

CHAPTER 1

Crossing the Road

Wrapped in each other's arms, a head lies resting. The chest's gentle rise and fall accompanied by a rhythmic heartbeat. Hands are stroking hands.

Nearly dark. Two empty glasses on the table. The telly on mute.

Comfort. Security. Warmth.

The sound of a key in the lock breaks the silence.

'Daddy!'

Climbing down. Rushing out. Lifted up. Small arms wrap around a father's neck.

'Have a good time, sweetheart?' he asked.

The head that once rested nodded. 'We had ice cream!' she whispered. A secret pleasure.

‘You had ice cream! Did you save me some?’ he replied.
‘Has she been okay, Mum?’

‘We’ve had a great time.’

A look asked the silent question, ‘Anyone?’

Her eyes replied, ‘No, not yet’.



Matt West lifted his hands from the keyboard to reach for the mug of cold coffee sat on his desk. He liked the way the opening to his second novel could be misinterpreted. It reminded him of a song in the nineties by Cornershop about everybody needing a bosom for a pillow. He smiled at the thought of strait-laced members of his dad’s church being appalled by the hint of a lovers’ embrace – and what may have happened before or after.

A child with her grandma. Some will get it; others won’t.

He wondered how the looks might lead the story. Whose eyes said what? Who are they waiting for? Ideas trickled, rather than flowed. The doctor calling about Grandad? The police saying they’d found... the dog, a child, a body? The bailiffs? It needed more work, but it was a start.

‘What do you think, love?’ Matt asked the photo next to the computer. The woman in the photo looked back.

Start. Power. Shut Down.

It was always a struggle to leave for work. The Housing Association had promised to install a power assisted door because manoeuvring his wheelchair was difficult. Matt was glad to live on the ground floor apart from when the chap opposite left his bike in the hallway.

Shoes secured (Velcro’s easier than laces). Coat on. Bag on the back. Beanie. iPhone. He loved his music. All the decades. Aretha. Bacharach. Beyoncé. Billy Joel. Coldplay. Marley. All on his playlist. All in his story.

The November sunshine was bright and clear and the cold wind chafed his hands as they gripped and pushed. He’d forgotten his gloves again. A five-minute push for a five-minute bus ride. His strong upper body compensating for the weaker lower half.

Half an hour from the coast, Eastwood Minster is a large, busy, multicultural town, its population swollen by tourists in the summer and university students the rest of the year. Shops cater for West Indian and Asian tastes and the increase in Eastern European flavours. A green belt

ensures weight gain from new builds is kept to a minimum. Parks and riverside walks aid the town's health and wellbeing. The 10th Century Minster Church stands proud in the centre alongside the river wending its way to the sea.

Locals called the 2B 'The Shakespeare Bus' because sometimes it didn't turn up. The drivers were usually helpful: stopping at the raised kerbs and lowering the ramp. Pushchair wars were a regular occurrence. Audible sighs accompanied the folding of ones used for shopping. Matt had got used to it by now but the eyes spoke. 'What are they saying when they look at me?' he wondered. People often stared at someone in a wheelchair. Sometimes out of pity. Sometimes out of disdain.

He'd worked the evening shift for four months now. Three days a week, three hours a day. It was better than nothing and supplemented Universal Credit. A great improvement on the 18 months or so he'd spent on the sick and he knew he'd get a better job one day. It was pretty much the same every time. Customers came and went. Some less than ten in a basket, others a trolley full. Matt had always been a smiler. He'd be the one to cheer up someone else's dreary day. He'd be the one to get children to say 'beep' as he scanned. Do to others as you would have

them do unto you. Until someone complained he was being too friendly and he got told off by the manager.

A First at Oxford. A rowing Blue. Five years at a leading advertising agency. 'Marketing maketh the man', he used to joke. Married at 24. Dad at 26. Published at 27. Now 29. A till operator in a pound shop. Not quite the career move he had planned or hoped for.

Besides rowing, Matt had occupied his university days with History and English and couldn't quite get over how he got in. His calm laid back exterior portrayed an equally stable and placid interior. No one had ever seen him 'lose it': whatever, whenever or wherever 'it' might have been. With a body honed in the gym and on the Thames, Matt's six foot two frame, combined with his natural humour, scored high on the student likeability index. This well-developed protective layer hid a lack of confidence: especially where women were concerned. He had tried and failed, lusted and lost.

It was different with Jo McKenzie. A finals year romance. They'd met through the Christian Union: described by many as a dating agency for virgins, as indeed some were. Jo was a BA Fine Arts at The Ruskin School. Petite, quietly spoken, her shoulder length, auburn hair provided the perfect frame for her bespectacled face. Lots of other guys

liked her and for a long time Matt thought he would probably lose out (again). She hated rowing though: nothing more boring to watch, she once said. A joint interest in art brought them closer. He preferred Hockney and Warhol. She liked Monet and Delacroix.

After leaving the city of dreaming spires, they moved on together but not in together. Shared faith meant shared restraint – although there were times when they wanted to, really wanted to. Jo got work at a National Lottery funded community arts project while Matt started with Wilson MacDonald. Designing ads for bus shelters wasn't top notch, but it was a start. Renting studio apartments only ten minutes' walk apart, Eastwood Minster provided a convenient commuting base for them both.

Matt's mum, Janice, a part-time social worker in Adult Services and his Pentecostal Pastor dad, Des, lived nearby. Matt was their only surviving child and Jo soon became the daughter they'd always wanted but never had.

Likewise, Rob and Gill McKenzie regularly welcomed Matt to their family home: a five-bedroomed detached in the heart of the Cotswolds. Both in their late fifties, Rob had taken a severance package from an investment bank in the City to live the dream of a long and happy

retirement. Devoted to their two daughters, only the best was good enough and they always gave the best.

Three years after leaving university, Jo and Matt's wedding was the talk of the Cotswolds' glossy magazines when Des' gospel choir rolled into the small village church. The local vicar lamented it wasn't always like that on Sundays. The parishioners were less enthusiastic: 'Just not Church of England' they muttered. At least the organist had a sense of humour: playing a few bars of Village People's 'Go West' in honour of Jo's married name. Some got it; others didn't.

Once married, they moved in to a cramped, second floor, two-bed rented apartment not far from Matt's parents. It was cheap but it was home because they made it so. Tilly arrived a couple of years later and, girl, did they know it. All the things a baby brings and two floors up. Life was never the same again and they loved her all the more because of it.

Matt had begun his debut novel about a teenage activist caught up in the 1950s American Black civil rights movement before uni. His paternal grandparents had often told him about what happened in the States before they emigrated to the UK. Playing Sam Cooke's 'A Change Gonna Come' on their Dansette record player, their

stories of racial segregation sparked a passion in Matt's heart whenever he visited them in the St Paul's area of Bristol.

He'd always admired the fact they'd carried on living there after the riot in April 1980. The trouble had started just down the road at the Black and White Café – the irony of the name was not lost on them. His grandparents told him how they were sat in their home in Albert Park. They could hear sirens outside and, in the days when listening to the police on FM radio was possible, they found out just how close it all was. Very close. Just at the end of the road. In the morning, the damage was clear. The bank was a burnt-out shell, as were other buildings – but none of the pubs. Cars lay wrecked and windows smashed. They told Matt how the young man next door at number 19 moved out soon afterwards because of it all. Many were injured and arrested although no one was ever convicted. It wrecked the area for a while and his grandparents played their part in supporting those who rebuilt it. The more he worked on his novel, the more he realised that racial tensions had always been prominent over here as well as in the States. He always knew Black lives mattered.

Study, rowing and meeting Jo had all intervened with writing the book, though, so when Tilly was in bed and Jo

was out teaching evening classes, Matt picked up the story's threads and weaved them together.



The setting sun signed its autograph in red and orange pastels that warm June evening. The book launch had gone well. The publishers had marketed the marketing man. Early sales were promising but not yet second book stage. It was a half-hour walk from Waterstones to pick up Tilly from Matt's parents. She always enjoyed being with her grandma and grandad. Jo held Matt's arm as they walked. She on the inside, him by the kerb – ever the chivalrous.

'It was good so many people came, Matt. You did really well saying what you did and explaining about the background to the book. I wonder how many people have no idea what was going on in those times?' Jo wondered. 'Did you see the man in the bright red coat?'

'Yeah, I know. Quite something, wasn't it? White beard too,' replied Matt. 'Shame it isn't Christmas. You know what, though, he asked me to sign three copies – one for his partner, called Greg I think and two for his kids.'

Jo raised her eyebrows very slightly. 'I wonder what the kids think?'

'What, you mean because...'

'Yeah. It must have taken some getting used to. I guess they're very much loved all the same.'

'And I very much love you,' replied Matt.

Jo turned and kissed him. They looked at each other. It was 'The Look of Love', as Burt Bacharach and Hal David called it (or ABC, Matt joked to himself).

'How are you feeling about your job?' he asked, as they walked on arm in arm.

'It's difficult to know,' she replied. 'I enjoy it but constantly going from funding crisis to funding crisis is unsettling and takes the edge off things a bit. The managers are always stressed and going on about cost-effectiveness and where they can cut back. It's almost as if they're not interested in what we're actually doing anymore. It's such a shame, really.'

They crossed the road at the junction with Church Street. It was ten past nine. A bus pulled up at the lights.

'I'm looking to move on,' Jo said as they reached the other side.

The car was travelling over thirty in a twenty zone when it mounted the pavement.

Jo never felt a thing.