

The Reach is wide and quiet this morning, the pale blue sky streaked with pink mackerel-belly clouds, the shallow sea barely rippling in the slight breeze, and so the sound of the dog barking breaks into the calm like gunshots, setting flocks of gulls crying and wheeling in the air.

Plovers and terns explode up as the dog bounds joyously down the riverbank, scampering down the runnelled side, where the earth turns from spiky grassy dunes to reed-specked mud, where the water wavers between salt and fresh.

In the distance the Tide Mill stands sentinel, black and battered against the cool calm of the morning sky, the only man-made structure in a landscape slowly crumbling back into the sea.

'Bob!' The woman's voice rings out above the volley of barks as she pants to catch up. 'Bob, you rascal. Drop it. Drop it, I say. What've you found?'

As she draws closer the dog tugs again at the object protruding from the mud, trying to pull it free.

'Bob, you filthy brute, you're covered. Let it go. Oh God, it's not another dead sheep, is it?'

It's the last heroic yank that sends the dog staggering back along the shore, something in its jaw. Triumphant, he scrambles up the bank to lay the object at the feet of his owner.

And as she stands, looking dumbstruck, the dog panting at her feet, the silence returns to the bay, like a tide coming in.

Rule One

Tell a Lie

The sound is just an ordinary text alert, a quiet ‘beep beep’ in the night that does not wake Owen, and would not have woken me except that I was already awake, lying there, staring into the darkness, the baby at my breast snuffing, not quite feeding, not quite unlatching.

I lie there for a moment thinking about the text, wondering who it could be. Who’d be texting at this hour? None of my friends would be awake . . . unless it’s Milly gone into labour already . . . God, it can’t be Milly, can it? I’d promised to take Noah if Milly’s parents couldn’t get up from Devon in time to look after him but I never really thought . . .

I can’t quite reach the phone from where I’m lying, and at last I unlatch Freya with a finger in the corner of her mouth, and rock her gently onto her back, milk-sated, her eyes rolling back in her head like someone stoned. I watch her for a moment, my palm resting lightly on her firm little body, feeling the thrum of her heart in the birdcage of her chest as she settles, and then I turn to check my phone, my own heart quickening slightly like a faint echo of my daughter’s.

As I tap in my PIN, squinting slightly at the brightness of the screen, I tell myself to stop being silly – it’s four weeks until Milly’s due, it’s probably just a spam text, *Have you considered claiming a refund for your payment protection insurance?*

But, when I get the phone unlocked, it’s not Milly. And the text is only three words.

I need you.

It is 3.30 a.m., and I am very, very awake, pacing the cold kitchen floor, biting at my fingernails to try and quell the longing for a cigarette. I haven’t touched one for nearly ten years, but the need for one ambushes me at odd moments of stress and fear.

I need you.

I don’t need to ask what it means – because I know, just as I know who sent it, even though it’s from a number I don’t recognise.

Kate.

Kate Atagon.

Just the sound of her name brings her back to me, like a vivid rush – the smell of her soap, the freckles across the bridge of her nose, cinnamon against olive. Kate. Fatima. Thea. And me.

I close my eyes, and picture them all, the phone still warm in my pocket, waiting for the texts to come through.

Fatima will be lying asleep beside Ali, curled into his spine. Her reply will come around 6 a.m., when she gets up to make breakfast for Nadia and Samir and get them ready for school.

Thea – Thea is harder to picture. If she’s working nights she’ll be in the casino where phones are forbidden to staff, and shut up in lockers until their shifts are finished. She’ll roll off

shift at eight in the morning, perhaps? Then she'll have a drink with the other girls, and then she'll reply, wired up with a successful night dealing with punters, collating chips, watching for card sharps and professional gamblers.

And Kate. Kate must be awake – she sent the text, after all. She'll be sitting at her dad's work table – hers now, I suppose – in the window overlooking the Reach, with the waters turning pale grey in the predawn light, reflecting the clouds and the dark hulk of the Tide Mill. She will be smoking, as she always did. Her eyes will be on the tides, the endlessly shifting, eddying tides, on the view that never changes and yet is never the same from one moment to the next – just like Kate herself.

Her long hair will be drawn back from her face, showing her fine bones, and the lines that thirty-two years of wind and sea have etched at the corners of her eyes. Her fingers will be stained with oil paint, ground into the cuticles, deep beneath the nails, and her eyes will be at their darkest slate blue, deep and unfathomable. She will be waiting for our replies. But she knows what we'll say – what we've always said, whenever we've got that text, those three words.

I'm coming.

I'm coming.

I'm coming.