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The Midwives

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Windmill Green
24 Mount Street
Manchester M2 3NX

A division of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
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 HarperNorth in 2024

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

PB ISBN: 978-0-00-871385-0

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon

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To women like Sue, who just carry
on through it all…

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Chapter One

Sue

I stare out at my colleagues in the audience. Each year, Darkford General Hospital holds an award ceremony. This year is different from other years for me, when it's always been a real celebration. I have to present an award, but one of us isn't here. I lean into the microphone and read the announcement from the card on the lectern in front of me.

'And the winner of the Darkford General Rising Star Award is Erica Davies, for services to midwifery.'

Erica, one third of my team, walks towards me. She looks as lost as I am.

The audience stands and cheers. I pick up the fake brass trophy and hand it to Erica. She deserves it after what she has been through. After what she had to do. One minute, all three of us were in the break room with a cup of tea and some jammy dodgers. Next minute, there's just us two, and our best friend, Katie, is behind bars.

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Erica holds the trophy to her chest. She adjusts the microphone with her free hand.

'Thank you. Thank you so much. Although I feel like a bit of a fraud. Most people here, including Sue, have delivered far more babies than me.' She smiles at me, then turns back to the assembly of nurses and doctors. 'It's an absolute privilege to help children into this world. I love my job and I am only sorry that the events of the last months have happened. I just played my part. Anyone would have done the same.'

She holds the trophy high above her. A camera flashes and she turns and hurries into the wings. She played her part. That is true. My stomach flips as I think about it. *Anyone would have done the same.* She's right. But I didn't. These past seven months, the shame of not noticing what was going on has driven me to exhaustion.

The clapping and cheering subside, and I follow her off the stage. We return to our seats as the introduction is made for the next award – another Rising Star but this time for paediatrics. I sit down heavily, grateful I only had to present one award as there's only one midwifery Rising Star. Today's been a busy one. Premature twins and a lady with an adverse reaction to an epidural. After all that, I didn't feel like coming tonight. But I couldn't let Erica, or the rest of the team from the maternity department who came to support, down.

I kick off my chunky-heeled sandals under the table, and pour a glass of bubbly each for myself and Erica. She is a hero. Someone who did the right thing. But she's looking unsure now, pulling up the straps of her soft, satin evening

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dress. I wonder if, like me, she's afraid of what will happen next. I take her hand.

'It's OK,' I say. 'It's not long until the trial. Then we'll have answers.' She smiles and nods. My stomach is still in knots. 'I can't believe we were all sitting here last year. She was laughing with us. Drinking. I just don't understand why she did it.'

Erica shrugs. 'We'll probably never know. She'll get what she deserves.' She reconsiders her words. 'I only hope she gets the help she needs.'

So do I. These women are my life. I would even go as far as to say I love them. I've worked with Katie for almost ten years, and Erica for two. To operate the way we do to take care of mothers and their babies, we need complete trust in each other. Our team of three worked. Other members of the department would often comment on how tight-knit and organised we were.

Now I feel lost. Katie was my wing-woman. She even has a badge saying that pinned to her scrubs: *wing-woman*. We're both married, but we made time for each other. We went out at least once a month for a meal and a catch-up. Since Erica joined the department, she's come along, too. She's younger than us, but that didn't stop us getting close. She's always happy to fetch and carry and do the – often literally – shitty tasks involved in midwifery. And her sunny attitude to life has got us all through some hard times, both at work and outside.

But this sorry situation has tainted Erica too. I often wonder how she summoned up the courage to whistle-

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blow. Despite all her optimism, she must have been sure. Unlike me. I was completely in denial.

On the ward, Katie was always at the business end. Completely skilled at every aspect of obstetrics. She was better than most of the doctors. Erica is at the mum-end. Reassuring and calming. Taking them through antenatal and making sure they knew what to expect. And me? I'm at the baby-end.

I make sure the babies have the best possible treatment and I have a qualification in special care of poorly infants. Of course, some don't make it, and those little mites still haunt me in my low moments.

But I didn't have a clue about all this. I've gone over and over it in my mind. How Katie could have duped me. How she could have lied to Adam, her husband. They don't have children, but she always said it was by choice after their first round of IVF was unsuccessful. They could have adopted, but they chose not to. Now I wonder if there's something else. Something deep inside her that went wrong.

The fifth of many awards of the night is presented and then there is an interlude. Music blasts out and there is a rush for the dancefloor. Pat Styles, a nurse from the gynae ward Erica is friendly with at work, grabs her out of her seat and drags her into the party. I stay at our table, watching as she smiles and spins to Kylie Minogue. At least I've still got her. But the rest of it feels like a divorce, where you were so sure your partner loved you and then you find out it has all been a lie.

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I recall that January day, as I have so many times. Erica and Katie were with Mrs Bolton when the police arrived at the locked department door. Ian Bowers, the senior ward clerk, wore a dark grimace as he spoke to them. I lingered longer than I needed to in the linen room, hoping to catch a snippet of their conversation. I could see them through the window, pointing urgently at our department. I thought they must be after one of the patients. Never for one moment did I think it would be one of us.

Once, we had a woman who was arrested on leaving the hospital with her newborn. She'd been involved in a robbery and her waters broke on the job, so to speak. I even laughed and told myself I'd seen everything.

But I hadn't. They strode in from reception. Two male officers and one female. I followed them up the corridor as Ian led the way.

There had been extra security on the ward lately, because several women had complained they had been 'drugged'. The Practice Committee had been looking into the complaints for months. But when we looked at the patients' files and medication lists, there was nothing to suggest anything abnormal had happened. Then, four days before the police came, one of the care assistants who was serving breakfast had been unable to wake one lady. She had pressed the alarm, and everyone had rushed in. Even Katie.

I can see it now. Katie's face, full of concern. Quiet, competent Katie. Her mannerisms urgent as we helped to transfer the woman into the ICU. What did I miss?

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But this police visit was unexpected. This was serious. I remember feeling a tingle of anxiety that they were here to accost a lady who was pregnant or, worse, in labour. I hurried my step until I was beside them.

'Can I ask what your business is here, please?' I said. 'It's just that we don't want to distress the ladies who are in labour.'

Ian's expression told me everything and nothing. His eyes pleading, telling me this was something else, but I couldn't process what it was. We continued into the labour ward and the police stopped. Ian went into Mrs Bolton's room. Calm, compliant Mrs Bolton. *What on earth could they want with her?* I wondered. I really was deluded.

Because, as it turned out, they didn't want Mrs Bolton. They wanted Katie. My kind, lovely friend. I stood at the door as Ian tapped her on the shoulder. She half turned towards us.

'In a minute, love. Our lady is six centimetres now.' She leaned over Mrs Bolton. 'Won't be long, love. Then you will meet your baby.'

I remember Erica made a *squee* face at that. She was always as excited as the mothers. But then Katie looked up and saw the police standing in the hallway. The colour drained from her face and her eyes found mine, questioning. Ian spoke softly.

'Just come with me, Katie. We'd like to ask you a few questions.'

I shrugged and mouthed to her the *what-the-fuck?* we usually reserve for much less serious situations. They were

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gone. Into the meeting room at the end of the corridor. Erica was beside me. I realised I was shaking.

'Do you think it's Adam? They don't come to your place of work for nothing.'

She shook her head, blinking back tears.

We stood and waited as long as we could. But Mrs Bolton needed us, so I asked the care assistant, Julie, to tell us when Katie came out of the meeting room. It was more than an hour. Then the assistant appeared.

'They're out. But she's not happy.'

I hurried to the end of the corridor and there Katie was. Flanked on either side by a police officer. She was crying her eyes out, glasses off, mascara everywhere and her face blotchy. Her long blonde hair, usually straight as a die and tied in a ponytail, was now loose and over her shoulders. She saw me and tried to move towards me, but the police officer held her back. Then she shouted it.

'Sue! Love. Tell them. Tell them I haven't done anything. It wasn't me. I swear. I wouldn't do something like that. Tell them!'

Ian stood watching after them. He was shaking his head, rubbing his face with both hands.

'It was her,' he muttered. 'Bloody hell. It was her. You never really know someone, do you?'

I moved closer to him and spoke in a calm low voice that did not reflect the anxiety rumbling in my soul.

'What was her? What has she done?' But he went into his office and shut the door. He must have felt as shocked

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as we did. He was on the ward as often as we were, filling in forms and discharge sheets. Giving patients their prescriptions and physio instructions. That afternoon, the police came back to take statements. I told them it couldn't be her, that she was an angel.

But they showed me the CCTV footage. Black and white and grainy from the ancient camera at the end of the department. Katie here when she shouldn't be. Off-shift. Her long blonde hair tied back and her thick-framed glasses. Her trademark leggings under a skirt and her plain black trainers. The camera showed her back as she walked up the corridor. And a momentary side view of her glasses. Into a side ward. Ten minutes later, she left by the door at the other end.

I'd blinked at the footage as my world shattered.

And that's why Erica was presented with the award tonight. Erica was the one who caught her. She had been on shift five nights before the police came, and Katie had popped in. They hadn't spoken, but she'd seen her. The incident with the mum who couldn't wake up was the following morning. It was only after the mum had been resuscitated in the ICU – luckily, both mum and baby were fine in the end – that Erica started to suspect Katie had tampered with the bloods.

She told Ian, and he checked the CCTV. The following night, Katie was also captured on camera, off-shift and sneaking into a laundry room. When the room was checked, hidden medication was found.

I haven't seen Katie since her arrest. I asked the police if I could go to the prison where she is being held and ask her

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what happened. I reasoned she might tell me the truth. But they advised against it. And besides, the police didn't need my help. The cold, hard facts were already there. Amid this glitzy party, I have to face the reality. My friend and colleague was over-medicating the mums-to-be.

My mind couldn't yet fast-forward to the end-game, but the media did. They spoke to some of the expectant mums and put two and two together, and soon pressed that particular button.

She wanted a child. She drugged those women to take a baby.