauded what appeared to be his friend's new chilled-out demeanour. He'd assumed it represented the subtle lowering of standards that generally accompanies the first few months of marriage – a healthy change in Wes's outlook on life, caused by the gentle removal of the invisible stick that

had seemingly been lodged up his backside since the age of three. But now the signs were getting worrying. Last time they'd arranged to meet at the Bricklayer's, the once-fastidious Wes had forgotten to turn up at all.

Eventually, Jeremy had tracked him down in the bookies on Putney High Street, but although Wes had apologised profusely for his slip-up, the experience had left Jeremy profoundly shaken. Forgetting to attend a wedding, or an exam, or a court appearance – these were things he could understand. *But the pub?* To Jeremy's mind, it clearly signalled a deeper malaise than letting your hair grow over your collar ever could.

Jeremy paused for a second at the entrance to the Bricklayer's Arms. It had become something of a ritual since giving up smoking – to linger for a moment with the cheery band of yellow-fingered tobacco addicts on the pub doorstep, taking on board a hearty lungful of second-hand nicotine before plunging into the

sanitised *mêlée* of the bar. Today, though, the darkening pavement was devoid of smokers, leaving Jeremy to savour his last sober moments alone. Then, confident that he'd have time to enjoy a couple of pints of Ram Tam before Wes arrived, he opened the door and stepped into the welcoming, softly lit bar of the Brick.

You didn't have to be Miss Marple to work out that Wes had beaten him to it, though. There, on his favourite table by the window, lay an open copy of the *Racing Post* – and, behind it, a half-supped pint and the telltale detritus of several bags of crisps. No Wes, though. *Must be in the khazi*, Jeremy reflected, ignoring the lure of the bar for a moment and sidling over to the vacant table.

He didn't quite know why, but Jeremy found himself glancing guiltily around the room as he picked up the *Post*. It was surprising that Wes hadn't taken it with him to the toilet, as he usually did. After all, he was generally pretty defensive about his racing selections. On the rare

occasions Jeremy had managed to sneak a peek at Wes's newspaper, he'd found its pages to be heavily annotated with cryptic hieroglyphs and occult-looking symbols. This time, though, most of the paper was still in pristine condition – except for the back page where, in Wes's semi-legible doctor's scrawl, were a number of angular words hacked out in jagged strokes of black biro.

Intrigued, Jeremy peered closer, unconsciously reaching for Wes's abandoned pint glass as he did so. As far as he could tell – and it wasn't easy, given the state of Wes's handwriting – all of the lad's scribblings said the same thing. *Nikki. NIKKI. nikki. NikKi. Nikkkki.* Jeremy drained Wes's beer and dabbed absently at a few of the crisp crumbs on the table. *Who the fuck was Nikki?* Not a horse, surely. It couldn't be a pet name for Gabi, could it? It seemed highly unlikely. Despite her striking similarity to the young Nicole Kidman, 'Nikki' was scarcely a name that sprang to mind when you thought of Dr Gabrielle Wynstanley. *'Snappy' or 'Tetchy',*

perhaps – but not 'Nikki'.

Not that Wes would be likely to say. *He never really talks about anything*, Jeremy mused, closing the newspaper and placing it back on the table. *He banters. He jokes. He makes acid little comments about Casualty and tells you why Lucky Lad won't win the 3:15 at Lingfield. But he never talks.* There was a time, of course, when Jeremy would've seen this as an asset in a friend. But since he'd been seeing Lisa... well, his perspectives had shifted slightly. *You can learn a lot from lasses*, he mentally conceded, making his way over to the bar. *Even when they're on the other side of the world.*

Then, from behind the bar area, a commotion caught his attention. Someone – or something – was emerging from the gents' toilets, with what appeared to be considerable difficulty. It stumbled dangerously between the tables, propping itself up from time to time against the bar's stout iron pillars, occasionally progressing towards the window table thanks to

the assistance of sundry gentle, guiding hands. Frowning beneath his overgrown fringe, Jeremy peered between the milling groups of early evening drinkers. 'Alright, Wes?' he said.

For a second, his friend's eyes swivelled vacantly, and when they finally alighted upon Jeremy's face, it was clear that their owner was already pretty far gone. 'Ah. Jeremy. *Jez,*' Wes slurred, collapsing on to his chair and gently patting the seat next to him. 'Sit down, dear boy. I've been waiting for you.'

'Not late, am I?'

'No. No, Jeremy – I was early.'

'How early?'

'About five hours.'

Jeremy's brow creased in concern. For a moderate drinker who only lived fifteen minutes away, Wes's five-hour head start seemed excessive – particularly since he hadn't seen the lad drunk since the day they'd opened their A level results, back in Whitby, half a lifetime ago. Since then... well, Wes just didn't *get* drunk. Not

'drunk' drunk, anyway. He'd always avoided it for the same reason Jeremy had embraced it – the loss of self-control, the unguarded conversations, and the fact he could never *ever* remember what he'd done in the morning. *Aye – this was a queer one, no doubt. A monumentally pissed Wes, and a mysteriously unsupervised copy of the Racing Post.* 'Any particular reason for the early start?'

'Fancied a little drinkie, that's all. Thought a couple of light ales might clear my head.' Wes's hand reached unsteadily for the empty pint glass on the table, and presented it to Jeremy. 'Speaking of which...'

On instinct, Jeremy reached for the glass, but stopped short of taking it. Doing so would, he knew, be the first step on an exceedingly well-worn path, and for a moment his hand hovered in mid-air before slowly returning to the table. Clearly, something significant and altogether unusual was occurring behind Wes's empty grin, and Jeremy needed to weigh up the situation carefully before deciding how best to deal with

his distinctly wobbly-looking mate.

Decisions like these were easier when I smoked, he reflected bitterly. *You just took a drag on your Rothmans, closed your eyes and an answer would come. You'd look pretty good, too – like a fiery oracle. And if your ciggie didn't give you the answer, Phil Lynott would.* Jeremy sighed as a nicotine-scented cloud of nostalgia engulfed him. Phil Lynott had, of course, been telling him what to do for over a decade – ever since the singer had taken up residence in the lad's subconscious at the age of fifteen, on a school exchange trip to Mönchen-Gladbach. Indeed, since his German pen friend Otto had first introduced him to Thin Lizzy's seminal *Jailbreak* album, Jeremy had more or less abdicated responsibility for all life's major decisions, preferring to address them on the basis of *What Would Phil Lynott Do?* Since that fateful evening, Phil had provided the soundtrack to his life; Phil had given him advice and companionship; Phil had given him a spiritual

lodestar. But as Lisa had made abundantly clear, there was no room for a third party in their relationship – and certainly not a dead Irish rocker with a penchant for afros, heroin and group sex.

Jeremy smiled, trying to hide his anxiety from Wes. The time had finally come, he realised, to go it alone – to use his initiative. He blinked hard, refocusing his attention on his ravaged-looking friend. 'So what's up with yourself, Wes?'

'Nothing.'

'Sure?'

'Of course. I'm absolutely dandy.'

'Nowt you want to talk about?'

'Not with you, no.'

Jeremy leaned back in his seat and gently rubbed his chin. 'I bet you'd spill your beans for Nikki.'

If Wes had looked green before, his face now took on pallor that was the wrong side of ghostly – and his voice, when it eventually

emerged, was little more than a hoarse gasp of incredulity. *'How the fuck do you know about Nikki?'*

'You uncle Jeremy knows all sorts of things, mate.' He smiled benignly, hoping not to betray his surprise at Wes's gobsmacked expression. 'Fancy that pint, now? Get it all off your chest?'

'No.'

'What do you want, then?'

Wes closed his eyes, his hand reaching out to grasp the edge of the table in front of him. 'I want... I think I want to be sick.'

2

**a porny old porn site,
full of porn**

It was hard to tell – particularly given the way he sprayed Gabi's muesli all over the sofa – whether Jeremy's words were intended to convey revulsion, incredulity or admiration. 'So you've been having an *affair* with this Nikki lass?'

'*Not* an affair. The whole point is that I *haven't* been having an affair.' Wes closed his eyes and gently massaged his forehead. It didn't help – not against the tsunami of caffeine and sugar coursing through his bloodstream. 'I'm a happily married man. I was very specifically *avoiding* having an affair. That was the whole

bloody point.'

Jeremy stretched back on the sofa, propping the heels of his Greek army boots on the edge of the smoked glass coffee table. He'd done it a couple of times in the past hour, quietly enjoying Wes's wince of anxiety every time he heard the squeak of rubber on glass. Mentioning Gabi, Jeremy had noticed, elicited pretty much the same effect. *Aye – she might be spending the night at her sister's, but her spirit lingers on.* Actually, he reflected, it wasn't just Gabrielle's spirit that inhabited the dark corners of the Sefton Street living room. It was her refined taste in soft furnishings, her preference for delicately balanced colour schemes, her enthusiasm for elegant lighting solutions. *Mustn't grumble about the candles, though,* thought Jeremy. After all, Wes had only really started opening up when Jeremy had created a shadow to skulk in – and, if the lad's recent spectacular revelations were anything to go by, he was just about to reach his optimum confessional level. *Still drunk enough*

to let his guard down, but sober enough to make sense. You'll be singing like a canary in five minutes. Jeremy's eyes narrowed as he regarded the curled-up form on the opposite sofa. 'Just imagine I'm Gabi, mate,' he urged softly, trying to keep the note of anticipatory excitement out of his voice. 'Call me Gabi, in fact. Try convincing me you've not been cheating.'

Imagining Gabi somehow inhabiting Jeremy's nicotine-addled cadaver was the last thing Wes wanted to do, of course. But the things they'd talked about in the hours since Jeremy'd carried him home from the Brick... well, they'd been a real weight off his tired mind. *And if you can't talk to one of your oldest mates, who can you talk to? Abiola? That husky-sounding German lass who lives in the satnav? God?* Wes closed his eyes in the darkness and cleared his throat.

'Well, *Gabi* – this friend of mine, Nikki – the one I *didn't* have an affair with – well, I never even met her,' he began, as gamely as he could.

'She lives on another continent. And I only ever talked to her in an internet chat room. And never about anything filthy. Therefore it wasn't an affair. Therefore you don't have to divorce me or take away my access rights to the Merc or the PS4 or anything.' His performance over, Wes turned to face Jeremy again. 'Nikki was a friend, mate – a good friend. Someone I could talk to. But just as a friend.'

Jeremy frowned. Wes's latest version of events seemed to diverge significantly from his earlier, franker account of the relationship. *Maybe the bugger's sobering up.* Wes's accent had certainly been drifting away from its rugged Yorkshire peaks and troughs in the past half an hour – back towards the featureless RP he'd struggled to adopt since starting medical school. Jeremy pointed the toe of his boot warningly in Wes's direction. 'Lies make baby Jesus cry, mate.'

'I'm not lying.'

'And that's the story you'd tell Gabi, is it?'

'Uh-huh. And she'd be totally cool about it.'

'And you don't think you've omitted any critical details in your account? The *juicier* details?' Jeremy's eyes sought out his friend in the darkness. 'Because baby Jesus also cries – pretty bloody bitterly – when you don't tell your uncle Jezzar all the juicy details.'

Suddenly, like a long-lost friend re-entering the room, Wes's northern twang was back. 'Like *what*, exactly?'

'Like the fact that the chat room where you had your little heart-to-hearts with this lass just happened to be part of a porn site,' Jeremy said, not altogether unkindly. 'A *porn* site, kid. And that the lass herself just happened to be a porn actress. And that the chat room in question just happens to be a subscription service where lonely, deluded trouser-fumblers wank away their giros while some equally desperate tart tells them how deliciously plump her tits are.'

For a minute, the only sound that could be heard was Wes's laboured breathing from the far side of the room. Then he spoke. 'It wasn't like

that, mate.'

'It wasn't like that, *Gabi*,' Jeremy corrected him. 'Get used to saying it. Because that's what you're going to be saying, when she's hoying your *Buffy* DVD's into a skip.'

Wes turned and regarded Jeremy balefully from across the sitting room. If he'd known how Jeremy's post-pub 'man chat' was going to develop – or if he'd been even vaguely sober – he'd have handled it more circumspectly, glossing over a few details here and there. Things like the unfortunate 'porn' and 'actress' revelations. It was too late now, though. *Too late for the usual blokesy lies and evasions*. He closed his eyes. 'Actually, the fact that I met Nikki on an adult site...'

'...a *porn* site. A porny old porn site, full of porn.'

'...an *adult* site... well, it made it easier to be friends with her. So did the fact that I was paying to use the chat room. It meant that neither of us kidded ourselves about any emotional

attachment. Although we actually got on really well, as it happens.'

'She was *paid* to get on with you, you daft prat,' Jeremy scoffed. 'It didn't matter whether she was complimenting your massive willy or giving you her mother's eggnog recipe. Becoming your extra-sexy new buddy was her *job*, kid. Just a job, that's all.'

'Aye, maybe to start with. But at the end it was more than that.' Wes swung his legs off the sofa and sat up, fixing Jeremy with an ardent stare. 'Nikki's a person, Jez. A real person – real as you or me.' Suddenly Wes appeared to deflate, as with some effort he hauled his legs back on to the sofa. 'I felt closer to her than I've felt to anyone,' he added quietly.

Jeremy glanced across the room at Wes's tortured expression. The flickering light from Gabi's candles carved dark shadows across the lad's forehead, and although his eyes were still hazy with drink, their meaning was unambiguous. It all seemed so... *unlikely*, though.

After all, ever since school, Wes had been the cynical one. Jeremy eyed him intently, probing his friend's face for any sign that he might be taking the piss. After all, even when he'd been drinking, Wes didn't 'do' sincerity any more than the Pope 'did' wife-swapping or crystal meth; sincerity simply wasn't part of his *modus operandi*, in the same way as anchovy simply wasn't part of a Victoria sponge. 'Seriously?'

'Afraid so.'

'And you do you still love Gabi?'

Jeremy's question seemed to surprise his friend, and Wes was silent for some time before answering. 'I don't think love is quite what Gabi's in the market for, Jez.'

'So your whole relationship's just a sham. Blimey.'

Wes appeared to physically recoil from Jeremy's words. 'That was a trifle fucking blunt, mate.'

'Was it? Sorry, kid. It's just that everything's making a bit more sense, now. You letting

yourself go, these last six months. All the pieces have slotted into place, now I know about Nikki. Now I know you're living in a loveless marriage.'

Wes subjected Jeremy to a withering stare. 'You know nothing about Nikki. Nothing. And my marriage is hardly loveless.' He glanced momentarily around the room before curling up and tucking his knees beneath his chin. 'There are many things I love in this marriage. Many things. The telly – I love the telly. And the Merc. And the sofa you're sitting on, mate. Very, very expensive. Highly lovable.'

Had he been able to see it, Wes might've been surprised to observe Jeremy's eyebrow shoot up a clear inch at this last statement. As a furniture restorer, Jeremy had been compiling a small dossier of criticisms of the sofa since the moment he'd first sat on it, some four or five hours earlier. *Crap workmanship. Badly upholstered. Covered in muesli.* Now didn't seem the time to mention it, though, as he slid his boots off the coffee table and reached for his

coat. He glanced down at Wes as he made his way over to the door. The lad, it'd have to be said, didn't look much happier for having aired his problems. In fact, he looked worse. Much worse. Jeremy zipped up his coat. 'So what happened with young Nikki, then?'

Wes gazed up at Jeremy, his face unreadable. 'She disappeared.'

'What do you mean, she disappeared?'

'One day I logged on, and her name wasn't there. Her chat room had been deleted from the list. She'd just gone. No way to contact her. No email, nothing.'

Jeremy shrugged. 'Well, maybe it's for the best, mate. In the long run.'

'Not for her, it's not.'

'Why not?'

Wes sighed and glanced up at the clock above the mantelpiece. *Two o'clock in the morning*. He closed his eyes, held his hands over them, then slumped forwards with his elbows on his knees. 'Do you *really* want to know?'

'Aye.'

Wes nodded in resignation. 'I'm too knackered to explain. I'll have to show you.' He took unsteadily to his feet and tottered out of the room. 'Make us some more coffee. Pop outside and have a cigarette. You'll need one. I'll be back in five minutes.'

Jeremy's hand groped its way over the surface of the coffee table until it found the mug. He dipped a finger inside. *Cold*. After a couple of seconds' consideration, he picked up the mug anyway and drained the contents. *Ugh*. He shivered. The central heating had gone off hours earlier, and even in his coat, the sitting room had become uncomfortably parky. *What time was it now?* It was impossible to say.

'For fuck's sake, Jez – *look* at her.'

'No can do, mate.'

'Just a passing glance.'

'It's not right – two blokes looking at porn

together.' Jeremy turned his head away from the laptop screen. Even through tightly closed eyes, he could still make out its seductive glow in the darkened room. 'I've not looked at a naked lass – *not one, mind* – since I started seeing Lisa. And I'm not starting now.'

'Just *look*.'

'Sorry, mate. I'm not the Shagfinder General any more – but he's only ever an inch or two under the surface. Could be very dangerous for me, a full-frontal porn injection. It's probably different for doctors. You're immune. You can look at what you like. But I'm like... I'm like a recovering alcoholic, mate. You can't just offer me a sweet sherry, then expect me to turn my nose up at the Special Brew. It's not on.'

For a moment, only the sound of the dawn chorus penetrated the room. Then Wes spoke, his voice shrill with excitement. 'Bloody hell. I've just flicked over to the BBC news page. Apparently they've discovered a whole album's worth of unreleased Thin Lizzy tracks at a

recording studio in Dublin...'

'Huh?' Jeremy's left eye flicked open. 'Oh, *shit.*'

There, juddering across Wes's laptop screen in a lurid low-res blur, were the scenes of unbridled debauchery he'd spent the previous twenty minutes studiously trying to avoid. Wes sighed with fleeting disappointment at how easily Jeremy had fallen for his ploy, and nodded at the screen. 'That one there – the blonde lass – that's Nikki. I downloaded this from the website, the day after they took down her chat room. This was the first time I found out what she looked like, actually.'

Jeremy stared, transfixed, at the scenes of gleeful rogering that were currently dancing across his field of vision. *The rubbing. The licking. The grinding.* It wasn't difficult to imagine the kinds of things Lisa would say, if she was here. Jeremy closed his eyes again, blanking out the image entirely, but to little avail. Squeals of simulated ecstasy filled his head. 'I can't look

at it any more, kid. You're just going to have to give me a commentary. I got up to the bit where that bloke was just about to shove his...'

'Jez, *look.*'

The tinny gasps and grunts from the laptop's tiny speaker stopped abruptly and Jeremy opened his eyes. There, on the screen, captured in a freeze frame close-up, was a vast expanse of pink... *something*. For a second, he struggled to work out exactly what it represented. 'Uh-huh?'

'What can you see?'

Jeremy peered at the image. Then he tilted his head to one side, wondering whether or not he'd missed something significant. Finally he returned his gaze to Wes. 'Well, that's an arse cheek, Wes. A lass's arse cheek. Not a shabby one, by the looks of things. Firm, but not too muscly.' His brow furrowed as he struggled to make sense of the situation. 'Are you trying to tell me you're an 'arse' man, mate? Because it's nowt to be ashamed of. Doesn't mean you're gay.'

Not these days.'

Wes sighed. He hadn't, he reflected, been an 'arse' man – either through choice or coercion – since the day he came back from his honeymoon, six months ago. He hadn't been an *anything* man, actually – not as far as relations with Gabrielle had been concerned. Not since the embarrassing *contretemps* over the fish slice. Not since he'd come home to find all his Calvin Klein boxer shorts and Elvis Costello CD's moved into the spare room, and the fish slice lying provocatively on the spare bed. *The spare bed*. He glanced warily at Jeremy, momentarily fearful that some further stray, shameful secret had somehow leaked out of his head and into his friend's. Satisfied that it hadn't, he nodded at the screen. 'Look again, Jez. What *specifically* can you see?'

Jeremy shrugged. 'Well, there's a little bit of... you know...' – Jeremy mentally spooled through the extensive selection of words that could describe what he saw – and the tiny subset which Lisa generally let him use – '*...muff*. Aye, a

smidgeon of muff. It's mostly cheek, though.'

Wes adjusted the zoom control on the toolbar, causing the distracting smidgeon of muff to obligingly disappear off the edge of the screen.

'What now?'

Jeremy nodded at the wide expanse of pink flesh. 'What, the scab thing – on her bum? Is that what you're on about?'

'It's not a scab, Jez.'

'It *looks* like a scab. I had one down there, once. Itchy little bugger.'

'You've not had one like this.'

'No?'

'No.'

'Why? What is it, then?'

'Well, as far as I can tell – and I could be wrong, you understand – it's a malignant melanoma.' Wes glanced across at Jeremy's vacant expression. 'Nikki's got cancer, Jez. Skin cancer. Very, very nasty.'

'Do you think she knows she's got it?'

'I doubt it. She never mentioned it.'

Jeremy gently closed the lid of the laptop, noticing for the first time that the first blue glimmer of dawn was beginning to materialise around the edges of the curtains. He looked at Wes, searching his friend's face for any signs that might indicate exactly how serious the situation was. Even in the hushed half-light, the whites of Wes's eyes were shot with jagged streaks of blood, his pupils dilated to fathomless pits, his expression grave. Jeremy slowly nodded in acknowledgement. 'Fuck.'

3

stockholm syndrome

Wes screwed his eyes shut and pulled the pillow tighter around his ears. *What time was it? And why couldn't someone turn off that fucking car alarm?* As if on autopilot, his free hand emerged from beneath the duvet and began scouting around the periphery of the bed for further sound insulation. *Another pillow. A sack of cement. Anything.* A moment later it disappeared again. *Arse fanny bollocks.*

Opening one eye in the darkness of the bed-cave, Wes surveyed his subterranean realm. What he saw gave him comfort – six inches of dimly-

lit duvet cover, bland but unthreatening. What he heard did not. *Didn't car alarms turn themselves off after a few minutes?* He closed his eye again and tried filtering it out. *La la la la la. I can't hear you.* It was no good, though. At this rate, without taking urgent remedial action, he could expect to be fully awake in no more than ten minutes. *Time for drastic steps, then.* Summoning all his strength, Wes slid a leg down the bed and gently levered himself over on to his other side. And then – almost as if a tiny mercury switch had been tipped in his cerebral cortex – the pain began.

'Fuck me sideways!' he exclaimed. *What the fuck did I drink last night?* More than the usual half dozen white Russians that generally characterised a Gabi-free evening, that was for sure – although the details remained horribly, evasively hazy. For a moment, despite knowing the folly of his quest, Wes twisted and contorted his body, trying to rediscover the position of pain-free tranquillity he'd occupied a minute

earlier. It was no use, though – and now the wail of the car alarm had been joined by something else. *Knocking. Vigorous, angry knocking. Somewhere nearby.*

'Fuck off!' he volunteered, somewhat lamely. Telling the world to fuck off would not, he knew, make the knocking stop – and wrapping pillows around his agonised head would not block it out. 'Okay. You win,' he eventually conceded, throwing off the duvet and staggering to the top of the stairs. 'You can stop knocking. I'm coming. I'm coming.'

Adjusting his pyjamas on the way downstairs – being a man who favoured an 'above the navel' policy with elasticated waistbands – Wes arrived at the front door and flung it open. There, on the doorstep, was a woman he vaguely recognised. *One of the neighbours – a pretty young Putney mum.* Although he couldn't put a name to the face, it was certainly one to which he'd introduced at one of Gabi's coffee mornings. He'd remembered

rather fancying its owner at the time, although the face looked far less amenable now, flushed and clearly vexed, and glaring at him unblinkingly through the tortured wail of the alarm. 'Hello,' he roared, trying to pitch his voice against the din while still sounding faintly alluring. 'How nice to see you again.'

'Your fucking smoke alarm's being going off for the past quarter of an hour.'

Wes swivelled on his heel. Sure enough, the noise was noticeably louder behind him than in front. *And what in God's name was that smell?* Returning to the door, Wes was dismayed to discover that his pleasingly-arranged neighbour, having delivered her communiqué, was now striding purposefully around the gatepost. *Bollocks.*

Wes followed the wisps of acrid-smelling smoke like a semi-zombified *Bisto* kid, entering the kitchen at the precise moment that the alarm stopped. Standing in the midst of a scene reminiscent of wartime Dresden, was Jeremy.

Momentarily deprived of words, Wes surveyed the carnage. Most of Gabi's beloved granite worktops were slathered in some unidentifiable off-white glop that appeared to have emerged from her Kenwood Professional blender. The blender itself, Gabi's pride and joy, was lying on its side on the draining board, surrounded by a glop-encrusted selection of its attachments. Twin tributaries of coffee and orange juice had conjoined to form a river of unidentifiable hue on the floor, while a large bag of self-raising flour had seemingly upended itself into the sink. Meanwhile, the handle of Gabi's Le Creuset griddle pan could just be seen peeping out from below the grill, from which thick clouds of black smoke were billowing playfully. A small number of them were clearly prepared to be seduced by the cooker's stainless steel extractor hood, but the vast majority had elected to form a single toxic cloud above Gabi's Terence Conran dining table. It hung there ominously, refusing to dissipate.

Slowly, Wes's eyes returned to the motionless figure in the centre of the room. *Jeremy*. 'What the fuck are *you* doing here? You know the rules,' he gasped. 'You don't come to the house. We meet in the *pub*, Jez – the *pub*.'

Jeremy frowned in concern. 'Don't you remember last night, mate?'

And then the memories – the unspeakable memories of the night before, the memories that his hungover brain had somehow contrived to suppress – burst through the front door of his mind. *The beer. The confessions. Nikki – Nikki, Nikki, Nikki.* Wes sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands. 'Oh God. Oh no.'

'I'm sorry about the smoke alarm, mate.'

Wes glanced up at the spot on the wall which the device had silently occupied for the past six months. The alarm was still there, but now with a large wooden spatula rammed through its centre. 'Don't worry about it, Jez.'

'It just wouldn't stop. It's not like the one in Lisa's kitchen. Yours is wired into the mains. I

couldn't get it off its mountings.'

Despite a near-overwhelming urge to weep, Wes found himself nodding understandingly. *What was that thing called, where hostages started sympathising with their captors? Stockholm syndrome. Ah, the Swedes – suicidal hardcore porn apologists. Just like me.* He smiled wanly and waved a hand in the general direction of Jeremy's culinary meltdown. 'What were you doing, anyway?'

'Making breakfast.' Jeremy took a tea towel, wrapped it round the handle of the griddle pan and gently lifted it out of the cooker. 'I was going to do pancakes, but I couldn't work out the recipe. So we're having friend egg sandwiches instead.'

Suddenly, the glint of something familiar made Wes catch his breath. Something sticking out of the back of the smoking grill pan. *Dave the barman's antique silver fish slice.* 'Is that what you've been using? To fry the eggs with?'

'Uh-huh. Just to scrape the burnt bits off the

pan. I found it in your bedside drawer, actually, while I was looking for a little nightcap.'

Wes closed his eyes as the room swam around him. 'You slept in Gabi's... our... bedroom?'

'Aye.' Jeremy returned to the grill pan, half-heartedly hacking at its contents with the fish slice. 'You'd cleared off to the spare room, so I slept in yours. All set for a spot of brekky, then?'

Wes's stomach lurched. 'Can't eat, mate.' He closed his eyes. For a moment, the image of the devastated kitchen hung against the backdrop of his mind. 'Don't think I'll ever eat again, actually.' *Or drink*, he thought, as more memories of the previous night began stealing into his consciousness. *I'll never drink again. Or make friends with beautiful blonde girls in internet chat rooms. Never ever.*

From behind tightly closed eyes, the world looked no more comforting than it did in the technicolor glare of daylight – but it did have one appealing feature. *No Jeremy*. Wes was absurdly

tempted, in fact, to simply retreat out of the kitchen on his hands and knees, grope his way blindly back to bed, and never, ever have to look at Jeremy's ridiculous hangdog expression again. He sighed and opened his eyes. It was no good, he realised – he'd have to deal with the daft bugger. Get him out of the house as quickly and quietly as possible, and refuse to be drawn on any Nikki-related topics that might crop up.

I'll feign laryngitis, he thought. Or amnesia. Or post-traumatic stress disorder. Anything that means we don't have to discuss Nikki. Anything that means we don't have to paw at her memory. Anything that stops us reducing her to a tumour on a buttock on the other side of the planet. He eyed Jeremy warily as his friend obliviously picked fragments of cremated egg off the grill pan and popped them in his mouth, wracking his throbbing brain for the best way to sidestep the sticky 'Nikki' issue. The thing about Jeremy, Wes knew, was that he'd want to help her. He'd want to get involved. Then he'd want to get other

people involved. Then he'd get pissed and tell someone he shouldn't. He'd leave messages on the answerphone that Gabi would listen to, then turn up in the dead of night with some fresh ideas he'd just been airing in the pub. He'd probably bring his pub friends with him, actually – a wild-eyed subcommittee of well-meaning pissheads and dropouts who'd want to spend the early hours of the morning discussing *Debbie Does Dallas* and leaving roach burns on Gabi's Liz Claiborne rug.

And eventually, one way or another, Gabi would get to know about Nikki. *And if Gabi ever got to know about Nikki...* Wes shivered and absently hoisted his pyjama trousers a couple of inches higher, knowing very well what the consequences of such a revelation would be. *Divorce. Destitution. And ultimately – the prospect of having to get a proper job. Oh God, no.*

Trying to suppress his feelings of rising panic, Wes forced a smile on to his face. It was

time, he knew, to confront the source of his fears – the shaggy-haired manbeast that was currently hacking a two-inch doorstep off Gabi's *pain d'Auvergne* and dipping it experimentally into the congealing glop on the worktop. Wes shivered again. Finding Jeremy in your house was like finding a horse's head in your bed – deeply, deeply sinister. Finding him making breakfast in your kitchen was like finding the rest of the horse galloping around your garden with nextdoor's kids sitting on its back. *Terrifying*. It signalled the kind of impending apocalypse that you only generally saw in Charlton Heston movies, where the Nile has been turned into a river of blood and the death of the first-born is just around the corner. *Of course, I haven't got a first-born*, thought Wes. *But I have got a brand new Mercedes. And a Rolex. And some really lovely Hermès cufflinks. Oh God.*

Clearly, there was only one thing for it. Wes had to get Jeremy out of his house, out of Putney, north of the river and – for the foreseeable future

– out of his life. The issue of What To Do About Nikki would be something he'd have to handle solo. He'd certainly never be able to mention Nikki in Jeremy's company again – and after six months or so had elapsed, he could quite reasonably pretend that he had no recollection of his drunken confessions.

He cleared his throat. 'Look, mate. I think we should get out of here. Get some fresh air. Get you back to Docklands, so you can get cleaned up before Lisa gets home. I'll walk you back to the Tube station.'

Jeremy appeared to weigh this suggestion for a moment. Then he nodded. 'Cool,' he said. 'We can talk about Nikki on the way.'

'I'll be haunted by that lass's arse 'til the day I die,' Jeremy declared, pulling his coat around him against the buffeting wind. '*Haunted*.'

'*Pas devant les enfants*, mate.' Wes inclined his head towards the small cluster of children

who had, over the preceding ten minutes, slowly gravitated towards their park bench. *Nice children. Middle-class children.* The kind of children he might someday like to produce with Gabrielle.

'Yeah, yeah. Sorry.' Jeremy drew deeply on his cigarette, its glowing tip gently singeing a few strands of hair that had rashly strayed across his face. His eyes narrowed, focusing on some unseen object in the far distance – something far beyond his overgrown fringe, beyond the playground, beyond the indifferent Thames. The smoke from his Rothmans engulfed Wes and broke like a pestilent wave over the gaggle of young mothers sitting on the next bench along. 'Still. Cancer, eh? What a fucker. What a complete fucking... *fucker.* That Nikki can't be any older than us, you know. Younger, probably, seeing as she's doing porn. *Porn.* Fuck.'

Wes lowered his voice, hoping that Jeremy would do likewise. 'She's twenty-two.'

Jeremy glanced apologetically at Wes. 'Of

course. I'd forgotten you were friends with her, kid. Sorry.'

Wes cupped his hands and struggled to light his own cigarette. He'd regretted having spoken almost as soon as the words left his lips. *The sooner I get a ciggie between them, the better.* After all, the whole point of 'going for a walk' had been to get Jeremy back to Putney Bridge tube station – but Jeremy had insisted on taking a diversion via Leaders Gardens, and now seemed intent on embarking on a full-blown discussion on What To Do About Nikki.

Wes looked sidelong at his friend. Maybe Gabi had been right about him. If he hadn't known the lad since before primary school, Wes reflected, there was no way they'd be mates now – and if he and Gabi were ever to have children, Jeremy would undoubtedly be the first friend he'd have to quietly cut adrift. *Then Lenny Jones. Then Tim Howden. Then Lakey-Boy and Arthur and Dave the barman from the Fat Ox.* Wes looked away, flushed with guilt. His friends –

every last one of them – were loyal as barnacles. It'd just be so much more convenient if they could all become television producers or barristers or aromatherapists, and move *en masse* to Putney. Then Gabi could invite them to her dinner parties, and Wes wouldn't have to systematically ostracise them through a decade of deleted emails, unsent Christmas cards and indifferent birthday presents. *Fuck.*

Catching sight of his friend's haunted expression, Jeremy gently punched Wes on the upper arm. 'Chin up, kid. After all, we don't *know* it's cancer, do we?'

Wes shrugged half-heartedly. 'Well, it *could* be a mole. You just can't tell. Not without a proper poke around. A biopsy and such.'

'And even if it *is* cancer, she might get better.'

'Not really. Not if it's a malignant melanoma.' Wes beckoned Jeremy closer, anxious that none of the park's under-fives should overhear him. 'Just between the two of us,

it's got a whiff of the slab. If you don't get it seen to, anyway. It all depends on whether it's spread.'

'Oh. I see.' Jeremy closed his eyes and allowed the fresh wave of nicotine to transport him back to the moment of grim revelation in Sefton Street. In the shadowy cavern of his mind, it wasn't difficult to recreate the images he'd seen on Wes's laptop – Nikki and her nameless, donkey-cocked beau, performing the kind of flicker-book sex that he fully expected to see on his deathbed when his life flashed before him. 'She looked lively enough though, didn't she – young Nikki? Highly energetic.' Jeremy opened his eyes and cast a pensive glance over the gang of children that was about to engulf the nearby climbing frame. 'Aye. Plenty of life in her,' he murmured, extinguishing his cigarette butt on the heel of his Greek army boot and groping in coat his pocket for another.

For a second, Wes fought the compulsion to shrug in tacit agreement. Shrugging in agreement would be the easy thing to do – the kind of

cowardly, selfish reaction he'd based a highly rewarding lifestyle on. But his drunken self must have shown the video to Jeremy for a reason – possibly, he reflected, because Jeremy possessed something that Wes himself lacked. *A childlike desire to do the right thing? A long-standing debt to womankind? A spine?* He eyed his old school friend from behind his scarf. 'Thing is, Nikki probably doesn't even know she's got a tumour. What, with it being on her backside and everything.'

'And when d'y'reckon she'll find out?'

'Most people only find out when it's too late.'

'Ah.' Jeremy gazed out over the choppy water of the Thames. In his mind's eye, Nikki's face had now reappeared, frozen in an open-mouthed rictus. Agony? Ecstasy? It was impossible to say. 'It's lucky you noticed it, then. Because she needs telling, doesn't she?'

Wes sighed. 'I've already tried, mate. I've emailed the people who run the website a dozen

times.'

Jeremy considered this for a moment, drawing deeply on his cigarette. 'Tricky email to write, that. Not that I've ever had to tell someone they've got cancer.' He blinked away another cloud of cigarette smoke, reflecting on his own limited experience of dropping medical bombshells. 'I've had to tell a lass she's got gonorrhoea, a couple of times. And unsightly facial hair, once. But never cancer. What happened with your emails, anyway?'

'Not much. I just got stock replies saying that the company wasn't prepared to discuss its employees.'

'And there's no other way of getting hold of her?'

Wes shuffled uncomfortably and made a last half-hearted attempt to light his cigarette. 'Well, I've had a look at a few other... erm, *adult* websites, obviously. To see if she's working for anyone else.'

'No joy?'

'None so far.'

'So what do we do next?'

For a second, Wes fought for breath as though winded by an invisible blow. This was it; the moment he'd most feared. *The 'we' moment.* The moment when Jeremy quietly and unobtrusively hopped across the Venn diagram of Wes's life, from the 'public' to the 'private' bubble. *The bubble that housed Gabi and Nikki, the female cast of Hollyoaks and Vesta beef curries, Dave the barman's antique fish slice and an unaccountable urge to address Fern Britton as 'mum'.* Wes's vision swam sickeningly before him, and he fleetingly felt he was about to faint – until, not a moment too soon, he realised he'd been trying to draw an entire lungful of breath through the filter of his unlit cigarette. He opened his mouth and gulped down oxygen. 'We?' he eventually gasped. 'We? We don't do anything, mate. There is no 'we', okay? Not when it comes to Nikki.' Wes breathed deeply, trying hard to recompose himself. 'I intend to try

tracking her down on the internet. She's got to be out there somewhere. But it's not a 'we' thing, Jez. It's just me – understand? *Just me.*'

For a moment, Jeremy regarded his friend coolly. Then he quietly plucked Wes's cigarette from his lips and lit it with the smouldering stub of his own. Then he handed it back to Wes. 'Well, I could help, mate. Put the word out to Lakey-Boy and Dave the barman. Get Big Rob on the case. Tim's a bit anti-porn, but Lenny Jones isn't averse to an unsheathed bosom. He'd track down young Nikki in no time...'

'*Please*, Jez. Don't tell anyone about Nikki. No one at all. I'm going to sort out the whole 'Nikki' business by myself.'

Wes glanced at Jeremy's face, trying to read his friend's expression. *Equanimity? Resolution? Or simply the half-formed desire for a bacon sandwich?* You could never tell with Jeremy – and Wes was about to seek clarification from the lad, when he suddenly spoke. 'Okay.'

'What?'

'I said okay.'

'You won't try to interfere?'

'It's your affair, mate.'

'It's not an affair. I haven't been having an affair.'

Jeremy sighed and began stretching out his legs in turn, as though limbering up for some taxing physical ordeal. 'That's not what I meant. But you're the doctor. You've got half a decade of medical training under your belt. I'm just a furniture restorer. You're the best person to deal with this – not me.'

'That's right. And you'll forget all about the Nikki business, won't you?'

'Already have, mate.' Jeremy levered himself off the bench and pulled his coat tight around himself. He dropped his cigarette on the asphalt path and extinguished it with his boot. 'I won't mention her to a soul.'

'Good lad. It's not that I don't appreciate what you're trying to do. And Nikki – well, she's really important to me. But just I don't want your

help with this one. I can do this by myself.'

Jeremy smiled and extended his hand to Wes. 'Okay, mate. Anything you say.'

Thanks for reading.

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Spike Evans was brought up in Yorkshire.
He is married and lives in north Hertfordshire
with his wife, Jo, and their cat, Fred.
'Cheek' is his second novel.

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