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What to do When Someone Dies
by
Nicci French

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Chapter One

Moments when your life changes: there will always be a before and an after, separated, perhaps, by a knock at the door. I had been interrupted. I was clearing up. I had cleared up yesterday's newspapers, old envelopes, scraps of paper, left them in the basket by the grate ready to make a fire after supper. I had just got the rice bubbling nicely. My first thought was that it was Greg and he had forgotten his keys, but then I remembered he couldn't have because he had taken the car that morning. Anyway, he probably wouldn't knock but shout through the letterbox. A friend, perhaps, or a neighbour, a Jehovah's Witness, a cold call from a desperate young man trying to sell dusters and clothes-pegs house-to-house. I turned away from the stove and went through the hall to the front door, opened it to a gust of cool air.

Not Greg, not a friend, not a neighbour, not a stranger selling religion or domesticity. Two female police officers stood in front of me. One looked like a schoolgirl, with a block fringe covering her eyebrows and jug ears; one was like her teacher, with a square jaw and greying hair cut mannishly short.

'Yes?' Had I been caught speeding? Littering? But then I saw an expression of uncertainty, even surprise, on both their faces and felt the first small prickle of foreboding in my chest.

'Mrs Manning?'

‘My name’s Eleanor Falkner,’ I said, ‘but I’m married to Greg Manning, so you could say . . .’ My words trailed away. ‘What is it?’

‘Can we come in?’

I led them into the small living room.

‘You’re the wife of Mr Gregory Manning?’

‘Yes.’

I heard everything, I noticed everything. I saw how the younger one looked up at the older one as she said the words, and I noticed she had a hole in her black tights. The older officer’s mouth opened and closed but didn’t seem synchronized with the words she was speaking so that I had to strain to make sense of them. The smell of risotto reached me from the kitchen, and I remembered that I hadn’t turned the ring off and it would be soggy and ruined. Then I remembered, with a stupid dullness, that of course it didn’t matter if it was ruined: nobody would be eating it now. Behind me I heard the wind fling a few dry leaves against the bay window. It was dark outside. Dark and chilly. In a few weeks’ time the clocks would go back. In a couple of months it would be Christmas.

She said, ‘I am very sorry, your husband has been in a fatal accident.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Though I did. The words made sense. Fatal accident. My legs felt as if they didn’t know how to hold me up any more.

‘Can we get you something? A glass of water, perhaps?’

‘You say . . .’

‘Your husband’s car left the road,’ she said slowly and patiently. Her mouth stretched and shrank.

‘Dead?’

‘I’m very sorry,’ she said. ‘Sorry for your loss.’

‘The car caught fire.’ It was the first time the younger woman had spoken. Her face was plump and pale; there was a faint smudge of mascara under one of her brown eyes. She wears contact lenses, I thought.

‘Mrs Falkner, do you understand what we have said?’

‘Yes.’

‘There was a passenger in the car.’

‘Sorry?’

‘He was with someone else. A woman. We thought . . . Well, we had thought it might be you.’

I stared dumbly at her. Did she expect me to produce identification?

‘Do you know who that would have been?’

‘I was just cooking supper for us. He should have been home by now.’

‘Your husband’s passenger.’

‘I don’t know.’ I rubbed my face. ‘Didn’t she have her bag with her or anything?’

‘They couldn’t recover much. Because of the fire.’

I put a hand against my chest and felt my heart beating heavily. ‘Are you sure it was Greg? There might have been a mistake.’

‘He was driving a red Citroën Saxo,’ she said. She looked down at her notebook and read out the registration number. ‘Your husband is the owner of the vehicle?’

‘Yes,’ I said. It was hard to speak properly. ‘Perhaps someone from work. He sometimes took them when he went to visit clients. Tania.’ I found, as I was speaking, that I couldn’t bring myself to care if Tania was also dead. I knew that later this might disturb me.

‘Tania?’

‘Tania Lott. From his office.’

‘Do you have her home number?’

I thought for a moment. It would be on Greg’s mobile, which was with him. I swallowed hard. ‘I don’t think so. It might be somewhere. Do you want me to look?’

‘We can find out.’

‘I don’t want you to think me rude, but I’d like you to go now.’

‘Have you got someone you can call? A relative or friend?’

‘What?’

‘You shouldn’t be alone.’

‘I want to be alone,’ I said.

‘You might want to talk to someone.’ The younger woman pulled a leaflet out of her pocket: she must have put it there before they’d left the station together. All prepared. I wondered how many times they did this in a year. They must get used to it, standing on a doorstep in all weathers with an expression of sympathy on their faces. ‘There are numbers here of counsellors who can help you.’

‘Thank you.’ I took the leaflet she was holding out and put it on the table.

Then she offered me a card.

‘You can reach me here you need anything.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Will you be all right?’

‘Yes,’ I said, more loudly than I’d meant to. ‘Excuse me, I think the pan might have boiled dry. I should rescue it. Can you let yourselves out?’

I left the room, with the two women still standing awkwardly in it, and went into the kitchen. I took the pan off

the hob and poked at the sticky mess of burned risotto with a wooden spoon. Greg loved risotto; it was the first meal he had ever cooked me. Risotto with red wine and green salad. I had a sudden clear picture of him sitting at the kitchen table in his shabby home clothes, smiling at me and lifting his glass in greeting, and I spun round, thinking that if I was quick enough I could catch him there.

Sorry for your loss.

Fatal accident.

This is not my world. Something is wrong, askew. It is a Monday evening in October. I am Ellie Falkner, thirty-four years old and married to Greg Manning. Although two police officers have just come to my door and told me he is dead, I know that can't be true because it happens in a world meant for other people.

I sat down at the kitchen table and waited. I didn't know what I was waiting for; perhaps to feel something. People cry when a loved one dies, don't they? Howl and sob, tears running down their cheeks. There was no doubt that Greg was my loved one, my dear heart, but I had never felt less like crying. My eyes were dry and hot; my throat ached slightly, as if I was coming down with a cold. My stomach ached too, and I put my hand on my belly for a few seconds and closed my eyes. There were crumbs on the surface, from breakfast. Toast and marmalade. Coffee.

What had he said when he left? I couldn't think. It had been just another Monday morning, grey sky and puddles on the pavement. When had he last kissed me? On the cheek or on the lips? We'd had a stupid argument on the phone that afternoon, just a few hours ago, about what time he was coming home. Had those been our last words? Little

bickering phrases before the great silence. For a moment I couldn't even remember his face, but then it came back to me: his curly hair and his dark eyes and the way he smiles. Smiled. His strong, capable hands, his solid warmth. It had to be a mistake.

I stood up, pulled the phone from its holster on the wall and punched in the number of his mobile. I waited to hear his voice and, after a few minutes, when I didn't, I put the phone carefully back and went to press my face to the window. There was a cat walking along the garden wall, very delicately. I could see its eyes shining. I watched until it disappeared.

I took a forkful of rice out of the pan and put it into my mouth. It had no taste. Perhaps I should pour myself a glass of whisky. That was what people did when they were in shock, and I supposed I must be in shock. But I didn't think we had any whisky in the house. I pulled open the drinks cupboard and gazed at the contents. There was a bottle of gin, a third full; a bottle of Pimm's, but that was for lazy, hot summer evenings a long way from here, from now; a small bottle of schnapps. I twisted the lid off and took an experimental sip, feeling its burning thread in my throat.

Burst into flames. Burst into flames.

I tried not to see his face on fire, his body consumed. I pressed the palms of my hands into the sockets of my eyes and the smallest sound escaped me. It was so quiet in the house. All the noises came from outside: the wind in the trees, the sound of cars passing, doors slamming, people getting on with their normal lives.

I don't know how long I stood there like that, but at last I went up the stairs, gripping the banisters and hauling my

weight from step to step like an old woman. I was a widow. Who was going to set the video for me, who was going to help me fail to do the crossword on Sunday, who was going to keep me warm at night, to hold me tight and keep me safe? I thought these things, but did not feel them. I stood in our bedroom for several minutes, gazing around me, then sat heavily on the bed – on my side, careful not to disturb Greg’s space. He was reading a travel book: he wanted us to go to India together. There was a bookmark a third of the way through. His dressing-gown – grey and blue stripes – hung on the hook on the door. There were slippers with their heels turned down under the old wooden chair, and on top of it a pair of jeans he’d worn yesterday with an old blue jumper. I went and picked it up, burying my face in the familiar sawdusty smell. Then I took off my own and pulled Greg’s over my head. There was a bald patch in one elbow and the hem was fraying.

I wandered into the small room next door to our bedroom, which, for the time being, served as a junk room, although we had plans for it. It was full of boxes of books and stray objects we’d never got round to unpacking, though we had moved to this house well over a year ago, as well as an old-fashioned bath with claw feet and cracked brass taps that I had picked up from a reclamation centre and had planned to install in our bathroom once I had done something about the taps. We had got stuck carrying it up the stairs, I remembered, unable to go backwards or forwards and giggling helplessly, while his mother had shouted useless instructions at us from the hallway.

His mother. I had to call his mother and father. I had to tell them that their eldest son was dead. I felt breathless and

had to lean against the door jamb. How do you break that kind of news? I returned to the bedroom and sat on the bed once more, picking up the phone that was on my bedside table. For a moment, I couldn't remember their number, and when I did, I found it hard to press the buttons. My fingers weren't working properly.

I hoped she wouldn't answer, but she did. Her high voice sounded aggrieved to be called at this late hour.

'Kitty.' I pressed the receiver to my ear and closed my eyes. 'It's me, Ellie.'

'Ellie, how –'

'I've got some bad news,' I said. And then, before she could draw breath to say anything: 'Greg's dead.' There was complete silence from the other end, as if she had hung up. 'Kitty?'

'Hello,' she said. Her voice had dwindled; she sounded very far away. 'I don't quite understand.'

'Greg's dead,' I persisted. 'He died in a car crash. I've only just heard.'

'Excuse me,' she said. 'Can you hold on a moment?'

I waited and then another voice came on the line, in a kind of gruff, no-nonsense bark. 'Ellie. Paul here. What's this?'

I repeated what I'd said. The words were becoming more and more unreal.

Paul Manning gave a short, nervous cough. 'Dead, you say?' In the background I could hear sobbing.

'Yes.'

'But he's only thirty-eight.'

'It was a road accident.'

'A crash?'

‘Yes.’

‘Where?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if they told me; maybe they did. It was hard to take everything in.’

He asked me more questions, detailed questions, none of which I could answer. It was as if information would give him some kind of control.

Then I dialled my parents’ number. That’s what you do, isn’t it? Even though you may not be close to them, that’s the right order. His parents, then my parents. Chief mourners. But there was no reply and I remembered that Monday was quiz night at the pub. They would stay until closing time. I depressed the button and sat for a few seconds listening to the dialling tone into my ear. The alarm clock on Greg’s side of the bed told me it was thirteen minutes past nine. Hours to go before morning came. What was I supposed to do until then? Should I start calling people, telling them the news in descending order of importance? That was what you did when a baby was born – but was it the same when a husband had died? And who should I tell first? Then it came to me.

I found her home number in Greg’s old address book. The phone rang several times, four, five, six. It was like a terrible game. Answer the phone and you’re still alive. Don’t answer and you’re dead. Or perhaps just out.

‘Hello.’

‘Oh.’ For a moment I couldn’t speak. ‘Is that Tania?’ I asked, although I knew it was.

‘Yes. Who’s this?’

‘It’s Ellie.’

‘Ellie. Hi.’

She waited, probably expecting an invitation. I took a deep breath and said the nonsense words again. ‘Greg’s dead. In an accident.’ I cut into the expressions of horror that came down the line. ‘I rang you because, well, I thought you might have been with him. In the car.’

‘Me? What do you mean?’

‘He had a passenger. A woman. And I assumed, you know, that it was someone from the office, so I thought . . .’

‘Two of them died?’

‘Yes.’

‘Christ.’

‘Yes.’

‘Ellie, how awful. God, I can’t get my head around this. I’m so incredibly . . .’

‘Do you know who it could have been, Tania?’

‘No.’

‘He didn’t leave with anyone?’ I asked. ‘Or go to meet anyone?’

‘No. He left about half past five. And I know he’d said earlier he was going to get home in good time for once.’

‘He said he was coming straight home?’

‘I assumed that. But, Ellie . . .’

‘What?’

‘It might not mean what you’re thinking.’

‘What am I thinking?’

‘Nothing. Listen, if there’s anything, anything at all, I can do, you only have to –’

‘Thanks,’ I said, and put the phone down on her.

What was I thinking? What might it not mean? I didn’t know. I only knew it was cold outside, and that time moved sluggishly on, and there was nothing I could do to make it

go faster. I crept downstairs and sat on the sofa in the living room, Greg's jersey pulled down over my knees. I waited for it to be morning.

Chapter Two

The sound of the newspaper and then, a few minutes later, a bundle of post being pushed through the letterbox and hitting the mat was a reminder that the world was outside, trying to get in. Soon there would things to do, duties to fulfil, responsibilities, observances. But first I phoned Tania again. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I wanted to catch you before you went to work.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it all night,’ she said. ‘I’ve hardly slept. I can’t believe it.’

‘When you get in, could you check who Greg was seeing yesterday?’

‘He just spent the day at the office, then left to go home.’

‘He might have called in on a client on his way, dropped something off. If you could have a look at his diary . . .’

‘I’ll do anything, Ellie,’ said Tania, ‘but what am I looking for?’

‘Ask Joe if Greg said anything to him yesterday.’

‘Joe wasn’t in the office. He was on a visit.’

‘It was a woman.’

‘Yes, I knew that. I’ll try.’

I thanked her and put the phone down. It rang instantly. Greg’s father had questions he wanted to ask me. He sounded formal and rehearsed, as if he had written them down before speaking to me. I wasn’t able to answer any of them. I had already told him everything I knew. He told me

that Kitty hadn't slept the whole night and I wondered if he was making a point about who was mourning most. When he put the phone down, I felt I had failed a test. I wasn't being an adequate wife. Widow. The word almost made me laugh. It wasn't a word for people like me. It was for old women with headscarves, pulling shopping baskets on wheels, women who had expected widowhood, had prepared for and accepted it.

I played over in my mind the exact moment when the policewoman had told me the news, that moment of transition. It was a line drawn across my life and everything after it would be different. I wasn't at all hungry or thirsty but I decided I ought to have something. I walked into the kitchen and the sight of Greg's leather jacket draped over one of the chairs hit me so that I could hardly breathe. I used to complain about that. Why couldn't he hang it on a proper hook, out of the way? Now I leaned down and tried to smell him on it. There would be a lot of moments like that. As I made myself coffee there were more of them. The coffee was Brazilian, a kind he always chose. The mug I took from the cupboard was from the gift shop of a nuclear-power station; Greg had got it as a joke. When I opened the fridge door, I was bombarded with memories, things he had bought, things I had bought for him, his preferences, his aversions.

I realized that the house was still almost as it had been when he had left it, but with every action I took, every door I opened, everything I used or moved, I was eliminating his presence, making him that little bit deader. On the other hand, how did that matter? He was dead. I took his jacket and hung it on the hook in the hall, the way I'd always nagged him to do.

My mobile was on the shelf there and I saw I had a text message – and then that it was from Greg, and for a moment I felt as though someone had taken my heart in their two hands and wrung it out like a flannel. With thick fingers, I called it up. It had been sent yesterday, shortly after I'd got upset with him for staying later at the office than he'd promised, and it wasn't very long: 'Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry. Im a stupid fool.' I stared at the message, then pressed the phone against my cheek, as if there was a bit of him left behind in the message that could enter me.

I took the coffee, his address book, my address book and a notebook and started to think of who I should call. I was immediately reminded of the party we had given earlier in the year, halfway between his birthday and mine. Same address books, same table and much the same sort of decisions. Who absolutely had to be invited? Who did we want? Who didn't we want? If we invited X, we had to invite Y. If we invited A, we mustn't invite B.

I felt as if my mind wasn't working properly and that I had to write everything down, so that I didn't forget someone or ring someone twice. There were close friends I would have to try to reach before they left for work. First of all, though, I rang my parents once more, dreading the call but knowing they would both be there at that time of morning.

My father answered and immediately called my mother so they were both on the line. Then they began telling me about a friend of theirs – did I remember Tony, who had just been diagnosed with diabetes and it was all because he ate too much, wasn't that a ridiculous thing and why couldn't people exercise control over their lives? I kept trying to

interrupt them and finally managed to insert a loud 'Please!' between two sentences and blurted it all out.

There was a sudden outpouring of emotion and then of questions. When had it happened? Was I all right? Did I need any help? Should my mother come over right now? Should they both come over? Had I told my sister or should she do that for me? And what about Aunt Caroline – she had to know? I told them I had to go, I would speak to them later, but right now I had calls to make and things to do. When I put the phone down, I thought about that. What were the things I had to do? There were death certificates to be signed. Wills to be read. A funeral. Did I have to do all that or did it happen automatically?

I needed to speak to Joe, Greg's partner and his dear friend. But I only got through to his answering-machine, and I couldn't bear to break the news like that. I imagined his face when he heard the news, his blazing blue eyes; he would be able to cry the tears I didn't yet seem able to. Tania would have to tell him for me. I thought she'd want to anyway; she was new to the company and adored Joe, as a schoolgirl adores a movie star.

I went through Greg's address book and mine and wrote out a list of forty-three people. It was a more select group than had been at our party. Then we had invited plenty of people we hadn't seen since the previous year's party, some neighbours, people we were gradually losing touch with. They would find out on the grapevine, or when they got in touch with me, or perhaps some would never find out. They would wonder occasionally what had happened to old Greg and Ellie and then they would think of something else.

I got the phone and started calling the people roughly in

the order they had come out of my address book and then out of Greg's. The first was Gwen Abbott, one of my oldest friends, and the last was Ollie Wilkes, the one cousin Greg had stayed closely in touch with. Making that first call, I could hardly punch out the number, my hands were trembling so much. When I told Gwen and heard her cry of shock and surprise, I felt that I was experiencing it all over again, except that it was worse because the blow was struck on bruised and broken flesh. After I had put the phone I simply sat, almost gasping for breath, as if I was in thin air at high altitude. I felt I couldn't go through with it, reliving the moment through other people over and over again.

But it got easier. I found a form of words that worked and practised it before making the calls. 'Hello, this is Ellie. I've got some bad news . . .' After a few times, I became quite calm about it. I managed to steer each conversation and bring it to a fairly quick close. I had a few set phrases. 'I have things to do'; 'I'm sorry, I can't really talk about him at the moment'; 'That's very kind of you.' It was worst with his dearest friend Fergus who had loved Greg for much longer than I had. He'd been his running companion, confidant, surrogate brother, best man. He said, 'What will we do without him, Ellie?' I heard his dazed, cracked voice and thought, 'That's how I'm feeling too; I just don't know it yet. I felt about grief as if it was crouching out of sight in hiding from me, waiting to spring out and ambush me when I least expected it.'

Halfway through the list, there was an urgent knocking at the door and I opened it to find Joe standing there. He was in a suit and carrying the familiar slim briefcase that Greg used to tease him about, saying it was always empty

and just for show. But although there were no bruises or injuries on him, he looked like a man who had been in a punch-up and come off worst, reeling, pale and glassy-eyed. Before I could speak, he stepped over the threshold and enveloped me in his embrace. All I could think of was how different he felt from Greg, taller and broader, with a different smell as well, soap and leather.

I wanted so badly to break down and cry in his arms, but somehow I couldn't. Instead Joe cried, tears coursing down his lived-in face, as he told me how wonderful my husband had been, and how lucky he was to have known me. He said I was family to him and that I must lean on him over the next few weeks. He kissed me on both cheeks and held my hands in his and told me very solemnly that I didn't have to be strong. He scoured the pan I'd burned the rice in, wiped the kitchen table and put out my rubbish bin. He even started trying to clear up some of the mess, lifting piles of paper and putting books on shelves in a frantic, utterly ineffectual way until I told him to stop. Then he left and I continued with my task.

When I had broken the news to someone, I ticked off their name on my piece of paper. Sometimes a child answered or a partner I didn't know or didn't know well enough. I didn't leave a message, I didn't even say who had called. I did less well on Greg's part of the list. By the time I got to them, people had started leaving for work. I didn't phone people's mobiles. I couldn't bear the idea of talking to people on trains, of them having to keep their voice down, getting embarrassed about their reactions in front of strangers.

I also got slowed up because by then the phone had started ringing. People I'd talked to had digested the news

and thought of things they needed to say, questions they wanted to ask. Friends had rung other friends and some of those friends immediately rang me and if they couldn't get through, they rang my mobile, which I switched off. Later I discovered that if they couldn't get through to my mobile, they'd sent me an email. But a lot of them did get through, one expression of grief after another, so that they seemed to merge into a continual howl. After each call, I wrote the name at the bottom of the list so that I wouldn't call them again by mistake.

One of the calls wasn't from a friend or relative, but from WPC Darby, one of the women who had broken the news to me. She asked how I was and I didn't really know what to say. 'I'm sorry to bother you,' she said, 'but did I say anything about identifying the body?'

'I can't remember,' I said.

'I know it's a difficult time,' she said, and there was a pause.

'Oh,' I said. 'You want me to identify the . . .' I stopped. 'My husband. But you came here. You told me about it. You know already.'

'It's a requirement,' she said. 'You could always nominate another family member. A brother or a parent.'

'No,' I said immediately. The idea was impossible. When Greg had married me, he had become mine. I wasn't going to let his family reclaim him. 'I'll do it. Should I do it today?'

'If you can.'

'Where is he?'

I heard a paper rustle.

'He is in the mortuary of the King George V hospital. Do you know it? Is there someone who can take you?'

*

I phoned Gwen and she said she would drive me to the hospital, even though I knew it meant she would have to phone in sick. I realized I was still in the clothes I had put on the previous morning. Greg had seen me put them on. Maybe he hadn't actually seen it. He was too used to me and too busy in the morning to sit and watch me but he had been bustling around when I was getting dressed. I took them all off, another bit of my life with Greg gone, and I stood in the shower under the very hot water, my head lifted into the jet and my eyes closed. I turned the water up hotter still as if it could scorch away what I was feeling. I dressed quickly, glanced in the mirror and saw that I was entirely in black. I took off my sweater and replaced it with a rust-coloured one. Sombre, but not like a Mediterranean widow.

Some people know instinctively how to respond to your moods. Gwen is like that. Greg and I once had a conversation about who of our friends never irritated us and she was the only name we both agreed on. She senses when to stand back and be dispassionate, even critical, when to come close, hug you, show you love and physical affection. Mary and I regularly argued, but Mary argues with most people, almost for the sake of it – you see a contrary gleam come into her eye and you know she's in one of her itchy, confrontational, emotionally volatile moods and there's nothing to be done about it except ride out the storm – or leave the room. I usually leave the room. But Gwen, with her soft mop of golden hair, her grey eyes, her quiet clothes, her calm and reflective manner, doesn't like to raise her voice. At university people who knew her called her 'the diplomat', a tag that was both admiring and sometimes slightly resentful, because she seemed to hold back from intimacy. But I

had always liked her reserve; it felt like a privilege to be let into her tiny circle of friends. Now, when I answered the door to her, she didn't open her arms, inviting me to step into them to cry and be comforted. Instead she looked at me with a grave tenderness, putting a hand on my shoulder but letting me decide if I wanted to break down or not. And I didn't. I wanted, needed, to hold myself together.

As she drove me towards the hospital in King's Cross, she didn't speak and allowed me to stay silent. I stared out of the window at passers-by, suddenly fascinated by the idea of people who were doing today what they had planned yesterday. Didn't they realize it was temporary? It might all seem to be going smoothly, but one day, tomorrow or the day after or in fifty years' time, the charade will come to an end.

We arrived at the hospital and discovered that we had to pay to park. I got suddenly and pointlessly angry. 'If we were going to the supermarket instead of to the morgue, we wouldn't have to pay.'

'Don't worry,' said Gwen. 'I've got the change with me.'

'What about people who come day after day?' I said. 'People with dying relatives.'

'You probably get a discount,' said Gwen.

'I wouldn't bet on it,' I said, and then I stopped, aware that I was behaving like those people I see shouting in the street, arguing with voices in their own head.

I experienced the hospital mainly as a succession of smells. Near the front desk there was a coffee shop of the kind you find in every shopping centre and high street. I could hear the hiss of cappuccino being frothed. There was a café as well. As we walked, the aroma of frying bacon

gradually gave way to the smell of floor polish, air-freshener, then the sting of cleaning fluids, carbolic and bleach, with an under-smell of something nasty. I hadn't been able to take in the instructions that the receptionist had given us but Gwen led me along corridors, down in a lift to a basement and another reception, with nobody in attendance.

'There's probably a bell or something,' Gwen said.

There wasn't. Gwen pulled a face. 'Hello?' she called.

There was the sound of footsteps and a man emerged from an office behind the reception desk. He was wearing a green coat, like someone at the counter of a hardware shop. He was very pale, as if he spent all his time down there underground, away from the sun. His stubble stood out plainly. While shaving he had missed a patch under his jaw. I thought of Greg shaving, holding his nose as he did the area beneath his nostrils. The man looked at us inquiringly.

'My friend is here to identify a body.'

He nodded in acknowledgement. 'I'm Dr Kyriacou,' he said. 'I'm a senior registrar. Are you a relative?'

'He's my husband,' I said. I wasn't ready to use the past tense yet.

'I'm very sorry for your loss,' he said, and for a moment I thought he really was sorry, as sorry as you could be when you expressed it every day, except for weekends and holidays.

'Do you need my name?' I said. 'Or his?'

'The deceased's,' said Dr Kyriacou.

'His name is Gregory Manning,' I said.

Dr Kyriacou rummaged through some files piled in a metal tray on the counter until he found the one he wanted.

He opened it and examined the papers inside. I tried to lean across and see but I couldn't read anything.

'Do you have any identification?' he asked. 'I'm sorry. It's a regulation.'

I handed him my driving licence. He took it and wrote something on his form. He frowned. 'Your husband's body was badly burned,' he said. 'This will be distressing for you. But may I say that in my experience it's better to see the body than not.'

I wanted to ask if that was really true, even after plane crashes, people hit by trains, but I couldn't speak.

'Do you want me to come with you?' Gwen asked.

Suddenly I felt possessive of the experience. I shook my head. She sat down and Dr Kyriacou led me along the corridor and into a room that looked as if it were full of filing cabinets with drawers four deep, but with handles like old-fashioned fridges. He glanced at the clipboard he was carrying, then walked to one and turned to me. 'Are you ready?' he asked.

I nodded. He pulled open the door and there was a rush of cold air into the already cold room. He drew out a tray. There was a body lying on it, covered with a sheet. Without hesitating he lifted a corner of the sheet. I couldn't stop myself gasping because now I knew, finally, decisively, that there was no mistake and that he was dead, my darling Greg, whom I'd last seen rushing out of the house, a half-eaten piece of toast between his teeth, so we hadn't even kissed.

I made myself look closely. His face was blackened by the fire, some of his hair was burned away and his scalp scorched. The only real damage was above his right eyebrow where there were signs of a terrible collision. I reached out

and touched some of his hair, then leaned forward and touched it with my lips. There was a strong smell of burning. 'Goodbye,' I whispered to him. 'My love.'

'Is this Gregory Manning?' said Dr Kyriacou.

I nodded.

'You need to say it aloud,' he said.

'Yes, it is.'

'Thank you,' he said, and wrote on his clipboard.

Dr Kyriacou took me back to Gwen and then a thought occurred to me. 'The other person in the crash. Is she here?'

'Yes,' he said.

I paused. I hardly dared ask the question. 'Do you . . .'
I began. 'Do you know her name?'

Dr Kyriacou rummaged through the files. 'Her husband came,' he said. 'Yes, here we are.' He looked at the front of the file. 'Milena Livingstone.'

Gwen looked at me. 'Who is she?'

'I've never heard of her,' I said.

Chapter Three

My little house filled with people. Filled with forms, with tasks, with long lists of what I had to do. Friends made me cups of tea and pushed pieces of toast at me that I tried to eat. The phone rang and rang. Gwen and Mary must have set up a rota between them, because as soon as one left it seemed that the other arrived. My parents turned up with an overcooked ginger cake in a tin I remembered from childhood, and bath salts. Joe came with whisky. He sat on the sofa, shook his head slowly from side to side in disbelief and called me 'darling'. Fergus arrived, his face ashen with shock; he called me 'sweetheart'. Everyone tried to hug me. I didn't want to be hugged. Or, at least, I didn't want to be hugged by anyone except Greg. I woke at night out of dreams in which he was holding me in his warm embrace, keeping me safe, and lay with dry, sore eyes, staring at the darkness, feeling the space in the bed beside me.

I needn't have worried about what I had to do for at every stage there were plenty of people to tell me. I had become part of a bureaucratic process and was channelled smoothly and efficiently towards the end point, the funeral. But before there could be a funeral, the death had to be registered, and for that, I discovered, there needed to be an inquest to establish the cause of death.

We used to talk about dying. Once, while drunk, we answered a questionnaire online that then provided you with

your date of death (me at eighty-eight, Greg at eighty-five), because death seemed ludicrously far away, a joke and an impossibility. If we had ever thought about it seriously, we would have assumed that when it came we would be old, and one of us would be holding the other's hand. But I hadn't been holding his hand and someone else had been with him. Milena Livingstone. The name crackled in my head. Who was she? Why had he been with her?

'Why do you think?' asked my mother, grimly, and I ordered her out of the house, slamming the door so hard behind her that little bits of plaster flaked to the floor.

'Why do you think?' asked Gwen, and I laid my head on the table, on top of all the bits of paper, and said I didn't know, I had no idea. But I knew Greg. He would never . . . I didn't finish the sentence.

'Tell me about her.'

'Who?' Joe looked at me with a grave, attentive expression.

'Milena. Who was she?'

'Ellie.' His voice was kind. 'I've already told you. I've no idea. I didn't know about her.'

'She wasn't a client?'

Joe and Greg were partners in their own business. Accountants are supposed to be thin, grey men in suits and glasses, but that certainly wasn't true of those two. Joe was flamboyant and charismatic. Women always gravitated towards him, drawn by his blue eyes, his wide smile, his air of utter attention. He was rather handsome himself, but Greg and I used to say that the real secret of his charm was that he made other people feel beautiful, special. He was

older than us, in his late forties, so he seemed like an uncle or a much older brother. And Greg – well, Greg was Greg. He used to say that if I'd known what he did for a living, I'd never have gone out with him. But I couldn't have known. We'd met at a party, a mutual friend of a friend's, and if I'd had to guess, I would have said he was a TV director, a writer, even an actor or a professional activist. He looked raffish and stylishly unkempt; there was a slightly dreamy, unworldly air about him. I was the one who was methodical and practical, whereas he was enthusiastic, untidy, boyish. Certainly not what I thought of as an accountant.

'No,' said Joe. 'I've looked through everything. Twice.'

'There must be an explanation.'

'Can't you think of anything?' This time his kind voice, pushing me gently to acknowledge the obvious, made me shudder.

'I would have known.' I glared at him. '*You* would have known.'

Joe put his hand on my shoulder. 'Everyone has secrets, Ellie. Both of us know how wonderful and adorable Greg was but, after all –'

'No,' I repeated, cutting him off. 'It's not possible.'

'Who was Milena?' I asked Fergus.

'I have no idea,' he replied. 'I swear he never mentioned anyone called Milena.'

'Did he mention . . .' I hesitated. 'Did he ever say he was . . . you know?'

'Having an affair?' Fergus finished the sentence I couldn't.

‘Yes.’

‘He adored you.’

‘That’s not the question.’

‘He never mentioned he was having an affair. Nor did I ever suspect that he might be. Not for a single second.’

‘And now?’

‘Now?’

‘Do you suspect he might have been?’

Fergus rubbed his face. ‘Honestly? I don’t know, Ellie. What can I say? You know I was in his office with him the day he died, working on the computers. He seemed completely normal. He talked about you. He never said anything that would make me suspect. Yet he died in a car with a strange woman whom no one seems to have heard of. What’s your explanation?’

The inquest was set for ten o’clock on Tuesday, 15 October, in the coroner’s court off Hackney Road. I was to attend and, if I wanted, I could ask questions of the witnesses. I could bring family and friends if I wished. It was open to the public and to the press. After the inquest, Greg’s death could be registered, I could collect the appropriate forms, E and F, and could set a date for the funeral.

I asked Gwen if she and Mary would come with me. ‘Unless it’s difficult for Mary to arrange childcare,’ I added. Mary had a young son, nearly a year old now. Until Greg’s death, the conversations between us had been dominated by nappies, first smiles, teething problems, cracked nipples, the swamping pleasures of maternity.

‘Of course we’ll come,’ said Gwen. ‘I’m going to cook you something.’

‘I’m not hungry and I’m not an invalid. Does everyone think she was another woman?’

‘I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. What do *you* think?’

What did I think? I thought I couldn’t survive without him, I thought he had abandoned me, I thought he had betrayed me. I knew, of course, that he hadn’t. I thought when I woke up at night that I could hear him breathing in the bed beside me, I thought a hundred times a day of things I needed to say to him, I thought I could no longer remember his face and then it returned to me, teasing and affectionate, or scorched into its death mask. I thought he should never have left me and it was his fault because he had chosen to go with her, and I thought, too, that I would go mad with not knowing who the woman was and yet if I discovered I should very likely go mad as well. Mad with sorrow, anger, or jealousy.

‘I’ve heard he was having an affair.’

My sister Maria’s voice sounded solemnly sympathetic. I could hear her baby crying in the background.

‘You’ve got to go.’ I banged the phone back into its holster.

An affair. Like death, affairs happen to other people, not me and Greg. Milena Livingstone. How old was she? What did she look like? All I knew about her was that she had a husband who had identified her body at the same morgue as Greg was in. Perhaps she’d been lying in the drawer above him. In death as in life. I shivered violently, feeling nauseous, then went upstairs to my laptop and turned it on, then Googled her name. There aren’t many Milena Livingstones around.

I clicked on the first reference and the screen was filled with an advertisement for a business, though at first I couldn't make out what it was. Something about everything being taken out of your hands and no detail left unattended to. Venues. Meals. I scrolled down. It seemed to be a glorified catering and party-arranging business for people with lots of money and no time. A sample menu. Tuna sashimi, sea bass marinated in ginger and lime, chocolate fondants. And here, yes, were the people who ran it, the hostesses.

Two photographs smiled at me from the screen. The face on the left was pale and triangular, with dark blonde hair cut artfully short, a straight nose and a restrained smile. She looked attractive, clever, classy. It wasn't her. No, it was the other one, with a tawny mane (dyed, I thought spitefully, and I bet she tosses it back all the time with one ringed hand; I bet she pouts), high cheekbones, white teeth, grey eyes. An older woman, then. A rich woman, by the look of it. A beautiful woman, but not the kind of beauty I'd ever expected Greg, who had fallen so heavily for me, to fall for. Milena Livingstone had a glamorous, artful look to her; her eyebrows were arched and her smile knowing. She was sure to have long, painted nails and immaculately waxed legs. A man's woman, I thought. But not my man. Surely not Greg. Bile rose in my throat and I turned off the computer without looking through any more references and went into the bedroom where I lay face down on my side of the bed. It was almost dark outside; the nights were getting longer and the days shorter.

I don't know how long I lay there like that, but at last I got up and went to the wardrobe. Greg's clothes hung on

the right-hand side. He didn't have many: one suit that we'd bought together for our wedding and he'd hardly worn since, a couple of casual jackets, several shirts. What had he been wearing when he died? I screwed my eyes shut and forced myself to remember – dark trousers and a pale blue shirt; his favourite jacket over the top. That was it: his non-accountant's accountant's outfit.

I started systematically to go through everything in the cupboard. I felt in each pocket, and found only a receipt for a meal we'd had in an Italian restaurant two weeks ago. I remembered: I'd been upset and he'd been patient and optimistic. A crumpled flyer for a jazz night that had been put under our windscreen wipers a few days ago. I pulled open the drawers where he kept T-shirts and underwear, but I didn't discover any lacy women's knickers or incriminating love letters. Everything was as it should have been. Nothing was as it should have been.

I stood in front of the mirror, examined myself and found myself wanting. I weighed myself and realized I was shrinking. I boiled myself an egg, broke open the top, then dabbed my spoon into the yellow yolk. I made myself eat half of it before I felt so sick I had to stop. I had stomach cramps, a grim, familiar backache, so I ran myself a bath and lowered myself into it, hearing the phone ring. I couldn't bear to answer it and heard Mary's voice saying into the answering-machine that poor little Robin was running a fever, she'd be round as soon as she could. I lay in the hot water and closed my eyes. Then I opened them and watched a curl of red blood run out of me and spread, then another.

So.

It wasn't to be, after all. Once again, as with all the other months of trying and hoping and praying, I wasn't pregnant, and Greg had died in his car with another woman and left me alone, and what on earth was I going to do now?