

Secrets

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

I WOKE WITH A start, not knowing where I was. And with that came a moment of panic. But I wasn't pinned to the bed by an intruder, simply by a twisted-up sheet. It was a hot night. It had been a hot evening, the late summer sun seeping into the flat and turning the air thick with dust and scent. I'd tried leaving the windows open, but the steady drone of late evening traffic had forced me to shut them and sweat it out as best I could.

I wasn't sure what had woken me, but even as I untangled my limbs from the fabric and took in the strange surroundings, it began again, a low buzzing sound. That was it. That was where I was. At my sister's flat in Cardiff. And something was going bump in the night.

'Crisis!' Ffion had said cheerfully a week ago. She was phoning because her nanny had let her down, and she had to go to New York for a week. Not leading the high life myself, I knew as much about nannies as I did about rocket science, but I knew she shared her nanny with

a couple who lived nearby. They had two toddlers and the mother only worked mornings, which fitted perfectly with Ffion's rather less routine lifestyle, because the nanny was then free for after-school and overnight stints. But not this time, it seemed.

'My nanny's going to have her wisdom teeth out,' Ffion explained, 'so she's got to go into hospital.' I knew how hard it was trying to run your life as a working single mum. Ffion had been doing it since Emily was three, with varying disasters along the way. It was only in the last couple of years that she'd been able to afford the luxury of having a nanny *to* let her down.

'So, big Sis, I had a brainwave,' she went on. 'I thought of you. You're not doing anything, are you? You'd only need to have her till the Saturday, and then Tom could drive down and pick her up from you.'

Which would be a novelty. Ffion's ex-husband and I hadn't seen each other for about seven years, which was fine by me, and by him too, I didn't doubt. With all that had happened he was my least favourite person, and though I knew from Ffion that he'd remained a good dad, that didn't alter my opinion. The last time we'd met there'd been such a chill in the

air I thought ice might start forming on my nose.

‘Oh, I’d love to have Emily come and stay,’ I said.

‘She’s off to stay at his parents’ caravan for the week after that,’ Ffion went on, clearly not hearing. ‘And you *were* only saying the other day how long it had been since you last spent any time with Em.’

This was true. There were almost two weeks left of the summer holidays, and though I still had enough lesson planning to do to make me feel term should be postponed till October, it would be nice to leave it for a few days to spend them with my niece.

‘Fine,’ I said again. ‘But you’ll have to sort something else out for Tigger. Lovely though he is, I’ve got Ben at home from college.’

My son, Ben, had asthma. Not that badly, but my sister’s big hairy dog wasn’t exactly the ideal house-mate for him.

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘I’d forgotten about that. I suppose I could – I know! Why don’t you come here? To Cardiff? You’re always saying how much you like my flat. And it’ll be a nice break for you. You must be due a rest from running around after Ben and his mates.’

This was true, too. I loved having Ben around, but there were only so many times a day you could rant on about music being too loud and piles of washing-up being too high. It would also give me a chance to catch up with an old friend I hadn't seen for a while.

So I'd come to Cardiff, and here I was now, in an unfamiliar bedroom, with the throngs of people outside, the traffic, and the sticky city heat. But she was right. It did feel like a holiday.

I listened again. The buzzing had stopped, but now another noise had started up somewhere else. I pushed off the sheet, slipped on Ffion's old towelling dressing gown, then padded across the bedroom and into the hall. The phone there was silent, and there was no sound from Emily's room. The light from the hallway spilled through the open door and across her frame sprawled under the duvet. I walked across the hall, the wooden floor warm beneath my feet. The sound grew louder as I approached the study, louder still as I pushed open the door.

It was a living room really, with French doors that opened onto a little balcony. But Ffion had styled it in typical Ffion fashion.

High tech and sparse, with a beech desk and severe looking cupboards, this was the place where she worked much of the time. Her life was – always had been – very different from my own and I felt a little unsure about all the hardware and wires. Anxious that if I touched the wrong button, disaster would strike.

The fax machine at the side of the desk was now still, though it had been belching rolls of paper on and off since I'd arrived two days ago. Beside it, a green light winking on the computer reminded me it never slept. Another, a red one, had just clicked on to join it. Her work phone. Of course. Abruptly, the ringing stopped and the room was suddenly full of Ffion's voice. *'Hi. I can't get to the phone right now...'* The greeting burred on for some seconds, then a beep sounded.

'Ffion?' a voice said. 'God, it *is* you, isn't it? You sound...well, just the same. No different at all. Look, don't faint, but...well, it's Jack...'

The voice was male, rich like dark chocolate, it now paused for a second, as if unsure what to say next. I paused too, feeling a little like I was eavesdropping. It was just after midnight. So late to be calling. But then it could be one of her foreign authors. Ffion worked as a publicist for a big firm of publishers. It was her job to see

their authors got noticed. She had always been good at getting herself noticed so it was no surprise she was so good at her job. That was how she'd first met Scott, her fiancé, a chef with two bestselling books already published. But this was probably nothing important. She'd told me not to worry about faxes and messages. She'd deal with them when she got back. I could let the man carry on and go back to bed.

I turned to leave him to it, but it was the silence, which continued for four or five more seconds, that made me pause to hear more. It was as if he really didn't know what to say.

'It's *me*, Ffion. *Jack*,' he repeated. 'I don't know if...well...' Another pause. A breath taken and exhaled. 'Oh, Ffion, I can hardly believe it. I can hardly believe I've...' Another breath. Another pause. 'Look, I'd just really like to speak to you. I *need* to speak to you, Ffion. Would you ring me? Please?'

He began reciting a number, but his pauses had been so long that the machine cut him off before he could finish it.

I stood still for several seconds, conscious that there was something about the message that was causing me disquiet. It wasn't anything I could put my finger on – just a

nagging sense that this was something important. I'd never heard the name and I didn't know the voice, but this was clearly someone who knew Ffion well. No surnames. No sense of this being business. He knew she'd know exactly who he was. And he sounded intimate. Like someone who knew her very well, in fact.

I picked the receiver up and dialled 1471. *We do not have the number to return the call*, the voice told me. Perhaps he was ex-directory. I put the phone down again, pulling the dressing gown tighter around me, conscious of a draught and the click-clack of Tigger's feet on the beech flooring, as he came in to find out what was going on. If it was important, he'd call again, I reasoned, as I took the dog back into the kitchen. But still I dithered. It would now be early evening in New York. Perhaps I should give Ffion a quick ring anyway, just in case it was someone she'd been waiting to hear from. Yes, I'd go back and do that.

But she wasn't in her hotel room. Probably out at some party or other. She was on tour with an author, and these tours, I knew, were as much about fun as they were about meetings. I left a message. Just telling her there was nothing to worry about with Emily, but that

there'd been a message on her work phone from someone called Jack.

I lay awake for some time after I got back into bed. I was sure she'd never mentioned a Jack to me before. Yet I also felt sure my gut response to his message was right. There was something about his words and manner that set off alarms in my head. 'Oh, Ffion...' he'd said. The words kept replaying. I'd been through all sorts of dramas with Ffion over the years. I hoped this wasn't about to become another one.

Hoping wasn't going to make any difference, of course. But I didn't know that, as I drifted back off to sleep.