

When a car carrying five teenagers home from a party crashes into a brick wall, the consequences are devastating – not just for the young people directly involved, but also for their families, their friends, and the wider community.

No one escapes unscathed, but some are more deeply scarred than others and one of the group will not survive. In their grief and confusion, those left behind question who was to blame for the accident, and what price they will pay.

A haunting and emotionally affecting novel of love and loyalty, grief and forgiveness.

**Caroline Bond** was born in Scarborough and studied English at Oxford University before working as a market researcher for 25 years. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Leeds Trinity University, and lives in Leeds with her husband and three children.

Publicity enquiries

Tel: 020 7269 0246 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: [kirstydoole@atlantic-books.co.uk](mailto:kirstydoole@atlantic-books.co.uk)

Sales: Isabel Bogod

Tel: 020 7269 0249 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: [isabelbogod@atlantic-books.co.uk](mailto:isabelbogod@atlantic-books.co.uk)

Atlantic Books, Ormond House,

26–27 Boswell Street, London, WC1N 3JZ

Tel: 020 7269 1610 Fax: 020 7430 0916

Email: [enquiries@atlantic-books.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@atlantic-books.co.uk)

# ONE SPLIT SECOND

*Caroline Bond*



**A note to reviewers: please remember that this proof is uncorrected and changes may be made before the book is printed. If any material from the book is to be quoted in a review, please check it against the text in the final bound edition which will be sent to you when it becomes available.**

Published in hardback in Great Britain in 2020 by Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Caroline Bond, 2020

The moral right of Caroline Bond to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her 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 novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 83895 107 8

Trade paperback ISBN: 978 1 78649 923 3

E-book ISBN: 978 1 78649 924 0

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus

An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd

Ormond House

26–27 Boswell Street

London

WC1N 3JZ

[www.corvus-books.co.uk](http://www.corvus-books.co.uk)

### 3 2 D A Y S A F T E R T H E A C C I D E N T

THE MESSAGE went out to *All Staff* at the beginning of the day. It was read and passed on over and over again. Conversations were had about who could be spared and who could not. Far more wanted to attend than were able, but that was the way it was – even for this. Many of the frontline staff knew immediately that they wouldn't be able to go. Their presence was required elsewhere. When your day job is a matter of life or death, *the living* take precedence. A number of people were secretly relieved to be denied permission. It felt wrong not to want to be there, *and* wrong to be thankful to miss it.

The corridor vigil was a St Thomas's tradition that had started with Lenny Okafor. Nineteen years of age, cause of death: inoperable internal bleeding caused by falling from a roof. (The firm that employed Lenny was eventually prosecuted for its poor health-and-safety procedures, but that provided little solace to Lenny's family.) Lenny's dad, Vincent – who was a porter at the hospital at the time of the accident – was, thankfully, not on duty the day his son was brought into A&E. In fact Vincent would never work as a porter again, not in St Thomas's or anywhere else. He said he simply couldn't

face doing the job any more, not after what happened. The honour guard for Lenny was a spontaneous gesture of support organised by Vincent's work mates. It felt like the least they could do to show their respects to the family and the brave decision they had made.

There were probably about twenty people there for that very first act of observance, most of them porters. They stood in clumps of twos and threes, ranged along the corridor, uncertain of the protocol, which was understandable – because there wasn't any. Robbed of their usual banter, their feet still and their hands idle for a change, Vincent's work mates shuffled and whispered quietly – until the doors of the ICU banged opened and Vincent, the bloke with the loudest laugh and the worst jokes, wheeled his firstborn out on his last-ever journey. As the gurney passed along the corridor the porters bowed their heads in absolute silence.

Now the attendees for the vigils came from every walk of life and level within the hospital. An untimely death touched all the staff, irrespective of their clinical and professional experience. They were all mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and lovers – all capable of contemplating the unimaginable, and humble enough to pay witness to it. Indeed, the corridor ritual for the organ-donation patients and their families had become a touchstone in the lives of many of them; a way – not that anyone ever voiced it – of warding away the Furies from their own precious, all-too-fragile loved ones.

By 10.36 a.m. on Wednesday 3 April more than two hundred people were gathered in the corridor on Level B. Clerks, porters, nurses, cleaners, quite a few of the junior doctors, a smattering of consultants and even a few members of the general public who happened to be there and who bravely chose to stay and participate. Many of the faces were familiar: rivals, adversaries, subordinates and bosses. They whispered to each other or stood apart in quiet contemplation – just as the porters had done for Lenny.

At 10.37 a.m. two of the ICU nurses came out of the ward and held open the doors. That was the signal. The gathered crowd, which had been subdued before, now fell silent.

The wait lasted only a matter of seconds, but it felt, as it always did, much longer.

Those nearest the door heard it first – the mechanical sound of the life-support machine. The trolley emerged slowly, flanked by the attendant staff and the patient's relatives. In a wordless ripple, the attendees along the corridor bowed their heads. They did so to pay their respects, but also to avoid looking into the eyes of the grieving family.





# Chapter 1

## THE NIGHT OF THE ACCIDENT

PETE MCKINNON was looking for his cat when he heard the bang or, more accurately, felt it deep inside his chest. There was a moment of silence. Then the screaming started – a loud stream of noise that went on, and on. Pete froze. For a split second he contemplated going back inside his house and pulling the door closed behind him, but his better instincts took over and he set off running.

According to the police report, it took Pete less than twenty seconds to get from his small, weed-filled front garden to *the incident*.

Pete was the first person on the scene.

The first person to call 999.

The first person to try and help.

The first witness.

And he would wish, for the rest of his life, that he hadn't been.

For years afterwards he would dream about the blood under the girl's fingernails and the way she'd rocked back and forth in the moonlight before collapsing face-down on the grass.

The sirens woke more people. They peered out from behind closed curtains, felt an immediate sense of shock and an irresistible impulse to see more. Bare feet were shoved into shoes, jackets pulled on top of pyjamas, and phones slipped into pockets. They emerged from their houses and crept guiltily towards the lights – moths towards the flame.

Many would later wish that they hadn't.

The first photo was posted sixteen minutes after the crash.

The first parent to feel vaguely sick when she saw the post was Tina Walker, up with her youngest daughter: earache – again. Tina was one of the lucky ones. Lydia, her eldest daughter, answered her phone on the third ring and promised faithfully – above the noise of the party – that she was fine. Tina insisted that she stay put and wait for her father to pick her up. It was a late-night 'dad taxi' run that Liam was deeply thankful to be able to do. Having reassured herself that her own daughter was safe, Tina began worrying about other people's kids. She called Steph to double-check on Becca. Steph understandably panicked and spread the gut-clenching anxiety by texting anyone and everyone who had a son or daughter of an age to be out on a Saturday night, including Kath. Kath sent a group WhatsApp, thinking it was the quickest way of getting the word out. Cheryl saw it and immediately rang Sam and Melanie and, on second thoughts, Dom.

And so it was that the arteries that ran deep within the flesh of the community spread the fear. Even parents who knew full well that their kids were safe, and in their rooms, scrambled out of bed and went to look in on their 'children', many of whom were awake, their faces lit by the glow of their screens.

News travels fast, especially bad news.

By 1.45 a.m. the ripples of alarm had gathered force and a tidal wave of panic was sluicing through the community. The promise of instant contact afforded by modern technology became a blight. Anyone unable to reach their son or daughter *immediately* assumed the worse, many incorrectly – but not all. Those who did speak to their kids directly did so hurriedly, urgently, telling them to stay put until they could be fetched safely home.

Five miles away in the home of Alice Mitcham – whose parents were away in Crete for the week – the party came to a juddering halt. The music stopped, the drinking stopped, the fun stopped. All of them suddenly felt stone-cold sober. Someone switched on the big light and the party-goers huddled together under its unforgiving glare, hugging each other. Names were whispered, roles assigned, motivations attributed. And so it was that the story of the night took root and began to grow. There was relief when the first cars started arriving to take them home. They left one by one, two by two, quietly, obediently, young adults returned to childhood by the shock. When the last person had gone, Alice sat, on her own, amidst the remnants of the party, her phone clutched in her hand, looking at the messages, wishing her own parents home.

By 2.30 a.m. the whereabouts of most of the kids was known. Most – but not all. Because, for a small handful of parents, there was no response to their frantic calls and messages. No wordless reunions and fierce hugs. These parents – the truly unlucky ones – plunged headlong into the awful realisation that their child had been involved in the night's events.

## Chapter 2

SAL REYNOLDS, Tish's mum, was at home, on her own – as she always was nowadays – when the posts started appearing. Her instant reaction was to assume that Tish was one of those hurt. The recorded message telling her that *the phone she was calling was switched off* made her feel sick. Sal had little faith in fate not to dump an unfair proportion of crap into the lives of those already struggling. And Sal was used to crap happening. It was Tish and her against the world. That's how they got by. The thought of something bad happening to her only child made Sal feel deeply, shakily afraid. She rocked, she paced, she dialled and re-dialled. Nothing. After half an hour of panic she simply couldn't stand being trapped in her small living room, not knowing, any longer. She put on her coat and set off for the crash site, compelled to go, but terrified of what she was going to find. As she hurried through the tight grid of streets that led down to the ring road, she noticed how many of the houses had lights on. Other families – the same fear.

She arrived quietly, unannounced, and stood behind the police cordon with the growing congregation of horrified, curious bystanders, her stomach clenched so tightly that she had to stoop to accommodate the pain.

Jake Hammond's three older brothers, Sonny, Charlie and Ed, also made their way down to the ring road. They drove – a couple of beers didn't count.

The minute they'd heard about the accident they'd felt a fizzing compulsion to find out what had happened. They'd gathered back at home, summoned by the frantic calls from their mum, Anita. As she cranked herself up into a frenzy of worry, they'd offered to go and double-check that Jake wasn't involved. Jake often stayed out until four or five in the morning; he was bound to be at a different party or in a bar somewhere. They were confident that he wouldn't be heading home this early on a night out.

They arrived at the crash site in plenty of time for the scene to have lost little of its excitement. Their hearts thumped in response to the lights, the crackle of the police radios and the frantic, but controlled focus of the fire and ambulance crews. The brothers were glad they'd come. People were going to be talking about this for weeks. They already felt a curious pride, knowing they'd be able to say that they *were there*. Instinctively they raised their phones and started taking pictures, zooming in, zooming out, trying hard to capture the drama and the scale of the carnage. Weaned as they were on the graphic simulations of *Grand Theft Auto*, the scene in front of them was nothing new, but what they were unprepared for was the dawning realisation that this was different – because *this was real*. This was what real speed did to a real car that had real passengers inside it. This was metal smashed with a bone-breaking impact, and glass exploded by the exertion of way too much force. This was the acrid smell of petrol and melted plastic, and the weird quiet of a closed road.

The car, or what was left of it, was embedded in the wall of the Gerard's Fabrications building. A total write-off. It had once been a Seat Leon. A blue Seat Leon.

Harry Westwood drove a midnight-blue Seat Leon.

Harry was Jake's mate – had been since primary school.

Jake and Harry went out together, a lot.

Their mum's hysteria began to seem like a rational reaction.

Dom was driving back up to York from Birmingham after a long, tedious meeting and a late business dinner when Cheryl rang and told him about the accident. Dom's company was looking into acquiring a new dealership group based in and around Edgbaston. It was pricey, especially given the state of the market, and the investors they had lined up were getting twitchy, but Dom thought they were being over-cautious. It was a good opportunity. The group was currently being run, badly, by a father, two sons and a nephew combo – some sort of Brummie mafia. They were stuck in the Dark Ages in terms of marketing and IT, but the showrooms were in great locations and the dealership had a large, loyal customer base. The deal had its problems, but it also offered a lot of potential. The last thing Dom needed at the end of a long day was this – whatever *this* was. Probably Cheryl panicking. She was a 'molehill into a mountain' merchant. That said, Dom drove faster after talking to her.

He instructed his hands-free to call Harry. He kept glancing at the display as it repeatedly, automatically, fruitlessly re-dialled his son's number. Anxiety increased the pressure of his foot on the accelerator, but as he neared home he was forced to slow down. Suddenly there was traffic, which made no sense; he would normally have sailed round this section of the ring road at this time of night. The realisation that the hold-up was probably a result of the accident was sobering. Dom sat in the queue of cars and refused to allow himself to worry. Harry often ignored his phone, especially when he was out. That was the mantra Dom decided to stick to – his son's all-round slackness, his 'easy come/easy go' life of friends and having a good time; Harry's similarity to himself at that age. The phone tried again, and once again abandoned the call after eight attempts. Harry

could very well have left his phone at home, dropped it down the loo – again – or just be ignoring his calls. All of which was highly likely. Dom drummed his fingers on the steering wheel and blocked out any possible connection between the crash, his son and his son's new, midnight-blue, high-spec Seat Leon.

Shazia and Nihal sat together on the sofa in their front room, taking it in turns to ring Mo, and trying to convince each other that the fact the police hadn't contacted them was a good sign, that there was still hope. But with every slow minute, that faith weakened and warped. They didn't know what to do, where to be, what to think – other than that they must try and not think the unthinkable. They had not wanted Mo to go the party. He had work in the morning, and he was a boy who needed his sleep. Not a boy, obviously; a young man now. University in September – all being well. Leaving home. He was not just growing up, but almost grown-up. But he was still a child in their minds, especially when he was hungry or grumpy with tiredness. And he would be more than tired by now. It was late. Later than he would ever normally stay out.

Where was he? And why hadn't he been in touch to let them know he was okay?

Half a mile away Fran and Marcus were asleep, unaware of the panic racing through their friends and neighbours. Two bottles of red wine after a frantic working week had poleaxed them both. Jess was safe and sound, round at Gabbie's – a girls' night in. As the messages piled up on their mobiles, they snored, sighed and rolled over beneath the duvet.

They were oblivious... until the doorbell shattered their dreams.

## Chapter 3

AFTER THE awful conversations with the police, the dash to the hospital, the slap of shoes on hard surfaces, the voices directing them *up here, just along this corridor, through the door on the left, please* – after all the rush and clamour – the sensation of being washed up on a far-away shore, isolated from events, was deeply disconcerting. Most of them had been brought to the hospital in squad cars driven by polite but monosyllabic uniformed officers. Dom was the exception; he'd insisted on driving himself, despite the very best efforts of the female officer who'd been assigned to him. She'd stood in his hallway, her radio crackling, advising him that the shock might make driving an unwise option. He had ignored her.

Now, gathered together in this small room, they looked at each other and saw their own panic made flesh. Anita was crying and talking uncontrollably – *Jake this, Jake that, Jake, Jake*; how she could maintain such a constant flow of tears and words was beyond most of them. The recognition that they were not going to swerve this tragedy, that they were going to be hit full-tilt by it, had stunned the rest of them into silence. Tears were out of reach. To cry was a release, and there could be no release until they knew how bad it was for their child. *Their* child, not anyone else's; there wasn't space, yet,



for such empathy. Their panic was too raw and personal to be shared. Hence they stood, passive and acquiescent, in their pairs or alone, as the senior policeman confirmed their place at the front of the queue for this nightmare. In a clear, steady voice he told them that their questions couldn't be answered – *not yet, not until there was clearer information about the casualties – which would be available soon. So please, if they could be patient for a little longer. The medical staff would be in to talk to them shortly.* The officer left the room, quickly, as if relieved to be away from them.

And then they waited.

Dave hugged Anita, while opposite them Shazia and Nihal sat immobile: poles of the same emotional compass. Fran and Marcus stood by the window, staring out at the orange halos of light in the darkness, trying not to imagine what might have happened to Jess, while Dom paced. And Sal? Sal sat on her own, near the door, hunched over her phone, lost in the world beyond the hospital, where the accident was a dramatic local news story, not a real event. Her croaky voice broke through their personal purgatories. 'Christ! There's so many photos.'

Dom went and sat next to her. She passed him her phone. The others watched as he swiped the screen – imagining what he was looking at. Fran couldn't bear it. 'Please, Dom, don't.' But Anita looked up and stretched out her hand. After Dom had seen enough, he passed her the phone. Anita's and Dave's faces creased and crumpled as they flicked through the images. Anita's hand went to her mouth and the sobbing started up again. Dave offered the phone to Nihal, who reached out and took it, but Shazia's recoil was so severe that he tossed the phone straight back at Dave. Dave then offered it to Marcus. Marcus's 'No!' was so loud that they all jumped. Fran turned away and closed her eyes.

She knew them all, liked them all, but she wished at that moment that she'd never met any of them. Never spent a minute – never

mind what felt like a lifetime – with Dom; never got to know and respect Sal; never learnt to appreciate Shazia and Nihal’s quiet humour; never found enough common ground with Dave and Anita to be around them, occasionally, for short periods without wanting to scream. In that claustrophobic room, waiting to hear just how bad it was, Fran wished, fervently, that Jess had never made friends with the children of any of these people.