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Our Song

Written by Dani Atkins

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OUR SONG

DANI ATKINS



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Chapter 1

There were many things that might have changed the eventual outcome of that night.

He could have taken his car to work, instead of leaving it for his wife to use. But then she wouldn't have made it to the school Christmas concert on time. And he knew how important it was for Jake to have at least one parent in the audience when he made his stage debut in the Nativity play. He was that kind of father.

He could have gone to the pub with the other tradesmen. But if it came to a contest between spending time drinking with his workmates, or going home to his beautiful wife, there was no choice. None at all. Even after seven years of marriage he never wanted to miss a single moment of time that could be spent with her. He never would. He was that kind of husband.

He could have ignored the children's pleas for help as he crossed the parkland. He could have told them their dog

would find its own way back to safety from the middle of the frozen lake. But once he'd seen the look of terror on the animal's face, as it struggled to pull itself out of the hole, he knew he'd have to rescue it. He was that kind of man.

The girl couldn't have been more than nine years old; the boy looked even younger than his son Jake. They had burst through the trees beside the pathway like two barrelling cannonballs, grabbing on to him and talking, or rather shouting, incoherently. For one crazy moment, he thought they were trying to rob him. He even imagined himself going home and telling his wife that he'd been mugged by some primary-school children, and by the way, darling, how was *your* day? But it wasn't his money they were after, he quickly realised that, although for several moments he was no closer to understanding what they did want of him, because they were both crying hysterically.

'Whoa, slow down there. What's wrong?' he asked, directing his question at the young girl.

'Please, can you help us? Marty and Todd are in trouble. Can you come?' The girl was tugging on his arm and trying to pull him off the path and through the narrow copse of snow-covered trees. The man knew this park well, he'd visited it many times as a child, played football matches here as a teenager, and used it regularly as a shortcut to and from the housing development site where he was currently working. There was nothing beyond the trees except a large boating lake which bordered the park. He felt a chill run through him that had nothing to do with the falling temperature.

'Calm down,' he instructed, resisting the surprisingly strong pull on his arm. 'Take a breath, tell me what happened. Who are Marty and Todd, and where are they?'

The girl answered, tears coursing down her face as she spoke so fast it seemed as though each word had run straight into the back of the one which came before, like a verbal pile-up.

'Marty is our big brother. We were playing with Todd by the lake, and I told Marty that it wasn't safe, but he said it was okay and then Todd ran backwards and he ended up in the middle of the lake and it was okay for a minute because it's all frozen over but then it cracked and he fell in and he couldn't get out, so Marty went to help him, and then he fell in as well.'

'Show me where they are,' the man commanded, already breaking into a run and heading towards the trees. The children, slightly calmer now they'd found an adult to take charge of the situation, were close at his heels. 'Are you here with anyone, a parent or someone?' he asked, his words emerging sharp and staccato from his mouth, accompanied by a cloud of billowing vapour. Mentally he was already berating the adults who had allowed these children to be in such danger. He would never in a million years let Jake go to the park without either of them being with him. His over-protectiveness drove his wife crazy at times, but just look what could happen when you let them go out by themselves. They ended up falling into a frozen lake.

Hang on, boys, the man silently urged. *I'm coming.*

The man burst through the trees and onto the edge of the frozen lake. Instinctively he threw both arms out to either side and braced them, to prevent the children running alongside him from skidding down the small snowy incline and onto the ice.

'There they are!' exclaimed the girl, extending a trembling arm as she indicated two spots some fifteen metres from where they stood, where the thin ice had cracked open and Marty and Todd had slipped through into the freezing water.

The man's eyes darted between the two holes in the ice, rapidly assessing the situation. It was bad, but thankfully not as bad as he'd first feared. From the furthest hole there came a volley of short sharp yelping barks, as Todd saw the return of his human family. But it was the other hole that concerned the man, where a young boy, who looked about eleven years old, was struggling to keep his elbows on the edge of the precarious jagged rim of ice. He was crying and clearly terrified, yet he still kept glancing behind him at the other hole, where his pet was splashing in the freezing water, trying to stay afloat.

'Hang on, son. Keep your elbows on the ice and try not to kick too much. I'm coming to get you,' the man urged, pulling off his heavy parka jacket and throwing it down on the snow-covered bank.

The boy's face was alabaster-white with fear, the freckles on his nose, a distant memory of summer, stood out like brown splatters of paint on a blank canvas. 'Pl-please get Todd f-first,' the boy begged through chattering teeth. 'He's been in the water longer than me.'

The man didn't reply, not wanting to agitate the boy further, although he did spare another glance at the dog struggling frantically in the ice-cold water, trying to reach the jagged edges of the hole, which resembled razor-sharp teeth set in bone-white jaws. The jaws of death. The man shuddered.

'People first, dogs second,' he said as he stepped carefully off the bank with its powdery white snow, and onto the slippery glass-like surface of the water. Cautiously he lowered his weight onto one foot, preparing for instant retreat if the ice should groan or crack beneath him. It stayed silent and solid so he pressed on.

Fifteen metres. It felt more like fifteen miles. After two or three steps he could feel a change beneath the soles of his heavy work-boots. What had initially felt skating-rink solid, now had a definite spongy spring beneath his weight. He paused, glanced back at the two children on the bank, and gave them a quick reassuring smile. Very slowly he lowered himself down, first into a crouch, then onto all fours before finally sliding forward until he was completely horizontal on the ice. Spread the weight, he told himself, rapidly trying to recall what other advice he might have picked up over the years for people attempting this kind of thing. The only one that seemed to come to mind was: *don't do it*. He blew the air noisily out through his mouth and gritted his teeth.

He crawled slowly on his stomach to the boy, fighting the urge to hurry, knowing the ice was capricious and cunningly deceitful. It felt like hours, but it could only have been minutes

before he was close enough to grab hold of one of his woollen-mittened hands in his own.

'Hold on tight,' he instructed, wrapping his fingers firmly around the young boy's bony wrists for better purchase. 'We'll have you out of there in no time.' It was a promise he prayed he could keep. He braced himself, and even the dog fell silent, as though he too had realised the importance of the moment. The man pulled as hard as he could, trying to ignore the worry of dislocations or injury on the sharp edges of the ice. They could be fixed. If the boy slipped from his grip now and sank beneath the icy surface, he might be beyond his help.

The boy flew out of the water like a fish on a line. From the bank he heard the younger children cheer in delight. The man gritted his teeth. They weren't home free yet.

'C-can we g-get Todd now?'

The man shook his head briefly as he began to inch them backwards towards the bank. 'Let's get you back on land first. Then we'll worry about your dog,' he replied, hoping the lie would pacify the lad until he had got him to safety. The boy was a sodden dead weight, despite being thin and gangly. There was no flesh on him, and the danger of hypothermia in a body this slight was all too real.

There were very few moments in his life when the man had felt such relief as he did when he finally pulled the boy off the ice. Perhaps the closest had been in the delivery room, when he was told the two people he cared about most in the world were alright. The man plucked up his thickly quilted coat and wrapped it around the shivering boy, rubbing his

hands briskly up and down the length of his quivering frame, to bring back the circulation.

'Are you okay? Can you breathe alright? Is anything hurt?' the man questioned, already pulling his phone from the pocket of his quilted jacket.

'No. Just cold,' said the boy through blue-tinged lips. 'Thank you. You're going back for Todd now, aren't you?'

The call connected to the emergency services, and he held up his hand to stall his reply as he requested an ambulance. But his eyes gave away his answer unknowingly. He always had been a terrible liar. The two younger children huddled around their brother, all three looking towards the remaining member of their family, who was still in peril. They spoke hurriedly in urgent whispers, yet still the man was slow to realise what was happening. It was only when he saw Marty shrug off his enveloping coat that he realised his intentions.

'You're not going to help Todd get out of the water, are you?' the boy asked, his voice shaky. Three young faces looked up at him, each urgently pleading for him to deny it.

'He's a dog,' the man said, already realising the futility in trying to make them understand.

'*Of course* he's a dog,' replied the youngest child with a disparaging look, his voice scornful. 'But you got Marty out, why can't you get Todd?'

Their eyes bored into him, like miniature Spanish Inquisitors. The man looked back to the ice and realised the animal's valiant efforts seemed to be diminishing by the moment as he grew increasingly colder and weaker. Large

chunks of ice broke off beneath his scrabbling paws whenever he got close to the edge, plunging him back into the freezing depths time and time again.

'He'll find his own way out,' the man said, with a reassurance he did not feel. 'Dogs are clever like that. Just give him a minute.'

The boy he had just rescued looked at him with unmistakable disappointment. 'You *have* to help him, or he's going to drown or freeze to death,' he declared, with dire and unshakeable certainty. 'And if *you're* not going to get him out, then I will.' He moved towards the edge of the frozen lake.

The man caught him easily. His cold bony body struggled against the restraining arm.

'Or I will,' said his determined sister, stepping much closer to the edge of the ice than was wise.

'Or me,' added the youngest.

The man gave a sound of desperation. He could stop one of them, but not all three.

'Todd!' cried the wriggling boy in his arms. The children gasped in unison as their pet slipped beneath the surface of the water. After ten agonising seconds his small furry head reappeared, and that was the moment when the man knew he had no choice, because he'd seen the look of defeat in the animal's eyes. He was giving up.

'Damn it,' muttered the man, looking around for another solution, another adult, another option, but there was none. He knew what he was about to do was a really bad idea, but

what was the alternative? The ice had held him before, it would do so again. He hoped.

He turned to the three children who were now all crying. He laid a strong and steady hand on the shoulders of the older two. 'Okay. Listen carefully. I'm going to try and help Todd, but I will only do this on one condition.' Three bobbing heads already promised they would gladly agree to whatever he asked of them. '*No one*, and I repeat *no one* is to take even so much as one single step onto this ice. No one except me. Is that understood? Whatever happens, you three are to stay right where you are until I get back. Promise?' Their eyes were wide as marbles with terror, but once again they nodded. The man took one last hopeful glance over his shoulder, but he didn't really expect to find anyone else walking by the lake at this time of day. He glanced skyward. It was going to be dark in less than fifteen minutes; if he was going to do this crazy thing at all, then he didn't have much time.

He stepped back onto the ice.

The taxi dropped him off at the corner, a short walk from the department store.

'Is here okay, mate?' The man glanced up from the screen, where he had just been checking his emails. The Oxford Street pavements were heaving with last-minute Christmas shoppers, which was only to be expected given that the holiday was less than a week away.

'Yes, that's fine,' murmured the man, snapping shut his phone case and distractedly pulling a note from his wallet. He

never even glanced at the fare displayed on the cab's meter, just handed over his money, with an automatic 'Keep the change'.

The cabbie smiled at the generous tip, and quickly pocketed the money in case the man might have selected the wrong colour note by mistake. 'Happy Christmas, mate,' he added, as the man straightened from his window. The man just nodded, his attention now all on what had caught his eye when they'd pulled up at the corner. Outside the department store he was bound for there was a small brass band, or orchestra or ensemble (he never *did* manage to work out what the difference was). Whatever it was called, there were people with an assortment of musical instruments, positioned in a large semi-circle behind music stands, following the wildly enthusiastic arm gesticulations of their conductor. The sound of Christmas carols filled the street, drowning out the London traffic and making even those who chose not to stop and listen walk past with a nostalgic smile.

He began to walk towards the store, hampered by the flow of the crowds. But after only twenty metres, an uncomfortable tight and breathless sensation hit him like a small fiery comet right in the middle of his chest. It was so sudden and unexpected he drew to an abrupt halt, causing a tattooed pierced man in a leather jacket walking two paces behind to cannon right into him.

'You can't fucking do that in the middle of the street,' the tattooed man snapped, clearly not at all affected by the wave

of Christmas good cheer that was infecting the assembled crowds from the music.

'Sorry,' muttered the man, more worried by the disturbing recurrence of this unexplained symptom than he was by the man's anger. He was definitely coming down with something. This was the third time this had happened in the last couple of days. He reached out and laid a supporting hand on a nearby lamppost and waited for the feeling to pass. It was cold; the forecast had threatened snow showers for the afternoon and evening, yet he suddenly felt incredibly hot. He had to resist the urge to tear off his expensive woollen topcoat and the jacket of his suit. He lifted his free hand and ran it across his mouth and upper lip, and wasn't surprised at all to feel the small beads of perspiration that had broken out there. Bugger it. He must be coming down with that flu bug that had been doing the rounds at the office. Just his damn luck to catch something right before the Christmas break. Well, he still had just over a week before they were due to fly – that should give him plenty of time to get over it. He smiled, and patted his inside pocket where the airline tickets to New York – his wife's surprise Christmas present – were hidden. She had been wanting to go back for ages, but he'd always made an excuse and put it off. But what was the point of working as hard as the pair of them did, if you couldn't just blow the schedule, and treat yourself once in a while? He smiled again, imagining the look on her face when she saw what he had done. He'd booked them into the fanciest hotel, got great seats for a Broadway show and was prepared to sit

by patiently and let her sight-see or shop to her heart's content. And if that wasn't true love, then he didn't know what was.

In less than a minute the weird feeling in his chest had passed. He reminded himself to pick up a packet of paracetamols when he was in the store and slipped once more into the flow of foot traffic. There was a throng of people around the musical group, some were even singing along. It made reaching the glass revolving doors of the store a more lengthy procedure, forcing him to stand and wait his turn for several moments. His back was to the group, he wasn't a musician – far from it – but when the trumpet notes sounded out loud and clear behind him, he instantly recognised the instrument. He felt once more that familiar compulsion, which even after all these years he could never resist. His head turned and his eyes went straight to the person playing the gleaming brass instrument. It was involuntary, a reflex; he did it every time he was at a show, a concert, or any live performance. It was as though the strains of the instrument called him like a siren song which he was powerless to ignore. He'd done it for years, he probably always would. His eye lifted to the face of the musician playing the instrument on the bustling London street. It wasn't her. It never was.

The curtain of hot air blasting down from the overhead vents as he entered the store made him feel like he was entering a greenhouse. The smell of a hundred different perfumes and cosmetics swirling above the shoppers in a cloying cocktail of fragrances just compounded that. For a moment he

regretted his decision to come shopping in the middle of the day, but his diary was full of meetings and appointments right up until the office officially shut down for the holiday season, and this was the only free time he had over the next few days.

He was propelled away from the entrance on a wave of shoppers and went with the flow, until he found the section he was looking for. There were undoubted advantages in being over six foot tall, and being able to see over the heads of a crowd was definitely one of them. He managed to successfully weave among the ditherers and browsers, avoided being sprayed with some cologne he had no interest in sampling, and found the counter with the jewellery concession he wanted.

He was looking for one last Christmas gift for his wife, to join the collection of glossy bags that were already hidden at the back of his wardrobe. They were both guilty of going a little over the top for birthdays, anniversaries and, of course, at Christmas too. It would be easy to say that they did this because they were over-compensating for the thing that was missing from their lives, but the truth was much simpler than that. He just liked spoiling her.

He stood before the sparkling array of designer jewellery that was securely locked away within a glass cabinet. He'd been quietly pleased with himself for having remembered her casually commenting that she liked this particular range a few months ago. But he hadn't been expecting there to be such a vast selection to choose from. He was going to need some help.

'Can I help you?'

He looked up and smiled at the female assistant, who in turn took in the tall, extremely good-looking man with the piercing blue eyes standing at her station, and returned his smile with added interest. The man genuinely didn't notice the way she stepped a little closer to the counter or the slight dilation of her pupils as she looked at him. He wasn't arrogant or conceited, but her reaction wasn't unusual. Women were drawn to him; he'd never had to work hard in that department. *Except for once*, a voice he tried never to listen to reminded him. He doused the spark of the memory, the way you would a fire, instantly and thoroughly before it had a chance to catch. Damn that trumpet in the band, he thought irritably.

'Yes, please. If you could. I'm looking for a gift for my wife.'

The disappointment on her face was just visible before she dipped her head. 'What exactly were you thinking of? We have some lovely necklaces and bracelets that have just come in. Would you like to start there?' The man nodded with a small helpless shrug, and the assistant laughed. 'Don't worry, we help lots of husbands pick out a special gift for their wives. I'm sure we'll find something that's just perfect for her.'

Fifteen minutes later he was no closer to making a decision. He absently ran a finger inside the collar of his shirt as he bent low to study the jewellery laid out on a blue velvet cloth. It seemed to be getting incredibly warm in the store, and he wondered if the heat had just been ramped up. In addition, the high-voltage lamp hanging low over the

counter to showcase the jewellery was beating down with scorching intensity on his head. He had broken out in a hot sweat, drenching his entire body in clammy perspiration, and really wished he'd stopped to buy himself those paracetamols before doing his shopping. He was sure he would have felt better by now, if only he'd have popped a couple of those.

He had a sudden pressing desire to get out of the over-crowded, over-warm and over-priced store. He wanted – no, *needed* – fresh air, cold fresh air. He could feel a pulse pounding rapidly in his neck, and when he spoke it was a real effort to draw up enough oxygen to breathe at the same time.

'I'll take that one,' he said, jabbing his finger randomly at one of the necklaces.

'Certainly,' said the assistant lifting it up from the surrounding items. 'Would you like it gift-wr—' She broke off, her voice suddenly full of concern. 'Are you feeling alright?'

He tried to find a reassuring smile, but the effort triggered a curious shooting pain in his jaw. 'I'm fine,' he lied, bracing one arm on the counter, because all at once he didn't trust that his legs were up to the job of supporting him. 'It's just a little warm in here.'

'Can I get you a glass of water or something?'

The man nodded his reply, wanting to conserve the breath in his lungs, which seemed to be struggling to do their job. *What kind of flu is this?* he thought worriedly.

He never even heard the woman ask one of her colleagues to fetch a glass of water, because he was far too concerned

with not keeling over right there in the aisle, and making a total spectacle of himself in front of the hordes of shoppers.

'There's a chair over there,' the assistant volunteered, lightly touching her hand to his elbow and gesturing to a red velvet-covered seat beside the adjacent counter.

'No, that's okay,' he answered, unaware his words were coming out through lips that were rapidly turning more blue than pink. Now she was *really* worried.

'Would you like me to call the manager? He could make an announcement and see if there's a doctor in the store?'

'God, no,' said the man fervently. 'It's just a touch of flu. It'll pass in a minute.'

The woman looked highly doubtful and glanced around to see if his water had arrived. But there was no one to be seen except the shoppers, bustling and jostling against each other like koi carp at feeding time.

'Here,' the woman said, diving beneath the counter and producing her own handbag. 'Have this, I haven't opened it yet'. She pulled a small bottle of water from the depths of her bag and passed it across the counter.

'Thank you,' muttered the man weakly. It was a struggle to break the seal with one hand still occupied supporting his weight, but eventually the flimsy plastic tag snapped free, sending the bottle top flying through the air. He never did drink from it, though, because as he shakily lifted the bottle to his lips, a heavy crushing pain suddenly constricted his chest. It felt like a solid steel belt was being cinched tighter and tighter around him. Grey spots danced before his eyes

and his hand simply released the bottle, splashing a small torrent down onto the jewellery display. The man hit the floor at just about the same time as the small plastic container.

Ally

They say the sense of smell is the most evocative of all the senses for conjuring up emotions and memories. I think I agree with that. Because for me the smell of chicken nuggets will forever be intrinsically bound up with bad news. Actually, perhaps I should clarify that, not chicken nuggets, but *burnt* chicken nuggets. They were under the grill, one side golden brown, the other side almost there when the knock came at my door. For a second I thought he had forgotten his keys, but then I remembered him separating them from the fob that held the car keys that morning.

I could see two silhouetted shadows beyond the frosted glass of the front door. I glanced around for my purse. It was a little early in the evening for carol singers, and the shapes standing on my doorstep were quite tall, but these days when they were out of school uniform most teenagers looked like adults. They weren't teenagers, and they weren't carol singers either. But they *were* in uniform. As soon as I opened the door they both reached up and took off their hats, in perfect unison, as though they had practised it like synchronised swimmers in the police academy. Why do they do that, some abstract part of my mind wondered, even while I could feel one hand rising to my throat, as though preparing to stifle a

cry. My other hand was already gripping the door jamb for support.

'Mrs Taylor?'

I nodded.

'Mrs Alexandra Taylor?' And why did they do that? Why two questions instead of one? Why waste time when it was obvious I was the person they'd come calling for, by the blood that was rapidly draining from my face.

'What's wrong? Is it Joe? Has something happened?' What a stupid question; of course something had happened. It was there in their eyes, in the hats tucked neatly beneath their arms, in the pause they took before answering.

'I'm afraid there's been an accident,' the taller and slightly older officer began. I looked at the second man standing beside him, as though he might have different news, but he was just looking uncomfortable and decidedly nervous. I could tell this was the first time that he'd done this.

'But *I* have the car,' I said stupidly, because that was always my fear when the roads were icy.

'Not a car accident,' the policeman said gently, as though the bad news might somehow have diminished my mental capacity. Actually, it probably had. 'May we come in?' I wanted to say no, because I didn't want any of this to be real. I wanted to shut the door – slam it even – in their young sympathetic faces and tell them they had the wrong house, the wrong woman, the wrong man.

I staggered back into the hallway and they followed me, one of them reaching out to grasp my elbow to steady me.

'Joe. What's happened to him? What sort of an accident? Is he . . .'

'Your husband is alive. He's been taken to St Elizabeth's hospital. Our latest information is that his condition is listed as critical; and he's still unconscious.'

The smell of burning breadcrumbs filtered from the kitchen into the hall, permeating the almost incomprehensible words.

'The paramedics successfully resuscitated him at the scene, but obviously we're unclear at this time how long he wasn't breathing.'

Joe, not breathing? This had to be some sort of horrible mistake. Joe did good breathing. A little noisy at night sometimes, but I kind of liked that. He was an *excellent* breather.

'I don't understand. What's happened to my husband?' I cried, gripping the officer's blue-jacketed arms as though I wanted to shake the answer out of him.

'I'm sorry, we should have explained. I am afraid technically he drowned, Mrs Taylor,' was the totally inconceivable reply.

Somewhere, far in the distance, the kitchen smoke alarm began to peal.

Charlotte

'*Raging Poppy* or *Scarlet Harlot*?' asked the manicurist with a small grin. I studied the two bottles on the table in front of me. My hand hovered back and forth above them, before

plucking up the darker red shade. 'I think a trip to the Big Apple deserves a bold colour like this one,' I decided, handing it over.

'You're *sooo* lucky,' she sighed, shaking the varnish as vigorously as any cocktail bar tender. 'I'll be surprised if I get anything more than a supermarket toiletry set from *my* boyfriend. He'd never think of surprising me with a holiday.'

I wriggled in my seat, a little embarrassed that I had blurted out my secret to a girl I hardly knew, who I only saw on my regular visits to the salon. But I had to tell somebody; I was so excited, I just wanted to share it, and I couldn't risk it getting back to David that I'd found the one email he had forgotten to delete confirming the itinerary for my surprise Christmas present. And it wasn't like I was deliberately snooping or anything; I had literally stumbled across it while looking for something else. *'I am not the kind of wife who goes rifling through her husband's inbox. Truly, Your Honour.'* I smiled as I visualised myself held up for charges in the dock. Perhaps once . . . but that was a very long time ago; another lifetime, another me. A small niggling memory emerged from nowhere to pierce my bubble of good humour, dragging me back to a night not that long ago. Just a month or two back, in fact, when the sound of my husband mumbling in his sleep had woken me in the middle of the night. I stiffened involuntarily, causing the manicurist to brush bright red varnish onto the skin around my perfectly oval-shaped nail.

'Sorry,' I murmured. She looked up and managed to hide her look of irritation as she fixed the problem.

I'd been lucky that they had been able to fit me in at such short notice, but I was a regular, so they'd juggled around some appointments for me. At least I didn't have to worry about getting time off work. That's the benefit of owning your own business – the boss is always very reasonable about stuff like that.

I didn't doubt for a minute that David had executed the planning of this holiday down to the last smallest detail. He was a master of organisation in everything he did. He had to be with his job. So there would be no missing documentation, no lapsed travel insurance, no out-of-date passports. But he was still a typical man, who simply wouldn't get the necessity of a mani, pedi and of course a good Brazilian before any self-respecting woman could go away on holiday.

Not that I intended to let him know I'd found out about our post-Christmas trip to New York. He would be crushed if I ruined the surprise, especially as he'd obviously gone to a lot of effort to give me this perfect present. I wasn't going to do anything to spoil the moment for him. Which meant I had spent quite a bit of time in front of the bathroom mirror over the last few days, practising my totally surprised and delighted face, until I was sure I could convey exactly the right blend of astonishment and excitement.

I found myself smiling yet again, as I sat waiting for the first coat of varnish to dry. The manicurist was right: I *was* a lucky girl. I caught a glimpse of my reflection in one of the salon's many mirrors, correction – woman, not girl. When your last birthday took you out of your twenties, you probably couldn't

justify hanging on to the title of *girl* for much longer. I looked again at my reflection, and wondered if David was right, that I didn't look my age. My naturally blonde hair was cut in a sharp and stylish style that feathered around my face and followed the line of my jaw. It was subtly highlighted to look as though I had just returned from a fortnight in the sun. I had the time and money to spend on make-up, manicures, spray tans and facials. I knew I looked years younger than many of the women I passed in the street, women who were probably around the same age as me. Women who looked stressed and harried by life as they pushed prams along the pavements, hurrying to get to child-minders or nurseries, tugging impatiently on the hands of small children who seemed totally devoid of any sense of urgency. Lucky, lucky me.

Halfway through the second coat of varnish, the soporific piped background music was interrupted by a jarring ringtone coming from the direction of my feet. I glanced down and saw the sides of my tan leather bag vibrating gently, as though a tiny creature was trapped within it.

'I'm sorry,' I apologised, 'I meant to put it on silent.'

'It's no problem,' assured the manicurist, pausing with her brush in the air before continuing. 'Do you want to get it?'

I shook my head. 'No. It can go to voicemail. I'll just ignore it,' I said.

But the phone wouldn't stop. A few moments after the caller would have been directed to leave a message, it rang again. I frowned at my bag, as though that might be enough to make them go away.

'Are you *sure* you don't want to answer it?' the girl questioned.

I looked down at my brilliant red fingernails, fanned out on the table like the wing tips of an exotic butterfly. I couldn't touch anything for at least ten minutes without ruining them.

'No. Whoever it is can wait,' I declared. But apparently they couldn't, because my handbag remained silent for less than a minute before the phone within it started ringing again.

'I am *so* sorry about this,' I apologised.

The girl stopped to screw on the lid of the clear varnish she had just started to apply. 'Don't worry. It happens all the time. Would you like me to answer it for you, as your nails are still wet?'

There's something a little unsettling about watching another woman go through your handbag, and I was much happier when she had finally extracted the phone and held it within her palm. She peered at the display. 'It's David,' she read 'Is he your—'

'Husband, yes,' I said, biting my lip. He probably assumed I was still at the office, because I hadn't told him I was taking a few hours off to prepare for a trip I wasn't supposed to know about.

'Would you mind just telling him that I'm tied up and that I'll call him back in twenty minutes or so?' David didn't know all the members of my team, so with luck he'd think he was talking to one of the juniors.

'Of course,' she replied, pressing the button to accept the call.

'Don't say anything about where I am,' I whispered just as she opened her mouth to speak. 'And nothing at all about New York,' I added in a panicked rush.

I sat back, feeling guilty, as though I'd been caught out cheating on him or something, which was totally crazy. As if I'd *ever* do anything like that.

'Hello. No, this isn't her, she can't come to the phone right now, I'm afraid.' A small silence followed, and because I was studying her carefully while she lied to my husband on my behalf, I saw the precise moment when she became aware that something was wrong. The realisation flooded over her face like a blush.

'What is it, what did he say?' I asked urgently.

The manicurist held out the phone to me. 'It's not him, it's some woman.'

There was no reason to think of her name, but in that brief millisecond as I leaned across the table, it was the only one that crossed my mind. The manicurist held the phone to my ear.

'Hello, who is this?' I heard the stiffness in my voice.

'My name is Marie, I work at Sunderson's Department Store. Am I talking to Mrs Williams?'

Even as I heard myself confirming that she was, my brain was scrolling, computer-fast, down a list of possible reasons for this call. It settled on the only one that seemed logical. David must have lost his phone and this woman had found it somewhere. I liked that solution; it made sense.

'Mrs Williams, your husband asked me to call you—'

'He did? I'm sorry. I don't understand,' I interrupted, my theory falling to the floor where it promptly shattered.

'He was in the store, shopping for – well, that's not important – but he . . . he wasn't feeling very well.'

In the time it took for me to jerk my hand up, snatch my phone from the manicurist – smudging all my nails in the process – a series of snapshots flashed through my mind: David pushing aside his meal last night, having scarcely touched it; David needing to stop between flights to get his breath climbing the stairs to our flat; his face as he kissed me goodbye that morning, his colour a little paler than usual.

'Is David there? Can you put him on the phone please?'

'I can't do that right now, Mrs Williams,' the assistant said with a small choked noise, which bizarrely made it sound as though she was crying.

Fear slid over and around me like a cloak. 'Why not? Where is he? Is he there?'

The woman hesitated before replying. 'Yes, he is, but he can't get to the phone right now.'

'Why not?'

'Because the paramedics are with him,' the unknown woman using David's phone continued. 'They're lifting him onto a stretcher right now.'

'Paramedics? Why does he need paramedics?' There was genuine panic in my voice now. 'Why is he on a stretcher? Please, tell me what's happened to him.'

I could hear someone talking in the background, and the woman took a second or two to reply. 'They've just told me

they're taking him to St Elizabeth's and that you should meet them there.'

'Why are they taking him to hospital? I don't understand. He's just coming down with the flu or something.'

The woman sounded almost apologetic to have to be the one to break it to me. It was beyond wrong that I was the last one to know. 'I don't think it's the flu, Mrs Williams,' said the woman kindly, 'I don't want to alarm you, but I think your husband may have had a heart attack.'