

From *Cinderdown*

Chapter 2

The Plain

Adrenaline courses through his veins like amphetamine. His head is full of noise, the blood pumping, his boss's voice, his colleagues' tears, the students' laughter. Darren's driving now, heading south with purpose. In the back of his car, his camouflage backpack lies on the seat. Everything he needs for a week or two, however long it takes.

He presses his foot on the accelerator and flicks on the wipers. The day started out bright, in blues, yellows and greens by the college. But now, half an hour later, on the single carriageway across Salisbury Plain, it's brown, grey, and murky. He feels remorse for a second, just a second, but lets it go. This is where Darren needs to go. It's where he needs to be more than anything. For his family. For his ancestors. For all those who were wronged. It's where he has to be.

He turns up the car stereo and the angry sounds of Public Enemy blast out while outside the rain falls on the fields either side of the road, splashing onto the windscreen of his 2008 Seat. He hasn't got the bass levels right but it's loud. The music fills his head and blocks out the other side of him; the side he usually listens to. The one that worries about the bills and rent and keeping his job. He puts the volume up another notch until the window is vibrating and the demisting lines on the rear windscreen are oscillating into figures of eight.

He drives through a village of pretty redbrick houses and white cottages with thatched roofs to the familiar sounds of Apache with its Western intro. This isn't his theme right now, too cheerful. But it makes him think of Elodie, his little sister, 'The

Accident', born to his mother in her late thirties, hence the chasmic age gap between them. He's fifteen years older at forty-three and their older brother Vincent – of whom we do not speak – is forty-five. Darren thinks of Elodie dancing along, she must have been twelve or thirteen. Her hair is messy in a high ponytail, teeth biting her bottom lip as she followed the instructions on the Wii to mimic the moves, 'Kemosabi, jump on it, jump on it' winding an imaginary lasso over her head. Now she's twenty-eight and is Mum's carer/companion/servant. Seeing the two of them together on their vapes depresses the hell out of him but what else were they going to do? It isn't their fault. Their lives were all mapped out from that day.

He puts on Pearl Jam. It's a stretch from hip hop to grunge but his tastes are eclectic and what's going to appeal to someone like him? Especially these days. Some sanitised ballad sung by a good-looking, straight-toothed stud straight out of public school? He wants to hear the fight. Not just a fight for your parents to understand you or the girls on the cheerleading team to suck you off but songs about what it's like to fight to live. To see your dad working so hard he dies from a heart attack at fifty-three, to see your sister throw away her dreams of university to look after your mum. To fight The Man, while The Man pays away allegations of sexual assault, corruption, fraud, murder. *Alright, Darren, all right*. He turns the music off.

The windscreen wipers give a regular thud and thump and his brain calms as it tunes into the rhythm. 'Ants in your pants' mum would say when he was a kid. 'You never can sit still.' It was true. His energy levels could rise until it felt like the top of his head might unscrew but he'd also stop for days on end and would have to push himself out of bed and to work.

Work.

He worries for the smallest fraction of a second and then grins as he imagines Anthony's face again. You know when you say you'd do something just to see the look on their face? This was one of those times it didn't disappoint. It was everything he hoped for and more.

He gets to the crossroads and looks for the turning. He knows the route well, so he passes the farm on the left and takes the right onto the lane towards the lost village.