# Before the Ruins

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1

# Game

THE YEAR PETER WENT MISSING was the year of the floods. The newspapers were full of them, that and the spate of plummeting businessmen troubling the capital's pavements. Rain fell on the roofs and the businessmen fell off them, leapt off them, were thrown off them, all over London, as if it were a craze. Before Peter went missing, I read the reports carefully, as though by paying close attention I might work out the rules of the game. I don't know why. Perhaps I wanted to play too. I had always had a weakness for games, a trait I shared with Peter.

I was on my way home from a meeting in Paris when the call came. It was a Wednesday, late April, and as the train hurtled towards London night was coming on. The clouds were darkest blue. A thin rim of brightness hugged the horizon. I was on my laptop, reading about the latest in a series of leaked financial papers. When I glanced up, the last light slipped away, and my reflection coalesced upon the window like the darkness was developing fluid.

My phone rang and I rooted violently for it in my

handbag, alive with panic, as though I was secretly, desperately hoping for a momentous and life-changing call from someone who would ring only once and withhold their number. In my wildest dreams, I would not have guessed Peter's mother would be the caller.

'Andrea … are you there? It's Patricia, Mrs White.' When I didn't answer, she went on, 'Is that you, Andy? Is it you?'

'Yes, it's me. How are you?' Had the vicar died? A quick, stabbing pain, deeper than I would have expected.

'We're both well, dear. You sound … a bit different.' Thinking about it later, I would realise she meant posher. 'Peter says you're doing very well.'

Her voice was trembly. She had always been old, even when we were small. Her eyes were a pale china blue. When I used to knock at the vicarage door, her mouth would purse in disappointment as though she'd been expecting a boy, not a girl, but a nice boy from a nice home called Rufus or Hugo. But there I was with my crew cut and pink plastic earrings, smiling the gap-toothed smile of a master criminal and inviting Peter to throw sticks in the stream, by which I meant trapping a slowworm and posting it through Mrs East's letterbox because I'd heard my mother call her a witch. We were always up to something or other.

'It's Peter, dear, I'm worried about him. We haven't heard from him. Not this past month. Have you spoken to him?'

'I'm afraid I haven't, Mrs White.' I imagined her standing in the vicarage front room, staring out towards the yew hedge, the vicar beside her with a crochet blanket draped over his knees. It seemed wrong, talking to her on an iPhone. She came from a generation that knew rationing and hand-cranked their cars and had uncles who'd died in the trenches. A time of myth, it seemed now, like that of Arthur and his knights.

'It's been four Sundays now. He always calls us on Sundays after evensong. I've tried calling him but I just get the recording.'

I hesitated. My instinct was to cover for him, only I didn't know what I was covering for. It had been my birthday, my thirty-eighth, the previous week. Usually Peter remembered and sent a text, but not this time.

'I don't see Peter very often. We sort of move in different circles. And work is always so busy. I mean mine and Peter's. Have you tried calling him there? Or his other friends?'

'He told us he changed jobs. I thought I wrote the name of the company down but I can't find it. It was a foreign name, or names, a sort of string of foreign names. And he hasn't brought anyone home in …well, in quite a while.'

No, it was unlikely that Peter would have brought anyone home.

'You were always such good friends. You and Peter. And Marcus and Emma, of course. But you and Peter were friends first. I know he always thought of you as his best friend, even after' – she paused – 'everything that happened.'

*Everything that happened.* Peter had wanted to talk about it at the wedding, the wedding I invited him to and after which he'd disappeared, if only from Patricia.

'Have you tried googling him, I mean for his work number?'

'Googling …? No, I was hoping … You will look into it for me, Andy? You'll find out what he's up to, won't you?'

After we hung up, I stared out of the window. The train carriage was quiet. We raced past a string of street lamps on a flyover, lights blurring so the night was stitched with golden thread. I wondered why I'd agreed. It might have been her calling me Andy. For well over a decade, Peter's

mother was pretty much the only person to call me by my full name. But I have been Andrea, or frequently Ms Carter, for many years now.

Then there was the fact she had always loved Peter, fervently, protectively; when he was sixteen she was still cutting the crusts off his crab-paste sandwiches, unaware that he'd been throwing them to the jackdaws in the graveyard since he was seven and buying chocolate bars for lunch with money he'd come by via the vicar's trouser pockets. Yes, Patricia loved Peter, and yet I don't know if she ever really knew him. She and the vicar had had some fairly clear ideas about who he should be, and in the end I think he consented to play pretend with them, to give them what they wanted, which meant, I suppose, that he loved them too.

At King's Cross I made my way underground. There, the walls were papered with moving, glowing dreams. Descending on the escalators to the Victoria Line, I found myself thinking that if ads were really dreams, the preoccupations of the unconscious, then all we wanted to be was sexy. Because they all said sexy – the women coy or inviting or half-naked, the men white of tooth and thick of mane – so that must be what we were buying. Not good or kind or honourable, the qualities the vicar had once struggled to impress on us, just sexy.

I forced myself to march the few streets home, wondering how quickly I could get into bed and fall asleep. I was always tired at that time. Doing my job, sleep came at a premium, but even when I did get a chance to catch up, it was a tiredness that sleep could not cure. If I had divided myself into parts – body, brain, heart, soul – I would have been unable to tell you which bit precisely was so exhausted.

Once home, I didn't immediately go to bed. Instead, I fussed about the flat, making tiny adjustments to things, wiping down the inside of the bin lid, passing a duster over the surfaces, even though the cleaner had been the day before. The fretfulness in Patricia's voice had got to me. I wondered what Peter was playing at, which made me think of the wedding, of the last time I had seen Peter. He had wanted to talk about the manor, but I had closed him down.

As I laid out my clothes for the next day, I had no inkling that, in light of Peter's disappearance, the manor and 'everything that happened' there was a subject that was going to be thoroughly reopened. That in pursuit of Peter, I would see and speak to them all again except, of course, for the one who could no longer speak to anyone.

Slipping between the sheets, I checked my emails and scrolled through the news one last time, then turned out the light. In the darkness, I lay listening to the quiet street and the distant sirens. In London, no matter where you live there are always sirens at night. I thought of the scenes the police were being called to, the people being raced to hospital in the backs of ambulances. I thought of all the games no longer being played. Of all the games gone wrong.

All of which should have meant bad dreams, or at least unsettled ones, but in fact my dream was quite the opposite, although in a way that was worse, since waking from it was so painful. I don't remember all of it, of course, was left only with a few images and a feeling: my bare feet ankle-deep in the wet emerald lawn, the sun falling just so on the manor, and to the left the lake where the wind stirred the reeds and the little white temple cast its dark shadow on the ripples. The whole afternoon lay ahead, spectral in its perfection. The sky would stay its clear, glassy blue, the

shadows would creep feline over the grass, and then as the sun sank, the stone of the place would begin to exhale the heat of the whole long day. And in my dream, I knew exactly which day it was. I knew that today was the day of the apocalypse, today was 20 June 1996, the day the four of us first went to the manor, the day we met David. Just before we found out about the diamonds.

2

# Apocalypse I

IT WAS MAY WHEN MY MOTHER came home and, collapsed upon the hall carpet, her face all concertinaed on one side, announced the coming of the apocalypse. It was coming, it was coming soon, and none of us would survive it.

'June the twentieth,' she said, 'nineteen ninety-six.' And then she passed out. I rolled her on to her side and pulled down her rucked-up skirt, breathing in vodka fumes and the smell of her unwashed hair. She opened her eyes, blinking sleepily like a kitten, and lashed out, her fist connecting with my jaw. I swore and backed off to a safe distance. Then I went to the kitchen, where I held a bag of frozen peas against my cheek while I waited for the murder to seep out of my heart. It'd been a while since she had caught me.

'It's coming! You're going to die too!'

I went over and slammed the kitchen door, sealing her off. I hadn't spoken to her properly in months. After a couple of minutes, I heard her shuffling into the living room where she slept these days, partly because she kept

falling down the stairs, partly because it was as far away from me as she could get.

The door clicked shut. The radio came on. I swapped the peas for a bag of fish fingers, reaching deep into the frost-encrusted maw of the freezer compartment and hauling them out in a shower of ice.

Ultimately, she was right, though. Not about Armageddon, but about a coming end.

It became a thing, the apocalypse. Like lines from films we watched together, the in-jokes we curated and the impressions we all did, even Peter, of Peter's father.

'So Mum says the world is ending on June the twentieth.' Nothing my mother said or did surprised them, and the hash we smoked, sat in the back of Marcus's uncle's van parked up at the castle or in a quiet spot in one of the lanes, meant our reactions were often muted and slow to load – although at the time the comparison would have conjured Atari computer games, rather than YouTube videos or Facebook Live. Porn was still a dirty magazine passed around class. We saved up for CDs and taped songs off the radio. I didn't have a TV because my mother wouldn't pay the licence fee so news came from skimming week-old copies of the *Sun* or the *Evening Adver* in Darren's office.

Outside the van, the hedgerows were clouded with cow parsley and hogweed. Peter, Em and I were eighteen. Marcus, my boyfriend, was nineteen. I was sitting wedged under Marcus's arm with a toolbox sticking into my back. His other hand held the ashtray, an empty paper coffee cup, and rested lightly on my thigh.

Sometimes I wished we could stay in the van for ever. I couldn't remember meeting any of them. We had gone to the same schools: infant, junior, senior. We had a common

language and a shared reference library of teachers, landmarks and local legends. It was as if they had always been on the edges of my vision: Peter in a stripy scarf, aged six, hopping across the playground; Em arriving at junior school each day with a red teapot slung over her shoulder on a string; Marcus, a good-looking boy in the year above, endlessly chasing a football across a field.

While we had always known him – because everyone knew everyone, because of who his uncle was – Marcus had been the last to join our tight-knit group. He had left school at sixteen but come back in to retake his English GCSE on his Uncle Darren's orders. There had been an empty chair next to Peter and Marcus took it, and at lunchtime trailed after him, looking awkward and asking questions about *King Lear*, and then about what we might all be doing later on or at the weekend, and scowling at anyone else who came near us. I was tempted to tell him to get lost, but Em said, 'He's all right Andy. I mean, he's not doing any harm.' Until suddenly we were four. And four was enough for me. Four was plenty.

'So no exam results, then?' Em was kneeling beside Peter on a rolled-up bit of carpet, her fringe over her eyes; Peter – all ankle, knee and elbow –had his long skinny legs drawn up under his chin.

'No Oxford?'

'No, Peter,' I said. 'After the apocalypse there will be no Oxford. No more school of any kind.'

'And Reading?' Marcus had his eye on a ticket to the festival.

'Cancelled due to the sun turning black and the heavens being rolled back like a scroll.'

Peter reached in and plucked the joint from my fingertips. 'The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away,' he

intoned. Sometimes it was almost like having the vicar in the van with us.

'But if the apocalypse is coming,' I went on, 'we can do exactly what we want, and only what we want. Until June the twentieth, that is.'

People had been talking to us about the future ever since we could remember, particularly in Peter's case: great things were expected of Peter. The idea of deleting it, and ending its hold over us, was worth exploring. In the van, wreathed in smoke, nostrils filled with the smell of grease and oil and the tang of hash, we talked about what we'd do. Who would die painfully. What we'd steal. The things we'd try, mostly things we'd seen people do on TV that were supposed to be fun. There was an edge of hysteria to our laughter. Em had to scramble out, bent over at ninety degrees, and pee behind one of the back wheels, getting thistled in the arse in the process.

They would have let it drop, however, had it not been for me. The apocalypse called out to something lodged under my skin, the longing for destruction perhaps, for erasure – of everything, of everyone, especially myself.

We dropped off Peter at the vicarage and Em at her family's cottage on the Hungerford road, and then Marcus and I drove into the Savernake Forest, ancient woodland where Henry VIII had once hunted, home to deer, walkers and courting couples, site of murders, and rumoured wandering place of a headless horsewoman. We parked the van and walked out to the Big Bellied Oak, climbing up till we reached a seat among its thousand-year-old branches. A little starlight crept through the new leaves. I thought of dead stars, dead events, all their rage consumed millions of years ago, just a memory of fire reaching out across the

universe, and for the first time since the punch I felt better, more normal, and not like my hands were twitching to strangle someone.

'You all right?'

I nodded. Marcus had a chivalrous streak. He was protective. Only a month ago, he'd sent Greg Martin sprawling for trying to put his arm around me. But my mum was a woman, and by Marcus's code you never hit women, never lifted a finger against them. His uncle said men who did that were no better than dogs. Still, better not to say anything.

'Just stoned,' I said.

'Me too.' With one arm gripping a branch, Marcus leaned in to kiss me. His mouth was warm and tasted, not unpleasantly, of cigarettes.

We'd been going out a year, since I'd heard rumours of a girl out at Bishopstone who liked him. It wasn't just the prospect of losing the lifts, or my weekend job at his uncle's office, or the fact that with Marcus around no one dared give Peter any trouble, not in the roughest of pubs. I liked Marcus, although it was sometimes hard, with all the other stuff in the balance, to know how much.

He drew back and let out a quick breath. 'If I close my eyes, I feel like I'm falling.' He wrapped both arms around the branch and glanced downwards. 'Oh, that's weird.'

'You've got the fear.'

'A bit. It'll pass. Hey, what are you doing?'

What I was doing was unbuttoning his Levi's. One of his legs began to tremble slightly, dancing in the air. I wondered what it would take for Marcus not to respond to my hands: more than the prospect of a thirty-foot drop, it seemed.

Something was rustling about in the undergrowth over to the left. The moon was peeping. I liked having him

where I wanted him. I liked the fact that like this, he could not touch me back, so I did it slow. Before he came, he said my name, quickly, with a furrowed brow, like I troubled him, like I pained him. I wiped my hand off on my jeans.

'I think you hit the headless horsewoman.' But part of my brain was thinking, *Well, that's that done for a while.*

Later, in bed, floating on a little hash cloud, I thought of the world after the apocalypse. I saw Marlborough empty of people, its supermarkets abandoned, its shops looted. I imagined packs of dogs marauding up the high street, and the great stone fountains of the College dry and full of leaves. At our own school, St John's, our work peeled from its sugar-paper mounting on the display boards, and in the canteen, the linoleum shrank and cracked, and the enormous saucepans rusted where they hung on the kitchen walls.

It made me feel something, something shimmery, like the times in the church, years before, when I would hang over one of the creaking pews till my hair touched the flagstones and Peter would ring one of the hand bells right next to my ear. Even after the sound had faded and my ears had stopped ringing, something in my brain would go on resounding, as though deep inside me a tiny cliff was shearing off into the sea, a tower block collapsing soundlessly.

So I kept bringing us back to it, asking Marcus and Peter and Em again and again what they would do if they had one more day, just one more day.

On 20 June, dawn broke the colour of Mrs East's roses. After much consideration, I'd decided not to kill my mother. Instead, I made myself pancakes for breakfast. I put all the golden syrup I wanted on them, which turned out to be all the golden syrup there was. Then I licked the plate.

The lane into town was narrow and windy. When cars came along, I waited on the verge and then wandered out again to the middle of the road where it was sunny. The woods exhaled cool air. At some point I started jogging, and then the jog became a sprint, just for the hell of it, in and out of the sunlight and the dappled shadows on the road, until I was winded, and slowed, panting, to a lope.

A tractor was haymaking in a field. I passed the rugby club, and then the corner of the common where the circus tents of the Mop would set up every autumn, and where certain girls would sit on the grass banks in summer, waiting for cars to pull up and take them out to some quiet spot in the Savernake and – almost always – bring them back.

When I got to Marlborough I went to the bank, and since it was the last day on earth, I took out every penny I had, which added up to nineteen pounds and seventy-eight pence.

The manor lay empty with a chain and padlock on the gate and signs that said the property was patrolled by guard dogs. It wasn't. Men working for Darren, Marcus's uncle, had put the signs up a few years back, when the family who owned it got into trouble with death duties and had to put it on the market. It had sold, a year or so ago, but there was still no sign of the new owners. A couple of times squatters had got in, but Marcus's uncle had ways of dealing with unwanted visitors, involving his Alsatians, Arnie and Sly, balaclavas and a couple of his bricklayer friends. Last time, he let them leave with what they could carry, burned the rest of their stuff and gave Marcus the thumb-sized piece of hash he'd taken from them.

As we came down the hill along the A436, from the van's passenger seat I could see the manor's shingle roof

and then, for a split second, I was allowed a glimpse of its lovely face before it was swallowed by the line of firs that stood along the front boundary, shielding it from the road. From the top deck of the double-decker to Swindon you could keep it in view for a few more seconds, and on school trips, or the annual Christmas excursion to see a show at the theatre, I always looked out for it, greeted it as a secret friend, like the mysterious, bowing blue-robed figure in the east window of the church.

Marcus parked the van in front of the gate and we climbed over quickly and moved up the driveway, out of sight of the road. There were weeds growing up through the gravel and the lawn was knee-high in wild barley and thistles. As we drew nearer and the sound of the cars – already muted by the firs – diminished, I became aware of the murmur of bees in the grass. I suppose there were crickets and hornets and wasps as well, but what I remember was that heavy, satisfied sound that bees make. The brick had weathered to a darkish pink, and each one was surrounded by a rime of white mortar. With the morning sun upon it, it made my heart quicken.

We stopped a few feet away from the front door and dropped our bags on the stone steps. Peter peered through the windows and as I bent over to untie my laces, I heard him bang the knocker against the door, and the sound echoed through the empty building. Marcus was standing with his hands in his pockets, gazing upwards.

The manor was three storeys high. On either side, set back a little, and a storey shorter, were wings. The roof was shingle, the façade brick, and around the mullioned windows, the builders had incorporated seams of local flint. Further on, if you followed the drive round, were stables and a clutch of outbuildings.

'Are you going to take that side?'

With his chin, Marcus indicated left. That way, the climb was fairly easy owing to a chimneypiece edged in sticking-out brickwork and, nearer the top, a string course, a line of bricks that stuck out edgeways from the wall.

No other route was immediately obvious, but I knew that Marcus had found one, and that it was hard, which was why he was nudging me towards the easier climb. Every way I looked, the eaves were the problem. Then I caught Marcus casting a quick look right and I followed his gaze: to the far right, in the shaded corner where the wing met the main house, there was a tree. Tiny, green and brown dappled pears hung from its branches and while it barely reached to the first-floor windows, coming halfway down the wall was a piece of drainpipe, and above that a series of jutting cornerstones.

I went to stand beneath it with Marcus at my heels.

'I'll take the tree and the pipe. You take the chimney,' I said.

'You sure?'

'The world ends today.'

'Right.' I wasn't going to be told what I could and could not climb and Marcus was smart enough to know it. Besides, it was one of the things he liked about me. His mum, Darren's sister, was a bag of nerves, forever calling up Marcus or Darren and asking them to drop whatever they were doing because she thought she smelled gas or the fridge was making a funny noise.

'I'll watch you.'

'Peter can do that. I'll meet you at the top.'

He looked at the route up and poked the toe of his trainers into the ground. The lawn at the base of the tree was soft and springy, but even so.

'You fall, Andy, you're fucked.'

'Think so?' Our smiles met. Peter, hearing his name, had ambled over, a finger thrust between the pages of a book to guard his place.

'There's a piano inside.'

Em was sitting on the lawn and had taken out her sketchbook. She lifted her skirt so the sun could get to her legs, her gaze settled upon the fountain and its stone cherubs and she sighed contentedly.

I stepped into Marcus's cupped hands, swung up into the pear tree, and a couple of birds shot skywards. Following the trunk, I hauled myself up, and then as I got higher, shifted my weight so that the tree bent over towards the wall of the house. As it did so, I pushed off with my feet and caught hold of the drainpipe. It was easy and within a few seconds, I had shinnied up and got my hands around the first of the cornerstones. There was a breeze higher up. A little winged creature, a beetle with petrol-blue iridescent wings, landed on my forearm. I got my feet right up under me and grasped for the next cornerstone and then the next, feeling the oil from my palms seeping into the stone.

The guttering was choked with rotting leaves and bright green moss. I reached up and put my hands on the roof. The shingles seemed firm, but they were old and I wondered when a human hand had last touched them. It seemed likely that they would take my weight, but I wouldn't know until it was too late. There were no handholds on the tiles, so the thing was just to get the feet up and run, keeping low and hunched forward. I got the first chimneystack in my sights, drove up with my legs and went for it.

By the time I got my hands to the stack, I was panting. The chimney pots were covered in bird shit and I held on

tight to them, managing a single whoop as I caught my breath. Marcus was coming up over the other side. From the other chimney he walked the length of the roof to me as though along a tightrope, his arms held out for balance. I swivelled round to get my first look over the back of the manor.

I would get to know it all well: the courtyard with the remains of a once fine rose garden; the fig trees in the kitchen garden, spliced against the crumbling walls, which dropped their fruit on to stone pathways where it split and rotted; the derelict greenhouses full of empty snail shells, spiders and broken glass. My gaze passed over the tangled orchard of apple trees and the remains of a rotting summerhouse. Further away, bordering the property at the back, was a copse and then the pale yellow of barley fields that rose to the horizon. Then I glimpsed the glint of sun on water and saw, to the left, at the bottom of the sloping lawn, a small lake, half choked with reeds, and there on its far side, a folly: a little white-pillared replica of a Greek temple.

Marcus kissed me, a quick, juddery kiss as we held on to the chimneys. Down below, a wood pigeon flew to a perch atop the pear tree and when I looked up towards the sun, the sky was clear as glass and specked with tiny flying insects. The shingles were like scales under my feet, like the scales of a great dragon. The shimmery feeling was back, and I did not think I could contain it. It tempted me to flinch, as though the joy of it would break my heart. For a second I thought Marcus was going to say something and I turned to look at him, at his gleaming face, wet with sweat from the climb, and ever so briefly he appeared to me like a stranger. But before he spoke, if he even intended to, I saw the white flash of Peter's waving hand and looked

down to see, standing next to him, a real stranger staring up at us, face shadowed by the hand that was shielding his eyes from the sun.