

The Networked Wonderland of Us

By Sarah Gibson Yates

Every story is connected

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Prologue |

So, this is when I tell you how I find her. The moment just before I understand how deeply and absolutely connected we all are. The moment that sparks everything. The moment I realise that those connections can't ever be broken, even if you want them to be.

Even if you're dead.

Chapter one | it's a film thing

So, this is when I tell you how I found her.

I'm going to write this in screenplay format. Sorry. I know it's unnecessary/annoying/pretentious/stupid—delete as appropriate—but it's just how I remember it. It's a film thing. Did I mention I'm into film? Well, I am. News flash! I'm a film student. Film is my happy place. I love watching films, thinking about films and making films but don't ask me what I plan to do with that once I graduate. I'm warning you. Don't. If I'm pushed, I'll mumble something about how I'd like to be a successful film director with unlimited budgets and awards—the whole shebang—but the stats are stacked against me. Only 34 % of UK film graduates find work in the film industry *at all*. And, I'm female. Only 13% of film directors are women. Sucks, but there it is.

So, this love-of-film thing is the main reason why I need to write this part of the story in screenplay but there's also the fact that everyone remembers significant moments from their life in moving images so why not screenplay? Safe to say that this is the most *significant moment* of my life so far by some measure, so there's my rationale. Anyway, long story short, I can't do this in prose. BTW I'm going to adapt the convention. I'm going to put it down in first person, rather than third which is what it should be, so don't copy this and expect anyone to take you seriously as a screenwriter because they won't. Just saying.

Here goes.

FLASHBACK (12 hours earlier):

EXT. LIGHT PARK CAR PARK - FRIDAY MAY 11th 10.34pm

A deserted car park an airstream street food van –DAISY'S
– waits patiently for customers.

ME [18] - blue black medium length hair, *Stranger Things*

tee, black jeans, signature yellow leather satchel and turquoise Doc Martins - walks slowly across the tarmac towards the back of the van.

The radio booms out distorted dance music. I wonder why it hasn't been tuned. It played fine earlier, when I stopped here for a munch before home. Something's off.

I notice flashing head-lights where RHID's parked, 200 yards away. He's telling me to hurry up. He can be such a pain sometimes.

I walk nearer, and stop.

Something's definitely not right.

I become aware of my heartbeat and listen hard.

Nothing.

Ok. I'll just pick up my phone from the counter where I left it and leave.

I walk around to the front counter..

CRACK! ...and JUMP OUT OF MY FREAKIN' SKIN.

ME

SH-IT.

I look around, heart somewhere between my throat and chest.

Inside the van, an electric insect killer fizzles as a zapped fly falls onto a carpet of other insect bodies gathering beneath it. A macabre snowflake with a thin line of white smoke rising from its singed remains.

I see my phone on the counter, by the tomato shaped ketchup bottle and other condiments.

FLASHBACK [WITHIN A FLASHBACK] - 40 minutes earlier that

evening

I'm chatting with the girl behind the counter. KASHA (18) is a striking British Jamaican girl with close shaved bleached hair, big smile and sparkly eyes. We're chatting about all sort of random stuff. I'm actually having a good time. We've even exchanged names.

Half-way between *do you follow X* and, *have you seen Y*, the food's ready. I drop my phone on the counter and struggle to balance my two chip bags, two burger boxes and two cans of coke in my puny inept arms.

Kasha laughs good-humouredly at my pathetic attempts at personal logistics and offers to help. Eventually, together, we balance the food, say good-bye and I walk back to the car where RHID is waiting.

END OF FLASHBACK [WITHIN A FLASHBACK]:

CUT BACK TO:

Standing in the doorway to the food van.

ME

Hello? Kasha?

I step forward and up on to a wooden box, rocking the van slightly. The fridge door swings opens. My heart stops.

The entire service area is covered in BLOOD. There's BLOOD up the walls, blood over boxes, BLOOD dripping down cupboards. BLOOD washes over everything like a messy child's painting, bright in places - thick and dark in others.

KASHA is face down on the griddle, her body unnaturally

twisted, immobile and still.

On the side of her face nearest the hot plate a white unicorn earring with a rainbow horn melts slowly - a rancid mix of burning plastic and flesh.

I wretch. Work hard to hold down insistent bile.

I reach out with finger and thumb for my phone a fair stretch away. I manage to pincer the device by its corner and drop it gingerly inside my jacket pocket. Then I look up to the polished chrome splashboard at the back of the van, streaked with KASHA'S slowly drying blood.

I don't look like me, or rather I look like somebody else.

I CLOSE MY EYES.

FADE TO BLACK.

SOUND: The insect killer's neon strip flickers and drones.

FADE UP FROM BLACK.

EYES OPEN.

Something moves in the view beyond the van behind me. I squint to focus.

ME

Pete?

I turn quickly - but there is no one.

An empty forecourt.

ME

[calling out]

Pete?!

No reply.

Can that have been Pete?

I shake off the question and return to what I know, scanning the scene.

A pile of white bread is stacked by the grill.

Kasha's hand lays limp beside it.

Something catches my eye -

In the soft, spongy dough there is a print. It's imperfect, broken at the edges, and small. Kasha's hand.

At some point in the struggle, she must have reached out and grabbed the bread.

The print is deep. Complete. As if her hand is still there.

Pressing down but invisible.

I look closer and see a chip of glossy purple nail polish stuck in the crust.

END

This is how I found her.

A girl I met a few minutes earlier. Dead.

Irony is, last night had looked like things might start shaping up for the better what with things-going-pretty-badly generally. I'd gone to a party with Rhid—Duma had invited a bunch of us to his house for a parents-away-for-weekend no-brainer. And it seemed people had started forgetting they weren't speaking to me. I'd seen Cyd for the first time since the video incident (I'll tell you about that soon) and we hadn't killed each other. I'd even seen Pete—the victim of the bullying incident that prompted me to make the video—and he seemed ok. It was from a distance, and I felt awkward as hell, but somehow I found the courage to smile at him and I'm sure he smiled back. For the first time in nearly a year I felt

that there was potential for some definite *moving on*. Maybe even forgiveness.
But there you go. That's my life. One minute I'm happy. There's a song I love on
the radio, the lights are all green on my cycle to uni, no one hated on me today.
The next it's free fall.

Chapter two | the day after I find her

- *u awake?*
- *yep*
- *alright?*
- *no*
- *b w u in 30*

Next morning, I'm lying in bed working out how to avoid the day entirely when a message from Rhid drops in. Rhid is one of only two friends who hasn't stopped talking to me. The other being Lola, who'll turn up later. As Rhid was with me last night—the RHID in the car flashing his lights impatiently, remember? So, I should probably explain what happened next.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. LIGHT PARK CAR PARK - DAISY'S STREET FOOD VAN - LAST NIGHT

RHID [19] arrives to find me frozen on the tarmac outside the van. As I clock him my throat catches again. This time I can't hold it down and elegantly slap the contents of my stomach onto the shiny black tarmac.

RHID

Nice.

He saunters in—usual Rhid—and sees me first.
Then he looks up.

What..?

He turns away, scrambling for his phone.

CUT TO:

10-15 MINUTES LATER (BUT FEELS LIKE HOURS): THE POLICE
ARRIVE.

IT IS NOTHING LIKE CSI

There are no flashing lights. Nothing like you see on the movies or on TV. A police car turns up. An ambulance. A few moments later two more police cars. Whoop.

RHID's face is white. Eyes glazed like a dead fish. I look around, trying to work out how long I've been standing there. I can't move but I can feel my body. Light and solid at the same time. My feet to the soles of my boots, in contact with the ground. The cold night air soft around my face. The comforting smell of my worn yellow leather satchel pressed close to my chest.

I take a breath.

RHID steps near and throws both arms around me. Then, as if suddenly someone has released the pause button, we slowly slide to the floor. Huge silent sobs shudder through us. Involuntary. Seismic.

Truth is: Whenever Rhid cries, I cry. I just can't help it. It's an empathy thing I guess. Thankfully he's only lost it twice in my company so this embarrassing connective impulse hasn't had too many public outings. The first was when his Grandma, Nana-Bo, died, just before his 9th birthday. The second when he trapped his finger in the front door of our house and had to have the

top sewn back on.

More people in uniforms arrive.

A senior officer surveys the area, noting the positions of two CCTV cameras. A tired looking man in a dark suit and bad tie - CHIEF DETECTIVE INSPECTOR IAIN LAYTON [54] has been here and done this before. I see him thinking crime detective thoughts at the cameras. *Someone will have to trawl through that.* LAYTON walks towards us before stopping to speak to a police woman. PC TRISH KENDAL [35] - a no-nonsense, community police officer with an efficient walk. They exchange words. I try to make out what they're saying but can't. Then she nods in our direction.

PC TRISH KENDAL (speaking louder)

These are the only witnesses so far:
Taylor Millar, first on scene, and
Rhidian Smith, second. Witnesses *after the fact.*

After the fact.

Her words make me feel guilty. Like we arrived too late.

Which we did.

PC KENDAL wraps a foil blanket around us and we're guided to one side to sit.

PC TRISH KENDAL

Shock's a tricky thing. You can feel alright one moment then boom! You've been staring at the curb for twenty minutes and not even realised.

She offers us sweet tea from a thermos.

Drink this. Remember to breathe.

As I sip, I think about when I heard a man on a documentary talking about seeing the New York Twin Towers collapse. As he spoke his gaze went off, as if he was seeing it again in front of him. With his inner eye. He described it as if seeing in *slow motion*. So slow he could see the horrible unimagivable event happening before it even happened. Like he knew what was coming. Like he'd seen it before.

Strange the way the brain works.

I walked up to the van for the second time that evening I'd seen nothing wrong, but somehow, I knew.

Was it guilt? If I hadn't gone back to Rhid, gone home, when I did. If I'd stayed longer, with Kasha, stealing chips and chatting about our night then maybe everything would be alright. She'd be alright.

Kasha could still be alive.

Chapter three | message from a dead girl

My curb, right now and the day after last night is the thing I'm staring at now. A friend request. My *second* phone notification of the morning:

Dear valued friend,
Sadly, my time with you on this beautiful, complicated planet has come to an end, but remember I am with you for as long as you remember me. Please visit my memorial page and post a memory or a picture of my name spelled out, or a favourite song, or poem. Keep our spirits alive together. Peace and love.
Kasha x
A friend in need

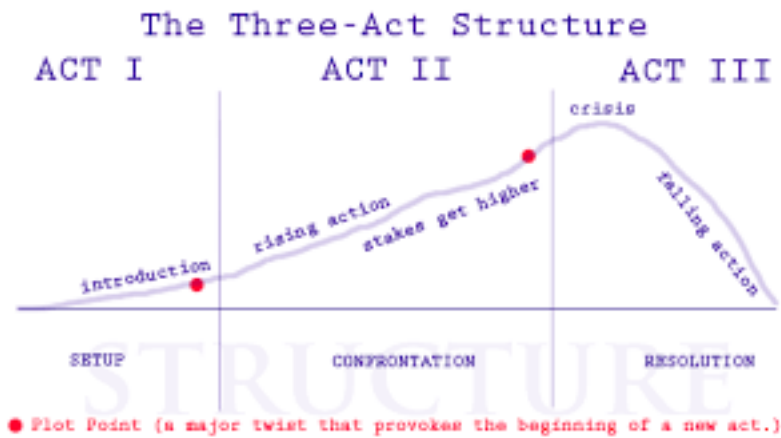
A message from a dead girl. How ...unusual? Maybe not so uncommon but here's where this story's sticky relationship to truth begins. 'Dear valued friend' is wrong. For a start Kasha Stone can't honestly call me her *valued friend* because I only met her last night. I mean, we liked each other, but it's a stretch to say someone you just met is a *valued friend*. Secondly, *she's dead*, so she *can't* be in need. It's just not possible for a dead person to *need* anything.

At least you'd think so.

In truth, none of us know how connected our stories truly are, but if stories fall into three acts—like most anyone who tells you anything about stories tells you they do—then currently I have no idea where I am. I'm way past the opening credits (birth infant-hood), over the inciting incident (defining moment when I failed to stand up to Cyd) and through most of the first Act. I'm 18 for goodness sake. If you claim to know where you are on your story arc at this age then you're either lying, or delusional or both.

If pushed I'd say I'm somewhere around the end of act one, hitting that all-important first turning point.

The point of *no return* (cue cheesy dramatic music).



I'm calling it: *Found a dead girl (that I could have saved.) (Potentially.)*

This is where I am.

From which point, in my tidy narrative arc of impossible logical causality, I can *only go forward*.

Going back isn't an option. Not that going back is *ever* an option. There *are* no time machines - sorry my sci-fi loving friends. Except if you count memory. And maybe films. Films are literally time machines. Seriously though, if real time machines were at all possible I'd have invented them last summer and rewind the whole month of June.

This isn't the first time I've stood-by and let something bad happen.

But I digress. More on that soon enough.

So, I'm reading this message for the 8th time wondering what to do, when an Insta notification pops up telling me I've been *followed* by someone called @Kashagogo. And the usual invitation to follow back. I'm pretty certain this is going to be Kasha Stone. In fact, if I was a betting woman, I'd put money on it.

Now I'm in a dilemma.

Should I accept this request? Follow the dead girl back? Or ignore?

What does this dead girl—or rather, whoever's now in control of Kasha's social media accounts—*want*?

Chapter four | one way to find out

There's only one way to find the answer to that particular question.

I click on the link to Kasha's memorialised facebook page. In the banner there are invitations to follow her insta @Kashagogo and a link to another website set up to honour and remember the dead. There's a search button where you can look the deceased up by name but also by type of death, for example, road traffic accident, natural causes, suicide or murder.

In The Universe of the Strange that is the internet, this is pretty up there.

A few people have posted on Kasha's page already *R.I.P angel, may you sing forever in heaven. / God bless xx. / The world is less without you in it.* You can donate to a music charity, receive a flickering candle gif to post alongside your personalised message or buy any number of memorial gifts to remember Kasha by but you have to login and create an account which I can't be bothered with right now. Besides, I'm more interested in looking around her social media, and finding out a bit about this girl's *life*—not death. So I flick over to her Facebook.

Kasha's profile picture is an unfiltered webcam selfie taken from her laptop. She pouts playfully at the viewer, the edges of her face dimly lit by the blue glow of her computer screen, and she's partly thrown into silhouette by yellow light bleeding in from the room beyond. Underexposed shadows are grainy and indistinct—sludge green darkness peppered with white noise. Kasha wears a bright green top with *Adidas* rhinestones across her chest. The gems catch the light showing off her curvy chest, waist and full hips. The large white star-shaped earrings and gold lamé headband are just the right side of eighties cool, ditto the purple round-rimmed fake Chanel sunglasses.

Despite the low quality of the image Kasha glows. Her naturally caramel complexion appears white and smooth. Kasha presents herself well. Whenever I post anything I'm never sure it's *The Me* I really want to put out there. I'm never happy with the way my selfies turn out. But Kasha looks natural. Authentic. It seems like she not only knows more about understanding how to appeal to people than me but also better at knowing how to be herself.

Or rather she *was*.

I scroll through her profile information. Under her name she's added a description: *love life, making music, family and friends*. She has 1450 followers. Her recent posts are a mix of night out selfies, home alone composing at her keyboards, or trying out new songs at her recording desk or cross advertising her YouTube channel. There's even a few of her at work at Daisy's with various happy chip munching customers/friends.

I spot one where Kasha's pointing to the words *always ready*, written on the chalk board propped outside at Daisy's. It was posted last night. Earlier in the evening.

The post before is a 'life moves pretty fast' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* gif. The one where smug Ferris sits in the back of his friend's dad's red 1961 Ferrari 250 GT California Spyder. Best friend worried in the back. Perfect girlfriend at his side,. It was posted yesterday at 17.46 p.m., has been liked 395 times and there are 234 comments below. I scroll through. Well-meaning messages, full of love and sadness emoji's and admiration for what they understand her to have been, based on the same thin information I'm looking at here.

I keep scrolling until one post stops me in my tracks. *always with us*.

Posted at 10.56 this morning.

The name by the post is Cyd Mendes.

Now, I know Cyd.

I know Cyd very well.

Safe to say *We-Have-History*. Quite a lot of history in fact, going back to when we were 7 ½ years old.

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE WITH CYD - THE GOOD (EARLY) YEARS:

2010: CYD MENDES (7 ½ years old) moves into the biggest, most expensive house on our street, four doors down from ours. She has a twin brother called JONTY who is, without exaggeration, the handsomest boy I have seen in real-life. They both are. Handsome, that is, not boys. Ha, ha. They live with their ex-model Brazilian mother SINITA MENDEZ, their very serious banker father GEORGE MENDEZ [British, Brazilian grandfather], and two white Chihuahuas called Crystal and Charlie who bark at anything and everything *all the time*.

AGED 8: SCHOOL PLAYGROUND

A GIRL has pulled my brand new Ponyo backpack and I'm trying to get it back. She is throwing it around, messing up everything inside and I'm getting really, really angry.

For some reason, this is making everyone laugh.

Suddenly CYD appears from nowhere and catches the bag. I launch at her. We fight, pulling hair and kicking hard. A teacher arrives, separates the two of us and we're marched off to the Head's office.

Sitting, waiting to go inside for a bollocking.

CYD

I was getting it back for you.

ME

[I scowl, sarcastically.]

You were?

CYD

Yes. I love that film.

ME

(cautious)

You've seen it?

(She's weirdly believable.)

CYD

Of course. Love it. [Beat]

I particularly like the bit when fish Ponyo turns into a girl for the first time.

ME

Me too!(too enthusiastically.)

CYD

Shall we just tell Drummer we were messing around? Hewlett over reacted? No harm done.

I think about the idea for a split second and agree. The alternative being a possible three-day suspension I don't feel like explaining to the parental. We get off with a light warning.

Unexpected outcome: I now feel slightly obligated to Cyd, due to her coming up with the idea, so now me and Cyd are strangely, but not altogether unpleasantly, *officially best friends*.

AGED 11: INT. MY HOUSE

I am dressed up for a party in what I consider to be a

pretty cool blue off the shoulder t-shirt dress with pink stripy leggings and yellow sparkly Trainers. I am waiting for CYD to come around so we can go together.

I wait. And wait.

Afternoon passes to evening and still no CYD. I go around to her house to find out she's already gone. Hours ago.

When I get to the party - not only is it nearly over CYD laughs at my outfit and then ignores me.

I'm furious.

AGED 13: INT. CYD'S HOUSE.

CYD tries out different make-up looks on me, playing at beautician. We laugh as she smears pink lipstick over my lips and smudges thick black eye liner across my lids it goes everywhere.

Age 16: INT. MY HOUSE - MY 16th BIRTHDAY PARTY.

Cyd's always looked older. She is curvier than all of us, long silky dark hair, altogether way more glamorous. She dresses to show all this off. Low cut dress and heels. I come down in a vintage red gingham dress over black jeans and red Dr Marten boots. I see her whisper to Shani. They both look me up and down, pull a face, then rush up squealing and hugging, all smiles and birthday wishes. Cyd is whispering and two faced all party. Later, while dancing, she catches me off guard, admiring her brother.

CYD

Sweet 16 and never been kissed.

She smiles and pushes Jonty over towards me,

It's a crime.

Time for a birthday kiss.

Jonty squirms. I blush beetroot, feet to head and run away. Crying from embarrassment and confusion and hurt I run into the bathroom and lock the door where Rhid finds me.

AGED 18: 6th FORM COLLEGE: SUMMER 2018: [LAST TERM OF HIGH SCHOOL]

A nerdy, kind looking boy with bright eyes, save the whales tee-shirt and Dunlop trainers called PETE RIVERS trips over in the lunch queue. The contents of his tray - roast chicken, mash potato and gravy - splats all over CYD. All over her new All Saints strictly non-uniform jacket she's showing off to Shani. She is furious. The canteen goes quiet. This has happened before. A different boy and Cyd publicly crucified him. We hold our breath waiting for her to react.

Silence and then (beat) surprisingly she gains control.

She look over to Pete and smiles.

END OF FLASHBACK

As I scroll through my feed I see Cyd's posted a picture of her and Kasha taken on a recent night out. She added a hand-written message in blue—*Darling Kasha. My heart is broken.* Followed by way too many hearts to reproduce here. She's linked a video of

Kasha singing at the 2019 Talent East Awards. I click play and directed over to Kasha's YouTube channel. Kasha is dressed in a long black sequined tube, large boots and feathered hat with white fringe, like something Lady Gaga might wear on a day off. I hit play. The crowd applauds, the intro begins. Kasha sings.

*I didn't know if you knew
what I knew about you
but I thought you should know
that whatever they said about me was untrue.
These things, they don't need names
These things, but we learned them all the same.*

I watch it through twice. Kasha has an amazing voice and a distinct turn of phrase. She transforms the lyrics giving every word something different each time. I'm impressed more than impressed, in fact I'm moved.

I scroll down a raft of enthusiastic comments posted under the video. She's replied to all them personally. Rhid should see this. Where is he? I check the time. It's been well over thirty minutes since he texted.

I decide to see if Kasha has a Facebook page to see what I can find there. No one under thirty admits to using Facebook any more. Too many parents but most keep up some kind of presence. And there it is, or rather the little I can see as I'm not her friend. I send her a request. Chances are someone's taking over this page too. Not much going on. She shared a cute cat meme I've seen doing the rounds and a gif of an angry bald Trump with a slab of orange hair on a lead, barking. I enter Cyd's name in the search window and can't hardly believe what I see at the top of her timeline:

- *Cyd where r u? I really need 2 speak. I've been calling 4 ages. Msge me, call me, anything!!! quick. I need to speak with u now. No word of. A. Lie.*

It's a message on Cyd's wall from Kasha, sent last night at 9.31 p.m.
Just about the time I placed my order at Daisy's.

Chapter five | an unexpected call

Rhid finally arrives wearing a black t-shirt with the words *cleverly disguised as a responsible adult* printed in small white text across his chest. This is funnier if you know Rhid. He enters my bedroom in the usual way—two long strides straight to my bed and flops himself down.

‘Alright?’ he asks, making himself comfortable.

‘I guess.’ I shrug.

‘Liar.’

‘Look.’ I try to scroll up the open browser window of my laptop but my cursor won’t move. Impatient I refresh the page and Kasha’s help message vanishes before my eyes! ‘What the..?’

‘What?’

‘Shit. Shit. Shit.’ I glare at the screen.

‘What?!’ Rhid sits up.

‘Kasha posted something last night – on Cyd’s wall, now it’s gone.’

‘What did it say?’

‘Paraphrasing: Kasha wanted to talk to Cyd *urgently*. She sounded really upset.’

I had seen that, hadn’t I? I didn’t *imagine* it? Or is this like the time when I couldn’t remember if I’d put salt in my ex-boyfriend’s drink or only wanted to. Or told Lola her hair looked truly ridiculous that green when I knew she wanted me to say it looked great. Or when I knew I should tell Cyd she’d gone too far, but didn’t. TBH I often find it hard to tell the difference between what’s real and what’s imaginary. Nothing huge. Nothing to put my sanity into question I don’t think, but enough to make me think twice. Like a dropped film frame or skip of a turn table stylus. Tiny ellipses, breaks in the continuum, gaps in the life I think I know.

‘Why’ve you got this?’ Rhid notices my phone on the bed.

‘It’s *my* phone...’ I reply, wary of stating the obvious.

‘You should have given it to the police.’

‘Why?’

'It was there when Kasha was killed last night. It might... I don't know ... have clues on it or something.' I think about that and pick it up, pressing my thumb on the home button. The screen wakes and I notice something unexpected in my call history.

Two *unidentified* calls. Two *unidentified* calls but *one same* number.

OK so let me repeat that. *Number. Not name.* Which means it isn't in my contacts.

One of these calls is green, meaning it's been dialled *out* from my phone and punched in *by hand*. The other is red which means that whoever someone called then *called back!*

Who used my phone? And who the hell did they call?!

A number of scenarios present themselves, none of them good.

I take a note of the number on some paper by my desk and stare at the screen.

'So...there are a number of things I could do right now:

1—I could listen to you and take the phone to the police.

2—find that business card PC Kendal gave me, tell *her* about the number and *she* could tell me to take it in.

3—call the number myself and find out.'

I can see what Rhid wants me to do but... I just can't help myself.

'Obviously, I'm going for number 3!' I deliver in a kind of Ta-Dah-kind-of-way. Hoping to make this potentially stupid/dangerous decision sound like lots of fun.

Rhid rolls his eyes. I take a breath, holding the phone in both hands, like some Neanderthal who's never held a phone before and dial the number on speakerphone.

It rings.

Bring. 'What if no one answers?' I whisper.

Rhid shrugs.

Bring. 'Should I leave a message?'

Rhid shrugs again, unhelpfully.

Bring... scuffle...

- - *Hello?*

'OMG. Someone's *actually* answered.' I whisper.

- - *Hello? Who's this?*

The voice repeats. It's female, but deep, with a strong London accent.

I seem to have lost my voice. I literally cannot speak.

- - *Who IS this?*

She's getting angry now.

OK. I need to woman up.

- - *Err. Hi. Yes. I'm calling because someone dialled this number on my phone last night. When I wasn't there and I...*

I was going for confident and self-assured but my voice is distant and faint.

- - *Who IS this?!!*

'Does this woman know no other words?' [Another helpful Rhid contribution.]

- - *This is my phone...and I...*
- - *What do you know about Kasha's murder?*

The woman asks in a way that makes me think that perhaps I *do* know something. Even though I blatantly don't.

- - *Me? Nothing!*

A short silence.

- - *No matter. I know.*

She says this last line slowly. Then there's another silence, and the line goes dead.

I stare at Rhid who seems to have lost the power of speech and lay the phone carefully on my bed. Like a bomb about to explode. I wait for my hands to stop shaking.

Regaining speech, Rhid orders. 'Police station. *Now*. Let's go.'

There are only a few people I'd let convince me do something I didn't first think of first myself. Mum, dad, Lola (sometimes) and Rhid. 'Okay, but I have to shower.'

'We need to get this to them NOW.'

'No way I'm leaving here without a shower.' I've already got my towel and heading out the room.

In the bathroom I let the hot shower water run over me, wishing away the past fifteen hours.

'Have you seen all these condolence messages?' Rhid's followed me into the bathroom. I can see his back shape leaning by the door, faced away.

'I know.' I call out from behind the curtain, over the sound of the water. Thank god the shower curtain is solid.

'Listen to this one: *'Even though I never met you I miss you already so much. u r in my thoughts always xxxxxx love u xxxxx'* and this, *'One more angel in heaven. God bless you, child.'* People are crazy.'

'Yeah I read some. It's weird they're addressed to Kasha.'

'Why?'

'As if she's out there still. In some digital afterlife or something. Scrolling through messages, waiting for updates...I don't know. It's just weird.'

He reads another: *'I never met you but you seem to be to me so beautiful. May your heart shine on forever; sing for us in heaven with the angels. RIP xxx. Just viewed your talent show vid. What a loss. You really had it, Kasha. You really did. Tragic.'*

'Tragic.' I say. Because it is.

Beat. 'Drink?' Rhid can change gear pretty quick.

'There's some cans in the fridge.' I call out through the curtain.

'On it.' Rhid leaves.

I catch my face in the polished chrome surface of the shower unit and see myself reflected in the bloodied splash-back of Daisy's kitchen last night. I turn up the heat. Steam billows around me but I turn it up again, letting the scalding water run over my body, turning my skin red. The bathroom fills with thick steam, so dense I can't see my face anymore.

Back in my room, wrapped in a towel, I join Rhid on the bed.

'I have to lie down.'

'Last night catching up with you?'

A bit.'

'Drink this.' Rhid passes me a can of coke and, sitting up I chug it down and burp.

'Easy!' We briefly laugh and lay back. I look up at a stain on the ceiling section where the paint is slightly peeling right above my pillow. It's been many different things over the years at different times of my life. Easter bunny. Christmas Elf. Elephant. A cloud. Today it looks like a cloud. A proper Mr Daydream cloud.

Maybe if I'd stayed with you like you asked, Kasha. Maybe you'd still be alive.

Rhid pushes me off the bed.

'Oi!'

'Get dressed. We need to go.'

I disappear behind my cupboard door for some privacy. A few moments later I emerge wearing black jeans, trainers and a tee with the words *moody bitch seeks relationship* across the chest. Rhid shakes his head. 'Maybe not for the police station.'

I change to a plain dark grey shirt with yellow trim and we leave, grabbing the phone. Half way down the stairs I realise Rhid isn't following.

'What are you doing?' I call up.

'Waiting for you to remember the hideous yellow satchel.'

'Why?'

'Because you take it everywhere.'

'Well, not today.'

Rhid looks at me like I've decided to leave home without my head.

When we open the front door we find Mum's walking up the path.

'Where are you two going? I've got lunch.' She says, holding up two grocery bags.

'We're taking my phone to the police station.'

Mum's confused. I take a breath. Admitting you've been majorly stupid is hard any time but when being-stupid interferes with a murder investigation, that's much harder. I can tell you.

'Someone used my phone last night. I left it on the counter at Daisy's after getting

our food. We found her when we went back to get when... Anyway...someone called a number from my phone, then *that* number called back.'

Mum's looking at me wondering if that's all. 'And... well...I...kind of called it – *them* - just now.'

'You did what?!' Mum puts down her bags.

'I wanted to find out who it was.' Rhid looks at Mum. 'I know. Stupid...'

'Why didn't you give it to the police last night?'

'I don't know.' I stare at the floor in silence. We all stare at the floor in silence.

'I've already lectured her on the importance of locking her keypad,' Rhid adds.

'You don't?' Mum looks like I've just told her I've stopped cleaning my teeth.

'I *do*. I *did*. It was set for like 10 minutes... anyway. Jesus! Shoot me, why don't you? There's a lot of things I *should* have done! I should have given the police my phone last night. I should have stayed longer at Daisy' and not rushed off. I should have stayed. Like Kasha asked me too. But I didn't.

'She asked you to stay?'

I nod.

'Why?'

'I wish I knew. I feel terrible.' And here's the reason why. 'It's just like last year. I didn't act then either did I? I stood by and let something horrible happen. Only now someone is dead.'

'You mean all that business Pete and Cyd?' Mum only really knows half of that story. A state of affairs I intend to keep that way, at all cost.

'Yes!' I sound strained and involuntarily emit a slightly hysterical laugh. It catches me out.

They're both worried. 'So I'm going, Mum. I'm going to the police station now, because you know and I know I *need to* give this to the police. Before anything else bad happens.'

'This isn't your fault Taylor.' Mum puts down the grocery bags and puts her arm around me. 'It's not always easy to know what to do in a difficult situation. It's easy to think what you *might* have done, with hindsight.'

Rhid steps in. 'Cyd was in crazy town that summer. No-one what knew what she was capable of. Not even you.' He's trying to be tactful, not give anything away. *He* knows every last detail.

'But I *could* have found out. I *should* have. Just like I *should* have stayed with Kasha.'

The three of us stand silently for a moment pondering similarities between two quite distinct events which somehow I've managed to merge into a tight ball of guilt.

I can see Mum calculating offspring risk.

'Don't worry I'm not going to do anything stupid. More stupid. I'm just going to drop it off, and come right back. Right?'

'They'll probably want us to make a statement.' Rhid adds.

'Right. Sure.' I move towards the side alley where our bikes are parked. 'Anyway. We need to go.

'Let me drive you.' Mum shakes her car keys. 'I'll just drop these inside ...'

'I'd rather bike with Rhid.'

'And *I'd* rather drive you.' Mum's easy come, easy go most of the time but she can do a hard line in *my way or the high way* when the situation calls for it. But then so can I. She considers her options. She's probably thinking it's good that her daughter wants to go out with her friend still. That she isn't so traumatised by last night's events that she doesn't want to never leave the house again. Good. Yes. But right now, she hates it.

She draws a deep breath, sucks in any reservations, and says, 'Ok.'

'Thanks.' I give her a big squeeze with both arms locked.

'You two! You scare me to death.'

'I'll look after her,' Rhid reassures.

'Like last night?'

Rhid stops in his tracks like he's been slapped. Mum's gone and voiced a feeling he's been working hard to suppress.

'It's not your fault Rhid.' I say, because if there's one thing I do know about all this it is that.

'I shouldn't have let you go on your own.' Rhid points out.

The three of us look at each other, each one of us suddenly realising the magnitude of last night.

'Sorry Rhid, that wasn't fair. None of this is your fault.' Mum pulls me in for another hug. Rhid stands awkwardly for a moment until mum pulls him in too.

Now we both feel awkward.

MONTAGE OF MY LIFE WITH RHID SO FAR -

EXT. OUR STREET

RHID [aged 7], SECOND GENERATION WELSH ASIAN peers out of a beat-up orange Toyota holding one end of a NATIONAL WELSH RUGBY SCARF. The other flaps out the back window like a flag. The car is covered with welsh national stickers. They slow-drive past our house, looking for an address. Which they eventually find - the last in a terrace of new build houses, at the end of the street. Dad steps outside to see what I'm looking at. He objected to these new houses at planning on the grounds there wasn't enough room on our street for the extra residents' cars, and the architectural design were, he said, unsympathetic with the rest of the Victorian properties on the street. His objections were ignored.

RHID spots me playing on the street on my bike. He sticks his tongue out and I copy. We laugh. His parents are busy looking around the house, unpacking, Rhid cycles out with two packs of sweets. He comes over, hands me one and cycles off. I cycle after him.

INT. UNIVERSITY PHYSICS LAB - CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

Aged 11. Rhid and I mess with the microscopes in the lab where Rhid's dad works as a technician. Rhid's dad gets cross and makes us wait outside in a long boring corridor. This doesn't last long. We go outside and cycle down the steps of the college. Rhid says he's going to be an award winning downhill cyclist when his older. We're told off by a porter. Rhid's dad is told off by the

porter. Rhid's dad tells us off again.

EXT. STREET - HALLOWEEN

Aged 13: Rhid is dressed up as the Pope and I'm dressed as a zombie witch. We are sitting in my room my dad's old portable cassette player on my lap and a small Casio keyboard beside me. We're recording repetitive 3 note loops and things like; *we know what you've done, we will never fooorget, you will paaaay*, and making screeching, retching and strangulation sounds while trying not to laugh.

CUT TO:

After dark: Rhid and I hide behind a large skip with the portable cassette player playing the muffled recordings to groups of younger kids out trick or treating. We jump out when we see anyone new, scaring them senseless.

INT. HOME - MY 16th BIRTHDAY

I'm having a party at home, everyone is dancing in the living room, cake, balloons scattered on the table, the works. I'm crying in the bathroom. Downstairs Rhid realises I'm missing and finds me. I don't want to tell him what's wrong and push the laundry basket over. One of mum's bras falls out. We both look at it and pull a face. He tries it on, over his t-shirt that says *I'm fine #what u lookin' at?* He admires himself in the mirror, acting sexy. He can certainly strike a pose can Rhid.

I laugh to crying.

END OF FLAHSBACK MONTAGE OF MY BEST BITS WITH RHID SO FAR

So, you see, Rhid and I go way back.

It's an odd alliance on many levels but, you know what? It works.

Chapter six | operation Alice

Finally, mum let's us leave and we cycle to the end of Victoria Avenue, over to the bus stops by Christ's Piece and from there it's only a few minutes to Parkside station. For a few moments, cycling along streets I've cycled so many times, I feel free. My turquoise Raleigh with drop down handles wrapped in cream leather tape with cherry red tyres is a completely customised Restoration Project of Love from dad who found me this rare vintage frame two Christmases ago. Rhid rides a black and green fixie with polished chrome rims and bright yellow tyres and yellow leather seat. It's way cooler than mine and I love it but I love mine more. I couldn't love mine more.

'So how'd Kasha know Cyd and everyone I wonder?'

'At a party I suppose. You saw who Kasha wassinger-songwriter with her own YouTube, *going places* and you know Cyd likes to friend people who might be useful one day.'

I knew. It's one of the reason we fell out.

'Listen to this.' Rhid was looking at his phone, 'Yesterday Kasha had 1107 friends. She now has 2,976. Thank you for helping remember a very special person. All friend requests will be confirmed so come and join Kasha's growing online family and keep her memory alive. Peace and love. ' He pulls a face.

'Do you think it's Cyd?'

'What's Cyd?'

'Who's taken over her fb?'

'Probably.' Rhid can't stop himself jumping up and down the odd curb narrowly avoiding cars and other vehicular road users.

'I found a whole load of stuff going back to last August when they became friends. Lots of photos of nights out, music shares, random gif likes. Usual.'

'Cyd and you weren't speaking then, right?'

'Not one single sarcastic emoji.'

Rhid jumps off the curb and pulls out a bike's length ahead of me. 'Shame we can't show the police that last post of Kasha's you saw, to Cyd.'

I push through the gears to keep up with Rhid. He's so much fitter than me. 'I know, but that's the trouble with social media. It only tells you part of the story. The parts people *want* you to see.'

The police station is a bland, grey concrete building next to the fire station. It was like the council was advised to put all their ugly essential services buildings together in one area of the city so they don't ruin the picturesque views Cambridge is famous for.

'I feel sick.' I look for a place to lock up.

'It's alright, Tay c'mon. They're not going to tell you off or anything.'

'Look at my hands.' They're shaking.

Rhid pushed his arm through mine. 'C'mon. It'll be fine. We'll explain. They'll be grateful for the lead. They're not going to lock you up.'

I think about that last statement. He's probably right. But then I think back again to last night.

If not telling them about the phone was all I wasn't telling them, he's probably right. Otherwise...

'C'mon. Let's just do it.' Rhid cycles off and I peddle hard to catch up.

Inside the police station, we walk up to the desk where the sergeant, a plain looking man, hard to age, regards us with a pretty impressive mix of disapproval and boredom.

'Can I help?'

'We need to see DCI Layton. We've something very important to tell him about last night.'

'And you are?'

'Taylor Millar.'

'Rhidian Smith.'

'We're the ones who found Kasha Stone last night.' Rhid leans on the counter. The desk sergeant pushes back and nods. He turns to the phone on the counter by a stack of CCTV cameras and makes a call.

A few moments later another officer ushers us into an interview room.

A few more minutes later PC Trish Kendal enters looking stiff and uncomfortable

in her uniform. I don't see how standard police uniform is practical for chasing criminals, surely tracksuits would be a better option? Hard to take anyone that seriously in a tracksuit though I suppose.

'Hi. I'm Trish. I told you last night but sometimes it's difficult to remember stuff like that when you've had a shock.' She's more business-like than last night but still friendly. 'Why don't you have a seat.'

We sit on orange plastic chairs set either side of a small table. Suddenly it all feels very real. The grey interview room in a grey police station with CCTV in the corner and what looks like a two-way mirror along one side.

'No one's on the other side of that if you're worrying.' Kendal reassures, reading my mind. 'Wouldn't have chosen this room myself but it's the only one free right now.'

I pull out my phone and put it on the table. 'This is the reason we found Kasha.'

'Okay.' Kendal takes that in.

'I bought some food from Daisy's earlier - Kasha served me - and then I left it behind. Accidentally.'

'Go on.'

'We were halfway home when I realised so we went back and well, that's when I found her.'

Kendal looks at the phone, then at Rhid and then me. 'How long were you away?'

'Twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes, tops,' I explain. 'I left it on the counter so it was there when Kasha...'

Just then the door opens and DCI Layton appears, looking grey, contained and slightly aloof, just like last night.

'Taylor, Rhidian, this is DCI Layton. The lead investigator.' Everyone shakes hands. Layton takes a seat. Kendal fills Layton in.

'I see.' Layton's expression is pure poker play. 'So, tell me about this call you made to the unknown number you found on your phone.'

I shift uncomfortably, glancing at Rhid. 'A woman answered. I asked her who she was. She asked me who I was. I told her this was my phone and then she asked about Kasha. She thought *I* was involved in her death. I said no way - then she seemed to change her mind.' Layton and Kendal listen carefully. 'She said he *knew* who killed her.'

'Who?' Kendal asks. *The Question* everyone's thinking.

'She didn't say. Just hung up.'

Silence.

'What about her voice. Anything distinctive about it? An accent?' Layton asks checking his phone.

'London I'd say, but with a tinge of something...maybe...West Indies...? Jamaican maybe?'

'Anything else you want to tell us?' The question is directed at both of us.

'No. I don't think so.' I say wracking my brains for anything I can remember of last night.

'Rhidian?'

Rhid shakes his head.

Layton walks over to the one window in the room and open the blinds a little. Early summer sun hits his face, blinding him slightly. He turns back to us. 'You'd been at a friend's earlier, you said a house party out in Barston?' I glance at Rhid he must have told them because I don't remember telling them anything. 'What time did you leave?'

'About ten-thirty.'

'And you drove straight to Daisy's?'

'Yeah. Munchies stop before bed.' Rhid grins, then stops realising Layton's probably some years away from the need for an after-party munch stop, if indeed he ever did.

'And the only other person you saw at Daisy's at the time was this truck driver?'

I nod, 'Apart from a few people at the club bouncers, smokers, taxi drivers, you know.' I try to work out what he's thinking. 'You think he had something to do with it?' I ask, I hadn't thought about him at all until now if I'm honest.

'Maybe. Worth a chat. If he's innocent he'll be easy to find. If he's guilty harder.' Layton pauses for thought. 'Tina said you spoke to Kasha while you were waiting for your food?'

'A bit.'

'What did you talk about?'

'College. She wanted to study music. I told her a bit about my experience.'

'Anything else?'

'Boys. How shit boys are.' Everybody smiles.

'Any particular reason for that conversation?'

'Do we need a specific reason?' I pull a face at Rhid. 'It looked like maybe she was

having some boy grief...'

'What makes you say that?'

'She kept trying to text and call someone. Without much luck by looks of it. And she seemed anxious... as if she wished she were somewhere else... or with someone else maybe... I don't know.'

Layton considers this and Kendal writes something in her notebook.

'Have you got any idea who might have done this to Kasha?' I ask.

'Not yet. We're trawling through the CCTV. Unfortunately, the van's pitch sits between two cameras. Exposed a bit of a blind spot.'

I think back to the person I saw reflected in the splash-back. Would the CCTV pick them up? Perhaps this is just another one of those times where I'm mistaken.

'Is there anything else you want to tell us?' Kendal interrupts, turning my thoughts to Kasha's deleted post.

'There *is* something.'

'Go on.'

'Kasha posted something on Facebook page last night. I saw it there this morning – but now it's gone.'

'Deleted?'

'I guess. She sounded desperate really wanted to talk to this person and well this person...she's a friend of mine. Or used to be. Cyd. Cynthia Mendes.'

'Local?'

I nod.

'Didn't think kids your age use Facebook anymore.'

'Sometimes. Some do. Anyway, *you* still use the telephone, right?'

Layton nods.

'Just because some new technology comes along doesn't mean we stop using the old one, does it?'

Layton concurs. 'So I'm getting it's not all harmony between you and this Cyd girl?'

'We fell out last year. You know, final days of 6th form there's a lot of stuff going on. Friendships get...reviewed. Long story short. We haven't spoken since.'

Layton considers me. 'So it might be fair to conclude you have a bit of an axe to grind with this girl?'

'With Cyd? Not really. Not now. Anyway this isn't about us. This is about Kasha.'

Layton addresses Kendal. 'Might be worth seeing if cyber can pull this message up.' He stands and moves to the door. 'I'm not sure some unanswered calls and one unanswered messages are much grounds for calling this Cyd in just yet, or else my missus would've pulled me in years ago.' He smiles at his little joke. Tina rolls her eyes. 'We'll see if we can trace the number in your phone and take things from there. PC Kendal will see you out.'

He leaves.

'What about my phone? When will I get it back?'

'Could be a while.' Layton stops and turns back to us, 'Probably best to get something else temporary meanwhile.' Then, addressing Kendal. 'Full Op Alice briefing in one hour.'

'Operation Alice?' I ask.

Layton takes a deep breath, 'That's what we're calling this investigation.'

Chapter seven | in which I carry on as normal

'I think I'm going to class...' Rhid says unlocking his bike. 'I've got intro to music tech at

3. What about you?'

'I'm not sure.' I unlock mine and we walk the 200 yards from the police station to uni and lock them to a railing.

'No one's going to mind if you take the day off. Given the circumstances.'

'Given the circumstances, I suppose not.'

Beep, Beep.

'It's Dug.' Rhid says looking at his phone. 'He wants me to meet him in the music room.'

'Cool.'

'Catch up later? Will you be alright?'

'Course. I'm fine. I will be fine.'

'How tho?'

'How what?'

'How will I catch with you later? No phone. Remember?'

'We live on the same street Rhid.'

'Sure yeah. Ok, see you later then.'

'Bye.'

'Bye.'

Streams of students come, go, hang, chat, laugh and smoke outside the early nineties office looking building, that is the main administrative and teaching portal for my uni. It's Friday which mean fish and chips in the canteen and lots of talk of where people are going tonight. It's also the last teaching week of the year so everyone's stressed with assignments.

Something is telling me I should just carry on as normal. Go to my film adaptation

class, do the presentation I prepared with Lola yesterday morning and then go home and freak out about the rest of my fucked up life.

So.

OK. Here goes.

The moment I step into the foyer I know I've made the wrong decision. For a moment, it's like nothing has changed. Like last night didn't happen and I've not just been sitting in a police interview room with my 'important evidence' phone with which I've just spoken to a woman who knows who murdered the girl I found last night.

But then.

The university town of Cambridge is in shock today as it struggles to come to terms with the news that they are the latest victims in Britain's escalating knife-crime epidemic...

The wall-mounted information screens are tuned to the news. They're never tuned into the news. Why today? [scream emoji]

Local talent competition winner seventeen-year-old Kasha Ray was found murdered yesterday at the street food van where she worked. She was found by two Cambridge residents...

Fortunately, they don't say my name because hearing Kasha's spoken in the dispassionate formal voice of the news-caster is weird enough. I've never heard the name Kasha before. I'll be hearing it everywhere now.

Young Reporter Edie Heller leads the story. I recognise her from other local news, potholes mostly, or new city traffic systems so this murder's a bit of a promotion. She's broadcasting from Daisy's, right from the spot where I hugged Rhid last night in fact. The report cuts to a close-up shot of blood-stained tarmac then cuts to DCI Layton, a caption gives his full title: DCI Steven Layton Cambridgeshire Constabulary.

This is a horrific and brutal attack – the worse I've seen in many years of policing...

He's sincere and sad and calls for calm in this difficult time. The camera cuts back to Edie who provides a few more details explaining how Kasha was found and ends with a call for information. Somebody looks at me, or at least I think they do and suddenly I'm thinking everyone's looking at me.

It's strange being part of the news.

I duck into the back stairway. Perhaps this presentation is a bad idea. Everyone is going to know what happened last night. Everyone will either be: A, looking at me and

thinking about the fact I was involved in a national murder case last night. Or:
B, politely trying to *ignore* the fact I was involved in a national murder case last night.

I could e-mail Dr P and explain. I'm sure she'll understand...let me do the presentation another time.

'Taylor! Presentation buddy of mine! So, glad you're here. I just messaged you! I was worried you were going to leave me flying solo...' Lo. Otherwise known as Lola. Has me in her huggy-grip.

I try to return the hug in kind but her backpack is too huge. 'Mate! Fucking can't believe it. How ARE you?'

'Ok. I think. Sorry didn't get your message, police have my phone...'

'Listen I totally want to hear all about what the fuck happened to you last night but we have 5 minutes until Dr P wants our arse up at 'em with facts about Wiseman and observational documentaries at our fingertips, or at least on the Power Point—you've got the Power Point?'

I hold it up.

'Phew. Thank fuck. I know I should have got you to send me it earlier... I so do not have any presentation facts at my fingertips. I can riff off slides with a compadre but solo...you know I'm no good solo...'

I do. If there is anyone who hates being alone it is Lola. Normally this kind of personality type is too much for this only child, happy spending days in her own company, reading, writing, filming, photographing, carousing the internet, etc. But I completely fell for Lola from the first day I clapped eyes on her blue haired nut-jobness. She's the exact opposite to me in many ways. She likes Fila leisure wear, high top trainers and big jewellery and grime, and I don't. I love Doc Martens, bomber jackets, nineties indie bands and weird German electro and she breaks out in hives if she so much as hears a synthesised chord. She's hazelnut praline latte every time, where I will only ever buy un-sugared soya flat whites, but somehow, against all these odds, we completely get each other.

Plus, Lola is also the only friend apart from Rhid who hasn't stopped talking to me.

Over the summer before I started uni I launched an anti-bullying website peoplelikeusactnow.me. I set it up in response to what happened to Pete. The way Cyd treated him. The lengths she went to make his life miserable. When I started uni

everyone seemed to already know about it. It was something to talk about. People thought it was great. People thought *I* was great. It *was* great. Maybe I got a bit big headed about it. Subs rose, I started a YouTube channel with people sharing their experiences. I even got a few minor celebrities to endorse the zero-tolerance message. I was meeting a lot of new people.

I liked what the video was doing but somehow it didn't quite get over the whole message.

Something kept nagging at me. A but.

That 'but' was this: It wasn't entirely honest.

The film I made didn't really tell the whole story.

It told part of the story. The part I wanted everyone to believe.

The story *I* wanted to believe.

I had to make a video about what really happened between me, Cyd and Pete that night.

I had to admit the truth to myself and to everyone.

I had to show how I was to blame as much as Cyd—maybe even more.

And how?

I was there.

I stood by and let it happen.

They call it the bystander effect.

Once I'd thought about doing the video I couldn't un-think it.

So, I did. I made a video about what really happened to Pete that night.

I knew it was going to undo me completely but I had to post it.

So, I did.

It went viral.

The Thing That Went Viral

FADE UP FROM BLACK

TITLE: BULLY IN THE MIRROR

ME V/O

It's not always the things you *do* that matter.
The things you *don't* count just as much.

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

TWO GIRLS [17]- one BLONDE, one BRUNETTE, stand either side of a grey school locker. The locker is tall and long. Big enough to hold a person inside. The two GIRLS stare at each other. Neither say a word. Neither give any ground.

O/S AUDIO: SOBBING. DEEP AND LOW.

AS IF SOMEONE IS TRYING NOT TO BE HEARD.

INT. LOCKER

POV: A BOY [17] in baseball cap and box-fresh converse peers out at the girls from inside. He shivers, but not from cold. He's sweating large drops on his face and hands. Struggling to catch his breath. A long strip of snot expands down his face and drops, soaking his shoe, ruining their pristine crispness.

The BOY sniffs, pulling his sleeve across his face and huddles back against the far wall. Suddenly he grabs his leg. Cramp shoots through his muscle. Sharp and excruciating. He rubs vigorously, like his nan showed him too, face twisted in pain. He tries to stamp it down,

beat the cramp out, but there's no room so he rubs and rubs, breathing through the pain. Arms and body pressed tight against the metal inside.

Suddenly the locker starts to fill with smoke. The BOY panics. Panic turns to hyperventilation.

CUT BACK TO:

The BLONDE GIRL holds up a key and smiles.

BRUNETTE GIRL

Give it to me. That's enough.

The BRUNETTE makes a grasp for it, but the BLONDE is too quick.

BLONDE GIRL

_____ Come and get it. But don't expect to come back
to our squad anytime if you do. I mean ever.

CUT BACK TO:

The TWO GIRLS stare at each other.

Neither give way.

Neither say a word.

Neither move.

Neither back down.

ME V/O

It'd taken me a long time to feel part of this squad.

Did I want to give it all up for someone I barely knew?

The BRUNETTE turns and walks away.

ME V/O

It wasn't me who locked a shy clumsy boy in a locker for accidentally messing up her new jacket. It wasn't me who set a smoke bomb inside to scare him to death. Poor boy thought he was going up in flames.

But I didn't stop her either.

CUT TO BLACK

V/O

Sometimes it's the person in the mirror, the person you least expect, who's the most to blame.

END CREDITS

Likes [24,027]

Shares [47,879]

Comments [2,650].

- I can't believe anyone would do this! It's sick. What sadist!
- They're both guilty duh. OF COURSE, they are!! BITCHES>
- I think this is a great video because it really shows how difficult a situation like that is. It's hard to know what to do sometimes.
- **bystander syndrome alert!!** OMG. Who would just stand by and

- let this happen. They're both guilty as fxxx! **Kill them now.**
- I think you're really brave to make this video. To share this and help others learn from your experience.
 - wow this takes guts. We all know who that 'brunette girl' is right. Taylor, you have double cohonos!!
 - so what the bully bitch starts an anti-bullying site? What a fraud! How can we believe anything you say??!
 - And there you go...bad things happen when (good)?!! people don't act
 - why didn't you do anything to help that poor boy?? I don't understand. You could have jumped that bitch and got that key. Why did you let her even put that poor boy in there in the first place? If you can't do it yourself tell someone who can. Don't you have any teachers in your school???!!!

I'm completely freaked out by this response.

I pull the website offline, and my YouTube channel, and vow never to go online again.

Lola and I sit at a computer in the shared study space above the cafeteria, trying hard to ignore the smell of canteen fish, chips and peas, and run through the presentation. It's on a sixties documentary set in a prison by an American called Frederick Wiseman. He's like the father of what's called the *observational style*. The fly-on-the-wall style of filmmaking you see everywhere with shaky shots that looks like no-ones watching. But, of course, we are. Basically, it's the style you see used in lots of reality TV shows. We have to prepare a talk about him, his work, pull some extracts, discuss and there we go. It's pretty interesting and worth 20% of our final assessment for this module.

We've just edited the final slide and noted the cue points and who's going to say what, when dad's face pops up in a Skype window on my screen.

- - *Dad! Hello!*
- - *Hi sweetie.* (He swings his lap top around and sits on what looks like a hotel bed.) *Mum's just told me what happened. Good God. Are you alright?*

- - *I think I'm fine.*
- - *Are you sure?*
- - [beat] *I think.* I laugh nervously.
- - *What happened exactly?*
- - (I take a deep breath. I really want to talk to him but...) *Look, dad I can't, not now. I've got a presentation to do in... (I look at the canteen clock) ...5 minutes.*
- - *A presentation? Today? Where are you?*
- - *In the canteen at uni. With Lola.*
- - (Lola sticks her head in shot and waves.)*Hi Mr Millar!*
- - *Hi Lola. Good to see you. Glad Tay's got some company. You look after her ok?*
- - *I will.*
- - *Look dad, I must go. I'll call you after class, Ok?*
- - *Straight after?*
- - *Straight after.*

After hanging up, we save the power point and rush upstairs to class.

Chapter eight | Justice for Kasha (.tv)

The presentation goes fine. A little better than fine, even.

We grab a drink from a machine and step outside for some air.

'We rocked that.' Lo insists on a high 10.

'Yeah it went ok.'

'Better than OK. You are my presentation buddy forever. Deal?'

'Deal.'

'So, come on Tay, from the beginning. Where were you and Rhid last night? Before... you know...Duna's party?'

'Not here.' I say not least because I'm not sure I won't break down. I walk us round to our bikes parked on a side street and find Rhid waiting for us.

'Have you seen this?' Rhid pulls up Kasha's Facebook page. 'It's some seriously crazy traffic. Most of these people don't even know her. They've just become her friend in the past ...what? Twelve hours? And the way people are writing these messages...'

'What do you mean?' Lola asks, trying to get up to speed.

‘They’re written *for* Kasha but they’re really for everyone else aren’t they? To show everyone how much they care.’ Rhid mansplains.

‘Of course they are. Duh. That’s how social media works.’ Lola’s and Rhid don’t always get on that well. I think Rhid irritates Lo a lot of the time and vice versa but I can’t work out whether it’s because they’re too similar or too different.

Lola gives this idea some thought. ‘Imagine if there’s some post-life virtual inbox where the dead collect messages from the living?’ Ditto, what I thought earlier.

‘Spooky.’

Lola and Rhid scroll in silence on their devices. I have total FOMO. I can’t stand not having a phone.

‘I thought you wanted to hear about last night Lo?’

‘Oh yeah, yeah. I do.’

A student passes by.

‘Let’s go to MB1. I’ll tell you on the way.’

After a slow walk with bikes while I tell Lola my story of last night we arrive at MB1, a quirky place which used to be an internet café back in the day when you had to go somewhere to get online. Now it offers perfectly serviceable free Wi-Fi, like every other café, restaurant, shopping centre, etc. It means I can follow what Lo and Rhid are following via my laptop. It is also pleasantly cluttered, full of old books, and mismatching furniture and does an amazing hot chocolate.

We find a free table and sit down.

‘This one is classic.’ Rhid brings up a video of a skinny white boy, about nineteen, sitting on a bed with a guitar on his knee. He’s quiet, praying, apparently, eyes to heaven and then he stops, and starts singing a sentimental acoustic song dedicated to Kasha. As the song progresses, fuzzy downloaded photographs of Kasha flash up. Underneath he’s written: *I can’t believe it! Just looked at your pages and you sound totally cool. What evil there is in this world to take someone like you with so much to give. Rest in peace. This one is for you.*

‘Perfect viral schmaltz.’ Rhid laughs.

Dad’s Skype face pops up in a window on my screen again.

‘It’s dad,’ I say. ‘I better take this.’

I carry my laptop out back to a quieter room and take a seat.

- - *How’d the presentation go?* (He’s still in his hotel room.)

- - *Good thanks. It goes towards the final assessment for that module so I kind of had to do it.*
- - *Well, well-done you. I'm sure you could have explained and they'd have understood.*
- - *Probably but it's done now.*
- - *(I can see he's not sure how to continue. cautious.)How are you feeling? I just can't imagine...*

So I help him out. I tell him everything except me calling the number I found dialled out from my phone, and the conversation with *Phone-woman* who thinks he knows who killed Kasha. I'll leave that out for now. Once I'm done there's a few moments silence as he pictures what I've told him.

- - *How old was she?*
- - *Eighteen. She wanted to go to college to do music. She'd just won a talent competition - had an amazing voice.*
- - *Sounds like she had a bright future ahead of her.*

We're silent again.

- - *I thought you were coming home this weekend.*
- - *It was all going well. Flights all booked, etc. then the bastard CEO at Rovinet called an emergency meeting. Things will have calmed down by the end of June hopefully and then I'll be back for a while.*

Silence.

Dad looks at me in that way parents do when they're trying to work out what their offspring really feel, behind what they're telling.

- - *You've seen an awful thing, Taylor. It'll take a while to process.*
- - *I know.*
- - *Had any more thoughts about the summer internship?*
- - *I'm still undecided dad. Sorry. Can you buy me a bit more time?'*
- - *I'll tell them what's happened. They'll understand but ...*
- - *But what?*
- - *It's a highly competitive position. Hundreds would kill for it.*
- - *I'll let you know in a few days. Promise.*

Silence.

- - *Look, I've got to go. I've got a meeting downtown.*

- - *You know what they say dad? All work and no play...*
- - *Did your mother tell you that one?*
- - *Dad, c'mon.*
- - *Sorry. How is she? Well? Covered in plaster?*
- - *You just spoke to her, didn't you?*
- - *We talked about you.*
- - *I think. She's ... happy. Got a run of commissions.*
- - *That's great.*
- I say, but can't help wonder what he feels about her now. I still struggle with the idea that after twenty
- years of happy marriage they got divorced. It doesn't make sense to me. I understand people change, grow
- to want different things, but what's different about any of the things my parents want? A comfortable
- home? A few nice holidays abroad every year? A reliable car? Trips out to nice restaurants every so often?
- Dinners in with friends? they have the same friends. Both want me, their only daughter, to be happy and
- successful. What changed exactly? And when?

I change subject.

- - *What's San Francisco like?*
- - *You'd love it. Full of weirdoes, lots of weirdoes...*
- - *Sounds like my kind of place.*
- - *Lots of music, clubs, galleries ... other general artiness.*
- - *Cool.*
- - *It is. Come and see next time I come. We can hang out. It'll be great. I'd love to show you around.*
- - *I know.*
- - *Ok. Don't let that put you off. (He laughs.) Listen, I should go.*

- - *Ok. Love you.*
- - *Love you, fluff cakes.*
- - *Jesus Dad! Fluff cakes?!'*

We laugh.

- - *Love you too Dad.*

'Look.' Rhid says as I re-join them in the café front room. 'It's a website, *Justice for Kasha.tv*.'

'Blimey that was quick.' Lola enters the URL to her browser and I do the same. At the top of the home page below a short paragraph outlining the website's purpose, there's a video with the words JUSTICE FOR KASHA filling the frame. I press play and what do I see Cyd sitting on a large leather sofa in a smartly furnished room. She's sharp and poised dressed in a black silk bomber jacket, white drainpipes, high-heeled grey suede ankle boots. Her glossy white-blonde hair, cut into an asymmetrical bob, a chocolate brown streak blazes through a pointed heavy fringe falling over her right eye. She peers at the viewer with the other and begins: *If you're watching this chances are you've already heard about Kasha and the terrible way she died.* She pauses, looks away, takes a deep breath and returns to the viewer. *Kasha brought light and laughter to everyone who knew her. She brought song where there was silence.* She pauses again - a moment of silence to illustrate her point. *She was a beautiful person... and my dearest friend.* Cyd wipes her eyes. *I can't begin to imagine how much I'm going to miss her.* Her mood changes. She grows angry. *If anyone knows anything that might help find her killer, anything at all, please, please, please, please contact the police. We can't let whoever did this get away with it. There must be justice for Kasha.*

There's a fundraising link underneath called The Justice for Kasha Campaign Fund. We stare at the screen in silence for a moment, trying to make sense of what we have just watched. I'm finding it hard to see how the Cyd I know could become so... motivated to do something so... right. It doesn't add up.

'So Kasha and Cyd were close?' I ask.

Scrolling through Cyd's Instagram I find hundreds of pictures of her and Cyd on nights out, dressed up, pouting at the camera, arms raised and smiling on the dance floor, laughing over restaurant dinners, in swanky bars and clubs, you name it.

Over on Kasha's it's a different story. Lots of quotes about creativity, poems about becoming yourself, lyrics, reworked images of artists and albums she loved.

I come across a still made of the moment when my anti-bullying video asked *who's guiltier? The girl who locked up the boy or the one who didn't stop her?* Kasha's marked up the image in neon blue with the words *we're all guilty. we all need to forgive.*

'Look. They're holding a vigil tonight.' Lola's reads. 'Let's go.'

'There is no way you're getting me to that vigil.' I say.

'Why? You *have* to go. *YOU* found her, Taylor.' Rhid agrees.

They work on me for about 10 minutes until, reluctantly, and against all that sane in my head, I agree.

The vigil doesn't officially start until 9pm so we arrange to meet up in two hours.

At home I find mum sitting in the dark. It's dusk outside but the curtains are already drawn and the gloomy glare of the TV news throws her body into silhouette. She sits up when she hears me and changes channel.

'Don't change over on my account.' I kick off my boots in the hall and walk over to join her.

'I've had enough of news, that's all.' Mum grabs a leaflet from the coffee table and pretends to read. This is her way of dealing with things. Switch over. Change channels. Do something else. Mum drops the Shiatsu for Pets flyer and looks at me while some celebrity with impossibly glossy hair promises the viewer we're worth it.

'Come.' She pats the sofa next to our old brown Labrador called Bo. I do as I'm told taking the remote, squishing in next to Bo who's sprawled out and not moving.

'How are you feeling?' Mum looks at me in that way dad did earlier, trying to read between the lines.

'I'm alright I think.'

Mum nods. 'Are you sure?' She strokes my hair.

'*I am fine*, Mum.' I know how it sounds. *I'm fine*: The classic brush-off hiding a

stratospheric range of feelings and generally code for the exact opposite, but how can I explain how I feel when I don't even know myself?

'It's such a terrible thing that's happened. A terrible thing you've seen.'

She wants to go on but my look's telling her otherwise. She backs off.

'I just need you to know I'm here. Whenever you want to talk.' I've seen *Crisis Mum* once before when her and dad told me they were getting divorced, two years ago. It'd involved lots of difficult conversations about how I felt and way too many offers of hugs.

'I know, Mum. Thanks.'

'Here. Mum hands me an old i-Phone with a slightly cracked screen, it was a couple of generations behind the one the police now held in custody.

'I thought you sold this?'

'Didn't get around to it. I've got a sim too... here.' She jumps up and rummages in the side board drawer. She finds one and hands it to me.

'How'd it go?'

'The police or the presentation?'

'Both.'

'Police have my phone. Thankfully didn't want to lock me up. Lola and I powered through the presentation like a pros. Everyone managed to not ask any questions about last night. It was really, really, weird.'

Mum nods. 'Well I'm glad the police have your phone now. Do they think they can trace the call?'

'They said they were going to try.'

Then looking at her watch she opens her laptop on the desk by the window.

Br-ing, Br-ing.

Another incoming Skype. This time from ...

'Auntie V?' I pull a face.

'I may have dropped her a text.'

I roll my eyes. Auntie Viv. I fix my face into happy and click the green phone.

- - *Taylor. Helen told me what happened. Jesus Christ.*
- - *Hi Aunt Viv. I'm fine. (She's also in a hotel room. It's plainer, far less luxurious, with one small bed and one small table.)*
- - *I can't imagine what you must be feeling.*
- - *Worse for the girl who's dead, right?*
- - *Indeed. Your mum asked me to call... not that I wouldn't have but well you know ... anyway, I've had some experiences, unfortunately, seeing some pretty nasty things...I think she hopes I can help somehow.*
- - *I'm fine really. But thanks.*
- - *No one knows how they're going to react to something like this. Some react straight away some much later.*
- - *(I nod.) Where are you?*
- - *Bogota, Columbia. Helping some villagers negotiate land rights with the local government. They're not being that co-operative the government that is. Local cartels got involved so that's not helping...*
- - *Wow.*
- - *Anyway, I've got to come back to the UK next week. Let's meet up. Do something nice.*
- - *That'd be good.*
- - *Great. Meanwhile, if you need to or want to... can call me any time. I mean it Taylor. Any time.*
- - *Sure, thanks Aunt Viv.*
- - *So, I better go.*

She looks at me and says nothing. Just studies me, taking me in.

Bye-bye, favourite niece.

- - *Bye-bye, favourite aunt.*

We always sign off like that.

Our little joke—because she's my only aunt and I'm her only niece.

Chapter nine | the sadness of strangers

The moment we leave the house I regret saying yes to the vigil idea. Rhid's car smells of last night's fried food, pink pine air freshener and diesel. We pick up Lola from her house and sit in silence. Rhid is driving, me shotgun and Lola leaning in between us from the back, a position called 'riding bitch' I recently learned. Nice.

'I don't think I can do this.' I say after about three minutes. We're nearly at the roundabout which will take us on the ring road to the Light Park car park where the vigil's taking place.

'It'll be fine.' Rhid reassures and passes a small joint, as if that's going to help. Against my better judgement I accept. I draw down slowly, opening out my lungs, hold and exhale. We drive through the night, pass rows of closed shops and curtained houses in silence. Stars sparkle between the gaps where broken street lights cast shadows into the dark sky. Rolling down the window I slip my head into the night. The effects of the smoke moves through me like a warm bath, easy and slow, softening the edges of things. Relaxing. Releasing. A recent shower scatters early spring blossom, transforming the rough texture of the tarmac road into tiny jewels of polished jet glistening in the headlights.

'No moon.' I look up feeling like I've got something wrong again. Like I've remembered something that didn't happen or forgotten something important that did.

I check the time on the dashboard clock; it reads 10.58. I think anyway. Bit hard to tell as it has a large crack across the middle. We pass the spot where Rhid drove us back to Daisy's, where I realised I'd forgotten my phone and before finding Kasha dead. We pass a large road sign reads: *Warning: High Casualty Route – Stay Alert, Slow Down, Stay Alive*. I'd always thought this sign was over the top but now it seems perfectly reasonable. Life *is* short. Staying alert can indeed mean the difference between life and death.

A steady stream of people head in our direction.

'Let's park here and walk.' Rhid suggests, stopping the car ahead of a young female officer directing traffic. We find a spot off a side street, grab our coats and weave through the parked cars, people and a small crew of local news media.

'There's that reporter.' I spot Edie, the reporter covering the story. I pull Rhid a sharp swerve away but it's too late. Spotted.

'Taylor Millar, Rhidian Smith.' She calls, 'Edie Conway, BBC Cambridgeshire. Could I have a few words?'

This is exactly what I didn't want. 'No.'

'Later maybe? After the ceremony.' Edie's not giving up that easily.

'Yeah, maybe.' Hopefully that'll get her off our back.

'You both OK?' Edie goes for the human touch.

'Yeah fine. Thanks.' I step away,

'Look sorry we've got to go.' Rhid hooks his arm through mine, guiding me away.

'Catch you later then.' Edie calls.

A crowd of about eighty people gather along the police-taped crime scene, marking its parameter. They're young, teenagers mostly, but there's older people too, and more are arriving every few minutes. The nearest street lamp is out, allowing the soft glow of the candles to light the growing pile of gifts. There're candles everywhere, large ones, small ones, multi-coloured ones, balanced between cards, flowers, soft toys and wreaths.

I shiver suddenly with a strong feeling of déjà vu. Rhid feels it too. It's because we're here. At night. Although the place looks different now it's still the same – the same place we found Kasha less than 24 hours ago. We look around for somewhere to stand and realise people are letting us through. Word has spread.

The kids who found her are here.

'We should have brought something,' Rhid mutters, worrying what people will think. 'A candle or flowers or...' his voice trails, a place opens near the front of the crowd, close to the police line. We move into the space and wait for things to begin I notice an attempt has been made to clean the blood from the floor where Kasha was laid before being bagged and taken away. There's a pile of flowers on the spot where I threw up.

Everyone quietens down when a middle-aged black man with shiny eyes steps forward and turns to face the crowd. He wears a sombre sage two-piece suit, an orange shirt, a knitted green tie and knows how to speak to crowds. He has a gentle, sympathetic smile.

'I didn't know Kasha very well.' His speaks with a strong Ghanaian accent. 'She came to our church only a few times but during those times I saw a girl who was beautiful.'

More mourners arrive and settle in at the back.

‘Not just that kind of beauty we can all see on the outside – Kasha was blessed with that too – but the *real* kind. The kind that comes from within.’ He pauses. ‘From deep, deep down inside – from a place only God can truly see. I know now that Kasha had no family. She grew up in the care of local children’s services after tragically losing both her parents in a road traffic accident at a young age. She was one of God’s children and as such we were all her family.’

He stops, allowing his audience to take that in.

‘We gather here tonight, in memory of this girl, this young woman who has been cruelly taken from us. We gather here with great sadness in our hearts but we gather also – let us not forget – to celebrate the gift of her life, however short. It is hard for us to feel anything but loss now, at this dreadful, dreadful time, but we should fully celebrate her life, her talents. The song of life she brought to everyone who knew her and which she wanted to share with the world.’

Everyone listens with their heads bowed, but I watch on, only half there. This doesn’t feel real to me. Occasionally someone nods as the comforting words of the reverend filter through the sadness. The familiar language of mourning mending shattered worlds, at least for a little while.

‘I feel as if I’ve been here before.’ I whisper to Rhid. He pulls a ‘what?’ face. ‘...like I’ve seen all this before, on TV or online somewhere...’ Rhid shrugs, he’s not sure what to say. I continue, ‘It feels so unreal. Like everyone is in shock, wondering what to make of it.’

‘Do you know what to make of it?’

I shake my head, of course I don’t. People stare half-lit at candles cupped in their hands like heavenly guardians holding Kasha’s spirit safe, protecting it.

‘Where was everybody last night? No one was there to protect her then.’

No one except me. Rhid looks at me funny, wishing I’d shut up.

Can you stay? Keep me company till Daisy gets back? Kasha’s words ring around my head.

The preacher steps down and someone else takes his place. She’s wearing a large hooded coat making it hard for anyone to see exactly who it is. Anyone except me that is. That walk. That turn. That swoop into position can only be one person.

Cyd.

‘Thank you, Reverend Markham.’ Cyd pushes back her hood. She wears the same clothes as she wore in the video we watched earlier. Markham bows graciously. She mirrors and smiles before turning back to her audience. ‘My name is Cynthia. I only knew Kasha for a short time but in that time I grew to love her like a sister.’

Cyd takes a few steps to the right.

‘Kasha was full of life. She was bright, beautiful and talented. She had everything to live for. Everything. And now that’s...Now *she’s* gone.’ She looks down. ‘You may already know that some of Kasha’s friends and myself have started a memorial website where you can leave messages of remembrance. I invite you to have a look. We want people to write Kasha’s name in as many places that you can and in as many ways as you can. Use stones, shells on a beach, leaves, petals on a lawn. Anything. Let your imagination be free. You can also light a virtual candle, leave a poem or post a video. Help us keep her memory alive. Help us keep her alive.’

Her tone changes. ‘We’ve let Kasha down.’ She looks up and fixes the faces of her audience with a stare that’s more like a dare. A challenge to contradict her. Piercing,

uncompromising, chilling. 'Who was around to help Kasha last night? Anyone? Does anyone know anything that might help the police find who did this?'

The crowd look at one another, some shake their heads. My mouth is suddenly dry. I feel woozy, feint even, my vision collapses, Cyd, the crowd, the lights, everything swerves and contracts to a point, like water sucked down a plug hole and I reach out for Rhid.

'You ok?' He asks. 'You've gone really white.'

I nod and hold his arm a little tighter. Cyd continues, 'We should look out for each other, *protect* each other, but when do we make the time? When?'

The crowd quietly mumble, *not much, not often enough.*

Cyd looks around again, straining to touch a nerve, to light a stronger response from the crowd, then she breaks down. 'The police will be asking questions and we must tell them everything, anything might lead us to Kasha's killer. If the people who do this go free there is no hope for any of us. We must help as if our own lives depend on it, because in all truth they do.' A murmur of approval breaks into applause. For a second, I think I catch her eye, but she acts as if she's not seen me. It's hard to tell if she has or hasn't. Cyd is a master at concealing what she feels.

FLASHBACK:

INT. SCHOOL CANTEEN - SUMMER 2018

LAST TERM OF HIGH SCHOOL

PETE RIVERS (17) - a nerdy looking boy with kind and bright eyes, save the whales tee-shirt and Dunlop trainers trips in the lunch queue. The contents of his

tray - roast chicken, mash potato and gravy - splats all over Cyd's strictly non-uniform, brand new All Saints jacket, that she's been showing off to Shani.

The canteen goes quiet - everyone wondering how she'll react. Cyd is furious, for a moment her eyes flare and if she was a dragon she spouting smoke and flames, but then suddenly it's gone. She gains control and then, cool, calm and collected says,

CYD

It's fine, Pete.

Just an accident.

This worries me.

Reverend Jim Markham steps up. 'Let us pray'

On finishing the Lord's Prayer the reverend invites everyone to say their own private prayers for Kasha and as the silence begins Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* swells up from a portable stereo.

'I'm confused,' I whisper to Rhid, 'About Cyd's involvement in all this. What's in it for her. She's only known this girl for what? A few months?'

Adagio for Strings fades out and Cyd steps forward to speak again. 'I want to end with something from Kasha. *These Things*, the song she wrote, performed and won best song for at Talent East last year. It's beautiful, emotionally honest and unique - just like she was.' Cyd steps back and nods to the ever-present Shani. The song starts up from

somewhere. A guitar strums in a few bars then a gentle, and controlled humming vocal part fades up. Next, the voice I've got to know so well in the past twenty-four hours fills the space around us. Kasha sings.

These things they don't need names

These things, but I learnt them all the same.

I found a voice for my tears

Made stories from those years

Stories to tell over and over and over and over -

Until you come back to me

Unforced, distinctive, her voice reverberates with a rich and soulful sound. It's sincere, as though she's singing about something specific that has happened to her, but it's impossible to tell what exactly the story is behind the song. As Kasha builds to the chorus people begin to join in, singing along with the dead girl. Quietly at first but soon they grow in confidence. Rhid too, sounding not like him at all but sombre and calm. The girl standing next to him recognises him. She nudges the girl on her other side and, turning back, catches Rhid's eye. He smiles back, awkward and unsure, but when the pretty one mouths *are you ok* with pout and sad puppy eyes Rhid's smile widens.

'Look at you. You're enjoying this!'

'No I'm not.'

'You. Are. You're at home in this... charade.'

'Oh Taylor please - don't take this the wrong way - but can't you just stop being outside everything all the time.'

'What do you mean?'

'Just be here. Try and feel what everyone else is feeling.'

'But I don't feel what everyone else is feeling. I feel like I'm in a film and someone's forgotten to give me the script.'

Kasha's song continues. *Stay? Keep me company till Daisy gets back?* Kasha's last words cut through the song like a beam of dark matter.

'OMG.' Someone else arrives up front. Someone I also recognise. Jonty and without much brotherly love about him. In fact, he's angry. Very angry. Cyd's further back into the crowd now but she's still in clear view. Jonty storms up and grabs her arm hard. He eyeballs her in a way I've never seen him do before. Cyd doesn't bat an eye. She returns his look unfazed, cool as glass. Jonty leans in and says something close and private. She fixes him with a piercing stare, and three tightly formed words. I can't tell what they are but whatever they are they stop Jonty dead.

I've been on the end of that look. That mouth.

Suddenly Jonty storms off.

What was that?

The candle on the floor by my foot goes out. It's wick smokes, sending a thin grey line into the air. The moon appears from behind a cloud. I pick up the dead candle, and, finding a lighter in my pocket, relight. I cup it, protectively, the way I've seen others do as Kasha's song reaches the chorus.

Everyone is singing.

Now Kasha's song is everyone's.

I lean forward, replace the candle and sing.

Chapter ten | last thing she ever said

Sunday. Two days after Kasha's death.

The next morning is bright. The bells of St Luke's church ripple through my duvet's warm cocoon. A happy, light-filled sound full of optimism for the day ahead—and the complete opposite to how I feel.

Downstairs the kitchen table is laid for four, which confuses me.

'We've guests for breakfast?' I flop onto my usual seat by the window. Even though we live together we don't see each much. I'm busy with college or friends or

sleeping in while mum loves early mornings and time in her studio. Occasionally we meet over cereal or toast and I try to not sound too grumpy while mum tries not to be too wide-awake-perky. As a result, breakfast can be tricky.

‘The police. Well two actually: DCI Layton and PC Kendal.’ Mum looks up at the kitchen clock. ‘Shit, they’ll be here in a minute.’

‘What?’

‘They called last night when you were at the vigil. They want to ask you a few questions.’ Mum places a plate of eggs, bacon, veggie sausage, mushrooms and toast in front of me, the eggs scrambled soft, not too sloppy - just how I love them.

‘And you said come now?’ I consider escape routes.

‘You can’t *not* speak to them.’

‘I might have arranged it a little latter in the day.’ I scowl, adding salt and pepper to my egg.

‘I can send them away.’ Mum pushes over the ketchup bottle. I squeeze some on the side of my plate and dip a fork piled with bacon.

Knock, Knock!

Mum looks at me with her best silent film star what-do-you-want-me-to-do look. I take a deep breath and blow out my cheeks, ‘Go on then.’

A few moments later mum ushers DCI Layton into the kitchen, closely followed by PC Kendal.

‘Good morning. How are you?’ Layton’s bright and cheery – another bloody morning person, just my luck.

‘All right thanks.’ Is the best I can do.

‘Sorry to interrupt your breakfast, but I’ve got a few questions about Friday night. Is that all right?’

'Fine.' I say, hoping it sounds sincere.

'Please, don't let me stop you.' He gestures to my loaded fork.

Despite losing most of my appetite to a sudden surge of anxiety I put the food in my mouth and load up another. Layton helps himself to a chair.

'Tea? Coffee?' Mum offers brightly. They place their orders.

'This is a lovely house.' Layton admires what he can see of the kitchen and living room beyond. 'How long have you lived here?'

The question's directed at me but mum, pulling two mugs from the cupboard, cuts in, 'About fifteen years.'

Layton smiles at me. 'About fifteen years.' I confirm, adding. 'She often does that.'

'Does what?' Mum turns to me.

'Cuts in...' I address Layton. '...answers questions to me on my behalf. I've had a word, and she's promised not to but as you can see...re-programming is impossible.'

Layton and Kendal laugh politely. 'So you grew up here?' Layton continues while mum distributes tea. 'Yep. Hard to tell, right?' He smiles. I am the quintessential white middle class girl, this, the quintessential white middle class home. It's what used to be quaintly referred to as the Cambridge muesli belt describing a growing urban suburb populated by baby boomer families. Politically liberal, professional classes, hippy weekenders. 'What did you want to ask me?'

'Was there anything else about that conversation with the woman on the phone... anything you can recall, that you haven't told us? Anything in the background? Anything that might give us a lead?'

'Just the accent, which I told you. Did you trace the number?'

'It's been disconnected.'

'Pity.' Layton stirs his tea. 'We dusted the handset. Aside from your prints we also found Kasha's.'

I put my fork down. 'Kasha used my phone?'

Kendal nods adding, 'She must have known that number by heart.' Everyone thinks about what that means.

'What about that Polish truck guy?' I ask.

'We interviewed him. We found his prints on the counter where you'd expect. Customer side. Nothing's suspicious turned up in forensics. Nothing connecting him to the attack.' He sips his tea. 'You didn't see anyone else? No one else in the service area?' I shake my head and immediately think back to the figure in Daisy's splash-back.

Was it Pete?

I don't want to tell them about that. Not yet anyway, I don't think, and to buy some time I look down at my breakfast, fill a fork and eat slowly.

'Are you sure?' Layton picks up on my hesitation. I've always been a shit liar.

'Well I thought I might have seen someone one, reflected in the splash-back, you know the metal around the food prep area... but when I turned back there was no one.'

'You didn't recognise them?' He pursues.

I shake my head.

'What time did you get back to Daisy's? The second time?' Kendal chips in.

'About ten thirty.' Then I realise something. 'Wouldn't you know that from the CCTV?'

'Just confirming.' Layton states.

'Confirming I'm reliable?'

'If you want to call it that.' He makes no apology.

'Did you see if Kasha had a phone with her that night?' Kendal asks.

'Haven't you got it?'

'No.'

'Of course she did. Why would an 18-year-old not have a phone with her? She was on it when I arrived the first time. It was white, with a silvery snakeskin case and Big. One of those Galaxy notes maybe?' Kendal writes that down. Everyone sits in silence a moment.

'What about that deleted post? Of Kasha's on Cyd's Facebook wall?'

'We haven't been able to recover it.'

'You can do that?' Mum asks. 'Retrieve deleted messages and find out who deleted them?'

Layton nods. 'Usually.'

'Why not this time?'

'We're working on it.'

If Cyd did delete Kasha's call for help, what does that mean? Could she be trying to hide something?

'She asked me to stay.' I say suddenly. I'm not sure why. Everyone turns to face me.

'Who?' Mum's confused.

'Kasha. It's the last thing she said to me. I thought she just wanted some company but maybe there was more to it. Maybe she knew something bad was going to happen.' I suddenly feel sick. Really, sick. The feeling rises quickly from my toes, tensing my body followed by something bile tasting in my mouth. I can't breathe. I need to get out fast.

At that moment, Bo pushes through the dog flap and stands in the middle of the kitchen wondering what's going on.

'That could have been the last thing Kasha said to anyone.' Kendal says what

everyone's thinking.

That's it. I can't hold it together any longer. Pushing back my chair, stumbling over Bo I rush out of the room.

EXT. LIGHTPARK - FRIDAY NIGHT 10.35pm

Beep. Beep.

Kasha and I check our phones. Finding mine blank I look up to see Kasha opening a message. A holographic unicorn hangs off a key ring attached to her phone and it bobs slightly as she types, shooting tiny rainbows across the counter. She's writing a long message. You can tell a lot about what someone's texting by the way they're texting it. This one looks like it contains a lot of capitals and cusses and emojis. Her glossy purple nails stabbing at the keys.

ME

Everything all right?

KASHA

What this? (She holds up her phone.) Yeah.

Fine. (Beat). Boy trouble. You know.

She smiles conspiratorially and returns to prepping the food.

ME

I do. Boys *mean* trouble. (Beat) What time you

on 'til?'

KASHA

Twelve. Boss's popped off on an errand.

ME

I used to come here a lot last year, but college keeps me pretty busy now.

KASHA

What are you studying?

ME

Film and Media.

KASHA

Which do you like best?

ME

Both. All of it.

She flips the burgers again.

KASHA

I want to study music. I write my own songs. Sing a bit.

(Beat). You know. Everyone sings.

ME

Well, no they don't. For instance, I don't. But you do. I heard just now.

(Beat.) What music do you like?

Cheesy question I know.

KASHA

No it's not. All sorts. UK grime dance,
dub step, hip hop, broken beat. A pretty
wide mix really. I also love old
songs from the sixties, jazz, bluegrass,
some folk, gospel, protest songs...that
kind of stuff.

ME

Good to meet a fellow diversifier...

KASHA

Big Billie Holiday fan too. She adds.

ME

She's the queen. (I say because she is.)

My Mum plays her all the time.

KASHA

Mine too.

We laugh.

Or at least she used to.

I wonder about that *used to*.

The food's ready. KASHA sets out the boxes and buns, performs

one final flip on the burgers and lays out everything on paper. I stand there wondering how to carry it all. I put down my phone, stuff the cans in my pockets and pile up the rest. Kasha looks over to the Polish HGV.

KASHA

Big Favour alert: Would you stay until my boss gets back? That guy over there is giving me the creeps.

She nods over to the HGV where a man she served before before has vanished.

You could just pop this food over to your friend and come back? I'm sure Daisy wont be long.

I think about to RHID waiting in the car and right on cue:

Beep, beep.

RHID'S sends me a red angry face and a dog with a empty bowl.

ME

My friends waiting. He's got to get up early.
A yawn arrives.

KASHA

(Taking a deep breath.) No worries.

ME

Sorry.

(I mumble, pulling my best sorry face.)

KASHA

It's fine. Really. (she smiles.) Go! Go!

And she shoos me off like a naughty cat.