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Opening Extract from...

No Turning Back

Written by Tracy Buchanan

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For my wonderful mum

Prologue

The First One

I shift my legs so I can peer up at the light. It sends shivers of pain along the tendons in my neck, down my calves and along my shoulder. But it's worth it, a brief respite from the darkness.

The light is like nectar: soft yellow, swirling with dust particles. I open my mouth, imagine drinking it, almost feel it slipping down my parched throat and filling me with a luminosity that might heal my bruises.

There's a faint glow of light and a shadow moves above. I think about the moment I crossed paths with him.

Oh God, is this really happening? I shake my head to somehow control my thoughts and my cheek scrapes against the brick, skin tearing, pain burning.

The sound of my voice echoes up the narrow space, bouncing off the walls then back again, seeming to wrap tight around me, stifling me.

Then there. The shadow again. A slight pause.

He's standing above, his dark form blocking some of the glow.

My heart pounds, a bird trying to flutter its way out of a cage. I'm breathing fast and heavy, my bare shoulders scraping the brick with each movement.

But I keep looking up, not caring about the pain. He hunches down, his pale fingers curling around the wooden slats above me. I hear his breath, deep and low.

My own breath quickens in response, rasping, heart flapping flapping flapping.

Then he lies on his belly to look through the slats. I crunch against the wall, curl myself inwards, my fringe falling over my forehead.

One eye, blue and heavily lashed, blinks down at me.

'I can see you!' he says, voice echoing towards me. Panic flutters inside. 'Can you hear me?' he asks.

I clamp my hand over my mouth.

'Please,' he says again, voice weaker with each word he utters. 'I'm hurt, it's really bad. Please help me.'

I quickly shove my hand down the slim gap at my side, fumbling for the door handle. The door clicks, air rushing in and I stride out, his cries echoing after me as I lock the door then double check it.

I have to be careful, the boy might find a way to get down here, even escape.

And that just won't do, it won't do at all.

Chapter One

1 July 2015

Coast to Coast. Your Say Question of the Day: Has the war on drugs failed?

Caller A: 'Yes, it bloody has! I was mugged last week by a druggie, the government's too lenient.' (Fiona, 47)

Caller B: 'No. I'm a recovering addict now working in rehabilitation. I've really noticed a change actually, especially over how drug addiction is now seen as a health issue.' (Ryan, 27)

Caller C: 'It's out of our control with all these immigrants flooding into the country!' (Dawn, 37)

The screen blurred in front of Anna's eyes. She put her hands to her face briefly, the smell of her little girl still on her palms: the sweet scent of baby lotion and that indescribable Joni smell. It

brought with it the sight of her baby's smile, flowering first in her brown eyes before spreading to those cherub cheeks and pink lips. Anna felt her whole being ache to be with her. She was only two hours into her first day back at work after eight months of maternity leave and she was already desperate to be back with her daughter.

'Thoughts, Anna?' She looked up to see Heather, her new producer, giving her a stern look through the glass window dividing them. Anna quickly took a gulp of her coffee, caffeine's magic taking effect. The memory of Joni's smile faded away, her scent replaced by the tart smell of coffee beans.

She leaned forward and pressed one of the buttons on her microphone. 'Let's take caller C out,' she said.

Heather frowned. 'I'm not sure that's wise. In the months you've been away we've found immigration calls go down well with the public, really puts fire into their bellies.'

'I've found in the past *seven years* I've been presenting the show, it's best to keep the focus tight. This phone-in isn't about immigration, it's about the success or failure of the government's fight against drug abuse.'

'I understand what you're saying,' Heather said, tucking a wisp of black hair behind her ear that had dared escape her trademark tight bun. 'But I'd like to keep it in. I was a senior news reporter at Radio 4, remember, Anna? An investigation I did on this very subject won me an award. I have an *instinct* about these things.'

Anna suppressed her irritation. Every opportunity Heather could get, she'd bring up her investigative reporter days. The two women held each other's gazes. Heather had been appointed as

Anna's new producer after the station's much-loved producer had retired a few months before Anna went on maternity leave. From the moment she'd started, Heather had got people's backs up, challenging everything Anna said, making it clear to everyone she wouldn't pander to the presenters. Some of the admin girls had told Anna they thought it was because Heather believed that as a woman, she wouldn't get the respect she deserved unless she played up her aggressive side. Anna wasn't so sure. To her, Heather was simply what her gran called a 'real-life dementer', somebody who sucked the happiness and light out of any encounter.

'Look, Heather,' Anna said, unable to stop herself yawning. She'd never felt quite so exhausted. After a spate of sleeping well, Joni had chosen the night before Anna returned to work to wake every hour. Maybe it was the heat, or maybe she was just going through a bad patch. Either way, the timing couldn't be worse. 'Things might have been a certain way while I was on maternity leave. But there's a reason Coast to Coast's listening figures doubled after I joined.' Anna cringed inside at the boastful remark. But she had to stand her ground, show Heather she too had made a success of things. She'd watched Coast to Coast grow from a barely known regional station covering just one small area while working out of a debilitated warehouse on the Docks, to a popular south-coast station attracting enough listeners and ad revenue to rent a glossy studio by the sea.

Anna peered out of the large window lining the corridor outside. The studio occupied a sought-after spot next to the village's seafront shops and cafes, its cocoon-shaped glass-fronted building reflecting the waves in its shiny windows. *She'd* played a role in securing enough money to pay for this building.

She looked Heather in the eye. 'The fact is, I'm back now so let's find a way to get those listening figures back up again.'

Heather bristled. 'I wouldn't quite say you're *back*, Anna.'

'What do you mean?'

Heather's black eyes glistened with spite. 'You know what I mean, you're clearly not with it today. Having a baby can take its toll.'

Anna looked at her in shock. 'What does having a baby have to do with all this?'

'What I'm trying to say is…well, look at you,' Heather said, flinging her hand towards Anna. 'You're exhausted.'

'Everyone's exhausted, Heather! We get here for five in the morning, for God's sake.'

Anna tried to keep the tremble out of her voice. She didn't want to give Heather the satisfaction of seeing she'd got to her. But the truth was, she *was* exhausted and she *was* worried it would affect her performance. Juggling work and looking after Joni plus everything else that had happened the past few weeks had been difficult.

Her mobile phone buzzed. She took the chance to break Heather's gaze and look down at her phone. She'd been like this since arriving that morning, any little beep from her phone making her wonder if it was the nursery calling. Even the fact her mother-in-law owned the nursery didn't stop Anna worrying. To make matters worse, she'd have to turn the phone off when the show went on air. What if there was an emergency? Sure, the nursery had the main switchboard number but it didn't feel the same.

Anna spent an unhealthy amount of time thinking of

emergencies when it came to Joni. Falls, cuts, choking, even accidental strangulation. Her friend Suzanne reassured her that everyone had them. But Anna couldn't help but wonder if *everyone* imagined the horrors in quite as much detail as she did.

Anna quickly clicked into her phone, relieved to see it was a text message from her gran.

Knock them dead, darling, you can do it. And remember, drink lots of coffee…and ignore the dementer! x

She smiled to herself, remembering the first time she'd got her gran a mobile phone, five Christmases ago. She'd looked at it in disgust, told Anna if she needed someone she'd walk to their house and talk to them. But now it never left her side and she seemed to have an uncanny knack of messaging Anna just when she needed her most.

Anna quickly typed back a message: *Two cups consumed already. See you later. x*

Anna looked back up at Heather. 'I've just had a brilliant idea for our next phone-in.'

Heather raised an eyebrow. 'Yes?'

'We can ask the question: do new mothers get discriminated against at work?'

Heather's face flushed and the assistant producer behind Heather suppressed a smirk.

'I'd take caller C out,' a voice said from the doorway. Anna peered up to see her co-presenter Nathan. 'We have a replacement for caller C, right?' he asked Heather.

Anna smiled to herself as she noticed the brief look of irritation on Heather's face.

'I'm not sure we need one, Nathan,' Heather said. 'We—'

'This is about drug legislation, remember, not immigration,' Nathan said. 'Keep the focus tight.'

Heather blinked rapidly as Anna's smile deepened. Nathan gave Anna a quick wink and strode in.

'Maybe we can replace it with this one?' Anna said, tapping her keyboard until one of the rejected callers lit up on their screens. 'Sanjeet talking about how the younger generation pop pills like they're sweets?'

'Perfect,' Nathan said, green eyes smiling as he sat down across from her. 'Bloody new mums, full of good ideas.'

Anna did a faux eye roll. 'Sexist bastard.'

Heather turned away from them both, crossing her arms. She didn't argue with him. *Nobody* agued with housewives' favourite, Nathan Wheeler. He'd once worked for a big national radio station but couldn't bear the commute any more. So three years ago he joined Coast to Coast as it gained in popularity and his presence further cemented the station's success. Anna and Nathan were the ideal co-presenters.

He was dressed casually today in a white polo t-shirt and blue jeans, his fair hair sticking up at the back from the way he criss-crossed his hands behind his head while on air. He liked to lean back in his chair, long legs stretched out on the table, a look of concentration on his face as he listened to someone moaning about something or another. That was Nathan's skill, the fact he *really* listened. That and his boyish good looks which helped when the station's publicity team pushed him as the 'poster boy' of the station.

As for Anna, she was the rough to his smooth with her gravelly voice and quick-witted responses to difficult, sometimes abusive,

listeners and guests. She might not be pushed as the face of the station like Nathan was, but she'd grown a reputation for perfectly reflecting the public's mood with her own opinions. It wasn't intentional. She just had what her dad used to call the 'crowd's gut': a natural instinct to know what the zeitgeist was at any given time.

Nathan leaned towards Anna. 'So good to have you back.'

She smiled. 'Thanks, Nathan, it's good to be back.'

And the fact was, despite missing Joni, the exhaustion and contending with Heather, it *did* feel good to be back doing what she knew best: radio.

Nathan switched off the speaker system so only Anna could hear him. 'So you accepted an offer on the house then?'

'Yep,' Anna said, trying to hide the jolt of pain she felt when she thought of it. 'We'll be out in a month.'

'That's it? It's definitely over between you and Guy?'

Anna took a sip of coffee, clutching the handle of the mug tight to stop Nathan seeing the way her hand trembled. 'I think selling the house is pretty final, don't you?'

'I'm so sorry, Anna.'

'It's fine,' she said, shrugging, trying to pretend it really was fine when it was so far from that. 'It's for the best. I didn't think that at the start but now I see it really is.'

'Still hurts like a bugger though, doesn't it?'

She felt her sinuses sting at the threat of tears. She saw it all over again in her mind, Guy softly pressing his lips against Joni's head three months before, whispering he'd see her very soon. Anna had begged him to stay then instantly felt foolish, desperate, *weak*. She hated appearing weak. But the fact was, Joni was too

young to watch her father walk away, just five months old at the time. And Anna had never dreamed of being a single mother, a *divorcee*, it just wasn't how she'd envisaged her life unfolding. Yes, their marriage had been having difficulties for a while. But why wouldn't he fight for it like she was willing to?

She surprised herself now as a sob escaped her. She quickly clamped her hand over her mouth.

'Come here,' Nathan said, putting his arms out to her. She hesitated a moment, peering through the glass divider at the production studio. But Heather and the assistant producer had their backs to them, peering at the computer screens. So Anna sank into Nathan's arms, taking comfort from the familiar musky smell of his aftershave. 'Cry all you want,' he said into her ear. 'I might even have some mascara in my drawer from that photoshoot I did with the *Ridgmont Waters Chronicle* a while back.'

She laughed into his polo shirt. 'I'm just tired, that's all.'

'Are you sure you need to be here?' he asked, looking down at her. 'Might be better you get yourself home, pick up that gorgeous baby of yours and have a duvet day in your new home. I can do the show alone.'

Anna pulled away and shook her head, the ends of her long brown hair skimming her arms. 'Absolutely not, I've only been back a couple of hours. I'm fine, really. Just first-day-back jitters, that's all.'

Nathan tilted his head as he examined Anna's face.

'What?' Anna frowned, putting her hand to her cheek. Were there still flakes on her face from the stale blueberry muffin she'd gulped down for breakfast that morning?

'You're a tough cookie, always have been,' he said.

Tough cookie.

That's what everyone said when they discovered what had happened to her when she was a kid. You go through all the stuff she had, you survive it and what are you left with? Comparisons to a biscuit. Thing is, she wasn't feeling so tough at the moment. Did that mean she could crumble any minute?

'I'm not the only working mother in the world, Nathan.'

'I know. But with everything going on at home too…'

'It's hard,' Anna said, making her voice strong. 'But I'll get through it. As long as Joni is okay, that's all that matters.' She looked at the photo she had of Joni. She'd taken it during one of their regular afternoon walks along the beach. She was sitting on the pebbles, her yellow sundress grubby, her dark hair a tangled mess around her red cheeks, brown eyes sparkling.

Nathan followed Anna's gaze. 'She's adorable.'

Anna's face softened. 'She's everything.'

He nodded as he turned the speaker system back on. 'Keep that strong in your mind, all right? That's all that matters.'

Anna looked at the photo on Nathan's desk of his twin boys: one fair like Nathan, the other dark like Val, his wife.

'One minute to airtime,' Heather's uptight voice blurted into their ears.

Nathan smiled. 'Here we go.'

'Here we go.' Anna took a long deep breath as Heather started counting down. 'Five…four…three…'

The show's intro tune pounded in Anna's ears, giving her strength.

'Two…one…'

Anna opened her eyes, a smile set on her face. 'Morning,