

# Chapter 1

*If you're reading this then I am no longer alive. Someone has been stalking me for the last three months and, if I am dead, it wasn't an accident. Tell the police to speak to my ex-boyfriend Alex Carter about what happened in London. That's where all this started.*

*The following people came to Rum for a walking tour, arriving on Saturday 2nd June. I am pretty sure one of them killed me.*

- Joe Armstrong*
- Christine Cuttle*
- Fiona Gardiner*
- Trevor Morgan*
- Malcolm Ward*
- Melanie Ward*
- Katie Ward*

*Their bookings and contact details can be found on the laptop in reception and in the medical files in the right-hand drawer of the desk. I have written down everything that's*

*happened since they arrived (and before) on the attached pieces of paper.*

*I hope you're not reading this. I hope it's screwed up in the bottom of a bin and that I've managed to escape. I don't know what else to say. Please tell my parents that I love them, and Alex that I hope he's okay and that he shouldn't feel bad about the way things turned out. I wish I'd never come here. ~~I wish I had never agreed to~~ I wish a lot of things. Mostly that I could turn back time.*

*Anna Willis*

*Acting Manager, Bay View Hotel, Isle of Rum*

*P.S. I am so sorry about what happened to David. Please tell his family that he was a wonderful man, full of heart and dry wit, and I was very fond of him. Please reassure them that his passing was very quick and he didn't suffer.*

# Part One



# Chapter 2

## *Anna*

THREE MONTHS EARLIER

*Sunday 25th February*

The mood in the car couldn't be more different than it was on Friday. On the way to the Brecon Beacons I couldn't hear the radio above the chatter and laughter. The team groaned when I told them we'd be spending a weekend in February on a team-building retreat, but most of them rallied once they got in the car. Now, on the way back to London, they're subdued – physically and mentally exhausted and, more than likely, hungover. Mohammed, sitting beside me in the passenger seat, is snoring. Peter, who amused the table with his impression of Michael Mackintosh over dinner last night, now has his head against the window and his coat pulled up over his shoulders. Beside him, Freddy Laing has his headphones jammed over his ears,

his eyes shut and his arms crossed over his chest. I doubt he remembers what he said about me last night. I know he was drunk, they all were, but it doesn't excuse the things he said when he thought I'd gone to bed.

'I can't believe she's going for the marketing director job. She's got no chance.'

Freddy's voice drifted across the hotel lobby to the desk where I was waiting impatiently for the receptionist to replace my wiped room card. I knew immediately that he was talking about me. Helen Mackesy, director of marketing, had been poached, leaving a vacancy. And it had my name on it. Unfortunately, Phil Acres, sales promotion manager, had been making noises about going for it too.

'She's really out of touch with digital marketing,' Freddy said. 'She's been in the job for so long she can't even find the pulse, never mind put her finger on it.'

There was a low laugh. Mohammed, most probably. I knew it wouldn't be Peter. He was forty, eight years older than me, and kept himself to himself. Mo and Freddy were closer in age, mid-twenties, and sat together at work. They spent more of their time chatting than working but I never told them to be quiet. They were professionals, not children. As long as they got their work done and didn't disrupt the others I let it go.

There was a pause in the conversation, then Freddy laughed uproariously.

'MySpace advertising. Fucking love it. Yeah, she's probably been telling Tim that blogs are the next big thing in social media marketing. GeoCities blogs!'

More cold, cruel, mocking laughter. My stomach tightened. I'd *worked* to get where I was. I'd been desperate to go to university to study design after my A-levels but we couldn't afford it. Mum had been working two jobs and I owed it to

her to start helping out financially. After what felt like a million interviews, and two years working in a hotel bar, I was finally offered a job as a marketing assistant for a computer software firm. My boss, Vicky, was brilliant. She took me under her wing and taught me everything she knew. That was twelve years ago and digital marketing was still in its infancy but I loved it. I still do.

‘Miss Willis,’ the receptionist called as I marched across the lobby, the blood pounding in my ears. ‘Miss Willis, your room card.’

There was a yelp of surprise, the squeal of trainers on tiles and more laughter. By the time I reached the lounge, Freddy and Mo were gone.

Mo snorts in his sleep, snapping me back to the icy, glistening road beyond the windscreen. The drizzle that clung to our hair and faces as we got into the car a little after 8 a.m. is now icy hail. The wipers speed back and forth, squeaking each time they sweep left. The sky is inky black and all I can see is a blurry refraction of the orange-red tail-lights of the car in front. We’ve finally hit the M25. Not long now until we’re back in London. I’ll drop the boys at a tube station, then go home. But I’m not sure I want to.

Squeak. Swish. Squeak. Swish.

The wipers move in time with my pulse. I’ve had too much coffee and my heart jumps in my chest whenever I remember what Freddy said last night. After he fled the lobby I searched the ground floor of the hotel for him, fuelled by anger and indignation, then gave up and went to my room to ring Alex, my boyfriend.

He didn’t pick up on the first ring. Or the second. He isn’t a fan of phone calls at the best of times but I wanted to hear a friendly voice. I needed someone to tell me that I wasn’t a

bad person or shit at my job and everything was going to be okay. I texted him instead.

*I've had a really shit night. We don't have to chat long. I just want to hear your voice.*

A text pinged back a couple of seconds later.

*Sorry, in bed. We can talk tomorrow.*

The curt tone of his message sliced through what was left of my self-confidence. We'd drifted apart. I'd sensed it for a while but I was too scared to bring it up because I didn't have the energy to fix what was broken or the head space to deal with a break-up. I poured myself into my work instead. Sometimes I'd stay late because I couldn't bear the thought of going home and sitting on the sofa with Alex, each of us curled into the armrests, ignoring the space between us but feeling the weight of it, as though it were as large and real as another person.

Maybe I shouldn't go for the marketing director job. Maybe I should give up work, leave Alex and move to the countryside. I could go freelance, buy a small cottage and a dog, take long walks and fill my lungs with fresh air. There are days at work when I feel I can't breathe, and not just because of the pollution. The air's thinner at the top of the ladder and I find myself clinging to it, terrified I might fall. Freddy would love it if I did.

Squeak. Swish. Squeak. Swish.

*Get. Home. Get. Home.*

The hail is falling heavily now, bouncing off the windscreen and rolling off the bonnet. Someone snorts in their sleep, making me jolt, before they fall silent again. I've been driving behind the car in front for a couple of miles now and we're both keeping to a steady seventy miles an hour. It's too dangerous to overtake and besides, there's something comforting about following their red fog lights at a safe distance.

Squeak. Swish. Squeak. Swish.



*Get. Home. Get. Home.*

I hear a loud, exaggerated yawn. It's Freddy, stretching his arms above his head and shifting in his seat. 'Anna? Can we stop at the services? I need the loo.'

'We're nearly in London.'

'Can you turn the heating down?' he adds as I glance from the rear-view mirror to the road. 'I'm sweating like a pig.'

'I can't. The heater on the windscreen's not working and it keeps fogging up.'

'I'm going to open a window then.'

'Freddy, don't!'

Anger surges through me as he twists in his seat and reaches for the button.

'Freddy, LEAVE IT!'

It happens in the blink of an eye. One moment there is a car in front of me, red tail-lights a warm, comforting glow, the next the car is gone, there's a blur of lights and the blare of a horn – frantic and desperate – and then I'm thrown to the left as the car tips to the side and all I can hear is crunching metal, breaking glass, screaming, and then nothing at all.



# Chapter 3

TWELVE HOURS AFTER THE ACCIDENT

There's someone in the room. My eyes are closed but I know I'm not alone. I can feel the weight of their gaze, the pinprick crawl of my skin. What are they waiting for? For me to open my eyes? I want to ignore them and go back to sleep but I can't ignore the churning in my belly and the tightness of my skin. They want to hurt me. Malevolence binds me to the bed like a blanket. I need to wake up. I need to get up and run.

But I can't move. There's a weight on my chest, pinning me to the bed.

'Anna? Anna, can you hear me?'

A voice drifts into my consciousness, then out again.

'Yes!' But my voice is only in my head. I can't move my lips. I can't get the sound to reverberate in my throat. The only part of me I can move is my eyes.

Someone's walking towards me, their cold blue eyes fixed on mine. There's no rise and fall of a nose and mouth, just a smooth stretch of skin, pulled tight.

'Don't be scared.'

They draw closer – staccato movements, like a film on freeze-frame – move, stop, move, stop. Closer and closer. I screw my eyes tightly shut. This isn't real. It's a dream. I need to wake up.

'That's right, Anna. Close your eyes and go back to sleep. Don't fight it. Let the pain and guilt and hurt go.'

I'm dreaming. I have to be. But it's too vivid. I saw blue curtains hanging on a white frame around my bed, a white blanket and the mound of my feet.

*No! No! Stop!*

I scream, but the sound of my voice doesn't leave my head. I can't move. I can only blink frantically – a silent SOS – as I'm grabbed by the wrist. They're going to hurt me and there's nothing I can do to stop them.

'Open your eyes, Anna. I know you can hear me. Anna, open your eyes!'

*Alex?*

He is beside me, his face pinched with worry, his eyes ringed with shadows, stubble circling his lips and stretching along his jawbone.

'Anna?'

There's a needle in the back of my hand. Alex catches it with his thumb as he rubs soft circles onto my skin. A sharp pain travels up the length of my arm.

*Stop.* The word doesn't travel from my mind to my lips. Why can't I speak? A wave of panic courses through me.

'Rest, rest.' Alex touches a hand to my shoulder, pressing me back into the bed.

*Alex? Where am I?*

There's a blue curtain, hanging from a rail surrounding the bed, and a white blanket, pulled tight, pinning me to the sheet. At the end of the bed is the mound of my feet. Am I still in the

dream? But it's not a faceless stranger wrapping their fingers around my wrist, it's Alex. I focus on my hand, resting limply on his, and tense the muscles in my forearm. My fingers contract and then I feel it, the softness of his skin under my fingertips. I'm not dreaming, I'm awake.

'It's okay,' Alex says, mistaking the relief in my eyes for fear. He gingerly perches on the bed, avoiding my legs. 'Don't try to speak. You've been in an accident. You're in the Royal Free Hospital in Hampstead. You had some internal bleeding and you've been operated on. They had . . .' he touches his throat, '. . . they had to give you some help breathing, they said your throat might hurt for a few days, but you're going to be okay. It's a fucking miracle that you . . .' He swallows and looks away.

*Survived?*

The memory returns like a juggernaut, smashing into my consciousness. I close my eyes to try block it out but it doesn't disappear. I was in the car. I was driving and it was hailing and the windscreen wipers were going back and forth and back and—

I snatch my hands up and over my head, cradling my face with my arms as the truck slams into the side of the car. The seat belt digs into my collarbone and chest as I am thrown forward, then I am turning and spinning and twisting and my head smashes against the steering wheel, the seat rest, the window and my arms are wheeling around, my hands reaching for something, anything to anchor myself, to brace myself for impact, but there's nothing. Nothing. Everyone is screaming and all I can do is pray.

'Anna, please.'

I am vaguely aware of someone pulling on my arms, gripping my elbows, trying to move them away from my face.

'Anna, stop it. Please. Please, stop screaming.'

'Anna? Anna, it's Becca, your nurse.'

Someone touches my fingers, tightly twisted in my hair. I hold on tighter. I can't let go. I won't.

'Is it my fault?' Alex's voice buzzes in and out of my consciousness. 'I shouldn't have mentioned the accident. Fuck. Is she going to stop? This is really . . . I can't . . . I don't know . . .'

'It's okay. It's all right. She's disorientated. One of the other nurses said she reacted violently when she came round in post-op.' Someone pulls on my arms again. I can smell coffee. 'Anna, sweetheart. Are you in pain? Can you open your eyes for me, please?'

'Why is she screaming? Isn't there something you can . . .'

'Can you press the alarm button?'

'Alarm? Why? What's . . .'

'I just need a doctor to see her. Can you just press . . .'

'Is she going to be okay? She looked at me. She tried to speak. I thought—'

'Anna. Anna, can you open your eyes? My name's Becca Porter. I'm your nurse. You're in hospital. Are you in any pain?'

'Sorry, excuse me. Would you mind waiting outside the curtains for a minute. I'm Dr Nowak. Thanks, great. So, who do we have here?'

'Anna Willis. Road traffic accident. Spleen laceration. She came round after post-op, her vitals were fine. She's been asleep for the last hour or so. I heard screaming a few minutes ago and—'

'Okay. Anna, I'm just going to have a look at your tummy, all right? Does it hurt when I press here?'

*No. It doesn't hurt there. It hurts here, in here, inside my head.*

I know the nurses are about somewhere – I can hear the soft squeak of shoes on lino, a low cough and a murmur of voices – but I can't see anyone. I've been staring around the ward for

what feels like forever. Most of the other patients are asleep, reading silently or watching films on iPads. Everyone apart from the young woman opposite, who's also awake and restless. She's younger than me, late twenties tops, with a long, narrow face and dark hair tied up in a messy bun on the top of her head. The first time our eyes met we both smiled and gave a polite nod before letting our gaze drift away again, but we keep meeting each other's eyes and it's getting embarrassing. My throat's still too sore to speak much above a whisper and I'd have to raise my voice to hold a conversation with her. I feel like I should apologise though. She was probably here last night when I screamed the place down. She must have been terrified. I imagine they all were. I didn't even realise what had happened until the nurse, Becca, woke me up to check my blood pressure and asked how I was feeling. They'd rushed me away for a scan after they'd sedated me, worried that something had gone wrong with the operation and I was bleeding again. I can't remember much about it, just a white ceiling, dotted with lights, speeding past as they pushed me down a corridor and then the low hum of the MRI machine. Apparently Alex stayed at the hospital until after the scan, then, reassured that I wasn't in any danger, he did as the nurse suggested and went home for a sleep.

I thanked Becca for looking after me and I apologised for the screams I could only vaguely remember making. She kept a pleasant smile fixed to her face the whole time but when I asked where my colleagues were, her smile faltered.

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'I know the lorry driver was taken to another hospital but I don't know about your friends. I can find out for you though.'

I didn't see her again. The next time my blood pressure was checked it was a different nurse. Becca's shift had ended, she said. She wouldn't be in until tomorrow. I asked her the same question, if she knew what had happened to the others in the

car. She genuinely didn't seem to know but said she'd find out. When I saw her the next morning she said she was sorry, she hadn't had time but the doctor would be along soon and she was sure he could answer my questions. I started to panic then. Where were Freddy, Peter and Mo? Had they been taken to a different ward? Unless they hadn't been as badly injured as me. They might have walked away unscathed, a quick visit to hospital to be checked over and then sent straight home. But . . . my tender stomach tightened as I remembered what Alex had said about my recovery being a 'miracle'.

The sound of wheels squeaking on lino makes me turn my head. A nurse has appeared in the doorway, pushing a trolley.

'Excuse me. Nurse.' I raise my hand and wave but she doesn't so much as glance my way, my voice is so quiet. I watch despairingly as she turns left and walks further down the ward.

'EXCUSE ME! NURSE!' The woman in the bed opposite shouts so loudly that all heads turn in her direction, including the nurse's. She waggles her hand in my direction as the nurse approaches, still pushing the trolley. 'The woman over there was trying to get your attention.'

I smile gratefully and attempt to sit up as the nurse comes over, but I feel as though my stomach muscles have been slashed and the most I can manage is a vague craning of my neck.

'Everything okay?' Up close I can see that it's Becca, the nurse who was so kind to me yesterday.

'Please,' I beg. 'I'm going mad here. I need to know what's happened to my team . . . the . . . the people who were in the car with me. I need to know they're all right.'

Her eyes cloud as she gazes at me. A shutter's come down; she doesn't want me to see what she's feeling. She glances down at the watch hanging on her uniform.

'Your partner will be here in about half an hour. Maybe it would be best if he were—'



‘Please,’ I beg. ‘Please just tell me. It’s bad news, isn’t it? You can tell me. I can take it.’

She looks at me as though she’s not entirely sure that I can, then she sighs and takes a shallow breath.

‘One of your colleagues is in a pretty bad way,’ she says softly. ‘He’s broken his back in several places.’

I press a hand to my mouth but it doesn’t mask my gasp.

‘But he’s stable,’ Becca adds. ‘He should pull through.’

‘Who is it?’

She grimaces, like she’s already regretting talking to me. Or perhaps it’s confidential information.

‘Please. Please tell me who it is.’

‘It’s Mohammed Khan.’

‘And the others? Peter Cross? Freddy Laing?’

As she lowers her gaze, my eyes fill with tears. No. No. Please. Please don’t let them . . . please . . .

She takes my hand and squeezes it tightly. ‘I’m so sorry, Anna. We did everything we could.’



# Chapter 4

## *Mohammed*

Mohammed's brain feels dull and woolly, as though it's not pain-relieving meds that are flowing through his veins and capillaries but a thick, dark fog. He likes the fog because, as well as anaesthetising the ache in his limbs, it has stupefied his brain. Whenever he tries to latch on to an emotion – anger, regret, fear – it twirls away on a cloud of smoke. As a teenager, wrestling with his hormones and the pressure of exams, Mohammed had looked longingly at his dog, Sonic, curled up on the floor by his desk, and wished he could swap places. What would it be like, he wondered, to be a dog; to find joy in base behaviours – food, play, affection – and not overload your brain thinking about the future, death, the nature of an infinite universe, global warming, war and disease. It didn't take much to make a dog happy – running around outside, catching a ball, a scratch behind the ears. What made him happy? Hanging out with his mates, staying up late, watching films, his PlayStation. Dogs lived in

the moment but he didn't. He was studying for exams, the outcome of which would shape his future.

He feels a bit like Sonic now, lying around, not thinking, just waiting, although what he's waiting for he isn't entirely sure. Movement in the corner of his eye makes him turn his head. He doesn't recognise the short, suited, middle-aged man standing in the doorway of the ward but he watches him, vaguely registering the way his eyebrows knit together in frustration, as he scans the supine bodies in their metal beds. He's obviously a visitor, looking for his loved one. The consultants look much more assured when they enter the ward. Two new emotions appear in the fog of Mohammed's thoughts but, instead of disappearing, they twist together, travel down to his chest and curl around his heart. Disappointment and regret.

He turns his head away from the door and closes his eyes, half listening to the slap, clack of leather-soled shoes on the ward floor, so different from the soft pad of the nurses' shoes. The sound grows louder and louder, then there's a soft cough.

'Mohammed?'

He opens his eyes. The short, suited, middle-aged man is standing at the end of his bed, hands in his pockets and an anxious but determined look on his face. There's something about his prominent nose, strong jaw and deep-set eyes that looks vaguely familiar but he's too tired to work out why.

Instead he says, 'Yes, I'm Mohammed. Who are you?'

'Mind if I . . .' The man gestures at the chair beside the bed and, with no reason to say no, Mohammed nods for him to sit down.

'Steve,' the man says, pulling at the thick material of his suit trousers as he takes a seat. He's thickset – muscle rather than fat, Mohammed thinks bitterly as he instinctively glances at the shape of his own legs beneath the tightly tucked hospital bedding. 'Steve Laing, Freddy's dad.'

Mohammed looks back at him, eyes widening in surprise. For a second or two he is lost in confusion. He was told that Freddy had died in the crash. Why would Steve Laing be in the hospital? Unless . . . he feels a flicker of hope in his heart . . . unless Freddy isn't really dead. Could they have made a mistake? Could he have? Maybe he was too out of it to take in what the nurse told him. Maybe . . .

His hope evaporates, leaving an empty chasm in his chest. There was no mistake. He cried when he heard. He cried for a very long time. Not just for Freddy and Peter but for himself too.

'I brought you some magazines,' Steve Laing says, reaching into his bag and plonking a pile of film and music magazines onto Mo's bedside table along with a bar of Galaxy, a packet of Skittles and some jelly babies, 'and some chocolates and stuff.'

'Thanks.'

They stare at each other, just long enough for it to become awkward, then Steve looks down at his lap and runs his palms back and forth on his knees.

'It's good to see you looking so . . . ' He shakes his head sharply and looks back up at Mo. 'Nah, I'm sorry, mate. I could give you that sugar-coated shit about you looking well and all that but that's not who I am. I tell it like it is and I imagine you've had quite enough of people tiptoeing around you and telling you to think positive and all that.' He pauses, but not long enough for Mo to reply. 'The truth is that what happened to you, what happened to Peter and my Freddy, was a fucking travesty. A tragedy. It never should have happened, Mo. Never should have fucking . . . ' He turns his head sharply as tears well in his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' Mo says, his throat tightening. 'About Freddy. He was a really good bloke.'

‘Too right.’ Steve Laing drags the back of his hand over his eyes and looks back at him, lips pursed.

‘I . . .’ The words dry up on Mohammed’s tongue. He wants to tell Freddy’s dad how he tries not to think about his son because, each time he imagines Freddy’s death and the fact that he’s gone forever, he feels completely disconnected from his body, spinning a thousand miles above the earth, untethered, fearful and out of control. He wants to tell him that but he won’t. Because that’s not the sort of thing you say, especially not to someone you only just met.

Instead he says, ‘I can’t even begin to imagine how hard this must be for you.’

Steve nods sharply and the pain in his eyes seems to lessen. They’re back on safe ground, social niceties and surface pleasantries.

‘The thing is, Mo, the reason I’m here is to ask you what happened. Not details,’ he adds quickly, sensing Mo’s mounting discomfort. ‘I don’t want you to talk me through the crash. No, mate, that would be cruel and I’m not a cruel person. You lived through that once, no need to do it again. Unless . . .’ He tails off.

Mo’s heart thunders in his chest. ‘Unless what?’

‘Unless you were a witness at the court case but, from speaking to your parents, I’m not sure you’ll be out of here in time.’ He pulls a face. ‘Sorry, mate. I’m not trying to be insensitive.’

‘You spoke to my parents?’

‘Yeah, your big boss . . . Tim something . . . put me in touch with them. That’s not a problem, is it?’

‘No, of course not.’

Another pause widens between the two men, then Steve clears his throat.

‘I’m trying to get a picture, Mo, of what happened that day. I know the police are doing their own investigation but this is for me, for my own peace of mind.’

‘Of course.’

‘Let’s start with Anna Willis. What’s your take on her?’

Mohammed closes his eyes, just for a split second, then opens them again. ‘What do you want to know about her?’

Steve raises his eyebrows. ‘Whatever you’ve got.’





# Chapter 5

## *Anna*

THREE WEEKS AFTER THE ACCIDENT

*Wednesday 14th March*

In the last half an hour the churchyard has transformed from a quiet, peaceful oasis in the heart of West Sussex to a thoroughfare for grief. I must have watched seventy, maybe a hundred mourners, all dressed in black with bowed heads and downturned eyes and matching mouths, walk the gravel path from the gate to the open door of the church. My stomach rumbles angrily and I press a clenched fist to my abdomen to silence it. I forgot to eat breakfast, again.

I didn't eat for two days after the nurse told me that two of my team were dead. How could I spoon cereal into my mouth and slurp down tea like nothing had happened? How could I laugh and chat with the nurses when Peter and Freddy were

lying in the mortuary? Instead I cried. I cried and I cried and I turned my head away from everyone who came to visit me, screwing up my eyes to block out faces creased with concern that I didn't deserve. Only when Dr Nowak told me that if I didn't eat something they'd fit me with a feeding tube did I finally agree to try half a slice of toast.

'Anna.' Alex touches my shoulder. 'I think we should go in now. It's due to start.'

It took me fifteen minutes to get out of the flat and into the car, and now we're parked up I don't want to get out again. Everything about driving terrifies me now: the motion, the proximity of other cars, swerving around roundabouts. I only made it home from the hospital because I kept my eyes tightly shut the whole way while Alex played my favourite album on loop. When we finally drew up outside our flat the tips of my fingers were red and numb from gripping the seat belt so tightly. Now, I press my cheek against the passenger side window. It's cool beneath my burning cheek but it does nothing to calm my churning, aching guts.

'I can't go in there, Alex. What do I . . . what do I say to his parents?'

'What people normally say – I'm so sorry for your loss, et cetera, et cetera, or nothing at all. You rang them last week, Anna. You don't have to go through all that again.'

It took me two days to work up the courage to ring Maureen and Arnold Cross. I was Peter's boss. It was only right that I rang them. But I was also the person who drove the car that rolled off the verge of the M25 and killed him. If I'd have been concentrating properly, if I'd have checked my side mirrors instead of glaring at Freddy in the rear-view mirror, I would have seen the half-ton truck drift towards us from the middle lane. I could have taken corrective action, moved us out of its path. And Peter would still be alive. If I'd let Freddy open the

window, if I hadn't let my irritation about what he'd said the night before distract me, then the lives of three people, and everyone who loved them, wouldn't be destroyed.

A family friend answered the Cross family's landline. He repeated my name loudly, as though announcing it to the room. There was a pause, then a woman said softly, 'I don't want to talk to her.' When an elderly man added, 'I will,' I felt faint with fear. Peter's dad. I couldn't speak for several seconds after he said hello, my throat was so tight. *I'm sorry*, that's what I said, over and over. *I'm so, so sorry. I can never forgive myself.* There was a pause, a silence that seemed to stretch forever and I braced myself for his fury. It was what I deserved. Instead he said simply, 'We miss him,' and silent tears rolled down my cheeks. 'We both do,' he added. 'Every time the phone rings we think it's him, checking if Maureen's sciatica is any better or asking me for gardening advice. Sometimes we . . .' His voice quivered and he coughed, then sniffed loudly. 'They say the lorry driver who ploughed into you fell asleep at the wheel. No alcohol or drugs. A micro-sleep, they reckon, less than thirty seconds long. Tell me Peter didn't suffer,' he begged. 'Just tell me that.'

'Anna.' Alex nudges me gently. 'Did you hear what I just said?'

'No, sorry. I was—'

'They don't blame you for what happened, Anna. No one does.'

'Freddy's dad does.'

'He was angry. His son has just died. Sorry,' he apologises quickly as I turn sharply. 'I know, I know.'

I couldn't face another call straight after I'd spoken to Peter's dad, so I waited until the next day to call Steve Laing. My hand still shook as I picked up the phone, but I didn't feel the blind panic I'd felt the day before. I knew what was coming – pain, sadness, grief and disbelief – and I determined to be more of a

comfort this time around. I'd tell him how popular Freddy had been on the team, talk about his achievements and take my time answering any questions Steve Laing might want to ask me.

Only he was nothing like Arnold Cross. When I introduced myself, he exploded down the phone at me. How dare I ring him while he was grieving? It was down to my negligence that his son was dead – mine and the company I worked for. Did I have children? Did I have any idea of the hell he was going through, his child dying before him? I tried to apologise but he shouted over me. Had I ever driven a car in such treacherous conditions before? Did I have any points on my licence? Had I ever been caught speeding or made a claim on my insurance? All I could do was stare in horror at the white patch of wall in front of me as he ranted and raged and took all his anger and grief out on me.

I didn't ring Mo or his parents. When I was still in hospital I asked a nurse if I could use a wheelchair to go and see him, but she told me he didn't want any visitors. When I asked again a couple of days later I was told that Mo didn't want to see me and it would probably be for the best if I didn't ask again.

'The CPS aren't pressing charges against you,' Alex says now. 'It's the lorry driver they're gunning for.'

'But maybe Steve Laing was right. I hadn't driven on the motorway when it was that icy before and—'

'We're going home.' Alex starts the engine. 'Coming here was a mistake.'

'No!' I rest my hand on the steering wheel. 'I need to do this.'

It's standing room only and we're crushed up against strangers in the back of the church. Alex is pressed against my right shoulder and a tall man with a bald head keeps bumping my left. The people at the front of the church are bundled up tightly in their hats, coats and scarves despite the orange glow of Calor

gas heaters dotted at the end of the pews. Tim, my boss, is sitting in a pew near the back, but it's the woman in the row at the very front that I can't take my eyes off. I can only see the back of her grey hair but, from the way it's resting on the shoulder of the man beside her, it can only be Peter's mother. A fresh wave of guilt tears through me. If it weren't for me, none of us would be here now and Peter would be . . .

A shadow falls across my face and all the air is knocked from my lungs. The coffin, lifted high on the shoulders of six grim-faced men, appears in the entrance to the church. The gentle murmuring of the congregation stops suddenly, as though someone has sharply twisted the volume control to the left, and Alex tightens his grip on my hand, pulling me after him as he takes a step back to make way. I want to look at him, at my shoes, anywhere but at the shiny wooden box that moves past me, but I keep my chin tipped up and my gaze steady. I need to face the reality of the devastation I caused. I owe Peter that. But my bravery doesn't last long. The moment the coffin turns into the aisle I collapse against Alex.

'I need to get out,' I whisper between sobs. 'I need some air.'  
'I'll come with you.'

'No.' I touch him on the arm. 'I won't be long. I just need to be alone for a few minutes.'

I feel the weight of his gaze as I slide past him and move through the mourners but he lets me go.

Out in the fresh March air I pull off the hat, coat and scarf that make me feel suffocated and I inhale deeply, sucking cold air into my lungs, pushing out the damp, sorrowful scent of the church. My stomach clenches violently, bile touching the back of my tongue and, for one horrifying moment, I think I'm going to be sick. I fight the sensation, breathing shallowly and staring at the cloudless grey sky until it passes, then I start to walk. I

drift from gravestone to gravestone, reading the inscriptions, looking at the dates, noting the flowers – or lack of them. As a distraction it only partially works. I feel lost in a fog of sadness and regret whenever I pass someone who died young. There's one grave that particularly upsets me. A man and a woman are listed on one stone, John and Elizabeth Oakes. He died aged fifty-nine in 1876. She died twenty years later aged seventy-six. Their children are listed below them – Albert, Emily, Charlotte, Edward, Martha and Thomas. Six children and not one of them made it past their fifth birthday. The grave is old and uncared for; moss clings to the children's names and the angel that sits atop the stone is chipped, her face worn away with age. I scan the cold, hard ground around the grave, looking for daisies or dandelions that I can bunch together with blades of grass. A clump of bowed snowdrops at the base of a tree catches my eye.

I crouch down beside the flowers and pinch one of the stems between my index finger and thumb, then pause, mid-snap. Someone's watching. I can feel their gaze resting on me, like a weight across my shoulder blades. I turn sharply, expecting to see a photographer behind a gravestone, or a journalist dressed in black with a faux-sad expression. The local press have been hounding me for an interview since I left hospital.

But whoever was watching me isn't interested in a chat. I catch a glimpse of a black coat or jacket disappearing around the side of the church and then they're gone. I abandon the clump of bright snowdrops – the idea of plucking them so they can wither and die on a gravestone suddenly feels wrong – and walk back towards the church. As I approach the leaf-strewn porch, the door opens and Alex slides out to the piped opening chords of 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'.

'Okay?' His eyes search my face.

'Not really, no.'