

Now: Johnno: The Best Man

In *The Best Man*, the protagonist finds himself entangled in a horrifying moment that he cannot escape, a reality that unfolds too quickly for him to control. He kneels beside Will, his hands slick with blood, his breath shallow as he realizes the terrible mistake he has just made—pulling the knife from his friend's chest, thinking for one brief, desperate moment that it might save him. The surrounding darkness seems to close in, pressing against him as he struggles to process what has just happened, but before he can react, the sounds of hurried footsteps and sharp voices cut through the night.

Femi, Angus, and Duncan burst into the scene, their torches flashing wildly as they take in the sight before them—Will collapsed, the knife in the protagonist's trembling hands, the stark image of a crime frozen in time. The panic in their eyes turns to something darker, something accusatory, and their voices rise in demand. *Drop the knife. Step away.* But he cannot move, cannot speak, cannot convince them that this moment is not what it seems.

The protagonist wants to explain, to tell them that he had only arrived seconds before, that he had tried to help, that pulling the knife free had been instinct, not violence. But their faces are filled with suspicion, their movements sharp and aggressive as they advance toward him. In their eyes, he is not a friend who has lost someone—he is a man caught in the act, guilty before he even has the chance to defend himself.

The weight of what has happened bears down on him, and his mind races, trying to make sense of how he got here. He remembers the storm, the thick fog of confusion that had clouded his thoughts after Pete Ramsay handed him something to take, something that left his senses dulled. He had stumbled through the night, the world swaying beneath him, and then—blackness. A blackout he cannot account for, a lapse

in time that now terrifies him, because what if he did more than he remembers?

And then there was Will. Finding him had been a shock, a moment so unreal that it had taken him several breaths to even process what he was seeing. The knife in his chest. The labored breathing. The fear in Will's eyes as he looked up at him, as if he, too, had questions he would never get the chance to ask.

The emotions that flood him now are unbearable, a mix of grief, guilt, and something else—love, raw and unspoken, a truth he had only fully realized when it was too late. He had held Will in those final moments, clinging to him as if it might somehow reverse what had already been set in motion. And now, as the others force him to the ground, restraining him like a criminal, that love becomes something weaponized against him—a reason they will never believe his innocence.

The ushers hold him down, their hands firm and unrelenting, their words lost in the overwhelming sound of his own thoughts. He is no longer a friend to them, no longer someone they know; he is a man they fear, someone they have already convicted in their minds. The fight drains from him as the Gardaí arrive, their uniforms stark against the chaotic backdrop of flashing lights and whispering voices, sealing his fate before he has a chance to reclaim it.

He realizes now, with a clarity that stings, that he has always been on the outside of this group, never fully accepted in the way he had wanted. He had been tolerated, yes, but never truly trusted, and now, when he needs them most, that distance becomes an impenetrable wall. No one will listen. No one will wait for his explanation. He is alone in his grief, alone in his truth, and the weight of that loneliness is more crushing than the accusations themselves.

The opening chapter paints a chilling portrait of misunderstanding, loss, and the irreversible consequences of a single moment. It immerses the reader in a world where fear speaks louder than reason, where trust is fragile and fleeting, where love—however real—is not enough to save him. As the protagonist is taken away, his future uncertain, the reader is left to question not only the events of that night but also

whether he will ever find a way to prove the truth when the world has already decided his guilt.

