

**DAVID McKEOWEN**

A hand is shown from the side, holding a pen nib. The hand and pen are rendered in a dark, almost black color against a blue, textured background that resembles crumpled paper. The pen nib is pointed towards the top right of the frame.

**FIVE PEOPLE ON THE EDGE...  
ONE CHANCE TO GET A**

**GRIP**

A dark silhouette of a city skyline is visible at the bottom of the page, with various building shapes of different heights and widths.

# GRIP

业学院图书馆  
书章

DAVID McKEOWEN



HODDER

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*for Jill*

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# one

## february 2000

The light was already failing in the early afternoon but there was just a suggestion of spring in the unseasonably warm, damp weather. A few crocuses were dotted around the muddy lawns and the mourners, mindful of their newly polished shoes, were careful to stay on the path as they made their way to the chapel.

Inside, the body lay in its mahogany, brass-handled casket, lined with maroon velvet. No-one had been able to agree on the music so there was none, and the short obsequies were spoken into a stiff, cold silence. From somewhere, a scent of geranium and lime-flowers drifted on the dank air.

Never again. A river running bright with possibilities now suddenly dry.

Then, as the bones and flesh burned behind the curtains, mourners filed out into the pale afternoon. The ceremony over, the formal procession eased into sociable circulation as they came through the doorway. A young man laughed as he gestured to three other men standing around him and the girl on his arm. Two older men, grey-haired, hands thrust in their overcoats, conferred earnestly while their wives stood

slightly apart and chatted amiably together. Shortly afterwards, a woman emerged from the chapel on her own and paused by the doorway to brush away a tear, and the trace of wetness was a transfer of grief on her cheek.

The little congregation began to break up and move off towards their cars. As they did so, a man appeared in the doorway to usher a new group of mourners into the chapel. The furnace was once again ready behind the curtains. It had finished with the mahogany casket and its contents and the ashes were now waiting to be collected round the back.

**eight months earlier . . .**





# two

**tuesday 6.30 a.m.**

At half past six on the morning of his birthday, James was woken by voices in the kitchen. Sushila and Mark were arguing about something in the newspaper as they got ready for work. The Vengaboys were on the radio. 'Boom, boom, boom, boom,' they went as Mark did up his tie and Sushila polished her shoes. James still found it unsettling to see them in suits. A year ago, he thought drowsily, none of them had got up until the afternoon and now Sushila was putting on the jacket of her little black suit as the sun rose. It was disconcerting. A year ago, she had not worn knickers. 'Boom, boom, boom, boom,' sang the Vengaboys on the radio. He was twenty-three today.

Twenty-three. How had their ocean of possibilities crystallised down to these jobs and this shrinking ambition and this daily struggle? Now Sushila and Mark had a common language with a vocabulary of offices and prospects and rivalries and salaries. Miranda, with whom he shared a room at Prendergast's, would have been at home round this breakfast table. But James was not. Whenever he heard them talking like this, he was chilled by foreboding. He went back to bed.

When he woke again, it was seven thirty. Sushila and Mark had left for work and the flat was quiet but someone was shouting in the street outside. They sounded cross. A car horn blared. There was more shouting.

James opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. The curtains stirred in the early morning breeze.

Chris would be here soon.

# three

**tuesday 8.00 a.m.**

Virginia carefully positioned the twenty-third candle in the cake. There. Twenty-three years of her baby's life in strawberry pink. She hoped James would not think the cake was meant seriously.

'Julie,' she called. 'Could you put those flowers in the sink in a vase and bring them here.'

There were going to be twenty-three items at his birthday dinner, one for each year of his life, and the project had stretched her ingenuity for weeks as she combed through old photograph albums for inspiration. But finally Virginia reached twenty-three and now the table was crowded with allusion and resonance – satsumas from every Christmas stocking, Smarties he had picked off his fifth birthday cake, quiche he had refused to eat when he was nine, and Rice Krispies from the breakfast in bed she had served for him and that blonde girl, the first time he had had someone stay the night. And then there was the Liebfraumilch that had made him sick when he was thirteen.

'Here you go,' Julie said. 'Where do you want them?'

As she came into the living room, there was a

sudden resemblance between the two women. The warmth of the early morning sun caught the high cheekbones and dancing eyes they shared and they could almost have been sisters.

‘If you are going to steal chocolate,’ Virginia said, ‘you shouldn’t leave the evidence all round your mouth.’

Julie laughed and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Tiny and with her blonde hair in an elfin bob, she looked as if she had just left school. Only the fine lines round her eyes suggested otherwise. ‘Now, where do you want them?’ she said.

‘Over there,’ Virginia said. ‘What do you think?’ As she spoke she looked quickly at her watch. There was just time to salt the almonds and submerge the chicken in its apricot marinade before she had to leave for school.

‘Lovely,’ Julie said. ‘I can’t believe he’s twenty-three. They grow up so quick.’

‘But you never stop worrying about them,’ Virginia said.

Julie looked at her sympathetically. ‘It’s hard, isn’t it,’ she said, ‘when it’s your only one. And they are so unpredictable. Two is different. You know where you are with two. The older one is always trying to please you and the younger one will never do anything you say.’

‘Rubbish,’ Virginia said. ‘Everyone’s different.’

‘No, it’s true,’ Julie said. ‘Look at Courtney and Nicole.’

‘Come on, Julie.’

‘What do you mean “come on”? They are just like that.’

‘I mean firstly they are three years old.’

‘Nearly four.’

‘And secondly, Courtney is twenty minutes older than Nicole. What does that prove?’

‘You can see it. Nicole is going to be a rebel.’ Julie opened her arms for emphasis. ‘You can just see it.’ As she punctuated the point with her hands, she caught a photograph on the table. ‘Whoops,’ she said. ‘Sorry.’

Virginia bent to pick it up and placed it carefully back on the table. James was turning into a handsome young man. He was beginning to look like Francis.

‘Your girls are lovely,’ Virginia said. ‘And so is my James. They are all our babies. Always.’ She hoped James was going to enjoy this evening. He was so polite when they were all together it was often hard to work out what was really going on in his head.

‘I’m off now,’ Julie said. ‘I’ve got to take the girls to school.’

‘Where’s Lisa?’

‘In bed. The lazy cow.’

‘You spoil that daughter of yours.’

‘That’s what mothers are for. Anyway, I love taking them. I pretend they’re mine.’

‘They are.’

‘Not the same. But it’s lovely being a grandma. No worries.’

Virginia put the champagne in the fridge. She

hoped Francis might unbend enough to drink. At least she had made sure Alex was not going to be there. He would only have complicated the evening. 'Can you come back later and give it all a good Hoover?' Virginia said. She scooped up some of the marinade with her little finger and licked it. They ought to enjoy themselves. It was delicious.

'Virginia,' Julie said. 'I hope you don't mind me asking, but can you pay me the four weeks you owe?'

'OK. I'll leave it in an envelope for you on Thursday.'

Julie looked at the floor. 'Would it be all right if you paid me now?'

'Are you in trouble?'

'Me?' Julie laughed. 'I am always in trouble. No, it's the twins' birthday on Saturday and I promised Lisa I'd get them a Barbie dress each. They're on offer at Woolworths and I'm worried if I don't get them today they will all go.'

'Why are you wasting your money on that rubbish?' Virginia said.

'It's what they want,' Julie said. 'And I need the money. It's forty-five pounds for the two and I don't get my benefit until next week. Please, Virginia.'

'OK,' Virginia relented. 'I'll go to the cash-machine on the way home. Come by tonight to pick it up. Before eight. Now, how do I look?'

'Lovely. Francis will see what he's missing. And Rachel will be jealous. Perfect.'

'Thank you. You will give it a good going-over, won't you?'

'Don't worry,' Julie said as she went, closing the door behind her.

Virginia inspected the table. It glowed with love. Surely James would feel that. Everything on it was a memory. And every one was precious. Virginia could still feel James in her arms, five minutes old, warm and soft in the delivery room.



# four

**tuesday 8.15 a.m.**

The baby nestled in her arms, the tiny perfect hand clasping itself instinctively round Francis's little finger. She lay in a pethidine daze feeling the warmth of her child. The tearing pain had faded, the infant's first seconds of screaming had given way to peaceful sleep and there was an exhausted joyous calm in the delivery room. Through her drowsiness, Rachel could feel Francis gently stroking her hair. The miracle of birth had awed the room into hushed reverence.

New life.

If only.

A hundred and forty-seven loving, diligent, careful acts of sexual congress and not one out of eighty billion sperm conscientiously ejaculated by Francis had managed to wriggle its way up to fertilise one of Rachel's eggs. Not one.

Which was why she now waited fretfully in the polished calm of Harley Street, in the immaculate waiting room, with its expensive wallpaper and huge centrepiece of lilies on the table, and a longcase clock ticking gravely in the corner.

Sometimes longing came rolling over her like the