

*HEY! Want to get away? Escape?*

*Something bad happen to you  
that you can't deal with yet?*

*Join*

***THE TRIBE***

*An immersive psychological programme.*

*Through group work, therapy, and tailored psychological  
tasks, we'll help you to overcome  
your own personal darkness.*

*Best of all, escape to a tropical African  
island paradise as you do...*

There! I stuck it in. The advert. Kept it, see? Found it folded up in a back pocket. Not that long ago, I read it every day.

For a while, it was the only note I wanted to read.

For a while, it was a good thing.

Mum left a note for me too, the night everything happened. I found it later, after the police had gone and I was alone at the kitchen table waiting for Dieter. Back when it was dark as killers' eyes outside.

*Tonight I'm catching the black cat.*

All she wrote.

Mum was odd like that. You'll see.

But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself.



So...

The first thing I remember about being here? That's something Lily wanted me to write about.

I guess it was the heat, slamming into me with a force that took my breath. People talk about walls of heat, but this felt like a whole mountain. It stopped me moving, made me unwilling to ever move again. I was sweating instantly, standing at the top of those rickety plane steps and staring out at the darkness. Long, black, endless darkness. That seemed appropriate, at least.

After the bright lights of the plane, the black was impenetrable, like there was nothing else beyond the end of the runway: the lights stopped and the world stopped too. There could've been a gigantic cliff there and we'd never have known it. They could've marched us straight towards it. That darkness was alive, too – full of screeching creatures, rustling movement. But there was no sound of water. No beach.

'Some island,' I said.

Sam was pushing me. 'Come on, the rest of us want to see too.'

The steps wiggled, so I grabbed hard onto the flimsy banister until I found the tarmac below. Heat seeped up through my trainers. If my feet had been bare, I'd have been

hopping. I thought it was crazy that tarmac could be so hot when it was night-time – how boiling did it get during the day? Could that tarmac melt and become a sticky river?

I turned to say this to Sam, but he was no longer right behind me. Instead, he was walking away from the plane with Nyall. They were chatting about one of the films that'd been on, something cheery about earthquakes and the end of the world. Nyall nodded seriously, not smiling at all, while Sam laughed and joked. Maybe Nyall was just bricking it to finally be here, like I was.

When Pete came over, I bet he was bricking it too, under his tough-guy look. But he slapped Nyall and Sam on the back like they were all comrades – a team about to embark on a dangerous mission.

*Wanker.*

I turned away and found the other girl, Annie, at my shoulder, pressing me to keep going. I stepped away from the plane. The camera was there, even then: George in front of our faces with a little hand-held, asking us *leading questions* about ourselves and how we were feeling.

‘What’s it all like? First impressions? What can you hear and taste and smell...?’

I can remember the smell: the shock of it. It was sweet, sort of, and wet. Like a mixture of damp school jumpers and the cheap flowery perfume one of my therapists had worn. I'd been expecting the sea. Something like salt-and-vinegary chips, maybe. I'd thought there'd be a breeze.

‘It smells like a slug,’ I said.

Sam was too busy chatting with his new best friend to hear me. Annie was still there, though, with her face screwed up, smelling it too.

‘It smells like hot knickers,’ she said, right to the camera.

I laughed. I didn’t think she could be funny. The camera caught it all.

Where’s that footage now?

Annie moved away from me then, away from the camera and George and out across the tarmac. I followed, still watching the darkness. Was it all just trees? Maybe it was like the woods on the mountain back home. And maybe the smell was a bit like bracken and moss, like the stuff Mum and I collected one autumn for one of her art projects. We had spent days doing that; I’d had dirt under my fingernails for weeks. I closed my eyes to stop thinking about it, but the noise of the place jolted them open again: the shrieks and rustles and calls. It was like we were stepping out into a zoo. When I caught up with Sam his cheeks were hot, red as cherries and almost bitable.

‘I told you this would be good,’ he said. He was looking at Annie, at her long blonde hair. He was breathing in the night.

‘We haven’t even got there yet, not properly,’ I said.

There was a gnawing feeling in my stomach, the one that had started the very first day I’d agreed to do this thing with him, that’d been eating away at me ever since. The one I still have now.

But it wasn’t the day when I said *yes* to *The Tribe* that really

started that feeling, not if I truly think about it. And *this* is what Lily actually wants me to write about – the beginning, my journey to being here. What started my own personal tip to the dark.



So maybe it starts here: when Sam asked me out.

I liked that. A lot. At the time.

I liked how Sam didn't even care that he was in the middle of our English classroom and there were people all around us. I liked how he kept holding my gaze. I liked how his cheeks went marshmallow pink, too. And he was grinning at me, knowing my answer. I liked that best of all.

'Tonight, after dark, we'll take her car,' he said. 'I know how.'

He'd been talking about doing it for ages. Just me, him and Mum's old banger at the end of the street. I'd thought it was all a joke, one of Sam's crazy ideas that never happened.

He scrunched his fingers into a fist, flicked his eyes from where Brandon was eavesdropping, and back to me. 'What do you think?'

And I looked at how wide and brown his eyes were, how cute his lips looked when he chewed them at the corner, and I said,

'Yes.'

...even though I had something else to do that night. Even though I knew what he was planning was unbelievably stupid and probably illegal. Even though Mum would hate it.