

the memory of US

DANI ATKINS



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*To Dusty
Best Listener.
Best Friend.
Best Dog.*



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For there is no friend like a sister

Christina Rossetti

PROLOGUE

They could have been anyone.

They could have chosen to come at a different time, on a different day, or even to a different beach. It was chance that made them swing their four-wheel-drive vehicle off the narrow lane and on to the sand dunes at that precise location.

Lashed to the Range Rover's roof rack was a robust orange dinghy and a pair of oars. In the back of the car was a tackle box and two state-of-the-art rods. But the men weren't fishermen. The local newspaper would call them guardian angels, but their real-life occupations were more prosaic: they were doctors.

They'd left their warm beds and sleeping wives in their luxury holiday rental and crept through the darkened house like excited schoolboys, hell-bent on adventure.

Dr Adam Banner, A & E consultant, was behind the wheel. He was grinning as he sipped hot coffee from a Thermos and drove over the rippled sand towards the water's edge.

Beside him, Dr Phillip Digby, consultant anaesthetist and highly competitive angler, was proposing a wager over who

was likely to catch the most fish that morning when he caught a glimpse of something in the headlight beams.

‘Hang on a sec. What was that?’

With one foot already moving from accelerator to brake, Adam took his eyes from the deserted sand dunes and turned to his passenger and oldest friend beside him.

‘What was *what*?’

Phil shook his head, craning forward in his seat to peer through the inky black expanse of sand and sea, broken only by the line of frothy white surf where water and shore collided.

‘There was something way over there, to the left. By the mudflats.’

Adam slowed the car and stared into the darkness.

‘What kind of a something?’ he asked. He shivered involuntarily, remembering the warning a local old-timer had given in the pub just the night before after overhearing their fishing plans. ‘You need to mind where you go walking on them mudflats,’ the old man had advised, happily accepting the pint Adam had offered him. ‘Seen ’em suck a man down right up to his waist.’

Phil was frowning. ‘I’m not sure what it was. It looked like a bundle of material or something.’

‘It’s probably just an old ripped sail, washed up by the tide,’ Adam replied. But even so, he was already turning the car in a slow circle, trying to capture whatever it was Phil believed he’d seen in his lights.

‘There!’ Phil cried triumphantly. On the periphery of the headlights’ beam, perilously easy to have missed, something *was* flapping in the wind. It was pale and fluttered like a flag. From this distance, it looked too flimsy to be part of

a thick waxy canvas sail. It looked more like a bundled-up dust sheet.

Wordlessly, Adam pointed the car towards it, feeling the consistency of the sand begin to change the closer they got to the mystery object. The car was sitting lower now, sinking into the dunes, which were sucking on the tyres even on a vehicle like theirs, built for off-road terrain.

The wheels were beginning to spin as they sought to find traction and with a helpless shrug Adam brought the car to a stop, with the object they were going to investigate squarely lit by the headlights. With unspoken agreement, the two men got out of the car and reached in unison for the heavy quilted jackets they'd thrown on the back seat. It was five o'clock in the morning in late January and neither needed a thermometer to know the temperature was below zero.

They walked swiftly and with purpose, unconsciously emulating the way they travelled the hospital corridors. 'Real-life doctors don't run the way they do in those TV shows,' Adam had once told his wife, who was addicted to medical dramas. 'And after twenty years as a physician, I've never once said "*stat*",' he added for good measure.

'It's bound to be just a piece of rubbish,' Phil declared, tugging to free one foot from the greedy sand.

'If it is, you owe me a new pair of trainers,' Adam said, releasing his own foot with a noisy squelch. 'In fact—' He never got to finish his sentence. Because that was the moment when he saw the woman's foot.

Neither of them could remember crossing the final twenty metres that separated them from the casualty. But they did so at a run. Phil had reached for his phone and was swearing softly at the absence of signal, while Adam dropped to his

knees beside the unconscious woman. She was lying on the mudflats, dressed in a thin cotton nightgown, one naked leg exposed to the elements, the other lost beneath the surface of the mud.

'Fuck! No reception,' Phil said, abandoning his mobile and hurrying to join Adam, who was already shaking his head as he sought for a pulse at the base of the woman's long, slender neck.

With slick choreography, Phil bent his ear to the woman's blue-tinged lips. No breath warmed his cheek, her chest didn't rise or fall. He reached for her hand, slapping the back of it as though searching for a vein.

'Hello? Hello? Can you hear me?' he shouted, but the woman was unresponsive.

'We need firmer ground for CPR,' Adam said, his teeth chattering from the cold.

There was probably an efficient technique to extract someone from the enveloping mud but neither doctor knew it, so they locked their hands beneath the woman's armpits and hauled her out roughly, knowing that ribs could mend, dislocated joints could be fixed, but there was no coming back from lack of oxygen to the brain.

'Here. Check mine,' Adam said, tossing his phone to Phil before bending to the woman. This was what he did. It was his job, and yet in all the years since he'd qualified, this was the first time he'd attempted to resuscitate anyone outside of a hospital ward.

Her ribcage lifted from the strength of his first rescue breaths but failed to take over the task when he'd finished. There was an unfamiliar tremor to his hands as he locked them in position in the middle of the woman's chest and began

compressions. As he breathed into her lungs and rhythmically forced her heart to circulate blood around her body, Phil tried their phones one more time.

'I need to get back on the road to call for an ambulance,' he said. Adam looked up from his patient, sweat dripping down his face from his exertions. How could he possibly have felt cold just a few minutes ago?

Phil had turned towards the car when a lightning-bolt memory shocked him into immobility. 'That pub last night. Wasn't there an AED cabinet on the outside wall?'

The moon slid out from behind a cloud, illuminating the look of hope on Adam's face.

'There was! And it's only a couple of miles from here.'

It took fifteen minutes for Phil to reach the pub, call 999, get the code to release the defibrillator from its cabinet and drive back to the beach. The sight of his car's headlights splitting the darkened beach was one of the best things Adam had ever seen. His arms felt like they were on fire, and his own breathing was ragged, but his rhythm hadn't faltered, not for a second.

He'd scarcely looked at the inert figure on the sand whose life he was desperately trying to save, but he did so now as Phil rapidly opened the defibrillator. The device was intended for hands far less skilled than theirs, and yet the men followed the machine's instructions as though they hadn't both done this more times than they cared to remember.

Adam winced as Phil tore open the woman's nightgown to access bare skin and saw the mottled marble hue of her torso. He kept up the compressions until the very last

second, stopping only when Phil shouted out the command: 'Clear.'

When the AED informed them that a heartbeat had been found, Adam wasn't ashamed of the tears falling down his cheeks. They were still there as the welcoming sound of a distant siren heralded the arrival of the ambulance.

1

The drone of the plane was soporific. I hadn't expected to find sleep, yet I'd somehow managed to slip several layers beneath its surface when a panicked cry jerked me awake. There are several things in life you never want to hear: a fearful scream on a commercial flight is one of them, and your phone waking you up in the dead of night is another. I'd experienced both in the last four hours.

As I fumbled with the button to return my seat to its upright position, I noticed I wasn't the only passenger to have been disturbed by the cry. Several seats had their overhead lamps switched on, spotlighting their occupants like actors on darkened stages. It took longer than it should for me to realise that while *I* was still looking around to see who had cried out, everyone else was looking at *me*. If further proof was needed, a member of the cabin crew was striding purposefully down the aisle towards me. The 747 was shadowy enough to hide my blush, but I could still feel it scorching my cheeks.

The flight attendant spoke in a hushed voice, not wanting

to disturb my fellow passengers, although her thoughtfulness was probably redundant after my noisy outburst.

‘Is everything alright, ma’am?’ she asked gently.

I nodded, caught off-guard by the kindness in her voice. At this point, I’d have coped better with anger or irritation. Compassion could very easily unravel me.

‘I’m sorry. I must have been having a bad dream. I didn’t mean to wake everyone.’

Her smile came readily. ‘That’s okay. No one sleeps well on a red-eye anyway. You’d be surprised how many passengers have nightmares when they’re flying.’

I smiled wanly, because my nightmare was still very much with me, even after screaming myself awake.

‘Can I get you something to drink, or eat?’ I shook my head, declining the offer of food as I’d done several hours earlier, shortly after take-off. My body clock was still on New York time and unaccustomed to eating a meal with no identity in the middle of the night.

‘Maybe I’ll go and freshen up,’ I said, glancing up and noting with relief that the nearest WC was currently unoccupied.

I mumbled an embarrassed apology to the passengers in the surrounding rows, many of whom were still looking at me curiously, perhaps waiting for my next diverting outburst. There would be none, I was sure of that. Sleep would elude me now for the rest of the night until our plane touched down at Heathrow.

After sliding the lock in place, I leant back heavily on the bifold toilet door. The closet was as small as a sarcophagus and several hours into the flight was now borderline unpleasant. I pulled a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and ran them under the cold water tap before pressing them to my

heated face. *No one* looks good under lighting that harsh, but the overhead fluorescent strip was particularly unkind to my pale skin. The freckles that could look like scattered gold dust on a good day now resembled splatters of mud. It was an unfortunate analogy.

She was covered in mud – her feet were thick with it.

My mother's voice had scored into my memory and her words were still with me at 38,000 feet.

I stared back at my reflection as though I'd never seen it before. My cheeks were pinched, and my eyes looked huge – not in a cute, Disney-character way, but round and fearful, the way they'd been for the last four hours. My chestnut hair looked dull and flat and in desperate need of the shampoo it had been promised in the morning. But plans for the relaxed day I'd intended to spend had been erased by my mum's frantic middle-of-the-night phone call.

Jeff heard my phone before I did. His left arm, which was flung wildly across both his pillow and mine, dropped to shake me awake.

'Your cell is going,' he mumbled, the Brooklyn twang of his voice disappearing into the memory foam of my pillows as he burrowed away from the sound.

After four years in the US, I still called it a mobile, but I knew what he meant.

I frowned as I reached for my phone, noting first the hour and then the identity of the caller. Some of my old UK friends still got the time difference wrong, adding when they should subtract, but not Mum. There were clocks set to New York time all over her house.

I swung out of bed, shivering in the cold air of my apartment – that term I *had* adopted. Grabbing a chunky cardigan from

the back of a chair, I shrugged into it as I hurried into my narrow hallway, answering the call as I went.

'Mum?' Habit put a question mark after her name, even though my phone had already identified her. I had no idea why she was calling, but there was already a hint of a tremor in my voice.

The peculiar sound at the other end of the line had nothing to do with cell phone reception or distorted sound waves. It took me several seconds to process it, because in all my thirty-one years, I'd only heard it a couple of times before. She was crying.

'Mum, what is it? What's wrong?'

More tears and then a garbled phrase that was impossible to decipher.

I'd gravitated to the ancient radiator in the hallway, the one that held its heat long after the other pipes had cooled, but an icy terror had crept into my veins. It was almost as though I already *knew*.

'Has something happened? Are you sick?'

Built like an emaciated sparrow, my seventy-three-year-old mother actually had the constitution of a fairly robust ox.

'It's not me. It's Amelia,' she said on a wail.

My knees liquefied and I slid slowly down the wall beside the radiator.

'Mimi?' I asked, the childish nickname emerging from the vaults of my memory. I hadn't called her that since I was about six years old, when my tongue had finally mastered its way around my older sister's name.

'She's been taken to hospital. That's where I'm calling you from,' Mum replied, and for the first time I noticed the

echoey quality of the call and an unfamiliar soundtrack in the background.

'Is she ill? Has she been in an accident?' I fired off my worst fears, as though they were bullets in a gun.

'Yes... and... well, no, it wasn't an accident, exactly. You see, she got lost, or so they think.'

'While she was driving?' I asked, frantically trying to piece together a story I could make sense of.

'No. While she was walking along the beach. During the night.'

There were too many confusing facts to assimilate in that single sentence. 'I don't understand, Mum. What was she doing wandering on the beach in the middle of the night in January? It must have been freezing. And how on earth did she get lost? She knows the coastline by her cottage like the back of her hand.'

'I don't know, Lexi. None of it makes any sense. *She's* not making any sense. They had to sedate her at the hospital because she was getting so distressed.'

Out of all the terrifying things Mum had said so far during our call, that was the one that scared me the most. Amelia was the sensible one. The 'wise head on young shoulders', that's what everyone had called her when, at just sixteen, she'd become the rock both Mum and I had leant on after losing Dad in that tragic and inexplicable accident. My sister had always been the one I turned to first. It was Amelia who'd taught me how to use tampons, how to solve quadratic equations and even master a three-point turn, which my driving instructor had despaired of me ever grasping. I'd always been the dreamer of the family, the one with her head

buried in the pages of a book. But Amelia had practically come out of the womb a fully fledged adult.

The idea of my capable older sister wandering lost on a wintry beach – one she walked on every single day of the year – was nothing short of inconceivable.

‘They’re worried she might have hypothermia,’ Mum continued. ‘She was so very cold when they brought her in, you see.’

I looked out through the hallway window where New York was already under six inches of snow. The last time Amelia had visited me in winter, I’d teased her for kitting up like an Arctic explorer whenever she walked even a block from the apartment.

‘She was found just before dawn on the mudflats,’ Mum said, her voice wobbling as she painted an incomprehensible picture. ‘It was minus one outside, but she was wearing nothing except a nightie, and her feet were bare.’

‘What the fuck?’ Jeff said, blinking dazedly as I snapped on the overhead light. ‘What’s going on?’ he asked, reaching for his phone on the nightstand. ‘Jesus, Lexi, it’s half past two in the morning.’

‘I have to pack,’ I said, my voice tight as I hauled my suitcase down from the top of the wardrobe. It bounced on the mattress, connecting with Jeff’s foot, which had admittedly encroached on to my half of the bed.

‘Is this about that phone call?’ Jeff asked. He was still middle-of-the-night slow, whereas I was running on high-octane adrenaline.

‘It was my mum on the phone,’ I said, pulling a random

handful of clothes from the dresser and throwing them haphazardly into the case. 'Amelia's been taken to hospital. They think she's got hypothermia.'

Jeff ran a hand through his thick sandy hair, which was already awry from the pillows. 'Shit. That's rough. I thought England was more wet than cold?'

I pulled an armful of jumpers from a drawer and lobbed them in the direction of the case. Most of them found their target. Sensing this wasn't the moment to discuss the climate of my homeland, Jeff grappled for his discarded boxers and swung out of my bed.

'Can I do something?' he asked, reaching once again for his phone. 'Do you want me to check for available flights?'

My grateful smile wobbled and was gone before he even saw it. I was already pulling on clothes for my long journey home as he headed to the kitchen to make coffee that I doubted there'd be time to drink.

Fifteen minutes later I was standing beside a bulging suitcase that was probably over the weight limit *and* filled with all the wrong clothes. It didn't matter. Amelia and I were the same size. I could borrow anything I needed from her.

'Passport? Charge cards? Cell phone?' Jeff asked, eyeing the tote bag slung over my shoulder.

I nodded. We'd not spoken much as I'd raced through the apartment, binning the perishables in my fridge and scribbling a note to slip beneath the super's door on my way out. I had no idea how long I'd be away and when Jeff asked what I was going to do about work, I'd looked at him as though he was speaking a foreign language. Work hadn't even crossed my

mind, not the way it would certainly do his if our situation was reversed. 'I'll call them and explain when I land,' I said, reaching for my laptop almost as an afterthought and shoving it into my hand luggage.

'Shit timing, what with the job offer and everything,' he said.

The look I threw him spoke volumes. Family was everything to me, something Jeff had never really understood.

'I'm sure it'll be fine,' I said, with a confidence that could well be misplaced. Working as an editor in the US was very different from working as one in the UK, and opportunities like the one I'd just been offered at work were rare.

My building's rickety elevator, which took perverse pleasure in terrorising the residents, juddered alarmingly as it took us down to street level. I kept my eyes riveted on the gauge throughout the descent. *Do not break down. Not tonight. Not now.* It was good advice for both the temperamental lift and me. It delivered us to the foyer with a bone-jarring shudder.

I scarcely noticed the cold night air biting my cheeks as we hurried down the steep steps to the street. 'The intersection's probably your best bet for getting a cab,' Jeff announced, lifting my suitcase free of the frozen snow coating the pavement.

I peered through the falling flurries for a canary-yellow taxi, the kind that had so delighted me when I'd first moved to New York, as though I hadn't really expected them to exist outside of films and TV shows.

'There's one!' I cried, breaking into an unnecessary run that the smooth soles of my boots couldn't cope with.

'Mind the sidewalk!'

Jeff's warning cry came too late to stop my feet from pinwheeling like a cartoon character before flying out from beneath me. I landed on the icy surface with the kind of force that was going to have left a bruise. But it wasn't pain that brought the tears to my eyes. It was the unrelenting anxiety, and a feeling of foreboding so thick it was practically suffocating. I scrambled back to my feet with the speed of a fallen figure skater.

'You okay?' Jeff asked, a hand already raised to hail one of the many cabs passing through the intersection. Just as he'd predicted. I'd lived here for four years but I'd never felt less like a New Yorker than I did tonight.

I gave the driver my destination and watched as he hefted my weighty case into the boot of the taxi.

'Do you want me to come with you?' Jeff asked, and I spun so fast to face him I almost landed on the ground again.

'Really?' I asked, the tears I was fighting to keep at bay already blurring my vision at the generosity of his offer. 'You'd do that?' There was an awkward silence followed by a race to see which one of us would realise my mistake first. 'Oh, I see. You mean to the airport.'

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I berated myself, knowing I'd not been quick enough to wipe the disappointment from my face. *Of course* Jeff wasn't offering to get on a plane and travel three and a half thousand miles across the Atlantic with me. Our relationship was too on-again/off-again for that kind of commitment.

'Or I could just catch a cab from here back to mine,' he completed lamely.

The driver, who'd finished stowing my case, flashed me a look of sympathy. Even total strangers could see that Jeff and

I were not going to go the distance. Why was it taking us so long to see that too?

'Thank you. It'd be nice to have some company on the ride.'

'No problem,' Jeff said, holding my elbow as I climbed into the back of the cab. 'We can go through the flight options I found.'

I didn't pay as much attention as I should have during the forty-minute drive to the airport. I *yep*-ed and *uh-huh*-ed a lot as Jeff listed the various routes he'd found online, but my eyes kept sliding to the cab windows where New York was currently disappearing under a blanket of snow. Had it been this cold on the beach where my sister had been found? Can a healthy, otherwise strong, thirty-nine-year-old woman bounce back from hypothermia? And what had driven her out into the night in the first place?

Those unanswerable questions were still running through my head as we pulled up outside the Departures terminal. Before I could reach for my purse, Jeff was already settling the fare. It was a nice gesture and I refused to think he was doing so out of guilt.

'Good luck,' said the driver, lifting my case from his cab and setting it on the pavement beside me. I chose to believe he meant for my journey home rather than in my relationship.

The city that never sleeps had lived up to its reputation on the roads, and things were just as busy in the bustling airport terminal. I already knew from Jeff's search that I was five hours too early for a direct flight, but I was happy to take anything that would shave even minutes off my arrival time in London.

Jeff was tall and broad, a college football player who used

his former skills to carve a swathe through the crowds to the airline desk. We got there without colliding with a single wheeled case or piled-high trolley. The good news was that there wasn't a queue ahead of me; the bad, this was because there were hardly any flight options left for me to take.

'Maybe you *should* wait for a direct flight?' Jeff suggested, his handsome brow creased in a frown after listening to the zigzag route through the skies that the airline rep had just proposed. 'You might even snag a seat in Business if you hang on.'

Was that the moment when I realised that a shared love of Chinese food, art-house films and pretty amazing sex wasn't going to be enough to keep us together for the rest of our lives? Jeff was an only child, and not particularly close to his parents, either geographically or emotionally, while I was at the exact opposite end of the spectrum. I might live thousands of miles from Amelia and Mum, but the ties that bound me to them had never felt stronger than they did right now.

Ignoring him, I turned to the woman behind the plexiglass screen. 'I really don't care where I'm seated. Put me in the hold with the luggage if that's the only choice. Just help me get home as fast as I can. Please.'

I slid my passport and credit card across the counter and didn't even wince at the eye-watering price of my last-minute ticket.

'One way?' the airline rep asked, her fingers already flying over the keyboard at an impressive speed.

'Yes. I think so.' I heard Jeff's indrawn breath but didn't turn around; I was too busy swapping my suitcase for a boarding pass and following the woman's instructions to 'run like crazy' to the gate.

I was too winded from the sprint to Security to say half the things I should probably have said to Jeff. They'd all have to wait. But perhaps he sensed them, for there was something hurried and detached in the kiss he pressed on my lips.

'Thank you for coming with me,' I said, already moving towards the automatic barrier.

'Let me know when you land,' he called as the gate spat me out on to airside.

It already felt as though there was a continent between us.

2

London was cold, foggy and wet and felt immediately like home in a way New York, for all its efforts and allure, never could. It seemed like the kind of day when the airline would surely lose my suitcase, or we'd be diverted to some airport in the Midlands because of bad weather. But miraculously, everything went smoothly. For the first time *ever*, my bag was the first on the carousel, and even the snaking queues at passport control moved with surprising speed.

Admittedly, the family ahead of me at the car hire desk seemed to be taking an excruciatingly long time to choose the model of car they wanted to rent, and just as long picking out the type of child seat they needed. My foot was doing an involuntary tap dance of frustration, but I stifled my impatience and used the time to rattle off messages to both Mum and Jeff, letting them know I'd landed safely. Mum's relieved reply pinged back almost instantly, but from Jeff there was only silence. We'd had plans for brunch with friends and then tickets for the ice hockey at Madison Square Garden. Jeff was a big fan of the New York Rangers.

Me? Not so much. There was obviously no reason for him to have cancelled his plans, but I couldn't help wondering who was sitting beside him in the seat that should have been mine.

The indecisive family in front of me finally settled on a vehicle and I stepped up to the counter. I took whatever they had to offer, which turned out to be bigger and more powerful than anything I'd driven before. I passed the Avis rep my UK driver's licence, grateful that the form I'd completed hadn't asked: *And exactly how long is it since you last drove?*

I pulled out of the airport car park with all the confidence of an eighty-year-old learner on their driving test. It was years since I'd been behind the wheel of a car, and I'd have preferred not to be doing so now, in the dark, on a wet, foggy evening. But somewhere in Somerset, my older sister was lying in a hospital bed, seriously ill, and I'd have crawled the three hundred miles to reach her on my hands and knees if that was the only way to get there.

My lips twitched at the notion. It was the sort of over-the-top comment I'd probably suggest deleting in a manuscript. But this wasn't a story I could edit to my liking. I shivered and turned the car heater up to maximum, but I still couldn't seem to get warm.

I stopped just once on the three-hour drive. I'd had less than four hours' sleep in the last thirty-six hours and knew it was madness and dangerous to keep going when I was this tired. I pulled off the motorway, in need of industrial strength caffeine.

The motorway services was too everything. Too bright, too loud, too full of people who had no idea this was one of the

most terrifying days of my life. My memory kept spinning me back in time to another contender for that title. And suddenly I was eight years old again, watching the blood drain from my mother's face and the phone fall from her hand as she took the call that had destroyed our happy little family. Why did it seem as though every piece of devastating news begins with that one dreadful phone call?

I practically inhaled two flat whites in the cafeteria, drinking them back to back as though it was a contest, and then got up and ordered a third to take away. I took one last look at the sandwich I'd bought, with its single, mouse-sized nibbled corner. It was wasteful, but I scrunched it up inside its cellophane package and dropped it into the nearest bin.

The fog was even thicker when I emerged from the services and I wasted precious minutes searching for the hire car, which blipped plaintively back at me in the mist before I eventually managed to track down where I'd parked it. There would be no more stopping until I got to the hospital, I resolved, which was probably a foolish plan given the amount of liquid I'd just consumed.

The only good thing about the atrocious driving conditions was that they forced me to concentrate on nothing but the road. But as soon as I reached the hospital site, it was as though a catch had been sprung on my emotions. I'd been focusing only on how to get there as quickly as I could, but now I could feel the panic starting to stream through my veins like a virus.

The hospital multistorey car park had hundreds of vacant spaces and yet I still managed to park badly, straddling two bays in my eagerness to reach my family. I sent Mum a

one-word message – ‘Here’ – and then walked briskly to the stairwell, following signs to the main entrance.

The hospital foyer probably looked very different during the day. There would be patients, visitors and hospital staff milling around. The shops would be brightly lit and open for business, not shadowy and deserted, shuttered behind metal grilles. And there would definitely have been someone sitting behind the Enquiries desk who could have directed me to Amelia’s ward.

There was an unsettling eeriness that made it feel like an empty soundstage waiting for someone to yell ‘Action’. I don’t spook easily, but I jumped when the silence was broken by a loud ping behind me. I spun around just as the metal doors of the lift slid open, for a moment failing to realise the small, weary-looking woman inside the carriage was my own mother. Until she called my name.

I fell into her arms, or she fell into mine, I couldn’t tell which. She’d always been slighter than both her daughters, petite and delicately framed in a way that we weren’t. And yet as children we’d clung to her when knees were scraped or dreams were scary, as though she was an Amazonian. I did so again now, inhaling all the things about her I never realised I missed until the moment I found them again. The tang of her hairspray that always caught the back of my throat, the sweetness of her perfume and her own unique scent. Her arms were warm as she folded them around me. It was strange, I hadn’t realised how cold I was until her hug began to thaw me.

‘How is she?’ I asked, skipping straight past ‘hello’, even though we hadn’t seen each other for over eight months.

‘She’s been given something to help her sleep,’ Mum

replied. For a retired primary school teacher, it was an evasive politician's answer.

'But is she okay? I've been googling hypothermia. It can be really dangerous.'

Something shifted in my mother's eyes. It alerted me, even before she reached for my hand.

'Why don't we go and sit down over there, where it's quiet,' she suggested, nodding towards a horseshoe of vacant seats in the far corner of the room. I glanced around the foyer. It was quiet *everywhere*.

'What is it, Mum? What's wrong?'

'Let's just go over there, out of the way,' Mum insisted.

Apart from a solitary cleaner who was leaning idly on his cart while checking his phone, we had the entire place to ourselves.

'Please, Lexi,' she said, and that was when I heard the tremor in her voice.

I dropped on to the hard plastic chair so fast it jarred my spine. Mum lowered herself on to the one beside me, with an elderly person's caution. It was a troubling observation that I stored away for another time.

She reached again for my hand. Hers were hot and dry, while mine felt cold and clammy with fear.

'Things... things are a little more serious than I told you on the phone.'

My heart dropped as though every anchoring artery had been severed. My sister had been found on a beach in the middle of the night, lost, confused and hypothermic. How much more serious could it get? I had no idea.

'Amelia wasn't awake when they found her.'

'What do you mean? She was asleep?'

Mum shook her head as though frustrated. I wasn't sure if it was with me or herself.

'I mean, she wasn't conscious.'

The words hit me like a slap. 'She'd passed out? Was it from the cold?'

Mum sighed and the words she'd been trying so hard not to say were finally set free.

'She wasn't breathing, Lexi. When the people found her on the beach, she'd stopped breathing. They don't know how long for.'

I blinked, like an animal caught in headlights. I kept trying to think of something more articulate to say than 'Oh my God', but in the end that was all I could manage.

'Technically she was... she was...' Mum couldn't finish that sentence. What parent could? I did it for her.

'Dead?'

Mum gave a single nod.

'Why didn't I know this?' Our eyes met. Hers light grey, mine – like Amelia's – a deep cerulean blue.

'I didn't want to tell you any of this before you got on a plane. I didn't want you to have that thought in your mind for all those hours in the air.'

I shook my head, because that hadn't been my question. I repeated it with more emphasis.

'Why didn't I *know* this? I should have known it... here.' I brought my fist up to my heart. Beneath my curled fingers, I could feel it racing alarmingly.

Mum's eyes fell to her lap. She had no answer. But then no one had ever been able to explain the curious connection Amelia and I shared. It was something we all took for granted.

'The men who found her were doctors. It's a miracle really,'

she said, her voice barely more than a whisper as she fumbled for the tissue tucked into her sleeve. 'They gave her mouth-to-mouth and then shocked her with one of those machine things. They got her heart beating again.'

'Do you know how long she was like that?'

Mum shook her head. 'It could have just happened before they found her, or it might have been much longer.'

My thoughts were spinning as I tried to formulate a sentence that didn't include the words 'brain damage'. I'm not sure if it was Mum I was trying to protect, or me. I might edit romantic fiction for a living, but I was a big fan of thrillers. And somewhere in the vaults of my subconscious I probably knew exactly how long before irreparable damage was sustained when a heart stopped beating. I stopped searching for the answer because I really didn't want to know.

'Can I see her?'

'Of course. The nurses have been so kind, explaining everything they're doing. But you need to prepare yourself, Lexi. She's hooked up to machines and monitors and has wires and tubes going everywhere—' She broke off with a cry and I drew her against me. Wordlessly, we rocked back and forth on the hard plastic chairs while a tsunami of fear crashed down upon us.

We rode the lift back up to the ICU floor in silence. Our footsteps echoed hollowly on the linoleum corridor, and unconsciously our voices dropped to church-like whispers.

'Have you been able to speak to her at all?' I asked, my feet faltering as I spotted the double doors to the ward.

'No. They said she was very disorientated and distressed, so they gave her something to calm her down before I got here. She wasn't really herself. She kept calling out for someone.'

I turned to Mum, my eyes bright with tears. ‘Me? Was it me?’

I don’t know what was more heartbreaking, the truth or the lie my mother quickly substituted it with. ‘I think it probably was.’