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Opening extract from

# No Going Back

Written by

**Alex Gutteridge**

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# NO GOING BACK

ALEX GUTTERIDGE



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# The End

In a second your life can change. One careless moment and everything that you have ever known and trusted has gone.

I was four years old and sitting at the top of the stairs, hidden just around the dog-leg, my knees pressed up tightly against my chest. It was a hot, airless August night and I was wearing my favourite pink brushed-cotton nightie. It had embroidered rosebuds on the collar, which buttoned right up under my chin, and the material was way too hot for the time of year. Perhaps that's why I couldn't sleep, or perhaps I sensed that something was wrong. I can't exactly remember. It's too long ago.

I remember that Dad had promised to read me a bedtime story and he'd never broken his promises before. We were halfway through *Winnie the Pooh* and I couldn't wait to hear about Pooh building



a house for Eeyore. When Dad was late, Mum put me to bed, but I didn't stay there for long. I could hear her in the hall, pacing, then ringing around, trying to track him down. There was a knot in my stomach which, with each futile phone call, got tighter and tighter and bigger and bigger. I wanted to leave the stairs and go down and sit on Mum's knee, to wrap my arms around her neck, to feel her reassuring kisses. But I didn't dare. She was strict with bedtimes, so instead I crept back up to my bedroom to fetch my favourite teddy, the one Dad had brought back from a business trip to Ireland when I was a baby. In those days Teddy always made everything better.

When the doorbell rang I slid down the top three steps to get a better look through the gaps under the dark oak banisters. The plum-coloured carpet scraped against my bottom. Mum flung open the front door and immediately her hands flew up to her face like a couple of fluttering, startled birds.

"No!"

Such a small word but she gasped it out, as if the effort of saying it had taken all of her breath.

The policeman teetered on the threshold, the tips

of his shiny shoes inside the house, heels still embedded in the golden gravel path.

"Mrs Cooper? Can we come in?"

The questions were innocent enough but I knew from the gravity of his tone and the stiffness of his fingers as they splayed against the side of his leg that he was about to say something I didn't want to hear. I put my hands over my ears and pressed my face down between my knees. The nightdress was soft against my cheeks, like a well-worn comfort blanket, and it smelled of vanilla fabric softener. In my mind I tried to make the policeman go away but when I lifted my head and opened my eyes he was still there, guiding Mum back into our house as if she were the stranger. Even before the WPC followed him in and insisted that Mum sat down on the sofa, even before the policeman said, "I'm afraid there's been an accident," I knew that my daddy wasn't ever coming back.

# Roots

After the funeral Gran wanted Mum to move back to Derbyshire.

"What on earth do you want to stay in London for?" she asked. "It isn't the right place to bring up a child on your own."

Mum gathered me close, made me feel almost safe again. Just for a moment.

"It's Laura's home," she'd said, over the top of my head. "I'm not uprooting her, not now. This is where her memories are."

Of course, that wasn't the end of it. Gran doesn't like taking no for an answer. Every now and then she'd bring it up, try to make Mum feel as if she was being a bad mother by not taking me back to 'where we belonged'. But my mum doesn't like being told what to do either and for ten whole years she stood her ground. She did waver when Grandad died

though. I was twelve by then and more than old enough to know that it was wrong to wish that Gran had gone first.

"Perhaps we ought to move back, Laura," Mum had said, as we drove home down the M1 after a strange weekend at the farm when I kept expecting Grandad to walk through the door in his brown overalls and envelop me in one of his big, strong, earthy-smelling hugs. "Gran's not getting any younger."

I studied the spray from the lorry in front and gripped the sides of the seat. Since Dad's accident motorways always made me edgy. "She's got Aunt Jane," I replied. "She's only at the other end of the village and we're not that far away. We visit loads as well."

Mum indicated and pulled into the middle lane to overtake. My tongue fixed itself to the roof of my mouth.

"It's not the same though," she said. "If something happened and we were closer…"

"Grandad had a massive heart attack," I interrupted. Forcing myself to say those words

made my own heart miss a beat. Losing Grandad so suddenly had felt like being dropped out of a plane into some frozen wilderness. For days I felt as if I were in this bizarre bubble. I was totally alone in a strange, unfriendly place with no one to guide me. I should have known how to cope because I'd been through something similar before. But that didn't make it any better. If anything it probably made it worse. Mum was in pieces too and I tried to comfort her. It was Grandad who understood us both the best. He was the one who showed us and told us how much he loved us every single time we saw or spoke to him and I realised, once he'd gone, that maybe we hadn't said those same words back. Not often enough anyway. I swallowed, put my hand to my chest where there seemed to be this void.

"If we'd been living next door to the farm it wouldn't have been near enough to make a difference," I said softly.

I sensed Mum wince.

"No, you're right," she said, reaching for a bottle of water.

"Mum! Please keep both hands on the wheel."

Momentarily, she turned her head and looked at me. "Sorry." She bypassed the water bottle and rested the tips of her fingers on my black leggings.

"Mum!" I screeched, lifting her hand and slapping it back where it belonged. "Besides," I continued, making a deliberate effort to lower my tone, to sound less of a nutcase. "I like where we live, and it suits us, doesn't it? You've got your job. I've got my friends…" I paused, felt that familiar tightness in my chest, "… and then there's Dad."

She didn't reply but, in the half-light, I saw her French-manicured nails wrap right around the steering wheel until they dug into her palms.

"Who would put flowers on his grave every week?" I said. "If we moved away it would feel as if we were leaving Dad behind." My voice dropped to a whisper. "I couldn't do that, not ever. You wouldn't want to do that either, would you, Mum? Not really?"

She sighed, gave me a brief sideways glance.

"One day, Laura, you might have to move away, for your job or if you get married. One day you're going to have to—"

"Don't say 'move on'," I snapped, "or I'll think Gran has hypnotised you. She won't forget Grandad, will she, so why does she want me to forget all about my dad?"

"Laura, that's very unkind and not fair," Mum shot out. "No one's suggesting that you forget your father."

"Really?"

My sarcasm sliced through the air as efficiently as the wiper blade despatched the rain from the windscreen.

"Are you telling me that Gran doesn't want *you* to 'move on', Mum, to find someone else? That's all she seems to talk about since Dad died – that and us moving out of London."

Mum brushed a strand of hair away from her face. "Gran just wants us both to be happy," she said softly. "That's all."

"Yeah right," I murmured. "But Gran's happiness manual seems to include the rule 'pretend that Dad didn't exist'."

The car swerved slightly as someone came past us very fast and I heard Mum suck in her breath.

I sank down in my seat and made a deliberate show of putting in my earphones. This was one of those conversations that wasn't going anywhere and the last thing my nerves needed was a good old row to take Mum's mind off the road. One fatal crash in the family was more than enough to cope with.