

Chapter 1

Ripples

‘We are programmed well how to forget.’

Kirsty’s car splashed along wet tarmac heading south, from Edinburgh on the east coast road. Casually negotiating the final bend of a narrow lane she arrived at a beach, having already anticipated brown churning waves crested with cream. To take this detour on her way home and observe the sea in all its moods had become routine. The broad tyres of her Range Rover crunched onto the gravel car park. Sighing deeply she silenced the engine before embracing the steering wheel, aware that in spite of such turbulence, the tide was on the ebb. Windscreen wipers intermittently dispersed sea spray and rain drops carried on the wind. One finger pressed open the window, empowering fierce gusts of salt laden wind to dishevel her auburn curls. Sometimes she might walk barefoot, squashing sand between her toes, but not on this day when wind rocked the car and moisture shimmered on black metal. The icy draught caused her to shiver, but endured as an aid to annul the turmoil of a working week and city traffic. She sat, a lone figure contemplating his words, until the greyness of winter twilight grew into to a black starless night. When the churning sea-swell became barely visible, with reluctance she admitted it was time to go home.

The ignition key sparked life again beneath the bonnet, but before releasing the handbrake she shouted out into a wild January night.

‘We are programmed well how to forget.’

To hear Kirsty talk in the school staffroom of her husband Toby, would suggest a degree of pride. He seemed to have flair to invent exactly the right marketing slogan for any product. This, coupled with his artistic ability and ruthless pursuit of success, proved a winning formula for growth. He worked independently, running his business from a small office in North Berwick High Street, where this lone venture rapidly expanded. Toby was slick and efficient, ensuring new work came through recommendation from satisfied customers.

Kirsty enjoyed teaching nine year olds at St Mungo’s. The age appealed because they were still innocent, but more house trained, as she put it, than her friend Diane’s group of infants. That afternoon her class enjoyed a visit from a former SAS soldier. It tied in nicely with project work they were doing on the Second World War, and provided some understanding as to why the army was

still needed today. Mr SAS was diplomatic, putting most of his focus on peace and negotiation, deftly avoiding any preference for blood, gore and guns. Carefully chosen words were pitched with candour appropriate to the age group he addressed. He brought pictures of himself in uniform and also some exhibiting a variety of army equipment. While he talked Kirsty observed his highly polished brown brogues, finding it preferable to study them in detail rather than risk eye contact. That is, until time ran out for the pupils to ask any more questions. Pre-rehearsed thank you speeches were delivered by a girl and a boy, which precipitated a spontaneous round of applause. Two of the more responsible children were delegated to escort Mr SAS to the staffroom.

‘I’ll join you shortly,’ she promised.

Five minutes after the home bell rang, she made her way along the corridor. Mr SAS was standing at ease with his hands behind his back looking out of the window at a tidal wave of children surge across the playground, eager to escape the school gates.

‘Thank you. I think your talk was a great success,’ she said. ‘Can I get you a cup of something?’

He nodded, only half turning in her direction, ‘Please, tea would be nice.’

Just then Marjorie, who taught Primary 4, rushed in.

‘God Almighty, Kirsty, what an afternoon. Please tell me I’m allowed to strangle just one of the little darlings.’ Then noticing an unknown man by the window laughed nervously. ‘Oops, only joking.’

He remained standing while the ladies sat and Marjorie complained how many reports she still had to write, insisting she’d rather clean the loo than settle to the task. Kirsty only half listened as she studied the stranger in their midst, wondering what made a man like him want to become a soldier in a crack regiment.

‘Well, these reports won’t write themselves,’ said Marjorie at last. ‘I’m going to love you and leave you.’

Mr SAS turned and smiled at Kirsty when her colleague left the room.

‘Truly dedicated,’ he said tipping his head to the side in the direction of the closed door. ‘Can’t stand people who are half-hearted about their chosen profession. I sense you are not.’

Blushing she said ‘I know the children will be talking about your visit for days to come,’ managing to fix her face to resemble a smile. It was then she asked the question which had prodded at her for the entire afternoon. ‘Have you ever killed another person?’

With no visible reaction he responded politely, ‘we are programmed well how to forget.’ Then looking at his watch, suggested it was time to go and how nice it had been to meet her.

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Early the following morning Kirsty leapt out of bed to pick up the phone, hoping she would not disturb Toby's Saturday slumber.

'Sam! What's wrong? Are you OK?' she said having noticed the number on display.

'Yes I'm alright but do have some sad news.'

'Aunt Maud?' said Kirsty.

'No not Maud. Poor old Aunt Cressida died this morning.'

'Aunt Cressida,' she said with surprise, moving quietly into the large open-plan kitchen, furthest away from the bedroom. She sat on the edge of one of their large leather armchairs.

'Yes totally unexpected, a heart attack. She was taken into hospital just after midnight, but apparently died about an hour ago. The precise time Maud told me was 5.40.'

'Oh that's sad. Poor Cressida.'

'I know, Aunt Maud has asked if I can go to Victoria Terrace immediately to console her. I think Cressida will be sorely missed, she was a great soother.'

'And can you? Go, I mean, yes she was, even if these last few years she preferred her own solitude.'

'Yes certainly I can go, but won't get there much before lunchtime. I have some days owing, so I'll call the office and take Monday off. How are you?'

'Me, oh fine. As ever. Busy, you know the usual round of work, domesticity and all that.'

Sam sighed, 'Who would have thought, Maud the last survivor?'

'True, but then nothing with her should ever surprise. We should know that by now.'

Sam laughed.

'Yes indeed. Do you remember when we were children and she made us eat every scrap of food on the plate and you struggled with the kidney in her home-made pie?'

'Oh God, yes I do. The texture made me want to gag, but it was terrifying to imagine being sick all over her wonderfully pristine lace table cloth.'

They both laughed, 'Well you managed to avoid that disaster.'

There followed speculation as to when the funeral might be, Sam promised he would call immediately as soon as arrangements became definite. He could arrange to take more days off if needed.

'I shall speak to Aunt Maud later,' she said, 'and remember if you need any help with anything just phone.'

'Thanks, it's such a pity it has to be a funeral that brings us together again.'

In a state of shock, Kirsty returned to the bedroom and sat gently on the bed, observing her husband as he slept. A surge of love for his handsome features, his mop of black hair and the pout of his lips wafted over her. Watching the perfect rise and fall of his shoulders she remembered Aunt Cressida playing the

piano while her mother and Maud looked on with admiration. Sam, the fair haired happy boy who idolised his father, Matthew. The family as she knew it had dwindled. Toby snored gently, he was her family now. During such moments she accepted no one was perfect and marriage was about generosity and tolerance. She left him to sleep.

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‘Did I hear the phone?’ he asked an hour later, rubbing his eyes as he approached Kirsty sitting at the breakfast bar.

‘You did, it was Sam.’

‘Who?’

‘Sam, my cousin, Matthew’s son.’

‘What did he want at such an early hour on a weekend when all sane people are asleep?’

‘Aunt Cressida died this morning.’

‘Oh,’ he helped himself to orange juice from the fridge. ‘Was that expected?’

‘No,’ she placed her empty glass on the worktop, indicating she wanted it refilled. ‘She was OK, or so we thought. A heart attack late last night, seemingly. The ambulance took her to hospital in Eastbourne but sadly she died around half five.’

‘I don’t suppose they know when the funeral will be yet?’ enquired Toby.

‘Sam promised to let me know as soon as possible. I imagine it will be towards the end of the week.’

‘Well, I hope it isn’t Thursday because I need you to go to a meeting on Wednesday evening. The Buccap crowd in the Eagle Hotel. Just the usual sort of thing drinks, canapés, networking.’

Kirsty said nothing, but he noticed her eyebrows knitting in a frown, ‘No need to look like that. I can’t go, Jo Langford is coming up from London to sign a contract. I need a representative at this do. PR and all that good stuff. You know the drill.’

Instantly adding lavish praise, claiming she was greatly respected in such circles, and perhaps should work for him full time.

‘I’ll make you some porridge?’ she said moving away from him.

Kirsty stirred the contents of the saucepan and looked absentmindedly across at the flats opposite. Sometimes shadowy figures moved at the windows so deduced that she too might be observed working in her kitchen. She hated not having a sea view from their flat in North Berwick. To purchase a property which did encompass waves and boats on the distant horizon cost an extra six thousand pounds. Toby refused to pay, not out of any claim to poverty, but insisted a five-minute walk could serve the purpose. There was a time she

would have kissed his cheek when presenting a steaming bowl of oatmeal. Any such dilemma dissipated, as his focus remained centered on the vivid orange filled glass. Kirsty had no previous experience of serious relationships. He had been her first and only boyfriend and they married young.

While they ate she was entertained with tales of sealing a contract with Frank McCardle, managing director of Benisom Books. Kirsty took care to praise her husband's business skills until he glowed.

'One thing I can always do is make you laugh. I like to hear you laugh,' he said.

Wiping her mouth on the red paper napkin, she blew a kiss across the table, before he moved to watch television. As she tidied the kitchen grunting noises could be heard as he scanned through the channels.

'Come and give me a cuddly,' he said when she eventually finished her chores.

'Diane had a funny one,' she started snuggling beside him. 'You know she takes the infant class? Well, she was reading *Cinderella*, with oodles of dramatic effect. When she got to the bit where *poor Cinderella was left all alone ...*'

'Shhh, I want to listen to this,' Toby said, having finally settled on the History Channel. Exerting a gentle squeeze on her shoulder, suggesting she should obey.

'I shall ...'

'Shhh, this is interesting,' he insisted becoming irritated.

Soon her eyes felt heavy, 'It's been a big week, think I'll have a lie down for a while and leave you in peace.'

'OK, on you go. I'll shout when it's lunch time.'

Efficient central heating ensured the bedroom had become stiflingly hot. Kirsty opened the window and lay spread-eagled on the bed, allowing cool air to circulate round her uncovered body. The curtains billowed, admitting an orange aura radiating from a street lamp still lit on the street below. The television had been silenced, which probably meant Toby was on the computer.

In her imagination she saw them lying together in this king-size bed between luxurious Egyptian cotton sheets. He kissed her brow with credible tenderness, it felt so real, as she drifted into sleep. The dream woke her, the one which often replayed unaltered, until she became convinced it was communicating some kind of message for to her to grasp and comprehend. It was always the same depicting, a slender, handsome woman standing outside a white-painted church with a headscarf framing her well-proportioned face. She stood with her back to a church door looking down from an elevated position onto a fairground below.

Sometimes the image was accompanied with an aura of menace which gripped Kirsty, making every nerve of her being tingle.

It was not the first dream believed to contain a message but the fairground, with its easy charm to mesmerise, had somehow clawed its way inside this woman. Why?

Toby dismissed her thoughts, saying, 'It's meaningless, no point in fretting over imaginary people?'

But Kirsty hated her inability to understand.

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Stretching and sitting up, she lifted a cardigan from the bedside chair, then returned to the kitchen where her husband had opened a tin of soup and made ham sandwiches. Over lunch Toby read the newspaper while she talked, conveying how sad she felt to think Aunt Cressida was gone. This aunt had always been considered the peacemaker in the family. Philippa, Kirsty's mother, once said when talking about their brother Matthew, not even Cressida could make a difference. Aunt Maud referred to Matthew, when he was alive, as 'estranged'. She insisted to say more could bring shame upon the family.

Toby showed little interest when she told him that according to Aunt Maud, Matthew's unsavoury relationship with some actress type cost him a marriage to a perfectly respectable girl whose father was, after all, a doctor. Then raising her voice slightly in an effort to provoke some sort of response she said 'Cressida was the only one ever to meet her, properly, to actually talk to the woman. Apparently she was actually quite nice, if a bit different from the norm.'

'The norm!' scoffed Toby from behind his newspaper.

A silence descended between them until he said 'Right, I'm going for a shower. Just don't ask or expect me to attend any funeral. Far too much going on at work.' Then, over his shoulder as he disappeared out of the room, 'And don't forget I need you for that meeting on Wednesday night.'

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'In reality, she was a hideous creature,' Aunt Maud emphasised the word hideous. Intrusive sunlight penetrated frayed window blinds, piercing Sam's eyes as he squinted to focus, and could only suppose his elderly aunt, as usual, knew best. He would have preferred to feel indifferent, but instead sadness wafted over him, because any opportunity to prove her wrong had died that morning with Cressida.

‘Be a dear and make me a cup of tea,’ she requested and retrieved a crisp lace handkerchief from her cardigan sleeve before adding, ‘Oh! And a biscuit would be nice, blue tin, left of the kettle.’

The smell of Maud’s life was most pungent around the three steps leading down to the kitchen. Sam paused for a moment before making his descent, to gaze into a large open cupboard which resembled a library crammed with Mills and Boon romances. Its distinct musty aroma of decaying paper was exactly the same as he remembered from his childhood visits.

Entering the kitchen brought a respite of temporary solitude. Although it was not yet noon it felt like an entire day had elapsed since Maud’s early morning summons to Victoria Terrace. The death left Maud the eldest of three sisters and one brother as the sole survivor. Maud had one daughter Victoria; Philippa, her younger sister by two years, had only Kirsty; Cressida, who was three years younger than her, had never married, and finally Matthew, the youngest, was Sam’s father.

He found himself wishing Kirsty did not live so far away and could be there to dilute Maud’s intensity. The reference to his stepmother being a hideous creature had induced acute discomfort.

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Kirsty fumbled frantically with the front door key, in order to answer the phone. It was Tuesday, which meant a staff meeting kept her later than usual at school. Picking up and trying not to sound too breathless, found it was Sam with information regarding the funeral evidently scheduled for Friday. He sounded tired.

‘It’s good to talk,’ she said as he unburdened details of life with Aunt Maud over the past few days. ‘Thanks for letting me know about the arrangements. See you Friday.’

‘OH! Wait, nearly forgot. There is a letter for you from Aunt Cressida.’

‘A letter from Cressida?’

‘Yes. The lawyer suggested I warn you to look out for it arriving.’

‘Oh!’

‘Yes, apparently she left a letter to be given to you when she died. I have no idea what it is all about. Anyways, now you know, so watch for it in the post.’