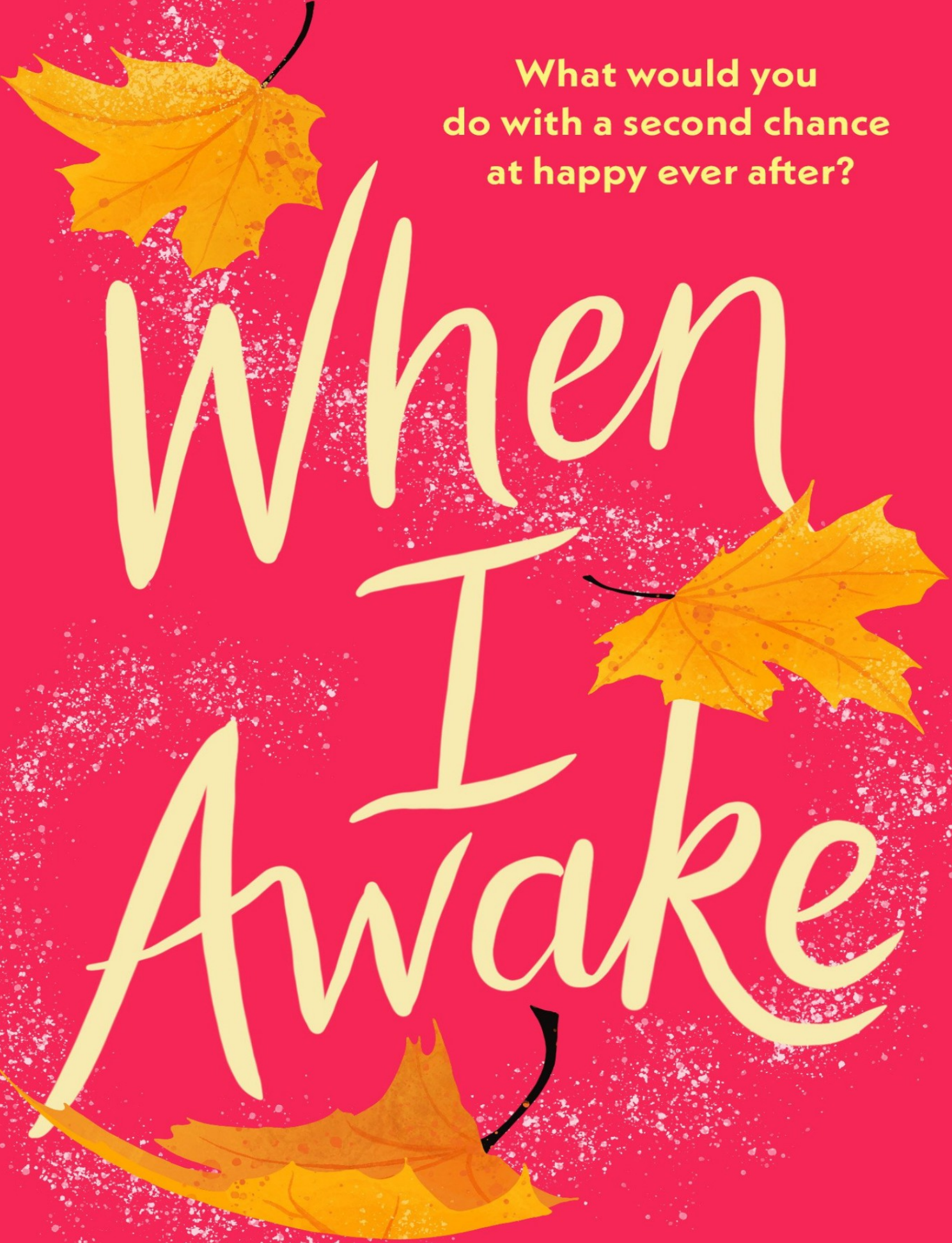


What would you  
do with a second chance  
at happy ever after?



# When I Awake

DANI ATKINS

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*Six Days*

*Then and Always (US title for Fractured)*

*Gone Too Soon (US title for A Sky Full of Star)*

*Perfect Strangers (A novella)*

# WHEN I AWAKE

**Dani Atkins**



*An Aria Book*

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To everyone who asked me:

*'What happened next?'*

This one's for you.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

‘Just one more, then we’ll stop.’

The sweat running down my back was more of a cascade than a trickle and the flight of stairs before me resembled Everest rather than thirteen risers that would take me up to the next floor of the hospital.

‘Isn’t that supposed to be my line?’ asked Duncan, my physical therapist who was standing beside me, his eyes narrowing as he took in my heaving ribs. ‘You’ve done four flights already. That’s enough for today.’

I shook my head, feeling the smart of perspiration trickling into my eyes. I’d forgotten to tie back my hair and it was sticking unpleasantly to the back of my neck. Was I too old to have hair this long, I wondered. In my head I still felt as though I was in my twenties, but my birth certificate told a completely different story.

‘One more,’ I told Duncan, not waiting for his approval as I set off up the flight.

‘Most obstinate and driven patient I’ve ever worked with,’ grumbled Duncan good-naturedly, trotting up the stairs beside me, always watchful for a stumble or trip that would prove him right and me wrong. I was pushing myself harder than he ever would, harder even than Heidi, my previous therapist, would have done – and her regime would have made a Marine quake.

When we got to the top, I reached greedily for the bottle of water Duncan was holding out in readiness as I collapsed against the wall.

‘Why do you do this, Maddie?’ Duncan asked, not for the first time. ‘Why are you in such a hurry?’

I drained half of the bottle before slowly meeting his eyes. He knew why. Everyone in the hospital knew why. Hell, half the town probably knew it too if they followed the news. Seventeen years ago, pregnant and just days before my wedding, I had been hit by a van that had left me in a coma for six years. When I woke up, I discovered my baby had miraculously survived the accident, but that my fiancé, Ryan, had married someone else. My daughter, Hope, had grown up calling another woman ‘Mummy’. I had only a little over a year to get to know my little girl when I had mysteriously collapsed again. And this time my coma had lasted ten years.

There are lots of reasons I would rather be famous for. I would prefer it if my name were in medical textbooks for having cured something, instead of finding it in chapters devoted to the longest-known surviving coma patients. And if you bother to read further, my history becomes even more intriguing, because I had been in a coma not just once, but twice.

‘You’re a bit like Harry Potter, aren’t you?’ Hope had said recently, her impossibly long legs scissoring back and forth as she perched on the edge of my hospital bed.

‘Magical, you mean?’

She took an enormous bite from the bright red apple she had swiped from my fruit bowl, looking so much like Snow White with her porcelain pale skin and long dark hair that I did a quick double take.

‘No, infamous,’ she had said, her mouth half full of apple. It was something I’m sure Chloe, the woman she had called Mum for the past sixteen years, would have pulled her up on if she had been in the room. I said nothing. ‘When I tell people I’m Maddie Chambers’ daughter, everyone knows who you are. If Harry’s ‘The Boy Who Lived’, then you’re ‘The Woman Who Slept’.’

‘Well, I’m awake now,’ I had said, reaching for her hand, because I would never, ever grow tired of holding it. Inwardly, I had congratulated myself for having edited my original response which would have been ‘I’m awake for now.’



I had woken more slowly this time, as though my body really hadn't been sure whether it wanted to do this again. After the first coma, I had opened my eyes and immediately been all the way back. But this time it was as though I had been cautiously dipping my toe into wakefulness. I had been drifting through a thick grey fog for what I suspect was several weeks, hearing and smelling things from the outside world that I grabbed hold of and took back down with me to my place of hibernation.

It was the voices that had pulled me back, my father's, and, more powerfully, one that I didn't recognise that called me 'Mum'. But there had also been wafts of perfume that drifted in and out of my consciousness and a hand, large and comforting that sometimes held mine. I had no idea who either of these people were.

\*

'I wish I had a better answer to give you, Maddie,' my consultant had said with genuine regret in his voice the day before I was discharged. 'Your case remains one of the most baffling and mysterious we have ever encountered.'

'And none of the tests you've run can give you a clearer idea?' I had asked sadly, because his slowly shaking head was already telling me they could not.

'I know the last six months have been frustrating for you, but if we kept you in hospital for a further six I *still* don't think we'd be any closer to knowing why you slipped into a second coma, nor why ten years later you miraculously woke up again. There's so much about the human brain we still don't understand and something unique and unfathomable happened to yours when you were struck by that van seventeen years ago.'

'So, what do I do now? How do I know it won't happen again; that there won't be a *third* coma?'

I have met many doctors over the years, and I know the one thing they really don't like is being asked questions they simply cannot answer. My consultant was no different on that score.

‘We don’t.’

\*

‘Are you excited to be going home?’ asked Leah, one of my favourite nurses, who had popped into my room to say a quick goodbye on my last morning as her patient.

‘Of course,’ I replied, remembering to put a smile on my face as I turned from the small pile of belongings on my bed, which like me were waiting to be collected. It was the answer she wanted to hear, and the one closer to the truth – the one where I admitted I was terrified of a world that had moved on without me – remained unspoken.

There were several people who had volunteered to collect me from hospital on the day I was finally discharged. Mitch, my close friend and landlord; my father, who had performed this task eleven years earlier; and even Ryan, the man I had loved and then lost while I slept the first time. But in the end there was really only one person whose arm I wanted to lean on; the woman who’d leant on mine when going through her own health trauma. Chloe. The person who had married the man I loved; who had become mother to my only child; and more remarkably than all of that, the woman who was now my closest friend.

‘You’ll come back and stay with us, obviously,’ announced Chloe in that no-nonsense decisive way of hers, when I had told her they were allowing me to go home. It was a tactic that might have worked on the daughter we shared, but on me... not so much.

‘Erm, that’s really kind of you, Chloe. But I don’t think so.’

Chloe looked truly astonished, as though she hadn’t for a second expected that I would refuse her offer. She ran her hand exasperatedly through her hair. There were a few strands of silver threaded through the blonde bob these days, and perhaps more curves on her small frame than there had been ten years before, but she still looked very much like the woman who’d won the heart of the man I had once wanted to marry. Beside her I felt angular and unwomanly.

‘Why won’t you stay with us?’

*Because sleeping in the guest bedroom of a house that with a different roll of the dice could have been mine was too much to ask of any friendship. Especially ours.* I answered her question with one of my own. ‘And what does Ryan think of the idea of me moving in with you?’

She had blushed a deep and not unbecoming rose colour. I had forgotten how easily she did that. ‘He thinks it’s a great idea.’ Chloe was good at a great many things, but lying wasn’t one of them.

‘No, he doesn’t,’ I had said assuredly.

She had winced, as though I’d just trodden on her toe. It must be beyond infuriating to have someone know your husband almost as well as you did yourself.

‘Okay, so he might have the odd reservation or two,’ she had admitted. ‘But it’s more important that you have somewhere to go where there are people who can look after you.’

I had shaken my head so vehemently my long dark hair swished from side to side like the tail of an irate horse.

‘If the doctors think I’m strong enough to leave here, then I’m strong enough to live on my own.’

‘And where exactly would that be?’ Chloe had challenged, with more steel in her voice than I remembered.

‘I’ll figure something out.’

But, in the end, I didn’t have to. I had been side-swiping through a variety of rental properties online, as though it were a dating site, when a dark shadow had fallen over the screen of my laptop. I was sitting in the visitor’s chair beside my bed. It wasn’t particularly low, and yet it still seemed to take quite a while for my gaze to travel up from the oversized boots, past the dark jeans and checked lumberjack shirt he liked to wear, before I finally reached his smile. At least I assumed he was smiling, Mitch’s beard and hair seemed to be in a competition to cover as much of his face as possible. Which was a shame really, because it was actually rather a nice face.

‘Thinking of buying a house?’ he asked, simultaneously dropping a kiss on my cheek and a bunch of sunflowers into my lap.

I smiled as I picked up the bouquet. ‘You must have spent an absolute fortune on sunflowers from your friend’s nursery over the last decade.’

Mitch was a blusher, even more than Chloe was. And it would seem he had got no better at controlling that habit in the years when I had been sleeping.

‘Not really. I get them at mate’s rates.’

I didn’t believe him, and to be honest I was still a little overwhelmed to discover that while I remained locked in my coma, Mitch had continued to bring me flowers. Every single week. Sunflowers had, and always would be, our ‘thing’. He was a great friend and one I felt lucky to have.

‘So why are you looking at properties?’ Mitch asked, pulling out a second chair and lowering himself onto it. The foam cushion seat gave a whisper of protest under his weight, like a reluctant whoopee cushion.

‘I’ve got to find somewhere new to live,’ I reasoned, clicking shut the laptop.

Mitch frowned, and his truly impressive eyebrows drew together to form a confused monobrow.

‘What’s wrong with the place you have?’

I looked around the small hospital room which had been my address longer than any other since my childhood. ‘They’re finally kicking me out of here.’

Mitch shook his head, and his shaggy, long-past-due-for-a-cut hair made him look like a bear battling with a wasp. ‘I don’t mean here. I mean my grandmother’s flat – or rather *your* flat. Why do you want to move?’

\*

‘I can’t believe he kept this place waiting for you for all these years,’ said Chloe, neatly parking her car in a tight space directly outside the large Victorian property. I looked through

the windscreen at the home I hadn't seen for ten years, and the enormity of Mitch's gesture hit me all over again.

'Neither can I. He must have lost out on a fortune by not renting the flat while I was in hospital. I offered to pay him back for the rent he'd lost.'

'You did? That would have made a big dent in your insurance payout money, wouldn't it? What did Mitch say to that?'

I gave a twisted smile. 'What do you think? He said no, of course.'

The sun felt like a warm embrace on my back as we climbed out of the car. I hadn't realised how much I'd missed the simple pleasure of inhaling fresh air, and it was hard to resist sucking it down now in greedy gulps. Chloe and I simultaneously reached into the boot for my holdall, but she beat me to it by a second or two. Short of engaging in a very undignified tug-of-war in the street, I gave in and allowed her to carry my bag up the black and white tiled path to my old ground floor flat. As well as my case, I had spotted two sturdy cardboard boxes in the back of her car; one filled with cleaning materials and the other with groceries.

'I'll come back for those,' Chloe said. There was a strange gleam in her eyes that I was pretty sure was excitement at the prospect of cleaning up ten years' worth of dust. I was careful to hide my bemused smile. For two women who had so much in common, we really were completely different.

I had expected the lock to feel stiff or resisting, but my key slid in smoothly and the door swung open easily. I breathed in, waiting to be hit by a wave of musty, stale air, but all I could smell was a sweet fresh aroma. I glanced curiously down the hallway. The cobwebs and thick dust-covered surfaces my imagination had conjured up were nowhere to be seen.

I walked slowly down the familiar corridor to the kitchen, where spring sunlight was streaming through windows that gleamed in a way I had never managed to achieve when I'd been in charge of the housework. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Chloe surreptitiously run her fingertips over the smooth

oak kitchen worktops, looking almost disappointed when they came away clean.

An old memory came back to me just then. Eleven years earlier, when viewing the flat for the first time, I had stood on exactly this spot while Mitch explained that he'd built this kitchen for his grandmother. It really wasn't that surprising that he hadn't allowed the home she'd left him when she died to fall into disrepair. He'd been far too fond of her to let that happen.

'He must have got a team of professionals in.' Chloe sounded glum, as though Mitch had deliberately ruined her fun.

I turned around and saw the vase of sunflowers on the kitchen window ledge. A second vase was just visible through the open lounge door and I was willing to bet good money there would also be one in the bedroom.

'I think he probably did this himself,' I said softly.

\*

Three hours later, I casually asked Chloe how much longer she'd be able to stay, never for a moment expecting her to reply: 'Until the morning, of course.'

'But what about Hope? Don't you have to go and pick her up from school?'

'You're joking, right? She'd die of embarrassment to find me waiting for her by the school gates. She catches the bus to and from school.'

I shook my head as though I could jiggle my thoughts into alignment like a kaleidoscope. The Hope of my memories would run out of school, clutching a painting she'd done that day and barrel straight into the arms of whoever was collecting her. For several months, when Chloe had been in hospital and later recovering from surgery to remove a brain tumour, that 'someone' had been me.

'You know that sweet little six-year-old you used to love playing with... well, she grew into a headstrong, opinionated teenager, with an answer for everything.' Chloe shrugged, but

the love she felt for her daughter shone through whatever she said. 'I've truly no idea how that happened.'

'Hmm... there's a possibility that might be my fault,' I said, thinking back to my own youth and a time when every conversation with my mum was potentially combustible. What I wouldn't give to re-write those stupid moments and needless arguments. Because the woman who had soothed my childhood nightmares, plastered my grazed knees, and been the anchor steadying me whenever I'd needed her, was gone. Mum hadn't been that person for a very long time. Dementia had already stolen her away from Dad and me long before my accident. In a way I was almost thankful that she hadn't known the pain of waiting for me to come back to life. Because I had seen the toll my condition had left on my father's face. At least Alzheimer's had spared Mum that.

I drew up my legs, to sit cross-legged on Mitch's grandmother's faded chintz settee. I thought I caught a quick envious glance from Chloe at my long flexible limbs. Those gruelling PT sessions had yielded some unexpected benefits. And while I certainly wouldn't recommend a coma as a beauty treatment, I had to admit that sixteen years without frowning, squinting, or having the sun on my skin had left me looking considerably younger than most women my age. I was a year older than Chloe, but time and life had left their marks on her face. And yet I would have exchanged my smooth unlined skin for all her laughter lines in a heartbeat.

Chloe padded off to the kitchen and came back carrying an open bottle of wine and two glasses. I had finally stopped my half-hearted protests about her intention to stay with me on my first night out of hospital. To be honest, I was glad that her mind was made up. In hospital you're surrounded by literally hundreds of people. And while part of me ought to be rejoicing that for the first time in ten years I could finally be alone, a much larger part of me was really glad that I didn't have to be.

## CHAPTER 2

‘Try it again with the leather jacket,’ suggested Hope, taking a step back to better study the overall effect.

I pulled the jacket down from its hook on the cubicle wall and did as she asked.

‘Yep. That’s definitely it. You look great.’

I turned back to the full-length mirror. The ripped jeans fitted me like a second skin. A very *expensive* second skin, I noticed, as I picked up the swinging price tag. It was an awful lot of money to spend on something that looked as though it needed mending.

‘It’s what everyone wears these days. Trust me,’ said Hope, nodding wisely.

‘I don’t think I’ve seen your mum in anything like this,’ I said, adding the jeans and leather jacket to the ‘yes’ pile on the changing room chair.

‘Which is precisely why you needed me on this shopping trip and not Mum. She’d have taken you to the posh bit of Marks & Spencer and made you buy a load of middle-aged stuff. You’re too young and pretty to wear things like that,’ she added, giving me a quick impulsive hug.

I thought of pointing out that technically I *was* almost middle-aged, and also older than her mum, but somehow the hug derailed me.

‘Besides, we’re the same size, and I’d really love to borrow some of these,’ Hope admitted artlessly, eyeing the pile of clothes that were about to make a considerable dent in my credit card.



‘Ah, now it all makes sense,’ I laughed, scooping up the bundle of clothes and exiting the changing room.

We handed back the rejected items to the attendant on our way out.

‘Did your sister like the leather jacket?’ she asked, directing her comment to Hope.

Hope slid her arm through mine. A full-length mirror on a nearby pillar showed two women who looked so similar that heads turned when we walked past. They’d been doing so all morning as we wandered through the large shopping mall on our mission to re-stock my out-of-date wardrobe.

‘She did,’ Hope replied, with a grin so wide her cheeks must surely be hurting. ‘But actually, she’s not my sister, she’s my mum.’

I had to admit I rather enjoyed the look of amazement on the assistant’s face.

‘Lunch,’ I declared when we were out in the main shopping concourse once again.

‘Great, I’m starving,’ said Hope, studying a huge map that listed a tempting choice of eateries. ‘Then afterwards we can move on to shoe shopping.’ She linked her arm with mine once more. ‘It’s funny how that shop assistant thought we were sisters, wasn’t it?’

‘It’s probably because we have the same colour hair and skin,’ I said, peering a little closer at the floor plan to read the names of the food outlets. My face might say I looked young, but my eyesight was definitely on its way to becoming middle-aged.

‘Well, it never happens when I’m out with Mum,’ Hope said.

‘Hmm... perhaps don’t mention it to her, eh?’ I suggested, knowing instinctively that Chloe would feel hurt by the comparison.

‘Sure,’ Hope said, with an easy shrug. ‘It’ll be our little secret.’ Somehow that made me feel even more guilty.

I picked a vibrant and busy Italian restaurant, with an outdoor seating area that gave it a faux piazza look. There was a free table by a small fountain that we snagged as the previous occupants got to their feet.

‘Are you having a fun day?’ asked Hope, surveying the collection of glossy carrier bags nestled at our feet.

‘I am,’ I said with a happy smile, although in truth I would have enjoyed spending precious time alone with Hope whatever we had done together.

We ordered our lunch and then sat back to people watch as we waited for our pasta to arrive. Hope was talking about a school trip she had been on to Italy and, as ever, I listened raptly, storing up every piece of information about her life that I’d missed out on. She was laughing as she told a story about midnight feasts and smuggled chocolates, and absently flicked her long dark hair to one side, exposing the pale white skin beneath her ear. Except it wasn’t *all* pale, for there was a large circular area with a fading purple smudge.

Hope saw my gaze fall on her neck and quickly flicked her hair forward to cover it up. Our eyes met, and locked. My eyebrows rose; hers drew together in a frown.

‘Oh, don’t you start on me too, Maddie. I had enough of that from Dad.’

‘I wonder why,’ I said, my voice deliberately innocent.

Hope glared at the cutlery on the table as though it had personally offended her. ‘He’s forgotten what it’s like when you’re young,’ she mumbled into her serviette.

I reached across the table and took her hand in mine. ‘I think it’s more likely that he remembers *only too well* what it’s like when you’re young. Do he and Chloe know the person who... who gave you that?’ I asked, my fingers reaching out and grazing her hair. She flinched even though I hadn’t touched her skin and pure instinct made me ask my next question.

‘Did you know it would mark your skin like that?’

Hope shook her head. ‘I thought he was just kissing my neck. I mean, it kind of hurt a bit, but I didn’t know it was going to look so, so... ugly.’

I rapidly rewound the years to a very similar conversation I had had with my own mother when I must have been a year or so younger than Hope was now. If my mum had come up with some invaluable words of wisdom to impart, I could no longer remember them. I *did* remember storming off and there being a fair bit of door slamming involved. I was fairly confident that in the middle of a shopping centre Hope had nowhere to storm off to, and luckily there weren’t too many doors around either. Even so, I trod carefully.

‘I’m going to take a guess that this boy is a bit older than you, right?’

For the first time Hope lifted her head. There was a look of awe on her face as though I had just revealed hidden psychic powers. ‘And you didn’t say ‘no’ to him because you wanted to look cool about it.’

‘Something like that,’ Hope mumbled.

‘So what did Ryan – I mean Dad – say?’

‘That I’m grounded until I’m twenty-one.’

Despite the serious direction our talk had taken, I couldn’t help laughing at that one. ‘Mum tried to calm him down a bit, but he was just so... so....’

‘Angry?’ I suggested. Hope nodded.

‘Scared of you getting hurt? Terrified you’re growing up too fast? Frightened of losing you?’ Hope shook her head at each of my other suggestions, but there was a look on her face that hadn’t been there before. Somehow, while struggling blindly in the dark for what to say, I’d managed to turn on a light bulb.

The waitress was weaving through the tables towards us with two steaming plates of pasta and I think we were both glad that the conversation was coming to an end. I had just one last thing to add.

‘After lunch we’ll pop into one of the department stores. There’s a really good concealer that’s the perfect colour for our skin tone.’

I couldn’t finish my mountain of tagliatelle, but Hope had no trouble polishing off hers. ‘I thought you were saving some room for a gelato,’ I said, glancing over at the very impressive ice cream counter. My eyes were already moving on when they stopped and darted back to two tall figures standing by the counter. He spotted me a second or so later.

‘Maddie.’

I smiled broadly across the heads of the other diners. ‘Mitch.’

‘Small world,’ called out Mitch, his voice a rumbling boom, even when he was trying to talk quietly. Thankfully, rather than annoy the other customers, he grabbed his companion’s arm, and began threading his way towards us.

I had seen Mitch briefly at the flat on a couple of occasions since I’d moved back in, but he’d been in a hurry both times and had needed to rush away. For a moment I thought he might be thinking of doing so again when he noticed that I wasn’t eating alone.

‘Hope, you remember Mitch, don’t you?’

My usually confident daughter mumbled a shy and almost inarticulate ‘Of course,’ and when I stole a sideways glance I noticed her pale skin was flushed a becoming pink. It was only as I looked *beyond* Mitch that I realised the blush hadn’t been for him.

‘This can’t be Sam, can it?’ I asked. The young man standing beside Mitch, who was almost as tall as his father, nodded once. His limbs looked disproportionately long, reminding me of a baby giraffe’s; a comparison I wisely chose not to share. I probably should have thought twice before voicing my next comment too. ‘How is that even possible? The last time I saw you, you were playing with Transformers and action men, and eating chocolate biscuits like they were going out of fashion.’

The fledgling stubble on Sam's cheeks wasn't thick enough to hide the rush of blood to his face.

'He still does that – the biscuit thing,' chimed in Mitch. Sam and Hope exchanged a look of mutual sympathy at their embarrassing parents. Their eyes connected for less than a second before quickly darting away. I noticed Hope was flattening her hair against her neck, making sure the unsightly love bite was completely hidden. Perhaps *that's* what prompted me to impulsively ask Mitch and his son to join us.

'We were about to order ice creams,' I said, shuffling my many carrier bags to one side to make room for Mitch to pull out a chair.

'And we were just going to get a couple to take away,' said Mitch, gesturing his son to take the chair beside Hope. 'But we could join you for a few minutes, if that's okay with both of you?'

'Great,' I said, answering for Hope who for some strange reason seemed to have mysteriously lost the ability to speak.

I shared a dessert menu with Mitch and ignored the pointed glare Hope shot my way when I suggested she and Sam 'scooch up' to share the second one.

'Have you decided?' Mitch asked, leaning in and jolting my attention away from our offspring, who disappointingly seemed more interested in their mobile phones than each other. From out of nowhere, a long-forgotten memory surfaced of Ryan jokingly complaining about my obsession with posting on social media. It wasn't often that I allowed myself to think back to the days before my accident, when Ryan had been mine instead of Chloe's. Looking back always unsettled me, so perhaps that's why I'd jumped when I'd looked up to find Mitch's face so close to mine. My heart spent several moments skittering around in my chest like a startled creature before finally finding and resuming its normal rhythm.

I chose randomly from the menu, anxious for Mitch to settle back in his own chair. If I didn't know better I would say I was nervous, but that was crazy because Mitch had always had the exact *opposite* effect on me. His friendship was like aloe vera,

a soothing balm on my soul. I'd tried once to explain it to him, but I must have reached for all the wrong words, because instead of taking it as the compliment I'd intended, he'd looked vaguely hurt as though I'd somehow insulted him.

'Are you and Sam shopping today too?' I asked, unable to stifle a laugh at the look of horror on Mitch's face. Mitch wore a 'uniform' of jeans and checked shirts which I had long suspected he bought in bulk to avoid any type of shopping expedition.

From the other end of our table Sam laughed. 'No. We're going to the cinema here.' He named a film I had never heard of, which apparently was the latest release in an action movie series that had broken box office records while I slept.

'I thought you were more of a romcom guy,' I said, turning to Mitch.

Amazingly his cheeks flushed with colour. 'I can't believe you remembered that. It must be years since we had that conversation.'

'Years to you, but just months to me,' I said trying not to sound sad, and almost managing to pull it off.

'You're a bit like a time traveller, aren't you, the way you drop in and out of our lives?' It was an unexpectedly poetic way for anyone to describe my medical history, and I could see Mitch rather liked his analogy. He smiled at me, brushing the hair out of his eyes, but leaving a single lock behind. It was much harder than it should have been not to reach over and tidy it away for him. He really *did* need a haircut.

'You've certainly aged much better than the rest of us,' Mitch continued.

'Well, I definitely feel old, especially when I see how grown up Hope and Sam are these days.' I looked over at the two teenagers who now appeared considerably more relaxed as they leant closer together, laughing at something on Hope's phone screen. 'Although tomorrow I'm sure I'll be feeling like a helpless child all over again.'

'Why? What's happening tomorrow?'

I swirled the spoon through the melting remains of ice cream in my bowl. 'I'm going to visit my mum in the care home. It's the first time I'll have seen her since I woke up. *This time*, that is.'

Mitch gave me the moment I needed to compose myself before startling me with his next question. 'How are you getting there? Because I happen to be visiting a friend tomorrow and she doesn't live that far away from your mum's care home. I could give you a lift if you like?'

His offer surprised me on several levels. One, that he had remembered the location of the care home after all these years; and that he'd realised how little I'd been looking forward to the long train journey. I refused to acknowledge that there was anything further that bothered me. I wasn't in the least bit curious about the identity of Mitch's female friend, because obviously that was none of my business. And yet, like a troublesome tooth that you just can't leave alone, my thoughts persisted in going back to it throughout the rest of afternoon.

## **CHAPTER 3**

‘She’s still in the shower, I’m afraid.’

‘Why am I not surprised,’ Ryan said with a wry smile.

‘You should probably blame me,’ I apologised, standing back in an unspoken invitation for him to come in. ‘We stayed up late last night, chatting.’

Ryan followed me down the narrow hallway to the sun-filled kitchen, where the smell of breakfast toast still lingered in the air.

‘It was lovely having Hope stay in her old room again,’ I said, my voice soft with nostalgia. Last night had been a different kind of sleepover from the type I remembered sharing with Hope. This time the bed was free of cuddly toys; there had been no bouncing on the mattress or bedtime stories, but just knowing my daughter was asleep in the room next to mine made it the best night I’d had in a very long while.

We had stayed up long after midnight, snug and cosy in fleecy pyjamas, sipping on mugs of sweet hot chocolate, and sharing stories. Hope was endlessly fascinated about my life before I had met Ryan. And I was hungry for everything I had missed in hers. We were like two jigsaw fanatics, determined to find all the missing pieces of each other’s past.

‘Did Grandma and Grandpa like all your boyfriends before Dad came along?’ She had been sitting cross-legged at the foot of my double bed, while I had occupied the pillow end in an almost identical pose. We had been like the mirrored halves of a slightly imperfect Rorschach inkblot. One side crisp and clear, the other a little blurred with age.

‘Who said there *were* other boyfriends before your dad?’ I had said, trying and failing to pull off sweet and innocent.



I snorted and ducked as she lobbed a scatter cushion my way. ‘Yeah, right, Maddie,’ Hope had said scornfully. I was mostly ‘Maddie’ rather than ‘Mum’ and I was okay with that. Well, mostly okay.

‘Your grandparents liked a few of them, but there were one or two who they took an instant dislike to.’

‘But they were the ones you liked best, weren’t they?’ Hope had asked with surprising insight.

I had shrugged, as though the arguments that had raged about the length of my boyfriends’ hair; the tattoos on their arm; or the motorbikes they drove, hadn’t felt like the end of the world to me at the time. But it had, and I could still remember those feelings. Because for me those rows weren’t buried deeply in the past; for me they seemed almost recent. It felt as though I was straddling *both* sides of the argument Hope was having with Ryan and Chloe. I could see both sides with equal clarity.

‘I am not going to stop seeing him,’ Hope had muttered darkly. ‘Dad can’t make me.’

I sighed softly. Feeling as though I was tiptoeing through an emotional minefield. One wrong step and everything could blow up in my face.

‘What’s his name, this boy of yours?’

‘Dan,’ Hope had replied, her entire face lighting up in much the way I imagine Juliet’s had probably done whenever she had spoken about Romeo.

\*

‘Coffee?’ I now asked, wagging the flask in Ryan’s direction. The flat was quiet and the drum of water from the shower carried easily to the kitchen.

‘I might as well. It looks as though she’s going to be a while. Somehow Hope manages to take three times as long as Chloe does to get ready!’

I came perilously close to reminding him that he used to jokingly complain about how long it took *me* to get ready, but

wisely thought better of it at the last moment. Reminding Ryan about anything from our past was like playing hopscotch on quicksand; it was way too dangerous and could only take us somewhere we really shouldn't go.

'I suppose Hope told you about this boy she's met,' he muttered.

I placed his coffee in front of him, with exactly the right amount of sugar and milk without having to ask. Some things remain so deeply imprinted in your brain you simply never forget them.

'She did mention him... in passing,' I said, playing down our conversation and still managing to feel disloyal to Hope for sharing, and also disloyal to Ryan for not disclosing more. Double agent was clearly another career choice I shouldn't bother pursuing.

'Well, he sounds like a right twat to me.'

'Yes. I got the impression you didn't exactly approve of their relationship,' I said cautiously, pulling out a kitchen chair to sit opposite him.

Ryan might have forgotten a great many things about the way we once were, but he was still pretty good at reading my conversational subtext.

'You think I'm wrong, don't you? That *we're* wrong,' he corrected, making it clear he and Chloe stood shoulder to shoulder on this one. I had no intention of getting in the middle of a family feud and raised both my hands in the universal gesture of surrender.

'I'm not taking sides here, Ryan. I'm Switzerland.'

His eyes met mine in a way they seldom did any more. It's true what the poets say about them being the windows to your soul. Once, a long time ago, my soul had been so closely entwined with his I thought nothing could ever separate us. But I was wrong back then. And Ryan was wrong now. I just didn't have the nerve to come straight out and say so. He'd had sixteen years of experience being a parent, whereas I only had a year or so under my belt.

‘Just be careful how you handle it with her,’ I urged. ‘The more you try to pull her away from this boy, the tighter she’ll hold on.’

‘And you know that how?’

I smiled gently. ‘Because she’s scarily like me at that age. She won’t be told. You and Chloe are going to have to trust that she’ll figure it out for herself. Eventually she’ll bring home a boy that you *do* like.’

*Like I did*, I thought, silently acknowledging how much my parents had always loved Ryan. And still did. Perhaps Ryan’s thoughts were journeying along a similar path, for he suddenly asked: ‘Aren’t you meant to be visiting Faye at the home today? Do you need a lift to the station?’

‘Thanks for the offer, but I’ve already got it sorted. Mitch is driving me.’

Ryan blinked four times before speaking. I know that because I counted them. In the past there’d been an occasional prickliness between him and Mitch. I’d never figured out why, and it astounded me that it apparently still existed after all these years.

‘That’s great,’ he eventually replied.

\*

By the time Ryan and Hope left, I had less than half an hour to get ready. I paused to pick up the damp towels Hope had half-heartedly aimed in the direction of the rail before having one of the fastest showers in history. Ryan would be amazed at how utilitarian hospital washrooms had cured me of any desire to linger in a bathroom. I ran a comb hurriedly through my long dark hair and gave it a drive-by blasting with the hairdryer. I was halfway to my wardrobe when I spotted the collection of glossy carrier bags from yesterday’s shopping expedition, lined up like colourful beach huts at the seaside. I hadn’t bothered putting away my new purchases, and because they were closer than the wardrobe, I pulled out the new jeans, a form fitting top, and the leather jacket from the bags.

I had only just finished applying mascara to my lashes and gloss to my lips when a shuddering bang rocked the front door. One day I really would have to tell Mitch he didn't need to thump quite so hard on it to gain my attention. But then again, it *was* his door and he was exceptionally good at fixing things. Nothing seemed to faze him: leaky taps, squeaky hinges, blown fuses. He was a man of many talents – and not all of them related to his DIY skills. He was a far better listener than most of the counsellors I had ever seen, and had a quick, dry sense of humour that caught people by surprise if they didn't know him well.

I ran lightly down the hall to answer his knock, fearful the wood wouldn't withstand a second assault. Mitch's grin split the forest of his beard as I opened the door. He filled the entire frame – and it was a fairly big door. And yet even though he was blocking the light from the hallway beyond, the day seemed suddenly a little brighter with him standing there. I realised, not for the first time, how lucky I was to count Mitch Richards as one of my friends.

\*

'I'm sorry. I should have cleared it out a bit better,' Mitch apologised, glancing down as two empty soft drink cans rolled out from beneath the passenger seat when we set off.

I nudged them aside with my toe and successfully hid my smile, wondering what the 'before' must have looked like if this was the 'after'. Mitch's vehicle had been a complete surprise. I'm not particularly knowledgeable about cars, but I was pretty sure he used to drive something fairly ordinary and nondescript. I had walked straight past the huge American Chevrolet truck parked outside my flat.

'This is me,' Mitch had said, blipping the doors to open the enormous bright red vehicle, with its gleaming chrome work and headlights the size of spotlights.

'It is?' I asked, unable to keep the amazement from my voice. This kind of car looked like it had been driven straight off Route 66 or the set of *The Dukes of Hazzard*. It was twice as tall, wide, and long as every other vehicle in the street and

yet it suited Mitch perfectly. He flushed the same colour as his paintwork when I told him this, but I could tell my observation had pleased him.

‘You should have seen it when I first got it, it was a total wreck. It took me years of weekends to track down parts before I could even *start* rebuilding it.’ Mitch’s expression was one of pride as he looked at the product of his hard work. For a single stupid moment the care and devotion he’d showered on the truck made me strangely envious. Perhaps it was a sign that I needed to find something to be equally passionate about?

Mitch had opened the passenger door, and one look at the height of the step explained why his hand was held out to help me in.

‘Well, your hard work has clearly paid off,’ I said, admiring the impressive truck as I swung myself into it. ‘You must have endless patience.’

Mitch’s hand was still gripping mine, and for a moment I felt the tightening of his hold before he let it fall away. ‘I’ve always thought some things are worth waiting for,’ he said, ‘and yes, I’ve learnt to be very patient.’ His eyes flickered away from mine and, for a second, I was no longer sure if we were still talking about his Chevrolet.

It was a three-hour drive to Mum’s care home, but the enormous tyres of the truck ate up the miles. Mitch spent the first part of the journey talking about Sam. By the time we pulled into the services for a necessary restroom stop and coffees to go, I could have scored an admirable pass in an exam on his son’s sporting and academic achievements.

‘I’m sorry. Have I been boring you?’ he apologised, as we crossed the car park. We were waiting for a break in the traffic, and when one appeared Mitch’s hand went automatically to the small of my back until we were safely on the pavement. Given my history with road crossing, I could hardly blame him for the excess of caution.

‘Not at all,’ I said, lifting my face to enjoy the cool blast of air from the building’s vents as the automatic doors swished apart. ‘It’s lovely to hear how proud you are of Sam. And it’s

great that the two of you have stayed so close.’ I glanced at him through lowered lashes as I shyly admitted: ‘You were always my role model for how to be a good parent when you don’t live in the same house as your child.’

It was so very easy to say the right thing to Mitch, but from the expression in his eyes I think I scored big time with that particular compliment. But then everything with Mitch was easy and comfortable. I wondered if the woman he was going to visit that day felt the same way? The thought left a slightly bitter taste in my mouth which I washed away with the jumbo-sized caramel latte Mitch had bought.

Back on the road once more, my thoughts were pulled like a magnet towards the imminent visit to my mother. It would be the first time we’d seen each other in ten years; something that I’m sure would tear at my heart far more than it would hers.

Memories of much-loved family members and an awareness of the passing years were two things dementia most liked to steal; and my mum had been robbed of both of those for many years.

‘Just don’t expect too much,’ my father had said on the phone last night. ‘She’s not as good as she was ten years ago.’ As Mum hadn’t even known who I was back then, it didn’t exactly bode well. But I hung like crazy onto the memory of that one brief moment when the fog had lifted and she’d recognised me. Despite my father’s warning, I couldn’t quite squash the hope that it would somehow happen again.

My dad was waiting for me in the care home foyer, and perhaps that ought to have alerted me that he didn’t want me to see Mum without him being right there beside me. Despite its height I had jumped down from Mitch’s truck before he’d even engaged the handbrake. Dad stepped out into the morning sunshine, raising an arm in greeting to Mitch. I felt oddly torn as I turned towards my road trip companion, as though I didn’t want him to abandon me and drive away, which was ridiculous.

‘Thank you so much for the lift,’ I said, my hand already raised to push the passenger door to a close.

‘Ring when you’re ready to leave,’ Mitch reminded me as the door clunked into place. I gave a brief, reluctant nod. The last few miles of our journey had been spent with me assuring him I could easily catch the train back home, and him insisting that he wouldn’t hear of it. I couldn’t imagine his lady friend would be pleased with his role as my personal driver, but Mitch shot down every objection I raised. In the end it was easier – and far less exhausting – to simply agree with him.

‘That was nice of him to drive you here; he’s a good lad,’ said my dad, kissing me warmly on the cheek as we watched the big red truck disappear down the driveway, spitting up gravel chippings as it went.

It had probably been quite a while since anyone had referred to Mitch – with his towering height and lumberjack physique – as a lad, unless they’d updated the dictionary definition while I slept. But thoughts of Mitch were disappearing from my head faster than his Chevrolet had sped down the drive. ‘How’s Mum today?’ I asked, slipping my hand through the crook of my father’s arm as we turned back towards the entrance.

‘Oh, you know. Same old, same old.’

Except that I didn’t know. Not at all. Even the very worst of my nightmares could never have prepared me for the changes the lost decade had wrought on the woman who had raised me.

‘You probably don’t remember the way,’ Dad said, taking my elbow to steer me down the maze of corridors after signing us both in.

But I did. Leapfrogging over the intervening years, I turned left and right where required until we reached her door. The blue carpet of the hallway had been replaced and was now a forest green, but other than that the place looked – and smelt – exactly as I had remembered it.

‘Faye Chambers,’ I said, softly, my fingers reaching up to trace Mum’s name on the small square card fixed beside her door. The card had yellowed with age. It looked faded and neglected, and that made me sad, but not as much as my dad’s next words.

‘She can’t remember her name these days,’ he said with a break in his voice that I probably wasn’t supposed to hear. ‘She asked me last week who Faye was.’ I had no time to react to this before he pressed down on the door handle and we walked into the two rooms that had become my mother’s world.

In my mind she was always sitting in the chair in the sitting room area of the small suite, looking out at the garden. She would probably be greyer, with a few more lines on her face, but still recognisable as the woman I loved. Except the sitting room area was empty and it looked as though no one had sat in its armchairs for quite some time.

The single bed in the adjacent room had been replaced with a fully functioning hospital one. The guard rails were up on both sides. I had slept in beds just like this for sixteen years of my life. I knew there would be a hand-held device somewhere nearby to raise and lower the bed into no end of different positions, but I very much doubted its occupant knew how to use it.

Despite the name on the door I found myself desperately hoping that we’d wandered into the wrong room, but of course we hadn’t. The woman in the bed was probably still almost as tall as me, but she was a diminished, shrunken version of who I was expecting to see. Her hair wasn’t the grey I’d imagined it would be, but pure snowy white and sparse enough in places to reveal sad glimpses of pink scalp. The lines on her face, especially those running from her nose to her mouth, looked as though they had been gouged with a chisel. Even her lips looked thinner, the fullness I had inherited from her now gone, although admittedly it was difficult to see as they were currently smeared with a layer of something that I guessed was porridge. The carer who’d been patiently spooning the gruel-like substance into my mother’s mouth got to her feet. Her plastic apron crinkled as she moved, and it was covered with spatters of my mother’s breakfast.

I turned to my father, my eyes awash with tears. Why hadn’t he told me things were this bad? His smile was sad and held a thousand regrets. ‘Some days she can still manage to feed



herself, but others she just doesn't have the energy.' It looked like there had been a great many days when this was the case because the arm Mum lifted to push away the bowl the carer was holding was as spindly as a stick. Her hand appeared to be just bones and skin, marbled with veins.

And yet when she slowly turned her head towards us, I could see that her eyes were still the same. Their shape was mine, and although their colour had long since faded, they were the same ones I had looked into a million times. I smiled into them now and waited for a flicker of recognition that I knew wasn't going to come.

'You,' she said. 'You came back.' For a moment I thought my heart would burst with joy, until I noticed that she wasn't looking at me at all but was focusing on my father. 'You've been here before, haven't you?' she asked the man who had made her his bride fifty years earlier.

'You know who this is, Faye. This is Bill. He comes here to see you every day.'

'He does?' questioned the stranger in my mother's bed, as though the carer was spinning some implausible yarn.

Dad stepped past me, took hold of one of mum's skeletal hands and raised it to his lips. 'Forever and ever,' he murmured softly, as though completing a prayer. Although Mum didn't exactly respond, she didn't snatch her hand away and tolerated the graze of his kiss on her skin. I saw it as an encouraging sign. I had been in her room for less than five minutes, and already my expectations had undergone a major readjustment.

The woman who'd taught me how to be the person I was today obediently tilted her face up to the carer as it was wiped clean of the porridge that hadn't made it to her mouth. I turned my head away, finding it too heart-breaking to watch, only to spot an oxygen tank propped up beside the bedside cabinet. I'd thought dementia was the only demon we were fighting here, but it looked as though Mum's health was failing too.

I heard the click of the door as the carer left and turned back towards the figure in the bed. 'Mummy,' I said sadly. How

many years had it been since I'd last called her that? Why had I ever stopped?

Her eyes met mine and there was a kindness in them that I hadn't expected to see. 'Are you lost, little girl? Do you need some help? Have you lost your mummy?'

Tears were streaming like a river down my cheeks. There was nothing I could do to stop them. I nodded sadly. 'I think I have, yes.'

\*

'Oh, Dad,' I said. My voice wasn't so much cracking as shattering. 'Why didn't you tell me how bad she was?'

Dad was sitting beside me on one of the many benches in the home's well-tended grounds. 'I tried... I did say that she wasn't doing so well these days,' he countered, addressing his comments not to me but to a bold woodpecker who'd just swooped down from a tree, searching for food on the neatly mown lawn.

'I thought you just meant that her memory was worse. I didn't realise she was sick too. What's wrong with her? Can they treat it?'

He shook his head. 'It's old age, my love. Her body is worn out and it's very, very tired. Eventually it will start to shut down.'

This was worse, so much worse than what I had been expecting.

'Is she... is she in any pain?'

That brought a smile, of sorts, to my father's face. 'No, thank God. She's not suffering.' It doesn't matter how old you are, you still never expect to see your parent cry. It rocked me to see Dad doing so openly now. 'We're the ones who are suffering, having to watch her leave us like this. But if that's the price I have to pay, then I do so willingly. I'd rather it was *me* hurting than her.'

\*

I could have spent the day wallowing in the sadness of the situation, but I'd already lost so much time with Mum, I couldn't bear the thought of squandering a single moment of whatever we had left. When Dad and I returned to her room, the carers had given Mum a wash and helped her from the bed to a wheelchair. Dad looked at the NHS-issue chair with delight, as though it represented a small victory. I had an entirely different response, but then I'd spent more time than I had ever wanted to confined to a similar model.

'It's always a good day when they can persuade her to get out of bed,' he declared, with the same excitement that he'd once shown for family celebrations and Christmases. Once again, I felt an internal shift as my expectations realigned to this new normal. 'I think it's because she's pleased to see you,' he said, squeezing my hand in his. And because he wanted so very much for me to believe it, I allowed myself to pretend it was true.

Mum's hair looked wild, like windswept candyfloss, so I drew my hairbrush from my handbag to fix it. Before addressing her, I crouched down before her chair, because I remembered how much I'd hated it when people spoke down to me when I'd been in one. 'Would you like me to brush your hair for you, M— ...maybe?' I'm sure Dad was the only one who noticed I'd shied away from calling her 'Mum' at the last moment. I couldn't see the point in confusing her even further if she really didn't remember me.

'Do you know how to do it properly?' she fired back in a slightly confrontational tone that I'd never heard her use before. What a cruel and sadistic thief this illness was, taking the very best bits of my mum and leaving almost nothing recognisable behind.

'Actually, I do know how to do it very well,' I assured her, moving into position behind her chair. 'I had an excellent teacher.'

Somehow, without any conscious decision, the hair brushing turned into an impromptu mini pampering session. Whilst delving into my make-up bag for a slide to keep her wispy hair in place, I discovered an emery board, a nail varnish and some

hand cream. Dad made a rather feeble excuse to absent himself, declaring it was all too girly for him, and that he was going to the lounge area to read the newspaper. But I saw the look in his eyes as he turned at the door and looked back on us; his girls. Always his girls. He was giving me this time; it was his gift to me and nothing he'd given me in my entire life had ever been so precious.

When her nails were done, Mum had wanted the television turned on and instructed me to find her favourite show. I scrolled through the guide with no idea what I was looking for... and then I found it. When Dad eventually returned we were on our third episode of a show devoted entirely to brides selecting their wedding dresses. It was a programme Mum and I had once watched together and I was amazed it was still on the air. But even more amazing was how halfway through the second episode she had reached over and taken hold of my hand. It was a moment I knew I was going to remember and cherish for the rest of my life.

I fed her her lunch. It should have felt weird, and I suppose in a way it was. But there was a tenderness there too as our lives came full circle. She had done all these things – and so much more – for me over forty years ago, and now it was my turn to do them for her.

## CHAPTER 4

The visit had been a surprising success, so bursting into tears as soon as Mitch pulled away from the care home was a genuine shock. And this wasn't genteel, refined weeping either. These were full-on, heart-wrenching sobs; the kind that leave make-up all over your face and make your nose run. We were on a busy road with nowhere to pull over, but I could tell Mitch was desperately looking for somewhere to do so anyway.

'No. Drive. Just drive,' I urged as though we were in a getaway car. If he stopped the truck, he would draw me into his arms to comfort me, and that scared me almost as much as my current emotional outburst. Mitch chewed worriedly on his lip but did as I asked, pressing his foot down once more on the accelerator. With one eye on the traffic and the other on me, he reached into the back seat and produced a man-sized box of tissues that he dropped onto my lap.

It took thirty miles and half the box before I finally managed to pull myself together. Throughout it all Mitch had stayed blissfully silent. There hadn't been a single '*What's wrong?*' or '*Come on now*', which was precisely why I loved him. The thought startled me so much, I stopped midway through a particularly noisy nose blow. *As a friend*, I added hastily, as though my subconscious was running off down a track it had no business journeying on. Of course, *as a friend*.

'Was it worse than you expected?' he asked eventually. It was the first thing he'd said in almost forty minutes. Mitch was right about one thing, he *was* incredibly patient.

'Uh huh,' I replied. My voice sounded rough, as if someone had gone over it with sandpaper.

‘That must have been tough,’ he said, and there was so much understanding in his voice I almost lost it all over again. I gave myself a brisk mental shake and turned slightly in my seat.

‘Thank you,’ I said simply. His eyes briefly left the road and found mine. ‘Thank you for knowing not to say anything and thank you for letting me cry it out.’

‘I hate seeing you so upset,’ he said, sounding almost embarrassed by the admission. ‘It makes me feel useless.’ It was an emotion I could tell didn’t sit comfortably with him.

I leant forward and rested my hand for a moment on his forearm. At some point during the day he’d rolled up his shirt sleeves and beneath my palm I could feel the heat of his skin stretched over muscles that appeared to have been hewn from granite. They contracted reflexively at my touch and I immediately withdrew my hand, not wanting to distract him while he was driving.

‘Everything at the care home was just as I remembered it,’ I said sadly, ‘except Mum, that is. I suppose I just wanted to wake up and find everything was exactly the same.’ I gave a small humourless laugh. ‘You’d think I’d be used to this happening by now.’

Mitch shook his head, as though somewhere, just beyond his grasp, were the right words to say, if only he could find them.

‘The crazy thing is I still *feel* young.’

‘You still look exactly the same,’ Mitch said, confirming his extreme loyalty, or a dire need for an eye test. Either way I smiled at him warmly. ‘Well, having a daughter who was playing with her dolls house when I went to sleep, and boys when I woke up is taking some getting used to.’

‘Hope has a boyfriend?’

‘She does. And here’s a surprise for you... Ryan doesn’t approve of him. Now there’s a shocker.’

Mitch’s laugh rumbled around the Chevy like a thunder roll. ‘Sam will be disappointed to hear that. I got impression he was

pretty keen too. And the two of them were messaging back and forth last night.'

'They were?' I asked in surprise. 'Well, for what it's worth, I think Sam would be a much better boyfriend than the one Hope has chosen.' It was impossible not to smile at how Mitch's face lit up with fatherly pride whenever his son was complimented. 'But, unfortunately, I think Hope and Sam are unlikely to be anything more than friends right now. She seems pretty keen on this other lad.'

'Well, friends is always a good place to start,' Mitch said. 'It often leads to romance a little further down the line.' There was something in his voice, or the way his hands had tightened on the steering wheel that set off a silent alarm. We *were* still talking about our teenage children, weren't we? I was no longer entirely sure.

'I'm pretty sure that kind of thing only happens in those romcom films you're so fond of,' I teased, dragging us away from the precipice of a conversation I didn't feel comfortable having.

Mitch must have sensed my discomfort, for he leant forward and switched on the radio and we spent the next thirty minutes listening to a country music station, a genre perfectly suited to a man with a penchant for checked shirts, jeans, and heavy boots.

It was only when we stopped for petrol that I wondered about my reaction; was I guilty of ignoring my own feelings? I've never been a jealous person. How could I be, when I'd ended up making friends with the woman who'd married my own fiancé? And yet when Mitch was halfway across the floodlit petrol station forecourt, I certainly felt a frisson of something I wasn't exactly proud of. Mitch had said very little when I'd asked him about his own day, other than to say: '*It was great, thanks. Sally's really good company.*'

And yet I felt my teeth grind together when his phone juddered in its stand on the dashboard, and above the image of our route home a green banner flashed up announcing an incoming message from Sally.

*Thank you for such a wonderful day. It was so good to see you again, Mitch. Next time we must...*

The temptation to press the screen and reveal the rest of Sally's message was so strong, I literally had to sit on my hands to prevent them from invading his privacy. It was a huge relief when the car door finally opened and Mitch slid back onto the seat beside me. His face immediately creased into a smile as he spotted the message and I twisted in my seat, feigning a sudden fascination in Pump Number 4 outside my window, as he opened the text and read it.

The rest of the journey passed uneventfully until my stomach interrupted the twanging guitar music with a chorus of unladylike growls. 'Sorry about that,' I murmured, glad the backlit dashboard wasn't bright enough to illuminate that for once *I* was the one who was blushing.

'Hungry?'

Another growl from my stomach answered his question. I'd skipped lunch so I could help Mum eat hers, but I was fast approaching the point where gnawing on my own arm was starting to sound appetising.

'What do you say we get a takeaway when we get back to yours?'

The suggestion and the easy companionable way it had been made felt as though a reset button had been pushed and we had been catapulted back onto familiar territory. Mitch and I were friends, really good ones, and anything that got in the way of that was like a troublesome weed that needed to be plucked out before its roots grew deeper.

I had less than fifteen minutes between the time Mitch dropped me at my front door and then hammered on it, his arms laden with two bulging bags of Chinese takeaway and a bottle of wine. I had spent most of his absence dashing through the flat like a mad woman, throwing things into cupboards that I'd struggle to find again. It left me with barely enough time to brush my teeth and tug a comb through my hair. But as Mitch had seen me looking far worse on numerous hospital visits, I wasn't sure why I was worrying so much.



He had easily bought enough food for four, and yet a short while later every single carton was empty apart from the odd prawn or elusive bean sprout. We'd eaten on the floor of the lounge, with our feast spread out in cartons on the low coffee table. I couldn't help wonder if Mitch's grandmother was somewhere looking down on us, tutting in disapproval. He laughed when I said this.

'She'd be fine about it,' he assured me. 'She'd have liked you.'

'How can you be so sure?' Three glasses of wine had released the tension knotting my shoulders, which was good; and also my tongue, which was less so.

'I know she'd have liked you, because I do. Very much,' he said simply.

The room suddenly seemed unnaturally quiet. The only sound was the metronome-like ticking of his grandmother's carriage clock, marking one awkward minute clicking into the next.

Mitch had opened a door that ought to be kept shut, but before it swung to a close there was a question I needed to ask. 'Why did you keep this flat for me for all those years I was in hospital? The doctors must have told you they had no idea when I'd wake up again – or even *if* I would.'

Mitch had drunk far less wine than me. Perhaps that's why his courage to meet my gaze failed him at the last moment. 'Because I couldn't let it happen to you for a second time. I couldn't have you wake up and find your entire life had been packed away in storage boxes. Again. You deserved to know that there'd been at least one person who'd never stopped believing you'd come back.'

'How could you possibly have been that sure?' I asked, my voice little more than a whisper.

Mitch finally lifted his head. His dark brown eyes looked strangely bright.

'Because you're Maddie Chambers. The Miracle Girl. It's what you do.'

## CHAPTER 5

‘This is weird, isn’t it?’

‘No. Not really.’

I turned to the woman standing beside me, who might possibly be the very worst liar I had ever met. She flinched under my scrutiny.

‘Okay, it’s a *little* weird,’ Chloe conceded. A light spring breeze was ruffling her hair, but my attention was on the twin frown lines between her eyebrows. This was not her relaxed face.

I came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the pavement, earning a *tsk* of complaint from a man walking behind me. We were still two hundred metres from our destination.

‘Let’s forget it. I can come back another day on my own. Let’s just go and find a wine bar or something.’

‘No,’ Chloe retorted with unexpected determination. ‘I circled that bloody car park four times before I found a space; and I know you, you won’t come here again, and besides it’s only half past ten in the morning, so we’re nowhere near wine o’clock.’

I laughed, but the sound was fragile, and the breeze whipped it from my lips. ‘It is still the weirdest thing we’ve ever done,’ I muttered.

‘Weirder than helping me shower in the hospital? Or aiding and abetting my escape from the ward? Or the wheelchair race?’

I laughed, and this time it sounded far more natural. ‘You make a good point. We specialise in weird.’

‘Come on then,’ Chloe urged, lifting one hand to use as a visor as she looked down the length of the street. ‘Let’s go and get your wedding dress.’

\*

I hadn’t given it a thought in years. Seventeen years to be precise. If it ever crossed my mind at all, I had always assumed it had been disposed of a long time ago. The letter had been on quite a journey before it reached me. I’d stared down at the envelope with its scribbled out addresses and ‘*not known at this location*’ messages scrawled on it. Its original destination had been an address so far back in my past that for a moment I struggled to remember that it had once been mine. I had all but moved out of my one-bedroom flat in the weeks leading up to my wedding. But that was the address the shop still held on their files, that and a mobile phone number that presumably had long since been reallocated to someone else.

From my old flat the letter had journeyed to Ryan’s former apartment, the place where we had intended to start our married life together. Of course, Ryan and our baby daughter had moved out of that building many years ago, at a time when my own residence continued to be a hospital bed on a high dependency unit.

The letter had finally been redirected to the large, detached property where Ryan and Chloe now lived. ‘Bizarrely, this arrived at our house,’ Chloe had said, passing me the envelope. ‘It’s addressed to you.’

I had taken the envelope and stared at it curiously. For some reason, my heart skipped a beat and then began to race. I slipped a forefinger beneath the flap and was rewarded with a particularly vicious paper cut. It was almost as if the letter was determined to wound me, one way or the other.

My confused frown deepened as I scanned the letterhead, embossed with the name of a shop I hadn’t thought of in a really long time. By the time I’d reached the flamboyant signature, my hand was shaking so much the letter had become a moving target, impossible to read.

‘What is it?’ Chloe had asked, presumably noticing that my already pale complexion had lost a little more colour. I passed her the letter. ‘Oh,’ she said slowly, lowering herself onto a kitchen chair as she re-read the letter as though it was written in another language. ‘They’ve found your wedding dress... after all these years.’

‘So it would appear,’ I said with a shaky laugh.

‘And they want to know if you’d like to collect it,’ Chloe continued, in an accurate precis of the letter from *Fleurs*, the bridal shop I’d last visited on the day of the accident.

I nodded as a silence descended between us. This was one of those awkward moments when the past became a tornado that picked us up and dropped us straight into a pool of quicksand.

‘Do you *want* to get it?’ Chloe’s question was reasonable and straightforward and yet it completely floored me.

‘No. Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.’ Another silence. I had no idea what Chloe was thinking, but my head was filled with the memory of a champagne coloured silk gown that I’d never imagined I’d see again. ‘I need to think about it.’

‘I know you must be worried that it’ll stir up old emotions, but I actually think you *need* to collect the dress... even if you end up giving it away,’ Chloe had reasoned.

I’d stared at her blankly for a moment. *Of course* I would be giving it away. What did she think I was going to do, wear it? Besides, that dress wasn’t mine; it had belonged to an entirely different Maddie.

‘If I *do* decide to get it, perhaps Hope might like to have it,’ I suggested tentatively. ‘As a kind of heirloom.’ Chloe’s smile had looked a little strained, and too late I wondered if her own wedding dress was packed away somewhere, waiting for our daughter to claim it.

In the end I’d slid the letter into a kitchen drawer, as though hoping it would get lost among the accumulation of takeaway menus and fliers from local tradesmen. But I could feel its presence every single time I entered the kitchen.

\*

It had never been my intention to ask Chloe to accompany me. Once I had made the decision to collect the dress, I had planned to go alone. But Chloe had been so insistent, and perhaps I hadn't fought her quite as hard as I should have done. 'This isn't like picking up some long-forgotten piece of dry-cleaning,' she had declared. 'This is your wedding dress.'

'No,' I corrected. 'It was going to be, but then everything changed.'

Perhaps buried deep beneath the foundations of our friendship there was still a lingering sense of guilt, because she had been the reason Ryan hadn't been a free man when I'd finally woken up. Or, more likely, Chloe really was the nicest person I had ever met. Either way, it was agreed that she would go with me to collect the dress.

\*

A bell tinkled above our heads as the shop door swung open and we entered a world of pure white and ivory. Except for a dove grey carpet, which a smartly dressed woman was currently crossing to greet us.

'Good morning,' she trilled. 'Can I help you?'

She was young, in her early twenties, and had probably still been in primary school the last time I had been here as a customer.

'Yes, please. We're here to collect a wedding dress.'

The assistant's eyes sparkled. She was a woman who clearly loved her job. 'And which of you lovely ladies is the bride?' she asked with a smile. From our expressions she must have instantly realised she had said the wrong thing, and I felt quite sorry for her as she mentally backtracked, trying to work out what it had been.

'Thank you, Jacqueline,' came a cool and imperious voice that I instantly recognised, even after all these years.

Gwendoline Flowers, the owner of *Fleurs Wedding Gowns*, emerged from the back of the shop. Dressed in black from

head to toe she cut a striking contrast against the wall-to-wall white dresses. ‘I’ll attend to these customers.’

The still-flustered Jacqueline was dispatched on what I suspected was a fabricated errand, and when the shop bell tinkled to mark her exit Gwendoline turned to face us. I braced myself for what was sure to be an awkward introduction, but the shop’s inimitable owner extended a slim-fingered hand towards me.

‘Madeline Chambers, it is a pleasure to see you again.’ Notoriety is a bittersweet pill, and sometimes I forgot the level of public interest in my accident, coma, and Miracle Girl status for having come back not just once, but twice.

‘Firstly, allow me to reiterate my sincerest apologies.’ Gwendoline was gripping my hand in a formidable handshake that could probably have given Mitch a run for his money. ‘Your dress should have been returned to you long before this.’ She motioned us to follow her through the shop and for an awful moment I thought we were heading towards one of the changing rooms. Surely she wasn’t expecting that I’d want to try the dress on? I could almost feel my composure hot-footing it out of the door after Jacqueline.

Thankfully, we walked straight past the fitting rooms and into Gwendoline Flowers’s private office. It was a fairly standard set-up, with a desk, a computer, and a couple of filing cabinets, but my eyes were fixed only on the white garment bag suspended on a rail.

I had expected a dress that had been unearthed in the shop’s basement to look dirtier and dusty, but the garment bag appeared spotless. It took a physical effort to force my attention away from it to focus on what Gwendoline was now saying.

‘Undeniably the fault is ours. After your tragic accident your family asked us to store the dress until such time as you were fully recovered, and the wedding rescheduled. Usually when weddings are postponed or cancelled we’ll hold the dress for a period of time and then, if the bride no longer wishes to take delivery of the gown, we’ll offer to either sell it

or donate it to charity. But somehow your dress must have slipped through the net when the store was remodelled and it ended up in our basement. I really am so very, very sorry.'

Throughout her explanation Gwendoline had been walking ever closer to the garment bag. 'Happily your dress is still in pristine condition,' she assured us. Her long slim fingers with their blood-red nails were hovering beside the garment bag's zipper. 'Do you want to see it?'

I glanced at Chloe, before saying the words that I'd once intended to say to her husband. 'I do.'

\*

There was a small table in the corner of the wine bar's courtyard garden. By the time I returned with two glasses of chilled white, Chloe had wiped the tabletop and chairs free of its scattering of cherry blossom that had fallen from a nearby tree. I was glad, because it had looked far too much like confetti, and I think we had both had enough of anything to do with weddings for one day.

I leant back in my chair and tilted my face up to catch the warmth of the midday rays. The courtyard was peaceful and a real suntrap and we were early enough to have it completely to ourselves. It was a perfect balm after a morning that had been far more stressful than I'd expected.

Even though my dress was now safely stowed in the boot of Chloe's car, it was hard to shut out the moment when Gwendoline had freed it from its bag, and with it all the memories that had inevitably come tumbling out.

'Thank you for coming with me today, Chloe,' I said, reaching across the wooden slatted table to give her hand a squeeze.

'You don't have to thank me. It's what friends *do*.'

'Well I'm lucky to have the exceptional kind, who stick around when things are tough.'

'Speaking of friends who stick around,' Chloe neatly segued, 'Ryan mentioned that Mitch drove you up when you visited Faye the other week.'

‘Did he?’

‘Well actually he said, “*That Hagrid guy*” was giving you a lift.’

An old judder of irritation ran through me. ‘He’s not still calling Mitch that, is he? He knows how much it winds me up.’

Chloe took a long mouthful of her wine. Her head was turned away, making it impossible to read the expression in her eyes. ‘I don’t think it’s malicious, it’s just Ryan being over-protective and maybe even a little jealous.’

I spluttered inelegantly on my wine and ended up coughing so hard Chloe looked poised to perform the Heimlich manoeuvre.

‘Ryan is jealous of Mitch?’ I said eventually, spacing out each word as though that would make them more believable. It didn’t. ‘That is totally ridiculous.’

‘Is it, though? He protected you fanatically for years after the accident. Perhaps a part of him still thinks he has to.’

‘You’re talking about things that happened seventeen years ago. Ryan doesn’t have those kind of feelings for anyone but you now, any idiot can see that.’ I paused, waiting for the familiar dart to pierce my heart, the way it always used to. Nothing. Not even a twinge. ‘And why would he be jealous of Mitch, who incidentally already has a girlfriend.’ Strangely, this time I *did* feel a small stab of... something.

‘Mitch has a girlfriend?’ Chloe sounded incredulous, as though she must surely have misheard me.

‘Yes. Why is that so remarkable? He’s single and good company – great company actually. It’s not surprising he’s found someone.’

‘Actually, it kind of is,’ Chloe said, still looking confused. ‘Because it’s obviously the *wrong* someone.’ She was staring at me meaningfully and I suddenly felt like a bug on the end of a stick, right before the dissection begins.

‘What? You mean me? No way.’



‘When I was sick I seem to remember the two of you were really close.’

‘That was over ten years ago,’ I reminded her, suddenly aware that beads of sweat were trickling down my back. When had the day turned this warm?

‘But isn’t that what you’re always saying – what seems like a long time to everyone else is like yesterday to you?’

I hated her excellent memory and the fact that she was getting very close to the bone with her questions.

Luckily at that moment a large group carrying balloons and a birthday cake spilled into the courtyard, shattering the peace. I was about to suggest we got the bill, when Chloe drew in a deep breath, as though she was about to dive into dangerous waters.

‘Actually, you’re not the only one Ryan’s being over-protective with.’

‘Do you mean Hope?’ I asked, immediately sitting up straighter, like a meerkat on alert.

Chloe nodded. ‘Things have been pretty fraught between her and Ryan lately, ever since she started seeing this new boyfriend of hers—’

‘—Dan,’ I supplied.

Chloe looked surprised. ‘She’s told you about him?’

I gave a nod, almost wishing we were back talking about Mitch and me again.

‘I spend all my time having to referee their arguments. Frankly, it’s exhausting.’ I looked a little closer and noticed what I should have seen before: the dark circles beneath her eyes, and maybe a few more silvery strands infiltrating the blonde at her temples. ‘He’s being too hard on her; setting rules and curfews that she keeps breaking. But whenever I try to talk to him about it, it ends badly. It’s the first time we’ve disagreed about anything this important since we got married.’ Chloe gave an unhappy sigh and reached for her glass, looking almost surprised to find it empty.

She and I had shared many frank conversations over the years, but by tacit agreement what went on between her and Ryan was permanently off the table. But today those barriers were starting to crumble. The friend in me wanted to kick the rubble out of the way and reach out to her; the ex-fiancée to her husband wanted to cover her ears and start singing ‘*la, la, la*’ very loudly.

‘Hope won’t confide in me,’ Chloe said sadly, ‘because she thinks I’m just going to tell her dad.’ She bit down on her lower lip, which I’d only just noticed was starting to tremble. ‘The only thing that makes it bearable is knowing that she has you to talk to, Maddie. She really needs you right now.’

\*

Later that night, in the quiet of my bedroom, Chloe’s words came back to haunt me, the way I had known they surely would. She’d unwittingly stepped right into the middle of my own personal nightmare. Because more than anything I longed to be a permanent part of Hope’s future – *and Mitch’s too?* asked a voice in my head. But how could I when the odds were stacked so high against me?

I closed my eyes and I was back in the consultant’s office, as he tried to cushion the blow of his words. ‘I wish I could give you the guarantee you’re asking for, Maddie. But the truth is we simply don’t understand enough about your condition. You *could* be awake now for the next forty years,’ he’d said, starting with the best-case scenario.

‘Or?’ I had prompted, needing to hear him say the words, even though I already knew them.

‘Or it could just be weeks or months,’ he had concluded sadly. ‘There’s no way of telling for sure.’

I had hurt so many people over the years by slipping out of their lives. And while I would fight with every last ounce of my strength to stay here for my daughter, it would be madness to fall in love again. That could never happen.

## CHAPTER 6

The sound pierced holes in my dream, which was a shame because it had been a particularly lovely one. I had been in a lush green meadow, enjoying a summer picnic with my mum. There was an old-fashioned hamper on a gingham cloth, and a feast of food to enjoy, but best of all the Alzheimer's that had stolen her away was miraculously gone. We were talking about the past... and she remembered it all with perfect clarity. We were both laughing when somewhere, far in the distance, a bell began to ring. I wanted to ignore it, because even dream me realised these moments with my mum were rare and should be treasured. But she wouldn't let me block out the sound. 'Maddie, answer the phone,' she commanded.

My hand emerged from beneath the duvet and groped blindly on my bedside cabinet for the source of the sound. I knocked my mobile to the floor and lost a few precious seconds having to haul it back up by its charger lead. With eyes still unfocussed, I squinted at the screen, noting that it was almost one o'clock in the morning. I jabbed frantically at the button to accept the call. It would be Dad, phoning to give me the news I had been dreading every single day since my visit to the care home.

My heart was pounding so loudly I couldn't even recognise his voice to begin with. 'Hello,' I said, trying to pull myself together. I could hear what sounded like sobs on the other end of the line. *Oh, Daddy, no*, I thought, my heart already breaking.

But it wasn't my father. The voice was too high, and also far, far too young.

'Hello. Who is this?' I asked, my question urgent with an entirely different fear. Please be a prank call, I silently prayed;

be some drunken idiot who'd punched in a load of random numbers and come up with mine. But, of course, it wasn't.

'M... m... Maddie.'

'Hope?' I said, my voice surfing on a rush of adrenaline. 'Is that you?'

A dull thud sounded in the background. It was followed swiftly by the unmistakable sound of breaking glass, and a lot of shouting. What the hell was going on?

'Hope, what's wrong? Where are you?'

The shouting in the background escalated. Wherever she was calling from, it definitely wasn't her own home. My question was answered with a succession of hitching sobs, interspersed with the odd word or two thrown in for me to decipher. It was like playing a very dangerous guessing game.

'I... I'm in a room... a bathroom. I've been sick,' she added miserably.

'Are you ill?' I guessed, already knowing I was on the wrong track. There was a heavy pulse of music in the background and suddenly all the pieces fell into place.

'Are you at a party?' I asked, already groping in the dark for my jeans. 'Who are you there with?'

'Dan. But he's downstairs now with some mates who I don't know. They're all much older and they've been drinking and... and taking stuff, and I got really scared. I've locked myself in the bathroom.'

'Okay, honey. Calm down. Do you have the address of the party?'

If the answer to that one was 'no' then I was calling 999 and to hell with the consequences.

'I... I'm not sure. We got an Uber here.'

'Was it your account or Dan's?' I asked urgently, pulling on my boots without even bothering to look for socks.

'Mine.'

‘Great. Then the address will be in the ‘Your Trips’ section of the app. Screenshot it and send it to me.’

‘Maddie, I’m scared. I don’t want to come out of the bathroom.’

‘Don’t come out,’ I said so loudly it was practically a shout. I forced myself to speak in a softer tone because she was clearly already terrified. ‘Stay right where you are. Keep the door locked until I get there. I’m on my way.’

\*

It would be wrong to say I didn’t think of calling Ryan the minute I hung up on our daughter. I gave the idea at least twenty seconds serious consideration before deciding it was too risky. There was a very good reason why Hope had phoned *me* for help and not her parents. Ryan had always been slow to anger, but where Hope was concerned, and if he thought she was in danger, it was impossible to know how he’d react. If I was making a bad decision, then I’d worry about that later. Right now my priority was to reach Hope as quickly as possible, and as my driving licence still hadn’t been reinstated, I was going to need help.

Much later I would wonder why it was *Mitch’s* number I’d instinctively dialled, instead of a cab company. He must be a really light sleeper, I thought distractedly, as he answered on the second ring, sounding instantly alert.

‘Maddie? Are you okay?’

‘I am, but Hope isn’t.’ I heard the rustle of bedcovers being thrown aside. ‘She’s at a party that’s got out of hand and I need to get there... like right now. Can you drive me?’ I heard a jangling noise that sounded blissfully like keys being plucked up.

‘Be with you in ten,’ he said. Neither of us bothered saying goodbye before hanging up.

I was standing outside in the street when he pulled up, determined to shave precious seconds off our ETA if I could. I should probably have taken a few of those seconds to grab a jacket to throw on, because by the time Mitch threw open the

passenger door for me to jump in, I was shivering as if I had a fever. It was probably more nerves than cold, but I was still grateful when Mitch turned the heater on full blast.

I'm sure anyone else would have fired a barrage of questions at me after being rudely dragged out of their bed in the middle of the night, but that wasn't Mitch's style. He simply tossed his phone my way and instructed me to key in the address.

With our route mapped out, he took his eyes briefly from the road to give me a reassuring smile. 'Teenagers,' he said sympathetically, 'can't live with them, can't lock 'em up.'

'I've got a feeling Ryan and Chloe might be doing just that after tonight,' I predicted darkly, as I pulled out my own phone and once again tried Hope's number. It went straight to voicemail, as it had done every single time since that first call. My panic levels rose exponentially with each failed attempt to reach her.

'She'll be fine,' Mitch said reassuringly, but I noticed his right foot pressing down even harder on the accelerator, taking us above the speed limit.

'Do you think I should have called the police?' I asked, chewing my bottom lip hard enough to make it bleed, and not even noticing. 'Or maybe Ryan?' I was suddenly afraid that my actions were so far removed from those of a sensible parent he'd probably never allow me to see Hope again.

'We're only five minutes away,' Mitch said, his eyes flashing from the screen of his phone and then back to the road. 'Let's see what the situation is when we get there.' He took one hand off the wheel and captured mine within it. 'It's going to be all right, Maddie. At least she had the good sense to call you.'

'But not enough to know not to go out partying where there were drinks and drugs involved.'

'Let's just get her safely out of there, and then you and Chloe and Ryan can work out how many years she's going to

be grounded,' he said. That at least brought me closer to a smile than anything else had done in the last half hour.

We didn't need the automated voice on Mitch's phone to tell us we'd 'reached our destination'. It was evident from the throb of loud music coming from a house at the end of a cul-de-sac.

'Why on earth haven't the neighbours complained to the police?' I asked, shaking my head in disbelief.

'It's mainly student rentals in this part of town,' Mitch replied knowingly. 'Half the street is probably at the party anyway.'

I looked through the windscreen and saw he could well be right. The three-storey house wasn't big enough to contain all the partying youngsters. Some had spilled out onto the drive and overgrown front garden, while others were gathered in clusters on the pavements and the road.

I liked the way Mitch didn't even bother looking for a parking space, but simply drew his oversized vehicle to a halt in the middle of the road. He didn't turn off the Chevrolet's headlights, and in their twin beams I saw several disgruntled faces turn our way at the intrusion.

'I suppose there's no hope at all of me asking you to stay in the car while I go and get her?' he asked. But he was directing his question to an empty seat for I was already halfway out of the truck and heading towards the house.

Mitch caught up with me easily and the awareness that he was right there behind me felt like a protective coat of armour. I edged my way past the groups of teenagers on the drive, most of whom appeared to be happily inebriated. In my haste I caught someone's elbow as I brushed past, sending their plastic beaker of drink flying.

'Hey, what the fuck?' challenged a boy who was swaying so badly it was a wonder he was still upright.

I spun around, but before I could say a word the boy's eyes had travelled beyond me to Mitch. I'm not sure if it was his

height or breadth that brought about the teenager's sudden change of attitude, and frankly I didn't care either way.

'My bad,' he mumbled, slinking back into the shadows.

I strode into the house, with Mitch right behind me. It was the smell that hit me first: alcohol and warm sweaty bodies and pungent pockets of weed that hung like clouds in the confined hallway. It was an older property, and even before the spilled drinks and cigarette burns, it must have been pretty rundown and ramshackle.

This was no place for anyone's sixteen-year-old daughter... especially mine.

We headed straight for the stairs. 'Where's the bathroom?' I asked a young man who was propping up a wall in the hallway.

'What? Who the hell are you?'

'Who she is, doesn't matter,' Mitch said, his voice perfectly controlled and almost pleasant. 'But *I* am the guy you really don't want to piss off. So would you mind answering her question.'

'There's two bathrooms. One on each floor,' said the boy, trying to hold on to a degree of swagger that was fast evaporating. 'It's not a public convenience, you know,' he added as an afterthought. But his words were wasted as we were already halfway up the stairs.

The first door we tried was a bedroom. There was a bed, currently occupied, with a duvet moving in a fairly unmistakable way. I slammed the door shut without bothering to apologise to the couple who probably hadn't even realised they'd been disturbed. The second door I tried was the bathroom. The *wrong* bathroom. It was empty.

'Next floor,' said Mitch, leading us towards the flight of stairs.

'Hope, are you up here?' I called out before we'd even crested the landing. There were four doors on this storey and all of them were closed. 'Hope? Can you hear me?'



If I live to be a hundred, I don't think I will ever feel as grateful as I was to hear her voice calling out in reply. 'I'm in here.'

I hurried towards the door and pressed down on the handle. It was locked.

'Hope, open the door, sweetheart.'

There was the sound of a key grating uselessly within the lock. 'I can't move it. It's stuck.'

The frustration of being so close to her and still just out of reach frayed my already tattered control.

'Step back,' said Mitch. It was an instruction I'd heard in countless movies, but never before in real life. I looked at the solid bathroom door and then at Mitch, wondering which might shatter first, the frame or his shoulder. 'Hope, try the key again,' I urged, leaning my weight against the locked door to help her. The click of the barrel rolling within the mechanism was the best sound ever.

The door swung open, and there stood Hope, looking far more like the six-year-old little girl I had first met than ever before. The make-up that I'm sure she'd applied with great care was now smeared over her cheeks like war paint, and her pale skin was clammy with sweat. Her long dark hair was a tangled mess. She looked like a shipwreck survivor. There was a sour aroma in the air, that got stronger as she fell into my arms.

'I threw up. Twice,' she said miserably, before dissolving into sobs against my shoulder.

'Come on,' I said, as I rocked her gently in my arms. 'Let's get you out of here.'

She took my arm, leaning heavily on it as we descended both flights of stairs. We were almost at the door when a voice from the throng of bodies behind us called out Hope's name. My fingers unconsciously curled into a fist as we turned around to face the boy who I sincerely hoped was about to become my daughter's ex-boyfriend. I looked down at my hand almost in surprise. Had I been worrying about the wrong

parent and their volatile temper? It took quite an effort to force my fingers to relax out of the fist.

‘Hope. Where are you going? The party’s not over yet,’ the boy slurred, slopping some of the contents of the can he was holding all over his feet.

‘I’m going home,’ Hope said quietly.

‘I’ve been looking for you everywhere,’ the boy continued, taking a step towards us. I made a small noise that sounded practically feral, shocking me almost as much as it did him. And yet even drunk and dishevelled, I could see the boy’s appeal. He was magazine-model good looking, and I wasn’t entirely proud of the fact that I wanted more than anything to punch him squarely on the nose.

‘Well you weren’t looking very hard, were you,’ I said, acid dripping from my words.

Almost as though he hadn’t even seen us before, Hope’s boyfriend turned to look at me and then did a small double take. ‘Who are you? You two look like twins,’ he said, squinting his eyes. ‘Well, kind of.’

This time it was Hope who made a sound of disgust. ‘This is my mother.’

It felt like a good exit line. We turned back to the door and the cool, fresh, night air had just hit my face when I heard another voice say with feeling: ‘Definitely a MILF.’

For a big man, Mitch could move surprisingly quickly. He was a mountain of fury as he stared down at the boy who now looked like he seriously regretted his lewd comment. I laid my hand lightly on Mitch’s arm, shocked at the tension I could feel thrumming within it.

‘Leave it, Mitch. They’re just kids. It’s not worth it. Just take us home.’

\*

Mitch had been busy during my absence. There was a plate piled high with buttered toast on my kitchen table, but I was more interested in the mug of steaming hot coffee.

‘How is she?’ he asked, sinking his teeth into a slice of toast.

‘Still asleep,’ I confirmed. ‘I’ve placed two bottles of water by her bed with “Drink Me” post-its stuck on, and a bucket on the floor that probably doesn’t need to have any instructions.’

Mitch smiled grimly.

I’d climbed into the back of the Chevrolet to sit beside Hope on our journey home, keeping my arms securely fastened around her slight frame, not entirely sure if that was for her comfort or mine. Her head was already drooping with exhaustion, but before I could allow her to sleep, I had to make sure that Ryan and Chloe knew she was safe. I held out my phone to her and was rewarded with a look of pure terror.

‘You *have* to phone them, Hope. They need to know you’re safe.’

She began plucking obsessively at a loose thread on her fashionably ripped jeans. ‘They already think I am,’ she mumbled.

‘Where exactly do they think you’re spending the night, Hope?’ I pressed, already sure I’d worked out the answer to that one.

‘With you,’ Hope admitted miserably, lifting eyes that were awash with tears to meet mine. ‘I told them Cathy’s mum was dropping me off at yours after the cinema,’ she confessed woefully. ‘I’m sorry I lied, Maddie. I’m sorry about everything.’

‘We’ll talk about this tomorrow,’ I said, which was more to give me time to work out what the hell I was supposed to say, than giving her a reprieve.

I met Mitch’s gaze in the Chevy’s rear-view mirror and caught his look of sympathy. I very much doubted that Sam would ever have got himself into this kind of a scrape. He seemed much too sensible.

I tightened my hold around her, and Hope had laid her head on my shoulder. She was fast asleep before we were even halfway home. Although she murmured softly, she didn’t stir,

not even when Mitch had gently lifted her from the back seat and carried her into the second bedroom, setting her down on the bed as though she weighed nothing more than a child.

The coffee Mitch made was potent. I could smell it in the air before I lifted the mug to my lips, and the kick it gave confirmed he had found the bottle of Cognac tucked away at the back of the cupboard.

I reached mindlessly for one of the slices of toast, realising with surprise that I was suddenly ravenous, which was an odd discovery to make at three o'clock in the morning.

'You must be absolutely exhausted,' I apologised, as I watched him attempt to stifle a yawn. 'Why don't you crash here for the rest of the night instead of driving home?'

As the owner of the flat, Mitch obviously knew exactly how many bedrooms there were in the property, and that staying here would mean sharing one of them. Presumably mine.

'I'm going to spend the night in with Hope,' I added on a rush, 'in case she wakes up and needs me.' I felt foolish that I needed to qualify my offer to make sure he realised I hadn't just asked him to share my bed.

'No, I really should get back,' he said, reaching for another piece of toast and showing no signs of wanting to leave.

'I can't thank you enough for everything you did tonight, Mitch. You were incredible.'

He smiled gently and shook his head. Neither of us had turned on the overhead lamp, so the kitchen was lit only by the soft glow from the cupboard lights. It gave the room an unexpected intimacy.

'I didn't do anything except drive the car. The rest was all you.' His words warmed me even more than the Cognac had done. 'It was like watching an Attenborough documentary, where the tigress fiercely defends her cub. You didn't even let me bust down the bathroom door, and you should know that's number two on my bucket list.'

I laughed. 'What's number one?'

He paused for a second before replying, and I knew with absolute certainty that he'd changed his mind about what he was going to say at the last moment.

'Having someone yell at me to "follow that car" of course,' he grinned.

I laughed softly, anxious not to wake Hope, which was probably highly unlikely unless I sounded a klaxon right beside her.

Mitch got to his feet and I was still trying to think of a way of adequately thanking him when his phone rang. I glanced at the kitchen clock; it was an unlikely time of day for anyone to be calling for a chat.

I busied myself by collecting up our mugs and dirty plates and slotting them into the dishwasher, trying very hard not to listen in to his side of the conversation, but as he was only on the other side of the kitchen, it was practically impossible.

'No,' he said, his voice warm. 'Everything's okay. We're back at Maddie's now. I'll be leaving soon. Try and get back to sleep.'

I turned from wiping down the worktops as he slid the phone back into his pocket. He didn't volunteer the caller's identity, and it was definitely not my place to ask. But it surprised me how badly I wanted to. I had heard the affection in his voice as he had spoken to whomever was on the end of the line.

Stupidly, when I had reached out to Mitch in the middle of the night, it hadn't even occurred to me that he might not be alone. Was Sally the mystery caller, waiting patiently in his bed for him to return? If it *was* her, she must be furious that he'd been dragged out of her arms by another woman. I sure as hell would be.

I walked with him to the front door, feeling dwarfed beside him as my boots had long since been discarded.

'Get some rest, Maddie,' he said kindly, his fingers grazing lightly on the skin beneath my eyes, which the mirror confirmed was so darkly shadowed it almost looked bruised.

Two friends with one thought, Mitch leant down to kiss my cheek at the exact same moment that I tilted my face to drop a peck on his. The angles were all wrong and our lips collided, and then instantly froze. For a punchy, sleep-deprived moment mine defrosted first, and moved tentatively against the soft skin of his mouth before realising the folly of their actions.

I stepped quickly backwards, thankful I hadn't turned on the hall light, because I was scared of what I might see in his eyes. What the hell was I doing, initiating a kiss when he was on his way back to another woman's bed?

'Sorry. I'm so tired I'm not thinking straight,' I apologised.

'Don't give it another thought,' he said, ducking his head the way he always had to do to get through the doorway.

Except I did. Quite a lot of them in fact, before dawn eventually broke through the bedroom curtains and I finally fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 7

‘Are you going to tell them?’

I wasn’t really surprised by her question. It was probably the one I would have asked at her age. And I had seen it burning in her eyes throughout our twenty-minute discussion about the events of the previous night.

‘*Are* you going to tell them?’ Hope asked again, her voice wobbling with anxiety.

‘No,’ I said, reaching past the empty cereal bowl on the table to take hold of her hand. ‘*You* are.’

I wondered if she was going to refuse, but Chloe had done a better job of raising her than that. ‘I knew you were going to say that.’

We smiled, and for a second it was like looking into a mirror.

Her phone interrupted the moment by vibrating on the table, as it had done at least half a dozen times since we’d sat down for the talk I had been dreading half the night. It was my first experience of having to walk the dangerous tightrope between wanting to be my daughter’s best friend and making her realise she had made some seriously bad decisions. No wonder Chloe was going grey, I thought. This was *really* tough.

‘Are you going to answer that?’ I asked, looking down at her phone. The mobile had juddered a pathway across the table during our conversation, moving from her plate, past the empty orange juice glass, and was now nudging impatiently against the carton of milk. Dan’s name and photograph lit up the screen once again, looking – it had to be said – considerably more presentable than he’d done in reality the night before.

‘No, I’m not,’ Hope declared firmly, pressing the button to decline his call. ‘Dan Abbots can go do one as far as I’m concerned. We’re done.’

‘Perhaps you should lead with that when you talk to your dad,’ I suggested as I got to my feet and dropped a kiss on her still-wet-from-the-shower hair. ‘It might help.’

Hope’s laugh was rueful. She had messed up, she knew that, but at least she was mature enough to want to make amends.

‘It’ll be fine,’ I assured her. ‘Everyone screws up when they’re a teenager. It’s practically a rite of passage. Just learn from this one and move on.’

‘And next time pick a boyfriend who isn’t a total dick.’

‘Am I meant to be telling you off for swearing like a marine?’ I asked, happy the mood between us had lightened.

‘No. I don’t think so,’ Hope replied innocently.

Thirty minutes later she emerged from her bedroom wearing one of my new tops, that I’d probably never see again, and carrying an enormous stone-washed denim jacket that definitely wasn’t mine. A snapshot of Mitch shrugging out of the jacket last night and slipping it around Hope’s shoulders went off like a flashbulb in my head. Later I had eased her gently out of it before covering her with the duvet, but I’d forgotten to return the jacket to its rightful owner.

‘Will you thank Mitch for lending me this and for... well, for everything else,’ Hope said, glancing at her watch. ‘He’s a really nice man... and kind of fit, for an old guy.’

I snorted into my coffee at the slightly twisted compliment. ‘I’ll be sure to tell him that.’

From somewhere nearby a car horn sounded. ‘I think that’s my taxi,’ Hope said peering through the window. I could practically see the years falling off her as she walked with reluctant steps towards the front door. All at once sixteen didn’t seem very old or brave.

‘I’ll walk you to the car,’ I said, throwing Mitch’s jacket around my own shoulders to combat the stiff breeze that was



leaving a trail of goosebumps on my bare arms. The smell of him instantly encompassed me. It was a cocktail of the toiletries he wore and an indefinable signature aroma that was as distinctive as a fingerprint. It almost felt like there were three of us walking down the black and white tiled pathway to the kerb, instead of just two.

‘Everything is going to be fine,’ I assured her as she settled herself in the back seat of the taxi. ‘Just keep remembering how much your parents love you.’

Hope attempted a confident smile, and almost succeeded in pulling it off. ‘I guess I’ll see you again when I’m about thirty or so,’ she joked.

‘I’ll be right here.’ Hidden beneath the long sleeves of Mitch’s jacket, I crossed my fingers.

Just as I was about to push the car door to a close, Hope’s phone rang once again.

‘I suppose you have to admire his persistence,’ I said, shaking my head.

Hope glanced down at her phone and a slow, secret smile found its way to her lips. ‘Actually, it’s not Dan, it’s Sam.’ With a quick wave in my direction she picked up the call. ‘Hi,’ she said shyly, before the closing car door cut off her words.

I walked back up the pathway with a spring in my step as I crazily addressed my comments to Mitch’s denim jacket. ‘Well, I have to say your boy’s timing is pretty much perfect.’

\*

There were a great many things I’d planned to do with my Saturday, but on less than two hours sleep I wasn’t in the mood for any of them. The laundry, grocery shopping, and vacuuming could all wait I decided, as I made myself a hot drink and padded into the lounge.

I channel hopped for something mindless to watch on TV, but I’d got through only half the menu before I could feel my eyelids beginning to droop. ‘Just a few minutes,’ I promised myself as I curled up my legs and drew a chintz-covered scatter cushion beneath my head. I was vaguely aware that I

was still wearing Mitch's jacket and really ought to take it off, but I was just too sleepy to remove it. Curled up within its copious folds I felt curiously safe, as though there were arms holding me close as I drifted off.

I awoke three hours later, completely disorientated. It took a while for me to even remember what day of the week it was, let alone what I was doing asleep in my lounge in the middle of the day. I unfurled myself like a pipe cleaner figurine, hearing the cracks from limbs and joints that used to be silent. The mirror might say I didn't look like a woman in her forties, but my bones politely disagreed.

I was still muzzy from sleep when the sound of three loud knocks on the front door reverberated down the hallway. Only Black Rod and Mitch rapped on a door in quite that fashion. He was leaning casually against the frame by the time I'd finished undoing the numerous locks and security chains he'd insisted on fitting. And although he couldn't have had much more sleep than me, Mitch definitely appeared far more refreshed and invigorated.

'Hello,' I croaked, my voice as rough as sandpaper, the way it always sounded whenever I had just woken up.

'I'm sorry, Maddie, did I wake you?'

I caught my reflection in the hall mirror: puffy cheeks, squinty eyes, and hair that resembled a giant, ebony-coloured haystack.

'No, I'm just trying out a new look.'

His laughter seemed to fill every corner of the two-bedroom flat.

'I was just going to put the kettle on,' I said, frantically wiping the sleep from my eyes the minute I was turned away from him. There was nothing to fix the furry coating on my tongue until I'd had something to drink.

Mitch followed me down the corridor, observing mildly as he did, 'Nice jacket, by the way. I've got one like that.'

I spun around to face him, not realising he was quite so close behind me. My face was just inches from his. 'Oh God,

Mitch, I'm really sorry. I grabbed it when Hope was leaving and then I just...' *Didn't want to take it off?* suggested an irritating voice in my head, '...fell asleep on the settee,' I completed lamely.

'That's okay,' he said good-naturedly. 'It looks better on you anyway. But then you could probably make a bin bag look stylish.'

I ran through several responses in my head but couldn't find a single one I liked. 'Is that what you're here for, to collect it?' I asked, wriggling Houdini-fast out of his jacket. I passed it to him, noticing with dismay it was a good deal more creased than it had been before I had slept in it for hours.

'Partly,' he said with an easy shrug. 'Mainly I just wanted to check and see how you and Hope were doing.'

He pulled out a kitchen chair and settled himself on it. He suited this room, I thought; suited the whole flat really. But then of course it *had* been his grandmother's home for a great many years, so it was hardly surprising he was comfortable here. It had nothing to do with being in my company, even though I suddenly found myself wishing that it did.

'Hope was actually remarkably chirpy this morning. No sign of the hangover that I was expecting she'd have. She didn't even seem too distraught about the boyfriend thing. Her biggest concern was having to face Ryan and Chloe.'

Mitch's grin was sympathetic. 'Yes, Sam mentioned that.' I was clearly ineffective at hiding my surprise. 'Sam was staying over at mine last night. He does that whenever he has early football practice on a Saturday morning,' Mitch explained.

'Ohhh,' I said, unable to hide the fact that I was really rather pleased Sam had been the person waiting for Mitch to return last night, and not Sally.

The dangerous thing about having too little sleep and an over-active imagination is that sooner or later one or both of them are going to get you into trouble. Which is exactly what

happened when I guilelessly admitted, ‘I thought *Sally* was the one at your house.’

I don’t really know how I imagined he’d react, but the blank stare, followed by the owl-like blinking, wasn’t what I was expecting. For once he seemed robbed of all words.

Awkwardly I felt the need to fill the silence. ‘Of course, it’s absolutely none of my business who you’re seeing and whether or not they’re... you know...’

‘You know?’ Mitch prompted. It was hard to tell for sure, but it looked very much like his lips were twitching slightly. ‘You know?’ he asked again.

‘Sleeping over,’ I said on an embarrassed mumble, deciding that ‘sleeping with you’ was a step too far off the gangplank I had unwittingly walked down.

‘You thought that Sally was with me last night... in a *biblical* kind of way?’

Okay, he was definitely mocking me now, and it was all entirely justified. People who are still half asleep should definitely keep their mouths shut and their thoughts to themselves.

‘Uh huh.’

‘Would you like to see a photo of Sally?’ Mitch asked, his usually expressive face completely devoid of any emotion.

‘If you like,’ I said in a false sing-song voice, suddenly wondering if there was any possibility at all of this being a truly horrible dream that I’d wake up from in a minute.

Mitch pulled out his mobile and began scanning through his photo library. This was all going to end very uncomfortably I suddenly realised, and I had no one to blame but myself.

‘Ah, here you go,’ he said, passing me his iPhone.

I took it, already prepared to say something nice about the woman, whatever I saw on the screen.

‘Er. This is a photograph of a shed,’ I said, swivelling his phone around to show him the picture on the screen.

‘Scroll right. The next one is a selfie I took of Sally and me the other week.’

I stared at the photo for a very long moment, not because I hadn’t instantly realised my colossal mistake, but more to give my burning hot cheeks time to cool down.

‘Of course, she’s a tad older than me,’ Mitch said, and now that I was listening for it, I could hear the humour in his voice. ‘But I’m very fond of her.’

‘Well, she looks lovely,’ I said, passing him back his phone.

He glanced down at the photo before clicking back to the home screen. ‘She is, and incredibly spritely for a woman in her seventies. Her late husband was a good friend of my dad’s. That shed, by the way, was what I was building for her while you were visiting your mum.’

I flopped down on the chair beside him, feeling like the world’s biggest idiot. ‘I’m sorry, Mitch. I got hold of the wrong end of the stick and then ran with it. And for what it’s worth, it’s absolutely none of my business if you’re dating a floozy in her twenties or a sexy octogenarian.’

‘That’s a pretty broad spectrum you’re giving me there,’ he said, with a smile. ‘But actually, I’m not in the market for finding anyone new at the moment.’

‘You already have someone?’ It felt as though the air had just been sucked out of the room. Was that why it was suddenly so hard to breathe?

‘I’m working on it,’ he said softly.

It took two cups of tea and a diversionary discussion about the merits of changing my broadband provider before it felt as though we were back on comfortable footing. *He didn’t say that ‘someone’ was you*, the voice in my head kept reminding me. And I had already jumped to far too many assumptions about Mitch’s love life to risk doing that again.

‘I’m sorry if losing out on your sleep last night messed up your weekend plans.’

‘It’s no problem,’ Mitch assured me comfortably. ‘Although I did sleep straight through the alarm and missed the hair appointment I had booked for this morning.’

He ran a hand ruefully through his thick dark hair. It didn’t exactly improve the overall appearance. Before I knew what I was doing, my tongue was off and running, still determined to get me into trouble.

‘I could cut it for you, if you like.’

He looked rightfully surprised. ‘Could you? I didn’t know you knew how to cut hair.’

‘Well not per se. I mean I’m not trained or anything, but I used to have a Saturday job in a hairdresser’s.’

‘Not wishing to be rude but isn’t that mainly just shampooing and sweeping up?’ he asked innocently.

I bristled on behalf of Saturday girls everywhere. ‘Observing is the best way of learning how to do something properly.’

His laughter filled the kitchen. ‘Okay then, let’s give it a go. But if you tell me one day that you’ve watched a couple of surgeries, I’m *still* not letting you take out my appendix.’

I heaved a huge sigh of relief. Not because he had just agreed to let me cut his hair, but because the teasing banter that I’d feared was gone was back now in spades.

\*

I hadn’t lied. I really did work in my local hair salon as a teenager. But in truth, beyond trimming my own fringe every now and then, I wouldn’t exactly say I was qualified to call myself competent. Ryan would certainly never have let me anywhere near him with a pair of scissors, and yet Mitch seemed far more trusting.

‘Where do you want to do it? I guess the bedroom probably has the best mirror.’

His suggestion panicked me. ‘No. Let’s do it in here. It’ll be easier to sweep up, and it’s better if you don’t see what I’m doing until I’ve finished.’

Mitch chuckled softly. ‘Not the most inspiring thing to hear, but you’re the boss.’

‘Maybe you should damp down your hair in the bathroom while I gather some things together. There’s a shower head over the bathtub.’

‘Yes, I know. I fitted it,’ Mitch said, clearly finding my nervousness amusing.

I waited until I heard the drum of water from the bathroom pipes before dashing to the bedroom and collecting towel, comb, and a pair of sharp scissors. I laid them out like surgical instruments on the kitchen table. *Music – that’s what we needed to relax the atmosphere*, I decided, switching the radio to an easy-listening station. It was a little worrying to see how much my hands were trembling as they turned the dial. If Mitch came out of this with both ears intact it would be nothing short of a miracle.

He returned to the kitchen, leaving a Hansel and Gretel trail of water droplets on the quarry tiles. ‘I wasn’t sure how wet you wanted it.’

My smile was a fixed rictus. Everything he said sounded like a smutty double entendre from a teen movie. The only way to get through this was to be completely professional.

‘It looks fine,’ I said. I nodded towards the kitchen chair that I had re-positioned in the centre of the room. ‘Take a seat.’

His hair was too wet to cut, so I reached for the towel and rough dried it vigorously. *This is okay*, I told myself. *It’s like towelling off our old dog after a walk in the rain*. It probably wasn’t the most flattering comparison, so I didn’t share it with Mitch as I reached for a comb and began to run it through his hair. Even damp it was thick and springy beneath my fingers.

How had I never noticed how intimate it was to cut someone’s hair? There was so much touching: of hair, skin, and face. And you had to stand so unbelievably close. I had slipped out of his denim jacket, but the strappy T-shirt I was wearing beneath it, with its low scooped neckline, was a huge

mistake. It was a rookie error that no bona fide hair stylist would make.

‘I’ll start at the back,’ I announced, moving to stand behind the chair, which felt much more comfortable. The first snip of the scissors was the most terrifying. My heart was beating so fast I could see its rhythm through the fabric of my top, and yet Mitch appeared supremely relaxed. His confidence in me was misplaced, but really rather sweet.

‘Don’t sweat it. It’s only hair. It’ll grow back.’

‘I don’t think the same can be said of your ears,’ I quipped.

His laughter relaxed me and I allowed my hands to take over, teasing the hair through my fingers, snipping, and shaping. The banter quietly died away as I concentrated on the task, surprised to discover how my breathing had changed. It was faster and more shallow than normal, but then, oddly, so was Mitch’s.

I was modestly pleased with the job I had done of the back and sides of his hair. Now all that was left was the front. I switched positions, but Mitch’s legs were so long it was physically impossible to get close enough to cut the hair that framed his face.

‘Is this easier?’ he asked, spreading his legs for me to stand between them.

‘That’s great,’ I said, my voice so low it sounded as though I had just contracted laryngitis.

His face was level with my cleavage, a place no one had been for longer than I cared to remember. ‘Perhaps you should close your eyes,’ I suggested. ‘I don’t want you to get hair in them.’ He did as I asked.

I think I must have known that something was going to happen between us. I could feel it like a sudden change in the climate. I was running my hands through his hair, making sure it was all the same length, while trying to shut out the haunting strains of a love song that was playing on the radio.

A small clump of cuttings had fallen onto Mitch’s closed eyelids, and without stopping to think of the consequences, I



did what my mum used to do when she'd trimmed my fringe as a child. Very gently I blew the hair from his face.

Mitch's eyes sprang open instantly, the pupils so large it was hard to even see the place where they merged with the dark brown irises. We were so close that his gasped expelled breath mingled with mine. I was caught in his eyes as though they were headlights, seeing into and then through me. I still don't know if *he* made the first move, or whether it was me. I just know that suddenly his lips and mine were together. If I had ever paused to wonder what it might be like to kiss Mitch, I'd always imagined it would be slow, sweet, and tentative. But nothing could have been further from the truth. I hardly recognised myself as I fiercely crushed his lips and met his searching tongue with mine.

The scissors slipped from my hand, miraculously not impaling my foot before hitting the floor. But their clatter broke the spell we were under. We separated abruptly, both breathing hard. I was the first to speak. 'I'm so sorry. I've no idea what I was... why I—'

'Do *not* apologise.' His voice was just about as serious as I had ever heard it. 'Don't make this something you feel you need to regret. Because I don't.'

His words were confusing me almost as much as the kiss had done. I groped for humour because that had always been the strongest connection between us.

'I guess you can see now why I lost my job at the salon.'

His hands were so fast I didn't see them move. They flew up like wings, cupping my face, not allowing me to escape. 'Don't make this into a joke, Maddie. Not this.'

I swallowed noisily, suddenly terribly afraid that I was going to cry. 'This can't be who we are.'

'Why not? You must know how I feel about you, Maddie. How I've *always* felt about you.'

I tried to shake my head, but those huge hands wouldn't release me. My face turned into the warmth of his palm, and I kissed the skin there gently, not with passion, but the way you

would a child... or a friend who you already knew you weren't going to see again for a very long time.

'I don't feel that way about you, Mitch,' I said, trying to shout down the deafening voice in my head that was screaming out *'Liar'*. 'Your friendship means more to me than you will ever know, but it can never be more than that between us.'

'Because you're still in love with Ryan?' His words sounded like wounds being ripped open.

I'm not sure what shocked me the most: the unexpected question, or the look in his eyes as he'd asked it. 'No. Of course not. That hasn't been true for a great many years.'

'Then why? Why won't you at least give us a chance? There's something here, Maddie. I *know* there is.'

I knew it too, but I cared too much for this man to allow him to waste even more years sitting beside a hospital bed, never knowing if or when I was coming back.

'I love you,' I said, allowing myself to say those words for the first and last time, 'but as a friend, a really good friend. Nothing more.'

## **CHAPTER 8**

Some endings are inevitable. You see them coming and you prepare yourself for them – as much as you can. But others blindsides you.

This would be the summer when I would lose my mother, I knew that. It broke my heart every single time I visited her. Each time I bent to kiss her goodbye – something that clearly bemused her because she seldom knew who I was – I would straighten up and wonder: was this it? Was this the last kiss I'd ever give her, was this the very last 'goodbye'?

What I hadn't known was that this would also be the summer when I'd lose my best friend, just when I needed him most. There was a gaping Mitch-sized hole in my life that refused to be plugged. It was there when my phone no longer rang with someone asking if I fancied 'a cheeky takeaway'. It found me queueing up at the bakery counter for doughnuts, before remembering there was no one to share them with. Or spotting a fox boldly basking in the back garden and turning around to discover there was no one there to tell.

'I don't understand why we can't still be friends,' I said glumly to Chloe after Mitch had politely declined yet another invitation to come round. 'The only time he sets foot in the place now is to fix things, and even then it's only when he knows I'm out.' I gave an unrepentant shrug. 'To be honest, I'm running out of things in the flat to break.'

'I'm sure you and Mitch will be friends again... eventually,' Chloe consoled. 'He just needs a little time to recalibrate. You don't carry a torch for someone for that many years and then simply get over it when they turn you down flat.'

'Was any of that sentence meant to make me feel better?' I asked.

Chloe's hug was warm, but hers weren't the arms I wanted around me.

'If you miss him that much, why don't you just tell him?' she'd asked, not unreasonably.

'Because... because I just can't,' I said, sounding more like a petulant teenager than Hope ever did.

\*

The phone call I had been expecting and dreading in equal measure came on a beautiful summer's day, where the sun rode high in a cloudless blue sky. It wasn't the kind of day when *anyone* should die.

It was half past nine in the morning. The radio was playing an ABBA song; a big fat bee was investigating the roses Mitch's grandmother had planted in her garden; and the washing machine had just begun to spin. I can remember every last detail with perfect clarity, but the moment I heard him speak I immediately forgot the colour of my mother's eyes. *That's* why I was crying before my dad had even said a word.

'Maddie. You need to come. Today.'

My reply was inarticulate, giving no indication that I had understood him.

'Maddie, do you get what I'm saying to you?'

'That it's time to say goodbye.' I closed my eyes and could see him, standing in the manager's office of the care home, trying very hard not to cry in front of the people who'd looked after the only woman he'd ever loved.

'Yes,' he said brokenly. 'Come now.'

I hurried to the bathroom to shower, before remembering I had already done so. Still in a daze I returned to the bedroom and flung open the wardrobe doors, throwing out item after item like a crazy woman. Green. Green was Mum's favourite colour. Why the hell didn't I have any green clothes? In the end I found a top in a shade of aquamarine, which was as close as I was going to get.

I hadn't realised I was still holding the phone until it rang in my hand. I dropped it as though it was a live grenade and then wasted several moments grappling beneath the bed to retrieve it. Chloe's name lit up the screen. I had been his first phone call, which was only right. But Chloe had been his second. I understood why. She had understudied my life in so many different roles: Ryan's partner, Hope's mother, and even as a surrogate daughter. But more important than any of that, she had ensured Hope had grown up knowing and loving her maternal grandparents.

'I'm on my way to pick you up,' she announced in lieu of 'hello'. 'Ryan's leaving work right now and heading over to Hope's school to collect her, but I figured you'd want to leave straight away. We'll go in two cars.'

Her thoughtfulness brought back the tears, not that they'd ever really been that far away. Chloe too had been crying on the drive over. Even though her eyes were hidden behind dark tinted sunglasses, the pile of screwed-up tissues in the car's footwell gave her away.

We had driven together on many occasions, but this was the first time I'd seen Chloe on an apparent mission to break every single speed limit. We drove in silence for most of the journey; her attention on the traffic and mine on a lifetime of memories that were flashing past my eyes even faster than the passing scenery. It was like flipping the pages of a photo album and seeing Mum beside me for every single 'first' in my life: word, step, day at school. It was almost impossible to visualise my world without her in it.

Chloe was the first to break the silence. 'She gave me such a tough time, you know, when Hope was first born.' I swivelled in my seat to look at her, wondering why in all the years, I had never heard this story before. 'Faye made it perfectly clear to Ryan that she didn't think I was competent to look after a baby.' She laughed softly at the old memory. 'I think she wanted Hope raised by a Norland nanny rather than an ex-librarian.'

'I wish you could have known her – properly known her – back before she got sick. She was so funny. And feisty.'

Chloe glanced away from the road to look at me. ‘Well, that explains where her daughter and granddaughter get it from.’

I reached over and squeezed her hand where it sat at precisely ten o’clock on the steering wheel. Chloe was *that* kind of driver. ‘Well, whatever my mum might have thought, you were the person *I* would have picked, if I’d been able to.’

‘If you’d been able to pick someone, they’d never have been needed in the first place,’ she reasoned. And there it was: our entire complicated history compressed in a single sentence.

When the first signpost for the care home came into sight, I felt one of the heavy boulders crushing my chest shift, ever so slightly. *Hang on, Mum, I’m almost there.*

\*

‘Your father spent the entire night here,’ the manager of the home informed me as I quickly scribbled an illegible signature in the visitors’ book. ‘We tried to persuade him to get some sleep in one of our empty rooms, but he wouldn’t leave your mum’s side.’

I nodded, unsurprised. If he’d been the type to have a tattoo, Dad would have had *For Better Or For Worse* inked across his heart. When this dreadful disease had tried to tug the woman he loved from his arms, he had simply held on even tighter. He was still doing it.

It had been little more than a week since my last visit, but the deterioration since I had last seen Mum brought me to standstill at the threshold of her room. There was so little left of her now, she scarcely looked bigger than a fold in the blankets. Ignoring her for a moment I hurried around to the far side of the bed where my dad was getting wearily to his feet to greet us.

‘No, sit down,’ I urged, afraid not for Mum – there was nothing I could do for her now – but for the man in his seventies who’d spent the last sixteen years of his life beside one hospital bed or another.

‘How are you holding up, Daddy?’ I asked, slipping back to that childhood name without even noticing.

‘Soldiering on,’ he replied gruffly. He came from a generation of stiff upper lips, strong cups of tea in a crisis, and unbending stoicism, but I knew him better than that.

‘Is she in any pain?’ I asked, reaching down and picking up one of Mum’s practically skeletal hands.

‘No. Thank goodness. They have her on morphine, and she drifts in and out for most of the time.’ He wiped a gnarled hand roughly beneath his eyes. ‘I’m glad you’re here now, Maddie.’ He looked across the room at Chloe, with a gentle smile. ‘Thanks for bringing her here, lass.’

‘You don’t need to thank me, Bill. You and Faye are my family too.’

\*

When Ryan and Hope arrived some thirty minutes later, carers magically appeared with more chairs and offers of refreshments that none of us could face. There was probably a rule about how many visitors the residents were allowed in their room, but today no one was enforcing it.

Dad had been right, Mum was drifting in and out of awareness, mumbling sentences that only he could decipher. ‘She wants to know why Maddie isn’t in school,’ he translated, his eyes sad as he directed his gaze at Hope who was still wearing her school uniform. I thought I was long since immune to the pain of her mistaking my daughter for me; it happened so frequently. But just this once I longed for her to recognise me, to know that *I* was Maddie.

‘I’m just going to get some air for a minute,’ I said, hurrying from the room so fast I nearly tripped over a chair leg. I knew the way to the gardens, and yet I got lost twice in the maze of corridors. I eventually burst through an exit door and out into the warmth of the day like an escaped prisoner. I walked blindly through the grounds, stopping only when I reached a large willow tree, with its fronds dipping into a pond.

I stood at the water’s edge with my eyes closed, listening to the birdsong and buzz of insects as though this was just any

other day.

‘I thought I’d find you here.’ His voice made me jump, but I didn’t need to open my eyes to see who it was. ‘Willows always were your favourite trees.’

I opened my eyes slowly, as though the tears sparkling on the long dark lashes were weighing them down. ‘I’m surprised you remember that.’

Ryan said nothing, but his arm came up to rest around my shoulder. Once, a long time ago, I would have fallen against him for comfort; my arms would have circled his body, and my tears would have saturated his shirt. But today the arm around my shoulders was enough.

‘Your dad never gave up on her, did he? Not once in all these years.’ I cast a sideways look, knowing where this was going. ‘I should have waited for you, Maddie. I should have been more like Bill.’

I shook my head. This was all too far in the past to hurt me. Only the present had the power to wound me now. ‘It was another time, and we were two very different people back then. You found the person you were meant to be with.’

‘But have you?’

Mitch’s face came into my head and for a moment it felt hard to breathe. I blinked in the bright sunlight as I shook my head. ‘I don’t think that’s how my story ends.’

\*

It was late afternoon and the sun had crept its way across the room. In films and books this type of scene is short and poignant. But real life is somewhat different. As the minutes ticked slowly into hours, I could see the toll it was beginning to have on Hope. It was a lot for a sixteen-year old to deal with, and no one protested when she subtly drew out her phone and began messaging.

‘Sam?’ I asked quietly.

She gave a shy smile and nodded.



Dad and I had been playing a sad game of musical chairs, taking it in turns to sit beside Mum's bed to hold her hand. There was a drip in her other arm, and a canula in her hand which made it awkward to hold. Between the discreet visits of the home's nurses and carers, Dad and I told stories of a time when none of this would ever have seemed possible. We spoke of family holidays and Christmases, filling the room with long-forgotten memories. Sometimes Mum smiled as though she was listening and also remembering, at least that's what I liked to think was happening.

Late in the afternoon I went to the communal lounge to fetch us all coffees. Chloe joined me a moment or two later.

'Thought I'd give you a hand,' she said, squeezing my shoulder gently. A buzzing from the depths of her bag made us both jump. As I poured coffee into plastic beakers, I saw her smile as she read the message on her phone and began tapping out a reply.

'Just work,' she said breezily, stuffing the phone back into her bag. I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost six, and the library where Chloe worked part-time closed an hour earlier. I didn't challenge her. Why would I?

Before I picked up the coffees, Chloe reached for my hand and took it between both of hers. 'I don't think it will be very much longer now.'

My eyes flared with panic. *Not yet. I wasn't ready. Not yet.*

'Oh?' my voice sounded small and lost, like that of a child.

She nodded sadly. Her years of working as a volunteer on a geriatric ward had given her an insight. She knew how these things went. But when we returned to the room I wondered if she was wrong. Mum's eyes were open, and she was talking more coherently than she'd done so far all day. She even turned her head our way, but her smile was vague and unfocussed.

'I think she might be feeling a little better,' Dad said hopefully, and no one in the room dared to break his heart even more by refuting it.

Mum lifted the arm with all the tubes in it and moved her hand back and forth through the air. A distant memory began to stir.

‘Cocoa,’ she said croakily, and then with even more feeling, ‘Cocoa.’

‘Do you want a drink, Grandma?’ asked Hope, springing to her feet. ‘We can get her some hot chocolate, can’t we, Mum?’ she asked turning to Chloe.

‘Cocoa,’ Mum said again, this time with a smile that showed her pale gums and yellowed teeth.

‘It’s not a drink she’s talking about,’ I said softly, my eyes meeting my father’s across the bed.

There were tears running down his cheeks. Mine too.

‘Cocoa was the dog we had when I was a child,’ I explained, my eyes fixed on my mother’s hand which was still moving through the air, stroking a collie’s head that only she could see.

‘Cocoa belonged to all of us... but it was Mum she loved the best. She was the one who fed her and walked her.’

Mum’s eyes were beginning to glaze, and in the corner of the room I saw Chloe reach for Hope’s hand. Ryan put his arm around them both.

*Now? It was happening now?*

‘Cocoa wants a walk. She’s got her lead in her mouth.’ Mum sounded so convinced I turned my head as though our long since passed dog was actually there beside the bed, her tail thumping the floor in anticipation.

And then Mum turned to me and smiled, and I froze the moment in my heart because I knew it would be the last one she would ever give me. ‘Be a good girl, Maddie. I’m just going to take Cocoa for a little walk.’

She disappeared behind my tears. ‘Okay, Mum. I love you.’

Dad had got to his feet and bent to kiss her gently on the lips. ‘You head off now,’ he said, turning away and glancing

out the window at the red gold of the setting sun. 'It's a lovely evening for a walk. I'll catch up with you in a little while.'

\*

It was the very best and the very worst of goodbyes. Soon the room would fill with carers and nurses, but these minutes were ours and we took them, standing in silence, thinking of all we'd just lost.

\*

Leaving my mum's room for the very last time was so much harder than I'd ever imagined. Chloe and Hope were still quietly sobbing, while Ryan kept a comforting arm around each of them. His face, I noted, was almost as white as mine. When Dad asked if we'd mind stepping outside so he could say his final goodbyes in private, we nodded dumbly, stumbling from the room in a daze of grief.

Ryan, Chloe, and Hope walked down the corridor three abreast, while I hung back a little behind them, feeling more alone than ever. I walked with eyes downcast, yet seeing with a clarity that shocked me. There was only one person I wanted to turn to when my heart was breaking into a thousand pieces, or when it was overflowing with joy. And I had ruined everything with him. How could I have been so stupid to have let something that rare slip through my fingers?

My view of the foyer was largely blocked by the three members of the Turner family. But beyond them I could see the glimmering rays of the setting sun shafting through the home's plate glass doors. I blinked in the light as I stepped out from the dim corridor, and as my eyes re-adjusted, I saw a figure that shimmered like the mirage it had to be. Only now the mirage was pushing away from the wall he had been leaning against and walking towards me.

Mitch's arms were open wide, ready to catch me, and I ran into them. Here was the comfort I needed. His arms held me against him as my tears saturated his shirt.

'Why are you here?' I asked, when speech was finally possible. 'How did you even *know*?'

‘Sam told me what was happening, and I just got straight into the car and started driving to be with you. It was only when I got closer that I realised you might not want me here.’

Everything was starting to make sense. ‘So... you checked with Chloe?’

He nodded. ‘I’m so sorry about your mum, Maddie. I thought you might need a friend with you tonight.’

I glanced over at the three members of the Turner family and caught Chloe’s eye. ‘I’m lucky. I have friends, really good ones.’ A look of uncertainty crossed Mitch’s face and I hated that I was the one who had put it there. ‘What I want, what I need goes beyond friendship. What I need... is you.’

A light came on in his eyes and I vowed to never extinguish it again. His hands were gentle as they cupped my face. ‘You already have that. You have done for a very long time.’

‘But what if it all happens again? What if I slip away once more?’

Mitch’s hands fell from my face and captured both of mine. With our fingers interlocked he brought them to his lips and gently kissed them. ‘Then I’ll be beside your bed, holding your hand just like this, until you wake up.’

His head slowly lowered and this time it was my lips he kissed. ‘Because you made me believe in miracles.’

‘Me too,’ I whispered.

And for the first time in seventeen years I felt that I was truly home.

I was finally awake.

## About the Author



DANI ATKINS is an award-winning novelist. Her 2013 debut *Fractured* (published as *Then and Always* in North America) has been translated into sixteen languages and has sold more than half a million copies since first publication in the UK. Dani is the author of four other bestselling novels, two of which, *This Love* and *A Sky Full of Stars*, won the Romantic Novel of the Year Award, in 2018 and 2022 respectively. Dani lives in a small village in Hertfordshire with her husband, one Siamese cat and a very sappy Border Collie.

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