

THE ACCIDENT

**Keeping this secret
was killing her...**



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Chapter 1

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Coma. There's something innocuous about the word, soothing almost in the way it conjures up the image of a dreamless sleep. Only Charlotte doesn't look as though she's sleeping to me. There's no soft heaviness to her closed eyelids. No curled fist pressed up against her temple. No warm breath escaping from her slightly parted lips. There is nothing peaceful at all about the way her body lies, prostrate, on the duvet-less bed, a clear tracheostomy tube snaking its way out of her neck, her chest polka-dotted with multicoloured electrodes.

The heart monitor in the corner of the room bleep-bleep-bleeps, marking the passage of time like a medical metronome and I close my eyes. If I concentrate hard enough I can transform the unnatural chirping into the reassuring tick-tick-tick of the grandfather clock in our living room. Fifteen years fall away in an instant and I am twenty-eight again, cradling baby Charlotte to my shoulder, her slumbering face pressed into the nook of my neck, her tiny heart out-beating mine, even in sleep. Back then it was so much easier to keep her safe.

'Sue?' There is a hand on my shoulder, heavy, dragging me back into the stark hospital room and my arms are empty again, save the handbag I clutch to my chest. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

I shake my head then instantly change my mind. 'Actually, yes.' I open my eyes. 'Do you know what else would be nice?'

Brian shakes his head.

'One of those lovely teacakes from M&S.'

My husband looks confused. 'I don't think they sell them in the canteen.'

'Oh.' I look away, feigning disappointment and instantly hate myself. It isn't in my nature to be manipulative. At least I don't think it is. There's a lot I don't know any more.

'It's okay.' There's that hand again. This time it adds a reassuring squeeze to its repertoire. 'I can pop into town.' He smiles at Charlotte. 'You don't mind if I leave you alone with your mum for a bit?'

If our daughter heard the question she doesn't let on. I reply for her by forcing a smile.

'She'll be fine,' I say.

Brian looks from me to Charlotte and back again. There's no mistaking the look on his face – it's the same wretched expression I've worn for the last six weeks whenever I've left Charlotte's side – terror she might die the second we leave the room.

'She'll be fine,' I repeat, more gently this time. 'I'll be here.'

Brian's rigid posture relaxes, ever so slightly, and he nods. 'Back soon.'

I watch as he crosses the room, gently shutting the door with a click as he leaves, then release the handbag from my chest and rest it on my lap. I keep my eyes fixed on the door for what seems like an eternity. Brian has never been able to leave the house without rushing back in seconds later to retrieve his keys, his phone or his sunglasses or to ask a 'quick question'. When I am sure he has gone I turn back to Charlotte. I half expect to see her eyelids flutter or her fingers twitch, some sign that she realises what I am about to say but nothing has changed. She is still 'asleep'. The doctors have no idea when, or even if, Charlotte will ever wake up. She's been subjected to a whole battery of tests – CAT scans, MRIs, the works – with more to come, and her brain function appears normal. There's no medical reason why she shouldn't come round.

'Darling,' I take Charlotte's diary out of my handbag, fumble it open and turn to the page I've already memorised. 'Please don't be angry with me but . . .' I glance at my daughter to monitor her expression. ' . . . I found your diary when I was tidying your room yesterday.'

Nothing. Not a sound, not a flicker, not a tic or a twinge. And the heart monitor continues its relentless bleep-bleep-bleeping. It is a lie of course, the confession about finding her diary. I found it years ago when I was changing her sheets. She'd hidden it under her mattress, exactly where I'd hidden my own teenaged journal so many years before. I didn't read it though, back then, I had no reason to. Yesterday I did.

'In the last entry,' I say, pausing to lick my lips, my mouth suddenly dry, 'you mention a secret.'

Charlotte says nothing.

'You said keeping it was killing you.'

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

'Is that why . . .'

Bleep-bleep-bleep.

' . . . you stepped in front of the bus?'

Still nothing.

Brian calls what happened an accident and has invented several theories to support this belief: she saw a friend on the other side of the street and didn't look both ways as she ran across the road; she tried to help an injured animal; she stumbled and tripped when she was texting or maybe she was just in her own little world and didn't look where she was walking.

Plausible, all of them. Apart from the fact the bus driver told the police she caught his eye then deliberately stepped into the road, straight into his path. Brian thinks he's lying, covering his own back because he'll lose his job if he gets convicted of dangerous driving. I don't.

Yesterday, when Brian was at work and I was on bed watch, I asked the doctor if she had carried out a pregnancy test on Charlotte. She looked at me suspiciously and asked why, did I have any reason to think she might be? I replied that I didn't know but I thought it might explain a thing or two. I waited as she checked the notes. No, she said, she wasn't.

'Charlotte,' I shuffle my chair forward so it's pressed up against the bed and wrap my fingers around my daughter's. 'Nothing you say or do could ever stop me from loving you. You can tell me anything. Anything at all.'

Charlotte says nothing.

'It doesn't matter if it's about you, one of your friends, me or your dad.' I pause. 'Is the secret something to do with your dad? Squeeze my fingers if it is.'

I hold my breath, praying she doesn't.

Friday 2nd September 1990

It's 5.41 a.m. and I'm sitting in the living room, glass of red in one hand, a cigarette in the other, wondering if the last eight hours of my life really happened.

I finally rang James on Wednesday evening, after an hour's worth of abortive attempts and several glasses of wine. The phone rang and rang and I started to think that maybe he was out when it suddenly stopped.

'Hello?'

I could barely say hello back I was so nervous but then:

'Susan, is that you? Gosh. You actually called.'

His voice sounded different – thinner, breathy – like he was nervous too, and I joked that he sounded relieved to hear from me.

'Of course,' he replied. 'I thought there was no way you'd call after what I did. Sorry, I'm not normally such a twat but I was so pleased to run into you alone backstage that I . . . Anyway, sorry. It was a stupid thing to do. I should have just asked you out like a normal person . . .'

He tailed off, embarrassed.

'Actually,' I said, feeling a sudden rush of affection towards him. 'I thought it was funny. No one's ever thrown a business card at me and shouted "Call me" before. I was almost flattered.'

'Flattered? I'm the one that should be flattered. You called! Oh God,' he paused, 'you are calling to arrange a drink, aren't you? You're not ringing to tell me I'm an absolute prat?'

'I did consider that option,' I laughed, 'but no, I happen to be unusually thirsty today so if you'd like to take me out for a drink that could be arranged.'

'God, of course. Whenever and wherever you want to go. All drinks on me, even the expensive ones.' He laughed too. 'I want to prove to you that I'm not . . . well, I'll let you make your own mind up. When are you free?'

I was tempted to say NOW but played it cool instead, as Hels had ordered me to do, and suggested Friday (tonight) night. James immediately agreed and we arranged to meet in the Dublin Castle.

I tried on dozens of different outfits before I went out, immediately discarding anything that made me look, or feel, fat and frumpy, but I needn't have worried. The second I was within grabbing distance, James pulled me against him and whispered 'You look beautiful' in my ear. I was just about to reply when he abruptly released me, grabbed my hand and said, 'I've got something amazing to show you,' and led me out of the pub, through the throng of Camden revellers, down a side street and into a kebab shop. I gave him a questioning look but he said, 'trust me' and shepherded me through the shop and out a door at the back. I expected to end up in the kitchen or the toilets. Instead I stumbled into a cacophony of sound and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the smoky darkness. James pointed out a four-piece jazz band in the corner of the room and shouted, 'They're the Grey Notes – London's best-kept secret' then led me to a table in the corner and held out a battered wooden chair for me to sit down.

'Whisky,' he said. 'I can't listen to jazz without it. You want one?'

I nodded, even though I'm not a fan then lit up a cigarette as James made his way to the bar. There was something so self-assured about the way he moved, it was almost hypnotic. I'd noticed it the first time I'd seen him on stage.

James couldn't be more different from my ex Nathan. Whilst Nathan was slight, baby-faced and only a couple of inches taller than I am, James is six foot four with a solidity to him that makes me feel small and delicate. He's got a cleft in his chin like Kirk Douglas but his nose is too large to make him classically good looking and his dirty blond hair continually flops into his eyes but there's something mercurial about his eyes that reminds me of Ralph Fiennes; one minute they're cool and detached, the next they're crinkled at the corners, dancing with excitement.

I knew something was wrong the second James returned from the bar. He didn't say anything but, as he set the whisky tumblers down on the table, his eyes flicked towards the cigarette in my hand and I instantly understood.

'You don't smoke.'

He shook his head. 'My father died of lung cancer.'

He tried to object, to tell me that whether I smoked or not was none of his business, but his frown evaporated the second I put my cigarette out and the atmosphere immediately lightened. The band was so loud it was hard to hear each other over the squeal of the trumpet and the scattling of the lead singer so James moved his chair closer to mine so we could whisper into each other's ears. Whenever he leaned in, his leg rested against mine and I'd feel his breath against my ear and neck. It was torturous, feeling his body against mine and smelling the warm spiciness of his aftershave and not touching him. When I didn't think I could bear it a second longer James cupped his hand over mine.

'Let's go somewhere else. I know the most magical place.'

I barely had the chance to say 'okay' when he bounced out of his seat and crossed the room to the bar. A second later he was back, a bottle of champagne in one hand and two glasses and a threadbare rug in the other. I raised an eyebrow but he just laughed and said, 'You'll see.'

We walked for what felt like forever, weaving our way through the Camden crowds until we passed Chalk Farm. I kept asking where we were going but James, striding alongside me, only laughed in reply. Finally we stopped walking at an entrance to a park and he laid a hand on my shoulder. I thought he was going to kiss me. Instead he told me to shut my eyes because he had a surprise for me.

I wasn't sure what could be quite so astonishing in a dark park at silly o'clock in the morning but I closed my eyes anyway. Then I felt something heavy and woollen being draped over my shoulders and warm spiciness enveloped me. James had noticed I was shivering and lent me his coat. I let him lead me through the entrance and up the hill. It was scary, putting my trust in someone I barely knew, but it was exhilarating too and strangely sensual. When we finally stopped walking he told me to stand still and wait. A couple of seconds later I felt the softness of the worn cotton rug under my fingers as he helped me to sit down.

'Ready?' I felt him move so he was crouched behind me, then his fingers touched my face, lightly brushing my cheekbones as they moved to cover my eyes. A tingle ran down my spine and I shivered, despite the coat.

'I'm ready,' I said.

James removed his fingers and I opened my eyes. 'Isn't it beautiful?'

I could only nod. At the base of the hill, the park was a chequerboard of black squares of unlit grass and illuminated pools of yellow-green light cast by glowing streetlamps. It was like a magical patchwork of light and dark. Beyond the park stretched the city, windows twinkling and buildings sparkling. The sky above was the darkest navy, shot with dirty orange clouds. It was the most breathtaking vista I'd ever seen.

'Your reaction when you opened your eyes . . .' James was staring at me. *'I've never seen anything so beautiful.'*

'Stop it!' I tried to laugh but it caught in my throat.

'You looked so young Suzy, so enchanted – like a child on Christmas Day.' He shook his head. 'How is someone like you single? How is that even possible?'

I opened my mouth to reply but he wasn't finished.

'You're the most amazing woman I've ever met,' he reached for my hand. 'You're funny, kind, intelligent and beautiful. What on earth are you doing here with me?'

I wanted to make a joke, to ask if he was so drunk he could remember leading me up the hill, but I found I couldn't.

'I wanted to be here,' I said. 'And I wouldn't want to be anywhere else.'

James's face lit up as though I'd just given him the most wonderful compliment and he cupped my face with his hands. He looked at me for the longest time and then he kissed me.

I'm not sure how long we kissed for, lying there on a rug on the top of Primrose Hill, our bodies entwined, our hands everywhere, grasping, pulling, clutching. We didn't remove our clothes and we didn't have sex, yet it was still the single most erotic moment of my life. I couldn't let go of James for more than a second without pulling him towards me again.

It grew darker and colder and I suggested we leave the park and go back to his.

James shook his head. 'Let me put you in a taxi home instead.'

'But—'

He pulled his coat tighter around my shoulders. 'There's time for that, Suzy. Plenty of time.'

Chapter 2

I wait until Brian leaves for work before I go through his things. It's nippy in the cloakroom, the tiled floor cold under my bare feet, the windowed walls damp with condensation but I don't pause to grab a pair of socks from the radiator in the hall. Instead I thrust my hands into the pockets of Brian's favourite jacket. The coat stand rocks violently as I move from pocket to pocket, pulling out the contents and dropping them to the floor in my haste to find evidence.

I've finished with the jacket and have just plunged both hands into the pockets of a hooded sweatshirt when there's a loud CRASH from the kitchen.

I freeze.

My mind goes blank – turns off – as though a switch has been thrown in my brain and I'm as rigid as the coat stand I'm standing beside, breathing shallowly, listening, waiting. I know I should move. I should take my hands out of Brian's fleece. I should kick the contents of his wax jacket into the corner of the room and hide the evidence that I am a terrible, mistrusting wife but I can't.

My heart is beating so violently the sound seems to fill the room and, in an instant, I'm catapulted twenty years into the past. I'm twenty-three, living in North London and I'm crouching in the wardrobe, a backpack stuffed with clothes in my left hand, a set of keys I stole from someone else's jacket, in my right. If I don't breathe he won't hear me. If I don't breathe he won't know that I'm about to . . .

'Brian?' The sense of déjà-vu falls away as the faintest scraping sound reaches my ears. 'Brian, is that you?'

I frown, straining to make out anything other than the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of my heart, but the house has fallen silent again.

'Brian?'

I jolt back to life, as though the switch in my brain has been flicked the other way, and I pull my hands out of his sweatshirt.

The hallway carpet is warm and plush under my feet as I inch forward, pausing every couple of seconds to listen, as I head towards the kitchen. The smell of bleach fills my nose and I realize one hand is covering my mouth, the scent of disinfectant still fresh on my fingers from cleaning the bathroom earlier. I pause again and try to slow my breathing. It is coming in small, sharp gasps, signalling a panic attack, but I am no longer afraid that my husband has come back to retrieve a forgotten briefcase or a lost house key. Instead I'm scared of—

'Milly!'

I'm almost knocked off my feet as an enormous Golden Retriever bowls down the hallway and launches herself at me, front paws on my chest, wet tongue on my chin. Normally I'd chastise her for jumping up but I'm so relieved to see her I wrap my arms around her and rub the top of her big soft head. When her joyful licking gets too much I push her down.

'How did you get out, naughty girl?'

Milly 'smiles' up at me, tendrils of drool dripping off her tongue. I've got a pretty good idea how she managed to escape.

Sure enough, when I reach the kitchen, the dog padding silently beside me, the door to the porch is open.

'You're supposed to stay in your bed until Mummy lets you out!' I say, pointing at the pile of rugs and blankets where she sleeps at night. Milly's ears prick up at the mention of the word 'bed' and her tail falls between her legs. 'Did silly Daddy leave the door open on his way to work?'

I never thought I'd be the kind of woman who'd refer to herself and her husband as 'Mummy and Daddy' when speaking to a pet but Milly is as much a part of our family as Charlotte. She's the sister we could never give her.

I shut Milly back in the porch, my heart twisting as she looks beseechingly at me with her big, brown eyes. It's eight o'clock. We should be strolling through the park at the back of the house but I need to continue what I started. I need to get back to the cloakroom.

The contents of Brian's pockets are where I left them – strewn around the base of the coat stand. I kneel down, wishing I'd grabbed a cushion from the living room as my knees click in protestation, and examine my spoils. There's a handkerchief, white with an embroidered golfer in the corner, unused, folded neatly into a square (given to him by one of the children for Christmas), three paper tissues, used, a length of twine, the same type Brian uses to tie up the tomatoes in his allotment, a receipt from the local supermarket for £40 worth of petrol, a mint imperial, coated with fluff, a handful of loose change and a crumpled cinema ticket. My heart races as I touch it – then I read the title of the film and the date – and my pulse returns to normal. It's for a comedy we went to see together. I hated it – found it rude, crude and slapstick – but Brian laughed like a drain.

And that's it. Nothing strange. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing incriminating.

Just . . . Brian stuff.

I sweep his belongings into a pile with the side of my hand, then scoop them up and carefully distribute them amongst his pockets, making sure everything is returned to where I found it. Brian isn't a fastidious man; he won't know, or care, which pocket held the change and which the cinema ticket but I'm not taking any chances.

Maybe there is no evidence at all.

Charlotte didn't squeeze my hand when I asked if her secret had anything to do with her father. She didn't so much as twitch. I don't know what I was thinking, imagining she might respond – or even asking the question in the first place. Actually I do. I was following up a hunch; a hunch that my husband was betraying me, again.

Six years ago Brian made a mistake – one that nearly destroyed not only our marriage, but his career too – he had an affair with a twenty-three-year-old Parliamentary intern. I raged, I shouted and I screamed. I stayed with my friend Jane for two nights. I would have stayed longer but I didn't want Charlotte to suffer. It took a long time but eventually I forgave Brian. Why? Because the affair happened shortly after one of my 'episodes', because my family is more important to me than anything in the world and because, although Brian has many faults, he is a good man at heart.

A 'good man at heart' – it sounds like such a terribly twee reason to forgive someone their infidelity, doesn't it? Perhaps it is. But it's infinitely preferable to life with a bad man and, when Brian and I met, I knew all about that.

It was the summer of 1993 and we were both living in Athens. I was a TEFL teacher and he was a widower businessman chasing a big deal. The first time Brian said hello to me, in a tatty tavern on the banks of the river Kifissos, I ignored him. The second time I moved seats. The third time he refused to let me continue pretending he didn't exist. He bought me a drink and delivered it to my table with a note that said 'Hello from one Brit to another' and then walked straight out of the pub without a backward glance. I couldn't help but smile. After that he was quietly persistent, a 'hello' here, a 'what are you reading?' there and we gradually became friends. It took me a long time to lower my barriers but finally, almost one year to the day after we first met, I let myself love him.

It was a warm, balmy evening and we were strolling beside the river, watching the lights of the city flicker and glow on the water when Brian started telling me about Tessa, his late wife, and how devastated he was when she lost her battle with cancer. He told me how shocked he'd been – the disease had progressed so rapidly – and then how angry, how he'd waited until his son was staying with his granny and then he'd smashed up his own car with a cricket bat because he didn't know how to deal with his rage. His eyes filled with tears when he told me how desperately he missed his son Oliver (he'd left him with his grandparents in the UK so he could fulfil a contract in Greece) but he made no attempt to blot them away. I touched his face, tracing

my fingers over his skin, smudging his tears away and then I reached for his hand. I didn't let go for three hours.

I push open the door to Brian's study and approach his desk, instantly feeling that I have intruded too far. I wash my husband's clothes, I iron them, some of them I buy, but his study represents his career – a part of his world that he keeps distinct from family life. Brian is a Member of Parliament. Saying it aloud makes me so proud but I wasn't always that way. Seventeen years ago I was bemused when he'd rail against 'Tory scum', 'class divides' and 'a failing NHS' but Brian wasn't content to sit on society's sidelines and moan. When we returned to the UK from Greece, still flushed with happiness from our impromptu bare-footed wedding on a beach in Rhodes, he was resolute. We'd settle in Brighton and he'd start a new business – he had a hunch recycling would be big – and then, when it was established and making a profit, he'd run for Parliament. He didn't have so much as an economics O-Level but I knew he'd do it. And he did.

I never stopped believing in him, I still do in many ways, but I am no longer in awe of him. I love Brian but I can also see only too well how vain and insecure his career choice has made him. Flattery goes a long way when you're approaching your mid-forties, sixteen stone and balding – particularly when the person doing the flattering is young, ambitious and works for you. Brian has changed since Charlotte's accident. We both have, but in different ways. Instead of our daughter's condition bringing us together we've been forced apart and the distance between us is growing. If Brian's having another affair I won't forgive him again.

I take another step towards my husband's desk and my fingers trail over the brushed silver frame of a black and white photograph. It's of Charlotte and I on a beach in Mallorca, taken on the first day of our holiday. We've still got our travelling clothes on, our trouser legs rolled up so we can paddle in the sea. I've got one hand raised to my forehead, protecting my eyes from the sun whilst the other clutches our daughter's tiny hand. She's staring up at me, her chin tilted, eyes wide. The photo must be at least ten years old but I still feel a warm swell of love when I look at the expression on her face. It's pure, unadulterated happiness.

A floorboard in the corridor squeaks and I snatch my fingers back from the photograph then sigh. When did I become so neurotic that every creak and groan of a two-hundred-year-old house sent me catatonic with fear?

I look back at the desk. It's a heavy mahogany affair with three drawers on the left, three on the right and a long, thin drawer that sits in between. I reach for the brass handle of the centre drawer and slowly ease it open. Another floorboard squeaks but I ignore it, even though it sounds closer than the last. There's something in the drawer, something handwritten, a card or letter maybe and I reach for it, being careful not to disturb the mounds of paperclips and rubber bands on either side as I attempt to slide—

'Sue?' says a man's voice, directly behind me. 'What are you doing?'

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