

## THE KISS

He didn't see it coming; he was laughing at something she'd said, half turning his head towards her. A flash of her blonde hair in front of him, then something else, darker, out of the corner of his eye.

The strange thing was that there was no pain at first, just a crack, like a stick being snapped in half, then a hot rush – as if he'd dived into a pool of boiling water. He was aware of sweat prickling out of every pore and a sudden roaring in his ears, like the moment a train enters a tunnel and the wind buffets against the carriage walls.

Then came the pain. Holy Moses, what pain.

His nose was on fire, throbbing, and the agony radiated out from there, spreading across his cheeks and forehead, up into his scalp, down his neck and along his arms.

He felt himself crashing to the ground and fell hard, onto his knees, grit from the stone floor embedding itself in the palms of his hands.

Then something rammed into his ribs, a boot connecting with bone. It was forceful enough to lift his body and push him backwards so he ended up lying on his side, his legs pulled up beneath him, arms automatically moving up to protect his head against whatever came next.

But there was nothing else.

'Leave. My. Girl. Alone.'

Each word yelled into his ear: its own fully formed sentence. The stagnant breath behind the sound was flooding up his nostrils – a stench so vile that it turned his stomach more than the iron taste of blood.

He must have blacked out for a few seconds. The next thing he was aware of, was the sound of her voice. She was so close, almost whispering in his ear, and he realised that she was sitting on the ground with him. She must have lifted up his head, because now she was cradling it in her lap, wiping away blood with a piece of material, something soft, maybe the sleeve of her jumper.

He was in agony, an intense hurt roaring around his body. He opened his eyes and tried to turn his face and look up at her; but when he moved the pain grew sharper, like knives piercing his eyelids. It was better to stay still. But he

knew she was there, was aware of one her hands on his shoulder, the fingers of the other gently stroking his forehead, pushing back the hair that was now soaked in sweat and plastered against his skin.

Her voice in his ear was low, a faint trace of an accent he couldn't place.

'You know what they call that?' she said.

He had no idea what she was talking about.

'A Glasgow kiss.'

Through the thudding, as the blood pounded around his skull, he realised he could hear sirens in the distance.

'The idea is to break your nose,' she whispered, her lips skimming across the edge of his ear. 'One quick crack, his forehead connecting with the bridge of your nose. That's all it takes. Job done.'

The sirens were getting louder, the screech hurting his ears. He suddenly realised they were coming for him, that help was on its way. He was so grateful. A keening wail was coming from somewhere nearby, as if from a dying animal.

She was still bent over him; even through the excruciating pain he could feel the tips of her hair caressing his cheek.

'That's why it's called a kiss,' she was saying. 'It's just a brief moment of contact. Like this.'

He felt something soft against his cheek bone, the slightest pressure: her mouth against his blood-caked skin. In his mind he saw her face as he'd seen it in those few seconds before her boyfriend hit him. Her lips full and moist as she raised her glass to drink, her mouth stretching wide as she smiled, flicking her blonde hair back over her shoulder.

Now those lips were against his skin.

'I'm sorry,' she was whispering. He heard the rustle of her coat as she got up and started backing away.

The wail had subsided into a low moan, and he realised, shocked, that he was the one making the inhuman noise.

The sirens were now so loud they seemed to be pushing their way inside his head. Opening his eyes he caught a flash of blue streaking backwards and forwards on the ground in front of him.

Then silence.

Doors slamming, footsteps.

'Alright mate?'

'Hang on in there, we'll get you sorted.'

Something was being thrown over him, possibly a blanket. His hand was picked up, fingers were moving around the wrist to find a pulse: stocky, rough fingers – so unlike hers.

'We'll check you over, then give you something for the pain.'

Now that help was here, he realised the tension was flowing out of his body, pumping away with the blood and bits of shattered bone from his nose, leaving him drained, but strangely calm. He needed to sleep.

He hardly felt the needle dig into his upper arm, but recognised the welcome numbness as the drugs crept through his veins.

'Where is she?' he asked.

He could open his eyes now that the pain was receding, focus them on the green uniforms, the two men wearing them, the bags of medical equipment.

'No-one here mate. Who are you looking for?'

'The woman. The one with blonde hair.'

The nearest paramedic was staring down at him, his forehead wrinkled in confusion.

'I can't see any woman,' he said. 'Try not to move, you've had a nasty blow. Barman says the guy made off pretty quickly. Any idea who he was?'

He tried to shake his head, but everything felt too heavy. He closed his eyes again, desperate to keep hold of the memory of her as it slipped gently away from him.

'Just a kiss,' he said.

(991 words)