

LUCAS

Kevin Brooks



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*For Susan –
for everything,
for ever.*



It was my dad's idea to write about Lucas and Angel and everything else that happened last summer. 'It won't make you feel any better,' he told me, 'it might even make things worse for a while. But you mustn't let the sadness die inside you. You have to give it some life. You have to . . .'

'Let it all out?'

He smiled. 'Something like that.'

'I don't know, Dad,' I sighed. 'I'm not sure I can write a story.'

'Ah, now, that's nonsense. Anyone can write a story. It's the easiest thing in the world. How else do you think I make a living out of it? All you have to do is tell the truth, tell it like it was.'

'But I don't know how it was, I don't know all the details, the facts—'

'Stories aren't facts, Cait, they're not details. Stories are *feelings*. You've got your feelings, haven't you?'

'Too many,' I said.

'Well, that's all you need.' He put his hand on mine. 'Cry yourself a story, love. It works. Believe me.'

So that's what I did, I cried myself a story.

And this is it.

Caitlin McCann

One

I first saw Lucas on a fine afternoon at the end of July last summer. Of course, I didn't know who he was then . . . in fact, come to think of it, I didn't even know *what* he was. All I could see from the back seat of the car was a green-clad creature padding along the Stand in a shimmering haze of heat; a slight and ragged figure with a mop of straw-blond hair and a way of walking – I smile when I think of it – a way of walking that whispered secrets to the air.

We were on our way back from the mainland.

My brother, Dominic, had been staying with friends in Norfolk since finishing his first year at university the month before, and he'd called that morning to let us know he was on his way home. His train was due in at five and he'd asked for a lift back from the station. Now, Dad normally hates being disturbed when he's writing (which is just about all the time), and he also hates having to go *anywhere*, but despite the usual sighs and moans – why can't the boy get a taxi? . . . what's wrong with the damn bus? – I could tell by the sparkle in his eyes that he was really looking forward to seeing Dominic again.

It wasn't that Dad was unhappy spending all of his time

with me, but with Dom away at university I think he felt there was something missing from his life. I'm sixteen (I was fifteen then), and Dad's forty-something. They're difficult ages – for both of us. Growing up, having to *be* grown up, girl things, man things, having to deal with emotions that neither of us understand . . . it's not easy. We can't always give each other what we need, no matter how hard we try, and sometimes it helps to have someone in the middle, someone to turn to when things get too much. If nothing else, Dominic had always been good at being someone in the middle.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason why Dad was looking forward to seeing him again – he was his son, after all. His boy. He was proud of him. He was worried about him. He loved him.

And so did I.

But for some reason I wasn't quite so excited about seeing him as Dad was. I don't know why. It wasn't that I didn't *want* to see him, because I did. It was just . . . I don't know.

Something didn't feel right.

'Are you ready, Cait?' Dad had asked, when it was time to go.

'Why don't you go on your own?' I'd suggested. 'You can have a "father and son" chat on the way back.'

'Ah, go on, he'll want to see his little sister.'

'Just a minute, then. I'll get Deefer.'

Dad's been terrified of driving on his own ever since

Mum was killed in a car crash ten years ago. I try to encourage him, but I haven't the heart to push it too hard.

So, anyway, we'd driven to the mainland and picked up Dominic from the station, and there we all were – the entire McCann family stuffed inside our decrepit old Fiesta, heading back to the island. Dad and Dominic in the front; me and Deefer in the back. (Deefer, by the way, is our dog. A big, black, foul-smelling thing, with a white streak over one eye and a head the size of an anvil. According to Dad, he's a cross between a skunk and a donkey.)

Dominic had been talking non-stop from the moment he'd slung his rucksack in the boot and got in the car. University this, university that, writers, books, magazines, parties, people, money, clubs, gigs . . . the only time he paused was to light a cigarette, which he did about every ten minutes. And when I say talking, I don't mean talking as in having a conversation, I mean talking as in jabbering like a mad thing. ' . . . I tell you, Dad, you wouldn't bloody believe it . . . they've actually got us studying *EastEnders*, for Christ's sake . . . something to do with *popular culture*, whatever the hell *that's* supposed to be . . . and another thing, the very first lecture, right? I'm just sitting there listening to this twatty old lecturer rambling on about sodding *Marxism* or something, minding my own business, when suddenly he stops and looks at me and says "why aren't you taking any notes?" I couldn't *believe* it. *Why aren't you taking notes?* Shit! I thought university was supposed to be about choice, you

know? The discipline of self-education, freedom to learn at your own pace . . .’

And on and on and on . . .

I didn’t like it.

The way he spoke, his constant swearing, the way he smoked his cigarette and waved his hands around like a phoney intellectual . . . it was embarrassing. It made me feel uncomfortable – that *wincing* kind of discomfort you feel when someone you like, someone close to you, suddenly starts acting like a complete idiot. And I didn’t like the way he was ignoring me, either. For all the attention I was getting I might as well not have been there. I felt like a stranger in my own car. It wasn’t until we’d almost reached the island that Dominic paused for breath, turned round, ruffled Deef’s head (‘Hey, Deef’) and finally spoke to me.

‘All right, kid? How’s it going?’

‘Hello, Dominic.’

‘What’s the matter? You look different. Christ, what’ve you done with your hair?’

‘I was going to ask you the same.’

He grinned and ran his fingers through his dyed-blond crop. ‘Like it?’

‘Very nice. Very beach bum. Is that how they all look in Liverpool?’

‘Well, they don’t look like *that*,’ he said, flicking at my hair. ‘Nice style. What’s it called – the Hedgehog?’

‘Hedgehogs have spikes,’ I told him, readjusting a ribbon. ‘These are plumes.’

‘*Plumes?* Yeah, right.’ He puffed on his cigarette. ‘What do you think, Dad?’

‘I think it’s very becoming,’ Dad said. ‘And, anyhow, I’d rather have a hedgehog in the family than a neo-Nazi surf boy.’

Dominic smiled, still looking at my hair. ‘*Und was denkst deiner Liebling davon?*’

‘What?’

‘Simon,’ he said. ‘What does Simon think of it?’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘You two haven’t split up, have you?’

‘Oh, don’t be so childish, Dominic. Simon’s just a friend—’

‘That’s what he *wants* you to think.’

I sighed. ‘I thought you were supposed to grow up when you went to university?’

‘Not me,’ he said, pulling a face. ‘I’m regressing.’

All the bad old memories of Dominic were beginning to creep back. The needling, the snide comments, the constant mickey-taking, the way he treated me like a stupid little girl . . . I suppose that was one of the reasons I’d been a bit wary of him coming back – I didn’t *want* to be treated like a stupid little girl any more, especially by someone who couldn’t act his *own* age. And the fact that I’d had a year *without* being treated like a moron only made it worse. I wasn’t used to it any more. And when you’re not used to something, it’s harder to put up with it. Which is why I was getting annoyed.

But then, just as the irritation was beginning to set in, Dominic reached across and gently touched my cheek.

‘It’s good to see you, Cait,’ he said softly.

For a brief moment he was the Dominic I used to know before he grew up, the *real* Dominic, the one who looked after me when I needed looking after – my big brother. But almost immediately he turned away with a shrug of his shoulders, as if he’d embarrassed himself, and good old big-voiced Dom was back.

‘Hey, Dad,’ he boomed. ‘When the hell are you going to get a new car?’

‘And why should I be wanting a new car?’

‘Because this one’s a shit-heap.’

Charming.

The island sky has its own unmistakable light, an iridescent sheen that moves with the moods of the sea. It’s never the same, but it’s always the same, and whenever I see it I know I’m nearly home.

Home is a small island called Hale. It’s about four kilometres long and two kilometres wide at its broadest point, and it’s joined to the mainland by a short causeway known as the Stand, a narrow road that bridges the estuary. Most of the time you wouldn’t know it’s a causeway, and you wouldn’t know it’s an island either, because most of the time the estuary is just a vast stretch of reeds and brown ooze. But when there’s a high tide and the estuary rises a half a metre or so above the road and nothing can pass until the tide goes

out again, then you know it's an island.

On that Friday afternoon, though, as we approached the island, the tide was low and the Stand stretched out before us, clear and dry, hazing in the heat – a raised strip of pale grey concrete bounded by white railings and a low footpath on either side, with rough cobbled banks leading down to the waterside. Beyond the railings, the estuary was glinting with that wonderful silver light that comes on in the late afternoon and lazes through to the early evening.

We were about halfway across when I saw Lucas.

I remember the moment quite clearly: Dominic was laughing uproariously about something he'd just said while patting his pockets in search of another cigarette; Dad was doing his best to look amused, tugging somewhat wearily at his beard; Deefer, as usual, was sitting bolt upright in his very-serious-dog-in-a-car pose, blinking only occasionally; and I was leaning to one side to get a better view of the sky. No . . . I can do better than that. I remember my *exact* position. I was sitting just to the right of the middle of the seat, cross-legged, leaning slightly to the left, looking out through the front windscreen over Dominic's shoulder. My left arm was stretched out around Deefer's back and my hand was resting in the dust and dog hairs of the blanket on the back seat. I was anchoring myself in this position by gripping onto the surround of the open window with my right hand . . . I remember it precisely. The feel of the hot metal in my hand, the rubber trim, the cooling wind on my fingers . . .

That was the moment I first saw him – a lone figure at

the far end of the Stand, on the left-hand side, with his back to us, walking towards the island.

Apart from wishing that Dominic would shut up braying, my first thought was how odd it was to see someone walking on the Stand. You don't often see people walking around here. The closest town is Moulton (where we'd just come from), about fifteen kilometres away on the mainland, and between Hale and Moulton there's nothing but small cottages, farms, heathland, the ranges, and the odd pub or two. So islanders don't walk, because there's nowhere nearby to walk *to*. And if they're going to Moulton they either drive or take the bus. So the only pedestrians you're likely to see around here are ramblers, bird-watchers, poachers, or, very occasionally, people (like me) who just like to walk. But even from a distance I could tell that the figure up ahead didn't fit into any of these categories. I wasn't sure how I knew, I just did. Deefer knew, too. His ears had pricked up and he was squinting curiously through the windscreen.

As we drew closer, the figure became clearer. It was a young man, or a boy, dressed loosely in a drab green T-shirt and baggy green trousers. He had a green army jacket tied around his waist and a green canvas bag slung over his shoulder. The only non-green thing about him was the pair of scruffy black walking boots on his feet. Although he was on the small side, he wasn't as slight as I'd first thought. He wasn't exactly *muscular*, but he wasn't weedy-looking either. It's hard to explain. There was an air of hidden strength about him, a graceful strength that showed in his balance,

the way he held himself, the way he walked . . .

As I've already said, the memory of Lucas's walk brings a smile to my face. It's an incredibly vivid memory, and if I close my eyes I can see it now. An easy-going lope. Nice and steady. Not too fast and not too slow. Fast enough to get somewhere, but not too fast to miss anything. Bouncy, alert, resolute, without concern and without vanity. A walk that both belonged to and was remote from everything around it.

You can tell a lot about people from the way they walk.

As the car got closer I realised that Dad and Dominic had stopped talking, and I was suddenly aware of a strange, almost ghostly, silence to the air – not just in the car, but outside as well. Birds had stopped calling, the wind had dropped, and in the distance the sky had brightened to the most intense blue I'd ever seen. It was like something out of a film, one of those slow-motion episodes played out in absolute silence when your skin starts tingling and you just *know* that something stunning is about to happen.

Dad was driving quite steadily, as he always does, but it seemed as if we were barely moving. I could hear the tyres humming on the dry road and the air rushing past the window, and I could see the railings at the side of the road flickering past in a blur of white, so I knew we *were* moving, but the distance between us and the boy didn't appear to be changing.

It was weird. Almost like a dream.

Then, all at once, time and distance seemed to lurch

forward and we drew level with the boy. As we did so, he turned his head and looked at us. No, that's wrong – he turned his head and looked at *me*. Directly at me. (When I talked to Dad about this a little while ago, he told me he'd had the very same feeling – that Lucas was looking directly at *him*, as if *he* was the only person in the whole world.)

It was a face I'll never forget. Not simply because of its beauty – although Lucas was undeniably beautiful – but more for its wondrous sense of being *beyond* things. Beyond the pale blue eyes and the tousled hair and the sad smile . . . beyond all this there was something else.

Something . . .

I still don't know what it was.

Dominic broke the spell by peering through the window and grunting, 'What the hell is *that*?'

And then the boy was gone, whizzing past into the background as we left the Stand and veered off towards the east of the island.

I wanted to look back. I was desperate to look back. But I couldn't. I was afraid he might not be there.

The rest of the journey was something of a blur. I remember Dad making a curious sniffing sound, glancing at me in the mirror, then clearing his throat and asking me if I was all right.

And me saying, 'Uh huh.'

And then Dominic saying, 'Do you know him, Cait?'
'Who?'

‘The droolee, the urchin . . . that thing you were gawping at.’

‘Shut up, Dominic.’

He laughed, mocking me – ‘*Shut up, Dominic . . .*’ – and then started on about something else.

I remember Dad changing gear and gunning the car up Black Hill with a rare burst of confidence, and I vaguely remember passing the sign that says *Beware Tractors*, only the *T* and the *R* are hidden behind a hedge, so it says *Beware actors*, and whenever we pass it one of us always makes a point of saying, Look out, there’s John Wayne, or Hugh Grant, or Brad Pitt . . . but I don’t remember who it was that afternoon.

I was somewhere else for a while.

I don’t know where.

All I can remember is a strange, buzzy feeling in my head, an intensity of excitement and sadness that I’d never felt before and probably won’t ever feel again.

It was as if I knew, even then, what was going to happen.

Over the last year I’ve often wondered what would have happened if I hadn’t seen Lucas that day. If we’d crossed the Stand ten minutes earlier, or ten minutes later. If Dominic’s train had been delayed. If the tide had been high. If Dad had stopped for petrol on the way back. If Lucas had left wherever he’d come from a day earlier, or a day later . . .

What would have happened? Would everything be different? Would I be a different person right now? Would I

be happier? Sadder? Would I dream different dreams? And what about Lucas? What would have happened to Lucas if I hadn't seen him that day? Would he still . . .

And it's then I realise how utterly pointless such thinking is. What if, what might have been . . .

It doesn't matter.

I did see him, and nothing can ever change that.

These things, these moments you take to be extraordinary, they have a way of melting back into reality, and the further we got from the Stand – the further we got from the moment – the less tingly I felt. By the time we turned into the narrow lane that leads down to our house, the buzzy feeling in my head had just about gone and the world had returned to something like normal.

The car lumped and shuddered down the lane and I gazed out at the familiar view: the poplar trees, with the sunlight strobing through the branches; the green fields; the pitted driveway; then the old grey house, looking restful and welcoming in the cooling sun; and beyond it all, the beach and the sea glistening in the evening distance. Aside from a lone container ship inching across the horizon, the sea was empty and still.

Dad told me once that this part of Hale, the east side, reminded him of his childhood home in Ireland. I've never been to Ireland, so I wouldn't know. But I know that I love everything about this place – the peace, the wildness, the birds, the smell of salt and seaweed, the call of the wind, the

unpredictability of the sea . . . I even love this straggly old house, with its mouldy old roof and its uneven walls and its scattering of outhouses and tumbledown sheds. It might not be the prettiest house in the world, but it's mine. It's where I live. I was born here.

I belong here.

Dad parked the car in the yard and turned off the engine. I opened the door. Deefer bounded out and started barking at Rita Gray, our neighbour, who was walking her Labrador along the lane. I got out of the car and waved to her. As she waved back, a pair of Mute swans flew in low across the field, their wings throbbing in the breeze. The Labrador started after them, barking like a lunatic.

'She'll never catch them,' Dad called out.

Rita shrugged and smiled. 'It'll do her good, John, she needs the exercise – oh, hello Dominic, I didn't recognise you.'

'Yo, Mrs Gee,' Dom replied, scuttling into the house.

The Labrador was halfway down the lane now, its tongue hanging out, yapping at the empty sky.

Rita shook her head and sighed. 'Damn dog, I don't know why she – oh, Cait, before I forget, Bill said would you give her a ring about tomorrow.'

'OK.'

'She'll be in until nine.'

'All right, thanks.'

She nodded at Dad, then strode off down the lane after her dog, whistling and laughing, swinging the dog lead in

the air, her red hair blowing in the breeze.

I noticed that Dad was watching her.

‘What?’ he said, when he saw me looking at him.

‘Nothing,’ I smiled.

Inside, Dominic had thrown his rucksack on the floor and was stomping up the stairs. ‘Give me a shout when grub’s on,’ he called out. ‘I’m just going to have a quick kip. I’m knackered.’

The bedroom door slammed shut.

It felt strange having someone else in the house. It unsettled me. I suppose I’d got used to being alone with Dad. Our sounds, our quietness. I’d got used to the calm and solitude.

Dad picked up Dominic’s rucksack and leaned it against the stairs. He smiled reassuringly at me, reading my thoughts. ‘He’s just a big kid, Cait. He doesn’t mean any harm.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘It’ll be fine. Don’t worry.’

I nodded. ‘Do you want something to eat?’

‘Not just now, eh? Give him an hour or two and then we’ll have something together.’ He leaned down and tightened one of the ribbons in my hair. ‘Plumes, you say?’

‘Plumes,’ I agreed.

He fixed the ribbon then stepped back and looked at me. ‘Very becoming, indeed.’

‘Thanks,’ I grinned. ‘You’re not too bad yourself. Did you

see the way Rita was looking at you?’

‘She looks at everyone like that. She’s worse than her daughter.’

‘She’s always asking after you, you know.’

‘Look, Cait—’

‘I’m only joking, Dad,’ I said. ‘Don’t look so worried.’

‘Who’s worried?’

‘You are. You worry about everything.’

We chatted away for a couple of minutes, but I could tell he was itching to get back to work. He kept looking at his watch.

‘I’m going to ring Bill,’ I told him. ‘And then I’ll take Deefer out for a walk. I’ll make something to eat when I get back.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘I suppose I’d better get a couple of hours in while I’ve still got the chance.’

‘How’s the new book going?’

‘Ah, you know, same old stuff . . .’ For a moment he just stood there staring down at the floor, rubbing at his beard, and I thought he was going to tell me something, share some of his problems with me. But after a while he just sighed again and said, ‘Well, I’d best be getting on – make sure you’re back before it’s dark. I’ll see you later, love.’ And he was gone, stooping into his study and shutting the door.

Dad writes books for teenagers, or *Young Adults*, as the bookshops like to call them. You’ve probably heard of him. You may even have read some of his books – *Some Kind of*

God, Nothing Ever Dies, New World . . . No? Well, even if you haven't read them, you've probably read *about* them. They're the kind of books that get nominated for prizes but never win, the kind of books that get rubbished by all the papers for being immoral, for setting a bad example, for contributing to the destruction of innocence in the youth of today. Basically, they're the kind of books that don't make very much money.

Bill was eating when she answered the phone. 'Mmyeah?'

'Bill? It's Cait—'

'Just a mm – hold on . . .' I could hear the television blaring in the background, Bill chewing, swallowing, burping . . . 'Right,' she said. '*Urrp* – sorry 'bout that.'

'Your mum said to ring you. I saw her down the lane.'

'Yeah, I thought she was never gonna go – just a minute . . .'

'Bill?'

'That's better, dying for a ciggy. You all right?'

'Fine—'

'I saw you coming back in the car, where've you been?'

'Picking up Dom.'

'Hey, now you're talking—'

'Oh, come on, Bill—'

'What?'

'You *know* what. He's nineteen, for God's sake.'

'So?'

'You're fifteen . . .'

‘Girls mature earlier than boys, Cait. It’s a well-known fact.’

‘Yeah? Well *you* certainly have.’

She laughed. ‘Can I help it if my hormones are hungry?’

‘Maybe you should try going on a diet?’

‘Ha!’

‘Anyway, Dom’s got a girlfriend.’

‘Who?’

‘I don’t know, someone at university, I think.’ I quickly formed a mental image. ‘A tall blonde with long legs and pots of money—’

‘You’re making it up.’

‘No, I’m not. Her name’s Helen, she lives in Norfolk somewhere—’

‘There you are, then.’

‘What?’

‘She’s in Norfolk – I’m two minutes walk up the lane. End of story.’ She laughed again, then covered the mouth-piece and spoke to somebody in the background.

I twiddled the telephone cord in my fingers and wiped a cobweb from the wall. I jiggled my foot. I told myself to ignore it, forget it, don’t let it bother you . . . but I couldn’t. This thing with Bill and Dominic was getting out of hand. It used to be funny – *Dear Trish, My best friend fancies my older brother, what should I do?* Yeah, it *used* to be funny, when Bill was ten and Dominic was fourteen. But it wasn’t funny any more, because Bill wasn’t joking any more. She really meant it. And that bothered me. The trouble was, if

I told her what I really thought she'd just laugh it off. She'd say – oh, come on, Cait, don't be so bloody *serious* all the time, it's just a bit of fun, girl . . .

So, right or wrong, I just went along with it.

'Cait?'

'Yeah, who was that?'

'What?'

'I thought you were talking to someone.'

'Nah, it's the telly. I was just turning it down. Anyway, are you still all right for tomorrow?'

'What time?'

'I'll meet you at the bus stop at two—'

'Why don't I come round to your place? We can walk over together.'

'No, I have to go somewhere first. I'll meet you at two.'

'The bus goes at ten to.'

'All right, quarter to, then. What are you wearing?'

'Wearing? I don't know, nothing special – why?'

'No reason, I just thought it'd be fun to spice it up for a change.'

'Spice it up?'

'You know, skirt, heels, skinny top . . .'

I laughed. 'We're only going to Moulton.'

'Yeah, well . . . you look nice when you get dressed up. You should do it more often. You can't wear those worn-out shorts and a T-shirt *all* the time.'

'I *don't*.'

'Yes, you do. Shorts and a T-shirt in summer, jeans and

a jumper in winter—’

‘What’s wrong with that?’

‘Nothing – all I’m saying is, you’ve got to make an effort now and then. Show a bit of leg, bit of belly, slap a bit of lippy on, you know . . .’

‘We’ll see. Maybe . . .’

‘Oh, go on, Cait. It’ll be a laugh.’

‘I said maybe—’

‘You never know, we might bump into someone decent . . . what’s Dom doing tomorrow? Bumpety bump—’

‘Look, Bill—’

‘Oops – gotta go. I think I heard Mum coming back and I’ve still got a ciggy going. I’ll see you tomorrow at two—’

‘Quarter to— Bill?’

But she’d already hung up.

I put the phone down and went into the kitchen. The house was quiet. Faint sounds drifted in the silence – the soft tap-tapping of Dad’s keyboard, the drone of an aeroplane high in the sky, the distant cry of a lone gull. Through the window I could see the container ship drifting round the Point, its vast grey hulk weighed down with a cargo of multicoloured metal crates. The sky above it was clouding over a little but the sun was still warm and bright, bathing the island in a gauze of pale pink.

I like this time of day. When the light glows softly and there’s a sense of sleepiness to the air – it’s as if the island is breathing out after a long hard day, getting ready for the night. During the summer I often sit in the kitchen for an

hour or two, just watching the sky change colour as the sun goes down, but that evening I couldn't settle. I'm a worrier, just like Dad. I was worried about him. I was worried about Dominic, how he'd changed so much in the last year. And the boy on the Stand . . . it worried me why I couldn't stop thinking about him . . . and Bill . . . I wished I hadn't called her. I wished we weren't going into town tomorrow. I wished . . . I don't know. I wished I didn't have to grow up. The whole thing was just too depressing.

I called Deefer and headed off down the lane.

The thing about Dad is, he's got far too much sadness in his bones. You can see it in the way he walks, the way he looks at things, even in the way he sits. When I left the house that evening I looked over at his study window and saw him hunched at his desk, staring at his computer screen, smoking a cigarette and sipping Irish whiskey. He looked so sad I felt like crying. It was that unmasked look of sadness you rarely see, the look of someone who thinks they're alone so they don't have to hide it any more.

It's Mum, of course. He's been alone with his sadness ever since she died.

It's not that he doesn't talk to me about her – he does. He tells me how wonderful she was, how pretty she was, how kind, how thoughtful, how funny she was – 'God, Cait, when Kathleen laughed it made your heart sing.' He tells me how happy they were together. He shows me photographs, reads me her poems, tells me how much I remind

him of her . . . he *tells* me how sad he is. But he won't take his own advice – he won't give his sadness some life.

I don't know why.

Sometimes I think it's because he *wants* the sadness to die inside him. That if it dies inside him, he's keeping it from me. But what he doesn't realise is that I don't *want* to be excluded from his sadness. I want some of it. I want to feel it, too. She was my mum. I hardly knew her, but the least he could do is let me share in her dying.

I don't know if that makes any sense.

I don't even know if it's true.

But it's what I was thinking.

Down at the creek, Deefer had ambled onto the little wooden bridge and was staring at a family of swans – an adult pair and three large cygnets. One of the adults was making a show of defending its brood, approaching Deefer with spread wings, an arched neck, and a loud hiss. Deefer couldn't care less. He's seen it all before. He just stood there staring and gently wagging his tail. After a minute or two the swan gave up, shook its head, and paddled back to its family.

The creek lies in a sunken valley that runs parallel to the beach, stretching all the way from the middle of the island right up to the mud flats across from the Point. Between the creek and the beach there's a broad spread of saltmarsh, a pale green carpet of glasswort and purslane dotted with countless muddy pools fringed with reeds and rushes. If you

know your way around, which I do, there are tracks through the saltmarsh that cut across to the beach. Otherwise you have to follow the creek path all the way up to the west end of the beach where the marshes thin out and merge into the shore, or else cut through a maze of dunes and gorse to the east and follow it round to the shallow bay beside the mud flats.

I called Deef and we cut across the saltmarsh, emerging onto the beach by the old concrete pillbox. The sea breeze was strengthening as we made our way down towards the shoreline, scenting the air with a mixture of salt and sand and unknown things that only dogs can smell. While Deefer trotted along with his head in the air, sniffing out the stories of his world, I paused for a moment and listened to the sounds of the sea. The waves lapping gently on the shore, the wind in the air, the rustling sand, the seabirds . . . and beneath it all, or above it all, the faint bubbling of the mud flats beside the Point.

The Point is the easternmost end of the island, a slim finger of shingle bounded by the open sea on one side and mud flats on the other. When the tide is out you can see the remains of ancient boats that have been sucked down and lost in the depths. Like skeletons of long-dead beasts, their stripped and blackened frames emerge from the ooze, giving stark warning of the dangers that lurk in the mud. Beyond the mud flats, a tangle of stunted woodland darkens a rugged islet in the mouth of the estuary. The tiny island overlooks the shore with a haunting blend of beauty and

menace, the limbs of its wizened trees twisted by the wind and tide into strange grasping shapes, like misformed hands reaching out for help.

Even in the height of summer this part of the beach is usually deserted. Visitors to the island generally keep to the west side, the village side, where the sand is soft and there's space for parking, where there's a country park (a field with litter bins), cliff walks, kite-flying, ice cream vans, a bandstand – there are even plans to open a caravan park. But that's another world. Down here on the east of the island the only people you're likely to see are locals, fishermen, dog walkers, the occasional anorak with a metal-detector, and sometimes, late on a summer's night, illicit lovers in the dunes.

That evening, though, as the light was beginning to fade, the beach was empty. A raw breeze was blowing in from the sea and the temperature was starting to drop. It wouldn't be long before the chill of night closed in, and all I had on – as Bill had kindly pointed out – was a T-shirt and a pair of worn-out shorts. So, rubbing my arms, I called Deef again and got going, heading briskly along the beach towards the Point.

Without really meaning to, I started thinking about the boy on the Stand again, wondering who he was, where he was going, what he was doing here . . . making up stories in my mind. He was an islander's son, I imagined, he'd been away for a while, in the army perhaps, maybe even in prison, and now he was coming home. His father was a

white-haired old man who lived alone in a tiny old fisherman's cottage. He would have spent all day cleaning the place up, getting something nice to eat, fixing up the spare room for his boy . . .

No, I thought. The boy's not old enough to have been in the army. What is he? Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen? I pictured his face again, and – damn it – my heart actually skipped a beat. Those pale blue eyes, that raggedy hair, that smile . . . I could see it all quite clearly. But the odd thing was, no matter how hard I studied the face in my mind, it was impossible to tell how old the boy was. One second he looked about thirteen; the next, he was a young man – eighteen, nineteen, twenty . . .

Very odd.

But anyway, I decided, he couldn't be an islander's son, he didn't look right. Islanders – and the offspring of islanders – have a particular look about them. They're short and dark, with lidded eyes and wiry hair to combat the wind, and even if they're not short and dark, with lidded eyes and wiry hair, they look as if they should be. The Boy – I was thinking of him now as the Boy – the Boy wasn't an islander. The face in my mind wasn't worn by the wind. The face in my mind was the face of a boy from nowhere.

Maybe he's looking for work? I thought. Or looking for someone? A girl, a sweetheart – or an enemy, perhaps? Someone who's wronged him. Someone who's offended his honour. He's travelled the length and breadth of the country in search of . . .

I stopped, suddenly aware of what I was thinking. My *God*, Caitlin, I thought. What the hell are you *doing*? Sweethearts? Enemies? Honour? It's Mills & Boon stuff. It's embarrassing. Look at yourself. You're acting like a dumb little girl swooning at some dopey-looking pop star in a magazine. For goodness sake, girl, get a grip. Grow up. Grow up, grow up, grow up . . .

I shook my head and started walking again.

It's hard to think about growing up when you're right in the middle of it. It's hard to know what you want. Sometimes there are so many voices in your head it's difficult to know which of them is yours. You want this; you want that. You think you want this; but then you want that. You think you ought to want this; but everyone says you're supposed to want that.

It's not easy.

I remember one time, when I was about ten or eleven, I came home from school crying my eyes out because the other kids had been calling me a baby. After Dad had comforted me and waited patiently for the tears to dry up, he sat me down and gave me some advice. 'Listen, Cait,' he said. 'You'll spend half your childhood wishing you were grown up, and then, when you *are* grown up, you'll spend half your time wishing you were a child again. So don't go worrying too much about what's right or wrong for your age – just do whatever you want.'

That got me thinking about Dad again, about his loneliness, his writing, his drinking . . . and then an unexpected

movement caught my eye and all my thoughts disappeared. There was someone swimming in the sea, just off the Point, heading towards the beach. And I was suddenly aware that it was getting dark, and I was cold, and I didn't know where Deefer was.

'Deefer!' I shouted, looking around. 'Here, boy! Come here, Deef!'

I waited, listening out for the jangle of his collar, then I whistled and called out again, but there was no answer. Out in the sea the swimmer had nearly reached the beach. I shielded my eyes to get a better look. It was a young, fair-haired man wearing dark swimming goggles. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but the light was unclear and I couldn't make out a face. Whoever it was, though, he was a good swimmer. As he moved closer to the shore I could hear the steady slap of his hands slicing through the water. Slap . . . slap . . . slap . . . a strangely eerie sound.

I looked around and called out for Deefer again. No reply. I looked everywhere – back along the beach, along the fringes of the saltmarsh, over at the mud flats. Nothing. No black dog, no sign of life at all. Just me and a slightly unnerving figure in dark goggles, who at that moment was wading out of the sea and crunching up the shingle towards me. Tall, muscular, and broad-shouldered, wearing a pair of tight trunks, a fancy black watch, and nothing else. A thin-lipped, mocking grin creased his mouth, and as he got closer I noticed that his skin was smeared with some kind of oil, or

clear grease. Water rolled from his skin, pearly with tiny rainbows.

‘Well, if it isn’t little Caity McCann,’ he said, removing his goggles and smiling at me. ‘What a *pleasant* surprise.’

‘Oh – Jamie,’ I said hesitantly. ‘What are you doing here?’

As he carried on towards me, adjusting his trunks and grinning his grin, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Jamie Tait – son of Ivan Tait, local landowner, wealthy businessman, and Member of Parliament for Moulton East – was the closest thing to a celebrity the island has ever produced. Captain of the County Schools Junior Rugby XV, national swimming champion at sixteen, and now a rising star in his second year at Oxford University.

Jamie Tait was a Bright Young Thing.

Or, as Dad would have it, the biggest little shite on the island.

He’d stopped about a metre away from me and was flicking his goggles against his leg, breathing heavily and looking me up and down.

‘So, what do you think, Cait?’ he said. ‘Have I still got it?’

‘Got what?’

He flicked wet hair from his eyes. ‘The style, the stuff . . . I saw you watching me.’

‘I wasn’t *watching* you, I was looking for my dog.’

‘Right,’ he winked. ‘Gotcha.’

His staring eyes gave me the creeps. Pale electric-blue, like androids’ eyes, it was impossible to tell what lay behind

them. I didn't like the way he was standing, either, the way he was holding his body. Too close, but not *too* close. Close enough to make it awkward to look away. Close enough to insinuate, to say – look, look at this, what do you think?

I took a step back and whistled for Deefer, scanning the beach. There was still nothing in sight. When I turned back, Jamie had stepped closer, his thumbs hooked inside his trunks. I could smell the oil on his skin, something sweet on his breath.

'Is Dom back from Liverpool yet?' he asked.

'This afternoon, he came back this afternoon. Would you mind—'

'Is he coming out tonight?'

'I really don't know. I think I'd—'

'What's the matter, Cait? Look at you, you're shivering.' He smiled. 'I'd give you something to put on, but as you can see, I don't have a lot to offer.' His eyes glanced downwards and he laughed. 'It's the cold, you know.'

'I have to go,' I said, and turned to walk away. My heart was thumping and my legs felt weak. I was half-expecting a hand to grab my arm – but nothing happened.

I don't think I was really frightened at that point, just angry. Angry at myself for . . . I don't know what for. For being there, I suppose. Angry that he'd made me angry.

After about half a dozen steps I heard him crunching along behind me, calling out in a friendly voice, 'Hold on, Caity, hold on. I want to ask you something.'

I carried on walking.

I thought I had the advantage. I had shoes on, Jamie didn't. Walking barefoot on sharp shingle isn't the easiest thing in the world. But within a few seconds he'd caught me up and was striding along beside me, hopping and grinning.

'Hey, where's the fire? What's the hurry?'

'I told you, I have to find my dog.'

'What's his name?'

'Deefer.'

'Deefer dog?' he laughed. 'That's very good. Very *imaginative*.' He laughed again, then cupped his hands to his mouth and started calling out. 'Dee-fer dawg! Dee-fer dawg! Dee-fer . . .' – spinning round as he walked, like a lighthouse – 'Dee-fer dawg! Dee-fer dawg! Dee-fer dawg! . . .'

I carried on, heading towards the pillbox, trying to work out what to do. There were all sorts of unsavoury rumours about Jamie Tait, most of which, according to Dominic, he'd started himself. 'Jamie's all right,' Dom told me once. 'He just needs to let off a bit of steam now and then. All this madman stuff, it's just island gossip. Jamie's a teddy bear, really.'

Well, I thought, teddy bear or not, the sooner I find Deefer and get home, the better.

I'd reached the pillbox now. A squat, circular building, half-sunk into the ground, with thick concrete walls and a flat roof, it looks – and smells – like a dirty old public lavatory. My nose wrinkled at the smell and I started to edge away, but I didn't know which way to go. Should I cut across

the saltmarshes and head for home, or should I get back to the beach and carry on looking for Deefer? Which way? Saltmarshes, beach, back to the Point . . . ?

Jamie had stopped his lunatic wailing and was skipping along the edges of the saltmarsh poking about in the reeds. 'He's not in here,' he called out to me, stooping to pick up a stick from the strandline. 'Hey, maybe he got a whiff of Rita Gray's bitch. You know what dogs are like when they get that smell.' He swung the stick at an empty Coke bottle then started towards me. 'How's Bill, by the way? She still got the hots for your brother?'

I ignored him, looking around the beach again, scanning the shore for Deefer, but the fading light was indistinct and I couldn't seem to focus on anything. The sky was darkening, streaked with yellow and grey, and the sea had taken on a black and icy look.

Jamie came up to me with the stick yoked across his shoulders. 'So,' he said, 'what are we going to do now?' I put my hands in my pockets and said nothing. He smiled, nodding at the pillbox behind me. 'My changing room.'

'What?'

'The pillbox, it's where I get changed.' He looked down at his trunks. 'You don't think I'm walking all the way back in just these do you? I'd get arrested.'

I looked away. 'I have to get going now.'

He stepped closer. 'How's your old man, Cait? Still writing naughty books for kiddies?'

I didn't say anything.

Jamie grinned. He was still breathing heavily, but not because he was out of breath.

‘I must come round some time,’ he said. ‘Have a chat with the great man. What do you think? Me and Johnny McCann. Johnny Mac. We could have a drink together, a little Oirish whiskey, a little smoke . . . what do you think, Cait? Would you like that?’

‘Goodnight, Jamie,’ I said, and turned to leave.

He moved quickly, stepping in close and bringing his stick down to block my way. A cold light iced his eyes. ‘I asked you a question, Cait.’

‘Get out of my way—’

‘I asked you a question.’

‘Please, I want to go home . . .’

He pursed his lips and smiled. ‘Oh, come on, Caity, let’s stop messing about. You can’t bring me all this way and then change your mind.’

‘What?’

‘You know what I’m talking about. Come on, it’s getting cold. Let’s go inside. Let me show you my changing room. I’ve got a bottle in my jacket. A nice drop of whiskey will warm us up—’

‘How’s Sara?’ I asked.

Sara was his fiancée. Sara Toms. A strikingly beautiful girl, with all the social graces a bright young thing could wish for, she was the daughter of Detective Inspector Toms, the head of the local police force. She was also insanely possessive. I suppose I thought that mentioning her name was

a smart thing to do under the circumstances, but as soon as I had, I wished I hadn't. At the sound of her name, Jamie froze. His pupils shrank to pinpoints and his mouth narrowed to a tight slit. For a moment I thought he was going to explode or something, but then – with an almost visible sigh – the anger left him and something else took over. Something worse. He smiled and stepped closer. Not close enough to actually touch me, but close enough to force me back against the wall of the pillbox. My head was racing, blood rushing through my veins, but I still didn't quite believe that anything was wrong. It was ridiculous, really. My instinct was telling me to kick him in the groin and run, but something else, some kind of inbred civility, I suppose, was saying – no, hold on, just hold on a minute, he's just trying it on, it's not serious, think how embarrassing it'll be if you kick him in the groin, think what the papers would make of it – *MP's Son Attacked By Local Girl*. I actually *imagined* the headline. Can you believe that?

He didn't say or do anything for a while, he just stood there breathing hard and staring into my eyes. I was still trying to convince myself that everything was OK, that there wasn't anything to worry about, that he was nothing more than a slightly unbalanced spoilt brat who needed to let off a bit of steam now and then . . . and then I felt him take my hand and move it towards him.

'No—'

'Shut up.'

I felt bare skin, cold and oily. I tried to take my hand

away but he was too strong.

‘*Don’t—*’

‘What?’ he grinned.

Kick him, I thought, *kick him* . . . but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t do anything. All I could do was look with disbelief into his eyes as he tightened his grip and moved even closer – and then a deep-throated snarl ripped through the air behind him.

‘*Shit!*’ he hissed, paralysed with fear. ‘What’s *that*?’

It was Deefer, standing tall, with his teeth bared and his hackles up. The snarl sounded wet and bloody.

Jamie still had hold of my hand. I yanked it away.

‘What is it?’ he whispered, his eyes darting, trying to see behind him without turning his head.

I couldn’t speak. Even if I’d wanted to, I couldn’t say anything. I wanted him away from me, I wanted to push him away, but I couldn’t bear to touch him. My hand, the hand he’d taken . . . I realised I was holding it out to one side, keeping it away from me. My throat was as dry as a bone.

‘Christ, Cait,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘What the *hell* is it? Tell me!’

I was very close to setting Deefer on him. One word from me and he’d have ripped Jamie to pieces. Instead, after what seemed like an hour, but was probably only thirty seconds or so, I managed to calm down a little, get my thoughts in order, and find a voice. I told Deefer to sit. I told him to stay and guard. Then I told Jamie to move back.

‘What—’

‘Move back now or I’ll set the dog on you.’

He took a cautious step back.

‘Don’t turn around,’ I told him. ‘Don’t move. If you move, he’ll bite you.’

Jamie looked at me. ‘Hey, Cait, come on. Look, you don’t think I was serious, do you? I was only messing around. I wasn’t—’

I walked away.

‘Cait!’ he called out. ‘Just a minute . . . what are you doing? Cait? You can’t leave me here, I’ll freeze. Cait!’

By the time I reached the creek my calmness had evaporated and I was shaking like a leaf. I took a deep breath and yelled for Deefer. While I was waiting for him to answer, I slid down the bank of the creek and washed my hands in the running water, scrubbing until they were numb, until there was no trace of feeling left. Then I washed the tears from my face.

It’s your own fault, I told myself, how could you have been so *stupid*? Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid . . . why didn’t you turn around and walk away as soon as you saw him? You *know* what he’s like. Why didn’t you just walk away?

I knew the answer.

I didn’t walk away because I didn’t want to appear rude. I didn’t want to appear *unfriendly* . . .

It was pathetic.

When I clambered back up the bank Deefer was sitting on the bridge, wagging his tail.

‘Where the hell *were* you?’ I said, wiping snotty tears from my face. ‘You’re supposed to look after me. Come here.’ He lowered his head and waddled over to me, crouched low to the ground. ‘Next time,’ I told him, ‘next time . . . just come back when I call you. All right?’ I patted his head. ‘It’s no good leaving it until the last minute – when I call you, you come back.’ His tail thumped and he yawned with shame. ‘And don’t you dare tell anyone about this,’ I sniffed. ‘It’s between you and me, OK? If Dad finds out, he’ll kill him. I’m not joking, Deef. He’ll kill him.’

The house was quiet when I got back. I went upstairs and took a shower, changed into some clean clothes, checked in the mirror to make sure the tears didn’t show, then bundled up my T-shirt and shorts with a pile of dirty washing and went back down to the kitchen. I was putting the clothes in the washing machine when Dad came in.

‘Hey there, Cait – what are you doing?’

‘Just a bit of washing . . . I was . . . there was some oil on the beach . . .’

‘Oil?’

‘Tar or something.’ I shrugged. ‘I got some on my shirt.’

‘Oh,’ he said, looking at me. ‘Are you all right? Your eyes—’

I turned away. ‘It’s nothing, a bit of sand . . .’

‘Here, let me see.’

‘I said it’s all *right*, Dad.’

He gave me a puzzled look. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Nothing, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you. Honestly, it’s nothing. I’m fine.’ I set the washing machine and turned it on. ‘Have you eaten yet?’

‘I’m not really hungry, love.’

‘What about Dominic? He’s not still asleep, is he?’

‘He went out. He had to meet some people . . .’

‘Where?’

He shook his head. ‘The Dog and Pheasant, I expect.’

‘Didn’t you want to go?’

He smiled awkwardly. ‘Ah, I’d only embarrass the boy. You know how it is . . . we’ll probably have a quiet drink together some other time . . .’ He crossed to the cupboard and took out a fresh bottle of whiskey. I could tell from his exaggerated steadiness that he’d already had a few drinks. He sat down at the table and poured himself another.

‘Did you have a nice walk?’ he asked.

‘Fine . . . it was fine . . . a bit cold . . .’

He nodded, looking out of the window. ‘And you’d tell me if anything was wrong?’

‘Yes, Dad. I’d tell you.’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise.’

He sipped his drink and looked at me with slightly glazed eyes. ‘No one ever kept a secret so well as a child.’

‘I’m not a child.’

‘No,’ he said sadly. ‘That’s the truth of it.’

‘Dad—’

‘The boy,’ he said, suddenly. ‘Tell me what you

think of him.'

'Which boy?'

He smiled knowingly. 'The fine-looking boy on the bridge.'

'The Stand?'

He drank some more. 'Bridge, Stand, whatever . . . didn't he make you wonder?'

'Wonder about what? What are you talking about, Dad?'

'Secrets,' he winked.

'I think you've had too much to drink.'

'I'm all right.'

'You don't look it.'

'Well, it's been a funny old day—'

'Yeah.'

He looked at me for a moment, his head swaying slightly on his shoulders, then he breathed in deeply and stood up. 'Well, I'd best get on. See if I can't come up with something to pay the bills . . .' He smiled again, then turned and headed for the door, clutching the bottle and glass.

'Dad?' I said.

'Yes, love?'

'Don't drink too much, OK?'

'OK.'

'Please.'

'You have my word.'

He came over and kissed me, then shuffled out, back to his study. His breath smelled of whiskey and sweet tobacco.

That night I couldn't get to sleep for a long time. The air was heavy and close and I couldn't settle. The sheets were clingy, the pillows too soft, too lumpy, the mattress too hard. I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened on the beach. Jamie Tait. The feel of his hand, his creepy eyes, his greasy skin . . . I knew I ought to tell someone about it, but I couldn't think who. And even if I did tell someone, what would be the point? It was my word against his. He was a local hero, an Oxford student, the son of an MP. And what was I? Nothing, just a strange little girl with ribbons in her hair, a girl who wore the same clothes all the time. The motherless daughter of a wifeless writer . . .

And anyway, I kept thinking, what actually happened? He hardly touched you, did he? He didn't *do* anything . . . he hardly touched you . . .

Then I started crying again.

Later, as I was sitting by the open window looking out into the dark, I heard Dad singing quietly in his study. The words drifted gently in the night air: '*. . . Oh, I'll take you back, Kathleen . . . to where your heart will feel no pain . . . and when the fields are fresh and green I'll take you to your home again . . .*'

I fell asleep eventually, only to be woken in the early hours of the morning by the sound of Deefer barking as a car roared down the lane and screeched to a halt in the yard.

Laughter and drunken voices cracked the night.

‘Yay, there! Dommo, Dommo . . .’

‘Watch it!’

‘Woof! Woof!’

‘Can’t get out, man—’

‘Hey, hey, Caity—’

‘Shhh!’

‘Mind the bleedin’ *door*—’

‘Ha! Yeah . . .’

After a couple of minutes of slamming doors and shouting, the car revved up, squealed round the yard and screamed back up the lane. I lay in bed listening to the sound of heavy steps dragging across the yard, coughing, keys fumbling at the front door, then the door opened and clonked shut and Dominic stumbled into the hall and tip-toed noisily up the stairs and into his room. Within five minutes the sound of drunken snoring was reverberating through the walls.

I closed my eyes.

The voices . . .

Hey, hey, Caity—

Shhh!

I couldn’t be sure, but the one doing the shushing sounded just like Bill. And the other one, the one who called my name – that was Jamie Tait.