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The Secrets We Share

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Emma
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The Secrets We Share

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Prologue

Dearest Nathalie,
I am not sure how much you know about me . . .

CLARA PAUSED, LAYING DOWN HER PEN ON THE soft cream paper for a moment, unsure of how to go on. She took a long sip of rich, dark coffee, then looked up towards the photograph on her bedside table, as if for guidance.

It was dawn. Her favourite time of day. Only she and the early-morning songbirds seemed enthusiastically compos mentis as she gazed through the partially opened curtains on to the empty street below.

Clara had always imagined she would know the right time to tell her story. For so many years she'd held her silence. But she knew the time had come for her to get her affairs in order.

As a vivacious and sprightly recently-turned-eighty-year-old, she was often jolted by her reflection. Nobody had ever mentioned the fact that her mind and body would somehow disconnect as the years progressed. In her mind's eye she was still a smooth, sallow-skinned, lithe little thing with dancing dark eyes and bouncing brown curls.

Of course she knew that wrinkles and lacklustre locks were inevitable, and being a pragmatic soul, she accepted them with grace. Unlike her daughter Ava, who in her mid-forties was raging a vicious war with Mother Nature. Clara didn't agree

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with Botox and fillers, but she figured it was her daughter's face and therefore her choice.

The one thing Ava had inherited from her was her love of fabric. As a talented seamstress, Clara had sewn all the soft furnishings in the house herself. From cushion covers to intricate patchwork quilts, she'd carefully designed all her interiors.

Blue was her favourite colour at the moment. She particularly adored the cornflower shading against the crisp white background in the current curtain fabric. It brought back such vivid memories of her early childhood days in Austria. As she tucked her arms behind her head and drank in the pretty floral pattern, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose. She could almost smell the delicate scent of the purply-blue Jacob's ladder that dotted the Alpine landscape, interspersed with dainty snow-coloured edelweiss. At that time, with her innocence intact, she had lived a perfect life.

Clara was younger than most when she realised how some people's existence was just a brief passing blessing. The past was so heavily peppered with love and heartache in equal measure, and her story was one that needed to be shared before she closed her eyes in eternal sleep. She had always known that one day she would feel compelled to speak, and when that time came, she would choose the right person to tell.

The one person she longed to tell was currently unobtainable to her, so she'd set the wheels in motion last week.

She'd felt like a real-life version of Miss Marple as she'd sat in Kevin O'Toole's office.

'I need to find someone,' she'd said.

'You've come to the right place,' he said drily, pointing to the *Private Investigator* sign etched in the glass of his office door.

'It's my son.'

'Oh, I see . . .' He coughed awkwardly. 'I didn't mean to be trite, Mrs . . .'

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'Clara will do nicely, dear.' She smiled and blinked slowly, holding his gaze. She noticed him relaxing and continued. 'He lives in Los Angeles. That's all I know.'

'Was he adopted as a baby?' Kevin asked, clasping his hands together.

'Oh no . . .'

'Sorry, you have a strong foreign accent, and I just assumed . . .'

'Yes, I grew up in Austria but Max was born here in Ireland. I was married to an Irishman and we raised him here. He left twenty years ago. His anger towards me drove him away, you see. I always figured he would return if I didn't badger him.'

'But obviously he still hasn't?'

'No.'

Clara gave Kevin the details she had.

'Conway is a fairly common name, but we might be pleasantly surprised at how few forty-year-old Max Conways there are living in LA. If he is indeed a doctor as you suspect, that'll make it even simpler.'

Clara had gone away and put the meeting to the back of her mind. She longed to confide in Ava and let her know that she could possibly be reunited with her long-lost brother. But any time she mentioned Max, which was often, Ava's brow furrowed. She had so much pent-up anger towards her younger brother, and Clara wasn't sure that would ever be resolved.

Last night, as she was in the sewing room planning a new patchwork quilt for the guest bedroom, Clara's landline had rung.

'I've found your son,' said a joyous Kevin. 'I thought it was the right man last week, but I needed to be certain.'

Clara thought her heart had actually stopped beating as she grappled for a chair and sat down clumsily.

'Tell me about him, please.'

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'He is a doctor, as you suspected. He did indeed transfer his course from Ireland and completed his medical studies. He then went on to train as a surgeon. He works in LA General Hospital and is married to one Amber Conway. They have a seventeen-year-old daughter called Nathalie.'

'Oh my . . .' Clara was reeling. 'I'm an *Oma.*'

'I beg your pardon?'

'*Oma*,' she repeated. 'It's grandmother in German. I had no idea I had a grandchild.'

Kevin promised to send all the details in a letter, but he read out Max's home address.

'Thank you. You have no idea how much I appreciate this.'

'Would you like me to obtain some photographs of the family? For a small extra fee I can have them trailed for a day and send you pictures.'

'Oh no, thank you,' she said. It was one thing having Kevin find Max, but she wasn't going to intrude on his life in a sneaky way.

She'd hung up and sat staring into space until the evening light faded and a chill hung in the air. Not sure of what else to do, she'd climbed into bed and nuzzled down into the duvet. Her dreams had been filled with memories of Max from the moment he was born until the awful day he'd stormed out of her life.

For the first time, she had his address. There was no reason why she couldn't turn up on his doorstep. But Clara knew that would be too big a gamble. She needed to approach this gently in order to maximise her chances of a happy reunion. Finishing her coffee, she concentrated on the job in hand and continued writing.

. . . I am not sure how much you know about me, but I have literally just found out you exist. I cannot begin to describe the emotions

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that are racing through my heart. Suffice it to say that it brings me unspeakable joy to know that I have a granddaughter.

Your father may or may not have told you the reason we became estranged. But I would like to take this opportunity to assure you that I have longed to see him since the day he left Ireland.

Not a day has gone by when I haven't thought of him and wanted to see him again.

I know it's a lot to ask, but I would love it if you would consider getting to know me.

I don't have an email address, which annoys your aunt Ava terribly. So I would be truly honoured if you would consider writing back, or even phoning me.

Of course you would be welcomed with open arms should you ever think of coming to Ireland.

I won't bombard you with a long and tedious letter. Instead I will leave the ball in your court.

A reply would be incredible but I will understand if you would rather not.

Yours faithfully and with untold affection,

Clara Conway (your Oma)

Her hands shook ever so slightly as she sealed the envelope and climbed out of bed. She felt a frisson of anticipation. Change was coming, she could sense it. With one last glance at the photograph next to her bed, she blew it a kiss and hurried downstairs to start her day.

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Chapter 1

A SHIVER OF EXCITEMENT SHOT THROUGH Nathalie as she scrutinised her reflection in the full-length mirror. She could barely believe it was finally her prom night.

'Wow,' came a voice behind her.

'Dad!'

'You look stunning,' he said with a smile.

'I saw this gown and thought it would look much better without the straps, so I cut them off. The wrap that was sold with it was just so boring, so I added the cream goose-down one instead! You like?'

She twirled around and did a little curtsey. 'Ooh and I customised my shoes with silk flowers.'

Max stood motionless for a moment. He looked as if he were fighting back tears.

'You OK?' Nathalie asked.

'Sure,' he said, blowing out air loudly. 'You reminded me of somebody just now.' He strode across the room, planted a light kiss on her forehead and pulled a pale blue box from his pocket.

'This is from Mom and me. Congratulations, darling.'

'Oh my gosh, this looks like . . .' She opened the box and screamed. 'It's a Tiffany necklace! Thank you, thank you, thank you!'

'You're welcome, welcome, welcome!' he said, looking vaguely uncomfortable with all the fuss.

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As Max fastened the necklace around Nathalie's neck, he reiterated how immensely proud they were of her. Well, to be exact, he regurgitated the speech his wife had just delivered to him. Amber had been responsible for the necklace too. He'd come home from work at the hospital, had the bag thrust at him and was pretty much catapulted into his daughter's room to let her know he loved her.

'She knows,' he'd said in an attempt to avoid the *Brady Bunch* moment.

'Everyone likes to be told they're loved. It can't happen too often,' Amber insisted. 'Now go and do your fatherly duty.'

He was mildly surprised by how thrilled Nathalie was. He made a mental note to let Amber know she'd been right. But then again, he was fairly certain she knew that. Amber was always right. She was always in control and always a step ahead of him with domestic matters.

'Thanks, Dad. You'd better get changed. DJ will be here soon.'

'Right.' His expression darkened.

'How many times have we had this conversation?' Nathalie sighed. 'DJ is a good guy.'

'In your opinion . . .'

'Please, let's not fight tonight. As far as I can tell, any guy I introduce to you wouldn't be good enough. So why can't you let me enjoy my prom?' She rolled her eyes as her father strode off to change out of his operating scrubs.

Max muttered grumpily to himself as he plucked his suit from the bed where Amber had laid it out for him. It was his wife's idea to give up on arguing over this DJ kid. If he had his way that good-for-nothing waste of time would be run off their property never to return. Amber was convinced they should put up and shut up, saying that Nathalie would come to her senses soon enough.

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'She's a smart girl, Max. The sheen will wear off with DJ. Allow her to enjoy her prom and let this little flush of love run its course. It's not as if she'll want to marry him, for crying out loud.'

Max wasn't so sure. As he was only too aware, Nathalie came from a long line of incredibly stubborn and strong-willed females. But Amber knew none of that. She knew nothing of his family or what they had done in the past, and he wasn't about to start explaining. Not tonight, or any other night for that matter.

He sighed. Amber was right. It was Nathalie's special night and of course he wanted her to have fun.

Besides, he knew he wasn't great at all the emotional stuff. He tended to leave that to Amber. She was a natural when it came to socializing at hospital fund-raisers. She could sweep into a room and light it up effortlessly. She was brilliant with Nathalie's friends and their air-kissing mothers too. He dreaded all the community schmoozing and found it nigh impossible to stand with a bottle of beer and talk nonsense to men he barely knew. He had enough to occupy his mind between working as a surgeon and being a husband and a father. He kept his cards close to his chest and appreciated it when others did the same. He preferred to concentrate on paying the bills and making sure his girls were well provided for. It was easier to show his love that way. Even though it was twenty years since he'd left Ireland, he still struggled to conform to the American way of conducting himself.

'You don't have to make lifelong pals of all the neighbours, but you do need to be civil,' Amber had scolded him. They'd moved to their current home ten years ago. It was a traditional gated community, where the houses were larger than most, with inhabitants to match.

'I don't have any desire to stand in Chuck's back yard being clapped on the back and referred to as "Doc",' he'd said.

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'Well suck it up and get on with it, Max. It's important to Nathalie and me that we fit in around here.'

So Max did the least amount of fitting-in possible. He'd learned to wave automatically and call out mindless greetings like Ned Flanders, and was relieved that it seemed to mollify most of the neighbours. Amber felt he was making an effort too, so it was a win-win situation.

Unlike his wife and daughter, he'd been dreading tonight. Americans took prom night so seriously. It was an industry all of its own. One he most definitely didn't get. But he loved his girls, and if it kept them happy, he'd grin and bear it.

He finished dressing and attached the cufflinks to his shirt. Flicking a comb through his honey-blond hair, he wondered where the creases around his eyes and the dulling of his bronzed skin might end. It was all the rage at the hospital to cruise into the plastics department for a shot of this and a zap of that to freshen one's face. But Max was neither vain nor bothered enough to pitch up. He figured he'd go for the ageing gracefully thing instead. Besides, he had his trump card, which always seemed to please his patients.

'Ooh, you have the most darling Irish accent!'

'I love the way you speak. My grandma was from Ireland too . . .'

He'd just stepped into the living room when Nathalie swept in behind him. Max stood and observed his two favourite girls.

'Wow,' he said, nodding in approval. Once again he was amazed by their closeness and mutual adoration.

'You look so beautiful, Nathalie,' Amber said, grasping both her hands.

'So do you, Mom,' Nathalie said sincerely.

'Ah, once I stick with Ms Coco Chanel, I'm on to a winner,' Amber said with a grin. 'Are you happy with your gown?'

'I love it, thank you, Mom. Most importantly, I've got DJ

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taking me, Mackenzie has a date and all our friends will be there. I can't believe I've finally reached this point in my life.'

'Neither can I, baby girl. I still remember how I felt when I discovered I was pregnant. Do you know, I secretly wished for a girl.'

'Why?' Nathalie smiled.

'For moments just like this one . . . For the camaraderie and the frills and spills that only a daughter brings. I'm blessed to have you in my world, darling.'

They hugged, and were both dabbing ever so gently at their expertly made-up eyes as Max cleared his throat.

'OK, you guys. Enough leaky girlie moments. You're both gorgeous and I am unbelievably proud.'

The tender moment was shattered by the arrival of Nathalie's sorry excuse for a boyfriend. Max couldn't abide him. He was everything he *didn't* want to see attached to his precious girl.

'No way!' Nathalie screamed, pointing outside. 'I can't believe he did that.' Flinging the front door open, she rushed down the drive towards the white stretch Hummer with tinted windows.

'So much for her being the belle of the ball,' Max said drily. 'As she charges down the drive looking like she's taking part in a timed sprint.'

'Lighten up, eh, Max,' Amber said dreamily. 'She's young and in love.'

'Just like you were a hundred years ago,' he said, teasing her as he took her in his arms.

'Do you remember my prom?'

'I'll never forget it,' he said. 'I was quaking in my slippery hired shoes, terrified to even open my mouth. Every time I spoke, your father corrected me.'

'He couldn't understand your Irish accent,' she giggled.

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'Yeah, that's his version of the story,' Max said. 'I think I can appreciate how he felt now. He told me repeatedly that you were only seventeen and I was far too old for you at twenty.' He leaned against the frame of the door with his arms folded and watched Nathalie as she allowed DJ to place a corsage around her wrist, then pick her up and twirl her around.

'Not so touchy-feely, young man,' Max growled.

'Oh Max, stop it.' Amber swatted him. 'Behave.'

He raised an eyebrow and side-glanced at his wife.

'I've waited a long time to make a guy feel as uncomfortable as I did at your prom. Let me have my moment in the sunshine.' He grinned wickedly.

'You mean thing,' Amber laughed.

'I wish it were simply a joke,' Max said, shaking his head. 'But look at the guy. He's a grease monkey with about as much class as a septic tank—'

'Enough,' Amber said sternly, holding her hand aloft. 'There's plenty of time for meaningful conversations about finding the right life partner. But this isn't one of them. Suck it up and let our daughter enjoy her prom. Besides, she's merely testing the water. If I know Nathalie, she'll be sick to the back teeth of DJ soon enough.'

'As long as she doesn't come home and say she's knocked up and they're off to live in a trailer park.'

'Your imagination runs riot at times, Max,' Amber said. 'Let's just enjoy the moment . . . Please?'

Reluctantly, Max did as he was bid. DJ bounded up the driveway.

'Evenin', Doc.'

Max clenched his jaw and shook the boy's hand before walking silently back into the living room to grab his house keys.

'Doc . . .' he muttered, tutting and grinding his teeth.

The others were waiting in the limo as he dawdled on purpose.

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He didn't want to sit in a confined space with this joker. But he knew he couldn't growl at him either, or Amber would be on his case and Nathalie would pout and treat him like a leper for the next week. He sighed and hid his smile, knowing that yet again he was under the thumb of his two women. Eventually he joined them.

'Max,' Amber hissed. 'Turn that frown upside down before I accidentally implant my stiletto in your toe.'

Max fixed a smile on his face.

The journey seemed endless. Amber and Nathalie babbled to one another, while DJ was busy opening all the compartments in the back of the limo, discussing the likely cost of replacing each one. Max tried to zone out and think about something completely different.

Once inside the school gym, Nathalie felt as if she would combust with excitement.

'Mom, look at the balloons and bunting. Isn't it magical?'

The foursome greeted the other kids and parents. The atmosphere was bittersweet, with some parents expressing their dismay at the thought of their children leaving school.

'The years have flown by so quickly,' Amber agreed, as Max stood motionless by her side. 'But I'm happy Nathalie is ready to spread her wings. She's headed for medical school, following in her father's footsteps,' she said proudly.

'There's Mackenzie,' Nathalie said, rushing to hug her best friend. 'You look totally wowzers!'

'So do you!'

'Hey, Jonas,' Nathalie said, kissing her friend's date on the cheek. DJ and Jonas shook hands and banged one another on the back.

Once the speeches and the drinks reception were over, it was time for the parents to leave.

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'Enjoy the rest of the evening, and don't forget to have her home by two,' Max said to DJ. 'We'll be at the Four Seasons if you need us before that, darling,' he said, kissing his daughter's cheek.



Nathalie waved her parents off and joined her friends to dance the night away. She grabbed Mackenzie's hand and they rushed to the rest room to touch up their make-up and have a quick chat.

'Did you *see* Jonas?' Mackenzie squealed. 'He's so hot and he brought me this.' She showed Nathalie the exquisite bracelet on her arm.

'Hey, I'm jealous,' Nathalie said. 'That's awesome. He is *so* into you. That must've cost a fortune.'

'I know!' Mackenzie grinned. 'That's what happens when your date is rich!' She bit her lip. 'I've never had anything like this before. My mom nearly choked when I opened it.'

Nathalie beamed back at her friend. Mackenzie had two brothers and a sister, and things at her home weren't easy since her father had lost his job. Nathalie was thrilled to see her enjoying the princess treatment for a change.

'He whispered that I look knock-dead stunning as we were getting into the limo,' Mackenzie said with shining eyes.

'Aw, that's so great, sweetie. For the record, he's right, you look amazing,' Nathalie said. 'He's a good guy. I've got a great feeling about you two.'

'I can't really see why he's chosen me, though. Have you seen how good Whitney looks? She's on fire . . . Every time I look up, she's glaring over at me. If I'd known it was going to upset her this much . . .'

'Huh,' Nathalie scoffed. 'She's pretty, but as the song says,

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honey, she has an ugly heart. Besides, they split months ago. Jonas made his choice and I happen to agree with him. Besides, what guy wants to sit and listen to her going on and on about her latest photo shoot?'

'I like her, though,' Mackenzie said blinking.

'Yeah, because you're the nicest person I've ever met. I, on the other hand, am not quite as charitable. Where would I be without you? I'd be a total monster.'

'Well, you'll never need to find out.' Mackenzie held up her pinkie and Nathalie linked it with hers.

'So does Jonas know you're planning on going away to college?'

'Yeah, I mentioned it. But he says he'll come and see me,' Mackenzie said, shrugging. 'It's good that DJ and Jonas are buddies. If we stay with them, they'll need to get along, seeing as we'll be buying apartments next door to one another in the future.'

'You said it,' Nathalie answered as she passed her lip gloss to Mackenzie to use. 'Do you reckon we can have a joint wedding? That way we can have babies at the same time . . .'

'. . . and they'll be best friends like us,' Mackenzie finished.

Nathalie hugged her friend and pulled her back out to the dance floor. The music was like a trip down memory lane as the songs that they'd all grown up with pumped from the speakers. Nathalie spotted Jonas watching them. He was eyeing Mackenzie appreciatively.

'Your man is drinking you in,' she said, cupping her friend's ear. She took Mackenzie's hands and moved her into the middle of the floor. She knew from her expression that Mackenzie was dying inside, but she encouraged her to keep going. As Jonas came over and put his arms around her from behind, Nathalie discreetly stepped away, winking at Mackenzie.

The night seemed to pass in an instant. Nathalie was hoarse from shouting and her feet were aching from dancing. Then DJ

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made the unwelcome announcement that he hadn't paid for the limo to take them home.

'How are we meant to get there?' Nathalie asked. 'It's like twenty minutes away. I'm wearing high shoes in case you hadn't noticed.'

She wasn't about to admit it to anyone, least of all her father, but DJ was swiftly beginning to annoy her.

'Hey,' he said, flinging his hands up. 'I don't earn bags of cash. I paid for the car here. We can call a cab if you don't want to walk.'

'What's up, sweetie?' Mackenzie asked, appearing by Nathalie's side.

'DJ thinks I'm walking home,' she whispered through gritted teeth.

'Come with us, both of you. Jonas has a limo booked.'

'Ah no. Thanks, but I don't want to cramp your style.'

Nathalie grinned as Mackenzie yanked her and DJ to the exit. As they climbed into the long-based black limousine, she was thrilled to see Whitney snarling at their car.

'She's so pissed!' she laughed.

'Aw, you're incorrigible.' Mackenzie swatted her. 'She's not that bad. I'm sure she'll improve as she gets older.'

As they settled in the back of the plush car, Nathalie couldn't have been more delighted. The prom had lived up to their expectations, and she couldn't believe how happy Mackenzie looked as she sat opposite her with Jonas's arm draped around her shoulder.

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