

EXTRACT 2

I sit at the kitchen table with my cup of tea, trying to calm myself before I go and pick Millie up from school. I need to be in a better frame of mind for her. She deserves nothing but joy in her life.

I'm so deep in thought that the knock at the door only partially registers with me. I hear it, and yet it seems for a moment as if it's got nothing to do with me at all.

I shake myself back to reality, wearily push myself up from the chair and head towards the door. *Who can be calling at this time on a Thursday afternoon?*

It's the last person I'm expecting to see, and I cling on to the door as if I need its support.

'Steve! Christ, what are you doing here?'

I was wrong to wonder if I would recognise him. He's older, tidier, but still has the same floppy blond hair and blue eyes.

'That's nice, when I've come especially to see you.' He looks over my shoulder as if to check that I'm alone. 'Can I come in?'

'No! Of course not.' I grip the door a little tighter. 'Ash could come home at any time, and he can't find you here.'

I know that he's unlikely to make an appearance at this time of day, but Steve doesn't, and I need to get rid of him. I don't want him here.

He ignores me. 'Where's Millie?'

'She's at school, and I need to go and pick her up in a minute. Steve, what the fuck are you doing turning up on my doorstep like this? We talked about how we had to keep this between us.'

'That's what *you* said, but I don't remember agreeing to it. You're asking a lot of me, you know. So maybe I want to check things out for myself before I agree.'

I stare at him, hoping the dismay isn't showing on my face. 'I'm not asking *anything* of you. You're being bloody ridiculous. Please go now. I'll come and see you – maybe tomorrow when Millie's at school.'

He pushes out his bottom lip in a most unattractive way. 'Not convenient, I'm afraid. I'm going to be staying in the middle of nowhere – up in the hills – with a friend.'

Why is he here, in Manchester, two hundred miles from his home? Was I right? Was it his eyes I could feel on the back of my neck on Monday? The thought makes me shudder.

'Have you been following me?'

He barks out a laugh. 'Don't be ridiculous. I would have told you I was going to come and see you today if you'd answered my texts. You're not helping by ignoring me, you know. This is a big decision, and if you want me on your side you need to be a bit nicer to me, don't you think?'

I don't know what to say to that. I don't want to antagonise him, but he's standing too close to me, and it's making me uneasy. If I take a step back it might suggest that I'm letting him into the house, so I stand my ground, feeling his warm breath, reeking of old tobacco, on my cheek.

'Maybe I *will* follow you. That's not a bad idea at all. I won't talk to you; I'll keep my distance.'

I don't want this. The thought fills me with horror, but I can't stop a man from walking along the road, and I know Steve is stubborn enough to walk that bit closer if I don't manage him properly.

He must see the confusion in my eyes, because he backs away with a smirk on his face.

'Don't look round, Jo. I'll be right behind you.'

The walk back from school with Millie is uncomfortable. I can feel Steve's eyes on us, but I refuse to turn and look for him. Millie is skipping along as always, telling me about her day and how she had helped Zofia and taught her some new words.

'I thought she should learn please and thank you, Mum, but it's quite hard to explain why we say those words.' She giggles. 'She wouldn't have understood anyway, so I kept saying them in all the right places, and do you know what?'

'No, you tell me.'

'When we went for our lunch, she took her plate and said thank you. How brilliant is that?'

It's great to see her excitement, but she must sense there's something wrong, because I'm not teasing her or trying to make her laugh.

'Are you okay, Mummy?'

I smile and nod, but Millie's not fooled and she takes my hand, walking the rest of the way in silence.

Finally, we reach home and close the door. Immediately my phone pings.

Cute kid. I'm going to be doing some thinking.

Do you want to find out what happens next to Jo and Millie?

Check out the book on Amazon – [here](#).