

The Worst Thing You've Ever Done

'So, what's the worst thing you've ever done?' His dark eyes stare at her over the rim of the glass.

'The worst thing?' She hesitates. Why has he asked that?

'Yeah, you know, we've all done things we're ashamed of. What is it with you? Blew your best friend out when she needed you? Missed your parents' anniversary after a heavy night?' He pauses and the yellow fleck in his eyes seems to dance. 'No ... I know ... Sat in the seat for disabled on the Tube and ignored the man with one leg?' He stops again. 'I'm right, aren't I? You're blushing!'

She feels the heat spreading up from her chest. Mottled red patches will have encircled her neck by now. She reaches out for the bottle of wine. The waiter has placed it in an ice bucket and drops of water slip down it. A small puddle forms on the table. She pours herself another glass and gestures towards his, which is almost empty. He shakes his head. She rests her cheek against the cool glass.

'What about you?' She plays for time. 'You must have some stories to tell.'

'You're not wriggling out of it like that. I asked you first.' He leans forward and touches her cheek. 'I love it when you blush.'

He takes her glass and places it on the table. He reaches for her hands and holds them tightly in his. She stares at their interlaced fingers. Her hands are thin and pale. His are thick, sturdy, sun-tanned. Confident hands.

She's going to have to say something. The question is unexpected. The timing is not. There always comes a point when the questions start. She's used to fielding the ones about past lovers. Sometimes it's the first time you've slept with them and you can see they can't resist it. 'So, how many have there been? Boyfriends, I mean?' So, it's the right time for a question. Just not this one: 'What's the worst thing you've ever done?'

'I stole some books when I was at school.' She watches as a broad grin creases his face. His teeth are very white.

'Is that all?' His nose wrinkles when he smiles. 'I thought you were going to tell me something terrible like you robbed old ladies or starred in porn movies!' He laughs out loud. 'You must have been some kind of swot to steal books.'

'They were exercise books. I couldn't resist all that lovely white paper.'

'Did you get caught?'

'Yes. The headmaster said I'd betrayed the trust the school had placed in me. I was the stationery monitor, you see.'

'How old were you?'

'Eight.' Her face feels cooler now. The moment has passed. She puts her wineglass down and reaches for the menu. 'Shall we order? I'm famished.'

She watches him as he studies the menu. His teeth bite his bottom lip as he concentrates. The conversation is apparently forgotten, a piece of harmless banter like all new lovers engage in. Her heart has almost returned to normal. He

looks up and catches her watching him.

'This wine is going to my head,' he says. 'Either that, or it's you!'

Perhaps she should tell him. Get it over with. She has this debate with herself every time. Tell them too soon and the relationship never gets off the starting blocks. Wait until you're about to move in together, and then see them scarper. That's what happened with Andrew. She made her mind up then never to say a word about it again. Until now, that is.

When she woke up this morning, he was watching her, one elbow on the pillow, head resting in his right hand.

'You're beautiful,' he said as soon as she opened her eyes. His gaze should have made her uncomfortable. It was raining the night before when they walked back from the cinema and her hair was a mess. Her mascara would be thick goo. His eyes on her should have felt intrusive. She turns back to the menu. She already likes him too much. She won't tell him yet.

They met at the pub. It was the usual thing, straight from work. The noise was so intense; it was hard to talk. That was what she liked. No opportunity for questions. He hadn't been there before and she noticed him straight away. His hair was long for a start, and the jeans ... amongst the sea of pin-striped suits his stained jeans marked him out as different, but he seemed to know Alex, one of guys from work and a regular at the pub on Friday nights. When it was time to go, he kissed her on both cheeks. His lips felt soft against her skin.

The next Friday he was there again and he caught her eye as soon as she arrived, almost as if he was waiting for her. He asked to see her on her own. 'Somewhere quiet. Where we can talk.' They met at Tate Modern the following Sunday morning, and since then, it seems he can't get enough of her. For the first time in a long while, she feels happy.

The waiter brings their food and another bottle of wine. Usually she drinks very little. Sometimes, after a few glasses, the desire to confide is overwhelming. That's how she came to blurt the whole story out to Andrew. They were getting on so well and he'd invited her to meet his parents. It seemed only fair to tell him. At first, he was understanding, sympathetic almost. She felt encouraged. Perhaps she wasn't a monster after all. Several glasses of wine later, and she'd provided all the gory details. The phone call the next day was like a blow to the solar plexus. No amount of sugaring the pill - 'It's me, it's not you', 'I think you're very brave', 'I hope we'll stay friends' could alter the reality. She told him and he dumped her.

'Don't you want to know about me?' His voice comes as a shock. The mushroom risotto is delicious and she's been devoting her attention to it.

'What?' She tries to concentrate.

He puts down his fork. He picks up the dish with the parmesan and slowly

and deliberately sprinkles several layers onto his Bolognese. He looks up.

'You've told me your dark secrets. Don't you want to hear mine?'

'Yes, of course ... if you want to tell me, that is.'

'It's not something I'm proud of, but if we're going to be close ...' he smiles – that small lop-sided lift to the side of his mouth. '... and I hope we are. You need to know.'

'You're making me nervous.' She tries to laugh but her mouth is dry. Her lips stick to her teeth.

'I've got a child,' he says.

She waits for him to go on, but his eyes are fixed on some spot on the wall behind her head. She feels compelled to break the silence. 'A boy or a girl?' she asks.

'A daughter. Fiona. She's six.'

'That's lovely, isn't it?' She says this, but she's dreading the reply. Is this a roundabout way of telling her he's married? She might have known it was too good to be true.

'I don't see her very often. She lives in Cornwall. Jane - her mum - and I split up when Fiona was a baby.' There's a catch in his voice and his hands fumble for the water jug. 'I was a fool. Couldn't cope with the responsibility, the crying.'

It's her turn to stretch across the table. She takes the jug of water from him and pours him a glass. She takes his hands in hers. His palms feel rough and the fingertips have thickened. They are strong hands, but inside, he's vulnerable. Like her. He meets her eyes at last. 'I don't suppose you'll want anything to do with me now?'

She squeezes his hands. 'Don't be silly.'

'I feel ashamed. I was hoping you might have done something terrible and then I wouldn't seem such a jerk, but, no ... stupid exercise books. That's the extent of your crimes!'

The heat creeps up her chest again. Perspiration prickles between her breasts. She opens her mouth. 'There is something ...'

But he doesn't seem to have heard. He picks up the fork and twirls loops of spaghetti around it with one deft movement of his wrist. 'I feel much better now I've told you. What a relief!' He pauses, the mound of food half way to his mouth. With his other hand he raises his glass. 'To us!'

'To us.' Her throat closes up and she almost retches as she tries to swallow the wine.

'Perhaps we could go down to Cornwall one weekend. You could meet Fiona.'

'That would be lovely,' she says, her voice barely a whisper.

That evening at her flat, she climbs on a chair and reaches for the box on top of the wardrobe. She'd bought some new black shoes that day three years ago and was wearing them when Jason came home. There were drops of blood on them, she remembers, and the police took them away as evidence. She never saw them

again, but for some reason, she kept the box they came in. She hasn't touched it for several months now and it's thick with dust. A cobweb's lacy network stretches from the box to the ceiling. It attaches itself to her hands and grey threads cling to her fingertips as she carries the box to the living room. She sets it down on the floor and lifts the lid.

She rifles through the various documents, a mixture of newspaper articles, photographs, records of court appearances and solicitors' letters – sixty-two at the last count. She finds the one she's looking for. It's yellowing and creased. She smooths it out.

Today, Miranda Tempest, aged 38, was dramatically cleared of the manslaughter of Jason Frobisher. Gasps of shock ran round the crown court when the jury's unanimous verdict was announced.

The case has been a difficult one from the beginning, and the police are now accused of bringing a prosecution with insufficient evidence. Mr Frobisher's family are angry at the verdict. This morning, Jonathan Frobisher, Jason's brother, said they intended to appeal. 'My brother didn't deserve to die,' he said. 'We want the truth.' Jason's mother, who flew over from her home in the States for the trial, said 'I'm heartbroken. I've lost my beautiful boy.'

She stops reading. It's a mistake to go over this stuff again. She has to move on. That's what the counsellor has told her: 'You have to forgive yourself and move on.' And she's tried. How many have there been since Jason? Peter, Bruce, Rob, Andrew ... she ticks off names in her mind ... She hasn't had any problem attracting men. There have been plenty of first and second dates, but they've all ended in disappointment and a sense of isolation greater than before. With Bruce and Andrew, it was because she told them about Jason, but more often it's been her. 'A deep fear of intimacy' was the counsellor's diagnosis.

But this time, although she hasn't known him for many weeks, she's got a feeling it might work. He's sensitive and thoughtful and he's got that lovely smile. She wonders what Jane is like. She must remember to ask Alex if he knew them when they were together. It was a shock at first to find out he has a child, but now she's got used to the idea, she's already planning how Fiona might come and stay. They could visit the park and the zoo, and they could go clothes shopping. She's always wanted a daughter. She remembers the arguments with Jason about whether they could have a baby. That's how it began that last evening ...

Miss Tempest said in her evidence that Jason had been out all day drinking. He'd been under pressure at work and had begun to spend every weekend in the pub. He was in a foul mood when he came in and threw the meal she'd saved for him across the table. Tempest sobbed in the witness box, as she recalled the final moments of Jason's life.

Her head starts to go round and she stops reading. She can feel Jason's hands round her throat, her own fingers desperately scrabbling to pull him off. The pressure in her lungs is unbearable. She closes her eyes. They feel as if they will burst from their sockets. With one hand, she reaches behind her. She is pinned against the draining board. The washing up is stacked there. Her fingers close over the knife's serrated edge.

The weeks fly by. She sees him most evenings and on the others, they ring and text each other constantly. He usually phones her just before she falls asleep.

'I wanted to say goodnight,' he'll say. 'I can't stop thinking about you.' In the darkness she smiles with happiness. He seems to have a sixth sense for the moment when she puts down her book and turns the light out. It makes her feel secure and wanted. No other man has ever been so attuned to her feelings and needs. Once when she got up in the morning, she found a love poem pushed through her letterbox.

'You shouldn't have,' she said. 'You spoil me.'

'I want you to know how much you mean to me,' he said.

He asks her if she'll go shopping with him. It's soon going to be Fiona's birthday and he wants her to help him buy a present.

'Have you got any ideas?' she says. 'I'm out of touch with little girls. Do they still do Barbies and things?'

'Search me.'

'What did you buy her last year?'

He looks vague. 'I can't remember.'

'Can't you ask her mum for suggestions? You do get on okay with Jane?'

'We've had our moments,' he says.

She wants to ask more, but doesn't want to pry, especially with her conscience convulsed by her own secret. The closer they become, the worse it gets. She's even started rehearsing how and when she'll tell him ... 'There's something you need to know about me ...' she'll say one night after they've made love. That's always a special time. For some reason, tears often fill her eyes. He holds her tightly and strokes her hair. He whispers soothing words. Then his hands move down from her head and sweep across her back. They creep lower, cupping her buttocks. She presses closer to him, wishing her body could disappear into his. If only he'd ask her why she's crying, she'd tell him. But he never does.

In the end, he buys a colouring book and some gel pens for Fiona. 'Something that will go in the post easily,' he says.

'I thought you might go and see her for her birthday,' she says. She'd got excited thinking he'd probably ask her to go with him.

'Jane's not sure of her plans.'

'That's not fair!' She begins to get angry on his behalf. 'Surely you've got a right

...'

'Can we leave it?' His eyes cloud over and there's an expression in them she can't fathom.

One Wednesday about 8 o' clock, he arrives at her flat unexpectedly. She's surprised to see him as she usually goes to her Spanish evening class on Wednesdays, but she had a headache at work and came home early.

'I had a feeling you'd be here,' he says, in response to her question. 'Anyway, I've got something for you.' He thrusts an envelope into her hand.

She can feel his eyes on her as she opens it. It's bulky, and he's stuck sellotape across the back to help seal it. She empties the contents onto the table. The first item is a luggage label. It's filled in with her name and the details of a flight from Gatwick to Marco Polo airport. She looks across at him and he takes a step towards her. 'Go on,' he says. She picks up the next item. It's a painting of a passport, with the lion and the unicorn, gold lettering - *Honi Soit Qui Mal Y Pense* - picked out on the red leather cover. Next, she opens a small wallet. Inside is a postcard of St Mark's Square, a set of keys and a photograph of a gondola. Two people are sitting in the gondola. The man has his arm round the woman's shoulders and she is laughing.

'Just a minute ...' she says. She stares at the photograph. The woman looks like her. She's wearing that blue dress. And the man ... 'That's us ... the people in the gondola. They're us!'

He laughs. 'The wonders of digital photography,' he says. 'Don't you remember all that posing last weekend?'

'Yes, but I didn't know you had anything like this up your sleeve.'

'So, will you come?'

'Where?'

'Isn't it obvious? You and me - three nights in Venice, the weekend after next.'

'Try and stop me,' she says.

But as the time draws closer, her excitement wanes. How can she go with him when he still doesn't know? She's got a feeling he might even produce an engagement ring while they're away. After all, Venice is a city for lovers, and it would be typical of him. He is the most romantic person she has ever met. She can't put it off any longer. She'll tell him tonight.

But when he arrives, he seems on edge. He doesn't kiss her. He pushes a bottle of wine into her hands and turns away. It's not like him. Usually he makes a big thing of lining up the glasses, finding the corkscrew. Somehow, he manages to turn even opening a bottle into a ceremony. It's something she loves about him. She pours the drinks and carries them through to the living room. She hands him one. He's sitting on the armchair over by the bookcase. She looks pointedly at the sofa where they usually sit together. He shrugs. 'I need to tell you something,' he

says. 'I thought it might be easier from over here.'

She thinks of her own secret. Does this mean she's got to wait? She geared herself up to tell him as soon as he arrived. She was going to tell him in the kitchen. She'd bought a pizza and had planned to slice it, while he fussed around, opening the wine. It would be easier to talk, if they were both busy. There wouldn't be his eyes. The silence while he gave her his full attention.

'I haven't been honest with you,' he is saying. Her heart flutters. If only he knew. He's already told her about leaving Jane because he couldn't cope with Fiona. It's not good, but he's not the first man not to be able to handle a crying baby. On a scale of one to ten, it hardly merits a five in the 'things I have done wrong' inventory, whereas hers is a whopping ...

'I didn't leave Jane,' he says.

'She left you?'

'No. Not quite.'

'Oh.' The word seems inadequate. What does he mean? Is he still with her? Perhaps he made her up to give himself a more colourful past. No, stupid idea.

'What about Fiona?' she asks.

'It's what I told you,' he says and he sounds irritable. 'Fiona's six, she lives in Cornwall ...' he hesitates, '... but not with Jane.'

She looks across at him. His face is a funny colour. His eyes are fixed on some point on the wall above her head.

'What is it?' she asks. 'You're scaring me.'

'I can't tell you.'

'You must.'

'Jane's dead,' he says.

'Oh no! I'm so sorry. What happened?'

'She was murdered.'

Her hand goes to her mouth. 'My God! That's terrible.'

'I killed her.' His voice is expressionless.

She stares at him, but his eyes are milky and unseeing.

'I was charged with manslaughter. I got out in January.'

'And Fiona?'

'Fiona lives with Jane's mother. I'm not allowed to see her.'

Afterwards, she always wonders what she said next, but her memory is blank. She remembers moving towards him. She remembers his arms fastening on her and the frantic casting off of clothes. She remembers the smell of him and the size of him moving inside her. And then, she remembers Jason. In between his arriving home and the fight, they'd had sex. The police had asked her about sex, she remembers.

'I can't believe it,' she says later. 'I was going to tell you about me.' She waits. He doesn't answer, but she can't stop now. 'You know when I told you about the exercise books,' she says.

He nods and gradually some of the unseeing look in his eyes goes. 'Of course, I remember,' he says. 'The worst thing you've ever done.'

'Except it wasn't!' She gets to her feet. There's a thrumming noise in her ears and her blood seems to surge through her veins. This is it, she thinks. 'I told you a lie ... I don't know why I said it. I mean it's true and I did steal those books but ...'

'It's not the worst thing you've ever done.'

There is a long silence. The pounding in her ears recedes. She realises where the sound of those words came from. She stares across at him. His face is smooth; he is smiling. 'You know?' she says, recognising something in his expression. He nods.

'How?'

'I read it in the paper.'

Her brain is spinning. She still scans the papers, the internet every day to see if someone has resurrected the story. The time around the anniversary is always dangerous. But lately, there's been nothing. She's sure. She's changed her name. How *can* he have found out about her?

'When?' she snaps. 'When did you read it?' She can hear her voice is shrill.

'When I was in prison,' he says.

'Before you met me? You knew before you met me?'

He nods.

'Why didn't you say anything?'

He smiles. That small lop-sided smile that usually makes her heart flip over. 'I was waiting.'

'For what? Waiting for what?'

'To see how long it would take you to tell me. I'm interested in these things.'

'Does Alex know?' There's a sick feeling growing in her chest. She can't bear the thought that everyone at work knows, that they've been pointing at her, sniggering at her behind her back. She's done everything she can to keep her secret, and now ... and now it looks as if it's all been for nothing.

She sees he's watching her. He looks puzzled. 'Who's Alex?' he asks.

'You know who Alex is.' She screws up her eyes, trying to clear her head.

'Do I?'

'You came to the pub with him ... you know ... the night we met.' Her legs feel weak. She turns and puts her hands on the table to support herself.

'I don't know any Alex. I came to the pub on my own. To see you.'

She hears him cross the room. He's standing behind her. She can smell the musky scent of his aftershave. His breath touches the back of her neck.

'How did you know I'd be there?' she asks.

'I found out where you worked and I followed you.'

She whirls round. His face is very close. She can see the yellow fleck in his eyes. He reaches out. She flinches. 'Don't touch me!'

He raises both his hands and backs away. 'Okay,' he says. 'Okay.'

'How long have you been following me?'

He shrugs. 'Three, maybe four months.'

She begins to shiver. 'That Wednesday night ... when I didn't go to Spanish ... you turned up ...'

'Yeah.'

'How did you know I was here?' She can feel a scream welling up in her throat.

'I saw you leave work. I was waiting in the café opposite. I always wait for you.'

She slumps back against the table. Her fingers grip the edge. 'What's this all about?' she whispers. 'What do you want?'

'We belong together,' he says. 'I'll look after you. I'll never let you out of my sight.'

'Why did you kill Jane?' she asks.

He moves towards her. He puts an arm round her shoulder, and with his other hand he strokes her cheek.

'Let's not worry about Jane,' he murmurs, his lips moving against her hair.

'But I need to know,' she insists, although every word is an effort.

'I would have given her the world,' he says. 'But she was going to leave me. And I couldn't let her do that, could I?'