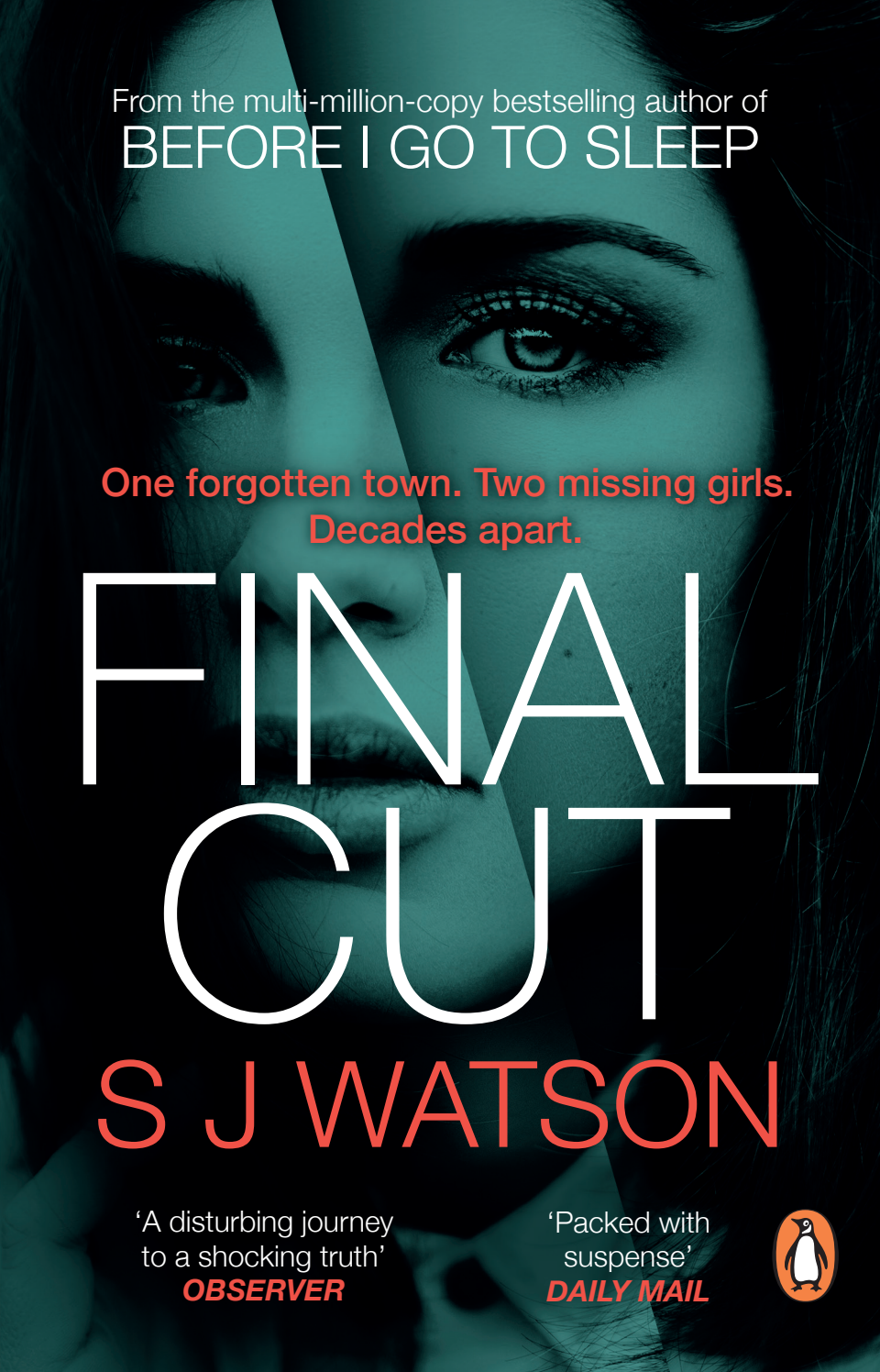

From the multi-million-copy bestselling author of
BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP
One forgotten town. Two missing girls.
Decades apart.
FINAL CUT
S J WATSON
'A disturbing journey to a shocking truth'
OBSERVER
'Packed with suspense'
DAILY MAIL

Acclaim for *Final Cut*

'Dark and twisty, and full of surprises and so smartly done' Joanna Cannon

'S J Watson, pacing his story with mesmerizing expertise, keeps you so invested in the fates of his characters' *Sunday Express*

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S J Watson's first novel, *Before I Go To Sleep*, became a phenomenal international success. A bestseller around the world, it won the Crime Writers' Association Award for Best Debut Novel and the Galaxy National Book Award for Crime Thriller of the Year. The film of the book, starring Nicole Kidman, Colin Firth and Mark Strong, and directed by Rowan Joffe, was released in September 2014. S J Watson's second novel, *Second Life*, a psychological thriller, was published to acclaim in 2015.

S J Watson was born in the Midlands and now lives in London.

For more information on S J Watson and his books, see his website at www.sjwatson-books.com

Also by S J Watson

BEFORE I GO TO SLEEP
SECOND LIFE

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FINAL CUT

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BLACK SWAN

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For Anna, Archie, Neil and Olivia

and

In memory of Anzel Britz (1979–2020)

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My life closed twice before its close—
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me

Emily Dickinson

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Then

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She runs across the moor, as hard and as fast as she can. The sliver of an old moon hangs above her and, somewhere far behind, the village lights shine anaemic yellow. But she keeps her eyes fixed forward. She sees nothing but the road ahead and hears only the wheeze of her dry breath and the cawing of the gulls as they swoop and dive. There are no sounds of pursuit, no shouting, no howling of dogs. She is safe, she thinks. She can calm down, stop running and walk. It's over.

But still she runs. She pushes herself harder, her limbs wheel, momentum carries her until she is on the edge of tumbling like a marionette, wires snipped, head over heels. A car flashes past on the horizon, and then it happens. Her body goes numb, as if she's fallen into cotton wool. Her arms and legs circle in front of her but they look alien, they're moving independently, she has no control. It's like looking through the wrong end of a telescope.

She tries to draw breath, to blink herself back to reality, but it's too late. Her body has rebelled. When she tries to stop running she finds she can't.

Her foot hits something then. It registers only as an abstract pain, dull, like the dentist's drill after the needle, but still she trips in slow motion as if falling through sludge. Her hands fly forward and she hits the cold ground, squeezing the breath from her lungs like air from a paper bag.

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She lies still. She could rest, she thinks; for ever, if need be. She sees herself as if from a distance, as if she's in a documentary. She's lying there in the dark, her eyes open, her lips blue. They'll find her in the morning, frozen. It wouldn't be so bad.

But no. She won't die here, not like this. Energy rushes in, a shot of adrenaline, and she get clumsily to her feet. She walks, putting one foot carefully in front of the other, over and over, until finally she reaches the junction. Her eyes dart. She shakes, though she doesn't feel fear. She doesn't feel anything. She puts her rucksack at her feet then holds out her hand, thumb up.

It's early morning and the road isn't busy. Cars pass infrequently, but eventually one stops. The driver winds down the window. It's a man, of course, but beggars can't be choosers.

'Where to, love?' he says, but she doesn't know how to answer him, she hasn't thought that far ahead. She imagines Bluff House; it's as if it's right in front of her, silhouetted against the pale sky, huge and looming with a solitary light shining in an upstairs room. She can never go back.

'Love?'

She shakes her head; she knows where she wants to end up, but not how to get there, and she has to choose somewhere before he drives off.

'Anywhere,' she says, before opening the door and climbing in. 'Anywhere. Just . . . away.'

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1

Evening Standard Website, 14 March 2011

NEWS IN BRIEF›

Mystery girl found on Deal beach

OLIVER JOHNSON | NO COMMENTS

Authorities are baffled by a mystery girl who was taken to hospital last week after being found unconscious on the beach in Deal, Kent, by a passer-by.

The teenager, who carried no identification but is believed to be around 15–18 years of age, was soaking wet and was admitted to Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital in Margate, where she was found to be suffering from hypothermia. On regaining consciousness, she was unable to tell doctors her name, where she lives or where she was born, and claims to have no knowledge of how she came to be in the seaside town.

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She was said to be extremely anxious, terrified of any new face, and reluctant to talk. Doctors have found no sign of injury and the police report that there is nothing to suggest foul play.

She remains in hospital while doctors decide whether she requires any further treatment. The police are thought to be considering a public appeal for information if her condition does not improve.

She is described as 5 feet 7 inches tall and overweight, with shoulder-length brown hair. She was wearing a black jacket, a white vest and blue jeans when found.

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Now

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2

I mustn't fall asleep. I know that, it's obvious. You hear the stories. People get trapped and eventually stop trying to escape. They succumb to exhaustion and close their eyes. The body shuts down. They die.

But what do I do to stay awake? That's the question that spins in my head and won't go away.

I'd just crested the hill when it happened. The dead thing lay in the road, leached of colour and completely still, and even as I registered its presence I knew I had no chance of avoiding it. It was too late to do anything but slam my foot on the brake and hope for the best.

The car began to skid. I saw myself as an observer might, someone filming the incident for posterity. I wondered if I'd get out of this alive. I imagined the vehicle turning slowly in a balletic curve before ploughing into a low stone wall with a sickening crunch. I saw the bonnet concertina, then a moment of perfect stillness and utter quiet before a fireball lights the scene from within.

I start to burn. My red flesh is eaten up by the inferno before a cool, sweet blackness washes over me. I know that when they find my body it'll be twisted, unrecognisable. They'll have to work out who I am from some clue – dental records, perhaps, the chassis number of the car – but even then they'll wonder who to tell. There's no one, not really. A

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flatmate I barely know. An ex-boyfriend who I doubt would really care.

And Dan, I suppose, though his interest will be purely professional. If the papers pick up the story, he'll tell them it's such a shame. A real tragedy. A promising career, wonderful to work with, her next film was shaping up to be really something, taken from us too young. Blah, blah, blah.

Something like that, anyway. They'll write it down and stick it on page seven, as long as nothing more interesting comes along. No better than I deserve.

But it didn't happen like that, of course. The car turned through a quarter-circle and lurched violently into a shallow ditch bordering the road. The seatbelt bit into my shoulder and the dashboard jerked towards me, then my teeth crunched painfully together as my head struck the steering wheel. Everything outside went black and for a second or two I heard a curious, high-pitched tinnitus. When I opened my eyes I saw double. Shit, I thought, the last thing I need is concussion.

But a moment later everything cleared and I pulled myself together. The lights were dead, and though the engine started after a while, it was with an odd, grinding noise, accompanied by the caustic stench of burning rubber. The wheels span.

I gave up and let the motor die. Silence rushed in; the moor swallowed me whole. The car's interior was cramped and airless and I had to force myself to breathe.

Why here? The nearest town is miles back; the next, the one I'm heading for, miles ahead. I've seen no other traffic for half an hour at least and one thing I do know is there'll be no phone signal.

I tried to look on the bright side. I was uninjured. Winded, but alive. My knuckles bled to white as I gripped the wheel; my skin burned with cold. I had to do something. I couldn't walk all the way, but neither could I sit there for ever. And

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whatever it was that had sent me spinning off the road was still out there.

My camera was on the passenger seat and I reached for it instinctively; I'm here to make a film, after all. I braced myself, then opened the door. The air outside was rotten, heavy with decay. My stomach roiled but I swallowed it down. I've smelled worse, or at least as bad. Back when I made my first film, for example. *Black Winter.* Out there on the street I slept in garbage, lived amidst the stink of rancid food, of open wounds and festering abscesses, of clothes that'd been worn so long they were fused with the putrefying flesh they were supposed to protect. Next to that this was nothing, just a dead animal bleeding into the pale snow.

Still, I wasted no time. I set the camera recording and began to film. It calmed me instantly. I had a purpose now. A curious detachment set in, one I'm used to, one that I first noticed when I lived with the girls on the street, shooting them for *Black Winter.* I become passive and invisible. I can zoom in and out, reframe as necessary, but my decisions are artistic, creative. I'm only recording, not part of the story. I'm not even there.

It was a sheep, its fleece matted and filthy. Something dark and gelatinous – blood, it must be, though in the dismal light it looked like oil – stained its upper quarter. I crouched down to frame it with the thin blade of the horizon in the background, the stars above. From this angle I could see its neck was twisted, the face blackened. Its torn lips spilled a bloody pink on to the ice; the eyes were glossy marbles. I began to shiver as I panned down the creature's lower body to the source of the fuliginous stench: a gash in its side, from which its innards oozed, dark and steaming. It must have been dead when I hit it, but dimly I wondered whether it was me who split it open, me who visited upon it this final, horrific indignity.

I carried on filming, but my defences were cracking. I was

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back in the middle of it all. My car was wrecked, the road iced over, and I knew soon the route might become impassable. My hands were numbed, my ears too, and I was standing over a body, a dead thing, bleeding, disgusting. Alone. I switched off my camera. I needed help, I knew, but who could I turn to?

I didn't think. I left my luggage in the car. It was much tougher going than it looked. The snow wasn't deep, but beneath the new fall it'd already frozen hard, and by the time I'd gone just a few yards I'd almost fallen twice.

'Shit,' I muttered under my breath, then a second later my ankle twisted beneath me, liquid pain shot up my leg and I stumbled once more, this time landing in the wet snow. I knew straight away that nothing was broken, but I also knew that I was defeated. I was going to have to wait it out. I hobbled back to the car.

That was an hour ago, maybe two. It's hard to tell. The temperature has dropped further; my breath mists the air then disappears. The car seems to be shrinking, hemming me in, but it's too cold to open the window. I look up at the stars. I search for Betelgeuse, the belt of Orion, fiery Venus. I make promises. Let me get out of here and I'll turn round and go straight back to London. Screw the channel, screw Dan, screw the film.

But I've no idea with whom I'm bargaining. Not God. Even if he exists, he gave up on me years ago. And in any case, there's no reply, just the empty, spectral howl of the wind over the moor. The snow falls silently, no longer even melting on the windscreen. My teeth begin to chatter. A car appears in the rear-view mirror, but it doesn't stop; I probably imagined it. I wonder how I'll look when they find me. My lips frozen, ice in my hair, my face covered with frozen snot, but still hugging my camera like it's the only thing that matters. She died for her art, they'll say. Ha ha ha. My head tips forward as I begin the slide into the dark, into the soft, black nothing.

12

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I catch myself in time. No, I tell myself. I didn't make it through what I made it through, didn't achieve what I've achieved, to die here. And in any case, this isn't a war zone, or even the wilds of Alaska, where it's forty below. This is the north of England. Not far from here, there'll be teenagers queuing outside nightclubs, the girls wearing not much more than their makeup, a short skirt, heels and a crop-top. The boys will be luckier, in T-shirts and jeans, but not much. I can see them, might have even been with them once, shivering not with the cold but with the anticipation of the night ahead. Eager for a drink and to dance, for the laughter and the lights, for the sickly-sweet smell of dry ice and warm flesh pressed in tight. Cigarettes, vodka. Pills and powder.

No. I'm not going to freeze to death. I just have to stay awake, that's all. I dig my nails into my palms, so hard I think I might draw blood, and then, in the rear-view mirror, I see the light.

At first I think it's my imagination again, but when I twist round to look over my shoulder I see I was right. There are headlights shining over the hill. Salvation. For a second I wonder if my bargaining worked, but as the vehicle itself appears I tell myself to drop the crap. It's coincidence, nothing more.

The car approaches cautiously on the treacherous road and doesn't slow. Almost too late I realise my own vehicle is in darkness, half off the road and easily missed. I have to move. I have to get out. It would be ironic if whoever's driving were to have an accident, too, end up skidding along the same path, winding up in the same ditch. I need to flag it down.

I pick up my phone from the dash and get the door open. The cold brings with it a surge of energy and I manage not to stumble. I wave the phone's lit screen as I shout, and this time I'm in luck. The car slows to a halt, then a tall figure steps out. I think instantly of the women I'd filmed on the streets,

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the strange vehicles pulling up in the gloom, mysterious figures inside who may or may not want to hurt you.

Well, I think as he approaches, let him try. 'You okay there?'

His voice is muffled by the wind, but friendly. Though I can't yet make out his face, my shoulders sag with relief.

'I just . . . not exactly.' My teeth chatter and I nod towards my stricken car. 'Can you give me a hand?'

He steps forward and into the beam from his own headlights. 'Broken down?'

He's about thirty, I guess, and tall – very tall, definitely six foot plus – and rangy. He wears square, thick-framed glasses and his face is long, his features angular. Though warm, his smile seems somehow wary. He has the same build as Aidan – my friend from back then, from before – but also the same awkwardness. I remember how Aidan made me laugh, and begin to relax. He seems innocent enough, though I know as much as anyone how deceptive looks can be. Those first few months in London taught me that, if nothing else.

'I came off the road,' I say. 'There's a sheep . . .'

He glances past me to where the creature lies in the middle of the road, a black shape on the ice just visible in the gloom.

'You hit it?'

I look back. The head lies angled towards us. Staring. Accusing. *You did this*, it says.

'No. It was already dead. I didn't see it.'

Does he believe me? I can't tell, but either way he holds out his hand.

'You want me to help?' he says. 'I'm Gavin.'

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3

It takes me a moment to place the name. Gavin. My assistant, Jess, had been looking for someone local to put up flyers for a meeting at the village hall to get the project up and running, and he ran the film club there and offered to help. We have a shared interest, at least.

'Alex.'

No sign of recognition; perhaps Jess didn't mention my name.

'I suppose I'd better take a look. At the . . .'

He motions towards the dead sheep, seemingly reluctant to name it.

'Thanks.'

We approach together and, torch in hand, he crouches at the pitiful creature.

'Something hit it hard,' he says, his face twitching with discomfort. 'It'd have been quick.'

I look down at the beast. A pool of blood spreads blackly from its hindquarters, staining the snow.

'We can't leave it here.'

His head falls. 'Suppose not.' He sighs. We kneel side by side and each grab two legs, then, together, we begin to pull. The thing is heavy but slides relatively easily over the ice. The viscera smudge the snow and a cloud of stink erupts. I hold my breath and glance at a grim-faced Gavin, who's doing the

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same, but after a moment it's done. We heave the body into the ditch.

'Right,' he says, standing up. 'How's your car?

I step back over the creature's smeared remains. I wonder what he thinks of me. That I'm helpless, just waiting to be rescued, clueless about the car to which I've entrusted my safety? I watch his face but can read none of that there. Only a willingness to help.

'Screwed, I think. I just need to ring the breakdown service. As soon as I get a signal. I'll be fine.'

He shakes his head. 'Look, I know a guy who'll help.'

'He can fix it?'

'Or tow it. He's got a Range Rover.'

A Range Rover? I think of the vehicle I thought I saw earlier. I could see nothing in the glare of the headlights: the driver was invisible and I couldn't even tell what make of car it was. Something big, some kind of four-wheeler.

'He wasn't here?' I say. 'Your friend? About half an hour ago?'

Gavin laughs. 'No. I just left him. Why?'

'There was another car,' I say. 'It looked as though it was going to pull up, but then it drove off.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes. But it doesn't matter.'

For a second I think he'll ask more, but he seems to change his mind.

'Where you headed?'

'Blackwood Bay.'

He smiles. 'Hop in. I'll give you a lift.'

He drives in almost complete silence, cautious in the snow. I wonder what he's like and look for clues. The car is spotless and completely devoid of the kind of junk that litters my own; the only evidence it's not brand new is the packet of

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liquorice sticks in the cup-holder between our seats. My stomach growls.

'It's lucky you came along,' I say, more to puncture the quiet than anything else.

He smiles. I look out, towards Blackwood Bay, the constellations clear above. There's a flash in the distance, the lighthouse on Crag Head strobing the low cloud. I was nearer than I thought. Again it occurs to me that I was a fool to come in winter. Not that I had any choice. After a minute or two he accelerates a little. The headlights pick out something, a brightness pricking the blackness, the glimpse of an eye, but it disappears as we pass. Another sheep? A rabbit? A deer? It's impossible to tell its size; the perspective is unknowable. Gavin cranks up the heating.

'You still cold?'

I tell him I'm fine and ask where he's from. 'Not Blackwood Bay?'

He looks puzzled. 'What makes you so sure?'

'The accent. Or lack of.'

'Oh, yes,' he says sheepishly. 'My folks are from Merseyside. But we moved down south. London.'

'And now you're here.'

'Yes. I felt like a change. I was working in the City and I'd just had enough. The commuting . . . pressure . . . you know how it is.'

I, I think. Not *we*. I say nothing. I've already clocked that there's no ring on his finger, though I'm not sure why I looked. Habit, perhaps.

'How long have you been here?'

'Oh, wow. About a year now.'

He whistles under his breath as he says it, as if he's surprised it's been so long, as if he came intending to stay a fortnight and then got stuck.

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'You like it?'

He tells me it's okay. He keeps busy.

'How about you? Where're you from?' he asks.

I keep my answer vague. 'London. You're not married?'

He laughs. 'No!'

He slows to take a blind bend. 'You're not from London originally, though?'

So he's picked up on my accent, too. No surprise. It's mostly gone, but some things will never change. A temptation to use 'were' instead of 'was'. The way I pronounce 'glass' to rhyme with 'ass' not 'arse'; ditto 'castle', 'bath', 'class'. Not that I've used any of those words, as far as I can recall, so I guess he must've spotted other, more subtle, clues.

'Near Leeds,' I tell him.

'Oh, right. Come for a visit?'

Now I'm faced with the question, I'm not sure how to respond. I'd wanted to stay under the radar. After all, it was never my plan to come here. But this isn't an ideal world, and I can't stay hidden for ever.

'Sort of,' I say. 'I'm here to work on a film.'

He laughs. 'Thought you might have something to do with that! So how do you fit in?'

'Oh, I just help out. You know?'

He drives on. A minute later he coughs.

'So what's it about, anyway?' He pauses. 'Zoe?'

My breath catches in my throat at the mention of the vanished girl, but he doesn't notice.

'Not exactly,' I say.

'You know about her, though? And Daisy? Yes?'

I tell him I do. I think of the research I've been doing, the conversations I've been having with Dan. I know too much, if anything.

'But really the film's about village life,' I say breezily.

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'So why here, if it's not about the girls?'

'No particular reason,' I say. 'You'd have to ask the producer, I suppose. He makes all the decisions; I just do the work.'

He laughs, but there's an undercurrent of disappointment. I remember Jess telling me about him. Lovely guy, she said; asks lots of questions, though.

I think back to how the project started. I'd met Dan at the festival in Amsterdam, and he'd told me he loved *Black Winter* but thought my second film – *Adam, Alive* – was 'worthy, but not what you should be doing'. I admired him for that; he was probably the only person who'd been honest. He asked me if I had anything in the pipeline.

'A few things,' I told him, although this wasn't true. He gave me his card and a few months later I invited myself to his office. It was all white furniture and glass partitions, ergonomic chairs and chai lattes. His awards glowered down at me from the wall behind his chair and my mind went to the night I won mine. I'd bought myself a new outfit – a trouser suit with a white jacket – and felt good. Even so, by the time they came to the Audience Award the last thing I was expecting was my name to be called out. The announcement came as if through a fog and I felt like everyone's eyes were boring into me. I stood up, feeling suddenly drunk and regretting the heels I'd bought on a whim. I stepped carefully to the front of the room and at the podium made a dry-mouthed speech before threading my way back through the smiles and claps. As I did, I thought of all the girls I'd filmed and put into my documentary. They were just a few miles away, those who'd survived. Shivering on the same streets, their world and mine now so far apart the distance was incalculable. I felt the champagne begin to rise and strode past my table, only just making it outside before vomiting on to the pavement. No one saw,

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but that didn't make me feel any better, and as I crouched, staring at my own disgust, I thought that at the very least I had the decency to feel guilty. I vowed to go back, to find the girls I'd filmed, to give them the money I'd just won.

'Alex?'

I looked up. Dan was waiting for me to begin. 'Well, what I thought is . . . let's do a film about ordinary life. About community. Mortality. Change. I mean, nowadays, what does "community" even mean? People are more likely to find it online than they are next door, or that's the popular myth anyway. But is that really true, once you get out of the city? I thought we could look at life in a small village in Britain. One with a dwindling population, or whatever. See what life's really like.'

He nodded. He was about to speak, but then his eyes went to my arm. My sleeve had ridden up; my scar was visible. I froze, holding his gaze, resisting the urge to tell him the story, and folded my hands neatly under the table. He shifted in his seat.

'It's very different from *Black Winter*. And I can't see what would make it unique.'

'Well,' I said, 'it could be mostly observational, self-shot by its subjects on their phones, digital cameras, iPads, or whatever. That way we'll get people's own perspective – everyone can contribute.'

'So, sort of *Three Salons* meets *Life in a Day*, then?'

'Exactly.'

He smiled, and I wondered whether he'd been testing me. Though a classic, *Three Salons at the Seaside* came out in ninety-four, or something like that. Long before my time, and – with its focus on northern women getting their shampoo and set – is, on the surface, the last thing anyone would think I'd be interested in.

Unless they knew me. And he did. He knew I'd done my

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GCSEs late, had gone on to do a diploma in Film-making and Photography. He knew I'd come to this with the passion of someone who has finally found their direction after a long time drifting, someone who found the guts to pitch her first film – uninvited, and despite her northern accent and shitty clothes – to one of the guest lecturers.

'The important thing,' I continued, 'would be that the film finds its own stories. Then all I'd need to do is amplify them. I thought I'd set up a website, people could upload their contributions, anonymously—'

'You'll get dick pics.'

I stared at him. If only he knew the things I've seen. If only he had the barest idea of just how many tiny, shrivelled pricks I've witnessed in my life, of how little a few more will bother me. 'You think I'm worried about that? Anyway,' I went on, 'I'd have administrator access. That way I can go through the submissions and delete any that are clearly no good. And any that I'm not sure about but might want to use I can mark *Private*, keep them out of the general pool. The rest would be public. People would need to sign up, but once that's done they could watch what other people are uploading.'

'Could be interesting. Have you thought about consent?'

'Yes. There are a few options. We could bury it in the Ts and Cs, for a start. When people log on for the first time, you know?'

'When they'll click on anything . . .'

'Exactly.'

He shrugged in agreement. These were all details we could work out, along with the ease with which people could upload their contributions. I knew it'd have to be as simple as clicking a button.

'How about a location?'

'Not sure yet. I could do some research . . . scout around.'

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That was my mistake. I should've done my research first, found a location, presented it to him on a silk cushion tied up with a bow. Then I wouldn't have ended up in Blackwood Bay.

I didn't know that then, though.

'I think I could really do something here, Dan. Something fresh, and interesting.'

'You know I love your work,' he said, after a pause.

'Yes?'

'It's just . . . I think it needs more.'

'More?'

'Yes. I think you should find somewhere with a story. Not something major, just a focus, something that people can talk about.'

I hesitated. I was broke, living in a shared flat, working behind bars whenever I got the chance, serving at tables, looking for admin work, trying my hand at a bit of journalism, though that paid next to nothing now. I had no parental funds to draw down, nobody I could go to, cap in hand.

'Okay,' I said, and he smiled and said he'd make some calls.

It was a couple of weeks before he invited me back into his office. 'So I heard from Anna at Channel Four,' he said as I sat down. Hope rose like a bruise.

'And?'

He grinned. 'Congratulations.'

'They're going for it?'

'Well, they're offering three grand. They just want a taster. A few minutes. Ten, tops.'

A taster, just to give an idea of what I wanted to do. Then they could decide whether to expand it into a series, a one-off, or drop it completely.

But three grand? It wasn't much.

'They want it by the end of the year, and Anna wants to know about location asap.' He paused. 'Drink? To celebrate?'

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For a second, I was tempted, but who knew where it might end up? And I'd promised my boyfriend I'd be back early; I couldn't let him down. Not again.

'I'm sorry, but I need to get on,' I said, gathering my things.

Was he disappointed? I couldn't tell. He walked me to the door.

'You'll have to make it amazing, Alex. But I know you can do that. You did it once, you can do it again. And don't forget,' he added, 'you need a story.'

'I'll find one,' I said. I had to. My second film had failed. This was my last chance.

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4

My last chance. The car rounds a bend and I catch sight of the sea, a cluster of lights in the distance, nestled at the water's edge.

Blackwood Bay. Tiny, tucked into its cleft in the hills; beyond it, cliffs and the endless coastline, shrouded in the gloom. The moonlight shines white on the rooftop snow. It looks beautiful but treacherous; it's not hard to imagine the smuggling that used to go on here, clandestine activities in the filthy night. My body tenses in the seat, as if preparing to open the door and leap out, to take my chances in the wilds.

It was never the plan to come here. At no stage did the list of possible locations for my film feature Blackwood Bay. I knew exactly the kind of place I was looking for. One that had that indefinable something; like the feeling you get viewing a new flat when it already feels like home. Or the feeling of meeting someone in a bar, eyes across the room, nothing really, but as soon as you speak you know there's something more, that you're going to fuck. I looked at various places, but nothing grabbed me. Then a card arrived at Dan's office and everything changed.

I was at home when he called me, researching some place in Oxfordshire with little to recommend it. He launched straight in.

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'I've never heard of it, but if you're sure, then I'm sure.'

By now I knew this was typical Dan, to begin as if we were already mid-conversation. No doubt he had his phone on hands-free and was typing an email as he spoke, an intern hovering at the door with an urgent message from another hungry director.

'Sorry?'

'The postcard.'

'What postcard, Dan?'

'Blackwood Bay.'

At first I thought I'd misheard him.

'What?'

He repeated himself, his voice reverberating thickly down the line, and this time I knew what I'd heard.

'Blackwood Bay? What about it?'

My own voice echoed.

'The card,' he said. 'It's not from you? Weird.' The word sounded like a shrug, and pointedly didn't answer my question. 'Anyway, you know it?'

'What the hell are you talking about?' I said, failing to hide my tetchiness.

'I've had this card,' he said, ignoring me. 'Picture of a harbour on one side. Blackwood Bay. The message is *How about here?* I just thought it must be from you.'

My hands shook as I took a swig of coffee. It was too hot, and my throat began to burn.

'Nope.'

'Anyway, it doesn't matter.'

But it does, I thought. *It does matter.* I could feel myself begin to panic and forced myself to count my breaths. 'No one else knows about the project, do they?'

'Well, Channel Four do, obviously.'

'They're not likely to send postcards, though.'

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'True, but maybe it's someone they've asked to sniff round. Anyway, this Blackwood Bay. You've been there?'

I considered lying, telling him I'd never heard of it.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Spent some time there as a child. I wasn't impressed, to be honest.'

'But it's a possibility?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'Why? That bad?'

'It's just . . . I mean, it's a long way. If one of us does end up having to go up there.'

'The channel are keen for the location to be in the north. So—'

'You didn't tell me that.'

'Pretty sure I did. Too much southern bias, apparently.'

'It's small. Maybe *too* small. I don't know how many people we'll get submitting films in a place that size. It's just . . . it's not the right place. Okay?'

I thought I heard him sigh. For a second I thought he'd suggest we pulled the plug, try something else or give the money back to Channel Four, along with our apologies and the tattered remains of my career.

'Have you still got the card?' I said.

'Why?'

'Keep it,' I said, my laptop already open, Google up. I typed in *Blackwood Bay*. If Dan was going to argue, I'd need to have to have a pretty solid reason not to film there. I wanted to see the same pages Dan would look at. I wanted to be prepared.

My eyes danced over the articles as I clicked through. I was relieved at first: it was mostly banal, ordinary stuff. Restaurants that'd closed their doors for ever; prettiest village in Yorkshire for the third year in a row, although that article was years out of date; a campaign to prevent the closure of the

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local lifeboat service that looked about to fail. I began to feel hopeful, but then I saw it. A missing teenager – a girl called Daisy – her suicide now confirmed beyond any real doubt.

There's no way Dan would miss that. No way he wouldn't seize on it as my story.

'We need to talk,' I said. 'I'm coming in.'

I arrived later that afternoon. The postcard was on his desk, a photograph of Blackwood Bay taken from the cliffs. It was faded, as if it'd been out in the sun. I held it but felt nothing.

I turned it over. Those three words in black ink. *How about here?* The postmark was smudged and illegible.

He handed me a coffee. 'Weird, huh?'

'You're sure it's not from someone in the office?'

He tipped his head. 'Well, I've asked. No one's owned up to it. But . . .' I knew what he was going to say. 'Why are you so bothered?

I couldn't answer that. In any case, it was obvious he couldn't care less.

'You're certain this wouldn't be the right place?' he said. 'I looked it up. Population's low, but it's not tiny, and it's going down. Seems to be what you were looking for. Small enough to have a community, but I don't think it's so small you have to worry that only a handful of people would do any filming.' He turned his monitor towards me and began to scroll through a Google Image search. 'Pretty, too. Look.'

I glanced at the screen. A photo of the main street. Slate Road. A bright day, the middle of summer. The shadows were keen, the steep street looked vertiginous, the houses, cafés and gift shops cute. Quaint. I leaned in and pretended interest. A view of the whole village from the cliffs above, the lighthouse in the distance, a photo taken from the shingle beach, the slipway looming in the foreground.

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'It'd look good on camera. But then you know that. If you've been there.'

'We're filming in winter, though. It might be difficult.'

'It's not like you're doing the filming, though, is it? I thought that was the point. And any bad weather might add atmosphere.'

He pulled up another picture. A cobbled street, too narrow for traffic. Hanging baskets, leaded windows.

'There aren't many vehicles, apparently. Road's too steep. And, most important thing, it's got a story.'

I stood up. I didn't want him to carry on. 'I'll consider it,' I said.

He tilted his head. I'd snapped. His gaze drilled into me.

'You know a girl went missing there?'

I hesitated, but there was no point in pretending. I thought of Daisy.

'Years ago. And it was suicide. What's—?'

'No. This is more recent. And there's no mention of suicide.' He pulled up another browser. 'Look.'

The story was from the website of the *Malby Messenger*. 'CCTV clue in desperate search for missing teen Zoe Pearson,' it read, above a blurred photograph taken from video footage. It showed a girl in a black jacket, her dark hair tied back, her pixellated features indistinct. The caption said she'd been spotted at a bus station in Meadowhall. I looked away, trying to focus on something else, but my vision felt distorted.

He scrolled down to a better picture, the same girl, now facing the camera, hair loose, almost smiling, but not quite.

'She disappeared from near Blackwood Bay. About three and a half years ago.'

I shook my head. *No*, I wanted to say. *That's not possible. I'd have known.*

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But is that true? I've been avoiding the place for so long now anything might've happened.

Dan looked up. 'What's that you mentioned? A suicide?'

Fuck. I couldn't back out now.

'A girl called Daisy,' I said. 'She killed herself.'

He flicked to a different screen, entered a search term. 'Daisy Willis. Ten years ago.' He sat back. 'First her, and then Zoe Pearson.'

He grinned, as if he'd won a jackpot. Part of me despised him.

'Don't you think it's strange?' he said. 'Two girls disappearing?'

I heard myself speak.

'Daisy was suicide. It was confirmed.'

He was skimming the article.

'There was no body, though. I mean—'

'It was suicide.'

'Whatever,' he said, looking once more at the screen. 'She jumped from the cliff. Disappeared. And seven years later this Zoe whatever goes missing as well. There's your story right there.' He stared straight at me, and for a second he looked exactly like the smug, self-satisfied prick I'd once thought he was.

'I have every confidence in you, Alex. But, well, not everyone else might.'

'Meaning?' I tried to keep my voice from breaking. I failed.

He shook his head, like I was a child, like he was disappointed in me. And then the sucker punch.

'I told them you'd find a place with a story, something unresolved, some tension. They wouldn't have given you the money if I hadn't.'

I couldn't afford to have the project pulled, and anyway, the image of Zoe must've had tiny hooks: it snagged me, got

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under my skin. When I closed my eyes I saw Daisy, too, the dead girl. She was reaching out, telling me I was the only one who could help. And yes, I admit it, when I thought about it there was a tiny rush of pride, like hot metal. Maybe I could be the one to help her find peace. I rang Dan the next morning.

'I've decided,' I said. 'Blackwood Bay it is.'

He was delighted, and we spent the next couple of weeks making the arrangements and getting the website up and running. Jess found someone local – Gavin, who ran the film club there – to help and went up in early October. They organised a meeting in the village hall, just before a showing. She explained the project, said it was a portrait of life in a small town, all very light-hearted. No one was out to get anyone.

The clips began to arrive. Slowly at first, just a trickle, but then, when people saw that their friends and neighbours had been filming, more came in. Mostly they were of everyday life – kids playing, people cooking, a party in a back garden. There were lots of pets, views of the cliffs. A few dick pics, yes, but I deleted those. Scenes in the pub, a shortish guy pushing a boat out on to the water. All good background. Nothing of Daisy or Zoe, no mention at all, and while I wavered between relief and disappointment, Dan came down squarely on the latter, as did Anna, who, he reminded me, held the chequebook.

'There's only one thing for it,' he told me. 'You'll have to go up there yourself. See what you can dig up, okay?'

So here I am, sitting in a car on the way to Blackwood Bay; a place I never wanted to go, to explore a story I never wanted to look at. Yet somehow I don't mind. Maybe it will make for a better film, after all.

Gavin is still talking. I tune back in.

'Where you staying?'

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'A cottage,' I say. 'Hope Lane?'

'Oh, Monica's place?' he says. 'Lovely. I can't take you down there, though. Road's too steep.'

'I know,' I say, too quickly, before I remember I'm not supposed to be familiar with the area. 'Monica's already warned me. If you drop me at the top, I can walk down.'

'Okay,' he says, and we drive on. The air gets heavier the closer we get, suffocating. I fight it, glancing at Gavin as I do, but he's oblivious, he looks perfectly happy. He pulls into the car park and shuts off the engine.

I stare out into the night. A penumbra of light shines around the lamps and the streets are empty: no sign of life at all, not even a dog or a fox rooting at the litter bins. As I get out of the car and gather my things I feel as if I'm about to descend into the past. I can see the smugglers, oilskins damp and glistening, heaving barrels of rum or tobacco, heading for the lost tunnels that are rumoured to connect the cellars in a vast, arterial network. Legend has it that it was once possible to smuggle contraband from sea level all the way up to the clifftop without it ever seeing the light of day and, looking now, I find myself believing it.

'You okay?'

'Fine,' I say, my eyes adjusting to the gloom. A few lights are on in the houses below, but not many.

'I'll give you a hand with your bags.'

For a moment, I think he's going to invite me for a drink later, or to dinner, and it occurs to me that maybe I'd like him to. He seems a nice guy and it'd be good to have a friend here.

'Okay.'

We get out. I look north, towards the grassy peninsula that extends out into the water, rising as it does to a shallow cliff. Not much is visible in the dark, but there's a light on in the distant house at its very edge.

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'What's that light?' I say.

'Oh, that's The Rocks.' He pauses. 'Bluff House.'

The words echo. It's been so long, I'd forgotten there was even a house there. It's as if my mind has erased it from the narrative.

'Bluff House?'

He looks at me, as if about to say something else, but then just smiles self-consciously. 'We'd better get going.'

I collect my things and we begin our descent. We fall into silence as we go: the quiet is enveloping, inhibiting; even the sound of our footsteps is deadened by the snow, shrunk to a soft crunch. Nothing is quite as I remember it; it's as if I'm seeing it through a filter, a distorting prism. The road seems to narrow further with each step, and as it becomes increasingly steep I notice a rusted handrail by the side of the road. I grip it as I go down. I know the sea is out there, ahead and below us, there's that familiar smell, of oil and seaweed, salty and sulphurous. We pass darkened cottages and empty cafés, lonely shops shuttered for the night. Here and there, footpaths and alleyways begin to appear, springing off from the main lane at improbable angles, but they're unlit and disappear into inky pockets of darkness. I wonder who might be lurking, and I'm glad I'm not alone.

I'm spooked, that's all. Being here, miles from home. Stuck without a car, without friends. Thinking about Daisy and Zoe; one dead, the other missing. I watch Gavin and wonder who sent Dan the postcard. Could it have been him? But how could he have known we were looking for a location? How could anyone?

Suddenly, Gavin stops.

'Well, this is me.' He points towards an alleyway a little further down Slate Road. 'You know where you're going?'

'Yes, thanks. I looked on the map.'

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