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**Opening Extract from...**

# Safe House

Written by Chris Ewan

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# Safe House

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## A Note on the Isle of Man

The Isle of Man is located in the middle of the Irish Sea, roughly halfway between the Lake District and Northern Ireland. The island is self-governing, with its own parliament and laws, and an independent police force.

For a fortnight every late May into early June, the Isle of Man stages the TT (Tourist Trophy) motorbike time-trial races. Run on public roads, the 37.7 mile track makes for one of the most spectacular and perilous motorcycle races in the world, with leading competitors recording top speeds of over 200 mph and average lap speeds in excess of 131 mph.

The island is thirty-two miles long and fourteen miles wide and has a population of eighty thousand people, none of whom form the basis for any of the characters in this book.

*I don't remember much about the accident. It happened too fast. Motorbike crashes usually do. Most of what I can remember is noise. A loud pop followed by a judder. The thud of the front forks collapsing. The squeal of the engine as the rear wheel kicked up and pitched me over the bars.*

*And I remember Lena's scream. The way her hands pinched my waist before slipping away. The crunch of our helmets colliding.*

*Or at least, I think I do . . .*



# Part One





## Chapter One

The doctor was young. Too young. She looked pale and frazzled, as if really she was the one in need of hospital rest. The skin beneath her eyes was tinged purple and she gripped my chart with unsteady hands, studying it like the script of a play she was aiming to memorise. Her lips moved as she traced the words.

‘You were in a motorbike accident.’ She glanced up, her spectacle lenses magnifying her bloodshot eyes.

I pulled the oxygen mask away from my mouth. ‘No kidding.’  
‘You suffered a loss of consciousness.’

I swallowed. My throat felt raw and bloated, as if something had been shoved down there while I was asleep – a breathing tube, maybe. ‘How long?’

She glanced at a clock on the wall in the corner of the room. Made a note on my file. ‘You were out for almost seven hours. Before you came round the first time.’

*Seven hours.* It must have been some shunt. Not my only one, by any means, but probably my biggest.

‘The first time?’ I asked.

‘You don’t remember?’

I eased my head from side to side on my pillow.

‘That’s OK. It’s perfectly normal. I’m Dr Gaskell. We met ninety minutes ago. You were only awake for a brief spell.’

I racked my brain but nothing came up. My vision was

blurred, as if someone had smeared Vaseline on my eyeballs. I blinked and the room tilted to the right.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not offended. Short-term memory loss is pretty common with a traumatic head injury.’

‘Traumatic?’

‘Try to relax, Mr Hale. Sleep if you need to. There’s plenty of time for you to discuss all this with the specialist in the morning.’

‘Tell me now. Please.’

She frowned. Pushed her spectacles up on her nose.

‘What’s the problem?’ I asked. ‘Afraid I’ll forget?’

She chewed her lip, like she was running through a debate with herself, but then she moved around the bed and freed the oxygen mask from my hands, settling it against my face. She plucked a penlight from the pocket of her white lab coat and shone it into my eyes.

‘Is that uncomfortable?’ she asked.

‘Hurts.’ My voice was muffled. My breath condensed on the inside of the mask.

‘Your speech is a little slurred. Any dizziness? Blurred vision? Nausea?’

‘All of those.’

She nodded. ‘You’ll be in hospital for a few days, at least. You’ve already had a CT scan but you may need an MRI, too. We have to watch for any secondary swelling. But that’s OK. It gives us time to treat your other injuries.’

The dimly lit room was growing dark from behind her, shadows bleeding in from the corners of my vision. I tried pushing myself up in bed, but someone stabbed me in the back and I groaned and crumpled.

‘Careful. Your left scapula is fractured.’ She placed her hands on my arm to stop me moving again. ‘Not a serious break. Barely a hairline crack. But it’ll take some healing. A nurse will be in soon to put your arm in a sling.’

I rolled my head to the side and saw the bandages that had been wrapped around my chest, under my armpit and over my collarbone. A fractured shoulder. It could be weeks until I had full movement. Months before I’d be able to lift heavy objects again. I was afraid of what that might mean for my business. There aren’t many one-armed heating engineers around. The impact on my road-racing season was likely to be much worse. Chances were, it was over before it had begun.

‘You’ve also bruised a couple of ribs,’ she said. ‘But other than that, you’ve been fortunate. You have some minor abrasions on your left side and bruising on your leg, but your pelvis, knees, ankles and feet are intact. And no broken fingers, miraculously. I’ve seen worse.’

I wasn’t sure I believed her. My face must have given me away.

‘I might be a junior doctor, Mr Hale, but this is the Isle of Man. I’ve had to treat more than my fair share of motorbike accidents, trust me.’

There was disapproval in her tone, but she was too young for it to carry much impact. Especially with a guy who was just barely awake.

‘And Lena?’ I asked. ‘How’s she doing?’

Dr Gaskell’s eyebrows forked above her spectacles. She squinted, as if she didn’t trust her hearing.

And I thought *I* was the one with the brain injury.

‘Lena,’ I said. ‘My friend. She was in the first ambulance.’

That was something I could definitely remember. Hard not to, really. Splayed on the side of the road, my head propped against the grass bank running alongside the cold, damp tarmac, my left arm bent awkwardly beneath me. I didn't know how long I'd been out, but I'd come round to a sideways view of the pitted blacktop and the wet, gloomy clouds pressing down from above.

A paramedic in a green jumpsuit appeared. He crouched and flipped up what remained of my helmet visor.

I struggled to move, but my arms and legs were numb. I told myself not to panic. That it was only the shock.

'You'll be OK,' the paramedic said. He had close-cropped hair and a fuzzy soul-patch beneath his lower lip. The facial hair didn't suit him but I wasn't about to say as much. 'There's another ambulance on the way. But the girl is hurt worse. We have to take her first. Understand?'

I wheezed back at him. Trying to say that was fine. That it was the right thing to do. But I couldn't speak.

The paramedic squeezed my gloved hand and something snagged against the skin of my wrist. He paced away. I heard a door close. Then I glimpsed a blur of white as the ambulance sped off up the road, abandoning me to a sickly silence that faded to grey, then black.

Next thing I knew, I was talking with Dr Gaskell. She looked troubled now. She bit down on her lip. Glanced over her shoulder towards the door.

'Let me find out for you,' she said.

I watched her go, a hard lump forming in my chest. Dead, I thought. Please, don't let her be dead.

It was typical. Just when I wanted it to, the blackness wouldn't come. I was groggy but awake. And scared half out of my mind.

Lena.

*My friend*, I'd called her. But was she even that? She was more than a customer, I supposed. Someone I'd liked? Without question. But how long had I really known her? An hour? Two? Long enough to know there was an attraction, at least.

And what did that make it when I'd taken her out on my bike? A first date?

She'd seemed so animated when we'd ridden along the dirt track that led away from the cottage. So alive. Slapping me on the back and giggling as I accelerated beneath the rain-drenched trees. As if it was more than a trip for her. Like it was an escape, maybe.

The door to my hospital room swung open and a lanky doctor hurried inside, the tails of his white coat flapping behind him. Dr Gaskell was struggling to keep up, looking paler and more lost than ever.

'Mr Hale, I'm Dr Stanley.'

He clicked on a penlight and pointed the beam into my eyes. It seemed a popular thing to do. I tried to snatch my head away but he had a firm grip of my eyelid with his thumb. He didn't let go until he'd exhaled stale coffee across my face.

'You've suffered a traumatic brain injury.' He straightened and scratched at the stubble on his jaw. 'Blunt trauma to the frontal lobe.'

I pulled my mask free. 'So I've been told.'

‘You can expect any number of side effects. Headaches. Dizziness. Nausea.’

‘We’ve been through this already.’

‘And confused thinking, Mr Hale. Cognitive disruption.’

He stared at me, as if his words should penetrate in a particular way. As if there was a secret message lurking behind them.

‘I get it,’ I said. ‘There are consequences. But what about Lena? She’s not dead, is she?’

Somehow, I managed to get the question out. I could feel more than just the soreness in the back of my throat.

‘This Lena. You say she was on the motorbike with you? That she was involved in the accident?’

‘She was in the first ambulance. But it’s OK – I know her injuries were more serious. The paramedic told me.’

Dr Stanley let go of a long breath. His shoulders sagged. ‘But that’s exactly my point, Mr Hale. The fact is there was no other ambulance. You were the only one found at the scene of the crash.’