

PROLOGUE

To say that the pain was a surprise is to put it mildly.

Of course I had expected pain but not having been through anything like it before, I'd had no idea really.

It was probably a good thing, I thought, eyes squeezed shut and mouth clamping firmly around the mouthpiece for the gas and air.

Hazel gently eased away my white-knuckled hand.

"That's enough now, just take a break," she advised, "You're all gas and no air."

She chuckled softly and I just knew that she would be looking to the midwife for approval for her witticism.

I kept my eyes closed. It seemed the best way. I had to get through this and I had to draw on my inner strength. I also had to try to ignore that it was Hazel there with me, at this most personal, testing, and let's face it, undignified, time.

Not my fiancé, no – the father of this child was not there to share this experience with me. I felt this was wrong and mostly because I thought he was missing out on something he could never get back. For despite the intense, immense pain, I still knew what this was all about. I was still glad it was happening because I knew it meant that our child was on its way and that soon, I would be able to hold our baby.

The strange little kicking and wriggling thing which I had felt grow inside me, and which had changed me both inside and out, was about to make its entrance into the world and its father was nowhere to be seen.

I tensed up as another contraction kicked in. I grabbed the gas and air back from Hazel and let out about the only real noise I think I made during the whole labour.

"Mum!" I cried, "Mum!"

I rammed the mouthpiece back in and sucked greedily, desperately. Dimly aware of Hazel's voice.

"Oh, she called me Mum," she gushed, and again I knew she would have that look on her face.

Only it wasn't that. I wasn't calling Hazel 'Mum'. I was calling for the person I most wanted to be there with me, but who I knew I could never see again.

PART ONE

Chapter One

How does an eleven-year-old girl deal with the death of her mother? I can't answer for every eleven-year-old girl who has been in that position but for me, I withdrew, from pretty much everything and everyone, except, for some reason, from my schoolwork.

My friends had become awkward with me anyway, not knowing what to say and worrying that they would say something stupid or 'wrong'. I could sense this and I didn't have the strength to put them right, tell them that I just needed them to be there. What they said didn't really matter. It couldn't change anything. They wanted the old Sarah back, though – jokey and always looking to have some fun. It's not that they didn't understand why I had changed. It's just that, I think understandably considering our age, they didn't know how to handle this sudden and unexpected alteration to my circumstances, and probably my personality too.

I vividly remember hours spent sitting on the windowsill of my bedroom, staring at the cherry blossom falling from the tree whose branches were so close they would tap on the glass panes when it was windy.

My grandparents came round more often, but I didn't feel I could talk to them. Mum's parents were grieving themselves, for their own dear daughter. Grandma would hug me tightly but I couldn't stand it really. Maybe she was just a bit too much like Mum but at the same time she wasn't her. I would tolerate the hugs because I knew it would hurt Grandma far too much if I didn't, but inside I felt almost panicked. I don't know if Grandad S experienced a similar sensation when he looked at me, as I knew I looked a lot like Mum had when she was my age. Maybe he was looking at me but saw only the daughter he had lost. Despite his smiles and calmness, I knew that his heart was broken.

My dad's parents were undemonstrative people, which didn't mean that they didn't care. However, they didn't seem to know how to show this in any other way than practical. Granny would keep the house clean and make healthy and hearty dinners which I couldn't eat.

Grandad M would ask me questions about school, seeming not to

notice my replies only ever involved subjects, not people.

Mum's sister Elizabeth lives in America so we only saw her for a short while. On reflection I think that this was a shame as she may have been the very person we all needed to pull us together. She is so like Mum; positive, wanting to sort things out, that I think she may have been the one to look beyond herself and her own feelings, and see how we could begin to have a life again.

Then there was Dad.

My poor dad. How could I put into words how he felt when his wife, just out-of-the-blue, dropped down dead?

All the photos I had ever seen of Mum and Dad together were beautiful. I am not calling my parents devastatingly attractive people. Film-star good looks and model figures do not run in my family. There was beauty in those pictures though, in how happy my parents looked when they were together. In the glances caught between them, and the balance that was somehow conveyed even in faded old photos from their dating days. The comfort and contentedness they shared should not be underestimated and to my mind is a thing of beauty.

How many clichés is it possible to use when I talk about the effect Mum's death had on Dad? His world fell apart, or crumbled, or was turned upside down. Clichés they may be but true nevertheless. I guess clichés must come from truth. Don't get me started on the clichés people doled out to us in an effort to comfort. Not their fault, they were just trying to help – but they didn't.

But back to Dad. I hated it. Seeing what was happening to him. Feeling unable to do anything about it and eventually unable to connect with him. I hate to think about it, what happened to us when Mum died. We had always had such fun together, Dad and I. He was funny, and light-hearted, and always wanting to do things. Days at the park, the zoo, the seaside. Bike rides in the summer, sledge rides in the winter. He taught me to play football and cricket so I was a match for most of the boys in my year.

For a time, just after Mum died, this all stopped. I don't think I even noticed then. I don't know what we did in those days, or weeks, after she had gone.

Eventually, after the funeral, we had to go back to our work/school routine. What about our 'free time' though? I really can't remember. Did we have a succession of visitors for a while? I seem to remember this – aside from family, there were Mum's friends, Dad's friends, my grandparents' friends. All meaning well, all in their grown up way realising they should not neglect us at this time (unlike my own friends) but still few of whom seemed to know how to talk to us or what to say.

I felt close to Dad during some of these visits; could imagine him cringing inside, as I was, at the pitying expressions, and those clichés. *Time is a great healer. It will get easier.* I knew what Dad was like, how down-to-earth and practical he was. These words would mean little to him, and just serve to make him feel awkward. He did his best though and always graciously thanked people for making the effort to see us.

As time drew on, the visits dried up and the house was ours again. Mine and Dad's. Only there was a large empty space in it. We could reorganise the furniture and even buy replacements (we did), redecorate (that too), keep the radio and/or TV on at all times that the house was occupied and yet this glaringly obvious silent space was always there. We were a body with a missing limb. A rudderless boat. A bike with no wheels. Whatever words you might choose, there was no escaping the fact that we were no longer whole. My ever-practical father did not have the skills or the tools to fix this problem.

We rarely talked about 'it', Dad and I, though we sometimes talked about her. We could remember her, and remind each other of times that we had enjoyed together or even simple things such as how she cooked a certain dish and what times of the year she had cut back the buddleia. Somehow though, we could not acknowledge to each other that we had to deal with this new situation, without her. She had held that role in our family – the emotional, open, 'let's talk about it' role, so it was almost ironic that it was she who was gone. Leaving two quiet, shocked people in her wake.

I could bore you with details of Christmases, birthdays, anniversaries. You don't need to know but can probably imagine. The detail which is important about the birthdays, though, is my

getting older. Becoming a teenager. Crucially, hitting puberty.

I had never thought of this when Mum died and I don't know if Dad had. Suddenly I was 'becoming a woman' and I had nobody to talk to who had been through it before. I think that Elizabeth had made some attempts to get me to talk to her, but I couldn't, not over the phone. I needed somebody real, tangible, and just *there*.

If I had talked to Dad about it I am sure he would have done his best, but I was thirteen years old and mightily embarrassed when my periods started. A dragging, aching pain the likes of which I had never experienced before, followed by bleeding, the shock of which no sex education classes could really, truly have prepared me for. I mean, I knew they were coming at some point, I knew that there would seem to be a lot of blood 'but really it's about a thimble full' (really?).

Although Elizabeth had left me some tampons and towels, I had to ask Dad for some money to get more. When he asked what for, I went so red that he just gave it to me, and looked concerned. Maybe even sympathetic. Had he guessed? I think now that he probably had. By nature he tended to be a great respecter of privacy and I think this is where things went slightly awry for us. Though I was painfully embarrassed by the onset of my bleeding, and Dad would have had to drag the details out of me, on this occasion I think that he should have done. It was not a time for privacy but for openness and understanding. Anyway, between us, we managed never to talk about this either. I will say this for us; we were bloody brilliant at not talking about stuff.

Our years passed quietly, routinely, and I suppose peacefully. I managed to integrate with my friends again and gradually I began to redevelop my sense of fun. So they were right; time is a great healer, it does get easier, but having said that, they never saw those moments when I would throw myself onto my bed and sob, wrecked by the grief and the missing her, and the needing a mother. Needing my mum. These were my moments and nobody else needed to be aware of them.

I am sure Dad had them too. We kept them neatly enclosed in our respective private spaces, the evidence confined to tear-dampened

duvets and pillows and the knowledge locked away in our minds. Over these years, I lost three of my grandparents, too. There was only Grandma left from that generation. How did she feel; one daughter overseas, and her husband and other daughter both dead? Dad seemed to accept the loss of his parents tiredly. He already knew life was sad. He was still grieving for his wife.

I left Dad to go to university. He dropped me off at my Halls of Residence, all bright smiles and cheerfulness, and pressed a £50 note into my hand after he had helped me unload my stuff. This gesture choked me for some reason, but I was keen for him to leave me, because I knew that I had to just get on with it.

I felt so sad though, watching him walk back to the car. I wondered how he would get on with the house all his own. I wished so hard that we were better at speaking about things and that I could tell him how much I loved him, and I thought about running after him but then there was a knock at my door and one of my fellow residents was there, excitedly introducing herself. When I looked back through the window, Dad had gone.

Chapter Two

University was fun. Probably too much fun, at least during that first term.

Chloe, the girl who had come knocking at my door when I was watching Dad leave, had an older brother who had just graduated from the same university and who had stayed in the city to work.

Jim provided us with a ready-made social life, with older friends, and a bit of relief from the non-stop ridiculous partying of our fellow Halls-dwellers. We had soon found that some of the people we shared kitchens and bathrooms with seemed to have split personalities. Or more realistically, they couldn't handle their drink. And there was a lot of drinking going on.

Eighteen is a fairly young age to leave home, and then to be allowed to live with a bunch of other eighteen-year-olds. All of whom have more free hours than the average person, some dispensable income, and little to dispense it on except booze.

There were 27 of us in our block, split nine to a floor. I just thanked my lucky stars that I had refused to share a room. It would have been completely luck of the draw, and I could see from some of the pairings that certain fellow students had fallen short on luck. My friend Mandy had a completely crazy room-mate called Emma who was studying some form of software development.

By day, Emma wore pink jogging suits and scraped her hair back into a way-too-tight ponytail, and by night she transformed herself into some sort of goth assemblage, and seduced the small pale boys who were on her course.

Chloe and I were paying slightly more for the privilege of our own space than those who shared a room but I would have gladly paid twice as much.

We did socialise with our fellow residents a fair bit but their taste tended more towards karaoke and cheesy nightclubs whereas Chloe and I were happy to go to what we considered some serious clubs with Jim and his mates.

We liked house music, drum'n'bass, and reggae. We always had a laugh at karaoke but inwardly I was cringing as this scene was a far cry from what my friends back home and I considered cool.

You may have noticed a theme here. I had started university yet what I seem to be describing is my social life. You may be asking, what about the studying? You've got a point. Well studying did happen, but that first term it all seemed to be fairly low level and my course, Philosophy, had very few hours of actual lectures. It depended a great deal on independent study and I had chosen some module subjects I already had some knowledge of so I thought I could probably get away with slightly less than the prescribed reading.

Everybody was pretty much the same. We were free at last! Out on our own in the world – except for the wardens and cleaners at the Halls of Residence, and of course parents who were largely supportive both financially and practically. Other than that though, we really were looking after ourselves. Oh, and had I mentioned that our evening meals were prepared for us and served in a huge cafeteria which catered for the 300 or so students who lived on the same site as us?

I had a whale of a time though, I really did, until around mid November when I caught a really bad dose of flu. The germs had been making their way steadily around the campus. The buses to university - windows steamed up with condensation against the first chill days of the winter – were uncomfortably warm and overcrowded with coughing, sneezing, nose-blowing teenagers. It was only a matter of time.

Unfortunately I have always been susceptible to colds, flu and the like. I suffered from asthma when I was a lot younger, and although that has long since stopped bothering me, I almost always find flu or a bad cold will end up on my chest.

This is exactly what happened that year, only then I tried to ignore it. I desperately didn't want to miss out, although now I think of it, what was I going to miss out on? Fun, yes, but the nights out we had very rarely differed. Whether we were with our fellow students or Jim and his friends, we went to the same places, danced to the same music, and drank the same drinks. We returned to our rooms in high spirits unless too much alcohol had taken its toll, in the form of stupor or sickness. I could have missed a week and nothing would have changed.

Silly me, though, I just couldn't stay in. I ended up with an upper

respiratory tract infection and feeling very sorry for myself. I had nobody to look after me and although my friends were sympathetic, they had lectures and social lives to worry about.

I called my dad.

“Oh love, you sound awful,” he said. “Can I bring you home?”

I hadn't been home so far that term. In fact I had probably not phoned home nearly half as much as I should have done. Dad was understanding, he never put any pressure on me. Now when I heard his words it was all I could do to hold back the tears.

“Yes please,” I sniffed.

“I'm on my way.”

I had been too busy enjoying myself to realise how much I missed him, and home. Now, run down and worn out, I couldn't think of any place I would rather be, or any person I would rather be with.

I no longer cared about missing out. I wrote Chloe a note explaining and slipped it under her door. I would text her later but I didn't want to bring any attention to myself. I just wanted to slide away, unnoticed.

I sat in my room and waited for my dad.