My Husband's Killer

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For Hattie, who always believed in me

Chapter 1

Liz

Today is my husband's funeral, but my grief has been stolen from me by what I've just found in the pocket of his shorts. Instead of crying, I am burning with rage. I kneel on the floor, his weekend bag still open at my side, swallowing down nausea. I don't have time for this now. My children, Ethan and Josh, are downstairs looking younger than their eleven and nine years, upright and silent in their formal clothes. They are waiting for me to go down and make it OK for them. That's what I have to do every day for the rest of their lives – try and make it OK that their daddy has died. Andrew has gone. There's no one else who can help me.

I close my eyes and shove the shorts back into the bag. It will have to wait. I paint on a smile and try to make my footsteps sounds light and breezy as I run downstairs.

'Right, boys! Time to go.'

In the church, the boys sit either side of me, huddling in as close as they can possibly get, my arms enfolding

them in the vain hope of providing some comfort. The vicar's voice echoes up to the rafters, sonorously reading out the eulogy I wrote, the eulogy I put my whole heart into. I sat up at the kitchen table late into the night, crafting every word, retrieving every memory I could, contacting his family and old friends to ensure I didn't leave out any vital facet. I don't hear a word. All I can think of is my hand meeting that small packet. When she has finished, my husband's best friend Owen stands and makes his way from the pew behind me to the lectern, a couple of sheets of A4 paper in his hand. He stands for a moment looking at the papers, clears his throat and begins.

'I knew Andrew for over thirty years, since our school days at Winchester College. I was a scholarship boy, out of my depth and petrified. The other boys were either indifferent to my plight, or minded to laugh at me. Andrew was different. He took me under his wing, and that was where I stayed. Until now.' His voice cracks and he takes a moment to compose himself. He tells a couple of anecdotes about their school days that raise a few gentle laughs, and then moves on to talk about Andrew meeting me.

'Liz and Andrew were a great match, and I watched as first love, and then fatherhood, transformed him.'

Ethan and Josh huddle in even tighter. I screw my eyes shut, unable to feel the way I want, and ought, to feel. What I found this morning prevents the uncomplicated tears of grief that should be falling. Fury rises in

me, hot and uncontrollable. My anger is partly directed at Andrew, because it has thrown everything I thought I knew about him into total disarray. He wasn't perfect, sure, but who is? But I never once suspected this. My ire is mostly reserved, however, for someone else, because what I found indicates there must have been a someone else. I don't know who she is, but what I do know is that she is sitting here in this church.

We finish with a hymn to which I hardly bother to mouth along, having let the vicar choose it, and a final prayer committing Andrew's body, wherever it may be, to a God he had little belief in. Originally I had mooted a non-religious ceremony but Andrew's parents had objected, and as I didn't have any strong feelings either way a church service seemed the right thing to do.

The boys and I are the first to leave with Andrew's parents following behind, his mother wailing and clinging to her husband who has aged ten years in the last three months. Mourners – family, friends, colleagues, red-eyed but offering supportive smiles – reach out from the end of almost every row. There are three serious men and a woman who I think are work associates. A dark-haired young woman I don't recognise sits in the final row, stifling tears, rummaging in her bag for a tissue.

The air in the churchyard is humid and oppressive, the sky a peculiar dark grey tinged with orange. Water droplets cling to the leaves in the trees, occasionally giving up and splashing to the ground. His mother wanted him to be buried here, but the Tyrrhenian Sea has so far

refused to give him up. Behind me, she begins to cry, her raw unfettered pain echoing around the churchyard. I am dry-eyed, consumed with jealousy at her straightforward misery. My friends Poppy, Saffie and Trina form a phalanx of support around me, a guard of honour as we walk to the car.

Afterwards, we gather in the village hall. The weather is still unpleasantly oppressive, but inside the hall the atmosphere is lighter now the worst bit is out of the way – or the worst bit for everybody else at least. For me, it's only the beginning.

I smell patchouli and herbal shampoo and before I know it, my best and oldest friend Poppy has enveloped me in a massive hug.

'I know I've said it a million times, Liz, but I am so sorry.'

I allow her to hold me, limp like a ragdoll in her arms, but I can't be comforted by her today. She releases me and steps back. She's dressed conservatively (for her) in a deep purple maxi dress and tan suede boots, her pink-streaked chestnut brown curls tamed into submission in a knot at the nape of her neck, a hammered silver pendant hanging almost to her waist.

'Thanks.' I'm aware I sound stilted but I hope she'll put it down to grief. 'Who are those lot, do you know?' I indicate a small group of men in mostly ill-fitting suits chatting quietly amongst themselves.

'They're the GreenEc lot,' Poppy says. 'God, I suppose I ought to go and schmooze them – sorry not

schmooze . . . I didn't mean to make this sound like some sort of grim *networking* event.'

I smile despite myself. Andrew had had his doubts about going into business with Poppy, but when he'd been looking for a partner to set up a PR agency with fifteen years ago, she'd been the obvious candidate. Her personal life might be chaotic but at work she was dedicated and professional, an ideal fit to support his vision for a PR firm serving ecologically, ethically sound businesses. For him it was a gap in the market he was keen to fill, but for her it not only chimed with her green instincts but was a natural next step from working as an in-house PR for various eco-charities.

'It's fine,' I say now. 'Go and talk to them.'

'OK, I'll have a quick word. Back soon.' She gives me another hug, a brief one this time, and heads over to the group. The men's faces light up. They are the earnest types – all natural fibres and vegan shoes – for whom Poppy's alternative style and natural beauty are catnip.

When Andrew and I were first together we would lie entwined in bed, discussing which of each other's friends we found attractive. It sounds like a dangerous game (and probably would be at a later stage of a relationship) but back then we were so secure in our love and attraction for each other that it felt perfectly safe. Poppy never featured very high on Andrew's list, although in retrospect that may have been political on his part. Is it ever a good idea to tell your partner you fancy their best friend? But I believed him, and have never experienced a speck of

mistrust over all the time they've been working together. Mind you, how many times have I heard that over the years? By the time you get to your mid-forties, you've witnessed a lot of relationship break-ups. For every one of my friends who saw it coming, there's another that was blindsided by a partner who behaved in a totally unexpected way, as if they'd been a different person to the one they seemed to be all along.

As Poppy passes Trina and Saffie, she gives them an almost imperceptible signal that indicates I've been left alone. As one, they descend on me like well-schooled dancers in a ballet, getting every step right. Saffie is as glamorous and elegant as ever. Her dark blonde hair falls in neat waves over the shoulders of the unfeasibly expensive navy trouser suit she's wearing over a cream silk blouse, demurely buttoned almost to the neck as befits a funeral. Trina's wearing a classic black shift dress that used to be fitted but is now loose around her hips and gapes under the arms. Her always-sharp cheekbones are more pronounced than ever under the wings of her pale blonde bob.

'All right, darling?' Saffie presses her cheek to mine and I breathe in a waft of her perfume, heady with jasmine. Trina gives me a brief hug, all angles and bones – she's definitely lost weight.

'Have you seen the boys?' I ask, aware that they've slipped from the orbit I've held them in so carefully all day.

'They're playing outside with Milo and Ben,' Saffie

says. 'Owen's watching them, don't worry.' I can sense how hard she's working to say her ex-husband's name in a neutral fashion, to not let their animosity spill into my husband's funeral. Of the two of them, it's Owen who has more right to be angry. Nine months ago, Saffie left him for Todd. Todd is an improbably good-looking, rich American with whom it transpired she'd been having an affair for some time, a betrayal of his best friend that Andrew – and I, if I'm honest – struggled to come to terms with.

'Julian's out there too,' Trina adds. 'He's setting up a cricket game with a stick and an old tennis ball they found in the bushes. Do you need wine? Food? Anything?'

'Nothing, thanks.'

A silence descends in which they regard me anxiously. They'll put it down to grief, but I know I'm being short with them and until this morning I would have said they don't deserve it. Along with Poppy, these women dropped everything to support me today, and over these last terrible three months. They came to the registrar with me when, having finally received confirmation of presumption of death, I went to register Andrew's death, unable to deal with it alone. They sat with me at the meeting with the vicar, helping me plan the service, knowing what I wanted without having to ask. They set up the projector for the montage of photos of Andrew I spent hours putting together as I wept uncontrollably at his innocent childhood face. But one of them has ruined everything.

'I could do with some fresh air,' I say, unable to stand here with them any longer. 'I'll go and check on the boys.'

I leave, not having to look back to know their faces are creased with concern.

Outside, Trina's husband Julian has set up a small suitcase as makeshift cricket stumps. He's calling out encouragement to my eldest, Ethan, who is preparing to bowl at his younger brother, Josh. Saffie and Owen's boys, Milo and Seb, crouch in the field, concentrating furiously. Owen is surveying the scene, his back to me, and I feel a throb of gratitude towards him. He's not only Andrew's friend, he's mine, too, and I'll be forever thankful for the energy he's putting in to make this an OK day for my children, a day which is so difficult for him personally. I give myself a mental pat on the back for encouraging my friends to bring their children today. It's so much better for the boys to be out here playing than sitting inside enduring a stream of well-meaning sympathy.

'Hey.' I touch Owen's elbow gently.

'Liz. Hi. Was it OK? My speech?'

'Yes, it was lovely. Thanks for doing it.'

'God, you're welcome. It was the least I could do. How have you been coping?'

That bloody question. I must have been asked it hundreds of times over the last three months and each time I've been at a loss as to how to answer. I usually fall back on clichés like 'as well as can be expected', which I think is what they want to hear. They certainly don't want the truth. They don't want to hear about the gaping hole that

has opened up in my life, the shock and trauma of my husband being by my side for almost twenty-five years and now suddenly gone. Disappeared. They don't want to know how I sit on the sofa night after night, when the kids have gone to bed, staring in horror at the empty space at the other end where he used to sit. They don't want to know what a monumental effort it is to get up every morning, exhausted from a tormented night lying awake, and put on a mask of happiness for my grieving children who mustn't be allowed for a second to think that their mum is not OK. They don't want to hear about how telling my boys their daddy was dead was the worst thing I have ever had to do, or ever hope to do, in my life. How when I opened my mouth, I wished I could suspend time and let them have a few more moments of innocence before I shattered their lives and took it away for ever. How I can't bear that they have had to learn this lesson so young – that life is cruel and unpredictable, that things change and people can be taken from you in the blink of an eye.

Since my discovery this morning, I'm even more poorly equipped to answer the question.

'I'm OK,' I say, unable to muster anything more detailed.

'Of course you're not,' Owen says. 'How could you be? None of us are. But it's a million times worse for you.'

For the first time today, a sob almost escapes my lips.

'Hey.' Owen takes me in his arms, and for a second I allow myself to relax, my face in his shoulder.

'Do you think we knew him?' I say indistinctly into his shirt.

'What?' Owen draws back, hands on my shoulders.

'Do you think we really knew him? That's what I keep going over and over.'

He hesitates for a second before replying.

'Yes, I do.'

'You don't sound very sure.'

'I mean … to the extent that we know anybody. There's always a part of everyone that's hidden, that they keep for themselves, I think. Don't you?'

'I suppose so.'

'And that's OK. Just because you didn't know every single little thing about Andrew doesn't invalidate your relationship with him, doesn't mean it wasn't real.'

'Mm hmm.' I press my lips together to keep the words inside. I want so badly to share with someone what I found this morning. Would it be wrong to do it here, now? Owen was Andrew's best friend. If there was something going on, there's a chance he knows about it. Andrew let his guard down around Owen. Once, years ago, drunk and uncertain of Andrew following an argument at a party, I'd asked Owen if he thought Andrew really loved me. Owen said he knew he did, and then asked me if I loved him. When I said yes, Owen said, *There's your answer. You're meant to be together.* I take a breath, unsure whether I'm going to tell him what I found or not, and then Julian comes jogging over, and the moment is gone.

'So sorry, old girl.' Julian leans down, hair flopping over his forehead, to give me a kiss on the cheek. I didn't know people in real life said 'old girl' until I met him. I once

heard him say – unironically – 'tally ho'. I loathed him on instinct when I first met him, assuming he would look down on me for my background, but actually he's never been anything but kind and rather sweet. 'Anything I can do, you only have to shout. Boys seem to bearing up OK.'

'Yes.' I watch Josh racing up the pitch as Milo runs for the ball. 'I worry they're coping too well on the outside – that they're not telling me how they really feel.'

'They'll be OK,' says Owen. 'But don't feel you're alone – let us support you.'

'Thanks.' I bite back tears again. 'I'd better go back in – let me know if the boys want me.'

I just about make it through to the end of the afternoon. Trina, Poppy and Saffie come back to my house, not wanting to leave me alone for the evening. Not 'our' house any more, unless you count the children who are in bed, exhausted after a day of seeing adults who are normally in full control of their emotions weeping and embracing. Enduring hugs and kisses from people they barely know. Coming to terms with their new lives, the one where they will always be those kids whose dad died.

We've all been drinking this afternoon, but the empty Prosecco bottles continue to accumulate on the kitchen worktop. A casual observer would think it a touching scene. A woman, widowed far too young at forty-five, surrounded by three other women, old friends, a group supremely at ease in each other's company. The kind of friends who can conjure up a shared joke with a single word, who can go for months without speaking and pick

up exactly where they left off without drawing breath; who can count on the others to be there when the chips are down, to catch them when they fall. We all lived in London in our early twenties, and then one by one moved out to the same family-friendly commuter town of Haverbridge. Andrew and I were the first to go, twelve years ago when I was pregnant with Ethan, in search of green spaces and extra bedrooms. Owen and Saffie, also expecting their first child, followed shortly after. A couple of years later, Poppy was left homeless after yet another disastrous relationship and with Scarlet due to start secondary school, moving here was a no-brainer. Trina and Julian were the last to tire of London but eventually they did.

There were tears earlier, of course, but now there is laughter and shared reminiscences and stories. The conversation around the kitchen table ebbs and flows like the tide that washed Andrew away. I'm not saying much, but my friends understand. They give space to my grief, allow me to just be, present but apart from them. The very best of friends. They think they know everything about me, but they don't. None of them would guess in a million years what's going on inside my head, eating away at me – chewing me up and spitting me out.

They are my three oldest, dearest friends, and I would have been lost without them these past three months. They helped with the logistics of my husband disappearing abroad, presumed drowned. They liaised on my behalf with the Landell Trust, a charity that helps

people whose loved ones have died overseas. They brought lasagnes and flowers and books and chocolate in those slow, quick, hazy days after we got home from Italy, days I can now scarcely remember. They took my boys – shell-shocked and dazed but still needing company and entertainment – on outings, giving me time to deal with the endless admin, or to do nothing at all but stare into space or cry on the sofa. They sat beside me today, holding my hand, in the church. They walked down the aisle with me so I didn't have to do it by myself. They tell me, over and over, that I am not alone. That although we're not related by blood, they are my family, and I theirs.

Part of me wishes I had never opened my husband's bag this morning, the one he took to Villa Rosa, the Italian villa where we spent his final weekend with these three women and their families. The place where he died. I hadn't been able to bring myself to touch it before, but this morning I was looking for his watch. I wanted to wear something of his at the funeral, and I couldn't wear his wedding ring because he was wearing it when he drowned. I forced myself to rummage through the bag, a brand new one he'd bought for the weekend away. The smell of him – washing powder and cologne and something indefinably him threatened to overwhelm me as I ran my shaking hands through the contents. His toothbrush was in there, and the things from the bedside table – his glasses, the book he was reading. Clean underwear he never got to wear. Someone must have packed this up in the aftermath. Or perhaps

it was me and I've blocked it out. No watch, though. I felt something in the pocket of a pair of shorts that he'd worn on the last day of his life, before he changed into his evening wear. I slid my fingers in and they met a small slippery square packet. I thought perhaps it was a sweet, although Andrew didn't eat them. I certainly didn't feel any trepidation as I drew it out into the light. It was like a kick to the stomach. I was already hollowed out by grief and exhaustion and the overhanging dread of the day ahead, but this was something else entirely. Something that snatched the breath from my lungs, made me tremble all over and press my hand to my mouth, stifling the urge to vomit. I had a contraceptive coil fitted after Josh was born. Andrew and I hadn't used condoms since we were first together. So why did he have one in his pocket? In sick fascination, I turned the shiny wrapper over and over, as if that would make it into something other than the betrayal it represented.

I look from one to the other of the dear faces of my oldest friends, seated around my kitchen table. They are more careworn and lined than when we first met, but as familiar to me as my own. All I can think is: which one of you bitches was sleeping with my husband?