

Chapter 1

The Unkindest Cut

I was woken by a tap on my shoulder. Blinking open my eyes, I saw it was Dave, our family friend and neighbour. *Dave?* The light from the landing streamed in behind his tall frame. *What is Dave doing in my room? Where is my mum? Am I dreaming?*

Very calmly he leaned into me and said in a soft voice: ‘There has been an accident. Get your sisters and come with me.’

I nodded, to show I understood but, all of a sudden, I felt scared – Dave already had my three-year-old sister Celine in his arms, fast asleep, and he stood waiting as I roused my two other sisters, who were in the double bed next to mine. Each looked confused and bleary-eyed as I gave them a little shake and then, once we were all up, standing in the middle of the room, barefoot in our Tinker Bell nighties, Dave led us across the landing to the stone spiral staircase with white steel balustrades.

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‘What’s happening?’ whispered my ten-year-old sister, Katie, clinging to my left arm as if she wanted to pull it off. Sophie, just seven, held onto my right arm with equal force, still too numb with sleep to speak.

‘I don’t know, but don’t worry,’ I tried to reassure her in my calm, adult voice. ‘Everything’s going to be okay, I promise.’

As we walked slowly down the cold stone stairs I saw four policemen staring at us all with pity and sadness in their eyes and two people in ordinary clothes. *What is happening? Why are they here and where is Mum and Dad?*

Suddenly, I noticed the red bloody handprints on the white-painted doorway and my heart began to race. Once at the bottom of the stairs, I went to walk through to the hall to get my school uniform but a police officer stood in my way.

Dave called out behind me: ‘Forget the clothes, we’ll come back for those.’

Now I saw more blood marks on the doorframe – they were everywhere. *What happened here? Where are Mum and Dad?* At that moment, everything felt so strange and wrong I couldn’t help myself. I burst into tears and ran out of the house.

Outside, the cool summer night enveloped me. Cold and damp with the heavy scent of darkness, it wrapped me up like a blanket and for a moment I stopped crying. I just stood there on the pavement, my chest heaving. Each sister ran up behind me then grabbed my hand again. I couldn’t let them see me like this – I couldn’t let them down; I knew Dave was depending on me to keep them calm. But as we crossed the road to Dave’s parents-in-law’s flat opposite our own flat, I could feel myself shaking inside.

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Dave and Suzie were our parents' good friends, and Suzie's parents, Maria and Alfonso, lived right across the road from us in a lovely flat. But I didn't see them – it was Suzie who met us at the front door and exchanged a quick, worried glance with Dave. They led us quietly up the stairs and into the spare room, showing us to the large double bed, where the others climbed in and immediately snuggled down under the large fluffy duvet.

'Don't worry,' she whispered to me as I looked at them questioningly. 'We'll take Celine back to ours tonight. Your parents are okay and you'll see them soon. We'll explain everything in the morning. Just try and get some sleep now.'

Then they crept out of the room and shut the door carefully behind them. Climbing into the big bed beside my sisters, I wrapped a protective arm around each one. I held them tightly, trying not to imagine the horrors that might have happened in my house and prayed my parents were indeed okay.

The room was light with the moon shining through the thin curtains. Maria had recently had it fitted with cream furniture and the place smelled like new wood. The walls were dotted with family pictures and religious paintings of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. I looked at the pictures and silently prayed to God, asking Him to make sure that my mum and dad were okay. I felt safe in this flat – Maria and Alfonso were kind, loving people who ran a fish-and-chip shop, where I often helped out at weekends. When we finished our late shift, I would often stay here overnight so as not to disturb my parents, so this place was familiar to me. Their flat, and especially this room, felt warm and comforting. But my mind was a whirl. For a long while, I

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just lay awake, staring at the pictures on the walls, listening to the sounds of my sisters' soft breathing beside me.

I must have fallen asleep eventually because I was woken by Suzie in the morning, with a gentle hand on my shoulder.

'Morning, Tina – are you okay?' she asked, smiling, her dark eyes crinkling in the corners, framed by her shoulder-length auburn hair. Suzie's family was Italian and she always looked very beautiful and exotic to me.

I nodded briefly – in a flash, the strange events from last night tumbled back into my mind, my limbs felt heavy and I was overcome by a horrible sense that things were definitely not okay.

'Would you like some breakfast?'

I followed Suzie through to the lounge, where I saw my sisters were already up and munching their way through large bowls of cornflakes. Just seeing them at the table like this, eating normally, immediately made me feel a little better but still there was a knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach. Suzie brought me a bowl of cornflakes and I sat with the others, eating slowly. I had no appetite.

Once the others had left the table and were seated round the TV watching Maria's favourite video, *Calamity Jane*, I beckoned Suzie over. She was wearing a smart, crisp white shirt tucked into blue jeans and her earrings jangled prettily when she moved.

'Can you tell me what happened, please?' I asked.

Suzie quickly put her head down: 'Dave will be back shortly and he will explain everything.'

Suddenly, the knot in my stomach clenched painfully. *Why*

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won't she talk to me about it? What's happened? I looked down at my half-finished bowl of cornflakes but I knew I couldn't eat another mouthful. Fear gripped me tightly and wouldn't let go. All I wanted was to go home and for everything to be back to normal. I wanted my mum and dad back again so that we could just carry on being a happy, loving family. I couldn't understand what might have happened – my mum and dad were madly in love and loved us, too. We thought they were the most beautiful, wonderful parents in the world. My dad was always happy, singing all the time, and my mum was an elegant, loving, adoring mother, whom we idolised. But where were they now?

An hour later, there was a knock at the front door and Suzie left to open it. From the living room, I heard a lot of hushed talk in the hallway, whispered urgent voices. Now I wanted to cry – I was desperate to know something, anything at all, but it was all being kept from us. Katie and Sophie clamoured for me to do their hair – all of us had long, white hair, which Mum normally plaited or braided into pigtails. But today there was no Mum and the realisation made me all the more miserable. Reluctantly, I brushed, pulled and weaved my sisters' hair into their requested styles but my stomach continued to churn with anxiety.

Eventually, I heard the front door close and Suzie returned to the living room. Quietly, I sidled up to her.

'How long will Dave be?' I asked. I was scared but I didn't want to let my sisters hear the fear in my voice. At thirteen, I was the eldest and I knew they were looking to me to show them there was nothing to be frightened of. They were my

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main concern now and I had to ensure they were safe and sound.

‘He won’t be long – he’s on his way,’ she replied quickly, then left the room again, saying she needed to go to the bathroom. Her voice sounded strange and I could tell she was reluctant to look me in the eye, which made me feel increasingly uneasy. Why would Suzie be so uncomfortable around me? I felt sick; I had never felt so scared before in all my life and not knowing what was going on was burning a hole in my tummy. I could feel the tears swell behind my eyes but I fought them back with all my might, taking in long, deep breaths. This was the worst feeling in the world.

At some point, Maria and Alfonso appeared and started bustling around, then Suzie brought our clothes over from across the street and we all changed into our jeans and T-shirts. At around midday, Dave arrived. He was wearing a red-checked shirt and his light blue eyes were clouded with worry. I waited patiently as he greeted the adults, watching him out of the corner of my eye while pretending to watch TV.

Eventually, he came over to me and quietly, so the others couldn’t hear, he said: ‘Tina, can I have a word with you next door?’

I followed him silently into the hallway and through to the room that Maria called her ‘antiques room’. She was a collector and the room was stuffed to the brim with the most wonderful old clocks, furniture, vases and chairs. It was an Aladdin’s cave, a treasure trove but, right now, I hardly took notice of the old wooden furniture around me and just plonked myself down on the cold cream-leather sofa.

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Dave came and sat down beside me.

‘Tina,’ he started slowly. ‘Last night, your mum hurt your dad . . .’

He didn’t get any further – the tears I’d been fighting back all morning suddenly welled up and spilled out of me in a giant sob. I crumpled up and buried my head in my hands. Dave put a comforting arm around me.

‘Shhhh now,’ he said softly. ‘Don’t worry. Everything is going to be okay. Just try to stay calm.’

But I knew at that moment nothing would ever be the same again. My head span, I felt sick and terrified at the same time. Our lives had changed and the happy family I had once known was now gone for ever. I sat like that for some time, weeping into my hands, until eventually, Dave said he had to get back to the others.

‘Just try and be strong,’ he said. ‘You’ll see your mum and dad again soon, I promise.’

And that was it: he left. I ran into the bathroom and locked the door. I had to pull myself together for the sake of my sisters. They couldn’t see me in this state or they would panic, too. So I ran the cold tap and dipped my hands in, splashing water over my face once, twice, three times, until the heat in my cheeks cleared a little and I started to calm down.

I looked up at the small mirror, into my puffy, bloodshot eyes and pink, tear-stained cheeks, and willed myself to calm down. It couldn’t have been more than ten minutes that I was in there, but it felt like for ever.

You can’t let them see you like this, I told myself sternly. Don’t let them know you are sad. Just be brave. Be brave!

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Even as I said those words to myself, I felt the tears bubbling up inside me again but I pushed them back and patted my wet face with the soft cream hand cloth.

I thought back to the day before. Everything had seemed so normal. I'd got in from school as usual and Mum was making tea in the kitchen while Dad was in the living room, listening to his Neil Diamond records. They had both been working hard recently – Mum with her beauty salon and Dad with his painting-and-decorating business. But it all seemed to be going so well. I couldn't understand how it had come to this. Mum looked like a model, with long, strawberry-blonde hair and an amazing figure, always immaculately groomed. Dad was very handsome and a real gentleman. My sisters and I were always together playing and loved being with each other. Now, our lives were in tatters.

I gave a little involuntary shudder then I unlocked the door and went through to the living room, wearing a great big fake smile.