

One day changes Jody's life forever.

She has shut herself down, haunted by her memories and unable to trust anyone. And then she meets Abe, the perfect stranger next door and suddenly life seems full of possibility and hope.

One day changes Mags's life forever.

After years of estrangement from her family, Mags receives a shocking phone call. Her brother Abe is in hospital and no-one knows what happened to him. She meets his fiancé Jody, and gradually pieces together the ruins of the life she left behind.

But the pieces don't quite seem to fit

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Sarah J Naughton grew up in Dorset, on a diet of tales of imperiled heroines and wolves in disguise. As an adult her reading matter changed but those dark fairytales had deep roots. Her debut children's thriller, *THE HANGED MAN RISES*, featured a fiend from beyond the grave menacing the streets of Victorian London, and was shortlisted for the 2013 Costa award.

TATTLETALE is her first adult novel, and has a monster of a different kind. Sarah lives in Central London with her husband and two sons.

Follow her on Twitter @sarahjnaughton

TATTLETALE

Sarah J. Naughton

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You know that place between sleep and awake, that place
where you still remember dreaming?
That's where I'll always love you.

J.M. Barrie

BEFORE

On a clear morning the sun shines so strongly through the stained glass it looks as if the concrete floor is awash with blood.

But it's past eight in the evening now and the only light comes from the wall lamps on each floor. Their dim illumination reveals a slowly spreading pool of pitch or tar.

Blood doesn't look like blood in the dark.

Now the adrenaline that powered her scramble down the stairs has drained away she feels as if her all her bones have been pulled out. She can barely stand, has to grasp the metal newel post for support as she stares and stares.

The fourth-floor landing light goes out.

It takes a long time for the brain to process a sudden accident – the nought-to-sixty acceleration from normality to calamity – to ratchet itself up to an appropriate response. She can feel it slowly building in her belly as she takes in the black spatters on the doors and walls of the ground-floor flats, the widening creep of the black pool.

At first she thought he would be OK. A few bruises. A bumped head. There is too much blood for that.

The third-floor landing light goes out.

In the few frozen moments after it happened she was dimly aware of a latch snicking shut, heavy footsteps rattling down the stairs, the creak and slam of the front door, but now everything is silent. The church is holding its breath, waiting to see what she will do.

She takes a wobbling step towards him.

There's a smell, like her purse when it's full of coppers.

He looks so uncomfortable. Why doesn't he move his leg so that his hips aren't so twisted? Why doesn't he turn his head as her shadow falls across him? Why doesn't he call out to her?

She kneels beside him and takes his hand. It's pure white against the blackness that is slowly seeping into his hair and clothes. She tries to say his name but there's a fist around her throat. Her thoughts sputter. There's something she should do. Yes. She should call 999.

The second-floor landing light goes out.

His lips are moving and his eyes are open. As she leans close to him to try and make out what he is saying her hair falls into the pool. Jerking back, the tips of her hair flick against her wrist, drawing scarlet lines on her white skin. Now she can see where the blood is coming from. A small noise escapes her lips. Horror and shock are hurtling towards her like an articulated lorry.

The first-floor landing light goes out.

She must do something for him. Now, here, in this moment, she is all he has. She must take her phone from her pocket, unlock it, and tap in the numbers. But she cannot let go of his hand; she cannot leave him adrift in all this darkness.

Her heart is racing, like the wheeling legs of a cartoon character just before it realises it's run off the cliff edge. Before it falls.

The ground-floor light goes out.

It is the sudden darkness, as much as anything else, that makes her scream. And once she's started she cannot stop.

AFTER

Chapter 1

Jody

Tuesday 8 November

Do you remember the first night we slept together? No, not that bit. That's easy. The part afterwards, when the sky had darkened to that greyish orange which is as dark as it ever gets in the city, and we'd gone inside, into the warmth of your flat. Everything was quiet except for the odd distant siren, hurried footsteps down Gordon Terrace as people tried to get home without being mugged, the wind rustling the rubbish blowing around the playground.

I didn't sleep much. How could I? I watched you sleep, watched your eyes moving beneath the lids. Were you dreaming about me? I never asked. Didn't want to seem too keen.

I watched your nostrils flare gently on every inward breath, your chest rise and fall, disturbing the hair that ran in a fine line to your belly button.

Your body was so boyish, the muscles as soft as mine. I liked the way our bodies mirrored each other. You dark and slim, with wide brown eyes and long, black lashes, me fair and skinny, with the lightest of eyes and lashes that are almost invisible. You were a masculine me, and I was a feminine you. Sometimes we would press our palms together and marvel at how similar they were in size and shape.

At least your hands are still the same, resting on the starched white sheet.

You're not in pain. The doctors promised me. In an induced coma you don't even dream. Beneath the lids your eyes are perfectly still. Your lashes rest on your cheek, almost the same colour as the dark flesh. They said the bruises would fade, that the swelling would go down, that your face would become yours again. I can't help thinking (hoping): what if it isn't really you under there? That they made a mistake; that you're sleeping peacefully in another ward somewhere, wondering why I'm not there.

No. It is you. I saw you fall.

I twist your ring about my own finger. Press my fingertip onto the engraving so that its mirror image is etched into my flesh.

True love.

I know that they're just clichéd words, like the hokey stuff they write in greetings cards, but whoever thought of them could never have known how right they were.

There has never been a truer love. And whatever happens, Abe, whatever you're like when you wake up, my love for you will stay true forever.

I take your hand and whisper the promise into your fingertips.

Chapter 2

Mags

Everyone else is asleep. Wound in their white sheets like mummies, wedged into the tiny open caskets advertised as

fully flat beds.

God knows what time it is.

I should have changed my watch before the first glass of champagne. It was personally selected by some wine guru who's presumably famous in Britain. They handed it to me when I boarded, presumably by way of apology for the ten hours of cramped, muzzy-headed tedium I was about to endure.

My phone will tell me when we arrive; until then I'm in a timeless limbo.

The remains of the Cromer crab cake and lime foam sit, dissected but untouched, on the pull-out table in front of me. Considering how many hosties per pampered fat cat there are in first class, you'd think they'd have figured out that I'm not going to eat it. Even the wine tastes shit, coating my tongue with sourness. I can feel my breath going bad, and though I showered in the club lounge I feel sticky and smelly.

I tip the vanity bag onto the table, looking for breath freshener. Toothpaste, toothbrush, moisturiser, eye mask, something called 'soothing pillow mist', earplugs, and a crappy pair of velour slippers. No breath spray.

I think about putting the eye mask on and misting the pillow, but I'm not sure there's any point. My brain is far too wired to sleep and every time I close my eyes the same film runs through my head. I'm falling through darkness, the wind blowing my hair, the circle of light above me getting smaller by the moment.

May as well keep drinking.

The next time a hostie comes past I ask her for a large whisky.

I make another attempt to get into the novel I bought at

the airport, a pulp thriller about some woman who thinks her husband has killed their son, but it turns out it was her and she's just forgotten all about it, because he's been spiking her food to protect her. I'm three quarters of the way through and I still don't give a toss about any of them. But it's probably just my state of mind.

The hostie returns and puts the drink down on a little doily.

'This is wine,' I say.

She smiles so hard the foundation at the corners of her mouth crackles. 'Yes, ma'am.'

'I asked for whisky.'

'Whisky?'

'Same first letter, but a sneaky extra syllable.'

Her eyelashes tremble, unsure whether I'm joking. I smile so she knows I'm not. Her gaze becomes glassy. Another bitch.

'I'll get your whisky right away.'

'You know what?' I hate it but still can't stop that American uplift at the end of my sentences. 'I'll just go to the bar.'

'As you wish.'

She stands back to let me struggle out of my seat-bed and the smell of perfume is overpowering. Beneath it is something medicinal. Hand soap, perhaps, or those lemon wipes in the Economy cutlery pack. It makes her seem entirely synthetic – but what do I expect on a Vegas flight?

I can feel her eyes on my back as I make my way up the aisle to the bar. Stepping through first class into business the plane gives a little hiccup and I stumble, turning my ankle.

'Careful, now,' she calls after me, and I resist the urge to

give her the finger. They can divert a plane these days for that sort of thing.

Jackson paid for the ticket. I said it was kind of him. He said No such thing, just another bribe to keep you at the firm. I resisted the urge to reassure him that I wasn't going anywhere. If you don't keep your boss on his toes you don't get first-class flights and six-figure bonuses. Not that they do me much good. Now that the apartment's paid for I find myself throwing money away on expensive crap like the Louboutins I now slip off to massage my ankle.

There's only one other drinker at the self-service bar, a man around my age, whose face has that flaky redness that always gets you on long haul if you don't keep hydrated. Normally I'd have been downing Evian since the wheels left the tarmac, but tonight I don't give a shit. It's not as if Abe's going to notice. I pour myself a large whisky and toss in some ice from the bucket. I think about taking it back to my seat – if I stay there's a definite risk the guy will try to talk to me – but it feels good to stretch my legs so I lean on the bar stool and flick through the in-flight magazine. There's an article about an actress, the retouched pictures make her appear two dimensional, and her upper lip is so stretched by collagen it looks simian.

'Going home?'

I sigh inwardly.

'Actually, I live in Vegas. Just going back to . . . see my brother.' I kick myself at the hesitation. It wouldn't have happened in court. I need to get myself together, work out the smooth lie that will stop people trying to talk to me or, worse, sympathise. There hasn't been time yet. I only heard this morning. It's taken me all day to sort out the flights and hotels and hand my cases over to Jackson. Though I've

spoken to them all in person and promised I'll be back within a fortnight, my clients aren't happy. No one else in the firm has my track record for helping guilty people get away with it. Jackson is taking over IRS vs Graziano. If the case goes badly Antonio will spend the rest of his days in a Federal Correctional Institution, trading his ass for cigarettes. Ass. I sound like a true yank. British people say arse. Nice arse. It sounds oddly polite with an English accent.

'London?' the man across the bar says.

Beneath the ravages of the flight he's good-looking. Square jaw, broad shoulders, blond hair cropped tight to minimise a receding hairline. A man's man. Banker, I think. Or another lawyer. Probably the former if he's travelling in first.

'Yes.'

'Me too. Looking forward to seeing him?'

That hesitation again. The whisky is fugging my reactions. I nod, then spin on the stool until I'm at a forty-five degree angle from him.

'That's not an English accent, is it?'

I spin back, with a polite smile that, if he's smart enough, he'll translate as get lost.

'Scottish.'

He isn't smart enough. 'Not strong, though, so I'm guessing you were gone by ... hm ... eighteen?'

I raise an eyebrow and despite myself say, 'Not bad. Sixteen.'

'Straight to Vegas from Bonnie Scotland? That takes balls.'

'They took a while to drop. I went to London first.'

'College?'

'Yes.'

'You know, you should carry one of those twenty questions gadgets around with you. It could do the talking. Save you the hassle.'

'Yes,' I say. Then a moment later, 'So, what am I?'

I kick myself again. I've let myself be drawn in. I must be drunk.

'Hmm . . .' He pretends to think. 'Are you . . . a hedgehog?'

I laugh loudly enough to draw a disapproving grunt from the fat guy wedged into the casket nearest the bar. 'Yeah. Spiky. Flea infested.'

'Not a hedgehog. You're travelling in first. Are you an oligarch's wife?'

He waits for me to bite. I shake my head calmly. 'That's nine questions. Twelve left.'

'Jesus, you're counting?'

'Don't take the Lord's name in vain.' I drain my glass and pour myself another.

It takes him a while but eventually he gets there.

'So, how do you get to be a first-class-travelling American lawyer when you left home at sixteen?'

'A levels at night school. Law degree at King's, my Juris Doctor at Columbia, then straight to Nevada because it looked like fun. Cheers.'

He clinks my glass and we drink. 'You make it sound so easy.'

It wasn't. One term I had five different jobs.

'So, what kind of law?'

'Corporate.'

'Seriously? I had you down for something more exciting.' He gives me an appreciative up and down look, but I don't think he means to be sleazy. I think he's just drunk. Actually,

I'm beginning to like him. Maybe I won't rush off just yet.

'I work for gangsters.'

'Defence or prosecution?'

'Defence. I would have got Al Capone off.'

He has a nice smile. My drowsiness is wearing off. I add a Coke to my whisky. A bit of flirtation will be a good distraction from the horror film in my head.

We talk some more. The Coke kicks in and I revive. He asks me how I would have got Capone off and I tell him some of the tricks of the trade: undermining the accused, exploiting technical loopholes, coaching your witnesses. The film is still playing but I'm not watching. Until he says, 'So, tell me about your family.'

I almost close up on the spot, but perhaps the topic can be deflected.

'What do you want to know?'

'The truth, I guess.'

'I'm a lawyer. I don't do truth.'

'Well, I'm a banker so I should know there's no such thing as truth. Only what you can make people believe. If I can make you believe shares in that whisky are about to go up 500 per cent, you go and buy them – and the shares go up. Belief becomes truth.' He waggles his eyebrows devilishly. 'OK, I'll start. My kids live in Islington.'

'You don't have to tell me.'

'I want to. I want you to know. They live there, I live in Vegas'

'So, you're a bad father. I don't give a shit.'

'Ah, but you should if we're going to date.' He sips his drink, peering over the glass at me archly.

I laugh again. 'I don't date guys with kids.'

'Why not?'

'Too complicated.'

He drinks before he answers, and when he puts his glass down the flippancy has gone. 'Life's complicated. If you think it's simple, you're not really living.'

'Goodnight.' I get up.

'Wait.' He puts his hand on my arm as I pass him. 'I'm sorry. My head always goes when I'm about to see them. I just keep thinking about how bad it'll be when I have to say goodbye.'

I sit down on the stool next to him. He's put on weight since he bought that shirt. It strains across his stomach. I imagine what his skin would feel like beneath the cotton. Warm and slightly tacky, downy blond hair running from his navel to his groin. 'What are their names?'

'Josh and Alfie. And I'm Daniel.'

'I'm Mags.' I shake his hand. 'And my brother's in a coma.'

Chapter 3

Jody

They've contacted your next of kin. Your sister, Mary. I wonder why it's not your parents. We never spoke about them. We never spoke about mine either. Didn't want anything to cast a shadow over our happiness. I try to imagine what she will look like. Dark, like you. Slim. Black eyelashes even longer than yours. She'll speak softly like you do. She'll hold my hand and look into my eyes and she'll just know. That I'm The One for you, that you're The One for me. That whatever happens I'll stay by your side. I'll be with you while you learn to walk and talk again. Through the tears and the despair, and then the first stirrings of hope. I don't care if you're very changed, or even if you've forgotten me. I'll learn to love the you you become.

My heart clenches when you make a little gurgling noise. As if you've read my mind.

I lean in to kiss your earlobe and my tears fall into the clump of hair they didn't shave off for the operation. They

nestle there, like the pearls on the dress I was wearing the day we first met. Do you remember? Is that part of your mind still whole? Maybe you've forgotten. We can remember it together.

I moved in at the end of the summer. The café job they lined up for me had gone badly. The manager was a bully. I used to spend my lunchtimes crying in the toilet, and then I just stopped going in. I lay in the bedsit for hours, unable to eat or sleep.

Then Tabby told me about St Jerome's. She sorted it all out for me, came and picked me up on a Sunday afternoon.

She wouldn't tell me much, just that the place was a deconsecrated church, owned by a Christian charity that let out the flats at piecemeal rent to vulnerable people – asylum seekers, people with mental health issues or family problems, former care home kids like me.

As the car pulled up in the little patch of tarmac by the grass I saw you. You must have been on your way out to the high road. You'd paused to watch the kids playing in the playground. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was close.

We were on the same floor. At the time it seemed like a happy coincidence; now I know it was fate. You smiled when we passed on the stairwell.

When you go into a church you don't realise how high it is. All that dusty air, just drifting in the huge empty space above the pews. They fitted four floors in there: we were at the top, looking out across the shops and takeaways to the green parks beyond. Each flat was unique: a mishmash of funny angles and sloping roofs, a gargoyle on the balcony, a column rising through the living room like a huge tree trunk. Some floors cut a stained-glass window in half, so

you might have the angel Gabriel's face and the flat downstairs would have his open hands.

I've always had an imagination, and a night in a deconsecrated church should have left me paralysed with terror, especially as it was so quiet compared with the bedsit, where there was always shouting or doors banging. But as midnight came around I could hear music. A smooth woman's voice singing the blues. It was coming from your flat. It lulled me to sleep.

Tabby was good, coming in every day to make sure I was settling in, that my prescriptions were all up to date, that I'd filled in all the benefits forms, that I had enough food.

In the day I potted around the flat, laying out all my special things, drawing, occasionally popping out to the high road where there were three charity shops, one with just books. I bought a whole set of romance novels and read one every evening. Your music was my lullaby at night.

Then one day you spoke to me.

It was a Monday afternoon. It had been raining heavily and my new book (*The Firefighter's Secret Heartbreak*) had turned pulpy in the carrier bag on the way home. I was wearing a dress from the charity shop, grey silk with little pearl beads around the neckline, and the hem was sopping wet where it hung down below my raincoat. It slapped against my legs as I ran towards St Jerome's. You were going in ahead of me and you stopped and held the security door.

'So much for our Indian Summer,' you said, with a smile that made one of your cheeks dimple.

I told you that my book had been ruined and you showed me how the blue dye of the carrier bag had stained your loaf of bread. You told me your name and I told you mine. Abe and Jody. Jody and Abe.

As we walked up the stairs together I said that I had just moved into Flat Twelve and you said it was nice to have a new neighbour, as the flat had been empty since the last occupant died. That frightened me, and you must have noticed because you laughed and said, 'Oh don't worry, he didn't die in the flat! He was staggering around in the road, drunk, and got hit by a car.'

'Poor man.'

'He was seventy-eight. Not a bad run for a raging alcoholic. Hope I make it that far.'

'You will,' I said, then blushed furiously, because I meant that you looked so young and fit and full of life, with your bright brown eyes and quick smile.

'Lovely dress,' you said as I unbuttoned my coat. 'It looks like the rain.'

And then you said goodbye and went into your flat. I stood outside mine for ages afterwards, thinking what a beautiful thing to say.

Chapter 4

Mags

Wednesday 9 November

I wake at four and can't get back to sleep so I get up and turn on my laptop, sitting in the faux leather club chair by the window that looks out over Hyde Park. Even at this time the traffic on Park Lane is nose to tail, though the double-glazing ensures the room is blanketed in an unnatural hush. The night sky reflects the glow of the city's lights, making it seem neither night nor day.

In Vegas the sun will have gone down over the desert. All the heat and dust will be vanishing straight up into the clear night sky. I'll be opening my first bottle of beer, licking the dribbles of icy perspiration off my fingers.

There are a couple of emails from angry clients. I knock off the usual pat reassurances, ending with a line about my brother to make them feel guilty. As if they're capable of an emotion other than greed.

Then I login to my social media: an invitation to a gallery opening, angry posts about the latest gun rampage, my timeline clogged with endless Happy Birthday Stu!s for an ex-boyfriend's thirtieth. I don't know why we're still 'friends': we slept with each other for three months max, and then I finished it. He cried.

I sigh and switch off.

The police are coming here at ten. Six hours to kill. I can't even turn on the news in case it wakes Daniel who, like me, didn't sleep a wink for the whole ten-hour flight. As I sit,

staring down at the brake lights of the cars, I begin to feel irrationally annoyed that he is still here, spreadeagled on my bed, my sheets in a tight twist beneath him.

In the end I run myself a bath.

Catching sight of myself in the steamed mirror I wonder why he was even interested. My hair's lank and dull, my lips are pinched, my tanned skin has become sallow. The loss of appetite has sucked the flesh from my stomach and my hipbones protrude, making me look rickety and frail, ninety instead of thirty.

The noise of the gushing water must have woken him because a moment after I get in he enters without knocking. 'Hey. How's your head?'

'Do you mind?' I say.

He blinks at me. 'I've, er, seen it all before. Last night. If you remember.'

'I'm washing,' I say coldly.

'Sorry.' He backs out of the door and closes it softly.

When I come out he is dressed. We gather our things in silence.

'Why are you being like this?' he says finally.

'Like what?'

'I thought we had a good time last night.'

'We did. And now it's not last night any more and I've got to speak to the police about my dying brother.'

'Of course, I'm sorry.'

I stand stiffly as he tries to embrace me.

'This is a bad time for you,' he says, stepping away. 'We probably shouldn't have – but I'm still glad we did.'

'Me too,' I say, more gently. I've been a bitch. Mostly down to dread of what I'm going to have to face today, and the start of a raging hangover.

'Take my number and let me know how it goes with Abe.'

'Sure.' I pocket the scrap of cardboard he gives me. It's the corner of a condom packet he ordered from reception along with the bottle of Jack Daniels. 'Good luck with Jake and ...'

'Josh and Alfie.'

'Yeah. Hope your wife's not too much of a cow.'

He looks at me and raises his eyebrows and I laugh despite myself. 'Yeah, well I've got a good reason to be.'

He comes over and kisses me. 'You were lovely. It was lovely. I'd like to do it again sometime.'

His breath is sour with booze and his skin still looks patchy from the flight.

'When your brother's back on his feet.'

'He won't be.'

He has the balls not to look away. Raising his hand to my face he passes his thumb across my cheek as if to brush away a tear that isn't there.

He seems like a decent enough person, for a banker. Although that isn't hard. For a corporate lawyer I'm an angel. Then he slings his jacket over his shoulder and picks up his case.

'Goodbye, Mags.' He turns at the door. 'Is it short for Margaret?'

I shake my head, hesitate, then say, 'Mary Magdalene.'

He looks at me quizzically, waiting for me to explain. When I don't he opens the door.

'What did your wife leave you for?' I say suddenly.

He turns and smiles. 'Alfie's fencing coach.'

We sit in the breakfast room of the hotel, looking out over a rubbish-strewn side street. The squad car is tucked

discreetly behind a four-by-four, presumably so as not to upset the guests. There are two of them, a solidly built middle-aged blonde woman, and a thin, lantern-jawed youth, young enough to be her son. Apparently it was her who called me to tell me what had happened. I was at home catching up with work emails before I headed to the office. It felt strange, sitting on my sun-drenched balcony in a playsuit and shades, with a mouth full of blueberry pancake, listening to her talk about induced comas and cranial haemorrhages.

Now she tells me more, speaking in a soft London accent as the boy takes notes. At first she gives me the logistics, timings, the distance fallen, the hours on the operating table, then slowly spirals back to the night itself, as if it's the only way I will be able to bear it.

'Your brother's fiancée, Jody Currie, was the only witness to the accident.'

'So, you're sure it was an accident?'

At what I considered to be a throwaway comment I'm surprised to see the boy raise his head and fix his gaze on his boss.

She pauses before answering. 'We've got no reason to suspect otherwise.'

I wait.

She sips her coffee. It's a standoff.

'But?' I say finally.

'There's no evidence to suspect foul play: no CCTV footage and no other witnesses.'

'So, why the question mark?'

I wait for her to fob me off – What question mark? – but to her credit she doesn't. 'Relationships are private things. Jody and your brother had both lost contact with their

parents and were living quite isolated existences. We have to believe her that the relationship was a happy one.'

'As opposed to a murderous, push-you-down-a-stairwell, sort of one?'

She shrugs. Whatever.

'So, you won't be investigating further?'

'Like I said, there's no evidence of foul play, so there's no reason not to take her word for what happened.'

'Which was?'

'On the night in question Miss Currie had booked a meal out. She felt that your brother seemed down and wanted to cheer him up.'

'That must be on CCTV, right?'

'It's not police policy to waste resources going through general CCTV footage when we don't think a crime has been committed. Can I go on?'

I give a curt nod.

'They returned to St Jerome's, the church where both of them live, at about 8.00 p.m.'

'Isn't that a bit early?'

'Miss Currie thought your brother was tired as he had been quiet all evening and had suggested they leave early. Both her and your brother's flats are on the fourth floor and she told us that they had almost reached this floor when your brother stated that he wanted to go down to check the door was securely closed. There's criminal gang activity in the area and he was concerned that if it wasn't closed properly someone might get in. Miss Currie went into your brother's flat and, after hearing a noise, came out to find him lying at the bottom of the stairwell. It's her belief that he jumped, due to depression brought about by work pressures.'

She folds her hands in her lap, her face tactfully averted as she waits for me to process the images that have been flowing through my mind.

'Her belief? So there was no note?'

'No.'

'Couldn't these criminal gangs you mentioned have got in and attacked him?'

'If that was the case then either Miss Currie or their neighbours on the top floor would have heard something, and, aside from the injuries sustained in the fall, there were no other wounds. Also, he had no valuables on his person as Miss Currie had taken his jacket inside.'

'Why?' I said.

'Why what?'

'Why did she take his jacket?'

The policewoman smiles. 'You're a lawyer, right?'

'Yes.'

'I can see you must be good at your job. Since they were coming into a warm environment from a cold one he might have taken it off and handed it to her for convenience as he went down to check the door.'

'But he wasn't going to check the door, was he? He was going to jump. So why bother taking off the jacket in the first place?'

'In a police investigation,' she says after a pause, 'there are some questions that are vital to help us judge whether or not a crime has been committed, and some that aren't. I suggest you speak to Miss Currie yourself so that she can give you a clearer picture of what happened that night.'

They get up, leaving two unfinished cups of bland hotel coffee on the glass table.

'If you have any concerns please do get in touch.' As she

hands me her card my fingertips brush hers. They feel unpleasantly soft: the nails are bitten halfway down to the cuticle and flesh bulges over the top of the remaining sliver of nail. I glance at the card. Her name is Amanda Derbyshire. A PC. Lowest of the low.

'Thanks,' I say coldly, shaking her hand and the clammy paw of her underling.

'I know you deal with criminals a lot yourself, Miss Mackenzie,' she says, turning to leave, 'but not every tragedy is a crime. Will you be seeing your brother today?'

'Yes. I'm going straightaway.'

'I hope the doctors can give you some good news.'

I give her a dry smile – we both know these are empty words – and she turns away.

Sitting by the window sipping my coffee, I watch them get back into their squad car. They are too stupid to realise that the twists and turns of the hotel lobby have led them out directly beside the window they were, until a moment ago, looking straight out of.

The woman says something and the boy gives an open mouthed guffaw, displaying rows of silver fillings. In his hand he has one of the Danish pastries from the buffet bar and as he climbs in, eating it, I hear her warn him not to get crumbs in her car.

To clear my head I'd swum for an hour in the hotel pool before our meeting and, thanks to that and my burgeoning hangover, I am finally hungry. I'm glad, as I load up my plate with hash browns, that the policewoman isn't here to see this inappropriate show of gluttony. I should be too grief-stricken to eat, but instead I pour ketchup over my breakfast, head for a table near a TV and scroll through the channels for CNN.

I haven't been in a British hospital for twenty-two years. In Vegas someone would be escorting me through the labyrinth of corridors to the ICU, telling me about my brother's condition as we go, preparing me for what to expect, but here I must find my own way and will have to wait until the doctor does his rounds to hear my brother's prognosis.

He fell twelve metres. It can't be good.

I try to imagine what he must have looked like before the accident. He was always slight. Slim-boned, with narrow shoulders. A child's body even after puberty. I wonder what he does for a living. Did. I wonder how he found me. The picture on the company website would be utterly unrecognisable to anyone who knew me as a child.

I was shocked to get the Christmas card. Sent to the office, to Mary, so it took ages to arrive at my desk. From Abe, and an address in London. I sent one back – embarrassingly late. From Mags. A line of communication, as fine and tight as a wire. I don't know if I thought we would become closer as we got older, that we would forgive one another for the things they made us do. I suppose I did. But now it's too late. There's nothing to miss.

The hospital walls are crowded with bad art. Tasteless collages and insipid watercolours, metal twisted into the shapes of fish and birds. I pass a door marked Room for Reflection and through the half-open blinds make out empty plastic chairs facing a table with a wooden cross.

A bed clatters by. On it an old lady is curled like a chrysalis. Beneath her translucent paper skin dark veins pulse, as if there's something beautiful and new ready to squirm out. She is yellow with liver failure. Perhaps our

mother looks like this now. Perhaps she is already dead.

I pass through the door marked ICU. It opens on a small reception area where a nurse frowns at a computer screen. Behind her is a set of double doors, presumably leading to the beds. A wave of guilt washes through me. I could easily have afforded to put Abe on my medical insurance policy. Then he would have had his own room.

'I'm Mary Mackenzie. My brother Abraham is here.'

The fat nurse doesn't reply, just holds up her hand: wait.

Bristling, I step away from the desk and stare blindly at the huge painting of a peony on the wall. Surely all those blood reds and flesh pinks are inappropriate here. The whole place stinks of piss and disinfectant, that British-hospital smell that screams of underpaid cleaners, harassed nurses, and patients left to stew in their own filth. And then, abruptly, absurdly, tears spring to my eyes. The peony blurs, becoming an open wound.

As unobtrusively as possible I blink them away and breathe deeply. I'm not crying for Abe. I'm crying for myself. Stuck here in this shitty hospital, in this shitty country, away from my friends, my job, the warmth of a Vegas autumn. I will have to wait for him to die. Damn it, I almost feel like ringing Daniel, but a good lay doesn't buy you the right to snivel on someone's shoulder.

'Miss Mackenzie?'

I blink to clear my eyes and turn.

'Your brother's fiancée is with him at the moment. I can ask her to give you some time alone with him?'

For some reason I don't want this nurse knowing that we are such a dysfunctional family I've never even met my brother's fiancée. 'It's OK,' I say. 'Just take me to him, please.'

Despite the beeps and wheezes of the machinery, the sensation I feel when the doors swing shut behind me is of a heavy, suffocating hush. For a moment I can't take a step. Every nerve in my body is tensed, to stop me bolting and I stand rigid as the nurse waddles up the room to disappear behind a blue curtain on the left.

There are six beds in all, each separated by a curtain, though most of them are open. The occupants lie on their backs, motionless, pale as wax, everything that makes them human concealed or distorted by pipes and masks and coloured stickers. Most of them are old; sparse white hair slicked across crêpe paper foreheads, gnarled fingers resting on the sheets like the shed husks of spiders.

A wave of nausea reminds me how much I drank last night. I can't be sick here: it would be the ultimate insult.

There are low voices, and a moment later the nurse emerges, gives me a tight smile, and passes back out through the doors.

The fiancée is waiting for me.

My heels click across the lino and the plastic rings clatter loudly when I pull back the curtain.

The girl – and she is just a girl – sits on a plastic chair pulled very close to the bed. She raises her head and attempts a smile. Older than I first thought, in her late twenties perhaps, but her manner is that of a child: shrunken shoulders, nervous eyes that cannot hold my gaze. In appearance she is like my brother in negative: the same birdlike build, an elfin face with a high forehead, large eyes, a small rosebud mouth. But where Abe is dark she is shockingly fair, almost albino, with eyes the colour of dishwater.

For a moment I'm disappointed. I suppose I had hoped

for someone like me. Someone I could talk to. I can tell immediately that all conversation with this girl will be punctuated by weeping. I will have to reassure her endlessly that it wasn't her fault, and ply her with cups of tea and tissues.

She gets to her feet unsteadily.

'I'm Jody,' she says, then adds, 'I'm so sorry,' and her face crumples.

Swallowing a sigh I wait patiently while she composes herself, then extend my hand. 'Mags.' Her handshake is predictably limp and she inhales when I squeeze her knuckles.

Finally I look down at my brother.

At least I assume the swollen, blackened lump of flesh and bone on the pillow is my brother.

The top of his head is swathed in bandages that various lines pass into. Another bandage covers his nose and cheeks and a neck brace compresses the lower part of his face. Only his eyes and mouth are visible, the lips purple with swelling. He is naked to the waist and his body bristles with tubes and lines leading to bags and bottles of clear liquid.

I breathe slowly and steadily, feeling Jody's eyes on me.

Finally I'm ready to speak. 'So, can you tell me what happened?'

But before she can answer a nurse comes over and begins checking the monitors. I take Jody gently but firmly by the elbow. 'Let's talk about it over a cup of tea.'

I buy us drinks from the vending machine and lead her out into a small garden that looks out over the main road. A brass plaque on the wall of the empty fountain announces that this is the Queen Mother Memorial Garden.

Jody takes the lid off her tea and the steam curls up into

the damp air. The garden is slightly below ground level and the air is leaden with cold. The sun is too weak to melt the night frost and the blades of grass are stiff and white as icicles. I sip the scalding black water that advertised itself as Americano. It is so far from American I want to weep.

As she stares at the dead fountain I wonder how far her thought process has progressed. Has she yet faced up to the prospect that Abe will die? If not immediately, then at some point in the future when the time comes to turn him off. No one gets up from a fall like that.

'It's my fault,' she says.

I wait for her to continue. Her irises are so pale that, seen from profile, they are no more than water surrounding the pupil, large in the gloom of the garden.

'I should have seen the signs. He was working too hard. Sometimes he wouldn't get in until nine or ten. And it's such a stressful job, being a carer.'

I try not to look disappointed at the revelation that my brother cleared up piss and shit for a living; microwaved ready meals, changed incontinence pants, baby-talked sponge-brained geriatrics. I don't know what I was expecting – Advertising? Graphic design? – something like me I suppose. God, what a narcissist.

'There was never enough time to get anything done, to do a good enough job, and you know how much of a perfectionist Abe is.'

I nod, knowing.

'And how kind he is. He couldn't bear leaving people when he knew he was the only company they would have for days. He would stay and make sure they were all right, which would make him late for the next appointment: sometimes he had to miss one entirely. They wouldn't pay

him for travelling time, and we were hoping to get married next year, so of course money worries just added to the pressure. It was really getting to him. I could see it. We barely saw each other.' She twists the ring on her engagement finger.

'That must have been difficult.'

'I understood, of course I did. But I hated to see him so stressed.'

'Tell me what happened the night he fell,' I say as gently as possible, laying my hand on hers in a gesture I hope will be reassuring and encouraging. Her skin is rough, chapped from the cold, the nails bitten ragged. I hold it there as long as I can bear, then release it into her lap.

'I wanted to try and cheer him up,' she says, looking away, across the garden to the city beyond. 'One of his patients had been taken into a nursing home, and she was very upset about it. So I booked a table in Cosmo's – that's our favourite restaurant. He was quiet during the meal, but I thought he was just tired, so I suggested skipping dessert and having an early night. I should have known. I should have guessed there was something wrong.'

'It's not your fault.'

'We should never have had that second glass of wine. He always gets sad when he's had a drink or two. On the way home he didn't say a word, just held my hand really tightly. We came in and started going up to his flat.'

'You don't live together, then?'

'We've asked the housing association for a bigger place, but we thought we'd keep both flats on in the meantime. When we got to the third floor Abe said he couldn't remember if he had closed the security door properly. Sometimes it sticks and there have been break-ins. He told

me to go ahead so I did. I wanted to get the heating on and light a few candles to try and help him relax.'

The ghost-grey irises swim with tears.

'If I had know how bad he was . . . I'm s-sorry.' Her voice rises tremulously. If she starts to sob I'll never get any more out of her.

'Then what happened,' I say, firmly, as if facing an overwrought witness.

'I opened the door of the flat and went into the hall and then I heard this . . .'

This time I can't bring myself to make her go on.

'It was such a horrible noise.' Her voice goes up again, on the way to a wail. 'It was so loud. Like there wasn't anything soft about him. Like he was a piece of wood or something.'

I close my eyes.

'I ran out of the flat and . . .'

A lorry trundles by, its tarpaulin sucking and billowing in the wind. She waits for the roar of its engine to subside and in those few moments all the life seems to have been sucked out of her.

'I'm so sorry,' she says as the normal traffic noise resumes.

'It wasn't your fault,' I say.

Eventually the doctor graces us with his presence. It's twenty past five and I'm so on edge that every thick, shuddering breath Jody takes is making me want to grab her by the hair and smash her head into the wall. At least the weeping wives who show up in court to plead ignorance of their husband's misdemeanours are faking it. Beneath the act they're hard-nosed businesswomen, doing their utmost to prevent the IRS discovering the little offshore hoards in

their names. Jody is something else. She holds my brother's hand the entire time, gazing into his pulped face, occasionally brushing the tube that protrudes from his mouth with her lips. The sight, along with the alcohol tang of disinfection, intensifies my nausea.

I pace to the window and back, trying not to look at the other cadavers, wondering what on earth the point is of spending all this money and effort to keep them in this parody of life. Presumably my brother, if he wakes at all, will be a drooling, infantilised wreck. Jody will lovingly feed him with purees and porridge, wiping the gloop from his slimy chin. At least Alzheimer's or dementia patients have the decency to be old. Abe could go on like that for decades.

Dr Bonville is very young, shorter than me, with the floppy-haired arrogance born out of the British public school system. He takes us to a shabby little room with a blue sofa so small that Jody and I must sit hip to hip.

'Well,' he says, and gives that pressed-lipped smile people use to express empathy. 'The swelling has gone down.' Jody turns to me and I can almost feel her itching to squeeze my hand. I keep looking at the doctor. I know what's coming.

'So we've been able to assess the damage to Abe's brain.'

He pauses then, rustling the papers on his lap. He doesn't sit behind the table but pulls out the chair to sit opposite us, a more informal, human position that can only mean the worst.

'Abe's cerebral cortex has suffered major trauma. The cortex is responsible for thinking and action. For this reason, when we take him out of the coma, I'm afraid Abe will be in a vegetative state.'

As he waits to let the news sink in I can hear ambulances

pulling in and out, their sirens gradually diminishing to be absorbed in the traffic.

The material of the sofa is loosely woven, like slack skin, and the arm is blotched with watermarks. How many tears, I wonder, have been shed here? My fingers are hypersensitive, as if I can feel the microscopic granules of salt beneath their tips.

'Will it heal by itself?' Jody says, her voice clumsy in the silence, making me wince.

'Of course not,' I say.

'No,' says Dr Bonville. 'I'm afraid that can't happen. I'm afraid you have to face the possibility that, in the very unlikely event that Abe ever regains consciousness, he will be very different from the man you knew.'

'He blinked,' Jody says. 'I saw his eyelids move.'

'Abe's lower brain stem is intact, so reflexes like breathing, swallowing, reacting to pain, even blinking, can still be present. Abe might even—'

'Stop saying his name.'

He turns his surprised gaze on me.

'Stop saying his name because you think it gives you the human touch.'

He looks at me steadily. 'I understand that you must be very upset,' he says quietly. 'Let me give you a minute.'

He goes to get up, but I get up faster. 'Talk to her,' I say. 'I've heard enough. Just tell me when it's time to turn him off.'

I walk out of the room and, without a glance at the doors of the ICU, down the corridor that leads to the exit. It seems to take years, and when I finally emerge into the grimy London air I gulp it down like water from an Alpine stream.

The traffic roars past and I'm buffeted by blank-faced

office workers rushing to get home. It's at times like this that the anonymity of a city is a blessing. Nobody knows I have just walked out on a doctor trying to tell me whether my brother is going to live or die. Nobody cares.

With a glance back at the hospital to confirm Jody isn't coming after me, I join the flow of people heading for the tube.

It feels like a year has passed when I finally arrive back at the hotel. I go for another swim, try – and fail – to read my book, pick at my room service order: a very poor imitation of a club sandwich. At six I hit the mini bar.

The room darkens.

On the pretext of a work chat, I call Jackson and when he picks up I can hear the hubbub of a restaurant behind him. I want to ask where he is but it might sound like an accusation. I imagine them at Ginelli's down in Paradise, drinking cold beers on the veranda with the smell of the desert on the wind. My heart aches.

'Let me go somewhere quieter,' he says.

No, it's fine,' I say, desperate for the sounds of home. 'It's just to check in really. How's Antonio?'

'We made the plea bargain and they're thinking it through. I told him they'll probably go for it.'

'Great. Send him my love.'

Jackson laughs. 'He'll be wanking all night over that one.' He kills the laugh and says, 'How's your brother?'

I exhale. 'Not great. Brain dead, it looks like. A botched suicide attempt.'

The muted TV at the end of the bed strobes images of a war zone – old women and children crying, grey corpses rotting in the road, an abandoned teddy.

Jackson tells me he's sorry. Then, after a seemingly pause, asks me, 'Do you think . . . dying will happen . . . naturally?'

I know what he's really asking. When will you be back at work?

'Potentially. But it might come down to turning the machines off and it's a bit early to think about that.'

'Of course, of course.'

'I'd be happy to leave any decision to his girlfriend, but as next of kin I'm supposed to have the final say.'

There's silence on the other end of the line and I can almost hear Jackson trying to frame the words.

'How long will you . . . er . . . wait?'

Suppressing the flash of irritation I keep my tone light. 'It'll depend on the doctors.'

'Take as long as you need, Mags.'

'Thanks. Listen, go and enjoy your lunch. What are you having?'

He clears his throat. 'Lobster thermidor.'

I groan with envy.

'There's one with your name on it, when you get back.'

'Send me a photo. I'll choose him myself. You can put a deposit down.'

'Will do. Take care, Mags. Lots of love.'

I hang up, then open the mini bar. Three gin and tonics later I'm sitting on the bed with the TV blaring to try and numb my head. PC Derbyshire was right, not all tragedies are crimes, but I'm a lawyer, so all I can think of now is questions.

Why haven't they checked the CCTV?

Why did Abe take his coat off?

Did someone get in through the door that he was going down to check?

With such a plainly devoted girlfriend why on earth would he decide to kill himself?

And if so, didn't she deserve a note?

Chapter 5

Jody

My family would have loved you. My dad may have been a forces man, but he was never a bully. He respected gentleness; he knew that strength isn't about muscles and fists, that it comes from inside. He would have seen the strength inside you.

Mum loved him so much she couldn't go on without him. I'm not angry with her for that. I can understand. I feel that way about you – if you die I won't want to go on.

Your sister is so hard. The way she talked about . . . well, about what the doctor said. It was horrible to listen to. Like she doesn't care about you at all and just wants to get it all over and done with. I won't let her, though, don't worry. I won't let them hurt you, Abe. They'd have to get a special court order before they can do anything like that anyway. I read about it once, a case in America where a woman had a stroke and was in a coma. The husband wanted to turn her machines off but her family didn't want to. They went with the husband in the end, which makes me scared because we're not married yet, but also hopeful that they take into account the wishes of the people closest to you. Your sister

hasn't seen you in years but she barely looks at you. She doesn't love you. I can't imagine her loving anyone. I'm not surprised she's on her own, even though she's really attractive.

She looks so much like you. The same slim face and wide, dark eyes. The same straight dark hair. You could be twins. How did your hearts turn out so different?

I came straight back to your flat after the doctor went away, and just being near the things you've touched is making me feel better.

I've lain on your bed for hours, gazing at the photograph of the two of us in that bar in the West End, but now I get up and open the wardrobe. As I run my fingers through your clothes the scent of you drifts out, and I close my eyes and breathe deeply. Then I take out one of your cardigans to put on after my shower, a cashmere one, soft as rabbit fur.

I use your shampoo, to keep my hair smelling like yours, and then I clean my teeth with your toothbrush and dry myself with the towel from the heated rail. A single black pubic hair curls from the weave. Yours. Mine are fair.

I put on your T-shirt and cardigan, and when I close my eyes it's almost like the ghost of you is all around me, embracing me. I wonder if your spirit can move from your body, because of the state you're in, or whether someone has to be dead for that to happen. Even if you die, Abe, it won't be the end – I promise. When two spirits like ours meet and forge such a strong and powerful love it can't just blink out like a light. Something has to remain.

Your flat is so much nicer than mine, and not just because it's filled with you. It's so bright and modern, all greys and whites and the type of wood they call 'blond'. Your window looks down on the grass at the front and the

bright colours of the children's playground. Even the kitchen, which is the same in all the flats, looks nicer, somehow. I think it's because of how you've "accessorised" it. The glass jars of pasta, the silver coffee maker, and the corkscrew that looks like a lady in a dress. It's Alessi, which I know is expensive, because in the charity shop they keep that sort of stuff in a locked cabinet.

It's silly but at dinnertime I lay two places and dish out two bowlfuls of pasta, and then I talk to you as if you're still there.

'How was work?'

Oh you know. Tiring.

'You work too hard.'

They need me. Mrs Evans was so relieved to see me. I don't think she'd spoken to anyone since my last visit. How was your day?

'Better now.' I close my eyes and reach across the table and imagine your hand in mine. I can almost feel it, the light touch of your warm fingers against my palm, and then the table starts to vibrate. I jump so hard my fork clatters off my plate and a blob of tomato sauce spatters the sleeve of your cardigan.

It's only my phone vibrating before the ringtone kicks in.

For a moment I think it's going to be you on the other end. But it's not. It's your sister.

'Hello?' I say, warily, wondering if she's going to be nasty.

'Listen, I'm sorry about earlier. I just hate the way these people patronise you.'

'Yes,' I murmur, but I don't really agree. Doctors have always made me feel safe.

'I've been thinking. It looks like I might be hanging around for a bit longer and it's silly to live out of a hotel

room, especially when I'm so far from the hospital. I'd much rather have a bit of space and be able to cook for myself, so I'm going to move into Abe's flat. The police haven't returned his belongings yet so I wondered if you had a key I could have.'

My breath catches. She wants to come here?

'I'm not stepping on your toes, am I? I mean, feel free to come round and collect any stuff you've left there.'

'It's not that,' I stammer. 'It's just that . . .' my mind goes blank, but eventually I come up with something. 'I'm not sure the Housing Association would allow it.'

'Oh, right. Well, can you give me the number and I'll talk to them?'

'Umm . . . wait a minute.'

I put the phone down on the table and stare at it for a moment, my skin creeping. I could say I've lost the number, but she'd be able to find it easily enough. I could give her the wrong one and then stop answering my phone, but she would just come and look for me at the hospital.

In the end I get up and head back to my flat, running in my socks so she can't hear my footsteps. As I run past Flat Eleven I can feel the spyhole watching me, black as a shark's eye. Sometimes I think I can sense someone hiding behind the door. Pushing the thought from my mind I go into my flat, find the number on an old letter, and run back.

But the spyhole has given me an idea and after I read it out to her I say, 'I don't know if you know, Mags, but this place is run by a charity. So as well as care home kids like me, there are other people, with worse conditions. You know, mental issues. I'm used to it, so I know to be careful, but you . . .' I tail off meaningfully.

She hesitates a moment, and I think that she might

change her mind.

But then she says she'll call the Association and if they say it's OK, she'll come by sometime tomorrow morning to pick up the keys. She adds, conversationally, that the police will be popping round to return Abe's stuff sometime over the next few days so if I remember anything I haven't mentioned to them already, that would be my chance to tell them.

I put the phone down and stare at your untouched plate of food, my heart thudding.

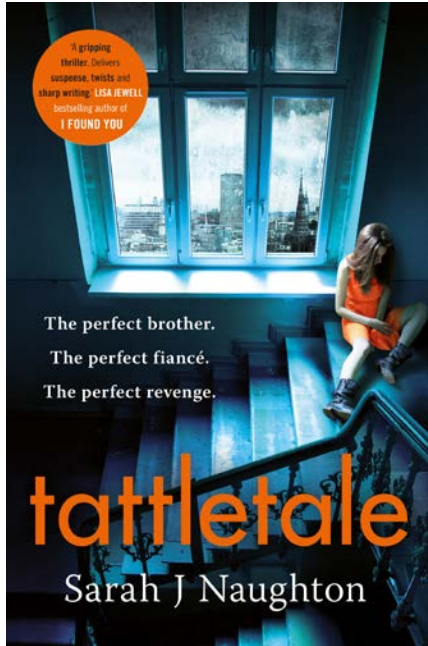
What does she mean?

Love this extract?

(Or hate us for leaving you on a cliff-hanger)

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