

THIS
BOY

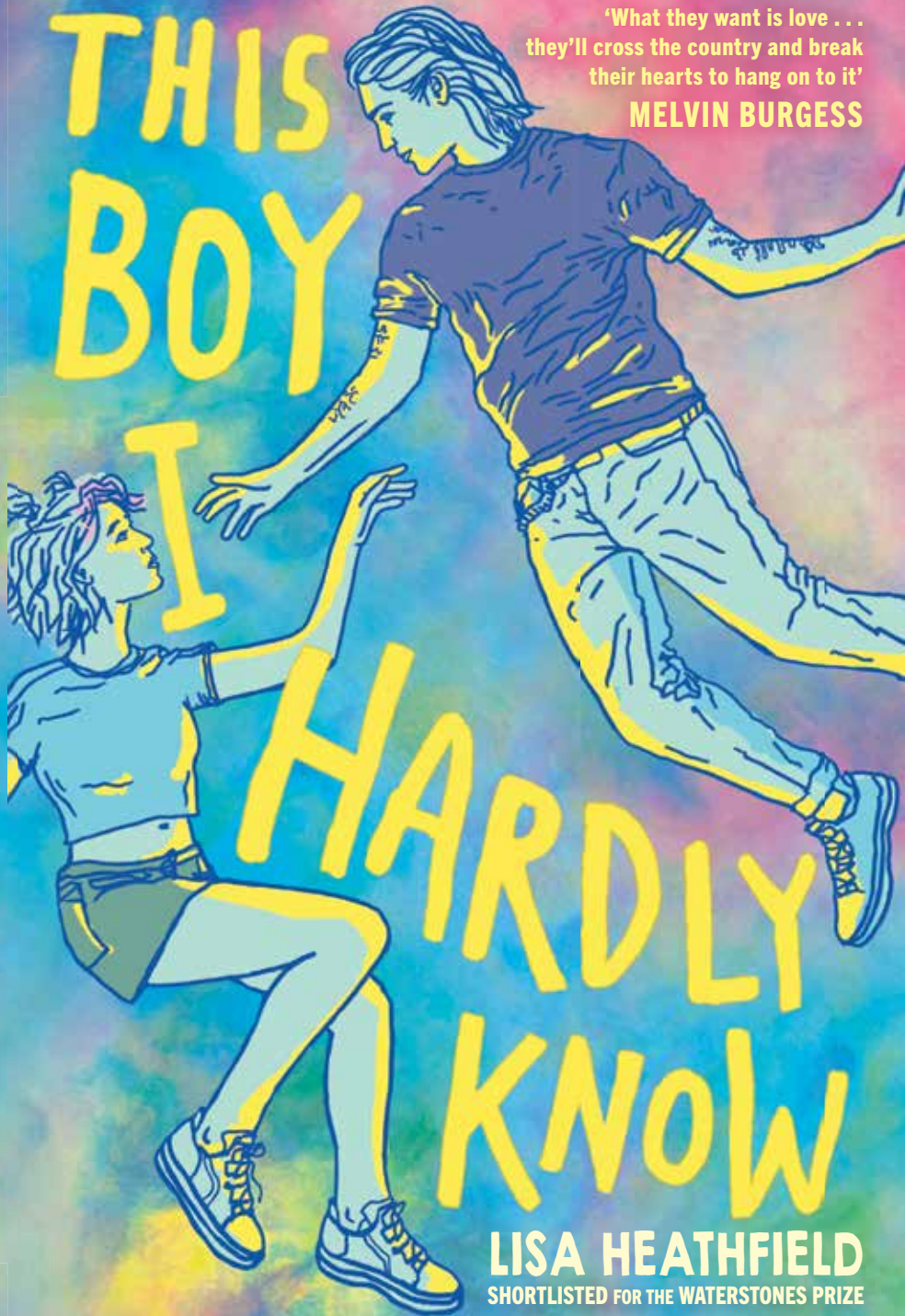
'What they want is love ...
they'll cross the country and break
their hearts to hang on to it'

MELVIN BURGESS

I
HARDLY
KNOW

LISA HEATHFIELD

SHORTLISTED FOR THE WATERSTONES PRIZE



Praise for *This Boy I Hardly Know*

‘This is one of those rare books that shines a light on a world we don’t often see – the lives of children in care.

Dusty’s story is raw, real, and full of heart, showing just how powerful love and loyalty can be when the odds are stacked against you’

CIARA SMYTH

‘What Dusty and Cooper want is love. They’ll do anything to find it, and once found, they’ll cross the country and break their hearts to hang on to it’

MELVIN BURGESS

‘Packed with colour and burning with life’s force . . .
Lisa Heathfield’s brilliant protagonist is full of urgent love, complex betrayals, and ferocious secrets’

LUKE PALMER

‘Dusty and Cooper have my heart entirely.
How do we live in a world where such precious lives are trampled so brutally?’

LOUISA REID

Other books by Lisa Heathfield

Seed

Paper Butterflies

Flight of a Starling

I am Not a Number

Such Pretty Things

Lisa Heathfield's YA novels have all won or been shortlisted for awards, including the Waterstones Children's Book Prize (twice), the YA Book Prize, the Virginia Reader's Choice Award, the North East Teen Award, the Fabulous Book Award, the Leeds Book Award, the Concorde Book Award, the Southern Schools Book Award and the GDST Award.

Having worked in a school for students with mental health challenges and also a residential children's home, Lisa now teaches teens who are unable to be in school for a variety of reasons. She lives in Brighton, UK, with her husband and three sons.

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For every child in the care
system – this book is for you.

Chapter One

There's a boy I don't know in my bedroom. I thought that sneaking him in would make me feel like I'm in charge of my life, but this Joe person doesn't look as fit as when I met him at the bus stop earlier. Plus, he's definitely been drinking.

'We've got to be quiet,' I tell him, because my sister is sleeping next door.

He stumbles into the cupboard, reaching into his hoodie pocket to bring out a bottle of vodka.

'Want some?' he asks.

I don't feel threatened by him or anything, I kind of just wish that he wasn't here. But I take the bottle and have a gulp that I swear rips the skin off my tonsils. We're both laughing as I cough and when he smiles, he's not as bad as I thought.

'What's all this?' he asks, going to my desk.

'My paints,' I say. I want to tell him that art is the one

subject I'm good at, that I'm going to be studying it for A level next term, but I get the feeling Joe wouldn't be that interested.

He picks up one of the tubes and squeezes loads on to the waiting piece of paper. He flattens his hand into it and then holds it up to me.

'Face paints,' he laughs.

I dodge his hand and press my own into the paint. It feels like when Poppy and I walked barefoot in the mud last winter. It was the best feeling, until our foster carer gave us hell for walking our footprints across her floor, when it wasn't even carpet and the wood washed clean as if we'd never been there.

Joe falls, his hand flat to the pristine wall.

'Shit,' I say. He's left a handprint of red paint.

'It looks cool,' he says.

'They're going to kill me.'

'For making a pretty picture?' Joe puts his hand on the wall again, the print fainter this time. 'I'm making a flower.'

I pull him away, laughing, but the door opens and my foster carer is standing there. I wish Poppy could see her face, because it's almost worth the trouble I'm going to be in.

'What the hell is going on?' she asks.

Joe stands straight, hiding the bottle of vodka behind his back.

'Sorry, Dusty's mum,' he says.

'She's not my mum,' I correct him. And feel the tiniest

bit bad, because Sue looks like she's swallowed a whole lemon.

'But this is my home,' she tells Joe. 'And you need to leave.' She steps back, her arm pointing in the direction of the front door.

'Fair enough,' Joe says, turning to me. 'See you around.' And he does a ridiculous salute with his hand that's smeared with the red paint.

I watch him disappear from my room and more than anything I feel relieved, even though the anger simmering from Sue is almost at boiling point. She stares at me and I keep my expression blank.

'None of this is OK, Dusty,' she says.

I don't reply.

'You thought you could just bring someone into our home without asking us? At this time of night?'

'I'm going to bed now,' I say.

'You should've been in bed ages ago,' she says.

'Well, I wasn't,' I reply and turn my back on her and pray that she doesn't notice the paint on the wall before she goes.

Chapter Two

Sue hasn't said anything about Joe all morning and I'm just waiting for the bomb to go off. I can tell she's stressed by the way her shoulders are too high, her knuckles white as she chops veg for later. I wish I could tell her to just leave Poppy and me to eat our lunch in peace, without her listening in on our conversation.

I nudge my sister. 'Prim?' It's not her name, but she once bought me Katniss socks, just because she wanted to buy them for me, and that hurts my heart in a whole new way. 'Want to go to the beach after?'

'To swim?' she asks.

'If you want,' I tell her.

She has a bit of ketchup on the side of her mouth and I should tell her to wipe it away. She'd have ketchup with everything if she could, but Sue decides what few meals she's allowed it. Poppy slides her finger through the last smear of sauce on her empty plate, squints at it on her skin,

before licking her finger clean. That's heaven right there for her. If I had it my way, she'd be allowed ketchup every day, which is why I wish I could force Sue's whole head into the toilet and pull the flush.

Poppy and I get up and clear away our plates, stacking them in the dishwasher. I swear Sue steps away from me as if I'm contagious.

Not all houses have been this bad. But it's almost better when you hate it, because when they let you down, the pain is easier to patch up. When we had to leave Guy and Chris, it hurt so much I thought I'd never be able to breathe normally again.

Poppy and I sit with our feet in the sand, pushing our toes deeper until we hit the cold bit. Her arms have got freckles that I'm sure weren't there before and I wonder if I should've brought sun cream. They did predict a heatwave, but I didn't think it'd be warm enough to burn.

'Would you rather,' Poppy says, 'have a giraffe's tongue forever, or a baboon's butt?'

I look at her, with that glint in her eye that no one else has, yet her face so serious that she might as well have just asked me if I know how deep the ocean is.

'Baboon's bum,' I say.

'You serious?' Poppy raises one eyebrow in a way that I can't do. 'Like all red and raw?'

'How many people are going to want to kiss me if I have

a tongue as long as a giraffe's?' I ask her, straightening my dyed-pink fringe.

'How many people want to kiss you in any case?' she laughs.

I slap her arm, guilt springing that it's harder than I meant.

'Would you rather wipe Snarky Sue's arse,' I say.

'I'm never going anywhere near Salty Sue's butt-cheeks.' Poppy pulls a face that makes me laugh so hard that I can hardly carry on.

'Or pick straws to do a dare?' I say.

'We haven't got any straws.'

'Metaphorically,' I say.

'Big word,' Poppy says.

'From a big sister who's got big exams soon.' It's too weird that after them I'll be leaving school, going to college to study art, and I don't even know what else. I scoop up a handful of sand and hold it behind my back, transferring the sand from one palm to the next. 'If you get the sand, you do the dare.'

I hold out my hands in front of me, edging the empty one further forward in a double-bluff. Poppy's fingers hover above it and touch down on my knuckles.

'Sure?' I ask her.

'Yes.' She doesn't hesitate.

'What's the dare going to be?' I ask her.

'Show me first.'

'So you'll make it worse if it's me?'

‘Of course,’ she says and I uncurl my left hand and there’s not a grain in my palm. ‘That’s what I’m talking about.’ She slaps the sand either side of her.

‘You’re some kind of gangster now?’ I laugh.

She’s looking around the beach. ‘That guy. The one with the blue shorts.’ She points to a group of boys kicking a ball. ‘Go up and ask him if he’s Jude Bellingham. But you’ve got to do it really seriously.’

‘I really don’t want to do that,’ I say.

‘You really don’t have a choice.’

‘I’ll buy you an ice cream instead,’ I tell her.

There’s a moment’s pause.

‘Nope,’ Poppy says.

‘You’re brutal,’ I tell her.

‘I learned it from the best.’

I shake my head but know the rules. The day that one of us refuses, it’s game over. Literally. We made a pact that if we ever back out, the bad luck will fall. And we’ve had enough bad luck in our life to fill a small country.

I stand up and wipe the sand from my denim shorts, ruffle my fringe and tighten the inch-long ponytails that stick straight up on my head, my insect antennae.

‘You’re seriously set on humiliating me?’ I ask, pulling my bra strap straight, but it just slips off my shoulder again.

‘Do it properly,’ Poppy says, her face serious again. ‘He’s got to totally believe that you think he’s Bellingham. And then you’ve got to kick the ball away.’

‘You’re cruel,’ I tell her.

‘But brilliant.’ She smiles and her whole face lights up. She’s like a little angel sitting there.

‘A brilliant demon,’ I say, walking away from her.

The boys must see me approaching, because they start doing that thing when they know girls are watching, they get plugged into the showing-off socket. One of them does a long hog of the ball, bluffing a kick, before messing up completely and the rest of them start shouting at him.

I’m getting closer and I wish I wasn’t doing this. I look back to where Poppy sits alone on the sand. She’s smiling at me and I think that if this is going to make her happy, then so be it.

I barge into the middle of the group, way more aggressively than I mean to.

‘Are you Jude Bellingham?’ I ask the boy in the blue shorts. He stops the football dead with his foot.

‘What?’ He looks genuinely confused and I feel a bit bad because he’s definitely starting to blush.

‘You look like him,’ I say. ‘That’s all.’

And I know it’s now or never for the second part of the dare, so I kick at the football and the boy topples, because he was leaning on it, and then I’m booting the ball and running to catch up with it.

I can’t turn to look at Poppy at the same time, but I know she’ll be loving this bit of improvisation, so I carry on, even when the Bellingham boy starts to tackle me.

We're both laughing and when he kicks the football high in an arc into the sea, I don't hesitate to charge after it, as though it's the most normal thing in the world. He splashes me and I'm knee-deep and it's freezing and I'm trying to run to the ball, but it's like wading through slushed ice. He's got more chance of getting it than me, so I whip up a ton of water and cover him.

'You win,' he says, his palms towards me.

His T-shirt is clinging to his chest now and it shows how toned his arms are. He actually isn't that bad-looking either. I realise my own T-shirt is soaking too, so I pull at the hem to bag it out a bit, but think that perhaps I quite like the way it makes my boobs look.

'What's your name?' he asks me, the sea swirling round his legs.

'Dusty,' I tell him.

'I'm Jude,' he says. 'Bellingham.' And he laughs and dives towards the football, managing to grab it, standing up again, flicking his hair in a way that makes me think I wouldn't mind kissing him, right here in the sea.

'You local?' he asks.

'Yeah.' I won't tell him that it's not my home, though. 'You?'

'Carnaby Avenue,' he says. 'Number thirty-four.'

I'm thinking he wants me to remember it and I smile at him and wonder if I'll have the courage to go and knock on his door.

‘You don’t go to Bridlington School?’ he asks.

‘No. Headlands,’ I tell him.

‘Year Twelve?’ he asks.

I could pretend I’m older, but I don’t. ‘Year Eleven.’

I look back to see Poppy’s reaction to this outcome of the dare, but she’s gone. I shield the sun from my eyes and I’m sure I’m looking at the spot where I left her, but she’s not there.

‘You OK?’ the boy asks me.

‘I can’t see my sister,’ I say, moving away from him.

‘Can I have your number?’ he asks, but suddenly I don’t care about anything, other than the fact that the place on the sand where Poppy should be is empty.

I’m out of the sea and walking up the beach and I want to call her name, but she’ll be embarrassed if everyone looks. My sliders are here where I left them. And there’s a dip in the sand where Poppy was sitting. I’m spinning round, thinking she’s playing with me, but I can’t see her. She’s not anywhere.

I grab my sliders and I’m running now, heading towards the toilets, because that’s got to be where she’s gone. They’re in a grey block set back from the beach and I run in and bang on every closed metal door.

‘Poppy?’ I shout.

A woman at the sink stares at me in the mirror.

‘Did you see a girl come in here?’ I ask her. ‘She’s wearing a white T-shirt and denim cut-offs. She’s got brown hair.’ I’m trying to keep my voice steady.

‘How old is she?’ the woman asks.

But there’s no point explaining, because if I tell her that Poppy is twelve, she’ll think she’s old enough to be safe, when she’s not.

The men’s toilets stink and I can’t go in, but I shout my sister’s name as close as I can get. There’s no one here, no one around. Only graffiti on a wall that’s too smudged to read.

A much older man comes out.

‘Is there a girl in there?’ I ask him.

‘Not that I saw,’ he says. ‘Have you tried phoning her?’ And he just walks away. And I haven’t got my phone because I never bring it to the beach, where the only person I ever want to speak to is Poppy.

I run back down to the sand, looking at every person, every gap between them. I go all the way to the shore and scan the people in the sea, but none of them are her.

All I can hear is my heart. It’s cracking in two. Because I see it in my mind and I try to stop it, but I think of the police coming here and Poppy being gone, really gone and it’s all my fault.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and the relief is like being flooded in light, because it’ll be Poppy, laughing. So I turn, but it’s not her. It’s the boy with the football.

‘Did you find your sister?’ he asks me.

‘Does it look like I have?’ I shout and he looks at me as if I’m mad and I don’t care that I’m running away from

him and I don't care that I'm still carrying my sliders, so I'm barefoot on the pavement.

Poppy will be back at the house, in her room, I know she will, thinking it's funny, that this was all part of her plan. But I can't get there fast enough and it's like I'm in one of those dreams where fog is pushing me back.

I'm in our street and the house is there. I slow down and look behind me, because perhaps Poppy has been following and she's going to jump-scare me. But the road is empty.

Poppy?

Her name echoes inside me, finding its way to the dark places where I usually hide my fear.

I open the front door into the silent hallway and try not to run along the corridor. Poppy's door is closed and I open it into an empty room. I look in her cupboard and I'm kneeling to see beneath her bed and there's a sound behind me.

'Where's Poppy?' Sue asks me.

I stand up and walk past her, into my room, but she follows me and won't let me close the door.

'Dusty?' she says.

I can't take on her worry when there's not enough air for me. I pick up my phone from the desk.

'Where is she?' she asks.

'I'm finding out.' I want to hurl the phone at her, but all my focus has to be on pressing in Poppy's number.

It rings. I stare at the curtains. At the repeat patterns

there, the squares overlapping, and the phone keeps on ringing.

‘Hello?’ she answers.

‘Poppy?’

A million dying moths lift from my brain.

‘Where did you go?’ she asks me.

‘Where did *I* go?’ I want to kill her and hug her all in the same moment. ‘You disappeared.’ My voice is weird and quiet.

‘I went to get you an ice cream,’ she says. ‘But it’s melted now.’

I think of my sister standing there in the sun, ice cream dripping down a cone, down her thumb. Waiting for me.

‘I couldn’t love you more,’ I tell her and I don’t care that Sue hears it all.

They’ve taken my paints. All of them. Simon and Sue were angrier than I’ve ever seen them, with Simon shouting about how irresponsible I am and Sue’s mouth clamped shut into a thin line. And then they took my paints, leaving a big gap on my desk where they should be.

I sit on my bed, with my duvet over my legs and look at the handprints Joe left on the wall. In the shadows, the pattern looks like the head of one of those creatures in *Stranger Things*. The ones that open up like some insane Venus flytrap.

Not having my paints with me does something weird

to my stomach. It hollows it, then fills it with drying clay. I clench my hands and dig my nails into my palms. *Breathe, Dusty*. I can feel rage starting, pinpricks beneath my skin, hundreds of them that melt and swim into my bloodstream. I just want my paints. I need to see their colours, create something from nothing. It's the only thing that really calms me, that takes me to a different place where I can escape. But Simon and Sue have taken them from me, so I can't.

I remember when Poppy and I had been here only a few weeks and things were going OK and I was desperate to stay, because I was with my sister in a house with sofas and a TV and I had my own duvet that Sue cleaned. And she made food that was fine and I was allowed to lie in the bath as long as I wanted. So I painted these foster carers a picture of their house and I knew it was good. I used a technique we'd been learning in school, so it looked a mixture between realistic, but modernist too. Simon didn't say much when I gave it to them, but Sue seemed to love it and I thought she might frame it, or at least put it on the fridge, as Jo used to do in house number four, when I was ten. But I found it in the recycling. And there's not a word in the dictionary to describe the feeling I had in me when I saw it there.

There are plenty of words for how I feel now, though, and none of them are pretty. I get up and it takes all my willpower not to smash the room to pieces. I breathe from the pit of my stomach in the way that Jen, my social worker,

told me I have to, and I creep out of the bedroom to the only place that'll calm me down.

In the utility room, next to the washing machine, Rex is curled in his basket, taking up all the space. He looks at me, his tail thumping. It's cold lying on the floor, but I rest my head on him and feel his heartbeat beneath his fur. It helps slow my own heart. It's the one place where I feel safe to cry.

Chapter Three

There's no getting around the fact that school is an endurance test. Poppy and I have been shifted from place to place so often that I don't bother trying to make friends any more and I put on a pretty convincing exterior that I don't care. I always tell myself on day one to keep looking forward, never at the ground. Don't freak out at sudden noises. Ignore the deliberate shoves and keep my expression blank as I get the inevitable *sweep you into the trash, Dusty*.

It's no surprise when I'm yanked by the elbow into the toilets. And no surprise that it's Tessa B doing the yanking. A bit more of a surprise to see so many people crammed in here, including boys, surrounding a girl called Janey. She looks at me as if begging to get her away, but there's no chance in hell I'll manage that.

'What do you want this time?' I ask Tessa. I sound confident, but my stomach has evaporated and I'm not sure my legs are going to keep me standing.

‘You two are going to kiss,’ Tessa says and there’s sniggering in the crowd.

I reply to Tessa with a stare that I’m hoping will summon every damn snake from the underworld to writhe up and drag her down.

People are holding their phones ready, obscuring their faces, waiting to record the moment that two Year 11 outcasts were forced together.

I shrug. ‘I’d prefer to kiss her than any of you freaks.’

Tessa grabs the front of my shirt, pulling me towards her. ‘Who are you calling a freak?’

I stare into her eyes. ‘Your breath stinks,’ I tell her. It causes chaos among the boys.

Tessa’s cheeks blush pink beneath her foundation. She shoves me towards Janey.

‘Do it,’ she says. ‘Now.’

Janey looks like she’s going to cry. Something tells me that she’s never kissed anyone before, as she usually scuttles around in the shadows. I know exactly why they’ve picked us two.

‘You want to keep your glasses on, or off?’ I ask her.

‘On,’ she whispers.

‘You’ll be fine,’ I tell her. ‘At least I’m not halitosis Tessa.’ I smile and before Tessa has time to grab me again, I step closer to Janey and kiss her. I’ve never kissed a girl and her lips feel a bit different, softer. It’d be nice if I couldn’t feel her shaking so much. I keep my eyes closed, but know that cameras are immortalising the moment.

I run my hand down Janey's arm until we're linking fingers and I stop kissing her.

'That was good,' I say and I mean it. I pull her with me through the crowd, not rushing, pretending that I'm cool with all of this.

Outside the door, with a few phones still on us, I squeeze Janey's hand and lean towards her ear.

'You're more beautiful than any one of them,' I tell her.

If I had longer hair, I'd fling it over my shoulder, but still I walk away giving the same attitude. That I'm invincible, that they can't touch me. I don't let on that I can feel the claws of every single one of them scraping away at my fragile soul.

There's a knock on the maths room door. Sir stops talking, hand mid-motion and we all look to where Miss Mason comes in, her shoes clacking on the floor. I'm surprised she doesn't feel self-conscious with that sound following her around all day. She says something to sir and he nods and it's definitely my direction he's looking in.

Miss Mason is coming towards me, her noisy shoes mimicking my heart. She must've seen the videos of me and Janey. But I don't think there are rules about kissing in break time?

She stops by my table and has a weird smile on. Great, so all the staff are laughing at me too.

'Can you gather your things and come with me?' she asks.

As if I have a choice. I'm seeing my hands pick up my

pen and chuck it into my bag, along with my maths book. I'm trying to pretend that I'm not shaking as I do up the zip and swing the bag over my shoulder and follow Miss Mason between the tables.

'So long, suckers,' I say. I think I'll turn and flip them all the finger, but sir is about the only teacher I like and I don't want him to see me do it.

It's always weird being out of lessons when the corridors are empty. It feels a bit like being underwater, that none of the air sits quite right. I wonder how I could catch the feeling in a painting. I calm myself by thinking about how I could make it look like mist. Or perhaps it wouldn't need that, perhaps just emptiness would do it.

We walk past Poppy's tutor room and although she wouldn't be in there now, it suddenly hits me.

'Is something wrong with Poppy?' I stop as I ask it. I won't be moving until I know she's OK.

'No,' Miss Mason says. 'Poppy is absolutely fine.'

I start walking again. Poppy will definitely see the footage of me and Janey. She won't mind me kissing her, but she'll hate that I was forced to do it. Katniss would've whipped out a crossbow and decimated them all.

We go up some stairs and Miss Mason opens the door to the small pastoral room.

'After you,' she says. I go inside, when everything is telling me to run the other way. Jen, my social worker, is sitting on one of the chairs. It takes me a moment to

figure out it's really her, because she never comes here. And I feel a familiar rush of shame. Of course Miss Mason knows I'm in care, but having my social worker in front of us completely confirms it.

'Dusty.' Jen's smile isn't the same as usual, but she gets up to hug me and it's familiar and for a spilt second I feel safe. But she lets go and I'm here, adrift in the middle of some ocean I don't think I want to be in. 'You can sit here.' She points to the comfiest-looking chair in the room, but instead I sit on the plastic one nearest me.

'Tessa B forced me to do it,' I say. But all this feels wrong for a kiss. Maybe Janey's mum has complained. But an even worse thought flares up. 'Is Janey OK? Has she done something?'

Jen glances up at Miss Mason. 'Janey?'

'Shall I leave you two for a bit?' Miss Mason asks.

'Thanks,' Jen says. 'We won't be long.'

We both watch Miss Mason leave. I should tell her that the hem of her skirt is coming down at the back, but she's shut the door and is gone.

'What's going on?' I ask.

Jen inhales deeper than I've ever seen her do before, letting the air out through puffed lips.

'Your foster carers phoned me. About the boy you had in your room.'

'Joe,' I say and have to swallow down a laugh. This isn't

about Poppy and it's not about Janey and I'm so flooded with relief that anything else I can cope with.

'Dusty, you had someone they didn't know in their home. You were drinking. And on top of it all, you smeared red paint all over their wall.'

'I didn't smear it,' I tell her.

'I've seen it,' Jen says. 'It's not OK.'

'You went to the house?'

'Your carers insist it showed malicious intent. That it's even something ritualistic.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I ask. 'It was handprints.'

'Made from what looked like blood.'

'Blood?' And now I do laugh. 'It was red paint.'

'We know that, but they felt that it symbolised something.'

'Are you joking me?'

I'm so close to telling her that Simon and Sue were probably too drunk to see it straight. That they've been drinking more and more since Poppy and I moved in, but we've never said, because we don't want to be moved on again and at least in this house we're never hungry.

'No, Dusty, I'm not joking you,' Jen says. 'They say you're behaving too irresponsibly. You left Poppy on the beach.'

'I didn't leave her there,' I say.

'You know you were on your final warning.'

'But no one really meant that, though.'

‘They did mean that. They’ve meant it for a long time. They’ve had enough.’

‘Enough?’ And there they are, the words that follow me everywhere. ‘Of me?’ I’m not good enough. I’m never good enough.

‘You’ve pushed them to this conclusion, Dusty.’

I’ve a sharp pain in my throat, but I scratch the back of my palm to make it go away.

‘They’re not nice to us,’ I tell her. ‘If they were nice, then I would be too.’

‘They’re entitled to be angry with you for sneaking someone into their home.’

‘There’s other stuff,’ I say.

‘Is this about you not being allowed the dog in your room at night?’ Jen asks. ‘That’s a perfectly normal request.’

I look at Jen and think about all the things I never told her, the little cruelties that add up. Simon sprinkling pepper all over Poppy’s comfort blanket, saying it was a joke. Tearing the last page out of the book she was reading. He gave it back to her, but by then the damage had already been done.

I look down at my lap, my leg shaking. I don’t need to keep my eyes forward for Jen, she knows the real me.

‘Dusty,’ she says, but I won’t look at her. If I can block her out, then I won’t hear the words that are coming next. ‘This placement has broken down.’

I nod and it’s not just my leg shaking now. My whole body is shivering, even though the room is hot.

‘They’re getting rid of us,’ I say. Like rubbish. Easily disposable.

‘They felt they had no choice.’

I can’t tell whether I feel bad for Poppy or not. Because of me she’s being uprooted again, but perhaps we’ll go to a better place.

Jen passes me the box of tissues, the top one pulled up like the wing of a dove. I shake my head. I don’t need them. I won’t cry.

‘I’ve packed up as much of your stuff as I could,’ she says. ‘If I’ve forgotten anything, I’ll easily get it to you.’

‘Why didn’t I pack myself?’ I ask, looking at her now.

‘They don’t want you back there.’

‘At all?’

‘At all,’ Jen repeats.

‘Not even to say goodbye?’

It feels like a drill is twisting deep into my heart.

‘I’m sorry, Dusty.’

‘But what about Rex? I can’t just never see him again.’
The drill slips and finds its way into my lungs.

Jen leans over and puts her hands on my knees.

‘It’ll be OK,’ she says.

OK? I want to scream it in her face, but the word is lost and I can’t find it. I can’t find anything, apart from tiny gasps of air.

‘I’ve managed to find a place for you,’ Jen says. ‘It wasn’t easy, but we’ve been really lucky.’

Lucky?

My brain is smoke.

‘It’s difficult to find somewhere for sixteen-year-olds, as you know.’

‘Especially when there are two of us.’ I know how this works. It’s written behind my eyelids to step into my dreams every night.

Jen looks like I’ve slapped her. She literally winces.

‘Poppy is going to stay where she is for a while,’ she says. ‘It’ll only be you who’s moving.’

‘Well, that’s not happening,’ I say. That’s a definite. Jen knows that Poppy and I don’t get separated, ever.

‘Your foster carers don’t have a problem with Poppy,’ Jen tells me. ‘They say that you’re the disruptive one.’

I stare at her. She’s narrowed me down to that one word. Disruptive. Forget that I can be funny, that I help clean, that I walk Rex and that I’m practically a mum for Poppy. Forget that I endure all their nasty shit. I’m *disruptive*. Kick her out. Move on.

‘Poppy isn’t staying there without me,’ I say.

‘That is what’s going to happen for the moment,’ Jen tells me.

‘No,’ I say. ‘It’s not.’

Jen takes her hands from my knees. ‘There’s no choice in this, Dusty.’

‘They’re not good people.’ I’m the one leaning forward now. ‘Poppy isn’t safe there without me.’

‘We’ve never been concerned about either of your safety in that home.’

‘Because I never tell you what they do.’

Jen’s face doesn’t give away any of her thoughts. ‘You’ve told me plenty of times. But not getting to watch what you want is not enough to get them struck off the register.’

I think again of what I didn’t tell her. Like when Simon thought it was funny to force Poppy to watch the worst horror movie when she was only ten. And once, when they were annoyed with me, they locked me in the kitchen for ages and I smashed every piece of their china. And I never said, because I was always so scared that they’d separate us.

‘You can’t do this,’ I say.

‘I’m afraid we can,’ Jen says. ‘Believe me, it’s the last thing I want to do, but there are no other options.’

‘Why can’t Poppy come with me to this new place?’

‘There’s no space for her. We were lucky to find anything at such short notice. It’s taken a lot of phone calls and wrangling.’

As if she’s doing me a favour.

‘Well, I’m sorry for the inconvenience,’ I say.

‘You’re never an inconvenience, Dusty,’ Jen says. ‘You’ve just got to try harder to control yourself when things don’t go your way.’

I can’t look at her any more. Instead, I stare out of the window. It was sunny this morning, but now the sky is the colour of ash.

‘I’m going to come with you, to settle you in,’ Jen says.

‘Now?’

‘Yes. I’ve got your clothes and everything in the car.’

‘I need to tell Poppy what’s going on,’ I say.

‘I discussed that with my supervisor,’ Jen says. ‘We both made the decision that wouldn’t be in Poppy’s best interest.’

‘I’m the only one who knows what my sister’s best interests are.’ The ash clouds from outside have seeped into the room and into my mouth.

‘She’d find it too much to process,’ Jen says. ‘It’d be unfair for her in a school setting.’

‘Then take us out of the school setting,’ I say. ‘We can go to the park. I can explain to her what’s going on there.’

‘Leave us to explain it,’ Jen says. ‘And hopefully tonight you can speak to her.’

I think of Poppy in Sue and Simon’s house without me, curled on the sofa, the phone to her ear.

When I woke up this morning, I had no idea that the end of the world was coming.

‘I need to see her,’ I say.

‘It would be too difficult for her,’ Jen says. ‘She can either be told later in the safety of her home, or we can pull her out of lessons now, with the potential of a traumatic scene that other students will see. We both know that’s not the best option.’

I feel like I’m in quicksand and it’s swallowing me whole.

Jen stands, but I can’t move. She reaches for my hand,

but I won't take it and her fingers circle my wrist so she can pull me up. She hugs me again, but it's so different this time. I'm caught in the jaws of a shark.

We go out and there's no sign of Miss Mason.

We go down the stairs and I know that somewhere in this building there's my sister. She'll be sitting there, her shirt tucked in, leaning over her work, trying her best. I always tell her to just try her best.

I think I'm going to be sick. I swallow back bile, but my stomach cramps. I hold on to the banister and there's the sudden, deafening, end-of-lesson bell. There'll be students everywhere and so I let Jen lead me by the arm, out the double doors to Reception. She nods to Miss Clark, who sits behind the front desk and doesn't stop us to ask where we're going, to tell us we've got to sign out.

We're in the car park and Jen gets a key from her pocket and points it towards her small green car. She opens the passenger door and I see myself step inside. I don't run, I don't scream, I don't smash every window in the school. I sit here, my school rucksack by my feet, and Jen pulls the seat belt across me and clicks it into place.

Her car smells like a taxi and it makes me want to vomit.

She passes me a bag of sweets, but I don't touch them. They sit on my lap as Jen starts her car, reverses us out and drives me away.