

The Accident

The mornings were darker now – winter had arrived cruelly, chilling her bones. Glancing out of the porch, she observed a distant silver light on the horizon, penetrating the overwhelming expanse of sky which dominated the space above. Salt and seaweed filtered the air, its sharp sweetness filling her lungs, providing her with the sustenance she needed to face the day. It was only later that she wished she'd stayed in bed, curling into the warmth of the duvet.

But Maria had been taking Bess out first thing each morning since he had left – she went out before breakfast, before coffee, before thinking. It grounded her. Without the morning freshness, the remainder of the day would unravel. She remembered that disorientating spiral of ruin and never wanted to feel it again. She'd promised herself. Now, it had become a ritual. A superstition, you could say.

'Come on, girl. Let's go.' Clouds of breath billowed like unspoken words, whispering out towards the sea. Bess leaped out, through the gate and across the open field. Murky clouds rumbled low across the sky, momentarily disguising that sliver of sunrise. The dog left a weaving trail in the grass, like a slalom skier; the powdered frost sparkled, directing Maria down towards the shore. The cliffs loomed on the left, a perfect backdrop which enveloped Havenport in black shadow, still waiting for the morning heat to thaw the November ground.

Maria followed the trail Bess had created, down to the pier: the lighthouse squatting, its all-seeing eye a sentinel for the harbour. She paused, breathing in the air once again, eyes closed and cheeks ruddy. Since she'd been made redundant from the newspaper in the summer, she'd been happier. She never expected the feeling of utter calm...of serenity, never expected to embrace her enforced retirement with relief. She had known though, that once she *had* retired, her relationship with Callum would disintegrate. He knew it, too. Maybe that's why she'd put it off before. It was obvious that her endless hours in the office, getting home late and only having a couple of hours for supper and TV before bed, had meant they

could just about tolerate each other. But she was going to be sixty next year. She wasn't going to waste her time in a perpetual cycle of destruction. And since he'd been gone, she'd been sober. Twenty-seven days, seven hours, twelve minutes. It was ironic, when she looked back on it later, that whilst mulling over this newfound contentment, she'd come across him. A vision materialising in tangible horror.

'Bess? What's all the fuss about? Come on, now,' she yelled into the darkness. She looked up to the sky again. It had clouded over, seeming darker in the few minutes since she'd left the house. Bess was barking with an urgency she couldn't ignore. *What has she found?* Maria clambered over the rocks, reaching the pebbly shore. A couple of inches of water lapped up over her wellies. Bess bounded back, excited, urging Maria to follow. 'Damned dog, it's too cold for this,' she muttered. But she followed anyway, her journalist's instinct overpowering her sense of comfort.

It seemed an eternity before she managed to get down, beneath the pier, but when she did, her throat constricted. She gaped at what Bess was sniffing. A black mound of material slouched sadly against the pillar. Faded black graffiti tags circled each column, declaring territory before the sea would take hold again in an hour's time. Someone was there. Her immediate thought was that it was a dead body, washed up after falling in somewhere up the coast after a night out, but as she got closer, she knew exactly who it was.

'Callum? Callum?' she repeated, instinctively looking for signs of life, touching his neck and cupping his face. His skin was grey, his clothes soaking. *Goodness knows how long he's been here.* She took his hand, which was submerged beneath the water. He wasn't dead. She knew she must move him, or he'd drown. Pulling on his arm, she whispered with urgency in his ear, 'Callum! Wake up!' Nothing. She shook him, his head lolling onto his shoulder.

‘Whaaaa’, he snorted. A familiar sound which would announce his consciousness after a heavy night. *The stupid sod*, she thought. *Stupid enough to drown himself*. At least he was conscious. Now time to get him up and to safety.

‘Callum, you silly old bastard. Get yourself up. Go on. Get!’

‘Wha? Where um I? Maria? What you doin’? Leave us alone, will you.’ Slurring his words. ‘What the fuck am I doing here? Why am I all wet?’ he started to become more aware, alert and clambering onto all fours like a startled animal.

‘You’re in the bloody water. You’re under the pier. Come on, the tide is coming in. Get yourself up.’ Maria straddled him and pulled him more insistently under both armpits. She could smell his staleness, a sourness of alcohol.

‘Alright, alright. Just give us a minute.’ He coughed, pushing her aside and using the pillar to pull himself up, he got to his feet and followed her up the beach. He collapsed, shivering and gasping.

‘Callum. We need to get you inside to the warmth. Looks like you’ve had a heavy night. Bourbon was it?’ she sneered.

‘What? No, no. I haven’t. I was coming to tell you...’ He sounded more lucid now, coming round with clarity. His speech ebbed: ‘Am I in Havenport?’ he asked, looking around staring up at the towering rockface. He stopped, face drained and looking greyer than ever. ‘Oh...my god.’ he wheezed with eyes wide. He jerked and leaned over, vomiting onto the ground.

She waited for him to stop retching. She’d seen this all before. ‘Get up, Callum. You need to get warm,’ Maria repeated.

‘I can’t. Oh my god. What have I done?’ he spoke with despair, his voice quavering.

‘I imagine you’ve had a skinful, Callum. Now, I’m not going to tell you again. Get up!’ she yanked him, cheeks reddening with heat despite the chill and the increasing wind that

blew down from the cliff top, across the field to the shore. He scrambled onto his feet, snatching glances up to the road.

The wind circled, whipping up around their ankles, but somehow, she managed to drag him up the hill, across the field and into the porch of the cottage where she sat him on the wicker chair, peeling his sodden boots from his feet. She took a step back and looked at him again: grey socks puddled on the tiled floor, navy trousers ripped at the knees, clumps of mud and sand congealed around the ankles. She unbuttoned his coat, heavy with water. It was ruined but she hung it up regardless. She started to remove his woollen jumper, noticing tiny shards of glass in his curly, grey hair. She picked one out.

‘What’ve you been doing, Callum? Why’ve you got glass in your hair?’ She leaned down to look him in the eyes. He leaned around her – she was blocking his vision through the window, a look of concentration as he strained his eyes over her shoulder. *What was he looking at? The cliff? The road?*

‘Maria, are they blue flashing lights? Is that the police?’ he suddenly exclaimed, standing up, his trousers gathered around his ankles.

‘Callum, knock it off, will you? Just get these sodding clothes off...get into the front room and warm up. I’ll get the fire going.’

‘No - it is, Maria. The police are up there on the top road!’

She looked again at the cliff top from the porch window. Sure enough, blue flashing lights were up there. Stationary. She froze – *what had he done?*

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ her voice wavering for a moment. ‘Sit inside - tell me what happened.’ Like a small child, he obeyed. She guided him to an armchair, placing a tweed throw over his shoulders, then kneeled at the fireplace, arranging kindling in the grate.

‘The police. They’ll know I’m here. They’ll come.’ He spoke with resignation, fear no longer in his voice.

‘Where’s your car?’ she asked tentatively. He must have had an accident on the top road. It didn’t take much to work it out – the glass in his hair, his gaze up in that direction. He’d been banned from driving before. It’d only been about six months since he’d got his licence back.

‘I needed to see you – tell you...I’ve stopped drinking. I’ve properly knocked it on the head, Maria. Properly. I wanted you to be proud of me. I’ve been sober a week.’

She stared with incredulity. Sober? A week? She’d known him for ten years. There was no chance he’d stopped drinking – not to mention the stale, sour stench emanating from him. But she kept quiet. If she was going to get answers, interrogation and accusation was not going to work.

‘I was on my way to tell you. I was excited. But I...I...on the road...’ he started sobbing, barely legible and disjointed. Between choked sobs she heard enough snippets to get the idea. ‘...came out of nowhere. I swear - can’t have my license revoked again...job in Carlisle. I need to drive...What to do, Maria?’ his voice increased in pitch. He was begging. He was pathetic.

‘What was it you hit? A tree? Remember that time you veered off the road and ended up in a ditch? Are you sure it wasn’t something like that?’ she held her breath, hoping it wasn’t more serious but alarmed by the blue flashing lights on the top road.

‘I saw her eyes. Oh Maria...’ more sobbing and choking. Snot and tears smeared as he wiped the throw across his face. ‘I hit her. I saw her eyes. She was looking straight at me, but I couldn’t stop in time. It was on the bend.’ He lowered his head, placing it between his knees.

Maria froze, mind racing. *She?* Who was it? Who lived up there? Who would be out early in the morning? *Isabella*...Sally’s girl did the paper round and had been delivering the

Gazette since she was thirteen. Maria expected her copy about 7:30am. That was ten minutes ago. Isabella was always on time.

‘Callum.’ She whispered, feeling a sickness rise to her throat. ‘Tell me *exactly* what happened.’

‘I have. Literally that *is* all that happened. I turned the bend, and it was dark...y’know the streetlights are few and far between up there. And then...I just saw eyes. The next thing I remember, I’m climbing out of the car. It’s still up there. I saw blood all over the road. I just ran. I was trying to get here. To find you.’

‘How did you end up at the pier?’

‘I don’t know. I think I was trying to cut across. I remember stumbling and I fell, down the shingle from the road. I...I was scared. I *am* scared. Oh, what have I done?’

She knew what he had done. He’d done something terrible. So terrible that he’d gone to hide and almost drowned. There was a sad desperation in his eyes as he looked back up at her, seawater dripping from his limp fringe.

‘I’ve got to call the police. Let them know you’re here.’ She wanted him out. She wanted nothing to do with him. If what he said was true, he may have killed that girl.

‘No! They will take my licence away!’

She stared at him, open-mouthed. Take his licence? How could he think that was a priority? He should be locked up. He should rot.

She headed to the telephone in the hallway and as she picked up the receiver, there was a hard knock at the door. Looking up, she recognised the tall silhouette of an officer, the blue lights a giveaway. Thank god. She knew Bruce, the officer, from her work at the Gazette. And those other times he’d called over. Their familiarity centred around Callum.

‘Bruce,’ she greeted with relief. ‘He’s through there. In the front room.’

‘Is he ok? His car was in a right mess, Maria.’ Bruce had a look of concern on his face. He seemed genuine.

‘Who cares, Bruce! How is the girl, is she alright?’

‘Girl? What girl?’

‘He told me he hit a girl. You mean you haven’t found her? Check the undergrowth. The impact may have thrown her—’

‘Wait!’ interrupted Bruce, ‘Maria...no girl has been hit. It looks like Callum hit a deer. It made a right mess, blood all over the road. It’s dead. No one else was hurt. They are lethal those things, always prancing into the road. I’m amazed Callum could walk over here. I was passing. Had to close the road. I assumed he’d come down here to get help.’

She was aware of a heat at her back. Callum was leaning close behind her. ‘You think I hit a child? Maria? I’m sorry – I didn’t – you must have misunderstood – I wouldn’t...’

‘Callum. You’ve been at it again, have you? C’mon mate. I think we need to take you to the hospital and just get you checked over, yeah.’ Bruce said, another officer approaching, an arm out to escort Callum to the van.

‘But I’m not wearing anything. I’m just in my underwear.’

‘That’s ok. We have stuff in the van. C’mon. Let’s go. You know the routine.’

Callum looked at Maria as he was led away, much like the way Bess might look at her when she went out without her. Bruce lingered for a moment.

‘Look, Maria. We found this in the car. It was obviously an accident with the deer, but this didn’t help.’ Bruce placed a bottle of Jack Daniels in her hand. ‘He was on his last chance, Maria. This one’s full, but there’s another one in the car. It’s empty. It’s not going to play out well. We’ll do the breath test now, but we both know the result.’

She held the bottle of whiskey tightly as Bruce walked away and into the van, pulling off as the watery sun finally emerged from the dissipating clouds. Without hesitation, she

unscrewed the lid, raising it to her nose and inhaling deeply for a few seconds. Then, tipping it up on its end, she poured the contents on the gravel driveway just as Isabella arrived with the Gazette.