

LBRIS

We know
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LISA
JEWELL

DON'T
LET
HIM IN

C
CENTURY

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PART ONE

1

November

The house is spectacular. A huge white stucco villa on three floors plus attic rooms, a direct view of the sea visible through tall windows that frame the vista at the back and the front. I imagine that a wall must have been taken down at some point to offer up that level of open-plan space in a Victorian house. Steel beams put in. Expensive stuff. Just to give the owners more light and space. I feel an uncharacteristic twitch of jealousy. It's not like me to envy others. I rarely, in fact, give a thought to them. But this is a different case altogether. I turn off the van's engine and sit, just for a moment, readying myself. Through the window on the other side of the house, I see the shadows of movement and as I pull on a baseball

cap and open the driver's door, I hear the muted murmur of chatter. There are four cars parked outside. Clearly the day is still going strong. I go to the side of the van and pull open the door. There it is, my last delivery of the day: an extra-large bouquet of white hydrangeas and roses, no expense spared, in a pink bag. On the envelope is the inscription 'Nina Swann & Family'.

I walk towards the front door, peering in subtly as I pass the kitchen window. A small group sits around the table, a mix of younger and older people. They all have wine, are dressed sombrely. There is music playing, candles are flickering. I see art and photography and graphics on the walls; I see a designer kitchen in midnight blue and pink, with flashes of brass and copper, big globe light bulbs hanging at irregular intervals from golden chains, plants on shelves. Through a door at the back of the kitchen, I see huge velvet sofas, a mixing desk, a Gorillaz poster.

It's the home of a Gen X man who has made good decisions, made a success of his life, piled his building blocks one on top of the other with precision and care. But also the home of a man who made one really bad mistake that his wife and his family are going to pay for, over and over again.

I keep moving past the window and then I put my finger to the doorbell.

2

Ash thanks the delivery driver, then closes the front door behind her and carries the flowers to the kitchen. Here, her mother Nina, her brother Arlo, her grandmother, her uncle, her aunt, her three cousins and her best friend all sit around the big wooden table, which is littered with wine-stained glasses, dirty plates, the gelatinous-looking remains of the canapés. The atmosphere is both brittle and unburdened. The worst of it is over, the day is done. Now Ash is shoeless in black tights, her heels abandoned earlier, once most of the other guests had left.

‘Who are they from?’ asks her mother. Her voice is ragged.

‘Er . . .’ Ash feels around the pale pink bag for a card, peels it off and hands it to her mother.

‘Please,’ says her mother. ‘You do it.’

Ash pulls a small card from the envelope; it is the same shade of antique pink as the bag and has a linear rose embossed on the front, over which she subconsciously runs her fingertip. Inside is a note scribbled in messy florist's handwriting with a water blotch on the ink.

*Thinking of you all
Love and condolences,
The Tanners*

'Who are the Tanners?'

Ash's mother sighs. 'Literally no idea. Can you put them in some water?'

'We've run out of vases.'

Her mother sighs again, and Ash knows that she must not mention anything more to do with flowers today. She sticks them in a vase that already holds a bouquet – the two bouquets look wildly mismatched, aesthetically unpleasing – then joins her family at the table.

Ella slops some white wine into Ash's empty glass. Ash makes a kiss at her.

The sun didn't come out today, not once, which is ironic as Ash's father was obsessed with sunshine, chased it around the garden, chased it around the world, kept a UV lamp in his home office for grey days, studied forecasts religiously, insisted on barbecues at the merest hint of spring. He'd wanted this house because it was south-facing; he had his favourite suntrap spots in the garden, one in particular where he could sunbathe even

in February, which he referred to as 'Ibiza': 'I'm going to Ibiza for a bit,' he'd say on a sunny morning, a coffee in one hand, sunglasses on his head. There was always a bottle of suncream by the back door. All year round.

But today, the day they said goodbye to him, the sun stayed away. Ash liked to think maybe he'd taken it for himself. But on the other hand – no. She very much believes that dead people have no influence.

He was fifty-four.

He was killed by a stranger.

Pushed onto the tracks.

Under a train.

He was on his way home from a restaurant opening, not one of his but a friend's, in Soho. He was very drunk. He'd been drinking tequila slammers, according to his friend. The life and soul. Always the life and soul, Paddy Swann.

The man who pushed him was called Joe Kritner.

There. Done. One moment. Two lives. More, if you include the train driver, the witnesses, the paramedics who had to pull the bits of him off the tracks.

There's a photo album on the table; Ash and her brother Arlo had put it together. They'd left space in the final pages for guests to add their own photos of Dad, of Paddy. Ash opens it at a random page and sighs at the sight of her dad wearing a bucket hat and sunglasses, holding a pint of beer in a plastic cup at some kind of festival. Peak 90s, Ash thinks. He was born in 1970, so must have been about twenty-five here. Same age as she is now.

‘Where’s that?’ she asks her mum, turning the album towards her mother.

‘Ha, Glastonbury. Of course.’

‘Of course,’ says Ash drily. ‘Were you there too?’

‘Yup. Oasis. Pulp. The Cure. Boiling hot. We went with Lena and Johnny. Dad got very, very . . .’

‘Drunk?’ Arlo suggests.

‘And the rest.’

They all smile wryly. Everyone knows what Paddy was like. He liked to drink, he liked to take party drugs, he liked to get stoned. He liked to listen to music all the time, always walked around in headphones. He liked vinyl, liked T-shirts, liked live music, liked people, liked food.

Paddy Swann was the most uncomplicated human being in the world, and then, two weeks ago, a very complicated person used Paddy Swann as a character in his own very complicated internal story and pushed him under a train. And now he is dead.

The remains of his clan are loud now, they don’t know how to be quiet, even in the fading light of the day that they buried him. But the noise is riven through with something piquant and terrible. The lack of his voice, his laugh, his bulk. The fact that at the other end of today, everyone’s lives will continue without him.

Ash slams the album shut and grabs her wine glass, tips it back, ignores the sugary, cloying warmth of it in her mouth, the way it leaches into the stale insides of her cheeks. How will they go to bed tonight? How will they say that this day is over, and the next bit begins?

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PART TWO

3

January

Ash picks up the card that is propped on the sideboard in the kitchen and reads the greeting inside.

Dear Nina and family,

I just heard the news about Paddy. I am so devastated to hear of his death last year. Paddy and I worked together in a restaurant in Mayfair many, many moons ago. He was one of the nicest guys I ever knew, and one of the best chefs I've ever worked alongside. A few years ago, I chanced upon his restaurant in Whitstable and didn't

realise it was his place until I saw him passing across the floor. I stopped him and we had a chat, and he looked so well, so full of his usual bonhomie and generosity of spirit. He pulled up a chair and joined me for the rest of my meal, forced good wines upon me. We caught up a little on our lives, his spent growing a family and a restaurant empire on the south coast, mine living the bachelor life and running a wine bar not far from where we first met in Mayfair. I always thought our paths would cross again someday, that I'd go back to Whitstable and enjoy another hour or two in his delightful company, eat another one of his delicious meals, but it never happened, life got in the way, and now it is too late.

Anyway, I just wanted you to know how much I adored Paddy and how sorry I was to hear that he had gone so young and in such tragic circumstances.

*Yours, with sympathy and with love,
Nick Radcliffe*

Ash waves the card at her mother, who is standing by the kettle, waiting for it to boil.

'Nice card.'

Her mother turns. Her eyes are dull and tinged with grey circles.

'Oh,' she says. 'Yes. Very sweet.'

'You ever met him?'

'No. I don't think so. At least, not that I remember.'

Ash pulls her phone out of her pocket and googles him, adding Mayfair to the search terms. His name pops up on LinkedIn and she clicks it.

Nick Radcliffe is listed as the 'Co-founder and Owner of Bar Amelie in London W1'. In his profile photo he looks about fifty, has pure white hair, a trim white beard, very blue eyes and a pleasant smile. She turns the phone towards her mum. 'Look,' she says.

Her mum glances distractedly at the photo and says, 'Nope. Never seen him before. He's quite hot, though.'

Ash throws her mother a look of horror.

'What?' says her mother. 'There's no law against it.'

Ash googles 'Bar Amelie' and finds a glitzy website for it. It's just off Curzon Street and is sleek and beautiful – brushed brass and pale velvet, three different types of caviar on the bar menu. It's the antithesis of her dad's restaurants: sandy-floored, rough-hewn, chalkboards, tongue-and-groove cladding, smoky chowders and chargrilled lobsters.

'We should go there,' Ash says, showing the wine bar's website to her mum. 'Get him to tell us more about what Dad was like back then, before you met him.'

'Your dad knew hundreds of people before I met him.'

'I know. But he sounds really nice. He might have stories.'

'Well then, you can go there,' she says. 'I'm sure he'd be thrilled to meet Paddy's lovely girl and share his stories with you. And you might get a free dinner. Or a job.'

This last sentence is clipped and raw and there follows a small, tense silence.