

From his bedroom window, David could see his mother returning from her date. He glanced at the clock and frowned. She'd promised to be home by eleven o'clock at the latest; it was now twenty past. He'd spent the time since she left alone in his room, playing his guitar, then watching MTV, then finishing an essay, then masturbating, then reading fifty pages of *On The Road*. He'd thrown it aside when he heard the sound of the car on the driveway and took up position at the window.

His mother got out first, her bright red coat noticeable even at night, and stood there for a moment, fishing for her housekeys, while her date locked the car and came around to talk to her. *She better not let him in*, thought David.

Jodie, David's mother, had divorced his father two years before. They'd been happy once, she'd explained to him at the time, but he was a drinker. It was after one particularly bad session, which had ended in a moment of violence, that she'd thrown him out and began divorce proceedings. Since then she'd dated two different men for short periods of time, both of whom David had despised, neither of whom had lasted.

'David,' said Jodie, as she stepped inside, surprised to discover her son standing on the stairs. 'What are you doing up?'

'It's 11:20,' he said, ignoring the man standing behind his mother. 'You're late.'

'Only a little,' she replied, trying to sound jovial. 'Go back to bed. You have school in the morning.'

David didn't move but stared at the couple venomously. Unlike other children from broken homes, he'd been glad when his father had moved out. All he could remember was constant arguments, plates being broken, pathetic statements of paternal love, slobbered over him as he tried to turn his face away from stinking whiskey breath. He was happy when his mother had thrown him out and it was just the two of them again. He wanted to look after her himself. He wanted her to want him to look after her.

'He's not staying,' said David finally, his voice low and threatening.

'That's not your decision,' said Jodie quietly.

'If he stays, I go,' said David.

'Don't be so -'

'David,' said the man, stepping towards him, his hands palm-out in a gesture of openness. 'David, I've changed. I promise I have. I haven't touched a drop in almost ten months. Things will be different this time. I promise you.'

The boy barely heard the words. Instead he felt his hands clench into fists and he could hear his own breathing, snorting through his nose, like a bull ready to charge. The image pleased him and he started to paw the ground beneath him with one bare foot, heel to toes, back and forth, poised to attack as his parents watched him, tense, bewildered, frightened, wondering what on earth he was going to do next.