

# ONE

*Death does not suit me. I wear it like a borrowed coat; it slips off my shoulders and trails in the dirt. It is ill-fitting. Uncomfortable.*

*I want to shrug it off; to throw it in the cupboard and take back my well-tailored clothes. I didn't want to leave my old life, but I'm hopeful for my next one – hopeful I can become someone beautiful and vibrant. For now, I am trapped.*

*Between lives.*

*In limbo.*

*They say sudden goodbyes are easier. Less painful. They're wrong. Any pain saved from the lingering goodbyes of a drawn-out illness is offset by the horror of a life stolen without notice. A life taken violently. On the day of my death I walked the tightrope between two worlds, the safety net in tatters beneath me. This way safety; that way danger.*

*I stepped.*

*I died.*

*We used to joke about dying – when we were young enough, still vital enough, for death to be something that happened to other people.*

*'Who do you think'll go first?' you said, one night when the wine had run dry and we lay by the electric fire in my rented Balham flat. An idle hand, stroking my thigh, softened your words. I was quick to answer.*

*'You, of course.'*

*You aimed a cushion at my head.*

*We'd been together a month; enjoying each other's bodies, talking about the future as though it belonged to someone else. No commitment, no promises – just possibilities.*

*'Women live longer.' I grinned. 'It's a well-known fact. Genetic. Survival of the fittest. Men can't cope on their own.'*

*You grew serious. Cupped my face in your hand and made me look at you. Your eyes were black in the half-light; the bars of the fire reflected in your pupils. 'It's true.'*

*I moved to kiss you but your fingers held me still; pressure on my chin as your thumb pushed against bone.*

*'If anything happened to you I don't know what I'd do.'*

*The briefest chill, despite the fierce heat from the fire. Footsteps on my grave.*

*'Give over.'*

*'I'd die too,' you insisted.*

*I put a stop to your youthful dramatics then, reaching to push aside your hand and free my chin. Keeping my fingers tangled with yours, so the rejection didn't sting. Kissing you, softly at first, then harder, until you rolled backwards and I was lying on top of you, my hair curtaining our faces.*

*You would die for me.*

*Our relationship was young; a spark that could be snuffed out as easily as coaxed into flames. I couldn't have known you'd stop loving me; that I'd stop loving you. I couldn't help but be flattered by the depth of your feeling, the intensity in your eyes.*

*You would die for me, and in that moment, I thought I might die for you, too.*

*I just never thought either of us would have to.*

# TWO

## ANNA

Ella is eight weeks old. Her eyes are closed, long dark lashes brushing apple cheeks that move up and down as she feeds. One tiny hand splays across my breast like a starfish. I sit, pinned to the sofa, and think of all the things I could be doing while she feeds. Reading. Watching television. An online food shop.

Not today.

Today is not a day for the ordinary.

I watch my daughter, and after a while her lashes lift and she fixes navy eyes on me, solemn and trusting. Her pupils are deep pools of unconditional love; my reflection small but unwavering.

Ella's sucking slows. We gaze at each other, and I think how motherhood is the best-kept secret: how all the books, all the films, all the advice in the world could never prepare you for the all-consuming feeling of being everything to one tiny person. Of that person being everything to you. I perpetuate the secret, telling no one, because who would I tell? Less than a decade after leaving school, my friends share their beds with lovers, not babies.

Ella's still gazing at me, but gradually the focus in her eyes blurs, the way morning mist creeps over a view. Her lids drop once, twice, then fall closed. Her sucking – always so ferocious at first, and then rhythmic, relaxed – slows, until several seconds elapse between mouthfuls. She stops. She sleeps.

I lift my hand and gently press my index finger onto my

breast, breaking the seal between my nipple and Ella's lips, then pull my nursing bra back into place. Ella's mouth continues to move for a while, then sleep takes her deeper, her lips frozen into a perfect 'O'.

I should put her down. Make the most of however long she will sleep. Ten minutes? An hour? We are a long way from any kind of routine. *Routine*. The watchword of the new mother; the single topic of conversation at the post-natal coffee mornings my health visitor bullies me into attending. *Is she sleeping through yet? You should try controlled crying. Have you read Gina Ford?*

I nod and smile, and say *I'll check it out*, then I gravitate towards one of the other new mums. Someone different. Someone less rigid. Because I don't care about routine. I don't want to leave Ella crying while I sit downstairs and post on Facebook about my 'parenting nightmare'.

It hurts to cry for a mother who isn't coming back. Ella doesn't need to know that yet.

She stirs in her sleep, and the ever-present lump in my throat swells. Awake, Ella is my daughter. When friends point out her similarities to me, or say how like Mark she is, I can never see it. I look at Ella, and I simply see Ella. But asleep . . . asleep I see my mother. There is a heart-shaped face hiding beneath those baby-plump cheeks, and the curve of their hairline is so alike I know that, in years to come, my daughter will spend hours in front of a mirror, attempting to tame the one tiny section that grows differently to the rest.

Do babies dream? What can they dream of, with so little experience of the world? I envy Ella her sleep, not only because I am tired in a way I never experienced before having a baby, but because when sleep comes, it brings with it nightmares. My dreams show me what I can't possibly know. Supposition from police reports and coroner's court. I see my parents, their faces bloated and disfigured from the water. I see fear on their faces as they fall from the cliff. I hear their screams.

Sometimes my subconscious is kind to me. I don't always see my parents fall; sometimes I see them fly. I see them stepping into nothing and spreading their arms and swooping low above a blue sea that sends spray into their laughing faces. I wake gently then, a smile lingering on my face until I open my eyes and realise that everything is just the way it was when I closed them.

Nineteen months ago, my father took a car – the newest and most expensive – from the forecourt of his own business. He drove the ten minutes from Eastbourne to Beachy Head, where he parked in the car park, left the door unlocked, and walked towards the cliff top. Along the way he collected rocks to weigh himself down. Then, when the tide was at its highest, he threw himself off the cliff.

Seven months later, consumed with grief, my mother followed him, with such devastating accuracy the local paper reported it as a 'copycat suicide'.

I know all these facts because on two separate occasions I heard the coroner take us through them, step by step. I sat with Uncle Billy as we listened to the gentle but painfully thorough account of two failed coastal rescue missions. I stared at my lap while experts proffered views on tides, survival rates, death statistics. And I closed my eyes while the coroner recorded the verdict of suicide.

My parents died seven months apart, but their linked deaths meant the inquests were held the same week. I learned lots of things, on those two days, but not the only thing that mattered.

Why they did it.

If indeed they *did* do it.

The facts are unarguable. Except that my parents were not suicidal. They were not depressed, anxious, fearful. They were the last people you would expect to give up on life.

'Mental illness isn't always obvious,' Mark says, when I raise it, his voice giving no hint of impatience that the conversation

is, once again, circling back to this. ‘The most capable, the most upbeat people can have depression.’

Over the last year I’ve learned to keep my theories to myself; not to give voice to the cynicism that lies beneath the surface of my grief. No one else has doubts. No one else feels unease.

But then, maybe no one else knew my parents the way I did.

The phone rings. I let the answerphone pick up but the caller doesn’t leave a message. Immediately I feel my mobile vibrate in my pocket, and I know even before I look that it’s Mark calling.

‘Under a sleeping baby, by any chance?’

‘How did you guess?’

‘How is she?’

‘Feeding every half an hour. I keep trying to start dinner and not getting anywhere.’

‘Leave it – I can do it when I get home. How are you feeling?’ There’s a subtle change of tone that no one else would notice. A subtext. How are you feeling *today, of all days?*

‘I’m okay.’

‘I can come home—’

‘I’m fine. Really.’

Mark would hate to leave his course halfway through. He collects qualifications the way other people collect beer mats, or foreign coins; so many letters they no longer fit after his name. Every few months he prints new business cards, and the least important letters fall off the end into oblivion. Today’s course is The Value of Empathy in the Client–Counsellor Relationship. He doesn’t need it; his empathy was evident the second I walked through his door.

He let me cry. Pushed a box of tissues towards me and told me to take my time. To begin when I was ready, and not before. And when I stopped crying, but still couldn’t find the words, he told me about the stages of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance – and I realised I hadn’t moved past first base.

We were four sessions in when Mark took a deep breath and told me he couldn't treat me any more, and I asked if it was me, and he said there was a conflict of interest and this was terribly unprofessional but would I like to have dinner some time?

He was older than me – closer to my mum's age than my own – with a confidence at odds with the nerves I now saw hovering beneath the surface.

I didn't hesitate. 'I'd love to.'

Afterwards he said he felt guiltier about interrupting my counselling than about the ethics of dating a patient. *Former patient*, I pointed out.

He still feels uncomfortable about it. People meet in all sorts of places, I remind him. My parents met in a London nightclub; his met in the frozen food section at Marks & Spencer. And he and I met in a seventh-floor apartment in Putney, in a consultation room with leather chairs and soft woollen throws, and a sign on the door that said MARK HEMMINGS, COUNSELLOR. BY APPOINTMENT ONLY.

'If you're sure. Give Ella-bella a kiss from me.'

'Bye.' I hang up first, and I know he has the handset pressed against his lips, the way he does when he's deep in thought. He'll have gone outside to make the call, forgoing coffee, or networking, or whatever thirty counsellors do when they're released from the classroom. In a moment he'll rejoin the others, and he'll be lost to me for the next few hours, as he works on displaying empathy for a made-up problem. Pretend anxiety. A fictional bereavement.

He'd like to work on mine. I don't let him. I stopped seeing a therapist when I realised all the talking in the world wasn't going to bring back my parents. You reach a point where the pain you feel inside is simply sadness. And there's no cure for that.

Grief is complicated. It ebbs and flows and is so multi-faceted

that unpicking it makes my head hurt. I can go for days without crying, then barely be able to breathe for the sobs that wrack my body. One moment I'll be laughing with Uncle Billy about something stupid Dad once did; the next I'll be filled with rage for his selfishness. If Dad hadn't killed himself, Mum wouldn't have done, either.

The anger is the worst part of all of this. The white-hot fury, and the guilt that inevitably follows.

Why did they do it?

I've gone over the days preceding my dad's death a million times; asked myself if we could have done anything to prevent it.

Your dad's missing.

I'd frowned at the text, looking for the punchline. I lived with my parents, but I was away overnight at a conference in Oxford, chatting over morning coffee with a colleague from London. I excused myself to call her.

'What do you mean, missing?'

Mum wasn't making sense. The words came slowly, as though she was dredging them up. They'd had an argument the night before; Dad had stormed off to the pub. So far, so normal. I had long since accepted the storminess of my parents' relationship; the squalls that would pass over as quickly as they blew in. Except this time Dad hadn't come home.

'I thought he might have slept at Bill's,' she said, 'but I'm at work now and Bill hasn't seen him. I'm out of my mind, Anna!'

I left the conference straight away. Not because I was worried about Dad, but because I was worried about Mum. They were careful to keep the causes of their arguments from me, but I'd picked up the aftermath too many times. Dad would disappear – off to work, or to the golf course, or to the pub. Mum would hide in the house, pretending to me she hadn't been crying.

It was all over by the time I got home. Police in the kitchen, their hats in their hands. Mum shaking so violently they'd called a paramedic to treat her for shock. Uncle Billy, white with grief. Laura, Mum's goddaughter, making tea and forgetting to add milk. None of us noticing.

I read the text Dad had sent.

I can't do this any more. The world will be a better place without me in it.

'Your father took a car from work.' The policeman was about Dad's age, and I wondered if he had children. If they took him for granted. 'The cameras show it heading towards Beachy Head late last night.' My mother let out a stifled cry. I saw Laura move to comfort her, but I couldn't do the same. I was frozen. Not wanting to hear, but compelled to listen all the same.

'Officers responded to a call-out around ten o'clock this morning,' PC Pickett stared at his notes. I suspected it was easier than looking at us. 'A woman reported seeing a man fill a rucksack with rocks, and place his wallet and phone on the ground, before stepping off the edge of the cliff.'

'And she didn't try to *stop* him?' I hadn't meant to shout, and Uncle Billy put a hand on my shoulder. I shook him off. Turned to the others. 'She just watched him jump?'

'It all happened very quickly. The caller was very upset, as you can imagine.' PC Pickett realised his poor judgement too late to bite his tongue.

'*She* was upset, was she? How did she think Dad was feeling?' I whirled round, searching for support in the faces around me, then fixing my gaze on the police officers. 'Have you questioned her?'

'Anna.' Laura spoke quietly.

'How do you know she didn't push him?'

'Anna, this isn't helping anyone.'

I was about to snap back, but I looked at my mother, leaning into Laura, moaning softly. The fight left me. I was hurting, but Mum was hurting more. I crossed the room and kneeled beside her, reaching for her hand and feeling tears wet my cheeks even before I knew they'd left my eyes. My parents were together for twenty-six years. They lived together – and worked together – and despite all their ups and downs, they loved each other.

PC Pickett cleared his throat. 'The description matched Mr Johnson. We were on scene within minutes. His car was recovered from Beachy Head car park, and on the edge of the cliff we found . . .' He tailed off, indicating a clear plastic evidence bag in the centre of our kitchen table, in which I could see Dad's mobile phone and his tan leather wallet. Out of nowhere I thought of the joke Uncle Billy always cracked, about the moths in Dad's jacket pockets, and for a second I thought I was going to burst into laughter. Instead I cried, and I didn't stop for three days.

My right arm, squashed beneath Ella, has gone to sleep. I slide it out and wiggle my fingers, feeling the tingle as the blood returns to the extremities. Suddenly restless, I extricate myself from beneath Ella's sleeping body with the newly acquired mothering stealth skills of a Royal Marine, and barricade her onto the sofa with cushions. I stand up, stretching out the stiffness that comes from too much sitting down.

My father had never suffered from depression or anxiety.

'Would he have told you, even if he did?' Laura said. We were sitting in the kitchen – Laura, Mum and me. The police, neighbours, everyone had gone, leaving us sitting numbly in the kitchen with a bottle of wine sour on our tongues. Laura's point was a valid one, even if I didn't want to acknowledge it. Dad came from a long line of men who believed talking about 'feelings' meant you were a 'poof'.

Whatever the reasons, his suicide came from nowhere, and plunged us all into grief.

Mark – and his replacement, once one had been found – encouraged me to work through the anger I felt in relation to my father’s death. I seized upon five words uttered by the coroner.

*While not of sound mind.*

They helped me separate the man from the act; helped me understand that Dad’s suicide wasn’t about hurting those he was leaving. Rather, his final text message suggested a genuinely held belief that we might be happier without him. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Harder than coming to terms with my dad’s suicide was what happened next. Trying to fathom why – after experiencing first hand the pain of bereavement by suicide; of watching me cry for my beloved father – my mother would knowingly put me through it again.

Blood hums in my ears like a wasp trapped against glass. I walk into the kitchen and drink a glass of water, fast, then press my hands onto the granite worktop and lean over the sink. I hear Mum, singing as she washes up; nagging Dad to *clear up after yourself once in a blue moon*. Clouds of flour as I made clumsy cakes in Mum’s heavy earthenware bowl. Her hands around mine – shaping biscuits, making pastry. And later, when I came back home to live; taking turns to lean against the Aga while the other made supper. Dad in the study, or watching TV in the sitting room. We women in the kitchen – through design, not default. Chatting as we cooked.

It’s in this room I feel most close to Mum. In this room it hurts the most.

A year ago, today.

*Grieving widow plunges to her death*, read the *Gazette*.  
*Chaplain calls for media blackout on suicide hotspot*, read the unwittingly ironic *Guardian* headline.

‘You knew,’ I whisper, feeling sure that talking out loud is not the action of a sane mind, yet being unable to contain it for a

second more. ‘You knew how much it hurt, and you still did it.’

I should have listened to Mark, and planned something for today. A distraction. I could have called Laura. Had lunch. Gone shopping. Anything that didn’t involve moping about the house, going over old ground, obsessing over the anniversary of Mum’s death. There is no logical reason why today should be any harder than any other. My mother is no more dead than she was yesterday; no more dead than she will be tomorrow.

And yet . . .

I take a deep breath and try to snap out of it. Put my glass in the sink and tut loudly, as though an audible admonishment to myself will make a difference. I will take Ella to the park. We can go the long way around to kill time, and on the way back we’ll pick up something for supper, and before I know it Mark will be home and today will be almost over. This abrupt decisiveness is a familiar trick, but it works. The ache in my heart lessens, and the pressure behind my eyes fades away.

*Fake it till you make it*, Laura always says. *Dress for the job you want, not the job you have* is another favourite. She means at work (you’d have to listen very carefully to pick up on the fact that her public-school accent is learned, not inherited) but the principle is the same. Pretend you’re okay, and you’ll feel okay. Before too long you really will be okay.

I’m still working on the last bit.

I hear the squeak that means Ella is awake. I’m halfway across the hall when I see something poking through the letterbox. It’s either been delivered by hand, or it got caught in the letterbox when the postman did his rounds. Either way I didn’t see it when I collected the post from the mat this morning.

It’s a card. I received two others this morning – both from school friends more comfortable with grief when held at arm’s length – and I’m touched by the number of people who note dates in this way. On the anniversary of Dad’s suicide someone left a casserole on my doorstep with the briefest of notes.

*Freeze or reheat. Thinking of you.*

I still don't know who it's from. Many of the condolence cards that arrived after my parents' deaths came with stories of the cars they'd sold over the years. Keys handed to over-confident teens and over-anxious parents. Two-seater sports cars traded for family-friendly estates. Cars to celebrate promotions, big birthdays, retirements. My parents played a part in many different stories.

The address is typed on a sticker, the postmark a smudge of ink in the top right-hand corner. The card is thick and expensive – I have to wiggle it out of its envelope.

I stare at the image.

Bright colours dance across the page: a border of lurid pink roses with intertwined stems and glossy green leaves. In the centre, two champagne glasses clink together. The greeting is embossed and finished with glitter.

*Happy Anniversary!*

I recoil as if I've been punched. Is this some kind of sick joke? A mistake? Some well-meaning, short-sighted acquaintance, mistaken in their choice of missive? I open the card.

The message is typed. Cut from cheap paper and glued to the inside.

This is no mistake.

My hands shake, making the words swim in front of my eyes. The wasp in my ears buzzes louder. I read it again.

Suicide? Think again.