

I

ADAM AND EVA

ONE

48 DAYS BEFORE THE DINNER PARTY

Afternoon

Adam felt the warmth of Eva's breath before she kissed him. And when he opened his eyes with a start – his heart beating fast as if to a shiver of infinite goose bumps - he saw his wife smile as she fell back beside him, the invisible half of her face barely denting the breadth of his muscular shoulder, and the fresh wetness of her body brushing against his very gently as she too began to shiver with the lightness of a leaf.

'You're still naked,' she said.

Lying flat across the crumple of their seven-foot bed, when Adam went to turn by raising his opposite shoulder, he felt the weight of Eva's arm move across his chest. Then the palm of her hand cupped his shoulder and pushed it back down.

'Stay,' she said. 'Just for a minute.'

It was a cloudless afternoon at the end of May, and with the sun still flooding in through the blinds that were always kept undrawn whenever, day or night, he and Eva had sex, Adam imagined himself looking down at their two naked bodies, one glittering in sweat and the other aglow in the wet of its luminous whiteness, not as fiercely entangled as they had been before but still somehow indivisibly together.

'You've been lying here all this time?' Eva asked.

'Thinking,' he said.

Even without looking at her Adam saw her beauty: the blackness of her hair as it broke the fragile whiteness of her skin, the vital liquid brightness of her pale grey-blue eyes, the small sideways bend in her nose that made it more perfect, the mouth that smoothly tapered into spirals, the neck that made the curves of her figure stand upright like those of a statue... All this like every other part of her was visible to him all the time.

'About what?' Eva lifted her head and propped herself up on her elbow.

'About how much I love you,' Adam said.

'Was it the sex?'

'That was more than just sex.'

'So it was the sex.'

'It was exactly like before,' Adam said. 'Like the sex we used to have when we first met.'

'You mean like the sex we stopped having when I almost lost the plot,' Eva said. 'I promise you that all that's behind us now, you don't have to worry any more.'

It was true that Eva's steady recovery had not been interrupted by the shock of their more recent setback, as Adam had been terrified it might. He had expected the devastating news – that his wife was unable to bear him a child - to precipitate *at least* an interruption, and had braced himself for a reversal or even a total collapse. Well, if tentatively all his fears had proved unfounded, this afternoon's sex, once again nothing short of sublime, had put paid to them once and for all, signifying not just another inching forward but a final, exponential leap by which the deficit that had remained had been spontaneously made good: it was as if within that timeless moment of climax the burden of Eva's melancholia had been conjured off their shoulders completely. Adam knew his wife very well. After ten years of marriage, even her most hidden and inscrutable moods, opaque and hieroglyphic to everyone else, had for Adam the transparency of an open book.

'After today, I think I believe you,' he said.

When Eva laughed and Adam glanced up at her, their eyes locked onto each other's for a moment, then Eva closed hers, and as she lowered her smile over his very slowly, Adam felt the tingle of her hair on his neck, and he closed his eyes too to wait for her kiss.

'Dingo?' asked Eva's voice.

By the time Adam opened his eyes, Eva was up on all fours looming over him.

'Don't worry about Dingo,' he said, and as he grasped her with both hands by the back of her neck, the ring of the doorbell reverberated harshly through the two-storey apartment, backed by a cascade of distant yaps.

'Woof, woof,' barked Dingo from behind the closed door of the furthest spare bedroom. 'Woof, woof,' he continued to bark after the ring of the doorbell had stopped.

'Wait,' Adam said, when Eva pulled away from him and went to get up. 'It's probably those kids selling over-priced dusters.'

'What time is it?' asked Eva, putting up no resistance as Adam held on to her tightly. When the doorbell rang again, Dingo howled more plaintively, as though from the top of a distant mountain. Adam loosened his grip, letting Eva wriggle out of it freely. She grabbed her towel from the side of the bed, and wrapping it around her she stood up.

'You're still wet,' Adam said, and already he had thrown on a T-shirt and slipped into the shorts he wore in bed. 'I'll go,' he said.

'It's Saturday,' said Eva inconsequentially. 'If it's kids selling overpriced dusters, don't let them bully you into buying any more. Don't even buzz them in.'

'Whoever it is, I'll get rid of them,' said Adam. And as he strode out of the room, before he closed the door behind him he held it for a moment ajar, to poke his head around it mischievously: 'Don't get dressed yet, it's only half past four.' He ignored Dingo's wailing and bounded down the stairs.

Adam saw the two policemen on the wide-angle intercom video screen. They seemed ready to give up and walk away, but then one of them extended his finger and pressed on the button again.

'Number 61, right?' Adam heard him crackle through the speaker.

'That's what they gave us,' the other one answered.

'Hello,' Adam said. 'This is number 61, can I help you?'

'Good evening, sir.' The taller of the two policemen had stooped over the microphone as though it were a confidant's ear. 'Is this the residence...' He pulled

back to consult the open pocket book he had in his hand, and then stooping again, 'Is this the residence of a Ms Eva Harper?'

'Polk,' said Adam. 'Harper was her maiden name. Yes it is, is something the matter?'

'And you are, sir?'

'Adam Polk,' Adam said. 'Her husband.'

'I apologize, sir, we seem to have been given incomplete information. May I ask if Mrs...'

'Polk,' Adam said. 'P-O-L-K.'

'Much obliged, sir, thank you. Mr Polk, may I ask if Mrs Polk is at home?'

'Yes, yes she is.'

'Would it be possible to have a word with her?'

'Is something wrong?' Adam asked again.

In a fuzzy burst of movement on the video screen, 'If you don't mind, sir, really we should talk to her in person,' said the other officer, manhandling his colleague out of the way as if to take his turn at hogging the microphone.

'I see.' Adam shifted absently from leg to leg.

'Sir?'

'Yes, yes of course. Sixth floor,' Adam said, and after buzzing the officers into the building, he brought the bottom of his T-shirt to his face and wiped his perspiration. Then he opened the door and waited for the elevator. Already above the call button the light had come on.

'Mr Polk?' asked the shorter officer.

When he nodded, both officers showed him their warrant cards and introduced themselves – were they called warrant cards or badges, Adam wondered stupidly as he showed the two officers in. While they were taking their helmets off, almost in a dream it occurred to him that neither of their names had registered, but unless he had imagined it, one was a constable and the other a sergeant. No, he could see the stripes now, three on one vest, discreetly on the epaulettes, and none on the other. It was the shorter officer who was the sergeant. He was shorter but stronger, bulging out of his vest like a fun-size circus muscleman.

'My wife's upstairs,' Adam said after shutting the door.

'Is there an upstairs?' asked the officer who wasn't a sergeant, leaning forward with his tallness to look this way and that, as if to ferret out the mysterious upstairs. 'That's unusual, isn't it, sarge?'

'Yes, it's a two-storey apartment,' Adam answered mechanically.

'Is it really, Mr Polk? A two-storey apartment, eh? Very nice, I'm sure.'

'Your wife, Mr Polk,' the sergeant snapped. 'We need to have a word with her, if you wouldn't mind fetching her.'

'I will,' Adam said, 'but first you need to tell me what's happened.' His after-sex euphoria had taken a plummet no sooner than the two policemen had mentioned "a Ms Eva Harper", and now his heart was pummelling against his chest with an extraordinary violence, as though escaping from an onslaught of a thousand incoherent premonitions.

'We have some very bad news about her mother, I'm afraid,' the sergeant offered reluctantly.

'Lynn?'

After taking an age to leaf through his pocket book, 'Lynn Harper, that's correct,' said the more garrulous officer who wasn't a sergeant. 'Perhaps Mr Polk could look at those photographs, sarge, just to make sure. No point upsetting Mrs Polk unnecessarily.'

'No, of course not,' the castigated sergeant snapped again, and taking an envelope out of one of his outside vest pockets (so *many* stab-vest pockets, Adam thought), 'Mr Polk, would you mind?' He took two photographs out of the envelope and handed them to Adam.

Adam examined them closely. One was of Eva as a seven or eight-year-old child, probably a studio photograph of her with her mother and father. He had seen photographs of Eva with her father before, and unmistakably the attractive, slightly plump woman somewhere in her youthful late twenties was Lynn. On the back someone had written in pencil: The Harpers, 1987. The other was of Eva and Lynn in Lynn's kitchen, with Eva gawping awkwardly at the camera and Lynn over her shoulder beaming. Adam could remember taking it at Lynn's insistence two or three years after he and Eva had met. He turned it around, where the same hand had written in black marker pen and in capital letters: NEXT OF KIN: EVA HARPER (DAUGHTER), 61 FITZROVIA TOWER, LONDON W1.

'Where did you find these?' Adam asked.

'They were in the lady's handbag,' the sergeant said. And pointing with his finger at the grown-up Eva, 'Is that your wife, Mr Polk?'

'I took this photograph myself after we were married,' said Adam. 'Why would Lynn have written Eva Harper?'

'I guess we'll never find out,' blabbed the officer who wasn't a sergeant. 'Unless of course she didn't think your marriage would last.'

'Don't be impertinent, George.'

'Sorry, sarge.'

'He's probably right,' said Adam.

'But it obviously has,' said irrepressible George.

'We've been married for almost ten years,' Adam said.

'Congratulations, sir,' said George.

'So, Mr Polk, might we have that word with your wife now?' said the sergeant.

'But if these were in Lynn's handbag...'

'There's been an accident, you see,' George put in. And then remembering to echo his sergeant, 'But really we should talk to her in person.'

Through the arch in the hallway and then turning to the right, Adam led the way to the living room.

'Look, sarge, there's the stairs!' George exclaimed enthusiastically.

'Yes, George, I can see them,' his sergeant replied with a short sharp shake of his head.

Adam offered the two officers a seat, and before he went upstairs to fetch his wife, he handed the two photographs back to the sergeant.

Behind the door of his prison cell (he had to be locked up whenever Eva and Adam had sex), Dingo was yapping again – had he ever stopped? Adam let him out and walked nervously behind him as they both made their way to Eva.

They found her half-dozing on the bed in her bathrobe.

'You've been ages,' she said. 'I nearly gave up and got dressed.'

Dingo leapt onto the bed and licked her face.

'You let the dog out,' Eva said with a scowl, as if to say the dog meant no more sex, and *why* had Adam let him out?

'I think you should,' Adam said.

'I should what?'

'Get dressed,' Adam said. 'The police want to talk to you.'

'The police?'

'They're downstairs, waiting.'

'Waiting for what? Have they come to arrest me?' When Eva laughed vivaciously, Dingo barked, as he always did when Eva laughed vivaciously. Adam continued to look at her sombrely.

'Something terrible's happened,' she said.

'I think so,' said Adam. 'There's been an accident, apparently. Eva, they have some bad news about Lynn. I think...'

'Bad news about Lynn?'

A broad smile had occupied a face that had suddenly lit up unfamiliarly, and already Adam's fears had been confirmed. His wife's recovery might not prove so resilient after all.

'Well, don't just stand there,' she said. 'Go tell them I'll be down in a minute. And offer them some tea. Wait. This can only mean one thing, right?'

'Eva, are you sure you're okay?'

'I mean, if they've gone to all the trouble to come here... How many of them are there?'

'Two.'

'Two? That's just like in the movies. Then I can't think what else it can mean. Go! And don't forget to offer them some tea. Proper tea, don't just give them teabags.'

Adam thought it best to lock Dingo away again, and then he hurried back downstairs to make tea.

'I must warn you,' he said to the two officers. 'I think my wife suspects the worst, and she's not being herself.'

When Eva walked into the living room wearing tumbledown jeans and an oversized Mickey Mouse sweatshirt, the officers put down their cups of tea, and then they both stood up to introduce themselves.

'Mrs Polk,' the sergeant began.

'I understand there's been an accident,' Eva interrupted him cheerfully.

'Well, you must tell me all about it, but first you'd like me to sit down, I suppose. Let's all sit down, shall we? Right then, I'm all ears.'

'It's about your mother, Mrs Polk,' the sergeant went on.

'Yes, yes, I know, can you *please* just tell me what's happened?'

'As you say, there was an accident earlier, an accident involving her vehicle...'

'A blue Mercedes,' said George.

'Apparently she lost control and careered off the road and smashed through some railings,' said the sergeant quickly.

'So she's dead,' Eva said.

'I'm afraid so, yes,' said the sergeant.

'Eva, I'm so sorry,' Adam said, but his wife's forbidding hand cut him short.

'Was she wearing her seat belt?'

'Was she wearing her seat belt?' the sergeant repeated uncertainly.

'Or did she smash through the windscreen?' Eva made a violent thrusting gesture with her arms.

'Ms Harper,' the sergeant stumbled, 'I mean Mrs Polk... I don't think...'

'Please,' Eva insisted, 'I'd like to know the details. Was she already dead when the ambulance arrived?'

'She was alive,' said the sergeant.

'And conscious?'

'I believe so, yes.'

'So she must have been in pain.'

'A piece of the railings had come loose, you see...'

'Sharp as the sharpest Roman spear, went right through her and pinned her to her seat,' George filled in for his sergeant poetically. 'Kind of makes it immaterial whether Mrs Harper was wearing her seat belt or not, doesn't it, sarge?'

'What's the matter with you, George, that's enough!' his sergeant ordered him firmly.

The sight of his wife goggle-eyed on the edge of her seat was making Adam sweat again, and every now and then he would wipe his face dry on his sleeves. But his sleeves were getting wet, and Adam was beginning to wonder if this blow-by-blow nightmare was ever going to end.

The sergeant must have wondered the same before finally deciding to end it.

'This piece of railing, Mrs Polk, when the ambulance arrived it was still lodged in her chest... I'm afraid it was some time before the fire crew could extract Mrs Harper from her vehicle...'

'And was she still alive then? She must have been in *terrible* pain,' Eva speculated merrily.

'Eva!'

'Not now, Adam, please!'

'She died shortly afterwards,' the sergeant said with a sigh. 'There was nothing much the paramedics could do, she'd lost too much blood.'

'Like a vampire!' said Eva. 'Killed by a stake through her heart. How deliciously apt!'

'Eva, what's wrong with you?' Adam heard his muscular voice resonate too loudly through the room. 'I'm sorry,' he said to the officers, 'I think my wife is in shock.'

'There's no need to be sorry, sir,' the sergeant said.

'We've known people react in all sorts of ways in these situations,' said George philosophically. 'Mrs Polk, we're really very sorry for your loss.'

'And the loss of one's mother must be a terrible shock,' said the sergeant.

'It's a terrible shock for a five-year old child,' retorted Eva sharply. 'I think there's something you all need to know. That woman certainly *wasn't* my mother, and now she's dead I don't have to pretend, nor do I have to call her "mother", I'm finally free!'

'Sarge?'

'Mr Polk?'

'Eva?'

'I'm sorry, Adam, we'll talk about this later.'

'But this photograph,' the sergeant remembered. He removed it from the envelope that already was out of his pocket, and after reading again what was written on the back, he handed it over to Eva. 'It says so clearly: DAUGHTER.'

When Eva Polk, née Harper, had given the officers a brief summary of her family history, and had additionally expressed her hatred since *before* the age of five for the woman whose death they had come to inform her of, the officers in turn expressed once again their regret that they had not been more accurately briefed.

'Am I still the next of kin?' Eva asked. 'I don't think she had anyone else.'

'I'd have to make inquiries, Mrs Polk,' said the sergeant. 'But my guess is you probably are.'

'Does that mean I get the chance to identify the body?'

'Eva, I forbid you to,' said Adam.

'But if there's really no one else...'

The two officers were hesitating at the door.

'If it's absolutely necessary, then I'll identify the body,' said Adam, and he gave the two officers his number.

'I think I need a pint after that,' Adam heard the sergeant say to George as the elevator door was closing.

'A two-storey apartment!' Adam heard George answer. 'How about that, though, eh, sarge?'

And then their voices faded before they disappeared.