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A Very Accidental Love Story

Written by Claudia Carroll

Published by AVON

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CLAUDIA CARROLL

A Very Accidental Love Story

A V O N

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the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

AVON
A division of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2012

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

ISBN-13: 978-1-84756-272-2

Set in Minion by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Acknowledgements

As always, huge and heartfelt thanks to Marianne Gunn O'Connor, or as she's known in my house, Marianne; Miracle Worker Extraordinaire. Thanks for working so tirelessly and for being such a constant source of inspiration and encouragement. An agent this amazing doesn't rightfully deserve the title 'loveliest woman you could ever possibly meet,' but she *is*, she really is.

Thanks to Pat Lynch, for keeping the show on the road. Pat, I honestly don't know what any of us would do without your calm, friendly voice down the other end of the phone!

Very special thanks to the wonderful Claire Bord. Claire, I really hope you know what an absolute pleasure it is to work with you, the kind of editor any author would gladly give their eye teeth for. Thank you for all the incredible hard work you put into this book and for your wonderful thoughts and suggestions which, as always, were pitch-perfect. Already looking forward to working with you on the new one!

Huge thanks to all the ladies at HarperCollins Avon, or the 'A' team as I call them. You're all amazing and it's a pure pleasure to work alongside you all, although somehow it never feels like work! Very special thanks to Caroline Ridding, Claire Power, Sammia Rafique, Keshini Naidoo and Helen Bolton. And a huge big thank you to the ever-patient Sam Hancock who works so hard on our digital campaigns, websites and newsletters. Looking forward to seeing you all very soon!

Harper Collins are lucky enough to have two of the hardest working people in the business based here in Dublin, who do so much and who make our lives so much easier. A very warm thank you to the legendary powerhouse that is Moira Reilly and also to Tony Purdue, who works so hard, he'd nearly put you to shame.

As always, massive thanks to the lovely Vicki Satlow in Milan, who daily performs miracles in selling translation rights. Vicki, you're a wonder and I only wish we got to see you in Ireland that bit more often. But I'll continue to nag at you!

This book is about a newspaper editor and when I was researching it I was cheeky enough to approach Geraldine Kennedy, then editor of the *Irish Times*, with all the blithe confidence of the gobshite. Here's the problem you see, everyone thinks you're telling lies when you ring them up and say, 'no really! I'm researching a book! Honest!) But with Geraldine, did I hit the jackpot or what? Instead of politely showing me the door, she was extraordinarily generous with her time and really went out of her way to give me insights into the workings of a scarily massive paper like that. Huge thanks again for everything Geraldine, and I wish you well in this exciting new phase of your life.

Very special thanks to my family, Mum and Dad and to my gorgeous gang of buddies, who've been in my life for decades now. (Yes, we are all VERY old, *scarily* old)

When I first got published way back in 2004, I had the real pleasure of meeting a whole new group of friends, female writers one and all, who've been so welcoming and so incredibly supportive from day one. I'm so grateful to have you all in my life and on a personal note, can I just say that I've dedicated this book to one of those very special writer buddies I've been lucky enough to meet along the way.

This one's for Anita Notaro.

For Anita Notaro, with love.

*Watch your thoughts, for they become words,
Watch your words, for they become actions,
Watch your actions, for they become habits,
Watch your habits, for they become character,
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.*

Anonymous

Prologue

They say no man is an island, but Eloise Elliot was.

Not that this particularly bothered her most of the time, but tonight was different.

It was her thirtieth birthday, and, bar a few stragglers from the accounts department who'd famously go to the opening of a fridge door if they thought they might scab a free drink out of it, no one had turned up.

No one.

Not a single one of the Board of Directors she worked so slavishly for; nor any of her senior editorial team, colleagues she'd known and worked shoulder-to-shoulder with for the past seven gruelling years. Not even the few – the very few – co-workers who, if she didn't exactly think of them as friends, at least didn't physically hurl furniture at her as she passed them by.

And so this was it. This was how Eloise Elliot came to mark her thirtieth year: upstairs in *The Daily Post's* conference room, surrounded by a few mangy-looking helium balloons and trays of dismal egg and watercress sandwiches that were already curling up at the edges, making faux-polite small talk with a bunch of semi-strangers. All of whom, for the record, then cried off early, pleading early

starts the next day and in all likelihood only dying to get out of there the minute the free gargle ran out.

‘Sure you wouldn’t like a vol-au-vent?’ Eloise asked a smiley-faced blonde girl, whose name she hadn’t quite caught. ‘Go on, look, there’s loads left. You can’t leave now, look at all this grub! You’ve got to help me get rid of at least some of it.’

‘Emm,’ Blonde Girl said uncertainly, glancing at the others for support, ‘well . . . I’d love to stay, but . . . I’ve got this really early meeting in the morning.’

‘Mini vegetarian frittata then?’ said Eloise, wafting an untouched tray under her nose. Like this might make a difference.

‘I’m so sorry, I really have to go . . .’

‘Yeah . . . me too, it’s so late,’ said her pal, a tall modelly-looking one who Eloise vaguely recognised from seeing in the staff canteen a few times.

‘Go on, just have a slice of birthday cake before you go. You know you want to!’ Eloise offered, trying her best to keep the slightly hysterical note out of her voice. And not succeeding very well.

‘Can’t, I’m afraid. I live miles away and if I miss my bus . . .’

‘How about yourself?’ Eloise said to a new intern, whose name she thought might be Susan, as she thrust a plateful of vanilla sponge gateaux at her.

‘Oh . . . ehh . . . thanks so much,’ Susan answered politely, the only one to look even slightly sympathetic, ‘but you see, I really do need to make tracks as well, been a really long day . . .’

Lost cause, Eloise thought. Waste of her time even asking them to stay. Instead she stood and watched the three of

them clatter out the door and on towards the lift bank in their too-high heels, getting giddier by the minute it seemed, the further they were away from her.

So this was it, she thought, this was the start of a brand-new decade for her. And so far, it was her worst nightmare come true.

She hadn't even wanted a party in the first place – no time, thanks very much – but then Eloise was famous for rarely socialising with anyone unless it was a) work related, b) would involve making several important new business contacts or c) there was just no possible way out of it. Even then, she'd be the last to arrive, the first to leave and would impatiently nurse a glass of still water for the hour or so that she was there, all while checking emails on her iPhone approximately every ten minutes or so.

Oh sure, she'd put in an appearance at the staff Christmas party mainly because she didn't really have a choice after all, she was the boss and even she knew how crap it would look if she didn't. But by and large, she was her own best friend and perfectly happy to be so. She was an island and islands are rarely bothered about popularity. Which at that particular moment in time, as she sat all alone on an empty desk beside rows and rows of untouched wineglasses, was probably just as well.

Absent-mindedly, she started to play with the string hanging off the end of a gaudy pink 'Congratulations!' helium balloon anchored beside her and for the first time in years, allowed herself a rare moment of introspection.

Welcome to my life, she thought. Thirty years of age and utterly alone. No friends, no 'significant other', no office colleagues who, perish the thought, might actually want to spend some non-work-related time with her – no one.

When it came down to it, she was basically living the life of a nun on a six-figure salary.

Sure she had family, but she saw them so rarely, they barely even figured. Her darling dad had passed away years ago and her mother now lived in Marbella with a duplex, a perma-tan and a worrying habit of drinking during the day. But although they'd have a weekly chat on the phone and in spite of countless invitations to 'jump on a plane and come and get some sun for yourself,' Eloise really only got to see her mum once a year, when she'd fly home for Christmas. If work permitted even that much. Last Christmas Day, a story had unexpectedly broken in the Middle East and Eloise ended up having to rush back to the *Post* to cover it.

She had a younger sister too, Helen, but she'd upped sticks and moved down to Cork a few years back. Besides, it was unspoken between the sisters, but deep down each knew they'd next to nothing in common. They saw each other rarely, spoke even less and even that was just for form's sake, little more.

In fairness, most of the time, Eloise didn't particularly miss having friends, mainly because how can you miss what you never really had in the first place? Dating right the way back to primary school, when she continually came top of her class, the other kids, viciously cruel as small kids usually are, would ostracise her and call her a freak, mainly because no one wanted to be pals with the girl who constantly badgered the teacher about their homework load being insufficient and unchallenging.

Eloise read at Junior Cert level by the age of four, was declared a member of Mensa at five and by nine, had composed a violin concerto to accompany the senior school's production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

For God's sake, even the teachers were a bit scared of her.

And so unsurprisingly, she grew up being utterly self-reliant and not really needing other people, thanks very much. Totally married to her job; in fact, she *was* the job. Youngest senior editor the *Post* had ever had, by the way, with all the stress ulcers to prove it, and in the space of a few short years she had not only trebled their circulation but completely turned their readership around, *a la* Tina Brown. First at her desk every morning, last to leave at night; this is not a woman who did down time, friends, family or socialising, ever. Sorry, no time.

Small wonder people didn't warm to her. She had a clatter of various nicknames behind her back among subordinates at her office, none of which stuck, mainly because the very phrase 'Eloise Elliot wants to see you in her office, now,' delivered just like that, unfrilled and straight up, was pretty much enough to terrify any poor unfortunate who worked for her into white-faced, trembling, silence.

And now on this of all nights, Eloise was suddenly seeing the rest of her whole life stretching right out in front of her. Seeing it as vividly as if she'd already lived it. Clear as crystal, she could see herself at forty, then at fifty, then right up all the way to retirement age, still editing the paper, still working eighteen-hour days, and still alone.

Pretending to celebrate a day she didn't particularly care about, while a handful of strangers looked at her the way everyone seemed to look at her these days; with a mixture of pity and terror.

Sometimes we don't recognise the most significant moments of our lives till they've long passed, but not Eloise. Hard to believe that miserable night would change the

whole course of her carefully ordered existence, and yet that's exactly how it would pan out.

Years later, she'd look back and pinpoint this as the precise moment when heaven whispered in her ear and when she suddenly knew what needed to be done to kill this life, to fix this problem. Because to someone with Eloise's keen mathematical brain, that was all this was; a problem to be solved, like a simple maths equation.

And make no mistake: solve it, she would.

So with that same dazzling clarity that you only ever get on rare, road-to-Damascus moments in life, Eloise Elliot rubbed sore, red eyes, took a deep breath and made one of the lightning-quick, clear-headed decisions for which she'd become legendary.

It was time to take action.

PART ONE

ELOISE

THREE YEARS LATER

Chapter One

Not today. Just please not today. I can't tell you how I so do NOT need this today.

It's barely five thirty in the morning and already my whole life seems to be spiralling dangerously out of all control, something that's happening with all-too alarming frequency these days. For starters, while I'm trying to slip out the door at the crack of dawn (nothing unusual there, this is when I have to leave for work every morning), Elka, my Polish nanny, picks today of all shagging days to have an out-and-out meltdown.

There I am, sneaking downstairs in my bare feet, trying not to wake anyone, already running late for the early morning news briefing. Never, ever a good start to the day. Next thing, madam stomps out of her bedroom, still in her dressing gown, not so much asking, as demanding, to have a 'queek word with you.'

'Emm . . . yes, of course, Elka,' I say, instantly smelling trouble and deliberately keeping my voice down to a low hiss, so as not to disturb Lily.

Lily, by the way, is my little girl; almost three years old now and the light of this exhausted, knackered-to-her-very-bone-marrow mummy's life.

‘Is everything OK?’ I ask politely, biting my tongue and bracing myself for the answer. Elka is the one nanny we’ve had who Lily adores and behaves beautifully for, and for her part, Elka herself genuinely seems fond of her too.

‘I neeeded to speak with you, and this crazy hour of morning is only time I am seeing you all this week,’ she tells me in her still-rubbishy English, in spite of the small fortune I’ve forked out on audio books and private lessons for her over the past few months.

Please don’t tell me you’re about to leave. Please for the love of God, don’t let another one leave . . .

‘Go ahead, Elka,’ I manage to say calmly, but with bowels clenched, only dreading what’s going to come out of her mouth next.

‘In my contract, it say that you am paying me to look after Lily,’ she says crisply, arms folded, ponytail swishing back, nostrils flaring. ‘But you must understand me when I tell to you, this mean during *reasoning* hours.’

‘I think you might mean *reasonable* hours,’ I tell her. ‘Can I ask you what’s suddenly brought all this on?’

‘You have huge nerve to ask that of me!’

‘Shhh! Can you keep it down please? You’ll wake Lily.’

‘I have many, many problem with the hours you expect me to be working. None of the other nannies who am my friends work as long days as I must.’

‘But Elka, your hours are hardly long. At least, not compared with mine, they’re not . . .’

‘Look at time now! Five thirty a.m.! And already you are going to office, which mean I am in care of Lily. You meant to be home at seven in the night times so I can have free time for me, and you never are. Ever!’

Okay, I’m momentarily silenced here. Because actually,

the girl does have a point. Technically I'm supposed to be home at seven-ish in the evening so she can clock off, but . . . well, for the past while, it's been a tiny bit later than that. Like eleven p.m. Or even midnight.

'All other nannies have evenings free! They am all meeting for coffee and beer and movies. All having good time in Ireland! All have boyfriends and days off and nights out! But never me! No fun for me, ever. I tell you I am sick of it, have enough! Is total crap!'

'Shhh! Elka, please will you keep your voice down,' I stage whisper at her, but madam's having none of it. Instead she's whipped herself up into a right frenzy and there's no stopping her now.

'No, you must be listening to me. Because you am working late, I must too. It's too much and I want to quit!'

'I hear what you're saying and I completely understand but can I also remind you that this is the nature of my job?' I tell her as soothingly as I can, knowing full well she has me backed into a corner now. Because if she walks out on me . . . Oh dear God, it just doesn't bear thinking about.

'And if you don't like the schedule I have to work Elka, well . . . I'm really sorry but there's absolutely nothing I can do about it. Believe me, I don't like working such long hours, any more than you do. So if you're looking for someone to blame, then take it up with . . . Eurozone leaders and the global economic meltdown. Or . . . blame the Arab Spring in the Middle East, which is hardly my fault, now is it?'

'I no understand . . . you must use little words for me!' I take another deep breath.

'I'm so sorry Elka,' I tell her as calmly as I can, given that I should have been out the door ten minutes ago and

even though the day has barely started, I'm now already well behind schedule, 'but if there's a big news story, the editor has to be there to oversee it. That's my life. News doesn't take time off and therefore neither can I. Editors at the *Post* don't sit around. In fairness, I did make this perfectly clear to you when I hired you. Plus, can I point out that I pay you far and above the rates all your other nanny pals are earning? But of course,' I tack on brightly, hoping against hope that this might just work, 'if it's a question of giving you yet another salary increase, I'd be perfectly happy to discuss it with you later.'

No, not even that sways her though. In fact, I might as well be talking to the back of my hand.

'You work too long days and it no good for Lily, as well as no good for me,' she lobs in, a cheap shot if ever there was one. The old emotional guilt-card thrown at a busy working mother.

'She miss her mama so much when you not here. All the time she ask me, when is Mama coming home?'

'Come on Elka, that is blatantly ridiculous and deeply hurtful . . .'

'Even at the weekend time, when you should be with her, you am still in the office. Always, always working.'

Now that bloody stung, and just as this conversation was heating up, temporarily stuns me into silence. I mean, yes, of course I wish I could spend twenty-four hours a day with Lily, I mean, who wouldn't? But how can I possibly?

I get a lightning-quick flashback to the first year she was born, when somehow, I seemed to manage just fine; got to spend whole weekends with her, even managed to get home relatively early most nights. I can do this, I thought;

I can have the best of both worlds. I can be Superwoman. I had my whole work/life balance sussed back then and can honestly say it was the happiest time of my life. By far.

But then the recession hit hard and the staff cutbacks started and that was the end of that. Suddenly I was expected to do the work of three people for the same money or else get out, that was it. Well, it was worse than Sophie's bleeding Choice. Because much as I love and adore the ground Lily walks on, work is a hugely important part of my life too and if these are my new working hours, then bar resigning, there's not a whole lot I can do about it.

In brutal moments of introspection, I just know I'm someone who'd go off her head in less than a week without a full-time career to nourish my soul. Sure, parenthood is a huge high, but then so is my job. *Peppa Pig* and *Barney* videos could never possibly give me the same buzz. So, if it's not too much to ask, can't I just have both? I mean, plenty of other women do, don't they?

But I have at least established clear boundaries with the office and made it perfectly clear to everyone that my Sundays with Lily are sacrosanct. The one day out of an otherwise mental week when I get to read her stories and make pancakes with her, then maybe take her to a Disney movie, or else to feed the ducks in the park. You know, spoil her rotten. Be a proper mummy.

Mind you, ever since the most recent staff culling started, I reluctantly have to admit that Elka might have a point and that even Sacred Sunday Mummy Time seems to have been seriously curtailed lately. Last week for instance; I'd made Lily her breakfast, played imaginary tea parties with her small army of dolls and was just about to take her to the toystore for a *very* special treat, when I got a call to get

into the office ASAP. There was an emergency news conference about a breaking story developing in Afghanistan, so what else could I do? I had to be there, simple as that. Goes with the job.

And I may not let it show, but I love my little Lily so much that it physically aches to be away from her for any length of time, never mind for the eighteen-hour days I'm practically expected to put in right now. For God's sake, don't I have enough guilt of my own to deal with at being apart from her, without having it flung into my face by someone who I'm employing? And at premium rates too, I might add?

'Tell you what, I have a suggestion Elka,' I say, evenly and deliberately locking my voice into its lowest register, which I've learned is absolutely the best way to deal with any confrontational situation. And I should know, having been through more than a fair few in my time. 'Is it too much to ask that you just get on with your job, let me get on with mine and then this evening when I'm home from work, we can discuss this calmly, at a more appropriate time. Come on now, what do you say to that?'

But madam's in no mood to listen to reason.

'I say to all the other nannies, you have no husband, you have no boyfriend, no man, instead you are married to your work.'

And . . . bam.

'Excuse me, *what* did you just say?'

' . . . all other children I know each has each mother and father, but not Lily. She only have mother. So the mother need to be here for her more. Much, much more.'

Okay, now that feels exactly the same as a hard wallop across the cheek and hurts so much it momentarily stuns

me. So of course, the second I come to, I snap right back at her, the way I seem to snap at everyone these days. But there you go, that's what deep, ongoing exhaustion and off-the-scale stress levels will do to you.

'Elka, I made it perfectly clear to you from day one that I was a single parent,' I tell her crisply. 'I don't have a problem with it and neither does Lily, but if this is some kind of issue for you, you really should have said so before now.'

'Single parent need to spend more time with kids, not less.'

Okay, so now I'm fuming, feeling like smoke is physically puffing out of my ears, cartoon-like. Because she's hit my weak spot square-on, with all the accuracy of an aircraft bomber. Yes, I'm a lone parent and yes, there can be huge disadvantages to that. But deal with it, is my attitude.

The subject of Lily's father is one that's not up for discussion. Not now, not ever.

And when I think of the amount of money I pay Elka every month – and all for what? So she can stand here, pass judgement on my life and make me feel about two inches tall? So she can spend all day playing with a little girl who's not even three years old? Does she think that I wouldn't jump at the chance to stay home all day and be a full-time mum? Doesn't she realise how it's like a stab in the chest every time I have to kiss Lily's little strawberry-blond head of curls goodbye? Or, worst of all, when I have to listen to the innumerable voice messages she leaves on my phone when I'm at work, in her angelic little baby voice, all with the same unvarying theme? 'I miss you Mama. When are you coming home?' There are times when all I want to do is hug her and hold her and tell her not to

bother growing up, it's not worth all the hassle. Just stay like this, stay my little girl forever.

Doesn't anyone realise how gutted I am that I seem to be missing out on so much of her? Missed her taking her first baby steps, missed her saying her first words . . . I'm never there, I'm either in a meeting or writing an editorial or chairing a news conference; always, always, working. And of course I went into single parenthood with both eyes open; I knew massive life changes would be involved. Which is why I hired a live-in nanny, plus two back-up child-minders in case of emergencies. Hired them – and then subsequently had to accept all their resignations, one by one like ducks in a row, for exactly the same reasons Elka is now citing.

But come on, in my defence, how was I supposed to know with all the redundancies at work in the past two years that my workload would effectively double? Anyway, I think, furious with exhaustion now, what does Elka think I'm putting in all these ungodly hours for anyway? Only to keep myself sane, while giving my little girl the best life that I possibly can. Hardly my fault that I can't be in two places at once – not with the hours I'm expected to put in, and certainly not with my contract up for renewal in six months. Not now. Apart from everything else I have to worry about, now there's trouble afoot at work, you see, though it's not normally something I articulate out loud.

Trouble by the name of Seth Coleman, managing editor of the *Post*.

Ah, Seth Coleman. Where do I begin? He hasn't even been in the job that long; he was headhunted from *The Sunday Press* when his predecessor at the *Post* left. Who by the way was a gorgeous, preppy, easy-going guy I strongly

suspect I drove out of there and who I now miss more than my right hand. His official reason for quitting was for 'work/life balance', and to be perfectly honest, who could blame him?

Anyway, when pressed officially as to my opinion of Seth, I smile curtly and acknowledge his fine leadership qualities and firm grasp of the newspaper business, always adding that he's never anything else than a consummate professional, at all times, always.

But when I'm standing in the shower, which is about the only place I get any kind of private time to myself these days, I will name-call Seth Coleman as the sleaziest, most hypocritical b**locks on the face of the planet, with a thin, slimy, greasy head of hair, and pockmarked, boiled-red skin, whose total absence of neck gives him more than a passing resemblance to Barney Rubble. Oh, and with an ego the approximate size of Saturn's fifty-seven moons. Represents just about every trait that I despise in the male sex and even manages to discover a few new ones along the way. Patronising to my face, but behind my back, I know right well that he's deeply resentful of working for a woman. And with my seven-year contract up for renewal in the next few months, even the dogs on the street seem to know that his greedy eye is now firmly focused on the big prize.

A classically mean-spirited man, he's also someone who keeps a mental tally of all my losses in work, diligently measuring all my shortcomings, rather than any of my gains. For starters, he's been busily spreading rumour after rumour about me and they've all filtered back; that I'm slipping, that ever since I had Lily I'm not the firebrand I once was, that I'm not living and breathing the job like I used to. And I know, just know without being told, that

he's just biding his time, waiting for me to crack, and so therefore I can't.

So I do what I have to do. Go into work and act the part of the bossiest boss that the world of big bossy business could ask for. Do exactly what I'm programmed to do. And it's tough and getting tougher by the day, even though my job defines me; it's who I am and not for one second could I consider doing something less stressful.

But having said all that, the brightest part of my day isn't when I sign off on the next issue of the *Post*, it's seeing the little strawberry-blonde head of an almost-three-year-old sleeping like an angel when I get home, cuddled up in her bed with her favourite teddy bear beside her. And I'll gaze at her adorably freckled pink little angel's face and whisper to her that I love her so, so much and that one day we'll have proper time to be together.

Then I do what I always do; collapse into bed and try to lock away the guilt that feels like heartburn every time I realise the one single thing that has the power to kill me on the inside; the only time I seem to see my baby girl these days is when she's sleeping.

But back to Elka, still spitting fire and venom at me on the upstairs landing.

'Lily is beautiful little girl,' she spews, 'and I will be sad to say goodbye to her, but the hours you make me work are crazy. Crazy! And they making me crazy too!'

'Really sorry about this,' I'm forced to interrupt, unable to take much more, But 'I'm going to be late for work. Could we please discuss this later?'

'I not finished! I know my entitlements too. My other friends tell me you must give me P45 with full salary entitlements paid up front before I leave.'