

## PATRICK

### Chapter Eight

#### Cinema

I found the video while I was trying to repack the boxes in the work room.

The film starts with a window, black and rain pocked. As the camera pulls back, patchwork curtains bracket the shot with squares of discordant colour and you can see the reflection of the room in the glass: a figure headed and armed with an old-fashioned video camera, big enough for a television studio, backing away from himself; two battered-looking sofas pushed back against the walls; a leafy pot plant; a floor lamp; the drab unreflective screen of an expensive TV set. Next to the pot plant, under the lamp, on the corner of one of the sofas, a girl is sitting. She leans to grind the end of a joint into the pot plant's roots. There is no sound to the recording, but you can see that she is laughing. There's another girl in the doorway, a silhouette against the light coming from the next room, but your eyes are drawn to the laughing one. The seated blonde with her mouth full of smoke.

It's irritating when the camera swings to meet the face of the girl we're not interested in. This girl's hair is dark and you could, I suppose, call her pretty. The cameraman must have a bit of a thing for her, because the shot dips to take in the swing of her breasts under a loose cotton vest. She holds a hand up to the lens, smothering our view for a couple of seconds and then we see her face again.

She opens her mouth and we get a shot of near perfect teeth (marred only by a single amalgam filling, bitten into a back tooth) and the fleshy workings at the back of her throat. Screaming or singing. The camera ignores the dilemma and glances down to where the other girl, our girl, is sitting.

She is literally doubled over, folded neatly in the middle, laughter vibrating out of her, leaving her helpless. A hand reaches round from behind the camera to ruffle her hair and pull her face up to meet the lens. This is the best part. The pale oval of the girl's face is streaked with a red blush that reaches down to caress her throat and chest. There are tears in her eyes and her blonde hair has come loose from her ponytail to lie in sticky strands across her brow. She looks both glorious and horrific. The dark girl slides in next to her on the sofa and they embrace, pushing their heads close and pulling faces at the camera.

There is so much laughter in this room. The fuel of it: the fug of cannabis smoke and smeared bowls of half-empty wine glasses that sit ignored on the coffee table in front of the entwined women, do not negate the happiness and freedom of those few captured minutes that I watch, with Dad sleeping at my back, on a kitchen chair in the front room of the studio. This is a time before us, before we wrote ourselves into her story. Sarah and her friends playing together in a room I've never visited, except in this short film. It's all a lie. I know what it was really like; Sarah told me all about it.

## SARAH

### Chapter Nine

#### Manchester

A handful of grape hyacinths have joined the red tulips in the vase on the white painted iron mantelpiece. Sarah had neither gathered nor arranged these flowers; their company has been forced upon her. It was easier last week when the vase held only three bare branches that Lucy had collected on her walk home and the week before that when Neil snipped a collection of dead nettles from the patch in the yard and brought their gloomy blooms to sit above the Victorian fireplace. Spring will not stay outdoors where it belongs; Sarah's house mates insist on bringing it in to colour the living room. The window is open and she can hear Neil pushing the bins back and forth in the back yard, he's on the phone to his girlfriend again. Lucy's on the landline in the hallway reading numbers into the receiver. Sarah is surrounded. Her tea has gone cold and the birds are singing. It's a lovely day outside, as she's already been told.

She sits on a rented sofa in a rented house threading her fingers through the rings in the crochet throw that her mother made in the '70s. She watches the wool gather on her fingers: red and black and green and yellow. There's a photograph somewhere of her wrapped in its folds, five years old with a gap-toothed grin and her hair tied in pink ribbon. She was safe in that photograph:

cocooned in bright wool, unstartled by the camera's flash, knowing that arms were waiting to lift her, hold her.

The fear is back today and Sarah will not be going to work. She works in an embroidery shop, surrounded by silks and needles, printed patterns and canvases of different sizes and densities. Usually, she likes her job. Her mobile is sitting on the coffee table next to her cold tea, but she can't summon the energy to dial a number and fane an illness; to join Neil and Lucy in their happy chattering. This is the sixth day that she has sat here trying to imagine herself back in a childhood photograph. There is no family to run to now, just this friendly room where she comes to escape her friends.

'Hello you,' Neil comes in through the back door, snapping his mobile shut and brushing rain from his hair. 'It's just started to come down out there. Dawn says hi.'

He moves through to the tiny kitchenette which links the living room to the rest of the house via a doorless doorway. Sarah can hear him fussing by the sink, running water; shifting plates.

'No work today?'

'No.'

He drains a glass of water and stands there with the empty glass in his hand staring at her.

'You all right, Sarah?'

'Yes.'

'It's two o'clock in the afternoon you know?'

'Yes.'

‘And you’re still in your PJs.’

‘Yes.’

He shrugs and walks back though to the kitchen. She’s worried him.

They’ve started to notice her. It must be the weekend, usually this is a safe place to be; Sarah can sit and observe the latest flower arrangements without interruption, but now they are both here. She can hear Neil speaking to Lucy in the hallway. If she moved a little to the left she could probably see them through the kitchen door: two huddled figures bent on discussing her varied oddities. She should pull herself together, wash and change her clothes. Brave it out. She could make them all a cup of tea and offer to cook supper. She’d have to go shopping first; she has been living off the basic essentials that the household all share, but Lucy would lend her ten pounds if she asked. A list of possible actions line up in front of Sarah with the calls she should have made to work, the smiles she should have returned, the steps she should have taken. She sits on the sofa and gathers her fistfuls of wool. Not yet.

‘Sarah.’

She looks up. Lucy is standing in front of her. She looks freshly minted; brisk and clean. Neil’s standing behind her in the kitchen doorway. Backup.

‘It’s a lovely day outside.’

‘It’s raining.’

Lucy frowns at the window.

‘That’ll pass.’

Lucy is a teacher; she is used to being disobeyed, but she that doesn’t mean she likes it. She used to have a special voice for her students: her ‘teacher

voice', they would tease her about it. She used to say that it was like putting on a one-man show every hour on the hour, playing a role, but recently the 'teacher voice' has started to take over. Everyday after school she comes home and takes a short nap, cooks her dinner and takes it to her room where she works on her lesson plans. They're pinned up on her walls, a paper carapace from which she emerges in tailored shirts and black trouser suits. Miss Spencer, nothing to do with Lucy.

She starts to gather the cups and newspapers that have settled into place on the coffee table. Lucy tidying is not a good sign.

'How long has this been going on?'

'What?'

'This...'. She takes Sarah in with a wide gesture, her hands still full of the debris she has collected. Sarah catches Neil's flinch as Lucy moves. Did he expect Lucy to strike her? How far were they going to take this? 'How long have you been sitting here, doing nothing? Me and Neil have been trying to work it out. It seems like forever. You're not ill, are you?'

'I don't think so.'

'This is what I'm talking about, Sarah. You don't even know what's wrong. We all have down days, days when we'd rather not get up and go to work, but we still do it. You need to get out of this house and out of those clothes.'

Sarah closes her eyes. If she could just get some sleep.

'I've got some time now.'

Sarah opens her eyes. Lucy is turning to Neil now, they have some kind of plan that they are putting into action. Lucy's lines have been rehearsed and Sarah is powerless to stop the production.

'We should go out. Go for a walk, we haven't done that for ages. It will do you good.'

They put her coat on over her pyjamas and stuff her feet into trainers. Neil ties her laces for her, as if she's a child being dressed for an outing. Then her feet start to work, one foot in front of the other, out of the front door, stepping over the tree roots that vein the pavement which runs down their little side street. The cracks and swells in the tarmac are on display under the gloss of fresh rain.

There is rain in the air too, it washes against their faces and leaves them gasping. Sarah's feet are still working; she marvels at their dogged progress. Lucy and Neil are talking to each other, huddled deep in their raincoats. Sarah catches snatches of their conversation: Lucy telling stories about her class and Neil laughing over some shared memory. Sarah feels like a lunatic, stumbling alongside them, borne onward by her marching feet. Her head is busy, but confused. The rain gets into her eyes so that she has to squint and cold leaches past her cuffs, her waistband and her neckline, penetrating her flesh in a deep shiver. Her mouth forms a word and drops it into the sharp wind that rattles their raincoats.

'What did you say?' Lucy pulls her hood to one side and steps closer to Sarah.

'Cold. I'm cold.'

'Yes, it is chilly and it was so lovely earlier on.'

'You told me.'

'What?'

They keep walking, taking the turn onto the main road. Sarah can no longer hear the other two; she concentrates on the cars ripping through the rain. Tear after tear. She doesn't want to be seen. She digs her hands into her pockets and lowers her head so that the hood slips down over her face. There's a piece of pencil in one of her pockets; she works it between her fingers. Here is the old defence. She scribbles onto her pocket's lining. Unable to watch the pencil's progress, the letters lurch and scabble, words overlap to form nothing more than a muddy scrawl. But there is comfort in the action. She thinks of her other missives hidden in secret places around the rented house: the underside of the cutlery drawer became a canvas; she delivered scraps of paper through a tear in the dark green sofa and spent the past six days nesting on their familiar crunch; before she'd stopped going into work, she'd made use of the old till rolls, winding out the unspent paper and printing her words along the remaining length before tossing it into the bin; she'd even crept into Lucy's room whilst she was away at work to vandalise the backs of her lesson plans. This was how her fear found its voice. This was Sarah's therapy. It wasn't helping much.

'Sarah!'

They were talking to her. She was caught again.

'Do you want anything?' Lucy spelt the words out, stretching her mouth, as if Sarah was an idiot.

They were at the shops. Sarah was out of the house and standing on the high street. Her feet were still, heavy blocks holding her in place.

'I need to go home.'

'Jesus, Sarah, we just got here. It'll only take a couple of minutes and I can wait with you if you want. Neil, you don't mind going in by yourself, do you?'

'It's all right. I can wait by myself.'

Lucy and Neil duck into the shop, taking Sarah's request for cigarettes with them. She has no money left to offer them, but they don't mention it. Neil stopped just before he went in to lay a hand on Sarah's arm and ask if she was sure that she would be OK. They are being kind. Sarah turns the pencil over in her pocket and digs the lead into the pad of her thumb; the blunt point offers nothing more than a dull irritation. They are being so kind. The rain grows more insistent, sizzling and spitting on the roofs of the parked cars. Sarah turns to the postcards tacked to the shop window, reading the lists of flatmates required, old furniture needing new homes and cats missing from theirs. She hides her face against the glass, her back to the road. She hopes that she will not be seen.