

## Chapter 1 The Centre Cannot Hold

“Loser!”

Kiera had just turned to write on the whiteboard and her back was facing the class as the word sliced the air. She felt blood rush to her cheeks; the sensation of sharp tingling and heat suffused her body. She knew the boy who had said it of course, but she had no proof.

The word spoke to a part of her that understood and even assented to the term. In this instance of recognition, the boy and the woman met, separated by decades but joined by mutual self-deprecation. Her eyes burned and a tear bulged, wanting release.

Then the anger kicked in. This was her comfort zone – anger felt safer than grief. It was more on her side.

Charged by adrenalin, she turned to face them. A sea of adolescent faces, around 30 fifteen year-olds looking at her expectantly, eager to see her next move. A battle was about to commence and the room buzzed with excitement. It was her versus them. They were the enemy. And although she didn't think these thoughts consciously, they were there, burning under the surface.

“Who said that?”

The class sat there in silence. A few boys sniggered

“Right, I want you to listen very carefully. Do NOT look at the person who just said that word.” At least seven heads turned towards Liam.

Now the anger surged throughout her body and took over. Kiera felt the thrill of adrenalin tighten her muscles for attack and impel her to action without hesitation or consideration of the consequences. Her gaze fixed on her prey. Liam was the most vexing of her nemeses. She didn't like the boy. She could see him looking at her, half scornful, half nervous uncertainty. He had seen the others looking at him. But he was defiant – he knew she had no proof. She couldn't *prove* it was him.

She took a deep breath, steadying herself for sweet revenge.

“I'm going to teach you a new word”, she said to the class in general. “It's called projection. It's like when you project a cricket ball” and she threw an imaginary cricket ball at the class. Some ducked. “It's sort of like another word for throwing. The point is, the ball comes from the person who throws it. And that's what projection means. The names come from yourself. Projection means that the names you call others come from the names you call yourself. So, if you call someone a loser that means you think that you are a loser”.

More sniggers. Some of the boys looked scornfully at Liam whilst a group of girls at the back smiled at each other and looked triumphantly in his direction.

“So I feel sorry for you”.

And as she said this, she looked at Liam. Liam, a slight boy with lank, blonde hair, seemed to shrink a little, become even skinnier than he had been at the start of the class. The last vestige of defiance faded whilst his face seemed to sink in to itself, his lips disappeared and his chin fell to his chest.

Kiera 2; Liam1, she thought. Though I may live to regret this – a flicker of doubt crept into her mind, together with a sickening feeling in her gut. The thought crossed her mind that she might have gone too far - but she dismissed it, enjoying the pride of her victory.

The class eventually filed out, Liam alone, head down and last to leave. A new class filed in, settled down and then started the low-grade misbehaviour that characterised most classes at the school. Girls sat at the back whispering and giggling; a group of boys started throwing pieces of screwed up paper across the room whilst a handful of the kids tried to work and listen to what she was saying.

Kiera took a deep breath, as if she were trying to draw an invisible energy into her body. She looked around at the kids, their gazes everywhere but at her. Smirks, punches, giggling, whispers all merging into a fog. She clapped her hands.

“Okay everyone, on Tuesday we were discussing ‘love’ in Romeo and Juliet. The question I left you with was, how do we know that Romeo truly loves Juliet? Isn’t he just playing the field – first Rosaline and then Juliet?”

A boy put his hand up. “At the beginning it feels like Romeo does go from Rosaline to Juliet because he just fancies them. But later, Romeo puts his life on the line for Juliet.”

“Creep!” The word emerged from a group of boys huddled together, most of them looking towards the window so no-one would know who’d said it.

The boy, inured to both physical and verbal insults, ignored the interruption. Kiera just sighed.

“Good Tom, you’re right and for homework you should look at the kind of language Romeo uses for Rosaline at the beginning of the play and how

different it is to what he uses for Juliet at the end. Let's look at this now. Okay everyone, get your books out and turn to page 45."

The class emitted a collective groan. Kiera's own groan was silent and as the class progressed she could hear her monotone voice, feel the heaviness of her body and see herself glancing at her watch far too often.

The rest of the day seemed to pull her slowly into what she called the grey zone. Classes came and went; she hardly noticed. She felt leaden, heaviness took over from the brief adrenalin high of the morning. She found it difficult to motivate herself, or the kids, and she just could not shake off the niggling feeling that something was not quite right in the normally predictable world of Kiera Brown. Edgy, angsty, prickly and uncomfortable were words that came to her when she tried to describe the strange mix of feelings and sensations that seemed to plague her nowadays. But she did not have a lot of time to think about it. Trouble was, she never had time to think about it. But the more she ignored the feelings the stronger they grew. They demanded to be acknowledged.

"Feel me. Fucking feel me".

Kiera jolted. She was in front of a class who were writing their first reactions to a poem they had just read. She wasn't sure if she had said these words out loud or not. But the children, 11 and 12 year olds, were clearly unperturbed. No, she hadn't spoken out loud, thank God.

Her day ended at five. As she packed her things, she looked around the classroom, as if seeing it for the first time. The beech-coloured laminate tops of the desks, offset by black, moulded plastic chairs, walls displaying pictures put up for a purpose long forgotten, scratched fawn-coloured paint, grey floor tiles...Kiera felt, with a surprising intensity and yearning, the profound lack of beauty in her life and with that, the lack of beauty in her students' lives. She

noted with surprise that this lack was just there, like the air or the rain, taken for granted, somehow normal. She felt a surge of anger come up from her gut, feeling her muscles tense and her heart harden as if there was a solid piece of granite lodged right in the centre. It seemed as if beauty was the privilege of others, so distant from herself. Why? she wondered. She had always done the right thing. She had worked hard, got good enough grades all for the promise of a good job. Did her job meet this criterion? Was it good? The thought occurred to her, accompanied by a sinking feeling in her heart, that she was just a jumped up check-out girl, beeping her kids through the system with their invisible bar codes destined to be consumed by someone or something. God knows what. She hated this sinking feeling and the thought that she was some kind of automaton in a system not of her own choosing – it triggered that awful combination of anger and shame, a feeling that somehow she had been tricked! By whom she did not know.

She tried to brighten herself up. Wasn't she contributing to something, a way out of this ugliness at least for some of the children? Wasn't her life meaningful, good? But on reflection, Kiera's life seemed, well, *functional*. She went from functional classrooms, in a functional school, to her functional flat in a functional estate where beauty was a rare visitor, coming in the form of a robin, blue tit or occasional kite screaming in the skies overhead. Kiera sighed. There was nothing to be done. She shook herself out of her reverie – no point walking down that track which only led to gloom and moodiness. This was her life and she had better get used to it.

These kinds of intrusive insights had been increasing in frequency and intensity for some time now. They were annoying because they felt deeply 'true' to Kiera and entered her consciousness with a clarity and power that was difficult to ignore. At the same time, they only served to pull her down and make her feel powerless. There was nothing that could be done about the lack of

beauty in her life, or, for that matter, the sense of pointlessness she was feeling lately. This was the most annoying of all the feelings that forced itself upon her awareness as there was nothing to be done about it. It seemed as if a sort of hopelessness had emerged from nowhere.

Not so long ago she had felt motivated, excited about her future, looking forward to her next promotion, probably as head of department, and dreamt of a fulfilled life, maybe one day a partner and even a family. Then, gradually, over a period of about a year, the excitement had cooled, the dreams melted, the prospects of spending her life competing for one promotion after the next appeared meaningless, pointless. Her energy had gradually seeped away and she was finding it increasingly difficult to motivate herself to do anything.

Forcing her attention away from her inner world, she brightened at the thought of meeting Rose and Caroline. She had texted them asking to meet outside the dining hall so they could walk together to the car park. Today she felt she had need of her friends.

The dining hall, a rectangular building, housing a kitchen and dining tables was adorned by a 'covered market', which was a hard plastic awning attached to the longer side which acted as an outdoor eating and gathering place in summer. The dining hall was the geographic hub of the school, sending out pathways to all parts of the campus which meant that at the end of lessons the whole community converged on the place, if only to leave it en route to somewhere else. Somehow, the building had become the heart of the community, though no-one seemed to realise this. It was a good place to meet.

At 5pm, it was quite dark, though Kiera could see the outlines of Caroline and Rose distinctly. At forty-two, Caroline was the older of the two women. She was tall and had long, dark blonde hair, thick and wavy that frizzed slightly at the temples. She was wearing a long flowing coat which swished about her hips,

almost like some grand lady in a period drama. Caroline had that unusual poise of someone who was at home in her own skin combined with a sensitivity and responsiveness to others. She always struck Kiera as wise and sometimes Kiera wondered how she had attained this state, what was her secret? Whatever it was, Kiera wanted it. Although she did not know it, Kiera rather loved Caroline and looked up to her as a mother figure and mentor.

Rose was very different. She was thirty-two, slim and compact, and sported a neat black bob with a trim, tailored profile. Kiera loved Rose too in her own way. Rose was the activist, the conscience and the social reformer of the group. She had gone into teaching to change the world, or maybe not the world, but certainly to change society in some small way. She was more certain, more focused, less discriminating than Caroline. Her words came from a fervour that Caroline didn't have. Sometimes the conversation between the two became tense and in these moments Kiera often glimpsed an impatience in Caroline, a slight flaw in an otherwise lovely character. Nevertheless, whatever the source of the tension, their mutual friendship always triumphed over argument and discord.

The friends greeted each other, swapping a few highlights of their day, but Kiera was quieter than normal and Caroline noticed, recalling too that Kiera had asked them to meet up before going home.

“So what's up, Kirry”, this was a pet name that Caroline used for her.  
“You seem a bit quiet.”

It was getting late and the damp evening was darkening quickly so it was difficult to see each other's faces. The darkness seemed to offer Kiera a veil of privacy and she found herself telling them about the Liam incident and, she noticed, not in a triumphant way but in a manner that communicated inner disturbance. She felt she had done wrong and, even more worrying, was not

quite sure what had motivated her actions. She felt an urgent need to talk it all through with her friends.

The women moved to the side of the path to let others pass by. This was a funny place to be offering a confession, Kiera thought, very public but somehow very private too.

“Hmmm, a bit harsh, Kiera”. Rose looked at her quizzically. “You know Liam’s mum is an alcoholic, don’t you?”

Caroline raised her eyes in a secret gesture of exasperation with Rose. Always right on the moral nail and missing the point by about a mile.

Kiera was struggling to contain herself. She knew what she had done was not her finest moment and Rose’s words stung. She felt tears well up in the corners of her eyes. Fearing exposure, she quickly transformed the shame to anger.

“You know what Rose? I don’t give a damn if Liam’s mum’s a bloody alcoholic!” and Kiera turned round to look her directly, eyes defiant, daring Rose to say whatever morally sound thing she was going to say next. Rose did not disappoint.

“But you can’t be a teacher if you don’t care. You just can’t. It doesn’t work.”

Caroline touched Kiera on her shoulder, turning her slightly away from Rose.

“Hey Kirry, this is not like you. What’s up?”

“Nothing. I mean everything. I don’t know. I’m feeling drained. I can’t explain it. How can I be expected to ladle out oodles of compassion when I’m



being attacked in my own classroom? I'm not a bloody robot. Who's looking after me? No-one. I'm drained – it's all gone. I'm sorry but I don't care that Liam's mum is an alcoholic and I do care when I am called a loser in my own classroom".

"You're tired, Kirry." Caroline's words soothed her but somehow missed the point.

"We all get tired", Rose acknowledged.

"Yes, I am. I'm bloody tired – in more senses than one".

A brief silence settled as all three women reflected on the difficult nature of their work and how impossible it was to convey this to people outside the profession.

"And I can tell you why I'm tired. One, our headmaster, the nearest I have ever come to a psychopath. All he cares about is his career, hitting the metrics so he can go on to his next promotion – he doesn't give a damn about the staff or the students. Two, our head of department, who's scared stiff of him and the ultimate 'yes woman' – weak, no backbone, a brown-noser par excellence. Why is it always these kinds of people who get on? *They* don't care, Rose, so you're wrong there."

Another silence. There was truth in what Kiera had said and they all knew it. The school had been failing and the new head had been brought in two years ago to 'turn it around'. He used the only tool he knew – fear. Fear had worked before and fear would work again. He particularly loved stalking the corridors and unexpectedly dropping into a classroom to monitor what was going on. This would be followed by a summons to his office where he would detail everything that had gone wrong in the moments of his presence. No encouragement, no support, no advice – just terror. And with this terror,

teachers focused with renewed intensity on exam results, prizing open the heads of their pupils to see just how much knowledge they could stuff in – for the exam. After which, everyone promptly forgot everything and went to work in the local supermarket or the call centre 10 miles away – where the wages were not too bad and the atmosphere not so different to school. So the pupils fitted in nicely.

Caroline was concerned – she hadn't heard Kiera speak quite like this before. Moreover, standing by the side of the main path to the car park, was not the place to prolong this discussion.

“And....” Kiera continued, “And *my* role in all this is to implement rules I disagree with, made by people I don't respect. In fact, my job is to churn out unthinking drones who then slavishly *follow* the people I don't respect”.

She felt much better saying this. In fact, she felt a weird kind of alignment take place in her body – as if her body, her emotions and her mind had all shaken hands, and agreed on something - it felt really good.

“It feels like you need a rest”, Caroline gently reflected this back to Kiera.

“I do. But I don't think it's going to help. This is deep, Caroline.”

Caroline reflected.

“Well, what about this? Why not go away for a long weekend. Get some quality time together. Get to the bottom of this”.

Kiera and Rose looked at Caroline.

“You know. Spend a day or two in a spa, have a massage, do a bit of yoga, sauna, swim, eat good food. Relax. Chat in the jacuzzi. You know what I mean.”

They both looked at Kiera. It seemed a good idea though Kiera was worried about the cost. Caroline and Rose both had partners who earned a decent salary. She didn't.

As if reading her mind, Rose suggested that this be a birthday treat. She and Caroline could contribute towards it for her birthday. And although her birthday was another 6 months away, it seemed a great way of giving Kiera the boost she needed.

“That would be nice”, she smiled at her two friends.

As they walked towards the car park, the rain started to fall. It was a satisfying kind of rain. The rain drops were heavy and fell in a straight line from the heavens – no having to contort your body to get the umbrella at the right angle to protect yourself from mercurial gusts of water coming at you from every direction. Not drizzle either which was impossible to avoid whatever water protection you employed. Just nice, plopping, gentle rain which bounced off the tarmac and splashed the puddles suffused with the orange of the streetlights overhead.

The friends dispersed. Rose to her partner, Alex, and Caroline to Tony and their two young children. Kiera drove home.