Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Fractured

Written by Dani Atkins

Published by Head of Zeus

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Fractured

Dani Atkins



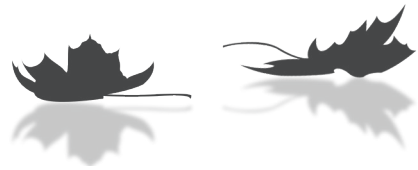
HEAD of ZEUS



Fractured

Dani Atkins lives with her family in a small village in Hertfordshire with two elderly cats and one very excitable border collie. **FRACTURED** is her first novel. Dani is currently working on her second book, due to be published in 2014.





First published as Ebook in the UK in 2013.
This edition published in the UK in 2013 by Head of Zeus Ltd.

Copyright © Dani Atkins 2013.

The moral right of Dani Atkins to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

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

Paperback ISBN: 9781781857113
Ebook ISBN: 9781781857106

Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY.

Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45-47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

www.headofzeus.com

My first life ended at 10.37 p.m. on a rainy December night, on a deserted street beside the old church.

My second life began some ten hours later, when I woke up to the blinding brilliance of the hospital lighting, with a large head wound and a life about which I had absolutely no recollection. I was surrounded by friends and family, and that should have made it better. But it didn't, as one of them had been dead for a considerable period of time.

* * *

I wanted to write down everything that had happened, to see if by committing it to paper I could make some sense of it all. Or perhaps I just needed to prove to everyone, even myself that I wasn't going crazy. For a long time I thought that this story should begin with what happened to me at the church, when my life literally came apart, but now I realise that to understand it all I have to go back much further than that. For it really all began five years earlier, on the night of the farewell dinner.

CHAPTER 1

September 2008

Long after the screaming had stopped, when the only sound to be heard was the soft crying of my friends as they waited for the ambulance to arrive, did I realise that I was still clutching the lucky penny tightly within my palm. My fingers refused to unfurl from around the tiny copper talisman, as though by sheer will alone I would somehow be able to wind back time and erase the tragedy around me.

Was it really only half an hour earlier that Jimmy had picked up the glinting coin from the restaurant's tarmacked car park?

'For luck,' he had grinned, tossing the coin up in the air and deftly catching it with one hand.

I smiled back and then saw the flicker of irritation flash through his pale blue eyes as Matt had quipped, 'Jimmy mate, you should've said if you're a little short of cash, no need to go grovelling about on the floor for money!'

Matt had laughed then, and thrown his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to his side. I thought the darkening expression on Jimmy's face was just a natural reaction to Matt's unnecessary comment, which highlighted the differences between their backgrounds. And maybe that was part of it. But it wasn't all of it. There was more . . . though of course I didn't understand that for a long time.

The three of us were standing in the fading sunlight of a

warm September evening, waiting for the rest of our group to arrive. Jimmy had already been in the car park when Matt and I had driven in. Matt had made quite a show of circling the empty spaces, looking for just the right spot to park his new acquisition. I guess he was still in that strange honeymoon phase boys have when they're really in love with their cars. I just hoped he'd have the good sense not to gloat about it too much in front of the rest of the group.

The new car was shiny, sporty and expensive. That's as much as I know about cars. He'd been given it by his parents when the exam results had come out. That alone should tell you enough about Matt's family to understand why comments about money sometimes hit a raw nerve with the rest of us. For the most part, Matt was really good and didn't rub it in too much. But the odd glib remark occasionally slipped under the wire and lit a spark. I really hoped he wasn't going to say anything that would ruin what was probably going to be one of the last nights we would all be spending together for quite a while.

'You've been at work today, Jimmy?' I asked, knowing full well that he had but anxious to steer things back onto neutral ground. Jimmy turned and gave me the smile that I swear hadn't changed at all since he was four years old.

'Yep, this is my last week helping out my uncle, after that I'm happily handing back the wheelbarrow and the pitchfork. The gardening world and I are about to part company.'

'Still, look at the bright side, you've got a great tan this summer, you'd not have got that stacking shelves in the supermarket.'

And it was true, Jimmy's normally fair skin was coloured a soft golden brown, and his forearms were definitely more sinewed and defined from his months of outdoor work. Of

course, Matt and I were both still sporting fairly decent suntans from our holiday in France at his parents' villa. That too had been another congratulatory gift – for both of us this time.

Actually, my dad had quite an issue over that one. Sure, he liked Matt well enough; he was a fairly familiar fixture around our house, and we *had* been going out for almost two years. But it had still been touch and go whether he'd allow me to go away for a fortnight with Matt's family. Part of it had been the money thing because, of course, Matt's parents had refused to accept any payment for the trip. The other part . . . the big part . . . had been the dad/daughter/boyfriend thing. I guess that's universal with dads, but it seemed even more so in our case, with no mum around to smooth things over. Eventually Matt and I had managed to persuade him; explaining how everything was going to be all above board, how it was strictly separate bedrooms and that we'd be with Matt's parents the whole time. Basically, we had just lied.

This chain of thought had made me wonder, and not for the first time, how Dad was going to cope when the time came for me to leave for university at the end of the month. I felt a frown forming and determinedly pushed the thought away. I'd spent most of the summer struggling with that one and I was *not* going to ruin the last evening my friends and I were going to have together by worrying over things I couldn't change.

Fortunately just then two cars, both considerably older than Matt's but no less appreciated by their owners, pulled into the restaurant's car park. The rear door of the small blue car nearest to where we stood flung open and Sarah ran over towards us in a clatter of improbably high heels. She tottered alarmingly over the uneven surface before enveloping me in a huge hug.

'Rachel, my lovely, how are you?' I hugged her back, feeling momentarily choked to realise that soon I'd only be seeing her during the uni holidays and not every day, as we had done for all of our senior school years. Apart from Jimmy, she was my oldest friend. And however close Jimmy and I were, and had always been, there were still some topics of conversation that were reserved only for your girlfriends.

'Sorry we're late,' Sarah apologised.

I gave her a wry smile. Sarah was *always* late. For a girl so naturally pretty, she still seemed to require an incredible amount of time getting ready to go out, with multiple hair and outfit changes before she could be persuaded to step away from the mirror. And she never seemed satisfied with the final effect, which was ridiculous, because with her heart-shaped face, her shiny brown curls and petite frame she always looked perfectly lovely.

'Have you been waiting long?' she asked, slipping her arm through mine and pulling me away from Matt to walk with her across the car park to the restaurant's entrance. This was most likely to ensure that she made it in one piece across the tarmac with those ridiculously high stilettos, although it could have been to avoid watching Trevor and Phil's knee-jerk reaction to Cathy as she climbed out of the car beside them.

'Just long enough for Matt to piss Jimmy off,' I replied in a voice low enough for only her to hear. She smiled knowingly.

'Oh, no time at all then!'

By now we had reached the patioed doorway at the rear of the restaurant and stood waiting while the various boys in our group of friends (Matt included) all tried to pretend that they were not noticing the extremely inviting cleavage being displayed by Cathy's low-cut top. Worn over skin-tight

jeans and high-heeled sandals – which, to Sarah's chagrin, she appeared to have no difficulty walking in – Cathy looked every inch as though she was off to a photo shoot. Long blonde hair fell around her shoulders and everything about her seemed so perfectly put together that I instantly felt as though I'd got dressed in the dark with clothes that'd been thrown out from a charity shop.

Cathy had been a fairly new addition to our circle of friends. Prior to her arrival into our sixth form, our group had been a tight unit of Sarah and me and the four boys. I suppose the boy–girl ratio had been a bit unbalanced, but we'd all been mates for so long that it wasn't an issue. That said, Cathy's slow inclusion into our group had been welcomed quite vigorously by pretty much all of the boys, for obvious reasons. And, looks aside, Cathy was good fun to have around. Her family had moved to Great Bishopsford from a much larger town, and she had seemed much more worldly and clued-up than the rest of us. Added to that, she was extremely open and friendly with a wicked sense of humour and, when she wasn't flirting outrageously with every male within a five-mile radius, I actually really liked her.

Sarah, though, had her reservations, and on more than one occasion, when Cathy had ruffled her feathers or stepped on her toes, I had heard her mutter darkly, 'Last in. First out.'

When Jimmy sauntered across the car park to join us, Sarah stepped to one side and began to peruse the menu displayed inside a glassed-in case by the doorway. The others had all walked over to admire Matt's car, or Cathy's chest, I thought waspishly, as I watched her bend down low, supposedly to examine the alloy wheels. As if she cared about wheels!

'You look much nicer than her,' Jimmy whispered into my ear, knowing instantly what was on my mind.

'Am I that easy to read?' I asked, smiling back up at him. He gave me the grin I knew so well, the one that crinkled up the corners of his eyes and lit up his whole face.

'Like a book,' he confirmed, 'but a good one.'

'Like a battered old paperback, you mean, rather than a glossy magazine.'

He followed both my eyes and my analogy as we looked across to where Cathy was standing with Matt, listening raptly while he extolled something or other about the car.

'You don't have anything to worry about,' Jimmy reassured me, giving my shoulder a brief friendly squeeze. 'Matt would be crazy to look at her when he's got you.'

'Hmm,' was all I managed in reply and was surprised to feel that the warmth of his words had ignited a small blush. I quickly turned away to avoid him seeing.

Catching my reflection in the restaurant's window I didn't feel my old friend was being entirely honest. Or if he was, then he seriously should think about getting his eyes tested. What I saw in the glass was certainly never going to elicit the kind of reaction from men that Cathy did. Long dark hair, fashionably poker straight, big eyes, that hardly functioned at all without their contact lenses, and lips that were a little too wide. It was a pleasant enough face, but not stunning and I was honest enough to know I was never going to stop traffic. And that had truly never worried me before, but since being with Matt, who was, let's face it, undeniably gorgeous, I seemed more aware than ever of some of the shortcomings Mother Nature had dished up.

'And just remember, to me you'll always be the freckly-faced girl with the gap in her front teeth, whose ears stuck out.'

'I was ten years old then,' I protested. 'Thank God for orthodontistry. Do you really have to remember every damn

thing about my geeky childhood?'

'I can't help myself,' Jimmy replied oddly. And I would have pursued that strange comment if we hadn't just then been joined by the others.

'C'mon then,' urged Matt, grabbing my hand and holding it tightly. 'Let's go before they give our table to someone else.'

We walked en masse through the large double doors, arms linked or thrown casually around a neighbouring shoulder, never realising that in the next half hour our lives were going to be irrevocably changed for ever.

We were led straight away to our table, which was situated at the very front of the restaurant beside a large plate-glass window, where we had an excellent view of the high street and the church perched high up on the hill nearby. As we wove between the other tables to reach our seats, I could see Cathy drawing several appreciative glances from the male diners and I was pretty certain that Matt too hadn't passed among the women unnoticed. I tried to stifle that small worried voice that had been whispering in my ear for several months.

Matt was a very attractive guy; he naturally drew the attention of other women, it was only to be expected, and while part of me relished the fact that it was *my* side he was standing by, *my* hand that he held in his as we slalomed between the closely packed tables, there was an unspoken worry that sooner or later I would have to address: what would happen when he was faced with inevitable temptation when we were apart? Would we be one of the couples who survived the university separation, or were we destined to become victims to the curse of the long-distance relationship?

I was pleased this line of thinking was interrupted by the softly accented Italian waiter, indicating we had arrived at our reserved table. Tight for space in the crowded restaurant,

they had pushed two tables together to accommodate our party, which resulted in rather a narrow gap by a concrete pillar which had to be squeezed past in order to reach the seat beside the window.

Wishing Sarah had got there first, as she was much smaller than me, I nevertheless managed to manoeuvre through the gap without getting embarrassingly stuck. Matt slid into the chair beside me, as the others all found a place and sat down. Jimmy took the window seat directly opposite me, with Sarah claiming the chair on his right-hand side. I refused to look at the undignified scrabble of who was sitting by Cathy on the other side of Matt. I guessed pole position was opposite her anyway, with its excellent view down the front of her top. Surreptitiously, under cover of the tablecloth, I tugged down on the hem of my own T-shirt, lowering the neckline by an inch or two: then felt myself blushing like an idiot as I saw Jimmy's quivering lips as he noticed what I'd done.

'What's so funny, Jimmy?' Matt asked and suddenly, by some horrible coincidence, the whole table fell silent to hear his response. I knew my eyes were frantically telegraphing him not to say anything, and I needn't have worried. Jimmy calmly picked up the menu and gave a casual shrug.

'Nothing, just thinking of something my uncle said earlier, that's all.'

While everyone else followed Jimmy's lead and began to study their menus, I looked across and mouthed a silent 'thank you'. The smile he gave me back was so full of warm affection and friendship that for some strange reason my stomach gave an erratic flip. Confused, I broke eye contact and pretended to be deeply interested in the merits of the lasagne versus the cannelloni.

Matt's arm snaked around my waist, pulling me against

him as we chose our meal and when I did look over to Jimmy a few minutes later, he was deep in conversation with Sarah, and although he caught my glance and gave me a small smile, my stomach remained exactly where it should have been.

It was impossible to ignore the nostalgia around the table, and the air of impending separation was almost as apparent as the tomato and garlic aromas wafting around us. While there were still a few weeks before I left for my place at Brighton, Trevor and Phil were both going to leave after the weekend, and Sarah only a few days later. Somehow I couldn't really imagine the condensed remains of our group: Cathy, Jimmy, Matt and me, all getting together in the remaining weeks.

This sudden reluctance to leave struck me unexpectedly with its intensity. It wasn't as though I didn't want to go away to university. Of course I did. I'd certainly worked hard enough to achieve the grades I needed to get on my journalism course. It was just that it finally seemed that tonight it was hitting home for the first time that this was really the end of a very important chapter in my life.

And just for the moment I couldn't really focus on the new beginnings, because all I could think of was leaving behind my boyfriend and my two closest friends. Ridiculously, I felt my eyes begin to water, and I hastily looked away, preferring the dazzling glare of the rays of the dwindling sun, than the reaction from around the table if they knew I'd been crying.

'You OK?' asked Jimmy softly, leaning forward so only I could hear his words.

Matt was placing the drinks order, so it was safe to quietly reply.

'Oh, you know, just feeling a little emotional, I guess. Changes coming, saying goodbye to everyone, stuff like that

. . .' I trailed off, expecting some sort of ridicule, but instead was surprised when his hand reached across the table, encircled my fingers which were fiddling restlessly with the cutlery, and encased them in his grasp.

His grip felt oddly different; not the familiar clasp I had known since nursery school. Perhaps it was just the rough texture of the skin from his summer gardening, or was it more the way my hand felt so small, tightly encompassed in his own?

I felt, rather than saw, Matt's slow awareness of Jimmy's action, but rather than a hurried retreat, Jimmy gave my hand one last squeeze and took his time before withdrawing his own. In an instinctive response, Matt drew his body closer towards mine, reclaiming both my attention and his territory and it was only after a moment or two that I became aware that when taking back his hand, Jimmy had somehow transferred the lucky penny he had picked up outside the restaurant from his hand to mine.

I held the coin tightly in my palm, imbuing the small copper disc with more significance than it perhaps deserved. It was typical of Jimmy to offer to share even the possibility of good fortune with me. We had, after all, shared so much for so many years. He was more like my brother than my friend: in fact, when I thought about it, his whole family were closer to me than many of my own relatives.

Jimmy's mother and mine had been very good friends long before Jimmy and I were even born, and when my mum had died so suddenly when I was only a toddler, Jimmy's family had reached out and somehow drawn both Dad and me into their lives and their hearts. I realised with a shock that my dad wasn't the only family I'd be leaving behind when I went away; it was going to be almost as tough saying

goodbye to Jimmy's parents and his younger brother too.

When the two bottles of wine Matt had ordered were delivered to the table, everyone took a glass to raise a toast.

'To going away . . .'

'To not dropping out . . . !'

'To our new lives . . .'

'. . . and old friends . . .'

The last was echoed by each person around the table, as glasses clinked together, catching a brilliant prism of evening sunlight.

As the others sat joking and bantering light-heartedly, I took a second to look around the table, trying to take a mental snapshot of the moment. I knew we were all destined to make new friends at our various colleges and universities, but just now it was hard to believe that the new bonds we would forge could ever be as strong as those that threaded between the seven of us around the table.

As my eye fell on each individual friend, a memory or emotion would erupt in response. So many, it was almost impossible to separate them, but each recollection was another brick in the wall of our friendship, which I had to believe would remain solid no matter where we all ended up.

When I looked at Sarah, I couldn't help but repress a smile. In a strange way I already felt jealous of the new friends she would be making on her art course. Crazy, loyal, funny and incredibly caring, Sarah's friendship was one of my most treasured possessions. Whoever they were, these new friends didn't know how lucky they were.

And then there was Jimmy. I'd spent so much of the summer stressing over how it would feel to be apart from Matt, that whenever the thought of also saying goodbye to Jimmy had intruded, I'd hastily stuffed it away to the back

of my mind. I knew it sounded strange, but the thought of not seeing my old friend on a regular basis was just so huge, so hard to absorb, that I couldn't even allow myself the time to contemplate it.

I realised with some disappointment that I wasn't nearly as ready as I should be to let go of any of them.

As we waited for our meals to arrive, I glanced occasionally through the window beside me and up the road to the church. The sun was just beginning its leisurely descent and the sky was bathed in diluted shades of red and gold, turning the usually drab high street into a magical abstract of colours. I noticed there were few pedestrians, but the lines of parked cars flanking both sides of the road meant that the pubs and restaurants were all doing good business that evening. From somewhere in the distance the distinctive wail of a siren could just be heard.

'Rachel, are you listening?'

With a start I drew my attention away from the scene outside and realised that Jimmy had been speaking.

'Sorry, I was miles away . . . what were you saying?'

His eyes flickered for a second towards Matt, who was chatting to Cathy at that moment on his other side. Jimmy didn't look comfortable having to repeat whatever it was I had just missed.

'I was asking if you weren't too busy tomorrow afternoon, if you'd be able to come round to my house?'

The oddly hesitant request wasn't like him at all and I found myself momentarily confused, both by his tone and the formality of the invitation. Jimmy and I usually just pitched up at each other's front doors without asking; no invites necessary.

'Sure, I can do that. I was intending to come round to

see your mum and dad again before I left, anyway.'

'Actually, they won't be home tomorrow.' Again, that oddly uncertain tone. 'No one will, just me. I . . . er . . . I just wanted to have a quiet word with you. Is that OK?'

Was it the red glow from the sun, or was he actually blushing?

He seemed anxious to elicit my response before Matt turned back, so I quickly reassured him. 'Yes, that's fine. I'll see you around two o'clock?'

He nodded then and sighed, as though some dreaded task had been accomplished, which only served to heighten my curiosity further. I guessed I would have to wait until the next day to find out what was on his mind.

The waiters had just arrived with the laden plates and begun to set them in front of us. Straightening up in his seat, Matt removed his right arm from where it had been resting around my waist, pausing to plant a firm kiss unexpectedly on my lips before pulling back.

'Pleeeease . . . people are trying to eat round here!' groaned Sarah, pretending repulsion.

I grinned back at Matt and held my face very still while he tucked a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. It was just a chance inconsequential action, but later I would wonder what might have happened to us all if he hadn't been leaning so closely towards me and seen the car.

'What the hell . . . !' he cried.

I spun around to follow his gaze, mouth dropping in amazement as I saw a small red car, with all four wheels off the tarmac, catapult into view over the crest of the hill. Moments later a second car appeared, driving almost as fast and only slightly less recklessly; its flashing blue lights and discordant siren shattering the peace of the summer evening.

In horror I saw a small van emerge from a side street and have to stand on its brakes to avoid losing the best part of its bonnet as the red car hurtled past with inches to spare. The car collided with grazing impact against the side of several parked vehicles, enshrouding the pursuing police car in a cloud of red hot sparks.

It was the shrieking scream of rubber from the van's brakes that alerted the attention of the rest of the group but Matt was way ahead of us all in assessing the oncoming danger. The red car was still comparatively high up on the hill, but at the speed it was travelling, that distance was being swallowed up with each passing second. When the police car began to narrow the gap between the vehicles, the red car veered crazily across the road, its driver clearly struggling to keep it from ploughing into the line of parked cars. Matt shot to his feet.

'He's lost it! He's out of control. That car's going to crash! Get away from the window! NOW!'

For the first time we all seemed to notice the vulnerability of our position, seated beside the large window at the front of the restaurant. Separated from the road by only the narrowest of low pavements and sited on the corner of a very tight bend at the foot of the hill, the inevitability of the danger suddenly seemed glaringly obvious.

I felt Matt's tight grip on my shoulder as he got to his feet, screaming out his warning. The panic became infectious as people around us also began to shout. I noticed distractedly the waiter dropped two of our plates of food on the floor before retreating hastily away from our table.

Well, that's made a horrible mess, I found myself thinking stupidly.

It wasn't as though I couldn't see what was happening; or that I hadn't fully understood my boyfriend's cry of warning.

It was just that everything had suddenly and strangely slipped into slow-motion. There seemed to be no immediate rush; there was plenty of time to get away from the table. No need to have dropped two perfectly good dinners in the process.

Around me was a blur of movement. I saw Jimmy and Sarah get out of their seats and was aware of them running over to where Phil was standing, screaming out for the rest of us to move. Matt's hand remained embedded in the hollow of my shoulder as I felt him half drag me from my chair. With his other hand I saw him begin to propel Cathy, who was standing beside him, away from the table.

The chaotic scramble of flung-back chairs and knocked-over wine glasses could only have taken a second or two, but in that time I did something really dumb: I turned to look back through the window at the approaching car. Still coming way too fast, the vehicle, its engine roaring like a banshee, erratically straddled the centre line of the road, heading straight towards the bend – and the front of the restaurant – with no sign of slowing down.

And that stupid moment, when I stopped to check the car's approach, was when Matt lost his grip on my shoulder. When I turned my horrified face back from the window, I saw that he and Cathy were already some distance away. I stumbled forwards to follow them, but somehow when leaving, Matt's chair had been knocked over and was now wedged firmly against the pillar beside me. My exit was blocked.

Frantically I pushed at the fallen wooden obstacle, succeeding only in wedging it further between the edge of the table and the pillar.

'Rachel!' screamed Sarah at the top of her lungs. 'Get out of the way!'

Gasping in terror, I knew that from where they stood they

must be able to see the car heading straight towards the window, beside which I was now trapped. I pushed and kicked at the chair with every ounce of strength, fear and adrenaline coursing through me, until the sounds of the restaurant diminished and all I could hear was the roar of the blood in my ears.

In desperation I looked up to Matt, and saw him begin to move back towards me and then, unbelievably, Cathy grabbed his arm and held him back.

'No, Matt, no! There's no time! You'll be killed.'

I heard *that* all right, and crazily part of my brain, the part that wasn't busy trying not to let the rest of me get killed, even had time to absorb what I'd just seen Cathy do. If she thought I was going to let that pass, she was very much mistaken.

But then another noise screeched out from the street behind me, as finally, for the first time, the speeding car began to apply the brakes. Still thrusting uselessly at the fallen chair I glanced behind me for the last time. Yes, the car was braking, but it was much too late.

The sight of the speeding vehicle was growing ever larger in the window, so close now that I could make out the frightened face of the young driver, his eyes wide in terror as the inevitable approached.

I never saw him coming. He must have moved at incredible speed to get to me. One moment I was trapped in this tiny space between the fallen chair and the window, and the next two strong arms had appeared from across the table and fastened onto my own like a vice.

How he found the strength I never knew, but Jimmy literally hauled me out from where I was trapped and over the top of the table. I caught the look on his face as he dragged me across the clothed surface, mindless of the scattering bottles and glasses as I ploughed through them. His eyes

were filled with indescribable fear and the tendons of his neck stood out like cables with the effort he was using to pull me towards him.

I grabbed onto him, trying to help, my feet scrabbling frantically over the cloth to propel me forward. Then from behind us I heard an ominously loud thump as the car left the road and mounted the pavement.

Jimmy threw me. That's the only way to describe what he did. One minute I was half across the table and the next I was lifted up, launched and thrown like a rag doll, slithering down to the floor some feet beyond the head of the table. But that act of impossible strength and bravery had taken up the last precious milliseconds between the car leaving the road and crashing into the restaurant.

Jimmy was still standing directly in the path of danger when the window exploded behind him.

* * *

The first thing I felt was the heat. Something heavy was over my legs, trapping them under a weight of pain that burned like fire. And there seemed to be water everywhere, thick, salty water running freely down from my forehead, over my cheeks, into my eyes and mouth. I tried to cry out, but no sound came. There was nothing left in my lungs but smoke-filled whispers of vapour. Someone was screaming behind me, someone else was crying. I tried to turn my head and realised I couldn't see properly with the sticky wetness blocking my vision. Tentatively I raised one hand to my head and attempted to rub my eyes. The hand came away covered in a slick red gauntlet of blood. All around me was a mountain of debris, so thick and dense I couldn't see beyond it to

where the crying and screaming people were. The car was also blocking my view, half in, half out of what had once been the window, it was impossible to see what was left of the mangled vehicle, as the air was thick with a dense fog of smoke from the engine and disintegrated masonry from the front wall. I felt the shroud of glass over and under me and knew I must be lying among the remains of the window.

From behind me I heard the voices shouting frantically as masonry and rubble began to be moved and I realised that people were trying to reach us. Us. Not just me; *of course* not just me. Jimmy had been there when the car came through the window. Jimmy, who had left his position of safety and had come back to save me.

Ignoring the way the blood began to flow even faster when I turned my head, I managed to lift my neck an inch or two off the glass to look for him. The haze of dust and smoke was still too thick, but I thought I could just make out a shape some feet away to one side. There were huge broken masonry blocks and some long twisted piece of metal, which I guessed had been wrenched from the car, and they were all lying at a strangely skewed angle on top of a long white board. As my vision began to clear further, I realised that it wasn't a board at all; it was what was left of our table. And the reason why it wasn't lying flat against the floor, but was canted at that strange angle, was that something, or someone, was beneath it.

Mindless of anything else, I flung out my arm, raking it in a desperate arc towards the crushed table and what must be beneath it. At first I felt nothing, and then the very tips of my fingers brushed, just for a moment, against something soft.

'Jimmy!' I croaked hoarsely. 'Jimmy, is that you, can you

hear me?' No reply. 'Jimmy.' I started to cry, the tears cutting small rivulets through the dirt and blood on my face. 'Jimmy, oh no, Jimmy. Say something . . .'

The dust and debris had begun to settle a little and I could just make out what it was I had been able to reach. Jimmy's forearm protruded at a strange angle from beneath what was left of the table. That was all I could see of him, just his forearm. The arm still looked strong and tanned, as it had a few moments before, when it had somehow found the strength to pull me away from danger. Only now it wasn't moving. Long before the ambulances reached us, I realised that it would never be moving again.