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No One Saw It Coming



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd
1 London Bridge Street,
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, D01 C9W8, Ireland

First published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2023
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-847186-6 (HB)
ISBN: 978-0-00-847187-3 (TPB)

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Typeset in Sabon LT Std by
Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and Bound in the UK using 100% Renewable Electricity
at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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They told me she was dead, but I've found her.

They said my mother was dead too.

She is now.

I'm staring at a photograph of her funeral – who photographs funerals? – and I'm wondering who all the people are. My sister is there, described as the only daughter. With our father being dead – damned straight to hell, I presume (and hope) – she is the chief mourner. She'll be forty-four by now. How time flies.

The last time I saw her she was three years old and screaming not to be wrenched from my arms. I knew better than to scream, but I couldn't help it. It's hard for a ten-year-old to stop themselves, in spite of knowing what will happen if they do.

She's grown into a beautiful woman. That is no surprise. I always knew she would. Our mother was beautiful too.

I more closely resemble our father, but in looks alone. I have nothing of his character. I have done everything in my power to prevent that.

This photograph shows my sister surrounded by people who care for her, and from what it says in the accompanying piece, they all cared for our mother too.

They didn't know the woman the way I did.

Apparently she became a paediatrician, a healer of children, which is such a screeching irony that it's as if every instrument in an orchestra is hitting the wrong note.

My sister's life has been very different to mine. I have no idea if she's ever thought about me, if she even remembers me.

I really don't care about my mother dying. I'm glad she's gone. I have no desire to confront what she was, or what she did. She might have ended up doing good, but she was an evil woman once. No one knows that better than I do.

I'm sorry that my sister never came to find me, although there's a good chance she thought I was dead.

I'm not. In fact, finally, after all these years, I'm close enough to see her whenever I choose, although she can't see me. Not yet, anyway, but soon, when the time is right, she will know all about me.

I hope it will bring us both nothing but joy.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

'You know, I can't help wondering how you're feeling right now.'

Hanna Madden blinked with surprise. She hadn't been aware of anyone close by, much less studying her. She had thought she was alone and, for the moment at least, unobserved.

She was standing in the doorway of the Orangery, gazing out over Goldney Hall gardens, where a very elegant evening party was in full swing. Twilight was bathing everyone in an almost dreamlike glow; small bursts of laughter seemed to float above the low rumble of voices, as graceful and captivating as the flowering lilies basking in the Dutch canal. Hanna had always loved this venue, with its lush, flowing lawns, richly foliaged trees and neoclassical statues – a truly splendid oasis at the heart of Clifton, one of Bristol's most exclusive suburbs.

'I'm sorry,' she said politely to the woman who'd joined her, 'have we met?'

The woman smiled winningly and put out a hand to shake. 'Riona Byrne,' she said, 'and I admit I feel as though I know you. Maybe our paths crossed in a past life?'

Hanna took the hand, not entirely sure whether this was

a light-hearted tease, or if Ms Byrne actually meant it. She was Irish, judging by the accent and name, and had a cultured, ironic sort of air about her. Her thick, beautiful red hair was shoulder length and naturally wavy, held from her oval face by a navy velvet Alice band; her eyes, gentle and grey, were humorous and direct. Her smile was friendly and yet Hanna was sensing a hidden hesitancy in its depths, as if she were half-afraid of being rebuffed.

'Now, that's an interesting notion,' Hanna responded with a genial laugh. She was used to putting people at their ease, was good at it, in fact. 'I wonder where the past life might have been?' she mused. 'And was it during this incarnation, or an earlier one?'

Clearly pleased to be taken up on the playful challenge, Riona said, 'I guess the possibilities are endless and not a little fascinating.'

Hanna laughed again, her gentle blue eyes lighting with mischief, her fair-skinned and lovely face flushing with pleasure. 'Seriously, have we met before?' she asked. 'You do seem . . . familiar? If so, I'm sorry for not remembering,' she quickly added. It was rude, pompous even, to have forgotten someone's name, never mind their existence, and she never felt comfortable trying to excuse it with the fact that she and her husband had such a wide and varied network of friends, family and business associates.

'Ah, Hanna! There you are.' Emerging from a nearby clutch of dark-suited men came the man of the hour, her husband, Jack. Though not conventionally handsome – his eyes were too narrow, his nose too large and jaw too prominent to make him so, his imposing height, broad shoulders and high-wattage smile rarely failed to make him

stand out in a crowd. They were also known to cause several female hearts to beat a little faster. The fact that he was one of the most prominent businessmen in the region also earned him a great deal of attention, and respect, for he was known to be a tough, but fair-minded and generous employer.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' she asked as he reached her. 'I'd like to introduce you to . . . ?'

'Jack, over here!' someone shouted. It was the newly elected Metro mayor, whose campaign Jack had robustly supported; Jack maintained his smile as he muttered under his breath, 'Is it time yet to let him know who's boss?'

Supressing a laugh as she glanced at Riona, Hanna said, 'Way too early. And don't forget, you like him.'

He grinned. 'Why aren't you mingling?' he asked, already starting to leave.

'I am.' She would have added that she'd just come from the ladies and had made a new acquaintance on the way, but he'd already gone and anyway it seemed a bit presumptuous to make such a claim of Riona Byrne. 'Sorry,' she said to her, 'I'll introduce you later when he's less in demand. Unless you already know him?' No, she couldn't – Jack would never have been so rude as to ignore someone he knew.

Appearing amused, Riona said, 'This is the first time our paths have actually crossed – and is there ever a time when he isn't in demand?'

Hanna rolled her eyes. 'Not really.'

Riona smiled. 'So this evening is to celebrate him taking the title of West Country Businessman of the Year for the fourth time in a row?'

Hanna regarded her openly, enjoying the gentle mockery

that seemed to have no edge to it, only a smooth, easy sense of irony. 'We are indeed,' she confirmed. 'He'll tell you he doesn't put any store by these accolades, but between us, I know he enjoys them.' Then realizing she could be talking to a journalist, she wished she could take it back.

'And what about you?' Riona probed. 'Does it bother you to be famous?'

Hanna had to laugh. 'I'd hardly describe myself as that,' she countered, giving a wave to someone she knew, 'but since you ask, there are times when we'd both prefer a little more anonymity.'

In fact there had been plenty of occasions during the twenty-three years of their marriage when they'd wanted nothing more than to shut out the rest of the world, but she certainly wasn't going to get into any of them now. Her eyes alighted briefly on a male figure in a group beneath the late flowering mulberry tree and her heart contracted. She knew he'd been watching her, had felt it since his arrival, but he wasn't looking her way now.

Riona said, 'I guess I'm hogging your company when I'm sure everyone here wants to talk to you.'

Hanna's gaze roamed the elegantly dressed clusters of people spread out around the lawns and colourful flower beds and said wryly, 'They seem to be managing just fine. Can I ask, are you a reporter?' she said.

Riona's eyebrows rose in surprise. 'No. I'm sorry if I gave that impression.'

Hanna said, 'So what do you do, Mrs . . . Ms . . .?'

'Actually, it's Doctor, but please call me Riona. And is it OK to call you Hanna?'

'Of course. Everyone does, even people who don't know me. Jack often goes for Han, or even Hanny – very annoying.

I tend to call him Jacky if he does that.' She wanted to ask what sort of doctor Riona was, and who she had come with, but was afraid it might sound as though she was challenging her right to be there. She didn't remember seeing her name on the guest list.

In timely answer to one of her questions, Sebastian – Seb – Goodman, Professor of Social and Political Theory from Bristol University, and one of Jack's oldest and dearest friends, came to drape an arm around Riona's shoulders.

'I see you two have met,' he declared. Hanna knew him well enough to tell from his slightly flushed face and glittering blue eyes how attracted he was to Riona Byrne. He was quite a looker himself, with his thick blond hair, chiselled jaw and pretty good physique, but since his wife's passing two years ago, he'd shown no interest in meeting anyone else. 'How are you, Han? Looking great, as uuj,' he said, kissing her lightly on the cheek. 'Did Riona tell you she's a fan?'

Wincing, Riona said, 'It's not exactly what I said. More an admirer,' she informed Hanna.

Pulling a contrite face, Seb said, 'I've obviously misspoken, so forgive me, ladies. Can I get you both a drink? Your glasses are empty and I have it on good authority that the vino on offer is pretty easy on the palate.'

It was Badger's Bluff, a chardonnay from a vineyard right here in the centre of Clifton – Jack and Hanna liked to keep things local where they could – and she was pleased to hear Seb, a known wine buff, talking up the vintage.

Aware of Jack's repeated glances in her direction, and others trying to get her attention now, Hanna said, 'Time for me to mingle, but it was lovely to meet you, Riona. I hope you're staying for the speeches.' Her eyes shone with mischief and, to her delight, Riona picked up on it.

'Wouldn't miss them for the world,' she assured her with a dryness that made Hanna laugh out loud.

As she moved away, soon swamped by other guests (a few minutes with her was the next best thing to an audience with Jack), she could feel herself being watched by the man beneath the mulberry tree. She took care to stay away, was determined not to look at him at all, but his scrutiny was like a tether, trying to reel her in. She was strong enough to resist, at least for now.

Everyone was here, from the uniformed High Sheriff (a position both Jack and his now-deceased father had held at various times over the years); all three mayors – Lord, Metro and City; at least two dozen members of the exclusive Society of Merchant Venturers, Jack being amongst their number; at least two High Court judges; several prominent barristers; the *grand maître* of the Bordeaux *Commanderie*; and many of the city's leading businessmen and -women.

As she listened, laughed, commiserated and flirted her way around the party, she found herself glancing about for Riona Byrne. She saw that she and Seb were talking to Bob Reeves, former president of the Rugby Football Union and grower of Badger's Bluff.

'Ah ha! Here you are. I'm so sorry we're late.'

Recognizing the breathless voice of one of her dearest friends, Hanna turned to embrace her. 'Hello you,' she said delightedly. 'Traffic bad?'

'Tell me about it.' Andee Lawrence kept her hands on Hanna's shoulders as they gazed into one another's eyes, wanting to intuit if there were any secrets to be shared, problems to solve, or good news to celebrate?

Andee was around the same age as Hanna, slightly

taller but just as slender and, where Hanna's hair was a delicate strawberry-blonde, Andee's glorious shoulder-length curls were exotically raven. It was her arresting aquamarine eyes that were her most compelling feature, however. They drew a person in instantly, and they also never missed a thing, which had made Andee an excellent detective in the past – and, albeit in a less formal capacity, still did.

She looked around, clocking the other guests, many of whom she knew, if only slightly.

'Where's Graeme?' Hanna asked, referring to Andee's partner; his property development company was currently partnering with Jack's on a Ministry of Defence project based in North Devon.

'He got waylaid as we came in,' Andee replied, 'and I'm sure he's found Jack by now. Who's that over there?' she asked, nodding in the direction of the mulberry tree. 'He seems very interested in . . . you?'

Hanna said, 'I'm sure it's you he's looking at, wondering who you are.'

Andee was amused. 'And he is . . .?' she prompted.

'Hugo Astor. He's heading up our in-house legal team now that Ernst Samuels has retired.'

Andee's eyebrows rose. 'He's very . . . *physical*,' she commented dryly.

Hanna spluttered a laugh. That was certainly one way of describing the man who oozed masculinity to the point of carnality. In fact, in her opinion – despite his looks – he was a pretty loathsome character: cocksure, self-satisfied, egocentric, pompous and, though it pained her to admit it, apparently brilliant at his job.

Wanting to steer Andee away before he realized they

were discussing him, she signalled to a waiter and took two full flutes of champagne from his tray.

'Lovely to see you,' she said, clinking her glass against Andee's.

'Likewise,' Andee responded. 'Are you sure it's OK for us to stay for a few nights?'

'Are you kidding? I've been looking forward to it.' It wasn't as if they didn't have the room – they had so much of it at their family home in the Chew Valley that sometimes she and Jack had to text or call to find out where the other was in the house or the grounds.

'Excellent, so we'll have plenty of time to chat.' Andee sipped her drink and made a swift survey of the gathering. 'I see the local high-fliers are out in number,' she commented.

'Still mostly white, over-privileged and entitled,' Hanna muttered, 'but generally good at heart.' She added with a smile, 'So how is life in Kesterly-on-Sea?'

Andee groaned. 'Crazy, but it's that time of year. Tourists fighting for deckchairs and spilling all over the pavements; cafés and pubs struggling to keep up with the crowds; teens beach-partying into the small hours . . . Frankly, it's good to get away for a spell.'

Wryly, Hanna said, 'And presumably no one's gone missing, or been murdered or kidnapped, so your extra-special services are not currently required?'

Andee smiled. 'Correct. Now, who's here that I should meet? Either of the children around, by the way?'

'Leo's is in Italy,' Hanna replied, referring to her and Jack's twenty-one-year-old son, who had recently graduated from Birmingham Uni with a 2:1 in business development. 'And Caitlin's taken the baby to stay with friends in Wales for a while.' Even as she spoke her daughter's name, she

could feel her heart tightening and twisting. Their rebellious eighteen-year-old was a uni no-show and regular pot-smoker, as well as mother to adorable eighteen-month-old Sofia. Much of the time Sofia's care fell to Jack's stepmother, Jenny. 'And what about your two?' she asked, certain already that Andee's perfect two – both a little older than Leo and Cait, and from her first marriage – were excelling in their chosen fields.

Before Andee could answer, Jack and Graeme swooped in on them, closely followed by a photographer who wanted shots of the four together – then of Hanna and Jack, followed by just Jack, then Hanna. By the time it was all over, Andee and Graeme had joined other friends, and Jack was talking to the party organizers about where to stand to deliver his speech.

The sun had dropped below the horizon by now, and all attention was starting to focus on Jack as he took his place in front of the Orangery. Hanna walked back a few paces and slipped quietly into the shadows, feeling the pull of her favourite part of the gardens. For most it would be the grotto – a spectacular man-made cave dug into the far hillside. Its walls and ceilings were decorated with hundreds of species of seashells and coral that Thomas Goldney III had transported from the Caribbean during the eighteenth century. There were moves afoot now to rename this historic hall and gardens, given Goldney's links to the triangular slave trade that had firmly placed him and many Bristol merchants amongst the wealthiest men of their time.

Moving past the grotto, Hanna wandered up the gentle slope of the hillside, passing the tower with its smooth stone walls and castellated rooftop. She arrived at a long, grassy walkway raised above the gardens, with the city

spread out below. In daylight, and in winter when there were no leaves on the trees, there were spectacular views down to the harbour and all the way across to Dundry Hill in the distance, the start of the Mendips.

She was lit only by moonlight as she slipped in front of the statue of Androcles, the lion wrapped around his sculpted body like a weathered cloak. She inhaled the fresh grassy scent of the nearby orchard and warm night air, and could hear Jack's voice far behind, though not what he was saying. She didn't need to listen; she knew the speech well, having helped to write it. She wondered if he'd noticed her walking away, if anyone had.

She was invisible to the crowd now, melding into the statue's shadow, her pale dress making her appear almost ethereal.

She didn't hear anyone approaching, no footsteps in the soft earth, no whisper of breath or rustle of clothing. She was only aware of him coming to lean against the plinth beside her, when gravity seemed to disappear and her senses began to swim.

Neither of them spoke, or touched, merely stood motionless and silent, the sounds of the party distant and strange, as though they belonged to another world. She could feel the thickening beat in her chest, was aware of her breath, shallow and fearful. She was as alive to him as if his hands and mouth were on her and he was pushing the force of his desire all the way into her.

'You shouldn't be here,' she croaked.

There was a smile in his voice as he said, 'But you knew I'd come.'

She could tell that he was looking at her, but she couldn't look at him. She knew if she did she would lose control;

it was already slipping away. She wanted him with an urgency that could so easily override everything else; that always did.

The last time they'd been in these gardens, less than a fortnight ago, at a mutual friend's wedding, they'd walked along this grassy bank to the rotunda, where he'd taken her, swiftly, violently, almost without feeling, his brutal hands clasped around her hips, hawk-like eyes alert to discovery. It had been as if he were doing her a favour, bringing her to a breathless, shattering climax before walking away. It was always like that and she couldn't get enough of it.

She knew already that it was going to be no different this evening.