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Opening Extract from...

The Accident

Written by Chris Pavone

Published by Faber and Faber

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First published in the United States in 2014
by Crown Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group,
a division of Random House LLC, a Penguin Random House Company, New York

First published in the United Kingdom in 2014
by Faber & Faber Ltd
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–571–29892–1



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PROLOGUE

He awakens suddenly, in terror. He spins his head around the spare room, searching the darkest shadows in the blue wash of moonlight, sitting bolt upright, head cocked, alert for noises. He reaches his hand across his body, and grabs the gun.

As he becomes less asleep, he realizes what woke him. The gun won't help. He returns the weapon to the end table, next to the ever-present water bottle. He swigs, but his stomach is roiling, and it takes a couple of seconds before he manages to swallow.

He walks to the end of the hall, to the room he uses as an office. Just a desk and a chair in front of a window. The reflection of the moon shimmers in the Zürichsee, a block away from this Victorian pile of bricks and wrought iron, covered in blooming wisteria, its scent spilling through the windows, seeping through the walls.

He jiggles the mouse to wake his computer, types in his password, launches the media player, and opens the live feed of streaming video. The camera is mounted high in a darkened room, focused on a woman who's lying in bed, reading. She takes a drag of a cigarette, and flicks her ash into a big glass ashtray.

He looks away from the invasive image on his screen to a small keypad mounted beneath the desktop. He punches buttons in rapid succession, and with a soft click the drawers unlock.

He pulls out the stack of paper, bound by a thick green rubber band. He turns to a page one-third of the way through, and scans the text to identify the scene. He flips forward ten pages, then five. Then back two. He runs his finger down the page, and he finds it, on the bottom of page 136, just as his mind's eye pictured it, in his sleep in the middle of the night. One word. One letter.

I.

He thought he'd caught every one.

This current draft of the manuscript is the third; it will also be the final. For the initial draft, he'd written from a first-person perspective, but not his own. Because this book was going to be a memoir, publicly authored by someone else but ghostwritten—or coauthored—by him; they hadn't decided on the exact nature of his credit.

Then circumstances changed. When he picked up the project again, he recast the story from his own point of view, first-person singular—*I did this, I saw that*. This was going to be a more honest book, more transparent.

After he'd finished, and typed THE END on the final page, and reread the whole thing, he changed his mind. He decided he needed to hide behind omniscience, and anonymity, to create the shadow of doubt about this book's authorship. To give himself some chance of survival. So he'd pored over the entire manuscript, revising everything to third person—*He drove around a long, dangerous bend. He stared in horror*. Deleting passages that no longer made sense, adding sections—adding chapters—that now did.

It was a big editorial job, but hardly a unique situation. This type of thing must happen all the time, in rewrites, revisions, reconsiderations. An author combs through every page, recasting point of view, replacing nouns and verb conjugations. Over and over and over, thousands of times.

But he misses one of these pronouns, or two. Just a little mistake, a couple of typos. Not a matter of life or death.

EPILOGUE

There is no single person in the world who can verify the entirety of what's in these pages. But there is one person who can come close: the subject himself, Charlie Wolfe. There are other people who could, if properly motivated, attest to the individual realities, one incident at a time, in which they had direct firsthand knowledge. Perhaps this book will be that motivation to those witnesses, an impetus to reveal their truths, to verify this story.

But the author isn't one of those possible witnesses. Because if what you are reading is a finished book, printed and bound and distributed into the world, I am, almost certainly, dead.

THE END

PART I

MORNING

CHAPTER 1

It's just before dawn when Isabel Reed turns the final sheet of paper. Halfway down the page, her mouth falls open, her heartbeat quickens. Her eyes dart across each typescript line at a rapid-fire pace, accelerating as she moves through the final paragraph, desperate to arrive at a revelation, to confirm her suspicions. She sucks in her breath, and holds that breath, for the last lines.

Isabel stares at the final period, the little black dot of ink . . . staring . . .

She lets out her breath. "My God." Astounded, at the enormity of the story. Disappointed, at the absence of the confirmation she was hoping for. Furious, at what it means. Terrified, at the dangers it presents. And, above all, heartbroken, at the immensity of the betrayal. Betrayals.

She puts the page down on the fat stack of paper that sits on the bedspread, next to a crumpled soft-pack of cigarettes and an overflowing crystal ashtray, a mildly snarky birthday present from a passive-aggressive colleague. She picks up the manuscript with both hands, flips it over, and uses her thumbs to align the pages. Her hands are trembling. She tries to steady herself with a deep breath, and sets the straightened pile of pages in her lap. There are four words centered at the top of the page:

The Accident

by Anonymous

Isabel stares across the room, off into the black nothingness of the picture window on the opposite wall, its severe surface barely softened by the half-drawn shades, an aggressive void invading the cocoon of her bedroom. The room is barely lit by a small bullet-shaped reading sconce mounted over the headboard, aiming a concentrated beam of light directly at her. In the window, the light's reflection hovers above her face, like a tiny sun illuminating the top of her head, creating a halo. An angel. Except she's not.

She can feel her body tense and her jaw tighten and her shoulders contract in a spasm of rage. She tries to suppress it, bites her lip, brings herself under the flimsiest tether of control.

Isabel draws aside the bedspread, struggles to a sitting position. It's been hours since she has shifted her body in any appreciable way, and her legs and back are stiff and achy—old, if she had to choose a word for her joints. Her legs dangle over the side of the mattress, her toes searching for the fleece-lined slippers.

Along the wall, long slivers of aluminum shelves—hundreds of horizontal feet—are filled with neat stacks of manuscripts, their authors' names written with thick black Sharpie into the sides of the stacks of pages. Tens of thousands of pages of proposed books of every sort, promising a wide assortment of entertainment and information, produced with a broad range of skill levels.

These days, everyone younger than Isabel seems to read manuscripts and proposals on e-readers; quite a few of those older, too. But she feels uncomfortable, unnatural, sitting there holding a little device in her hands. Isabel is of the generation that's just old enough to be congenitally uncomfortable with new technologies. When she started her first job, she didn't have a computer at her desk. A year later, she did.

Maybe next year she'll start using one of those things, but for now

she's still reading on paper, turning pages, making notes with pens, surrounding herself with stacks of paper, like bricks, bunkered against the relentless onslaught of the future. And for *The Accident*, she didn't even have a choice. Because although nearly all new projects are now delivered to her office electronically, this submission was not.

She shuffles down the hall, through the darkness. Turns on the kitchen lights, and the coffee machine—switched from AUTO-ON, which is set to start brewing an hour from now, to ON—and the small television. Filling the silent lonely apartment with humming electronic life.

Isabel had been reading frantically, hoping to discover the one assertion that rang untrue, the single mismatched thread that would unravel the whole narrative, growing increasingly discouraged as page 1 at the office in the morning became page two-hundred-something at home in the evening. She fell asleep sometime after eleven, more than halfway through, then woke again at two, unable to quiet her mind, anxious to get back to it. People in the book business are constantly claiming "I couldn't put it down" or "it kept me up all night" or "I read it in one day." This time, all that was true.

So at two a.m. Isabel picked up the manuscript and started reading again, page after page, through the late-late night. Vaguely reminiscent of those days when Tommy was an infant, and she was sleep-deprived, awake in a dormant world. They are very discrete periods, for very specific reasons, when it's a normal part of life to be awake at four a.m.: it's for making babies or caring for them, in the small desperate hours when a blanket of quiet smothers the city, but through the moth-eaten holes there's the occasional lowing of a railroad in New Jersey, the distant Dopplered wail of an ambulance siren. Then the inevitable thump of the newspaper on the doormat, the end of the idea of night, even if it's still dark out.

Nothing she encountered during the 488 pages seemed false. Now she stares at the anchor's face on the television, tuned to Wolfe . . . That goddamned son of a bitch . . .

Her anger swells, and she loses control—

Isabel cocks her arm and hurls the remote across the kitchen, cracking and splintering against the refrigerator door, clattering loudly to the floor. Then the heightened silence of the aftermath, the subdued thrum of a double-A battery rolling across the tile, the impotent click as it comes to rest against a baseboard.

She feels tears trickling down her cheek, and wipes them away.

The coffee machine hisses and sputters the final drops, big plops falling into the tempered glass. Isabel glances at the contraption's clock, changing from 5:48 to 5:49, in the corner of the neatly organized counter, a study in right angles of brushed stainless steel. Isabel is a passionate proponent of perfect alignment. Fanatical, some might say.

She opens the refrigerator door, with its new scratch from the airborne remote, whose jagged pieces she kicks out of her way. She takes out the quart of skim and pours a splash into her mug. She grabs the plastic handle of the carafe and fills the mug with hot, viscous, bitter, bracing caffeination. She takes a small sip, then a larger one. She tops up the mug, and again wipes away tears.

She walks back down the now-lighted hall, lined with the family photographs she'd unearthed when she was moving out of her matrimonial apartment, into this single-woman space in a new neighborhood, far from the painful memories of her home—of her life—downtown, where she'd been running into too many mothers, often with their children. Women she'd known from the playgrounds and toy stores and mommy-and-me music classes, from the gyms and grocers and coffee shops, from preschool drop-off and the pediatrician's waiting room. All those other little children growing older, getting bigger, Emmas and Stellas in precious little plaids, Ashers and Amoses with mops of messy curls in skinny jeans on scooters; all those self-satisfied downtown bobo parents, unabashedly proud of their progeny's precociousness.

She'd bought herself a one-bedroom in a full-service uptown co-op, the type of apartment that a woman chooses when she becomes reconciled that she's not going to be living with another human being. She had

reached that age, that stage, when a lifestyle starts to look permanent: it is what it is, and ever will be, until you die. She was making her loneliness as comfortable as possible. Palliative care.

If she wasn't allergic to cats, there'd probably be a couple of them lurking around, scrutinizing her disdainfully.

Isabel lined this nice new hallway—parquet floors, ornate moldings, electrical outlets where she wants them—with framed photos. There she is, a smiling little toddler being held aloft by her tragically beautiful mother in Central Park, at the playground near the museum, a couple of blocks from the Classic 8 on Park Avenue that her parents couldn't actually afford. And then hand-in-hand with her remarkably unambitious father, starting fourth grade at the small-town public school in the Hudson Valley, after they'd finally abandoned the city for their "country place," the old family estate that they'd been selling off, half-acre parcels at a time, to pay for their life. Then in cap and gown, the high school valedictorian, bound not for Harvard or Yale or even a first-rate state school, but for a second-tier—maybe third?—private college upstate, because it offered a full scholarship, including room and board, and didn't necessitate expensive out-of-state travel. The drive was just a few hours.

Her parents had called her Belle; still do. But once she was old enough to understand what the word meant, she couldn't bear to lay claim to it. She began to insist on Isabel.

Isabel had intended to go to graduate school, to continue studying American literature, eventually to teach at the university level, maybe. But that plan was formed before she'd had an understanding of the realities of personal finance. She took what she thought would be a short-term job at a publishing house—one of her father's school chums was a famous editor—with the irrational expectation that she'd be able to save money to pay for school, in a year, or two. She was buoyed by modest success in an enjoyable workplace during good business years, and one thing led to another. Plus she never saved a dime. By the time she was twenty-five, she no longer thought about grad school. Almost never.

So then there she is, in a little black dress onstage at a book-award

ceremony, accepting on behalf of her author who was in South America at the time, chasing a new story. And in a big white dress, aglow, in the middle of the panoramic-lens group shot, the thirty-six-year-old bride with her bridesmaids, at her wedding to a man she'd started dating a mere eight months earlier, short on time, perfectly willing to turn a blind eye to his obvious faults, the personality traits that her friends were too supportive to point out, until the safe remove of hindsight.

That utter bastard.

It still amazes her how quickly youth slipped away, how severely her options narrowed. Just a couple of bad relationship decisions—one guy who as it turned out was never going to commit, another who was a closeted asshole—and the infinite choices of her late twenties turned into the dwindling selection of her mid-thirties, now saying yes to any non-creepy men who asked her out at parties or introduced themselves in bars, sometimes using her middle name if the guy was on the margins of acceptability and she might end up wanting to hide behind the unstalkable shield of an alias; over the years she'd had more than a few dates with men who thought her name was something else. Half the time, she was glad for the deception.

Another photo, a smaller print, lying in the hospital bed with Tommy in her arms, tiny and red and angry in his striped swaddling blanket and blue cap. Isabel returned to work after the standard three months, but in that quarter-year something had passed, and she was complacent to allow it. Her husband was suddenly making embarrassing amounts of money, so Isabel hired a housekeeper to go with the nanny. She started leading one of those enviable-looking lives—a four-day workweek, driving the shiny car from the pristine loft to the shingled beach house, a perfect baby and a rich handsome smart funny husband . . .

And then.

She stops at the final photo, spotlit, a small black-and-white in the center of an expanse of stark-white matting. A little boy, laughing on a

rocky beach, running out of the gentle surf, wearing water wings. Isabel reaches her hand to her lips, plants a kiss on her fingers, and transfers the kiss to the little boy. As she does every morning.

Isabel continues to the bathroom, unbuttoning her flannel top as she walks, untying the drawstring of the pajama bottoms, which crumple as she releases the knot. She pushes her panties down and steps out of them, leaving a small, tight puddle of cotton on the floor.

The hot shower punishes her tense, tired shoulders. Steam billows in thick bursts, pulled out the bathroom door, spilling into the dressing area, the bedroom. The water fills her ears, drowning out any sounds of the television, of the world. If there's anything else in her apartment making noise, she can't hear it.

What exactly is she going to do with this manuscript? She shakes water out of her hair, licks her top lip, shifts her hands, her feet, her weight, standing under the stream, distracted and disarmed, distressed. It all beats down on her, the shower stream and the manuscript and the boy and the past, and the old guilt plus the new guilt, and the new earth-shattering truths, and fear for her career and maybe, now, fear for her life.

She slips into a soft, thick white bathrobe, towel-dries her hair. She sweeps her hand across the steamed-up glass, and examines her tired eyes, bagged and bloodshot, wrinkled at the corners. The bathroom's high-wattage lighting isn't doing her any favors this morning. She had long ago become accustomed to not sleeping well, for a variety of reasons. But with each passing year, it has become harder and harder to hide the physical evidence of sleeplessness.

From the other room, she can hear the irrelevant prattle of the so-called news, the piddling dramas of box-office grosses, petty marital indiscretions, celebrity substance abuse. Steam recolonizes the mirror, and she watches big thick drops of condensation streak down from the top beveled edge of the glass, cutting narrow paths of clarity through the fog, thin clear lines in which she can glimpse her reflection . . .

Something is different, and a jolt of nervous electricity shoots through her, a flash of an image, Hitchcockian terror. Something in that slim clear streak has changed. The light has shifted, there's now a darkness, a shadow—

But it's nothing, she sees, just the reflection of the bedroom TV, more footage of yesterday's international news, today. Today she has to consider the news in a whole new light. Now and forevermore.

She gets dressed, a sleek navy skirt suit over a crisp white blouse, low heels. The type of office attire for someone who wants to look good, without particularly caring about being fashionable. She blow-dries, brushes her shoulder-length blonde hair, applies makeup. Sets contacts into her hazel eyes. She assesses herself—tired-looking, inarguably middle-aged—in the full-length mirror, and sighs, disappointed. Three hours of sleep pushes the limit of what makeup can accomplish.

She stares again at the bottom of *The Accident*'s covering page: *Author contact 40004026@worldmail.net*. She types another e-mail—she's already sent two of these, in the past twelve hours. "I finished. How can we talk?" Hits Send. She again receives the frustrating bounce-back message: an unrecognized address.

That doesn't make any sense. Who would go to the trouble of writing such a manuscript and then not be reachable? So she'll keep trying, willing herself to believe that it's some technical problem, something that'll eventually get resolved. She stares at her laptop, the gradations of gray of the various windows on the screen, the silver frame of the device itself. The little black circle at the top, the pinhole camera, that she never uses, never even considers.

She could burn the manuscript right now, in the fireplace, using the long fancy fireplace matches that her penny-pinching aunt sent as a housewarming. She could pretend she never read the submission, never received it. Forget about it.

Or she could go to the authorities, explain what happened, let them handle it. Which authorities? Certainly not the CIA. The FBI?

Or she could take this to the news media—the *New York Times*, CNN. Or even Wolfe, for that matter; that could be interesting.

Or she could call the president; she could *try* to call the president. She spends a minute wondering whether it's possible that she, a well-known literary agent at a famous agency, could get the president of the United States on the telephone. No.

Or she could do what she knows she should, and wants to, do: get this published, quickly and quietly to protect herself, waiting for the inevitable ubiquity of the publicity—the public-ness of this book's story, the weight of its accusations—to protect her. She can't be arrested—or killed—in front of the whole world. Can she?

Isabel picks up her phone, and plucks a cigarette from the silver box atop the marble mantel, under her one and only piece of fine art, hanging where everyone positions their nicest framed thing. She walks out to her terrace and lights the cigarette, inhales deeply, expels smoke into the sky. She leans on the parapet and stares out at the dark, sinister-looking greens and blacks of Central Park, across to the skyline of Fifth Avenue, to the azure sky and the fiery orange ball rising in the northeast. It's a spectacular view from up here, on her plant-filled terrace jutting out from her professionally decorated apartment, swathed in calming neutral tones. It certainly looks like a nice life that she has.

She knows that she is the obvious—the inevitable—literary agent for this project. And there's also one very obvious acquiring editor for the manuscript, a close friend who never met a conspiracy theory he didn't like, no matter how ludicrous, no matter what level of lunatic the author. He used to have impressive success with this type of book, even by some of his less rational authors; there's apparently a good-size book-buying audience out there that inhabits a space beyond the margins of sane discourse. He'll be motivated to publish another. Especially this one, about these people.

Isabel tries to fight off the fear that wells up inside her again. She takes a final drag of her cigarette, knocks the glowing ember off the butt, then

flicks the relatively harmless fiberglass filter out into the air above Central Park West, where it seems to hover for a split-second, Wile E. Coyote–like, before falling, fluttering out of sight.

She scrolls through her phone's address book, finds the number, and hits Call.