

THE SISTER OF
THE BOY WHO

Ele Nash

R E P R E S E N T E D B Y T H E V I N E Y A G E N C Y

JAKE

New Year's Eve

“I’m not like them, with eyes that look in.

I kiss with a gaze; I seek out the days

When I will be free.”

Lyrics from *Honestly*, by *Black Hearts in Battersea*

The irregular drumbeat was giving Jake Bennett a headache. He wanted to tell the crappy band, the whole bloody bar, to shut the hell up but he guessed that wasn't in the spirit of New Year's. His watch read 23.42. Not long to go 'til midnight then he could get out of here. Not home. Not to his parents watching New Year on TV rather than being a part of it. All they did these days was go on at him to knuckle down. But what did A-Levels matter when he was going to be a rock star, touring the world?

'This band's crap,' Rocco said. 'You should be playing, Jake. Get a bit of The Boy Who to mix things up, yeah?'

Jake glanced at Rocco's bleached-blond hair and black-polished fingernails. He was a nice enough kid from the year below, Ava's year. 'Too right, Rocco-boy,' Jake said.

'No one plays bass like you.' Rocco bit his lip then said: 'I'm, you know, learning.'

Jake inhaled and smiled. 'Yeah?' Jake couldn't help being the guy every other guy wanted to be. The Boy Who. It's how his band got their name. Jake was the boy who people wanted to hang with, the boy who got the girl, the boy who picked up a bass and played it like he was John Entwistle from The Who reincarnated.

Rocco kept talking, getting technical about plucking. Jake's attention wandered until his gaze found Kitty Greene: the breathy singer in his band. God, that girl was beautiful. Not conventionally. Not like a model. She had an interesting kind of beauty, like an actress. Blonde and pale with the bluest eyes Jake had ever seen. He hadn't expected to see her tonight. Wasn't she supposed to be staying with her mother? The witch had probably let Kitty down again. Kitty was probably feeling vulnerable. Jake smiled at her. His night had just got a whole lot better.

'See you later, mate,' Jake said to Rocco – who was still talking – and made his way over to Kitty.

Kitty raised her unplucked eyebrow. He wanted to kiss her then and there. He would have but he couldn't be sure she'd kiss him back. And there was no way he was going to be shown up in front of all these people.

'Let's go outside,' he whispered in her ear, delighted when she rolled her shoulder up; he'd given her shivers.

He took her hand and tugged her through the crowds, out the door and quickly past the smokers trembling in the cold night. He could use a fag but he didn't want her to have an asthma attack. She was always having those.

'My mum,' Kitty began, her mouth down-turned.

Those lips! He wanted those lips under his, all over him. He caught his hand on the back of her head, fingers raking through her bushy hair and pulled her to him. Just a hug. He had to show that he cared, that he wasn't just after one thing – which was her reason for always pushing him away. He told himself he didn't just want her for one thing but that one thing did seem to crowd his thoughts every minute of every hour of every day.

Out here, the rubbish band sounded no better than it had inside the bar. As though reading his thoughts, Kitty Greene said: 'They should have asked us to play.'

Jake pulled back a little, keeping his hand in her hair, keeping her close. 'Too bloody right. But my parents reckon Ava's too young to play in bars. I wish we knew someone else who could play drums like her. Someone aged eighteen.'

Not that Jake was eighteen yet either. Not for another year but he was always tripping ahead of himself, rushing to get to the next moment. Now he felt an urgency to get to the next moment with Kitty Greene. She started to sway, her hand lightly resting on his chest and before he knew it, they were kind of dancing.

She laughed, low and husky. For the first time ever, Jake wanted to press pause on this moment. There was a stillness, a painful longing that was kind of brilliant.

‘Ava! You pissed? It’s this way!’

Despite himself, Jake turned his head in the direction of the shout, not yet registering the name but somehow responding to it. He saw his sister, Ava, staggering around the corner with a straggling group of her hyena friends. Typically, they were laughing.

Jake felt Kitty loosening herself from his grasp. His blood, which had been simmering from their intimacy a moment ago, now began to boil, turning – as it so often turned – to anger. Directed at Ava.

‘What the hell are you doing out?’

He spat the words and took several steps toward her. Fifteen-year-old Ava blinked at him, her blurred eyes trying to focus. She had told their parents that she was staying over at Ting’s. Ting was with her, looking – Jake couldn’t help himself from noticing – like jailbait in a tight black dress and red lipstick.

‘We’re just,’ Ava slurred then hiccupped.

The motley crew around her burst into peals of laughter again. Jake was sure he caught a whiff of dope.

‘Bloody hell, Ava. All of you. Get yourselves home before you fall over. And what the hell are you wearing?’ Now Jake looked, Ava was dressed in a short skirt, low cut shirt, ripped tights. Like a girl his mates would lurch all over. ‘Where’s your coat?’

Ava snorted a laugh. ‘Alright, grandad. Calm down! I’m not three, you know.’

‘Dad’ll kill you.’

‘Dad’ll kill you,’ she parroted.

‘Ava!’

‘OK you two,’ Kitty said, stepping between them, her hand on Jake’s wrist. This alone was enough to distract him from Ava. ‘Promise you’ll go home. All of you?’

Ting nodded while the rest of the girls stepped back; they clearly had no plans to go home. Jake realised Megadeath – Meredith – wasn’t out with them; the only sensible one of Ava’s friends.

Ava shook her head at Kitty and tipped her chin up defiantly. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

Before he knew it, Jake’s temper flared again. ‘Go home, Ava, or I’ll drag you home and tell Dad exactly where I found you.’

‘Piss off, Jake. There’s like a million things I could tell Dad about you. Like how you and that girl – what was her name? Jenny, Jamie, Jule...’

‘Shut up!’ Jake glanced at Kitty, who had taken a step away from him. His temper, which had so far only fluttered in his palms, now seized his whole body. ‘Do what the hell you like then, you stupid little bitch.’

He span around, clenching his fists, needing to get away. Fuck her. Fuck them all. He hated everything about this town, about the losers in it. He especially hated his idiot sister. Spotting a bicycle leant up against the bar wall, he grabbed it and got on. Not the coolest getaway vehicle but quicker than being on foot.

‘Hey,’ Kitty said, chasing him onto the back. ‘I’m coming.’

Yes, Jake thought. Yes.

The bike wobbled. It wasn’t easy getting the pedals going with the weight of two. But he did it.

‘Jake,’ Ava said. ‘You’re such a twat.’

Ting started to laugh. He heard the tinkle of it as he turned onto the quiet road. The bike staggered from left to right.

A crowd of Jake's mates spilled out from the pub, caught sight of him.

'Woah, Jake-y!' they yelled and whistled.

Jake waved, his back to them. Kitty Greene looked behind her, laughing her husky laugh. Ava rolled her bloodshot eyes and was about to turn away. The headlights caught them all off guard, swinging around the corner at speed. Tugged by an invisible hand, the bike swerved straight into the path of the headlights.

'Jake,' Ava whispered.

Jake felt the impact but nothing hurt. He and Kitty seemed to spin up, up, into the cold night and stayed suspended there for a lifetime. The invisible hand that drew the bike into the car now cradled him, held him so he had time to hear, he thought, the cry of Kitty. Or was that a scream from his own head? It puzzled him for a moment and he tried to make sense of the sound when, vroom, the invisible hand lost its grasp of him and he fell.

And he landed.

And everything, all the world, pushed up from beneath him, travelled through him and ripped out of him the other side.

AVA

Nine months later

October

“The eyes are the window to the soul.”

English proverb

Coping skills to tolerate distress

1. *Listening to music*

I start up a drumroll to drown out Mum's wail. It adds to the drama that's going on downstairs, like I'm signifying an announcement – *and the winner is*, kind of thing. Building anticipation. Only there's no anticipation here. I can guess what Mum's saying. She's said it about a hundred times before. Or since, depending on where you're standing.

I'm standing in this morning, in the now, upstairs in my bedroom; the walls are covered in moody Black Hearts in Battersea posters and there are photos too, collaged faces from a year ago or more. Nothing recent. I could say I'm sitting but I never sit when drumming. I hover, levitate. The beats create an air-pocket that lifts me off the stool. That's how it feels. Weightless. It's the only time I ever feel light. Drumming is a time machine, taking me back to The Boy Who, back to Jake, back to before. Drumming gives me wings.

No, wings would mean I could fly and if that were true, I'd be out the window and into the dawn in a flash, like in a dream. Like in those brightly-coloured dreams when I had a bird's eye view. The town sprawled beneath me: a patchwork of red roofs, honey-coloured buildings, green trees and sun-dried parks. And crisscrossing through it all, a network of charcoal roads crawling with white lights. Flying next to me was a boy I called Jake, my brother only somehow not my brother. As we flew, my elbow knocked against something. Jake said, *look out*, and I looked but not fast enough. Liquid spilled, across the landscape. The buildings and trees, the parks and roads, all oozed red stuff. I actually gasped as I woke.

It persists, the memory of the dream, for reasons that now seem prescient, like a rooster crowing in a Thomas Hardy novel, a bad omen, a symbolism of the spilling to come.

I'm over-thinking it. But even if the dream means nothing, it's a proof of sorts that I once dreamed in colour and now I do not. I dream in a scale of grey, light to dark, like I'm in an old movie, only I'm not the lead. My brain, rather than making me its star, the one spilling red across the town, has relegated me to watching. Not like a director, simply a viewer, passive, inactive. I worry why my brain is doing this, like it's important. It might need probing by a therapist - but I'm stuck with Tanya. A proper therapist would surmise that all is not right in Ava's head, with Ava's emotional well-being, with Ava.

That's what I think. But that's never what I'd say. I'm the ghost of Ava, a background ghost who doesn't spook – or speak. At school, nobody ever tells me to do anything. Yesterday, the sun burst out from behind a cloud and I closed my eyes and lifted my chin and let it beat on my face for a full minute and this was in the middle of a hockey match and no one, not even pissy, competitive Freya Watson told me to fucking wake up and get the hockey ball that was rolling past me.

There's a good reason they don't hound me: tears. At first, I cried a lot. Like every time anybody said they were sorry to hear about... well, you know. It must be hard, they'd say and perhaps rub my arm and blink a few times and that was often when that emotion, that well of darkness inside my gut, started spewing. Only it came out of me in saltwater, which made me cry harder because it should have been like treacle sticking to my eyelashes. This upset wasn't insipid like tears, it was tacky, claggy, stewed and thick. It was the disgusting hair you pull out of plugholes. It should make you retch to see it, make you physically recoil in horror.

That's what my pathetic tears should have done. Instead, these tears garnered sympathy, whispers, hushed reassurances, a tissue, two tissues, three. It sometimes led the person to spout their own easy tears and then I'd be the one patting their arm and apologising like something was my fault.

After a while, people began to tiptoe around me, hoping I wouldn't start all of that bawling. What use was it now? After all these months. Shouldn't she be used to it? It's dragging all of us down. Like a weight. Like an anchor when we only want to set sail on the waters of our own tears about our own problems, our own heartaches. Haven't we heard enough of hers by now?

They were right, of course they were. Crying distilled saltwater meant nothing when the darkness within remained. So I stopped crying and then, over hours, over days, I stopped functioning. Stopped talking. Stopped myself dead. I should move or say something but it's like a gust of wind has permanently carried my voice away. I am shut down. I am shut up. I have the blinds drawn and the closed sign turned on the door. I am driving everyone crazy.

Mum says: 'If that school counsellor calls me one more time, Ava. Just talk to her!'

Just talk, like that, like it's that easy. Switch on. Plug in. Turn the key. Mum thinks I'm doing it on purpose. *Electing* mutism. Maybe I am sometimes - like with Tanya. But lately, increasingly, things, feelings, words, get stuck. Inside. They don't come out for anyone.

Except Jake. I don't freeze around him; my words never get lost. I am open, blinds up, as soon as I see him at the end of the school day. I tell him about my crappy day at school, what Meredith said to Ting and what Ting called her behind her back. I tell Jake about the new guy with the diamond earring, whatever his name is, I don't remember or I didn't listen or maybe he never said.

The words bubble up out of my throat like foam. We watch them fly, the words. Jake tries to catch them and we clap when he does. Often he doesn't reach but that's not his fault and that's OK anyway because it's fun watching them fly. I like watching the swear words fly the most. Let fly. Let rip. Yes, maybe that's better. Rip. The words tear the sky to pieces and then the pieces fall on us like confetti.

Now I fall. The lightness as I drum is deception. I'm weighted by questions. A million of them. Was it my fault? And that leads me into the labyrinth, down blind alleys and dead ends. Why did I

persuade Ting to go out that night? Why didn't I just stay home, like Meredith had? I should have buried myself like I'm buried now.

I close my eyes. Jake stands outside the bar, swaying with Kitty Greene in his arms. Without my interruption, he might have stayed that way forever. Might have been The Boy Who forever. It's still his name, only without the capitals. He's now *the boy who* is a tragedy, *the boy who* will never be the same, *the boy who* is changed forever. Poor bastard.

I drop the drumsticks. I imagine Mrs Hardy next door breathing a sigh of relief – even if she insists she doesn't mind my drumming at this ungodly hour. But the house is now too silent. Pressing in against the walls, against the roof, wanting to force its way out. A pressure-cooker. She's going to blow!

I drummed too long. I'm running behind, rushing through getting dressed for school – in my usual black T-shirt and jeans - putting on mascara and a touch of powder. I have a spot the size of Mount Everest that could use more coverage, but there's no time. I move quickly onto the landing, heart hammering, back sweaty. The door to Jake's bedroom is open. Except for his bass guitar – which hangs on the wall in the living room like a picture - his stuff spills across the floor where he'd left it: music magazines, clothes, homework. Jake spills out of here. But Jake isn't in here.

The floor tremors, or is that me? I do what I always do when the explosion seems imminent. I go find Jake.