# What My Best Friend Did

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Extract

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# *Chapter One*

'Can you tell me what's happened Alice?' says the calm voice on the end of the phone. My heart is thudding, squishing around in my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. I can feel the *thump, thump* of it in my ears.

'It's my best friend,' I gasp, my voice rising involuntarily, shrill with fear. 'I think she's tried to kill herself.' I look at the smashed whisky bottle at Gretchen's feet, shards of glass mixed in with the scattered pills. 'Please, someone needs to help her!'

I manage to stay coherent enough to give them the address and then with my useless, rubbery tubes of fingers that seemed to bend off the buttons seconds ago when I dialled 999, I hang up, slip-sliding the phone back into the holder. Then it's just me and Gretchen, in the quiet of her sitting room. Despite the fact that it's early evening and people in flats and houses all around us are probably getting home from work, tiredly kicking off shoes and putting on kettles, there isn't a sound in here – everything has gone eerily quiet. No TV, no radio, no sign of life.

I back up, not taking my eyes off her, and when I feel the wall behind me I sink to the floor. All I can hear is my own ragged breath as I try to get it under control.

Gretchen is seated, not with her usual sassy poise, but slumped in the corner where two walls meet. One knee is hitched up, her head is lolling forward and one arm is stuck out rigid. She looks as though she's had too much to drink and, from standing, has now just slid down the wall gracefully, to a stop.

There is a sticky, sickly smell of alcohol in the air and a dark pool of it by her feet, dotted with confetti-like small white pills. I can't see her face; her long, wavy blonde hair is covering it. She is silent and still. I don't know if she is unconscious or – *oh God* – dead. I can taste vomit in my mouth and my teeth are starting to chatter. I know I ought to be doing something, trying to put her in a recovery position, but I can't for the life of me remember what that is and I'm scared of touching her. She looks like a heroin awareness poster I was shown in sixth form – only that girl had been dead for three days before anyone found her.

I pull my knees in tightly to my chest, bury my head, close my eyes really, really tight and picture the ambulance, forcing mopeds and four-wheel drives alike off into bus lanes as they come to rescue us. I am aware that I am rocking slightly on the spot and whimpering, but I can't seem to stop.

After what feels like for ever, I hear distant wailing sirens becoming louder and louder. Then blue lights flash on the wall above Gretchen's head.

The buzz of the door makes me jump violently, even though I am waiting for it. I clamber stiffly to my feet and rush across the room. A male voice says my name through the intercom and I press the release for downstairs, saying urgently, 'Third floor – we're up here!' Then I hang up and

open the front door to the flat. Immediately I can hear feet clattering up the iron stairwell and then they're here. A man and a woman, both older than me – dressed in green uniforms, moving across to her quickly, taking over. The relief is immense but then everything becomes a blur of questions: 'Do you know if she took all of these pills Alice? Has she ever done anything like this before Alice?'

I can see what they are doing, using my name, trying to keep me connected to reality, and I try to be helpful. I tell them everything I can.

Then we're in the back of the ambulance. The woman is driving, which surprises me, although I'm not sure why it should, and the man is quietly sat behind Gretchen's head, adjusting a tube as I grip the side with one hand and try not to slide off my seat. I'm also trying not to look at her body, bound to the stretcher, rocking from side to side with the motion as we slam through traffic, all sirens screaming.

My fingers are starting to shake and it's suddenly getting very hot in this small space full of unfamiliar machines and wires. I let out an involuntary gasp and the paramedic looks at me sharply. I think he said his name was Joe – I can't remember.

'It's OK, Alice,' he says reassuringly. 'We're nearly there now.'

I think this must be what shock is.

'So Gretchen's your best friend then?' he asks above the noise of the sirens, like we're having a conversation over a drink in a bar. 'From school? University?'

'Er,' I try to drag my mind back. 'No, I met her through work.' I think of LA; us giggling like crazy as we walked through the Sky Bar, arms linked as Gretchen whispered to me delightedly, 'You've got to see this!'

'What is it you do?' he says.

'I'm a photographer.'

'So does Gretchen work with you too?'

What the hell does it matter? 'No, but I met her through work,' I say in an effort to be polite, and instinctively glance at Gretchen, lying there on the stretcher, strapped in. The ambulance seems to slow and weaves jerkily from side to side – I guess we must be cutting through heavier traffic – but then suddenly it slams into fast forward again. My head snaps to the left. Gretchen stays completely motionless, although the trolley holding her slips slightly and slides an inch towards me. If it came loose at this speed it would crush me against the side of the ambulance. The paramedic puts out a hand to steady it. 'Whoops!' he says.

We slow to a stop. The doors swing open, the cold January air blasts in like a slap round the face, but I feel a little better for it. I can see the gaping hole of the double doors to A&E, and nurses waiting, looking up at us from their lower vantage point down on the ground. I sit still as Gretchen is taken out first, then stumble out after her.

She is wheeled straight past the staring eyes of bored, zombie people who have minor twisted ankles, light bangs to the head and have been there for hours, condemned to read ancient copies of women's magazines bursting with reader letters about their grandchildren's 'hilarious' antics, tips on how to get oil stains off a silk blouse, knitting patterns and a fat-free cheesecake recipe. I follow the stretcher uncertainly, then I feel a light, firm hand on my arm guiding me to one side as Gretchen is taken into another room and the doors flap shut behind her. I can see through the porthole; heads of medical staff are moving urgently round the room.

'Alice?' The nurse is speaking. 'Can you come with me? We need some information.'

She takes me to a small room which contains a chair, table and a sink, above which is a PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS sign. She asks me who Gretchen's next of kin is and if there is anyone I would like them to call.

'Er, her brother, Bailey . . . my boyfriend . . . Tom,' I say, dazed and automatically. Then I remember actually that's not true any more and I should say ex, but the moment has passed. 'Bailey is in Madrid – at the airport, or at least he was. He rang me from there earlier to ask me to go over to Gretchen's. Tom is at a work do in Bath . . .'

'Do you have a contact number for Bailey?' she asks.

I start to shift through numbers in my head. 'He has a work mobile. It's not often switched on though. It's 079 . . . no, hang on . . . 0787 . . . Sorry, I can't think straight, I can't . . .'

'Take your time,' the nurse says kindly.

I get there eventually and, having written it down, she looks up from her pad and says, 'What about Tom's?'

'07 . . .' I begin, then hesitate. 'Actually, can I phone him myself please? If that's OK?'

'Of course,' she says. 'Now, do you know how we can contact Gretchen's parents?'

I shake my head. 'She has a difficult relationship with them. Bailey is the one who—'

The nurse cuts across me. 'Her parents really should be called,' she insists gently, and that's when I realise what she is saying . . . without actually saying it.

'I don't know their number,' I reply hopelessly. 'I've never even met them! Where's Gretchen now? What's happening to her?'

'She's in Resuscitation,' she says soothingly. 'I'm going to give this information to someone then I'll be right back. I'll just be a second.'

Once I am alone, I reach for my handbag and pull out my phone, but in this small room I have no signal and anyway, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to use it inside the hospital. I slide it back into my bag – I will have to wait until the nurse returns. I stare very hard at the PLEASE WASH YOUR HANDS sign and try not to panic.

She isn't long. They have found Bailey at the airport on standby for a flight back to London; his phone was on but, typically, he had barely any battery left and apparently it cut out just seconds after the nurse told him I was here with Gretchen and what hospital to come to. I imagine him waiting, alone and terrified on those rows of airport seats it's impossible to get comfy on, powerless to make his wait go faster – or maybe by now he's boarding the plane.

I ask if it is possible to use my mobile to call Tom and she shakes her head regretfully. 'Only outside, I'm afraid.'

I tell her I'll be right back and make my way purposefully through A&E, into the car park. It's a typically cold and dark January night. I shiver involuntarily in my thin tracksuit bottoms, finding his number and waiting as it connects, my breath clouding in front of me, one arm wrapped round my body, my hand in my sleeve for warmth.

It goes straight to voicemail. Either it's switched off or he busy-toned me.

'Hi, it's me,' I say after the bleep, my voice shaking. 'Tom, I'm at the hospital with Gretchen. You need to get here. We're at A&E. I have to go back in a minute and I'm not allowed to have my phone on, so you can't call me – but please just come straight away . . .'

I give him the address, more or less, and hang up. Was that the right thing to say? Should I have told him what's happened? Or is the less he knows until he gets here the better? I don't want him driving in a blind panic, feeling

like he's having to race death and crashing. Suddenly I see why practised hospital staff make these calls. I wait for a moment or two – just long enough that he could check his voicemail – but he doesn't immediately call back, so very reluctantly I switch my phone off and go back in.

Forty minutes later I'm given a message that Tom has called the hospital to say he is on his way and by nine p.m., Gretchen has been moved to intensive care, or ICU as they call it. She is still unconscious but I'm told Bailey asked for me to sit with her. There are three nurses buzzing around her efficiently, murmuring to each other in a technical language that makes no sense to me and includes words like pumps, drips, sats and pressure drops.

I'm sitting as far away from the hospital bed as I can, letting Gretchen's name trip across my tongue soundlessly, like a mantra to focus my very chaotic mind. It is a name that suggests a little doll with a porcelain face, plaits weaving round her head and eyes that do not close when she lies down. She certainly looks breakable now, lying in this hospital bed, all hooked up to machines and tubes, silent apart from mechanical bleeping.

Her skin is a little waxy and where she would normally have a faint flush to her cheeks, she is pale. She is closer to Coppélia than a little girl's plaything, just waiting in the workshop to come to life. A real life-sized, creamy-skinned girl who might sit up in the bed and pull the covers back; but her eyelids don't lift, she doesn't flinch and her mouth stays forced wide by the tube that is keeping her burnt throat open, making me think in turn of a blow-up plastic doll being forced to perform an obscene act.

I look at her hands. Thumbs, fingers. With their small, neat, square nails. They don't and have not moved – not even a flicker. Her long, loose hair has been combed back

by someone and tucked out of the way, which I know would piss her off. Gretchen'd want it to be spread about her on the pillow; she'd appreciate the theatrical potential of her situation. She still looks ethereal though. Gretchen has the kind of beauty that can't be diminished by dull hair or a lack of make-up.

There's a painting I've seen, I think maybe in the National Gallery. A girl is being floated down a river to her grave, clutching pale pink flowers to her chest in a locked grasp of icy fingers. Her wavy blonde hair streams out behind her like seaweed and her limpid green dress trails over the edge of the funeral pyre and drags lightly through the surface, causing ripples. That's what Gretchen looks like now.

I am horrified to find myself wondering if she will look that beautiful dead, or if at the crucial moment, something will wisp away from her, unseen, up towards the ceiling on its way to Gretchen's version of heaven. Tears flood to my eyes and I start to shake slightly again. One of the nurses glances at me curiously and I manage a frightened, watery smile. She smiles sympathetically back and I wonder if she can see everything written all over my face. I don't think she can, because she turns away and then writes something down – there is just the rhythmical bleeping of machines helping Gretchen breathe. Outwardly, it looks like a scene under control.

Except in my head, even though I am trying to ignore it, to push the thought underwater and hold it there until it stops breathing, I can't stop thinking:

*Please don't wake up, please don't wake up, please don't wake up.*

# *Chapter Two*

I jump as one of the nurses cuts across this hideous thought and says kindly, 'You can hold her hand if you want – it's OK. And you can talk to her, too.'

I shake my head vehemently, watching the other two nurses slip out of the room.

'I won't listen,' the remaining one says with an honest smile. She looks about our age, twenty-nine or so.

'I'm OK, thanks,' I manage and she nods understandingly.

'Well, if you change your mind feel free. I know it'll seem a little bit weird, but lots of people do talk – we're very used to it. I'm sorry we've been so rushed tonight and haven't had much time to explain to you what we're doing, what's happening.' She sits down next to me. 'There isn't very much I'm able to tell you, Alice, because you're not Gretchen's next of kin, so I can't give you specific details right now, but quite obviously, Gretchen is still unconscious.'

'Is she going to come round soon, do you think?' I ask anxiously.

'Gretchen's in a very deep state of unconsciousness,' she says gently. 'She's not able to respond to her environment. It's not like being asleep, so we can't just wake her up. One of the symptoms of a severe overdose of the drugs you found near Gretchen is coma.'

'She's in a coma?' I echo, shocked, and twist to look at Gretchen. A coma to me means days and days of the patient lying there, suspended between life and death, or cheap hospital TV dramas where someone has an agonising decision: switch off a life support machine or wait indefinitely for ever? That's not what could happen here, is it?

'How long will she be in a coma for?'

'I don't know,' the nurse says. 'It's too early to tell.'

'Is that why you said I should talk to her?' I ask, looking at the nurse directly as a thought occurs to me. 'Can she hear me? Could she be aware I'm here?'

The nurse hesitates, and I can see she's picking her words carefully so she doesn't give me any false hope. 'Some studies have documented coma sufferers recovering and reporting conversations they heard, yes.'

Oh, shit.

I turn back to Gretchen and look at her. On one long school trip in primary school I pretended to be asleep on the coach so I could hear what other people said about me. Actually no one said anything apart from, 'I'm going to eat her crisps.' Obviously I don't think that is what Gretchen is doing now, pretending, but the thought that underneath those eyelids is a whirring brain aware of everything that is going on in this small room chills and stills my blood. She will know if I betray her confidence and tell her secrets.

'I'll be right over here if you want to ask me anything else,' the nurse says. She stands up and moves to the back of the room.

'There is something actually,' I blurt, turning to her. 'When – if – she starts to regain consciousness, will she just open her eyes?'

The nurse pauses before speaking. 'People in comas,' she says, cleverly making it general and not specific to Gretchen, 'don't do that, except on TV. They start to make little movements, like trying to lift their head or fluttering their fingers when they begin to come round.'

'Can they talk? Straight away?'

The nurse shakes her head. 'You see that tube in her mouth?'

I nod.

'That's helping her breathe and she can't talk with that in.'

'But she could write?' I ask. 'If she came round.'

'She'd find a way to communicate with us.'

The nurse looks at me steadily.

'I'm scared that she's conscious but paralysed,' I say, which isn't true and if Gretchen *can* hear me, she'll be doing an inward sardonic snort right now. Actually she won't, she'll have other things on her mind, like why and how her carefully laid plans have gone so awry – thanks to me. '*You promised*,' I can hear her saying. '*Some best friend you turned out to be!*'

'I read a book recently about a French man that happened to, it was called locked-in syndrome,' I say, trying to focus on the real sound of my own voice.

'That's not what this is,' the nurse assures me, and then pauses before saying, 'Gretchen won't be able to communicate with us until she regains consciousness and

she's very ill, she's not going to just wake up like you see in the films. I'm sorry.'

We fall silent and I look at Gretchen again, feeling more tears well up. Oh, Gretch. How the hell did we wind up here? How can this be happening to us? I just want to go back to us laughing together, laughing so much we could barely stand, I can even hear the sound of it! Please, I want *those* moments back.

I can't do this – I can't just sit in this room pretending. Not when I know, I *know* what we both did . . .

'I have to go and check my messages,' I say, unable to bear it a moment longer, standing up so quickly I surprise my legs and they almost give way beneath me. 'In case Tom has called me.'

'OK,' the nurse says and smiles encouragingly, but I've already turned and I'm bursting back out into the corridor and practically running out of the ICU, shoving determinedly out through the double doors back into the main hospital. I see an exit. Having pushed through the door with a sickening relief, I find myself in what looks like a small, spill-over staff car park. I've no idea where I am in relation to A&E now – I've completely lost my bearings. I just scrabble in my bag for my phone and switch it on. I have three new messages.

The first one is Tom, left twenty minutes after I called him. 'Alice? What the hell has happened?' He sounds cross but I can tell it's because he's very frightened. 'What do you mean you're both at the hospital? Why? Look, if you get this in the next five minutes call me back, OK?'

The next one is him, six minutes later. 'It's me again. I'm going to call the hospital.'

And then, eighteen minutes after that, him shouting above a roaring car engine, obviously on the road, saying, 'I'm on

my way, don't panic, Alice. It'll be all right. I'll be there just as soon as possible, I promise. I've left Bath – I don't know how long it'll take me – but luckily I'm going against the traffic, I'll be as quick as I can.'

I picture him gripping the steering wheel firmly with one hand, mobile to his ear with the other, hurtling down the motorway in his work suit, and it makes me want to cry with relief that he is on his way. My bottom lip trembles and tears spring to the corners of my eyes. Thank God. I feel better just having heard his voice.

Tom is a fixer, someone to rely on. He's the sort of person friends ring when they need advice on selling a car, filling out a tax return or have some heavy furniture that needs moving. My dad wanted me to marry Tom the second he found out he owned a fully stocked tool kit – with no bits missing – *and* knew what to do with it. He sorted a leaking tap for me the first day I met him, for God's sake.

'That should do it,' he said, climbing out of the bath – fully suited sadly – and turning the tap on and off experimentally, still clutching the pair of pliers I'd given him, the only tool-type thing I'd been able to find in the whole flat. My flatmate Vic and I stared at the tap, waiting for the inevitable drip to begin – but it didn't. We were totally delighted.

'So Tom,' Vic said quickly. 'You're a management consultant – which sounds well paid and stable . . .'

Tom nodded modestly.

'You're a friend of a friend so you're unlikely to be a lunatic,' Vic continued. 'You can mend things . . .'

And you're fit, I thought, staring as his light blue eyes crinkled behind his glasses because he'd smiled.

'The room's yours if you want it,' Vic said, having looked at me for the OK first.

'That's it?' he laughed. 'Don't you want to see any references? You should, you know,' he said, suddenly serious. 'I could be anyone. I'm not – but I could be.'

But he was of course the model flatmate and, it turned out ten months later, boyfriend.

The phone rings in my already cold, numb hand. It's him. 'Tom?' I answer quickly. 'Where are you?'

'. . . fen . . . M4 . . . like a wanker . . . but flyover . . . passed Olympia . . . twenty min . . .' It's cutting in and out so badly I can barely hear him, but it sounds like he's still in the car. '. . . happened? . . . hospital reception and I'll . . .' Then it goes completely dead. I call him back but it goes straight to voicemail. He said twenty minutes though – I heard that. Gripping my phone like a talisman, I try to go back in through the door I just came out of, but discover I can't because it requires a code.

I spend the next ten minutes walking faster and faster around the outside of the hospital, following signs that say they are taking me to the main reception but in fact lead me down unlit, narrow passageways between very dark, old red-brick clinic buildings which have open curtains on eerily empty rooms. I try not to look in through the windows as I speed past them, scared of glimpsing ghostly figures moving silently around inside – past patients who died there and are now bound to the austere Victorian building for ever. I'm almost sick with the fear I've worked myself into and have to, need to, hear someone's familiar, no-nonsense voice. So I call Frances.

'Hello?' My elder sister answers the phone with a hushed tone.

'It's me.' My voice is wavering around all over the place, not just because of my hurried footsteps.

'Oh hi, Al. Look I'm really sorry, but now's not a great

time – I've just put Freddie down. He's really unsettled tonight.'

I try to picture Frances sitting in her neat little semi-detached, curtains regimentally pulled, tea washed up, TV on – calm and normal.

'It's a dreadful line anyway,' she says. 'It sounds like you're in a wind tunnel.'

I turn a corner sharply, look to my left and nearly collapse with relief. Oh thank God – I can see the front of A&E. I slow down, trying to catch my breath as I walk past several stationary ambulances, but then leap out of my skin as one suddenly blasts out a brief siren, begins to flash its lights and then swiftly pulls away to go and rescue somebody else. I hadn't even noticed a driver was sitting in the dark front seat.

'Where *are* you?' Frances says immediately.

I take a breath. 'I'm—'

'Oh no!' she interrupts. 'I think Freddie heard that. Oh please God, don't let him wake up! Just don't say anything Alice!' she whispers urgently and obediently I fall silent, although I can't help but wonder how Freddie could possibly have heard an ambulance down a phone that he's probably nowhere near. He's a baby, not a bat.

'It's OK,' she breathes. 'He's fine. Actually I'm glad you rang, I can't get hold of Mum. Do you know where she is? I've tried at home, but there's no answer. They can't *all* be out – it's a Thursday night!'

I pause, knowing full well that, on my advice, Mum and Dad have taken to unplugging the phone during meal times for half an hour of peace from the incessant baby-related calls. They've probably forgotten to plug it back in again.

'Freddie feels a little flushed,' Frances says. 'And he's only

just recovered from that cough last week. I think it might be the start of pneumonia and Adam's still at work.'

'I have no idea where Mum is,' I say and then I burst into tears.

'Alice? Are you *crying*? What on earth is the matter?'

'I'm at the hospital and—'

'Why? Are you hurt?' Frances says sharply, automatically swinging into big sister mode.

'No,' I begin. 'I'm fine but—'

But she bulldozes over me, 'You're not ill? Nothing's broken?'

This is typical Frances. Back in secondary school, there was a group of 'cool' girls in my class who bullied everyone from time to time. They used to cluster round their victim in the corridors between classes, always one of the worst times, or at lunch when the teachers would be shut away in the staffroom reading the paper, having a fag and angrily watching the clock hands which had dragged all morning suddenly whizzing round.

It was my turn on the day I was the only person to get an A in art and the teacher warmly and stupidly praised me in front of the whole class. The cool girls' eyes all swivelled on to me – and I just *knew* what was going to happen at break.

Sure enough, six of them circled round me on the top corridor and began jostling and pushing me. I kept quiet and looked at the floor, because saying *anything* only made it worse. I'd seen what they'd done to poor Catherine Gibbons, who'd bravely chanted 'Sticks and stones may break my bones.'

One of the girls had just given me a rather half-hearted push that made me stumble and clutch my bag a little tighter when, amid their increasingly bored jeers, there was a sudden bellow of 'HEY!' We all turned to see Frances

steamrollering towards us, red in the face with rage. Within seconds she grabbed the ringleader round the neck and growled, 'You touch my little sister again and I'll break your face, understand?'

She dumped the girl down, at which point they all scarpered. I remember she looked at me and sighed. 'Pull your shirt out, Al, no one tucks it in like that . . .'

'Alice,' she says, waiting for me to answer her. 'You're frightening me. Are you sure nothing's wrong with you?'

I take a deep breath and try to calm down. 'It's not me. I've brought Gretchen in.'

'Oh God,' Frances snorts. 'You poor thing! Your friends are such drama queens. You're too nice for your own good Alice, you really are. I take it this is some sort of alcohol-related injury you're having to surpervise?'

'Kind of. I went round to her flat earlier this evening and—' I suddenly really want to tell her. I am, however, interrupted by a thin wail in the background.

'Oh I don't believe it!' Frances says. 'He's awake. Fuck, fuck, fuck. You promise me *you're* all right, Al?'

The crying in the background becomes louder with renewed vigour – it's a lusty, determined demand for attention and I can't help but feel a moment of respect for my tiny, no doubt scarlet-faced nephew.

'How the hell can you be awake *already*?' Frances says in disbelief. 'I only fed you fifteen minutes ago.' She lets out a heavy, slightly desperate sigh.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. 'Fran,' I insist, 'I'm fine. I can deal with this. You go.'

'If you're sure?' I can hear the relief in her voice. 'What's happened to Gretchen anyway?'

Freddie cranks up the volume to a level that could break glass.

'Nothing, nothing major. I'll call you later if I need to.'

'Just try Mum, OK?' she says guiltily. 'She'll know what to do. They might be back by now. If you get her, tell her to call me when you're done, all right?'

'OK,' I say dully, a fresh tear trickling down my cheek, and then she hangs up without even saying goodbye. I want to dial her back straight away and say, 'Actually I do need you. I'm frightened, Fran!' Instead, I dial my parents and begin to walk slowly down to the main doors. But just as Frances said, it just rings and rings before eventually going to answerphone.

So I dial my younger brother Phil's number. If he's at home, he can go downstairs and tell them to plug the phone back in, that *I* want to speak to them. I suddenly very urgently need to talk to Mum or Dad – have someone tell me this is going to be all right because—

'This is Phil. I can't come to the phone right now, I'm probably busy. And by busy, I mean out. And by out I mean having a smoke. You can leave a message, but no promises, alriiitttteeee?'

For a moment I can see exactly how Phil can drive my dad into a rage in under five seconds flat. What kind of recorded message is *that* given prospective graduate employers might be calling him? He won't even get an interview, never mind a job. I just hang up and drop my phone into my bag in defeat.

I glance desperately up at the black sky and try to calm myself down. There are no stars, and no navigation lights of planes visible either. I can hear one, distantly buried in the thick cloud above my head. I can't see it, but I wish I were on it, going somewhere, anywhere away from here.

I bring my head down and look at my watch. Has it been twenty minutes yet? Tom must be nearly here by now.

He could have parked and slipped in another door? Perhaps he's up there already? I don't want him walking into Gretchen's room on his own.

I hurriedly clatter up the disabled ramp leading to A&E, arms tightly wrapped round myself. The persistent wind is managing to bite at my very bones, but before I can plunge back into the stifling warmth of the hospital, the mechanism of the automatic double doors yanks into action and a mother and daughter begin to slowly hobble through. I have to stand to one side to let them pass. The daughter supports the mum as she leans heavily on her and a crutch. She's perspiring with the effort, even though it's freezing, and is clutching furiously at her daughter's hand. I glance at her heavily bandaged foot and notice two unattractive purple toes peeking out at the top, adorned with fat blobs of coral polish. 'Well done, Mum,' the daughter says kindly. 'Dad's just bringing the car round. Nearly there.'

The mother glances up to thank me for waiting and her eyes widen briefly as she takes me in. I catch sight of my reflection in the glass and raise a hand self-consciously to my jaw, twisting my face slightly so I can get a better look. There is nothing obviously untoward, just my pale, make-up-smudged face; red eyes and nose attractively set off by my long, unstyled dark hair, but she's right – I'm a state. My baggy tracksuit bottoms and old hoodie top complete the look, but then, I thought I had a night in front of the TV ahead of me, not this.

I drop my head and dart past them as soon as I'm able to. Scanning the waiting room, I can see no sign of Tom, only a drunk verbally abusing the receptionist, so I step away hurriedly, moving towards the corridor that I think will lead me to the ICU.

But once I'm back up there, I pause outside the heavy

doors leading on to the unit. He *will* be here by now, won't he? I don't want him in there without me, but I don't want to sit waiting alone either.

The doors unexpectedly swing open, nearly hitting me as a doctor marches through with energy. 'Sorry!' he says automatically, though he also frowns slightly as if he's thinking, 'bloody stupid place to stand', so I walk through. I can't just stand here like a weirdo doing nothing.

The nurse looks up expectantly and then smiles with recognition as I enter the room. Tom is not there. I don't look at Gretchen, just put my bag back under the chair and sink down on to it uncomfortably. As I wipe my nose, which is streaming from the cold outside, I wonder for a moment if the nurse can tell I've been crying. But she'd expect me to have been, wouldn't she?

Eventually, after staring at the floor for what feels like for ever, I shoot a glance at Gretchen. I can't help it, I don't want to, but she looks just the same as when I left. Calm and, ironically, untroubled – but equally she looks sick, colourless. Once, I would have wanted her to be sitting up in bed, excited and shrieking, a wide smile across her face as I push her down the corridors, making doctors and nurses leap to safety as we hurtle past them. That couldn't happen. Not now.

Oh, if I could go back and change it all I would! I really, really would. I would give anything to be us just starting out again. I should have done what she asked, I know I should have. She needed me and I didn't do it . . .

I can feel myself creasing and crumpling up inside. I'm scared and the chair suddenly feels like it's shrinking under me – the whole room feels too small. Gretchen looks scarily fragile, vulnerable, and yet I am too terrified to touch her. My own friend.

I start to cry, and that is unfortunately how Tom finds me as he bursts into the room in a creased work suit, tie askew, shaken and breathless from having run in to find us.