

# 1

Man, I couldn't stop looking at her. When I closed my eyes, I still saw her. Her hair was thick and blonde, and a curl looped over her ear to her shoulder. She wore black mascara and green eyeliner and her lips looked shiny and sticky.

Sonya Wilson was right there next to me and it made my brain buzz.

The fairground was doing its thing around us. Every family in Hackney was out today, every eight-year-old in the world come along just to squeal at each other. The queue for the dodgems stretched out past the barriers and on to the grass. Legs dangled from the top of the Tower of Power as it shot halfway down to Australia and back up again. The Octopus was swinging screamers towards us and away.

All that noise was fighting with the music and the music was fighting with itself. It was the usual crappy mashup, The Beatles mixed with Frank Sinatra mixed with Michael Jackson. But underneath was a bass beat, thump, thump, thump, like my heart.

What if I reached over and touched Sonya's chest to see if her heart was thumping too? Damn, she'd slap me from Hackney to Hawaii! I laughed.

She looked around. 'What's so funny?'

'Nothing really.'

She smiled. 'Yeah, it gets you that way.'

She finished paying for the hot dogs and offered me one. She'd squirted mustard *and* ketchup, an 'S' on mine and two straight lines on hers. I should have told her I hated mustard, but it was an 'S' for Sonya, like she was giving herself to me. My brain cells were glowing, all lit up with bubbles of serotonin. That's what Ecstasy does to you; it tickles your brain's insides. I grinned, at the hot dog seller, a steward, anybody.

Sonya said, 'Try it.'

I took a bite of hot dog and the claggy bread stuck to the roof of my mouth.

'You like?'

'Mmph.'

I forced myself to swallow. A big lump of mustard dropped to the bottom of my stomach, bread and pink sausage churning up together. My gut jumped, ready to seal itself shut. Sonya was looking at me, so I took another bite and she nodded her approval. My brain circuits were flashing like Switchback lights.

'Better stuff it in now,' she said. 'When the pill kicks in proper, you won't want nothing to eat. Except, maybe me.'

I felt myself blush. She couldn't have meant *that*. Those South London girls must use words differently. She grabbed

my hand and I was grinning again. I must look like Pac-Man. I wrapped my fingers round hers, not too tight or she'd feel them all sweaty. That must be the drugs again . . .

Or just being skin to skin with her.

We stood side by side, looking across the fair. Could she see it too? The world a bit gold and glittery?

I said, 'I think it's working.'

She shrugged. 'You only had a quarter, Marlon. But it's your first time, and the first time's always the best.'

*Ha.*

Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. I could have been like Yasir or those other wide-mouths. If everything they said was true, they'd smoked their weight in weed by time they were six.

I poked my tongue across the roof of my mouth. 'Should I have another drink?'

She rolled her eyes. 'You're all right. A quarter's just dust.'

It looked like I was heading towards sad-case country, so I took a deep, silent breath and put my arm round her shoulders, not too much pressure, keeping it all light. She didn't move away, but *her* arm stayed by her side.

'You're right,' I said. 'This is much better than revision.'

'Yeah.'

'My mum'll go mental.'

Sonya pulled her lips down into a sad face. 'You're going to tell her?'

‘Course not!’

‘So what’s the problem?’

*My mother’s a secret god and she can see everything.*

‘Nothing. Look!’ It was the pick ‘n’ mix stall. I still had a twenty in my pocket. ‘Fancy some?’

‘No. Let’s go around before it gets really mad. You don’t want too many people about if the pill sends you loony.’

I blinked. The world had turned dull again. ‘It doesn’t do that, does it?’

She gave a little sigh. ‘I was joking! I’ve done it loads of times and I’m all right.’

Yes, she was. More than all right, but I’d be a slick creep if I told her straight.

I said, ‘What do you fancy doing after?’

‘I dunno. We haven’t finished here yet.’

She sounded flat. I had to stop being so para. Girls like Sonya picked up on that stuff quick.

I smiled and said, ‘Cool. It’s up to you.’

But she must have heard something in my voice. She wriggled out from under my arm and moved round so she was facing me. Sonya’s face was different from this angle and when she smiled, her cheeks were big and round like a young kid. She held my hand between hers and squeezed my fingers. Oh, yes! Now my whole head was one giant light bulb. You could probably see it from the moon, no, even further than that. Thirty trillion miles away, an Alpha

Centaurian astronomer was wondering about that bright new speck blazing through the Milky Way.

Her little finger moved up to my mouth and stroked the side. Thirty trillion miles away, a lens shattered from the heat.

‘Ketchup,’ she said. ‘Seriously *not* cool.’

She unravelled her other hand from mine, took a tissue out of her little bag and dabbed my mouth. Even after she stopped, it felt like her finger was still there.

‘Why think about later when we’re here now?’ she said. ‘And even if we don’t do anything after, we’re definitely on for tomorrow. Today’s like, I don’t know, the starter. And tomorrow’s the main course.’

Our fingers were twisting together again, black and white all mixed up. At least Mum wouldn’t be funny about me going out with a white girl. Sonya’s family might not feel the same way about me, though. I’d have to find a way to ask her. Not now. Next time, or the time after that.

*And Tish? What’s she going to say when she finds out? She should be happy for me. We’d be equals.*

I scanned the crowds. Imagine if big mouth Yasir or double-thick Ronnie were here. Or Amir or Saul, or any of them other idiots. I played it out in my head. They’d swagger off some ride and catch sight of me and Sonya. Their mouths would drop open in shock. I’d slip my hand out of Sonya’s and slide my arm round her waist, all in real

slow-mo. And we'd walk away leaving them staring.

I know that sounds shallow. And yeah, she turned heads, but there was more to it. I wanted to make her laugh. I wanted to touch her arm. I wanted her to know how my breath kept getting stuck when she looked at me.

'It's the Dizzy Drum!' She pulled me towards it.

'We've just had hot dogs!'

'So what? Come on!'

Say 'no'? Not happening. I just had to stop thinking about the chaos that'd follow if I threw up in there.

I handed the yellow tokens to the fairground guy and we went through. Sonya pressed herself against the wall and I moved in next to her. Our fingertips touched as the drum began to spin.

'Here we go!' She squealed.

I was slammed against the metal like a dead fly, my hot dog squeezed into mush. The floor fell away from us and Sonya was just a blur of screams and pink jumper. Our fingers slipped apart and now I couldn't turn my head to see her. She was shouting or was that the girl across from me? Or me? The blood was pumping through my head like it was looking to burst out. And that mustard. I swallowed, swallowed, swallowed.

It slowed down, then stopped. Sonya grabbed my sleeve, laughing.

'You all right, Marlon?'

‘Yeah. Perfect.’

We stood there looking at each other, just for a second. Our hands locked again and we staggered off together, her shoulder nudged against mine so her hair brushed against my face.

*If we have kids together, what will their hair look like?*

*Kids? I haven’t even kissed her yet!*

If I did kiss her now, she’d taste of hot dogs and fun. All I had to do was bring her towards me, put my other hand on her back and stoop down a bit.

She was looking at me.

‘What are you thinking, Marlon?’

‘Spaceships.’

How the hell had that been in my head?

She didn’t run away though. She giggled. ‘Why?’

I had to get this back, but my mouth had become an independent life form. ‘The fairground. All the noise is like when the spaceship takes off. The flashing lights are when the engines go online and the gravity goes, and . . .’

Quick as it came to life, my mouth died.

‘Er . . . right.’ She stopped and let go of my hand, but it was okay. She was stroking my back now. The spine. Dead centre. ‘They must have cut these pills with something really good.’

My stomach blipped, but I made my voice casual. ‘Like what?’

She giggled again. 'Fairydust.'

I waited for her to walk away, straight on the phone to her mates about the moron she'd dumped in the park. But that didn't happen. Her hand worked its way up my back until she was tickling the hair on my neck. My follicles tingled, and my skin was straining up to her fingers like a happy cat.

And she said, 'Go on, Marlon. Tell me more about the spaceship.'

Kiss of life to my mouth. 'I know it's kind of geeky, but my dad was a Trekkie. Not just *Star Trek*, all of it, *Next Generation*, *Wrath of Khan*, everything. And *Star Wars* and *Blade Runner*, he was into that too. Even the really old stuff, like *Space 1999*.'

She stuck her fingers under my cap and twisted one of my plaits. 'Maybe everyone here's really an alien and we're the only humans.'

'Some people really think that,' I said.

She widened her eyes. 'Serious?' Her finger moved back down my neck until its path was stopped by my t-shirt. 'Go on, then!'

She was tracing shapes across the fabric, drawing circles on the knobbly end of my spine. *Speak, Marlon!*

She said, 'Come on! Tell me about all the abduction stuff!'

'It's not really abduction. Some people have got this

thing wrong with their brain, which means they never remember faces. It's called prosopagnosia.'

Luckily I managed to miss her with the bucket load of spit that came with saying that.

She raised her eyebrows, like she was impressed. 'So they don't recognise no one?'

'Kind of. It's more like they don't really remember what a face is. They think it could be an umbrella, or a hat, or, I don't know, a banana. So they might think their mum was an alien or something.'

Sonya breathed out heavily. 'Yeah, I can understand that. I sometimes think my mum's from another planet. How do you know all this stuff?'

'You know I told you about my brother?'

She nodded.

'When he was in hospital, the doctors gave me and Mum loads of neuroscience stuff to read. And then, I don't know, I just kept reading.'

'That's cool. Maybe you can be a brain surgeon.'

I laughed. 'How many brain surgeons do you know from Hackney?'

She poked my back. 'There may be some. Or you could be the first. You could really do that, Marlon.'

This was it. Now. With her face tilted sideways, looking at me with that smile. She had dimples! Why hadn't I noticed before? Perhaps she hadn't smiled this way before.

My throat was all sandy and my mouth tasted of metal, but I could just touch my lips against hers. Starters.

I reached my arms around her and she moved towards me, like she knew the routine. She wouldn't let me if she wasn't happy about it. But she was happy, because her fingers were stroking my neck again. She was looking right at me. Around me. Behind me.

She stepped back, taking her hand away. My bare skin seemed to stretch out to her. I needed her to touch me again.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I thought you wanted to—'

'Not now.' It was like she'd put a forcefield up all around her.

I touched her arm. 'What's wrong?'

She shook her head and pulled away from me, stalking across the fairground. I stood there staring at the roughed up grass and rubbish. Was this a game for her? Had she got a mate filming this for YouTube? No. I was getting para again.

'Sonya!' I called. 'Wait!'

Her flash of pink jumper was disappearing through the crowds. I squinted. She wasn't by herself. There were three boys, brushing round her, much too close. One was a black kid with cane row. Him and a skinny white kid with a bike were on one side of Sonya. I reckoned that they could be the same age as me, but I didn't recognise them.

The last one wore an old Stussy cap with his hood up, so the shadow made it hard to see his face. He was taller than the others, maybe a bit older. Then the black one turned around and stared right at me, a proper, hard screwface look.

*What the hell?*

*It's her boyfriend. He's come for her.*

I let my eyes drop, then looked again. He was walking away, the others sloping after him. Something far back in my brain started itching. Who was he?

'Sonya!'

I pushed towards her. All the dads out with their kids were looking at me, at her, then at me again. None of them were getting out the way. She was up ahead, standing by the Ghost Train, rubbing her face. Her eyes were shut. I stopped in front of her, went to touch her shoulder, but let my hand drop.

I said, 'Why d'you run off like that?'

She opened her eyes and stared right through me.

'I thought I was going to throw up,' she said, at last. 'But I'm okay now. It must have been that ride.'

'Those kids, were they hassling you?'

'I know them.'

'Yeah, the black one, I thought I recognised him too.'

She shrugged. 'Maybe you do. I don't know your life.'

*Sonya?*

‘It’s just, I thought, one of them might be your boyfriend, or something!’

‘You what? You think I pass between boys? You really think that?’

*No! The words came out wrong!*

‘Serious, Marlon! If you think that, you can just fuck off now. Actually, maybe it’s best if you do.’

Her face was pale and she was screwing up her eyes like the air was too bright.

I waited a second, like I did when Andre went off on one, and kept my voice low. ‘D’you think the pill’s making you feel a bit dodgy?’

‘No, Marlon! I don’t!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Just clear off and leave me alone!’

She was loud enough for people in the queue to turn around and look at us.

‘Okay,’ I said quietly. ‘I’ll go.’

But neither of us moved. Then Sonya jammed her knuckles into her eyes and her body hunched. When she took her hands away, green eyeliner was smeared down her cheek.

‘I’m really sorry.’ She rested a hand on each of my shoulders, with her forehead on my chest. ‘I didn’t mean to be such a bitch. My head feels like I’ve been shot between the eyes.’

‘We can go somewhere quiet, if you want.’

‘No, I’ll be fine. It’s sort of like a migraine and they come and go dead quick.’

*Don’t breathe too hard. Don’t jog her head. Don’t start her off again. Just—*

I wrapped both my arms around her, breathing in slowly like I was drawing her into me. I closed my eyes and let my chin touch the top of her head. A massive group of kids swarmed past us, jumping around and singing the chorus to ‘Thriller’. But it was okay, because I could hold her steady.

‘Thanks, Marlon. I feel a bit better now.’

‘Cool.’

‘Do I look okay?’

‘Yeah, great.’ *Perfect.*

She grinned. ‘You wouldn’t tell me if I looked shit, though, would you?’

It would have been good to run through some of this stuff with Tish first. She’d have told me the right answer to that one.

Sonya was scabbling in her little bag, probably looking for her tissue again. She glanced around quickly and pressed something into my palm. She was squeezing my fingers shut around a plastic pouch.

I looked down at my hand. ‘What are you doing?’

‘A present,’ she said. ‘We can share them.’

‘What is it?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘You know what it is. There’s six there.’

Six Ecstasy pills, clenched in my fist. ‘I can’t take these.’

Her face clouded over. ‘Why not?’

*Because Mum thinks I’m at home with my nose in a book and she’ll have a breakdown if she knows what’s in my hand.*

*Because boys like me don’t walk round Hackney with a pocket full of drugs.*

*Because . . .*

‘I just can’t.’

She shrugged, then covered my fist with her palm.

‘Aren’t you enjoying this, Marlon? Me and you being together?’

‘Yeah . . .’

‘We can have a picnic tomorrow, if the weather’s nice. Take another half each and just lie back and enjoy it. But it’s okay,’ she said brightly. ‘I know you’re supposed to be doing your revision. I don’t want to get you in trouble.’

‘Sorry. I just can’t.’

She blinked two, three times, quickly, then smiled. One hand covered my fist, the other moved round my back, fingers pressing my t-shirt against my skin.

‘It’s not fair I take all the risk,’ she said. ‘If I’m a bit bad, you have to be a bit bad too. We can be bad together.’

Tomorrow, on a blanket lying side by side staring at the

clouds, her blonde hair like sun. I'd lean over her and she'd close her eyes, reach up and pull me towards her. She was looking up at me again. Her lips were still shiny. If I kissed them, would my mouth be shiny too?

'Well?' she asked.

I shoved the pouch deep into my jeans pocket. I moved to put my arm around her, but she wriggled away.

'Come on!' she said. 'Let's go on this!'

'The ghost train? They're always crap!'

Her thumb stroked the backs of my fingers. It was like pressing a lever; a dam opened and all my endorphins came rushing out. She moved her lips close to my ear. 'It's dark in there. You can balls it.'

'What?'

'The pills. You know, stick them down your pants. Make sure they're safe.'

How'd she know about that? I only knew because that was one of Andre's old mates' tricks. Sometimes they'd even wear two pairs of joggers to make sure their stash was good and snug.

I said, 'Yeah. Sure.'

I handed over more yellow tokens to a kid in a red jacket. Even he did a double-take at Sonya. I smiled right back at him.

It was a tight fit in the carriage, even though neither one of us was fat. The bar pushed down on my thighs. My jeans

were rubbing against Sonya's, the pouch in my pocket squeezing against her hip. I was never going to get it out and in my pants here, not unless she was going to help me.

*Jesus, Marlon. Show some respect!* My brother may have worked his way round two local sixth forms by the time he was my age. But I didn't want *gyals*. I wanted one girl, this girl, sitting next to me. I'd risk the Portaloo afterwards and stash the pills then.

I rested my arm along the back, my fingertips in Sonya's hair. Just a few millimetres away, Sonya's head was full of thoughts. I wished I could see them.

The carriage slammed through the door into total blackness and the air seemed to wobble with the noise.

'Mum and Dad used to take us to Littlehampton,' I said. 'I was only four, but even then I knew the ghost train was pretty crap.'

She didn't answer me, but she probably hadn't heard. It was hard to hear anything with the mad volume soundtrack, groans and shrieks, rattling chains and banging doors, probably ramped right up to stop us thinking about how sad everything was. I peered into the gloom. Light flashed on and off grey witches with enormous noses and plastic bones the colour of old butter. An ogre shrieked in a corner and somewhere far back, a kid screamed. They didn't sound like they meant it.

But the light was weird in here, like they'd sucked every

bright colour into a hole. I looked down at my hands; they were grey. Sonya's fingers jerked on the bar, then she relaxed back. I covered her hand with mine, the same way she'd done with me.

A zombie poked its head out of a hole and bellowed at us.

I laughed. 'Look at that one! You can see the strings holding it up!'

Sonya didn't reply, didn't even look at me. Maybe, and my chest hurt thinking this, maybe she really didn't want to be with me after all.

We bumped to a stop. I flexed my arm, my fingers catching for a moment in her hair. Still no reaction. I turned to her, but she was staring straight ahead. A fairground guy released the bars of the carriage in front. He was waving a severed head, making the little kids squeal. It was a rubber and plastic thing, with eyes that rolled up and down.

'Sonya?'

The severed head was coming our way now. What would she do if I just dropped the pills in her lap and went off and left her?

'Sonya?'

The fairground guy was standing in front of us, the head drooped in his hand. His lips were moving, like he was singing her a song.

'Sonya!' I nudged her shoulder. Her head slumped

forward, her hands still gripping the bar. A smear of bright mustard blazed on her sleeve.

*God . . .*

Her neck was all bent over, not the way bodies should be. If I turned away, if I blinked long and hard, she'd sit up and laugh at me. This was her joke. It couldn't be real.

The bar yanked up, the men pulling Sonya from the seat, me trying to stumble after them. Strangers laying Sonya on the floor, hands pumping her chest making her body jolt around. A man's mouth pushing air through her – *shiny* – lips. The silence when the first aider leaned away from her.

And that kid with the cane row, just there behind the barrier.

No, all this must be a brain glitch, the Ecstasy tickling way too hard.

The shriek building in the bottom of my throat, that was real.