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# **The Kindest Thing**

Written by Cath Staincliffe

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# The Kindest Thing

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## Chapter One

It's my birthday tomorrow. Fifty. The big five-oh. I'm not having a party – I'll be in court. The charge is murder. More than one way to make the occasion memorable. Sorry. I'm being flippant. Fear does that to me. While it squeezes my insides and tightens my spine, my brain seizes on irreverent wisecracks and sarky comments. A defence mechanism, I guess. To hide how close I am to dissolving in terror at my situation.

The authorities find this verbal bravado very difficult to deal with. My lawyer soon cottoned on and told me to button it. Menopausal women with dead husbands are not meant to offer up smart remarks. Too bold. Too hard. It makes people uncomfortable – not least because for a nanosecond they share the humour. An expression of delight and hilarity flashes across their faces, chased away by frowns and winces. They wriggle in their seats, swallow and ease their stiff shirt collars with the hook of a finger. They expect a victim, all soft sighs and shame, begging for mercy. Not a backchatting bitch having a laugh. Different century and I'd have been fitted with a scold's bridle or floated on the village pond. Instead it's the Crown Court and the front pages of the nationals.

When the fear gets too large, when it threatens to devour me, like now, I drag my thoughts back to

Neil, to what we had, what we shared before it was all narrowed down to one infamous act. The good old bad old days.

I wish he were here with me. He could still me with a look. In his gaze I would find strength and love and an edge of amusement. No matter how dark things got, he always had that sardonic half-smile in him. And things got dark; they are dark. It's an illogical wish – if Neil were here, I wouldn't be. He's the reason I'm here.

I didn't like him the first time we met. Fancied – yes. Liked – no. He was beautiful but I mistrusted his confidence. Took it for arrogance. He was seated with his friends outside the pub. A hot September lunchtime. I was a fresher, heading back to the halls for something to eat. Feeling lonely and excited by the move to uni, unsettled and bound up tight, lurching from one event to the next and wondering how long it would all feel strange. He had his chair tilted back and he was talking loudly – no idea what he was saying but ripples and little explosions of laughter came from the people around him. There was a girl at his side, quirky-looking with a round pale face and shiny black hair cut like Cleopatra's. I assumed they were a couple. He caught my eye as I passed, just before I turned away, and I felt a little jolt of energy. Then he went on talking and there was more laughter and I'd a horrible fear they were laughing at me. Prat, I told myself, thinks he's God's gift.

The next few times I came across him, I made a point of ignoring him. I'd glimpse him out of the corner of my eye and force myself not to look his

way. I'd see him around the arts faculty and eventually worked out he was studying history. I had expected something flashier: theatre studies or fine art.

Later that term, there was a house party in one of the big villas that the university let to students. A cold night, November or maybe December. The place filled up quickly; most of them were second and third years. Jane and I went along. She'd started seeing one of the second years who rented the place but most nights she came back to halls and slept there. Jane was ambitious and intent on getting good grades. Her three older brothers had all graduated with honours and she had a lot to live up to.

Friends from my course and I were sitting in a corner in the main room bitching about our lecturers and the essays we had to do – though none of us would have swapped it for the world. Neil came in with Cleopatra and a couple of blokes. One was small and wiry, he wore a duffel-coat, and the other was a lanky lad with shocking blond hair who always dressed in black. I turned away and pretended to listen to my friends, but when I looked back Neil's gaze was locked on mine. And I held it. Just a beat too long. Then I went into the kitchen, aware he'd be heading that way for a drink. I poured some wine into a plastic cup.

He was beside me then. 'Deborah Shelley.' He knew my name.

'And you are . . .?' Me trying to be clever, as if I hadn't made a point of finding out exactly who he was.

But he saw right through me, burst out laughing, a rich, throaty sound, and leaned closer in. 'Very pleased to meet you,' he said archly. 'Come outside, come and talk to me.'

‘What about Cleopatra?’

He blinked; his eyes were the colour of green olives, his hair dark brown, almost black, brushing his shoulders. He realized I meant the girl. ‘Jackie? She’s gay. I don’t think she’ll mind. Not unless she’s got her eye on you.’

I blushed, a little startled. I hadn’t met any lesbians back then. Well, none that were out anyway, though at school we’d had our suspicions about the chemistry teacher. I drank some of the wine, cold and sharp. I hated blushing but he was kind and didn’t tease me any more.

‘Deborah.’ He said my name again, slowly, like a kiss, all three syllables.

‘It’s freezing out there.’

‘I’ll keep you warm. Look.’ He wore a greatcoat, a big heavy thing in grey, ex-army or something. It practically reached the ground. With his hands in his pockets he spread his arms out, flinging the coat wide open. An invitation.

I swallowed the rest of my wine.

He took my hand. His fingers were cool and long.

Outside, the garden was full of junk, old milk bottles, bakery trays and a broken dining chair, all frosted and glistening. There was just room to stand beside the door. I trembled. It could have been either the cold or the wine or the desire that flushed through my limbs and over my skin.

‘Kiss me,’ I said.

He raised a hand to tuck his hair behind his ear as he bent towards me.

I closed my eyes.

I fell in love.

\* \* \*



The day Neil died, when he'd stopped breathing, I lay down beside him on our bed. Hoping, I think, that I might gain some equilibrium, some respite after the horror. Wanting to stay there till the soft June sunshine rolled into night. Keeping a vigil if you like. Not ready to let him go. But I knew I had to phone the ambulance and let Sophie and Adam know that their father was dead.

I kissed Neil again, told him I loved him and got up off the bed. Panic crashed over me. My stomach spasmed and water flooded my mouth. I ran for the bathroom and was violently sick, the vomit forcing its way down my nostrils as well as out of my mouth, scouring my throat. While I washed my hands and face and brushed my teeth, a lump of fear lodged in my stomach. Why had I ever agreed?

Fetching the phone from the hallway, I returned to our room, watching Neil while I made the call. 'He's stopped breathing, my husband. I think he's dead.' After I'd given my name and the address, I called Adam. His phone went to voicemail. 'Come home, Adam, as soon as you can.'

Sophie knew straight away. 'It's Dad?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, Mum.' Her voice broke. 'Is he in hospital?'

'At home.'

She got back before the ambulance arrived. Found me upstairs sitting on the edge of the bed. Her hand covered her mouth. The room stank. Her eyes flew to her father. 'He was fine this morning,' she said.

'Yes.' In the scale of things. Better than dead, anyway.

'Have you tried anything – the breathing space kit?'

I froze, tried to swallow. ‘Sophie, it’s too late. Darling, I’m sorry.’ I walked over to her. She threw her arms around me and squeezed tight, sobbing into my neck. She wasn’t often physically demonstrative. Not with me. With Neil – yes. ‘Oh, Dad,’ she wailed. After a minute or two she pulled away.

‘It’s all right,’ I told her, ‘if you want to sit with him or hold his hand or anything.’

She looked at her father again, then shook her head. She went out of the room. I’d misjudged it, perhaps. She was fifteen and we were constantly second-guessing her reactions. Sophie was always so practical and sensible that it was easy to forget how young she really was. Unlike Adam.

I followed her down. I hated to leave Neil on his own. Sophie was on her phone. She ended the call as I came into the kitchen.

‘You didn’t tell Grandma.’ It sounded like an accusation.

‘Not yet. I thought you and Adam – you’ve told her?’

She nodded. She was being so grown-up. I realized that this was how she would deal with it now. She’d throw herself into the arrangements and help me with the tasks that needed doing and find a way to be useful.

‘Thank you,’ I said.

The doorbell rang. There was an ambulance outside, a man on the step. He checked that he’d come to the right place and signalled for his mate to join him.

‘He’s upstairs,’ I told them. ‘He’s been very ill.’ I led the way and the two men followed. One crossed over to Neil’s side and felt for his pulse. The other distracted me, asking questions: he’d been ill, what

with, which hospital was he being seen by, how had he been earlier that day.

‘He is dead,’ his colleague confirmed. I nodded. The door went again. I heard voices. Then Sophie calling me. The ambulance man examining Neil gestured that I could go.

Downstairs there was a young policeman. Sophie had seated him at the kitchen table. He stood up as I entered the room. He was one of those men whose jaw is wider than his forehead, giving him the look of a comic-book hero. He introduced himself as PC Stenner, and explained he was following up on reports of a sudden death.

I sat down opposite him. Sophie was making tea.

‘My husband Neil. He has motor neurone disease. I went to check on him this afternoon, about three o’clock. Anyway, he wasn’t breathing.’

‘Big shock,’ he offered.

‘Just a question of time, really. It’s a terminal illness.’

‘He’s not in hospital?’

‘There’s no treatment.’

His eyes fell for a moment. ‘I see. Well, the coroner will be informed, just a matter of routine. Any sudden death. But, like you say, if it was expected . . .’ He wrote a few lines in his notebook, then stood and spoke to Sophie. ‘I won’t be needing that cuppa, ta.’

Her hands stilled and she flexed her fingers, a little signal of frustration. ‘You can do one for me, love,’ I put in.

The policeman left, and then the ambulance men came downstairs and explained that they would be fetching a stretcher to remove Neil’s body. I tried Adam’s number again but it was still on voicemail.

Typical. If he got back in time for the funeral it would be a bloody miracle.

Sophie passed me my tea and I took it upstairs to the bedroom. The smell caught me afresh; I'd probably have to chuck the mattress. We'd never thought about that. The way a body empties on death.

The sun was glancing off Neil's hair, turning the grey at his temples into silver and bringing out the shine in the rest, still dark brown. His skin tanned in spite of death's pallor. He'd loved the sun. Had inherited his father Michael's skin colouring, not his mother's. Michael had Spanish ancestry while Veronica was Irish, complexion pale as milk and prone to burn. They were both small, Veronica was petite really, and Neil had towered over them. They joked he was their cuckoo child.

His parents arrived as the ambulance men were manoeuvring the stretcher down our stairs. Veronica was weeping noisily even as she came up the path. Sophie ran out to meet them and Veronica pulled her close. Michael moved on into the house, looking older and smaller, curly grey hair, a thick moustache. 'Deborah.' I moved into his arms.

He caught sight of the stretcher, let me go and moved to support his wife. Veronica groaned as the men brought Neil down. As they stepped on to the hall floor and straightened, she gave a wail and moved forward. 'My boy,' she cried. A fifty-year-old man. Ridiculous, perhaps, but I recognized the passion in her cry, the depth of her grief. If this had been my boy, my Adam . . . I started to cry, too. She loved Neil. I loved him. And now he was gone. Veronica clasped Neil's hand between her own and kissed it.

‘Where are you taking him?’ I asked the ambulance men. ‘Only my son . . .’

‘He’ll be at the mortuary. Once you’ve sorted out the funeral arrangements, you can arrange a viewing at the funeral home.’

Michael eased Veronica away and I bent forward and kissed Neil’s cheek. I couldn’t speak. I stepped back to let them pass and stood in the front doorway while they carried him down to the ambulance and slid him inside. I watched until they had driven out of view.

When we were at university open relationships were all the rage, and Neil and I were nothing if not fashionable. Neil had one-night stands with a stream of women when I was away or staying in to study. I had a few short-lived affairs. Most of the time we’d sleep together, either at his house or at the bed-sit I’d moved into in my second year.

One night I’d been visiting my mother and got back sooner than expected. The trip had rattled me. She and I had so little to say to each other that, for me at any rate, the visits were an excruciating mix of tension and boredom. We relied on banalities, talked about the weather, the increase in fuel prices, domestic mishaps and the ups and downs of acquaintances we cared little about. I went out of a sense of duty; I never could tell whether she got any pleasure from our encounters.

There was a disco on at the student’s union that evening, and although I’d missed most of it, it would be more fun than sitting in getting stewed on my own. While I changed, putting on a vintage silk dress and dramatic makeup, I drank a couple of brandy-and-lemonades and smoked a joint.

Things were in full swing when I arrived, the air humid and smoky, the lights rippling over the crowd. Neil was in a corner, a pretty redheaded girl sitting on his lap. My guts clenched in reaction. I shot him a blazing smile and turned away. I wanted to rip her off him. I wanted him to dump her on the floor and come over to me. I wanted to kill them both. Not acceptable reactions. For the next hour I flirted with a group of lads at the bar before going off with the prettiest. It felt meaningless.

When I rolled up at my place the following afternoon, shivering in my thin dress, Neil was sitting on the doorstep. My heart burned when I saw him. He kissed me and followed me in.

I had a shower while he made bacon-and-egg butties. He was quiet as we ate and the tension was plain in the set of his jaw and the cast of his eyes. I put music on, rolled a joint. We lay on the bed smoking. He put the roach in the ashtray. I straddled him, let my robe fall open, traced his clavicle with my fingers. He stayed my hand and my skin chilled. He was leaving me. That was why he'd come round, why he was so wound up.

‘Move in with me,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Or I’ll move in here. I don’t want anyone else.’ He edged himself up onto his elbows, shook his hair back from his face. ‘I don’t want to share you.’ His eyes were hot.

‘Very bourgeois.’

‘Deborah,’ he warned me, his grip on my wrist tightening.

‘Okay.’

He closed his eyes, a gesture of relief. Then looked at me again. Lay back down. I began to unbuckle his belt.

Living together. Monogamy. I wondered how long it would last.

We argued about housework: cleaning, shopping, cooking, washing. He tried to joke about it but I was deadly serious. There was no way I was going to become my mother; solely responsible for all that – even before my dad died. Life was too short and chores too soul-destroying. Neil was an adult, not a child, and I appealed to his political sensibility. ‘You believe in equality – this is part of the equation.’ I had little respect for a man who needed servicing. It worked both ways: I would shift rubbish and change fuses with the best of them. Not for me the helpless act, the little lady who hauls home the groceries then finds her muscles have melted clean away when faced with a flagstone.

Things weren’t up to scratch for a long time but I’d seen my brother successfully use the excuse of incompetence to get away with doing nothing in the house so that wouldn’t wash. We taught each other and weathered the ridicule of friends and family: *You the one wearing the apron, Neil?*

He became competent at cooking and cleaning and laundry. No more than that, but no more was expected. And I became a dab hand at DIY.