



Gloved

Kaylen Forsyth

The first time it happens you are preparing a meal for your family. Lily is back from university. This is the only time in months the three of you are getting to eat dinner together. She's sitting on the counter with one earphone in, watching you cut up bell peppers. She's saying how you should have deseeded them first, that's how she does it, back home. So, she's calling London home already.

'Would you like to do it?'

Lily clicks her tongue in that new way she has, puts her second earphone in, and flounces upstairs.

You hadn't meant it like that though. You just thought it might be nice to do something together, even if it was chopping vegetables. When she got off the train yesterday, her hair was different. Her fringe had grown out; she could almost slide it behind her ears. You had stayed awake for hours, trying to remember what it used to look like.

'That's a lot of peppers,' John comments from the doorway.

He's got his mobile to his ear. He must be on hold.

'It's a chilli, John.'

'I know but...' And then his tone changes. It's warmer. He's smiling. 'That'll be wonderful.'

'Thanks, love.' You smile back but he's facing away; he had been talking to work. It's his favourite, most expensive knife in your hands – Sheffield steel, something like that. For a moment you pause and imagine pressing the blade down hard against the board, blunting it.

It's time to chop the tomatoes. Softer than they should be and fairly bruised – it won't matter though, once they're boiled.

'They're all squashed up.'

John's finished his call now, and looking over your shoulder.

'They'll be fine, once they're spiced and boiled and everything.'

'Where's my phone charger, love?'

You point to where it sits near the fruit bowl, full of plastic apples and oranges.

Some of the paint has chipped off the granny smith apple, and it looks almost like a tennis ball.

When John tries to move past you, when his hand touches your waist – that is when. It happens abruptly and with such a force, you will look back and forget there was ever a time in that kitchen when you were stood upright surveying tomatoes, as though it were the most pressing problem in your world. You collapse onto the tiles, and try to sit back up but your muscles won't do what you want them to. They seize, all over your body the muscles seize, then spasm, then seize again. Warm urine runs down the inside of your leg. A hand on the back of your head, the only barrier between your skull and the hard floor. John is holding you but that doesn't make things any better. He's pulling at your collar, fingers searching for a pulse.

Lily has come downstairs. She's crying by the door. Neither of her earphones are in. She's crying over *you*. Shouting at her dad. 'Help her,' she's shouting. 'Help my mum.'

There's nothing you can do, not physically, except stare up at John's hovering face and the disappearing lights above the oven. Dust swirls in their beams. It looks lovely, almost like rain.

The doctor says there has never been a case like it, not in all of recorded history. How long did that take him? To consult all of recorded history. The way he speaks isn't with

curiosity, or wonder at beholding something so new to medicine. The way he speaks is with a dry smile. A raised eyebrow. This is why you'd avoided coming, stomached your family's beratements for days until conceding.

You go through it once more, stressing the same details.

'It happens when people touch me, I wouldn't make this up. It happened with my husband, and then again when he tried to help me up. That was when I realised what was going on, I told him, and he touched me a third time to be sure.'

His eyebrow is still raised. Part of you already knows what will happen next.

He leans over and touches you, a sweaty red palm on the side of your cheek.

Coming to, you're lying on the small examination table in the corner of the room. Stale saliva has crusted on your chin, but your tights are dry, thank God. The doctor is sat in his chair, marking a green notebook with a pencil. There's something in his eyes, and his eyebrow, even now, after evidence, *still* raised.

'These attacks, they are only happening at the touch of men?'

You shrug. 'I'm not sure. All the women I've told haven't wanted to touch me to find out.'

He nods, though you're not sure he understands what he's nodding at. He says to begin an inventory of all the times this happens, and to come back in a week for scans.

'Oh, and one more thing,' he says just as you're leaving. 'You might want to invest in a pair of gloves.' His lip is upturned, the subtlest hint of a smirk.

Out of everything the doctor said, when recounting it to John, the only part that seems to register with him is the gloves. He doesn't seem too bothered about the smirk.

'It's a lot for anyone to get their head around,' he says.

The next day he buys you a pair of white gloves that go halfway up your wrist, made of thick wool. You wear them every day, but they're not comfortable and your hands clam up. People look at you strangely, walking around with gloves like that in August.

To begin with, John sleeps on the sofa, and you have the bedroom to yourself. But after a week his back starts hurting and he gets in the bed again, as close to the edge as possible, the both of you curled up in foetal positions. A pillow in between, gloves back on.

Something must happen one night, perhaps someone rolls over too far, elbow catches an elbow, something like that, because you come around from a seizure with him kneeling over you. There's blood and your tongue hurts.

'John?'

'That was a bad one.'

'Oh. Was it?'

He's massaging the bridge of his nose. 'I can't go on like this for much longer, you know.'

You're not really sure what he has to go on *with*, but you nod anyway, focusing on the details of his spine. They are distracting. From the back you could pretend a different man sits there, you could pretend this is a patient husband. He says he's going for a glass of water. From a different room, you could pretend this is what you'd hoped for. Who you'd hoped for. And that you were eager for him to come back.

When he does come back, he mutters some kind of quick apology, standing above you, but you keep your eyes closed, and breathe heavier, as though snoring. He gets back into bed, not bothering too much with distance, you notice.

Lily is acting different.

It's not that you're new to her mood swings. One too many times you have been on the receiving end of a weeklong silent treatment. What's different this time is the lack of intent. She doesn't leave her earphones in constantly anymore, and her eyes and voice are always soft every time she speaks – but there are few words. This doesn't feel clipped, or even bored. It feels uncomfortable, awkward almost, like you are a stranger she doesn't know how to speak to.

Talking to John about this, he shrugs. 'It's just that difficult age.'

'She's 20, John. And she's not like this with you.'

He smiles with a vague air of sympathy, glancing down at his phone. You want to shake him. There's something about that *oblivious* smile.

'John?'

'Yes, love?' He says, typing.

You wonder whether there's any point continuing. Looking back, every time you've tried talking with him, you were met with that same old smile. A smile that seemed to say *I'm sorry, but this has got nothing to do with me*. It's still on his face now, probably primed and ready for when he eventually does look up again. And despite whatever that smile says, this does in fact, have everything to do with him. Everything.

You wait, for one more moment.

Then: 'Will you get off your fucking phone for one second and look at me?'

His neck whips up instantly.

'Don't start.'

'When do I *ever* start?'

'I don't know, you're always sitting there, waiting to. Plotting.'

He's stood up now, closer than the two of you have been in weeks, faces six inches apart. You can see his teeth like organised headstones, and the flecks of saliva coating them as the two of you shout like you haven't shouted in a while. There is the pad of approaching

footsteps. Lily stands in the doorway now but that doesn't stop you. She'll side with her dad anyway, anyone but her strange expectant mother. *Illness can alienate children for a while*, the forums say. *Do not expect instant warmth*. But you are not expectant, you are tired. Tired of many things – but most especially, these stupid fucking gloves.

The moment you stop speaking, John lifts his hand, and moves towards your exposed arm. You recoil at once, hurtling backwards into the doorway, almost crashing into Lily.

There is suddenly no temper left. All you can speak are the facts: 'You were going to touch me.'

His hand is by his side again, his face bright red. 'No, I wasn't.'

'You were going to touch me, John.'

He does not look like John anymore, not to you. Or perhaps, he looks so much like John that you can't bare to see it. He was really going to do that to you, your husband.

'Get out.'

Your voice sounds different, higher-pitched, and then you realise you are not actually speaking.

Lily – eyes red and narrowed towards her father – is trembling.

'Lil, I wasn't, I promise, I wasn't going to touch her.'

'Get out,' she says again. You have never noticed before, but her voice is as slow and careful as yours when she's angry.

Lily stays with you, and a few times a week visits her Dad's. John has sent many messages, explained himself on many long-winded phone calls, and you haven't shouted. In fact, you've found that you don't have much to say back. There is the possibility you can live with him again and forget what ever happened, but there remains that small chance, that

anything you ever did from now on that might irk him, he would respond with the simplest touch. And how were you supposed to live like that?

Lily is more casual with you these days. Her earphones are in and out and her silent treatments have returned. When she is talking to you, it doesn't feel like she's putting on the detached air of a stranger anymore. It feels like Lily.

The two of you don't speak about what happened, and that's fine. Though neither do you talk about her distant behaviour. But you're thinking about it, thinking about a way of bringing it up. She needs to know it wasn't right. It might take time, the two of you aren't close like that.

But you're learning.

One night, when she's back from London for the weekend, she shows you a purple box. Inside it is a pair of white gloves, smaller than your own.

'I've already got some,' you smile, wiggling your fingers. 'But thanks.'

She rolls her eyes. 'Not for you.' She puts them on her freckled hands. 'They're mine. I thought maybe you could take yours off for a while, at least in the house. I'll keep these on so I don't slip and catch you or anything.'

Lily is smiling.

You look down at the thick white gloves you've come to know as your hands, and finger by finger, you pull them off.

