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Blink of an Eye

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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BLINK OF AN EYE

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CHAPTER ONE

Carmel

Before and after. Two different lives. Before – did we really know how lucky we were? How wonderful everything was? How fragile?

A warm May day, the sun golden, the air soft with a hint of humidity, the silver birch offering dappled shade in the corner of the garden. I'd spent most of the afternoon on the swing seat there, doting grandma, three-week-old Ollie dozing in my arms. Phil, as besotted as I was, taking photographs, dozens of photographs. I had not believed people when they eulogized about the emotional impact of having grandchildren, but meeting Ollie had been like a punch to my gut, the sensation close to that I'd felt when our girls were born. A mix of overwhelming love and rabid fear – the urge to cherish and the fearsome drive to protect. Part of me was bemused, though, thinking, how did I get here? Like the Talking Heads track. When did I get to be a middle-aged woman? Fifty-two and still feeling like a seventeen-year-old inside.

The place was brimming with guests, mainly friends of Suzanne and Jonty, a sprinkling of kids, a couple of their neighbours, Julia and Fraser from the end cottage.

Jonty was living it large at the barbecue, florid with heat, his ginger curls damp, sporting a butcher's apron, garish Bermuda shorts and flip-flops. A bear of a man next to our

daughter, who is petite, neat, who can get away with buying children's clothes.

Phil, at my side, traced a finger down Ollie's nose; the baby's eyelids flickered in response.

'He takes after Suzanne,' I murmured. 'The fair hair.'

'And the build, thank God,' he replied. 'Maybe they'll have a girl next, big as Jonty; she can take up rugby.'

'Don't,' I shushed him.

We had speculated plenty of times what an odd couple they made. Suzanne so crisp and competent, always in control, bossy even; and Jonty, who had something of the overgrown schoolboy about him. Exuberant, expansive, generous to a fault. Phil reckoned Jonty was a work in progress for Suzanne. Whatever – it seemed to work.

I loved to see her happy, in her element, socializing, serving drinks, prompting people to take another kebab or choose a dessert. She and Jonty were foodies, an interest verging on obsession in my opinion; you couldn't eat a thing they'd made without a spiel about its provenance and preparation. But it did make for a stunning barbecue: filo parcels of cheese and spinach, sizzling lamb patties, spatchcocked chicken seasoned with lemon and cardamom, peppered beef and tuna steaks, seafood or veg kebabs, puffy golden garlic-mushroom rolls. There were huge bowls of glossy purple-black olives, Colcannon mash, a table of salads: watercress, pepper and avocado, wild rice and chilli, Moroccan couscous. A cheeseboard and puddings: tropical fruit salad, cranberry pinwheels, chocolate mousse, lemon cheesecake, lavender sorbet. The colours a feast in themselves.

Jonty and Suzanne shared an energy, a drive which had underpinned their life together so far. They were both on good salaries – Suzanne as a buyer for Debenhams and Jonty as a television producer – which enabled them to get a mortgage and buy the house. It was on the outskirts of

the city, an old weaver's cottage with thick stone walls and tiny windows. One of three original cottages on the cul-de-sac. The only other houses were two new-build detacheds opposite.

The previous owners had modernized it inside. Suzanne and Jonty had redecorated and remodelled the garden, replacing the lawn and cottage borders with a patio and barbecue pit, gravel paths and specimen plants: mimosa, ailanthus, bamboo, birch. Now that they had a baby, Suzanne would take three months off work, then return part time until Ollie started school. Jonty was in the process of producing a series of historical documentaries that would keep him in work for the next two years. They were on a roll.

Things had been tougher for Naomi, our younger daughter. She was still out of work, though she helped out in Phil's music shop whenever his assistant was on holiday or off sick. She was one of thousands of graduates who had found that their hard-won qualifications – hers was a degree in tourism and leisure – didn't translate into better job opportunities. Not yet, anyway. Though she had got an interview at long last, for a job as a teaching assistant. We tried to keep positive with her; the recession wouldn't last for ever. Naomi's boyfriend Alex was struggling too, eager to put his law qualification to some use. The pair divided their time between our house and his mother's. We rubbed along okay, but of course they wanted their independence.

Ollie began to fuss, nose creased, head turning. Suzanne heard, set down the plates she'd been clearing and came over to feed him.

'Tea?' I offered, and she nodded.

'Thirsty work.' I smiled. 'He's gorgeous.'

'Of course he is,' she said.

'And you're amazing,' I said.

‘What? Why?’

I gestured to Ollie, then at the guests. ‘All this. I don’t think I made it out of bed for the first month. Certainly didn’t get dressed properly for a year, never left the house before midday.’ Whereas she looked cool and composed in a white linen skirt and a white blouse with pale gold trim.

She raised an eyebrow as she settled the baby at her breast. ‘It’s just a question of routine.’

I bit my tongue, swallowed a smile. She was serious. Phil and I swapped a look. She noticed. ‘Well, you and Dad, you were all hippy-trippy.’

‘Punk!’ Phil protested. ‘Totally different scene.’

‘Man,’ Suzanne said, putting the word in inverted commas, teasing Phil. She snorted. Ollie paused for a moment; she stroked his head and he continued suckling.

Naomi

The sun is shining and I’m ravenous and there’s bound to be a really good buffet: Suzanne’s a great cook – well, they both are.

I want to show Alex off, shout his news from the rooftops. It finally feels like everything is falling into place. I haven’t felt this good for ages; it’s not been a brilliant few months really. I want to dance, they might have dancing later – in fact I’ll make sure of it. I’ve sorted out a playlist.

Alex pulls me back just before we go in the side gate. Kisses me, and I get that hollow, sexy feeling inside. I kiss him back harder, and he groans a little and then pulls free, laughing. He’s excited. ‘Better stop now,’ he says.

‘You started it,’ I say.

‘Yeah?’ His eyes dance, green eyes, teasing me. ‘Well I’ll finish it later.’

This is so corny, I crack up laughing and he does too. And I hold the champagne with both hands, making sure I don't drop the bottle.

He grabs my waist and turns me to face down the path, leans his chin on my shoulder and says quietly in my ear, 'Come on then, into the dragon's den, eh?'

'Maybe motherhood has mellowed her,' I say. 'Hope so.'

He kisses my ear and smacks me on the bum and we head on in.

Carmel

When I came back out with Suzanne's tea, there were calls and greetings at the side gate. Naomi and Alex were arriving. Naomi made a beeline for Suzanne. She was swinging a bottle of champagne. 'Hello.' She bent down and stroked Ollie's leg, cupped his foot in her hand. 'Oh, Suze, he's so sweet. He looks bigger already. Can I hold him after?'

'Of course,' said Suzanne.

Naomi is dark-haired, like Phil and me. She's a taller, darker version of Suzanne. Apart from that, the girls have the same dark blue eyes, pointed chin, Phil's long slim nose. Naomi was wearing a short-sleeved blue dress in a waffle cotton, the dye faded and the hem a raw fringe, part of the design.

She straightened up. 'Glasses?' she said, hoisting the bottle up.

'Kitchen,' said Suzanne. 'Ask Jonty.'

'Splashing out?' Phil remarked. 'The real McCoy.' It wasn't cava.

'Celebrating.' Merriment danced in Naomi's eyes. 'Alex has got a job!'

We all jumped in with congratulations.

Alex grinned. He's a lovely-looking boy: pale skin, dark hair and green eyes.

'Training contract with a legal firm in town,' he said.

Even better. I knew he had looked far and wide, but the pair of them wanted to stay in Manchester if possible, dreading a move somewhere out in the sticks or to some soulless small town where there was nothing going on.

'So you'll be getting a place together at last?' Phil teased. 'Shall I book a van?'

'Give us a chance, Dad,' Naomi said, punching her father on the shoulder.

Alex took the bottle from Naomi, raised it and caught Jonty's attention. Jonty disappeared inside and came back moments later with a tray of glasses. Alex popped the champagne and filled the glasses and Naomi handed them round. I caught Phil's eye and winked. He winked back.

'New job!' Naomi led the toast.

The champagne was fresh and lemony, tingly on my tongue.

We sat and chatted. Suzanne wanted to know about our travel plans. We'd been saving up. I was about to book leave, some of it unpaid. It wasn't a good time to be doing it really, as there were cuts on the way (I'm a social worker on the emergency duty team). But we had finally paid off our mortgage after twenty-five years, and that made it financially doable. I felt that if we didn't get away and do some travelling soon, we never would, and I didn't want to live with that regret.

We had fantasized for ages about seeing more of the world; we'd never been beyond Europe. The idea was that we would take off for two months. If the worst came to the worst and I was made redundant or Phil's shop went under, then we could always sell the house and rent somewhere. While Phil explained which cities he wanted to visit in the

States (New Orleans, Chicago, Memphis, Detroit, San Francisco – music Meccas every one), I watched a toddler diligently placing pieces of gravel in a plastic cup. Someone was blowing bubbles, the light catching the oily rainbow colours as they drifted about the garden.

We stayed another half-hour or so and then left them to it. Phil had a gig that evening at a pub. He played lead guitar. A dream that had turned into a hobby somewhere along the way. They do a mix of rock and blues. He looks the part, an ageing rocker, greying hair down to his shoulders, jeans and T-shirt his uniform. No need for the ubiquitous leather jacket on that warm day. He was growing thicker round the waist but I still fancied the pants off him. And thought there might be a chance to prove it if we got home before too long.

I kissed Ollie goodbye, hugged Suzanne, found Naomi and Alex and congratulated them again. He was beaming and she clapped her hands. ‘I can’t believe it! Now I need some of his luck for my interview.’

‘Fingers crossed.’

At the car, Phil kissed me, long and slow. Just the way I like it.

Naomi

Everyone’s congratulating Alex. Suzanne’s waiting for Jonty to bring glasses, and she flashes this look my way. A spark of irritation in her eyes, her lips tight. My stomach sinks for a moment. Maybe I’m overreacting? Is she pissed off with Jonty for not being quicker with the glasses? I wait to see if she’ll roll her eyes or pull a face to let me in on the joke. But she doesn’t. She turns away and says something to Mum.

Perhaps it's not me she's irritated with. She could just be tired with having Ollie, or she's got a headache or something and the look wasn't directed at me. But if it was, what have I done wrong now? Is it because we brought champagne? Or made a thing out of Alex's job offer? Doesn't that just make the barbecue even more of an event? It's not like we're taking anything away from it.

The glasses arrive, and Alex unscrews the wire cap and pops the champagne. It froths out of the bottle and we fill the glasses and I hand them round then make a toast. I drink most of my glass; it's so fizzy that it's hard to swallow fast and my throat burns.

I could just ignore her. But I don't want to be stuck with this horrible sour feeling inside. So I walk around and sit next to her.

'He really is gorgeous,' I say, looking at Ollie. I mean it. He's so perfect and other-worldly. His eyes are very, very dark, and his head is pointed at the back. He's delicate and really pretty. 'How are you?' I say.

'Fine,' she says, though it sounds brittle. But then she says, 'It's good news about Alex.'

So maybe I am wrong? 'Can't believe it,' I say, 'and I've got an interview for a teaching assistant job.'

'Right.' Ollie's gone to sleep and she starts to look around as though she needs to get away. The dutiful hostess.

'Probably be a lot of competition,' I add.

'God, yes,' she says. 'Anyone can apply, can't they? For that sort of thing?'

It's a put-down. A typical Suzanne snub. It's hard to tell if she's even aware she's doing it.

'Thanks for the support,' I say, fed up now.

She raises her eyebrows. 'You've got to face facts, Naomi. It's tough out there.'

‘I know,’ I snap at her. ‘I’m the one sending off twenty application forms a week.’ Why do I let her wind me up like this?

‘Top-up?’ Alex is there holding the champagne out to Suzanne.

‘I can’t.’ She nods at Ollie. ‘Feeding. We’ve got some in the chiller, actually. We were saving it for a bit later on when everyone’s here.’

Now I get it. We’ve stolen her thunder. But I make myself sound bright. ‘Great! This is nearly finished anyway. I bet yours is a good vintage, isn’t it?’ I say, though I’m not sure if champagne has vintages in the same way wine does. ‘Save the best for later, eh?’

More guests arrive and she goes to greet them. Alex can tell things have been a bit tense. ‘You okay?’ He rubs my back between my shoulder blades, where I can feel the stiffness.

‘Families,’ I smile.

Why can’t I just ignore her? What pisses me off is that I let it get to me. I wish there was a magic formula, something I could just switch on so I’d be immune to her sarky comments or her needling at me. Why do I care what she thinks? It’s not like I want to be her or anything. I don’t want her life; I’m not bothered about status and having loads of money. She never puts a foot wrong, but is she happy? She spends all her time watching eagle-eyed for other people (especially me) to make mistakes. I’m twenty-five and in a steady relationship and I’ve got a degree, and still she pushes all my buttons and I’ve not found a way yet to brush it off. Distance, absence helps. If I don’t see her much. But put us together, and like some species of animal – rabbits or hamsters or something – if we have to share a cage, one of us gets savaged.

Any time I try talking to her directly, being really open

about it, saying, ‘Why are you so bitchy to me?’ or ‘Why do you always have to be so negative?’ she either denies it or says she’s simply being honest.

Alex has a job, I tell myself, I’ve got an interview for a post I actually like the sound of, even if the money’s not great, and we will soon have a place of our own. No way is my snotty sister going to spoil it. Fuck her, I am going to celebrate.

I raise my glass and wink at Alex, and he smiles back. ‘To everything,’ I say, and he echoes me and we toast the future.

Carmel

Before.

When the sun burnished everything and bubbles floated over the laughter and the future brimmed bright, ripe with adventure.

Before.

Were we smug? I don’t believe so. But I dared to be happy, thinking that the girls were grown and building lives of their own, that Phil’s business was ticking over in the teeth of the downturn, and a new generation had joined the family.

There wasn’t any sense of entitlement, but relief rather. Like any family we’ve had our share of bad luck and misfortune. From the terror of Suzanne’s bout of meningitis and the shocks of my dad’s sudden death, Naomi’s teenage high-jinks and my father-in-law’s cancer, to the more mundane upsets of burglaries and credit-card debts. And I didn’t for one minute think this phase of contentment would last – life’s not like that.

It wasn’t perfect. Naomi had been finding it increasingly

hard to motivate herself after so many rejections. And Phil, one of the most laid-back people I know, was on medication for high blood pressure. His latest tests had been disappointing, and the GP was keen to try and get it down to an acceptable level. Then there was my mother in a nursing home, lost to dementia. But that hazy afternoon it seemed like things were pretty damn good – and I was thankful. I was counting my blessings.

We left Suzanne's at about five. Phil set off for his gig at seven. It's nearby, a place they play two or three times a year, and they don't need long to set up. I could have gone along, but it wasn't like I hadn't seen them a million times, and I was more interested in catching up on some television.

I watered the garden first. We have a small square patch at the back of the house laid with flagstones, so everything is grown in containers. It's handy: no grass to mow, little weeding to do. Our home is one of four flat-roofed, split-level modern houses, three bedrooms, picture windows, open stairs. When I say modern, they were built in the sixties to replace the end of a terrace that had been demolished. They still look like a glaring anomaly in an area of identical terraced rows. The flagstoned garden is the back yard of the original property. I'd never imagined Phil and me living in what he describes as a little box, without the features and character of the older houses all around. But when we bought it, it was a bargain we couldn't ignore, on the market at a knock-down price due to problems with the flat roof. It was handy for schools and shops and a great place to raise the kids (apart from the windows, which were smeared with finger marks and kisses, traces of jam and Marmite for months on end).

As I filled the watering can from the butt and drenched

the pots, the day was ending, the sky a lavender blue draped with shreds of coral-pink clouds over in the west.

It was five to nine when I sat down and began flicking through the channels, a glass of wine at my side.

It was five past nine when the phone rang. And everything changed.

CHAPTER TWO

Naomi

Run! Run! Freaking out, fear squirting inside. Run! Can't move. Something squats on my chest, heavy, cold. Choking. Shout, warn them! Shout for help. Mouth stuck, tongue too. Can't even open my lips. Scream trapped in my throat, loud and red raw. Got to get away. Get away!

No light. Pitch dark and cold. Buried alive. Suffocating. Can't smell. Dark, still, silent. No – thumping, hammering. Something, someone, hammering. Thud, thud, thud, thud. Digging to reach me? Nailing me in? Each thud rocks me. Am I the nail? Salt in my mouth, brine.

Help! The scream echoes round inside my head. *Alex! Mum! Dad!*

There! Going up the escalator. I'm running. Legs like rubber bands, heart exploding, yelling and yelling. They never turn. They don't see me. No one sees, no one hears.

The ground trembles, hammering louder. Everything shudders and cracks. The pillars shatter and collapse, great clouds of dust billow, huge discs of stone fall and tumble, rocking the ground.

Running, dodging, everything thick with gritty dust. The ground splits, like cloth tearing, a massive wrenching noise and the world erupts. Tongues of fire and a blizzard of ash. I can't stop.

Falling.

Falling.

Like a puppet bumping off the walls of the canyon.
Thump, smack, thump. To the bottom.

Crouching in a ball, arms over my head, coughing. I hear the beast coming, a river of molten lava, stone and gravel and debris. Thundering.

Battering me.

Burying me. Deep in pain.

No one will ever find me here.

Carmel

It was Alex's mum, Monica, on the phone. We had met briefly a couple of times. I was a little taken aback, then I assumed she was calling about Alex's new job and began to talk. 'Alex told us this afternoon, it's wonderful for them—'

She cut me short. 'Carmel, listen, I'm sorry, I've got some bad news.'

I laughed, I think I laughed, awkward, wrong-footed, trying to deny the danger in her voice. It seemed preposterous that there could be bad news. Was she ill, perhaps? Why was she sorry? My mother? Did she know her? Had Mum had another stroke, or an aneurysm? That might be a blessing – something that allowed her to escape from the bizarre and frightening world she now inhabited.

'What is it?' I said. 'What?'

I heard her sniff or swallow, felt my skin chill and my stomach tighten.

'I'm sorry, there's been an accident. Alex and Naomi . . . in the car, there was a collision.'

My heart imploded; that was how it felt, a collapse in my chest, pain and my vision blurring. All that was left was the voice on the phone, the words that I was trying to decipher, the gaps between the words where the truth hung.

‘Are they all right?’ I could still speak, though I sounded odd, fractured, jerky. ‘Monica?’

‘I’ve talked to Alex,’ she said. ‘I’m waiting to see him. He’s got broken bones, bruising.’

‘Naomi?’ I was trembling and shuddering. I thought about hanging up. I didn’t want to know. It must be bad; she was breaking it slowly, gently. Couldn’t come straight out with *Oh, she’s great, not a scratch or Just a bump or two, miraculous escape.*

‘I don’t know,’ she said quietly. ‘Alex said they were working on her.’

Working on her. I swallowed. ‘Which hospital?’

‘Wythenshawe.’

In the taxi, I texted Phil, my fingers slipping, missing the keys, then I realized he would have his phone off while they played. Directory enquiries put me through to the pub. I could hear the band in the background, ‘Stagger Lee’. We once learnt to jive to that, rockabilly style. Broken chicken walk, they called the step, almost like a limp, and the moves included lots of spinning round and away from each other, then back together. Me getting the giggles and losing the rhythm and setting Phil off. I repeated to the barman that he must interrupt the set at the end of this number and tell the lead guitarist, Phil, to ring his wife urgently. A family emergency. He promised.

Phil would be tapping his foot as he played, exchanging banter with Hugh on bass and lead vocals, supplying the odd backing harmony when the fancy took him, jamming with his mates at the end of a perfect day, no idea what was about to hit him.

A collision, Monica had said. So what about the other vehicle? Another car? A bus? A lorry? Where had they crashed? It was about a twenty-minute drive from

Suzanne's to ours. Were they coming back to ours? I couldn't remember. It's not like there were any fixed arrangements; they had their own keys, made their own meals. Or were they going to Monica's? Her house was even closer.

A new moon, a sliver of white, cut the inky sky. The roads were quiet: Sunday evening, people facing work the following morning. *Working on her.*

As we approached the hospital, the lights glared out from the corridors and entrance bays, the car park.

At A&E I paid the driver and got out. An ambulance was approaching, still out of sight, but its siren, insistent keening, filled the night.

Outside the entrance there was a couple standing with two policemen. The man had an arm round the woman, hugging her close, and she was weeping into his chest. He was smoking, his own eyes bright with pain. I quickly averted my gaze, not wanting to intrude, hating the sudden surge of empathy that quickened my pulse and stung my eyes. Why were the police there with them? Had they done something wrong?

My phone rang and I slid it open. *Phil.*

'Carmel?'

'Oh Phil, it's Naomi, there's been a car accident. I don't know . . . I've just got here, Wythenshawe. Come now, you must come now.'

'Oh God.'

There was a chant in my head, *pleasepleaseplease*, a frantic mantra. Not to any particular higher entity. To the world, to the world and everything in it, *please-pleaseplease*.

Naomi.

The enquiries desk was quiet. Half a dozen people waited on chairs nearby, subdued. One man had a dressing pressed

to his ear. An older woman opposite him was bent double. I rang the bell for attention, my eyes skating over notices about abuse of staff and no-smoking policies.

A woman came through and sat down behind the counter. She asked how she could help and I gave her Naomi's name and said she'd been in a car accident.

'Date of birth?'

I reeled it off. A September baby. An Indian summer. The nights had been sultry, the days baking. I'd moved in a daze, barely sleeping, trying to look after her and Suzanne, who was two and a half going on middle-aged and patently jealous of the baby. We had laid blankets on the flagstones and filled a paddling pool with water, kept it topped up. Sometimes I'd pull up a chair and rest my feet in it, feeding Naomi while Suzanne waterboarded her dolls: 'Naughty baby, you so dirty.' Phil took a couple of weeks off, got a mate to staff the shop, so he could cover the washing and shopping and feed us. We lived on salad, bread and cheese.

'Are you next of kin?'

'Her mother.'

The nurse checked a clipboard, then the computer. 'Yes, she's here. I'll ask someone to come and have a word. If you'd like to take a seat in the other waiting room, along the corridor on the left.'

There was no one in the waiting room, just two rows of plastic chairs and a low table between them with magazines on. Garish colours and chirpy headlines exhorting the reader to *Eat for Health this Summer* and *Exercise for Energy!*. Posters on the wall advised about bowel cancer and stroke, chlamydia and smoking cessation.

It was impossible to sit still and there wasn't enough room to pace. I checked my phone. Where was Phil?

Naomi. My heart felt unsteady, beating more quickly

than usual, and with each thump I felt an ache inside, as though the shock had bruised it.

In the end I settled for sitting down, elbows braced on my knees, head in my hands, rhythmically drumming my feet in an effort to release some tension.

I hadn't let Suzanne know yet. Would they still be partying? We'd found it easy to maintain a social life when Suzanne was very small; she'd sleep anywhere and accompanied us to parties, concerts and festivals. But she probably already had a set bedtime for Ollie. She'd be feeding at four-hourly intervals through the night rather than on demand, and getting him to sleep through like a dream as soon as he'd gained enough weight. Suzanne didn't do failure. She might be asleep herself, it was after ten. Or she might still be clearing up; she'd never leave a mess overnight.

I was selecting her phone number when there was a knock at the door. A man in a doctor's coat. 'Mrs Baxter?'

I dropped my phone as I sprang to my feet, then winced and scrabbled to pick it up.

'Yes, how is she? Is she ...' My throat closed up, suddenly dry. I could feel the drum of a pulse under my jaw, hear a humming from the strip lights. *Pleaseplease-please.*

'She's being prepared for theatre,' he said.

'Oh, thank God.' The pictures I had been holding at bay – Naomi decapitated, Naomi crushed, Naomi on a slab – flooded in. I began to cry.

That was when Phil arrived. He said later that when he heard me crying, he thought we'd lost her.

The doctor sat us both down and explained that Naomi's heart had stopped and she had been resuscitated at the scene. She had sustained a fractured skull, broken ribs, a broken collarbone and a broken ankle, and she also had extensive internal injuries. Their first priority was to isolate

and stop any internal bleeding and repair damage to vital organs.

Phil kept asking questions: would she be okay, exactly what organs were damaged, how long would the surgery take, would she make a full recovery?

The doctor stressed that it was impossible to say at this stage how she would respond, or what they would find once they had her in theatre. He said it could be several hours. He had questions too about whether she'd had any previous surgery, any allergies or pre-existing medical conditions.

'Nothing,' I said. 'She's always been really healthy.'

'And Alex?' asked Phil. 'Her boyfriend?'

'I believe he's in X-ray.'

'Monica said he was okay, broken bones and bruises,' I said.

'Monica?' said Phil.

'That's how I knew,' I explained. 'She rang me.'

'The accident,' I turned to the doctor. 'Do you know what happened? Was it another car?' Or an HGV, I thought, pinning Alex's Honda Civic beneath the chassis. Had the fire brigade needed to cut her free?

'I don't know, I'm sorry. But the police are here and they'll be able to tell you more.'

The couple at the entrance doors, the man smoking, the woman weeping: were they in the other car? In the absence of hard facts, my mind was hyperactive, swooping on anything to fill in the blanks.

'She will be all right?' I said, as he took his leave. A plea as much as a question.

'We'll do our very best,' he said, confirming my fears.

Once he'd gone, Phil turned to hug me and we sat like that, twisted in the chairs, until I broke away, my arm deadened and my neck cricked.

He kissed my head.

‘We’d better ring Suzanne,’ I said.

He sighed. ‘She can’t do anything at this time of night.’

‘I know, but we can’t not tell her.’

He rubbed his face, sighed again, cleared his throat as he stood and keyed his mobile.

I listened to his side of the conversation as he spoke first with Jonty and then Suzanne. I closed my eyes and leant my head back against the wall. She was alive – now she had to stay alive. That was all that mattered. *Pleasepleaseplease*.

Phil had finished talking, promising to update Suzanne the moment there was any news, whatever time it was. Insisting there was absolutely no point in her coming to the hospital yet, while Naomi was on the operating table. Now he sat on one of the chairs opposite me, frowning, deep grooves between his bushy eyebrows, his mouth set. He looked over at me, shaking his head, his eyes raw. I walked across to him and put my arms around his head, pulled him close, felt the heat of his head against my belly, noticing how the hair on his scalp was thinning. Daft the things you see at times like that.

‘What on earth happened?’ When he finally spoke, his words were muffled.

I shook my head and exhaled, a long breath. There was nothing I could tell him.

Time passed. My eyes were closed, not because I was trying to sleep but because the harsh lights were unbearable, when a sound startled me, a door banging somewhere in the bowels of the building. My mouth was tacky. I signalled to Phil for the water: he had found a vending machine earlier and got drinks. He handed me the bottle; his eyes were bloodshot, his jaw darkened with stubble.

The next thing I remember, some time later, was the door opening. ‘Mr and Mrs Baxter?’ There were two police

officers, a woman with freckled skin and glossy red hair pulled back in a French plait, and a stocky man with his hair cut very short. It made him look like a soldier. I wondered if they still had rules about hairstyles. Was he allowed to have a skinhead? I met plenty of police in the course of my work, but hadn't come across anyone with such short hair. Maybe he'd had chemo or shaved his head for charity?

He introduced himself and his colleague. I forgot the names as soon as I heard them, but he gave us his card. He was John Leland and he added her name in biro, Phoebe Jones.

'What happened?' Phil said straight out, but the man put off answering, saying they would tell us what they could but they needed to ask some questions first.

Outrage flared through me. Were they bargaining with us? Naomi was seriously hurt, her skull cracked, her insides torn, on the operating table; no one would or could tell us if she'd be okay, and now the facts of the accident were being withheld.

'We want to know what happened.' My voice was loud and shaky as I got to my feet. 'Why on earth can't you tell us that?'

'Carmel . . .' Phil tried to calm me down.

'The investigation into the accident has only just got under way.' The woman had a high, breathy voice which sounded at odds with the authority she held.

'The bare facts, then,' I insisted. 'We don't even know where it was or how they crashed.'

'Mottram Lane,' Leland said, 'just after the junction with Lees Hall Road, near the school.'

Only five minutes from home. I pictured it in my mind's eye. There were traffic lights on Lees Hall Road and it was a right turn into Mottram Lane coming back from

Suzanne's. The river ran along the left-hand side of the road for a couple of hundred yards until the end of an S-bend where houses began. Opposite, on the right, were houses then a school. The start of the bend was sharp; you couldn't see round the corner and there had been a successful campaign to get a green-man crossing instead of relying just on a lollipop lady to help people negotiate the traffic.

They were nearly home.

'What about the other vehicle?' I said.

Leland stilled and blinked a couple of times; his colleague shook her head almost imperceptibly but I caught it.

'What?' I asked. 'There was another vehicle, wasn't there?' I looked at Phil. 'They said a collision. Monica . . . or the doctor.' Suddenly my memory was unreliable. Had someone said that? It was Monica, wasn't it? Or had I dreamt it up to plug the vacuum of knowledge?

'A cyclist was involved,' Leland said. 'It appears that there was a collision between the car and a cyclist.'

'Oh God, no.' I sat down. Cyclists were at real risk of accident. Drivers didn't see them, didn't give them enough room; our whole car-first culture and the lack of separate cycleways always made them vulnerable. Phil cycled to work most days unless he had anything bulky to carry. The girls had both used bikes to get around as teenagers, but we wouldn't let them ride into town, the route was too dangerous.

I imagined a bloke, a mountain biker on his Sunday ride out to the Peaks and back, tired and mud-splattered, lurid Spandex and a fancy water bottle. Or a woman, someone like me, with a butcher's bike, sit-up-and-beg, a wicker basket in front, cycling home from a picnic with friends. Alex seeing them, a fraction too late.

‘How are they?’ Phil said, his voice gruff.

Phoebe Jones was picking at her nails, her knees and shoes close together.

‘Didn’t survive the accident,’ said Leland.

I gasped, and Phil reached and took my hand, gripped it hard.

‘That’s terrible,’ I said. I saw Naomi holding up the champagne and Alex’s dazzling smile and the patchy shade beneath the birch tree. And some poor person lying like a rag doll on the road, their bike a tangle of metal.

Phil shuddered.

But there was worse to come.

‘It was a little girl,’ Phoebe Jones said, in her breathy voice. ‘Nine years old.’

I struggled to take it in. ‘No.’ Then, ‘You’re sure?’ Desperate. Stupid. As if there was some chance they had it wrong, might backtrack, find a get-out clause. As if they would tell us something like that if there was the faintest margin of doubt.

Leland coughed. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘And you don’t know why, how?’ I asked. ‘Was she crossing the road? Where was it? Was it a blind spot? Could Alex not stop in time?’

Silence. The fizz of the lighting, Phil’s breath unsteady, a swift intake of air from Leland, who shifted on his buttocks and said, ‘Apparently Naomi was driving.’

‘Sorry?’ I was numb, something clotting my senses, my comprehension.

‘Naomi was driving the car; Alex was in the passenger seat.’

Naomi was driving. The enormity of what he was saying tore into me. I could not speak. With my hand clamped to my mouth, I shook my head over and over, my eyes burning. *No no no no. Please no.* A child was dead. Naomi

was driving. Naomi. *They were working on her.* She was in theatre. *Naomi was driving.*

After. When everything changed.