

Kevin Brooks

A promotional poster for the film 'Until the Darkness Comes'. The background features a weathered, light-colored trailer with a glowing window, parked on a grassy field. In the distance, a body of water is visible under a dark, stormy sky with heavy clouds. The overall mood is somber and atmospheric.

'Unputdownable
and riveting'
MO HAYDER

Until the
Darkness
Comes

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Kevin Brooks

Title Page

Dedication

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Author's Note

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About the Book

'Waiting, watching. I'm good at it. It's what I do. I wait and I watch.'

PI John Craine has come to Hale Island to get away from it all - the memories and the guilt, and a past that just won't let go.

But within hours he stumbles across the dead body of a young girl on the beach. When the police arrive the body has inexplicably disappeared. Or - in his already tormented state - did Craine imagine it in the first place?

Determined to get at the truth, Craine starts asking questions. But it seems no one on the island is talking. And all too soon he finds himself tangled up in a deadly network of fear and violence.

Someone has a dark secret to keep, and Craine is getting in the way...

About the Author

Kevin Brooks was born in Exeter, Devon, in 1959. He studied psychology and philosophy in Birmingham and cultural studies in London. He spent much of his early life writing and recording music, and later turned to painting and sculpting. He worked as a civil servant, a crematorium handyman, a hotdog vendor at London Zoo, a post office counter clerk, a petrol station attendant, and a call centre operator.

Since 2002 he has written eleven novels for teenagers and has won several awards, including the Canongate Prize for New Writing, the Branford Boase Award, the North East Book Award, and the Angus Book Award. In Germany, his books have twice won the prestigious Jugendliteraturpreis and he has also been awarded the Buxtehude Bulle and the Golden Bookworm.

A Dance of Ghosts, his first novel for adults, was published in 2011. He lives in North Yorkshire with his wife Susan.

Also by Kevin Brooks

A Dance of Ghosts

Kevin
Brooks

Until the
Darkness
Comes



arrow books

For Jess, our beloved friend and saviour.
Your head will always rest in our laps.

THEY CAME OUT of the house together, mother and daughter. The mother was thirty-seven years old, the daughter eighteen. They were arguing. I couldn't hear what they were saying because I was sitting in a bus shelter about forty yards up the street, and a cold hard wind was blowing in from the sea, drowning out the sounds of their voices. But as the mother glanced impatiently at her watch and opened the door of an old Ford Escort parked outside the house, and the daughter stayed on the doorstep angrily pulling up the hood of her coat, it wasn't hard to guess what the argument was about.

I don't have time to give you a lift, OK?

It'll only take five minutes.

I haven't got five minutes.

Fuck's sake, Mum. I'm going to be late—

And whose fault is that?

They both looked older than they were, tired and worn out before their time - tired of the same old arguments, tired of each other, tired of everything. It was too hard, this life. It ground you down, day after day ...

It turned your heart to stone.

The mother paused for a moment, looking back at her daughter - *why does it always have to be like this?* - but the daughter was blanking her now, avoiding her gaze, staring hard-eyed at nothing.

The mother shook her head, got in the car, and drove off up the street.

Her name was Serina Mayo.

As the Escort approached the bus shelter - the engine coughing, blue-grey exhaust fumes billowing in the wind - I instinctively lowered my eyes and pretended to read the newspaper in my lap, but then, almost immediately, remembering where I was and what I was doing, I raised my eyes again and gazed quite openly at the car. I didn't have to worry about my cover being blown. I didn't *have* a cover. Not today. I didn't need one. Even if Serina did notice me watching her - which, given the faraway look in her eyes, was highly unlikely - she wouldn't think anything of it. She didn't know who I was. She'd never seen me before. She'd have no reason to suspect that I was watching her. All she'd see was a somewhat dishevelled forty-year-old man, with a week's growth of beard and a bandaged hand, sitting in a bus shelter watching the cars pass by.

I watched her car pass by.

I watched her.

Serina Mayo.

She had dyed black hair, pulled back tight and tied in a ponytail. Her lips were thin, her eyes heavily made-up, her mouth set hard in a permanent scowl. It was a harsh face, dark and brittle, the skin lined and cracked like the varnish on a dusty old portrait. It was the face of a once beautiful woman who'd suffered too much, too young.

The car passed by, taking Serina with it.

I watched it go, coughing on the exhaust fumes. It slowed down at the end of the street, backfired once, then turned left and disappeared round a corner.

I lit a cigarette.

Serina Mayo ...

The mother ...

In 1991, at the age of eighteen, Serina had an affair with my father. My father was forty-seven years old at the time. In February 1992, he locked himself in his office at home, drank most of a full bottle of whisky, and shot himself in the head.

The daughter ...

Her name was Robyn.

She was walking away down the street now, struggling against the wind. Her hooded head was bowed down, her arms crossed over her midriff, keeping her zipperless coat closed.

I got to my feet, lit a cigarette, and followed her.

It was around ten o'clock in the morning and the streets were quiet. Working people had gone to work, the postman had been and gone, the school run was over. In a place like this, nothing much would happen now until lunchtime.

As I approached the Mayos' house, I crossed the road for a closer look. It was a small terraced house, the pale-yellow paintwork faded and flaking, the windowsills rotten and cracked. There was no front garden, not even a yard. The front door opened directly onto the pavement. Which meant that as I walked past the house, all I had to do was turn my head and gaze through the downstairs window, and I could see directly into the sitting room. There wasn't a lot to see - settee, armchair, TV, bookshelves ... framed seascapes hung on the walls. It was just a sitting room.

I carried on walking.

Robyn had reached the end of the street now and was crossing over a junction and heading off to the left. I wasn't familiar with the streets round here, and I didn't know where she was going, so I picked up my pace and hurried after her. When I got to the junction, I was just in time to see her turning right off another terraced street into a

narrow lane that, as far as I could tell, would lead her across to the caravan park.

I paused for a moment, thinking things through.

The caravan park would be almost deserted at this time of year. Even in the height of summer, it wouldn't be all that busy. But now, at the tail end of October, any tourists would be long gone, and the only people left in the park would be ...

Who?

Locals?

Islanders?

Why would *anyone* want to stay in a caravan at this time of year?

I didn't know.

All I knew was that I could only see part of the caravan park from here, so if I stayed where I was I might lose sight of Robyn. But if I went after her, there was a fairly good chance that she'd see me - a stranger, a lone man, following her into the park - and I didn't want to give her any cause for alarm. She might even decide to confront me, and I didn't want that either.

Not yet anyway.

I gazed over at the caravan park again. It was set back about four hundred yards from the beach, its southern edge bordered by a narrow strip of scrubland and ditches. Between the caravan park and the beach, a small public car park gave access to an open area known as the country park, which was basically just a sloping field with hedged pathways on either side, a covered bandstand in the middle, and a steep flight of wooden steps at the end that led down to the beach. In the summer months, the country park was the place for picnics and kite-flying and occasional brass-band performances, but now it was just another windswept emptiness.

An emptiness that offered an unblocked view of the caravan park.

Robyn was entering the park now. She still had her head bowed down, and it was clear from the way she was threading confidently through the caravans and trailers that she knew exactly where she was going.

I watched her for a moment or two, still unsure what to do.

Stay here and hope that I didn't lose sight of her?

Or cut down the little track to my right that led to the country park?

Whatever I did, it didn't really matter.

I didn't know what I was doing anyway.

I crossed the road and headed down the track.

Hale Island lies just off the coast of Essex, about ten miles south of Hey. It's only a small place, about four miles long and two miles wide at its broadest point, and it's joined to the mainland by a short causeway known as the Stand, a narrow road that bridges the Blackdown estuary. Most of the time you wouldn't know it's a causeway, and you wouldn't know it's an island either, because most of the time the estuary is just a vast stretch of reeds and brown ooze. But when there's a flood tide and the estuary rises a yard or so above the road, and nothing can pass until the tide goes out again ... then you know it's an island.

The track led me out into the potholed car park at the top of the sloping field, and as I crossed the car park, scanning the rows of caravans and trailers up ahead, I couldn't see any sign of Robyn. A fine rain had begun to fall, a thin silver drizzle that drifted in the wind like spider silk, and the predominantly white roofs of the caravans were shining dully in the sinking light.

I shielded my eyes and gazed around the caravan park again.

Nothing.

No movement, no sign of life.

I looked over my shoulder. Apart from a lone Volvo estate with blankets and a dog basket in the back, the car park was empty.

No movement, no sign of life.

Nothing.

I turned back to the caravan park, lit another cigarette, and waited.

Waiting, watching ...

I'm good at it.

It's what I do.

I wait and I watch.

It's not much of a life ...

But it's what I do.

I closed my eyes for a second or two and went back to the moment when Robyn had come out of the house with Serina. It was the first time I'd seen her - the first time I'd seen either of them - and since then Robyn had been walking away from me, with the hood of her coat pulled up, so all I really had to go on was that very first glimpse of her coming out of the house.

But that was enough.

I studied the picture of her in my mind. On the surface, she looked like the young girl she was - fashionably tattooed and pierced, underdressed in a thin white parka over a tight white vest and low-slung track pants ... blonde hair, white teeth, red lips, smoky eyes. But just below the surface, beneath the veneer of the ordinary young girl, Robyn was something else. Hollow-eyed and gaunt, her dyed-blonde hair dull and brittle, her pretty face cast with the same harsh beauty as her mother's ...

She was a junky.

She looked like a junky, she walked like a junky. The bowed head, the tightly crossed arms, the blind determination to get where she was going ...

Junky.

I was sure of it.

I could have been wrong, of course - it wouldn't have been the first time - and I really hoped that I was, but as I opened my eyes and saw Robyn coming out of a dirty white caravan at the lower end of the park, I knew straight away that I wasn't. She'd changed. She wasn't all tensed up and tight any more, she was loose and relaxed ... kind of floaty and sleepy-looking. And she was smiling too. Smiling to herself, smiling at the world, smiling dopily at the bare-chested man who was standing in the doorway of the caravan. Tall and muscled, with long greasy hair and biker tattoos, he was in his mid- to late twenties. He smiled at Robyn as she turned and waved goodbye to him, but as she did a little pirouette and began walking away, his smile disappeared like a light going out. He watched her for a moment, his eyes cold and empty, then he wiped his nose with the back of his hand, spat on the ground, and closed the caravan door.

I turned my attention back to Robyn.

She was heading in my direction now, slowly making her way towards a narrow pathway that crossed the scrubland and led up to the car park. I waited a moment, idly looking around, then I casually put my hands in my pockets and wandered off down the field.

I was nothing, nobody.

I wasn't worth noticing.

I was just a lonely middle-aged man, wandering around on his own, looking at stuff, idly passing the time of day ...

That's all I was.

Nothing to worry about.

Nothing to fear.

Not that Robyn would be particularly afraid or worried about *anything* just now. Not if I was right, and she'd just had a hit of something. She'd be lost in her own little bubble, disconnected from the rest of the world, safe and warm and happy. And I knew that I had no right to feel anything about that. Whatever Robyn did to herself,

whatever life or non-life she chose, it was nothing to do with me. And even if it was ...

It wasn't.

And who the fuck was I to talk anyway? I wasn't exactly—
Shut up, John, the voice in my heart said. *Just concentrate on what you're doing.*

'I don't *know* what I'm doing,' I muttered.

Well, there's a surprise.

I'd reached the bandstand in the middle of the field now, and so far I'd resisted the temptation to look back and see where Robyn was going. I guessed it was probably OK to look now, but I took my time anyway, just in case - stopping at the bandstand, taking out my cigarettes, pausing to gaze out at the sea. The tide was out, the grey sands of the beach merging into the slick brown ooze of mudflats. Flocks of waders were stalking in the mud - long-legged birds, poking and searching, scything their beaks through the mud - and just off the shore a fishing boat was pattering along through the rain. Further out, I could just make out the low black outline of a container ship inching silently across the horizon. Heading for Harwich, I guessed.

I lit my cigarette and slowly turned round.

I couldn't see Robyn at first, and for a moment I thought I'd lost her. But then, as I carried on looking around, gradually widening my search, I saw a flash of white over to my right, at the edge of the field - a slim hooded figure ducking through a gap in a hedge. She disappeared for a moment, dipping down out of sight, and then she reappeared about ten yards further on. I was pretty sure now that she was heading for a raised dirt pathway that followed a little creek all the way along to the easternmost end of the island. I carried on watching her for a while, just to make sure, but when I saw her climbing some wooden steps set into the bank of the pathway, I knew I was right. I still didn't know where she was going - or why it mattered,

or what I was doing - but I knew that the pathway ran parallel to the beach ...

And, again, that was good enough for me.

I turned round and made my way down to the beach.

The pathway and the beach are separated by a broad spread of saltmarshes, a thick green carpet of ground-hugging plants dotted with countless boggy pools fringed with reeds and rushes, so although I was plainly visible to Robyn as I walked along the beach, there was enough of a barrier between us for her to happily ignore me. And besides, she wasn't really paying attention to anything anyway, just dawdling along the pathway, lost in her own timeless world.

It hadn't taken long for me to draw level with her, pass her by, and then gradually slow down so that I was matching her pace but deliberately keeping in front of her. So even if she did happen to notice me, she wouldn't think I was following her.

Way up ahead of me I could see two coated figures and a golden retriever ambling along the shore - a middle-aged couple, I guessed, they probably owned the Volvo in the car park - but, apart from that, the beach was deserted. All I could see as I looked into the distance was a long stretch of sand and shingle, the glimmering ooze of the mudflats, and the silent grey emptiness of the sea. And all I could hear was the moaning wind and the ever-present voice in my heart.

Are you all right, John?

'Not really,' I said quietly.

It'll be OK. You just need to get some rest.

'Yeah ...'

I glanced over at Robyn. She'd stopped to light a cigarette, turning her back to the wind, lowering her head, cupping the lighter in her hands ... *click, click, click*. I watched her for a moment, waiting for her to lift her head

and blow out a cloud of smoke, then I pulled up my coat collar and walked on.

I used to visit Hale Island with my parents when I was a kid. Sunday afternoons, we'd drive down from Hey, park in the car park, and then spend an hour or two just strolling along the beach - Mum and Dad walking together, talking quietly to each other, while I went off on my own, scuffing along the strandline, kicking up junk, looking for jewels - tropical beans, cuttlefish bones, mermaid's purses ...

I was happy then.

And now ...?

There didn't seem to be any jewels any more. No tropical beans, no cuttlefish bones, no mermaid's purses ... just plastic bottles, bits of polystyrene, food wrappers, carrier bags. Nothing worth picking up. Not for me, anyway. Maybe if I was a kid now, *these* things would be my jewels. Plastic jewels, jewels of rubber and polythene ... polystyrene pearls.

Or maybe I was just remembering stuff that never happened anyway.

Maybe there never were any jewels on the beach ...

And I was never happy.

By the time I was nearing the end of the beach, and Robyn was approaching the end of the pathway, I began to wonder what I was going to do if she just kept on going and then cut down to the beach and started walking back in my direction. What would I do when we passed? Would I say anything to her? Would I stop and talk to her? Or would I just smile and nod my head, as I had with the Volvo couple and their dog a few minutes earlier? Smile, nod, and walk on by.

I didn't know.

I couldn't decide.

In the end, though, I didn't have to.

Because just as I reached the old stone pillbox that, for me, had always been the signal that the end of the beach was near, I glanced over and saw Robyn disappearing off the pathway and heading down to a little wooden bridge that spanned the creek. As her hooded head bobbed out of sight, I tried to think where she could be going. What was on the other side of the creek? Not much, I vaguely remembered. A few remote houses, a small farm or two, maybe a church. This was the east of the island, the wilder side. Visitors and tourists generally keep to the west side, the village side, where the sand is soft and the streets and the shops are never too far away. But down here the only people you're likely to see are locals, fishermen, dog walkers ... the occasional anorak with a metal detector. And kids sometimes, at night, doing their stuff in the dunes ... sex, drugs, whatever.

I couldn't see Robyn now.

She'd gone.

I didn't know where.

And there was no point in trying to find out. If I wanted to follow her now, I'd either have to cut across the saltmarshes or run along to the end of the beach and then double back along the path to the point where she'd disappeared. I knew there *were* tracks across the saltmarshes, but I also knew that unless you know exactly where the tracks are, there's a good chance you'll end up getting stuck in the mud. Or worse. And as for running along to the end of the island ... well, I really didn't feel like running just then.

I was too tired.

Too lifeless.

And it didn't matter anyway.

I'd done what I'd set out to do. I'd seen Serina and Robyn. I knew what they looked like. And I had a *sense* of them now - who they were, what they were, what kinds of lives they were living ...

I lit a cigarette and looked out over the beach. At the end of the island, shrouded in a mist of rain, I could just make out the Point, a slim finger of shingle that juts out from the beach and is bounded by the sea on one side and ancient mudflats on the other. Beyond the mudflats, in the mouth of the estuary, the fishing boat I'd seen earlier was skirting a small wooded island about half a mile from shore.

A young woman was standing at the end of the Point, looking out over the mudflats. She didn't seem to be doing anything, she was just standing there, gazing in silence, the wind ruffling her hair ...

I wondered if she might know where Robyn had gone. I could try asking her, couldn't I? She probably wouldn't mind. I could just walk up to her and say, 'Excuse me, I'm sorry to bother you, but—'

No, John, Stacy said to me. Just leave her.

'Why?'

She's sad. She doesn't want to talk to anyone. Just leave her.

'OK ...'

It doesn't matter where Robyn has gone anyway, does it?

'No.'

You've done what you set out to do. You've seen her. You know what she looks like.

'She looks a bit like Dad.'

She looks a bit like you.

'You think so?'

Yeah ...

'Do you think she's Dad's daughter?'

Possibly.

'So she *could* be my sister?'

Half-sister.

'Half-sister.'

Yeah, she could be.

'Shit.'

You're tired, John. You need to go back to the hotel and get some rest.

I looked over at the Point again, looking for the sad young woman. But she wasn't there any more. She'd gone.

The wind was getting up.

The rain was turning cold.

I buttoned my coat and headed back to the hotel.

STACY WAS MY wife ... Stacy Craine. She was my wife. Seventeen years ago, on 13 August 1993, she was raped and murdered by a man called Anton Viner. Two weeks later, I shot Viner in the head and disposed of his body in a crematorium furnace.

Stacy has never left me.

She's always in my heart.

She'd been there five days ago when DCI Mick Bishop had shown up at my office in Hey and suggested that I leave town for a while.

'How long's a while?' I'd asked him.

'Ten days ... couple of weeks. Just until it all blows over.'

'It's all going to just "blow over", is it?'

'It will if you do what I tell you.'

I looked at him. 'So I just go away for a while, and when I come back ... everything's just as it was?'

'That's right.'

'And you can live with that, can you?'

He smiled. 'It's not going to kill me.'

'What about the business?'

'What business?'

'My business.'

'What about it?'

'Well, if I go away for a couple of weeks—'

'Just shut it down, for fuck's sake. I mean, it's not as if the world's going to stop turning without your fucking private investigation business, is it?' He grinned at me. 'What's the worst that can happen? You lose a couple of insurance fraud cases? You miss out on the opportunity to catch another DVD pirate?'

'It pays the bills,' I said.

'You need money? I can let you have—'

'I don't need your money.'

'So what's your problem?'

'Nothing ...' I'd sighed, shaking my head. 'Nothing at all.'

Just do it, Stacy had told me later that night. You might as well. Just close down for a couple of weeks, go somewhere nice, and try to forget about everything. You never know ... you might even enjoy it.

I wasn't sure that I was going to *enjoy* being on Hale Island, and it probably wasn't the kind of place that Stacy had meant when she'd told me to 'go somewhere nice'. But I'd been thinking a lot about my father recently - his past, his history, his suicide - and when I'd got in touch with Cal Franks, my nephew-in-law and occasional colleague, and I'd asked him to find out what he could about Serina Mayo, and he'd found out that she lived on Hale Island, *and* that she had an eighteen-year-old daughter ... well, I'd just thought to myself, why not?

Pack a bag, book a hotel, close down the business ...

Jump on a bus ...

Why not?

Just go.

Try to forget about everything.

Why not?

There was a lot to forget.

The hotel I was staying in was a rickety old place called Victoria Hall. It was the kind of hotel that in its day had probably been quite grand, but over the years, as its business had declined, its grandeur had gradually faded. It was still perfectly habitable, and from a distance it still looked fairly impressive, but up close you could tell straight away that its best days were long gone. The weather-beaten walls, the peeling paintwork, the creaking wooden floors, the doors that didn't shut properly, the stale and musty atmosphere ...

It was hardly The Ritz.

But it was close to the village, and it backed onto the beach, and it was relatively cheap. And the rooms were spacious, with double windows that opened out onto a balcony, which meant that I could smoke. But the main reason I'd chosen to stay at Victoria Hall was that I remembered it from my childhood. We used to drive past it on the way home from our Sunday-afternoon trips to the beach, and there was always something about the place that fascinated me ... I didn't know what it was. I didn't even know that it was a hotel at the time. I just liked looking at it - the big white house with the funny little windows, the tall brick chimneys, the crooked wooden balconies - and I always wondered what it would be like to live there.

And I know that bringing childhood wishes to life is rarely a good idea, because their reality is usually so drab and disappointing, but in this case ... well, the way I saw it, I was feeling so shitty about everything anyway that a bit of disappointment probably wouldn't make much difference.

It was around 11.30 when I got back to the hotel that day. The white-haired old man who managed the place was sitting behind the reception desk idly reading a newspaper, and when I came in he looked up and smiled at me, his bright old eyes peering over the rims of his reading glasses.

‘Good morning, Mr Chandler,’ he said. ‘Enjoying the weather?’

From the slight twinkle in his eyes, and the almost imperceptible emphasis he gave to the words ‘Mr Chandler’, I couldn’t help thinking that he knew it wasn’t my real name. He’d given me the same kind of look when I’d checked in as John Chandler the day before, the kind of look that’s as good as a wink - *don’t worry, John, your secret’s safe with me.*

Or maybe I was just being paranoid.

Maybe I was seeing things that weren’t there.

Not that it mattered. The only reason I’d checked in under a false name was that my real name, John Craine, had been in the news for the past week or so, and the whole point of being here was - in Mick Bishop’s words - to let things blow over. But even if this old man *did* know who I was, and even if he *did* leak it to the press ...

Well, so what?

All I’d have to do was pack up and go somewhere else.

‘Excuse me,’ I said to the old man, going over to the reception desk. ‘You haven’t got a map of the island, have you?’

He put down his newspaper, reached under the desk, and passed me a photocopied map.

‘Thanks,’ I said, studying it.

‘Is there anything in particular you’re looking for, Mr Chandler?’

‘Just “John” is fine,’ I told him, without looking up. ‘“Mr Chandler” makes me feel old.’

‘Arthur Finch,’ he smiled, standing up and offering his hand. ‘I *am* old.’

I smiled back and shook his hand, then looked down at the map again, trying to locate the spot where Robyn had left the pathway. The pathway was marked with a dotted line, and as I followed it back from the Point and then scanned the area just north of the creek, the only thing I

could see on the map – apart from saltmarshes and a few scattered farms – was a small black cross.

‘Is that a church?’ I asked Arthur Finch, indicating the symbol.

He angled his head to get a better look. ‘Where?’

‘There.’

‘Ah, right.’ He smiled. ‘No, it used to be a church, but I’m afraid this map’s a little out of date. It’s actually a farm shop now.’

‘A farm shop?’

He nodded. ‘Hale Organics. They sell locally produced meat, home-made cheese, free-range eggs ... that sort of thing.’ He looked at me. ‘I can find out their opening times, if you’re interested.’

I shook my head. ‘Is there anything else around there?’

‘What are you looking for, exactly?’

‘Nothing really ...’ I smiled at him. ‘It’s just that it could get a bit boring, you know ... walking up to the end of the beach every day and then turning round and walking all the way back again.’ I shrugged. ‘I was just wondering if there was anywhere else I could go, that’s all.’

‘Well,’ he said, turning his attention back to the map. ‘You can cross over the creek here, and there’s a little path that takes you to the farm shop. There’s not a lot else to see around there – a few farms, a bit of woodland – but from the farm shop you could follow the East Road all the way along the coast back to the Stand, and then back along the Coast Road to the village.’ He looked at me again. ‘It’s a fair old walk ... probably a couple of hours or so. And I wouldn’t recommend it unless the weather improves.’

‘Right ...’

‘And, of course, there’s a lot more to see if you head up towards the west of the island.’

‘Yeah,’ I said, picking up the map. ‘I might just do that.’

‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’

‘Not just now, thanks.’

'Will you be dining here this evening?'

'I don't know.'

'Not to worry,' he said, smiling. 'I doubt if we're going to be fully booked.'

I nodded, suddenly feeling incredibly tired. Too tired to speak. Too tired to smile. Too tired to move.

'Well ...' Arthur Finch said hesitantly. 'As I said, if you need anything else ...'

I just nodded again, hoping that I didn't look as bad as I felt. I could tell from the way the old man was looking at me that he was beginning to suspect that something wasn't quite right, and I knew that if I didn't move now, or say something else, he was going to start asking himself some serious questions - *what's he doing? why's he just standing there? what the hell's the matter with him?*

So I took a deep breath, placing both hands on the edge of the desk to steady myself, and then - forcing the shape of a smile to my face - I mumbled something vague enough to mean anything, nodded again, and shoved myself off from the desk.

My head was gone now.

My legs weighed too much.

I'd forgotten how to walk.

But somehow my instincts, and the desire to avoid the embarrassment of falling over, kept me going - one step, another step ... just keep moving - and by the time I was halfway across the lobby I'd almost got the hang of walking again, and I probably didn't look *too* much like a zombie. It was tempting to look back over my shoulder and smile casually at Arthur, just to show him how normal I was, but even the thought of it - walking *and* looking over my shoulder - made me feel dizzy. So I just carried on as I was - one step, another step ... one step, another step ...

You can do it.

Luckily my room was on the ground floor, so I didn't have to worry about stairs, all I had to do was keep going in a

straight line - across the lobby, through the door at the end, past the staircase, along the corridor ... one step, another step ...

I could do it.

Just keep going ...

As I reached the end of the lobby and pushed open the door, someone on the other side pulled it open, and I staggered through and bumped into a man in a red waterproof coat.

'Sorry,' I muttered, keeping my head down and stepping unsteadily to one side.

'No problem,' the man said. Then, 'Hey, are you OK?'

I felt his hand on my arm then, a helping hand, and I looked up at him. He had a beard, and glasses. A kindly face.

'You all right, buddy?' he said.

American.

'Yeah ...' I mumbled. 'Yeah, thanks ... I'm just ... yeah, I'm fine.'

He let go of my arm and stepped back, looking genuinely concerned. A woman was standing beside him, also dressed in a red waterproof coat, and behind them both, watching me curiously from the foot of the staircase, was a gum-chewing teenage girl. Wife and daughter, I assumed.

'You need any help?' the man asked me.

'No ... thanks.' I smiled at him. 'It's just a ... a migraine ...'

'Oh, yeah,' he said, nodding knowingly. 'They can be real bad.' He glanced at the woman next to him. 'Your sister suffers from migraines, doesn't she, honey?'

The woman nodded, looking at me. 'She has to lie down in a darkened room.'

'Yeah, me too ...'

'OK,' the man said. 'Well, we won't keep you ... you take it easy, OK?'

I nodded. 'Thanks ...'

'See you later.'

'Yeah.'

As they headed off through the door into the lobby, the teenage girl glanced back at me and smiled. Dressed in a black puffa jacket over a big white hoody, and a short denim skirt over skinny black jeans, I guessed she was about fourteen or fifteen. She had earplugs in, the wires snaking out from under her hood, and as her still-smiling face disappeared through the door, I wondered what she was listening to ...

Something new?

Something I wouldn't like?

Something I'd never heard of?

And I wondered how I'd feel if *I* was her father, and I didn't like the music she listened to ... what would I do?

You wouldn't do anything.

'I'd feel old.'

You are old.

'She smiled at me, Stace. Did you see her?'

Yeah.

'She smiled at me.'

I know.

It wasn't a migraine ... I've never had a migraine in my life. But it's easier to tell someone that you're suffering from a migraine than to tell them that you're sinking down into the black place. And that's all it was - the deadening fatigue, the weight of tiredness, the void in my head - it was the black place, the fog of depression that creeps up on me every now and then and drapes me in darkness for a day or two.

It had been stirring inside me for a while now, threatening to rise up and drag me down, and usually when I feel it coming I just go to bed, close my eyes, and let it happen. It's not a nice experience, and sometimes it can get really bad, but it's been with me for a long time now,

and although it's not the kind of thing that you can ever really get used to, at least I know what it is. I know how it works. And because I know that it's not going to *kill* me, and that it's *not* going to last for ever, I don't normally bother trying to fight it.

But this time ...

Well, this time, when I'd felt it coming on, it just hadn't been *convenient* to close my eyes and let it happen. The case I'd been working on had fucked me up. Bad stuff had happened. People I cared about had been hurt ... and I'd had to deal with that hurt. Theirs, mine ... I couldn't just close my eyes to it, I had to deal with it. And I can't deal with anything when I'm in the black place. I can't do anything at all. So I'd had to keep it at bay. And that meant self-medication - alcohol, drugs, whatever it takes. Alcohol to drown it, smother it, numb it. Speed and cocaine to lift me above it. More alcohol to let me sleep, more speed to wake me up ...

More of everything ... just to keep going.

And the more you keep going, the worse it is when you stop.

So you don't stop, you just keep going.

You shuffle into your hotel room at 11.45 in the morning, you close the door, lock it, and shuffle over to the table by the wall. You uncap the bottle of whisky on the table and half-fill a glass tumbler, take a long drink, shudder, then top up the glass and head over to the double windows. You open the windows, step out onto the balcony, and light a cigarette. It's cold, you shiver. You drink more whisky. You're so tired, so weak, you can hardly stand up. You lean against the balcony rail and look out over the beach, the dull skies, the blue-grey sea ... the emptiness. You hear the mournful cry of seabirds, the distant clink of rigging, the wind in the air ...

You smoke.

You drink.