

THE
Truths
AND
Triumphs
OF
Grace
Atherton

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SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2019
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-47117-379-0
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978-1-47117-380-6
eBook ISBN: 978-1-47117-382-0
Audio ISBN: 978-1-47117-518-3

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Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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the leading international forest certification organisation. Our books
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Chapter One

We were staying at David's apartment in Paris the night the woman fell onto the Metro tracks.

It was late July, one of those sweating angry evenings when the heartbeat of the city quickens as it reaches breaking point, where it readies itself for the rushed exit of August. Shopkeepers hurry their customers through with the same urgency that they will use to take to the motorways any day now. Children bubble with excitement and young people shout across the summer air. They will all be leaving in less than a week and they can't wait. I've never been in Paris long enough to feel like that about it.

That night, David and I had been to the Conservatoire for a concert. It was a surprise gift, a romantic gesture.

'These are for you,' he said and slid the envelope across the breakfast table towards me. It said '*For Grace*' in his neat handwriting, the sloping letters drawn with the black fountain pen he always uses. 'You've been working too hard.

And I,' he stood up and came to my side of the table, curling his arms around me and kissing my face, 'have been a lousy boyfriend.'

'As if.'

David is never a lousy boyfriend. He thinks of everything and leaves nothing to chance; it's part of his charm.

I opened the envelope, gasped at the programme, the appropriateness of it. David can bring things to my life that I don't even know are missing.

'What did I do to deserve this?'

'I'll think of something,' David said, 'maybe coming all the way here when you've been working non-stop for weeks? Maybe forgiving me for missing my last two trips over to you, being so patient? Maybe just for being beautiful.' He pushed my side plate out of the way, leaving a thin trail of apricot jam across the table. He pulled me to my feet. 'You want to earn those concert tickets, both of them?'

We went back to bed, laughing.

In the ornate concert hall of the Paris Conservatoire, I sat open-mouthed and barely breathing as that year's finest students gave their end-of-year recital. A young 'cellist, not yet out of his teens, did such justice to Corelli's 'La Follia' that it brought tears to my eyes. When I was his age I practised for six hours a day, but I still could not play like that; I lacked the right kind of soul.

David had a perfectly ironed white handkerchief in his jacket pocket and he handed it to me, gesturing towards the

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fat, quiet tears about to tip onto my face. He smiled as he did it.

We only have three days together: two nights and three precious days in Paris before I take the two-hour train journey back to the UK and he heads off home to Strasbourg. We try not to pack these short trips full of activities. We spend our time cooking or trailing our fingers along the edges of market stalls, wondering which vegetables to get, how best to dress salad: mundane and comforting domesticity.

We get up late and go to bed early, cocooned. We mostly stay in the apartment, drinking coffee on the iron balcony, or we drape ourselves across the deep sofas and listen to music. We don't go out to restaurants and we don't have friends here; it would dilute our tiny amount of time together, time made precious by its scarcity.

So it is unusual for us to be standing at the Metro station, to be travelling home with those people itching to leave the city. The Porte de Pantin foyer is crowded; we knew it would be. We could have waited at a bar nearby, sat outside and watched the swallows dive for the evening gnats above us in the open air, but we want to be back. I will be leaving tomorrow afternoon; our time is so brief, so funnelled in, that even the blissful moments at the concert seemed like a tiny treachery.

David takes my hand and we squash between the other passengers. We walk along the white-tiled corridors, down into the belly of the packed station.

On the platform, a fug of hot engine grease hangs in the air like the ghost of a train. The old-fashioned box sign clicks through its announcements; the next train is only moments away. We get ready to jostle our way through the crowd, the girls with impossibly slim legs in bright-coloured trousers, boys in suit jackets with their sleeves rolled back, one perfect fold, to reveal knobby wrists, old women stifling in gabardine raincoats.

Directly in front of us, her feet almost touching the platform edge, is a woman. She wears some kind of shalwar kameez in black and a shimmering headscarf, threaded through with gold, across her hair and shoulders.

Everything happens too fast. I can't register the order of events, let alone the consequences. One moment she is there, her feet parallel with mine, her shoulders the same width, her head the same height, and then she vanishes. She crumples to the floor like a conjuror's trick. I see how her knees buckle and I get ready for her head to hit the ground, although I am not swift enough to catch it. My getting ready takes the form of a split-second's anticipation rather than any action.

But there is no ground for her to hit. She is standing at the very edge of the platform.

Someone screams and I hear the rumble of the train.

I look at my own feet, at the rail down below where the mice scuttle, at the lump of her, unconscious and curled in the black sump of the railway track.

Next to her is David.

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More screams. Not mine, but all around me people are screaming. They are shouting words I don't understand. I am – utterly – frozen.

'À l'aide bon Dieu! Au secours!' David shouts up at the platform. He is half-standing, one leg bent and his foot under the rail, bracing. The other leg is straight, deep in the pit of the track. He has the woman in his arms, cupped like a baby, her head lolling downwards and her shawl trailing onto the rail.

The rumble of the dragon in the tunnel gets louder. A blaring noise startles everyone. In hindsight, I presume the helpless train driver could see them in his headlights.

Three or four men get onto their knees at the edge of the platform. They drag the woman from David's arms and pass her behind them. Once more she is right in front of me.

They pull David by his arms and shoulder blades, heave him clear a second or two before the train grinds to a screeching stop in front of us, in the spot where his shadow is still warm, where drops of his sweat are left behind on the tracks.

The woman is unconscious and people fuss around her. She is lying on her back and, through the folds of her clothes, I can see that David has saved not one life but two.

'Tip her over. You must put her in the recovery position.' I come to life. 'She can't lie on her back like that when she's pregnant,' but I'm speaking in English and no one reacts. I buy every new pregnancy book that comes out, even now. I am something of a barrack-room expert.

I push past a large man who is crowding over her and start

to move her into the recovery position. David shouts in rapid French and I assume he is telling those other hands to let go, that I can manage this.

I can manage; the woman is slight, even smaller than me. I assume in my racing head that she has fainted with the heat and this heavy burden of baby. Her pulse is solid, her breathing clear. I put my ear by her mouth to be sure and can see the tiny black hairs around her upper lip, the rouge on her cheeks.

A man in uniform comes along, barging his way through the crowds gathered around. He skitters to a halt by us and I assume he is the train driver.

David shouts across the thick crowd. *'Est-qu'il y'a un médecin ici? Elle a besoin d'un médecin.'*

A woman pushes her way through the crowd and kneels beside me.

'Je suis sage-femme,' she says, and puts her hand on the woman's face.

'Je suis Anglaise,' I say before she can continue talking. Later, David tells me that she said she was a midwife, but she may as well have been a florist. I just wanted someone else to be in charge.

David pulls at my hand. 'Come on.' He helps me up and out of the way. He turns towards the exit and starts to lead me through the crowd.

'Shouldn't we wait and see if she's all right?'

'We need to get a phone signal, call an ambulance.' He is running towards the escalator and, breathless, I trip along

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behind him. 'I'll run up, see you at the top.' Despite his rush, he turns and smiles at me, makes sure I'm calm and on my way up into the light.

I watch him run up the escalator; a tall man, an inch or two bigger than most other people in a crowd, broad-shouldered and fit. His jacket is so elegantly cut that it doesn't really move as his elbows power like pistons and he nears the top of the long staircase. At the top, he disappears and I hurry up.

'It's okay, Grace,' he says when I get up into the foyer where we started. 'The train driver sent up a signal. The ambulance is on its way.' He pulls me to him, bends over the top of my head and buries his face in my hair. I can feel the tension ripple through him, almost smell the adrenaline. 'Let's go home.'

This humility is so very him. The last thing he would ever ask for is praise. He knows who he is and what his faults are. He plays down his strengths.

He is, in one of my few French phrases, totally *bien dans sa peau*: happy in his skin.

We walk back up to the street and hail a cab. The roads around us are as we left them. The air is thick and exotic, the pavement dry and dirty in spots, the outside seats of cafés full with chatter and the sounds of Paris.

It does not feel like David nearly lost his life or, worse, that I stood with my hands by my sides and almost watched him be smashed by a train, gone for ever. Those things will hit us later.

*

We get into the apartment and lock the door tightly behind us.

In the taxi, I had tried to talk about what had happened but David had shaken his head at me, one finger across his lips in a gesture of silence, of secrets. This city, his city, is a small one. It had not occurred to me that the driver might speak English.

At home, he kicks off his shoes, looks down at the knees of his linen trousers, black with grime. He walks over to the sink and washes his hands methodically, turning them round and round under the running tap, soaping them three separate times.

‘Sit down, sweetheart,’ I say, and move behind him, my hands either side of his waist.

‘God, I’m sorry. Are you okay?’ He wheels round, looks straight in my face. ‘You must have been terrified.’

I hold him tight and feel his arms slide around me in response, pressing my face into his chest. ‘Me?’ I ask him. ‘You’re nuts. You came within a whisker of being killed and you’re worried about me?’

‘I just thought how I would feel if it was you on that track. And then, in another sense, I didn’t think at all. It was instinct. Somewhere, someone feels about her like I feel about you. I owed it to that person.’

Tears well up in my eyes and I think about how close I came to losing him; for a few heart-stopping moments I’d been convinced that would be how tonight ended. I can’t bring myself to think about the way that would play out, how mourning David would even begin.

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I shudder and grip him tighter. David kisses the top of my head and loosens his hold on me. 'I think we need a brandy.' He is smiling again, colour has returned to his face and his skin looks smooth and soft.

'Drink this, darling,' he says, and puts a round goblet into my hands. I realise I am still trembling.

I blow into the brandy and feel the fumes flood my face. My cheeks redden. I take a sip.

David holds his glass in one large hand. With the other, he reaches across and pops the catch on the balcony doors. He tucks them back into the walls and the noise of the river, of the city, floats in to join us. It is wonderfully calming.

The apartment has one bedroom, along the chalk-white corridor, and a bathroom designed for indulgence. David talks about letting clients use the apartment when necessary, but, as far as I know, none of them ever has. Just in case, though, it retains this elegant air, this impersonal but classic Paris 'feel', from the moment you step out of the art deco elevator, all dragging iron doors and coloured glass, to the floor-to-ceiling balcony doors and their hazy drapes.

The fifth-floor windows overlook Passy Cemetery on one side and the River Seine on the other. If you could crane your neck around the next corner, the edges of the next-door apartment, you would see the Eiffel Tower; as it is, you have to rely on trust that it is there.

'The concert was something else,' David says, and I realise I'd forgotten all about it in the crisis.

‘Did you know it would be “La Follia” when you booked it?’ I’m curious; Corelli’s version of the simple folk tune is in my all-time top ten of music, but I can’t remember telling David that.

‘Of course I knew.’ He is on the balcony, leaning with his back against it and looking in through the tall gap at me. ‘It’s almost always in your CD player and, when I came over last time, the dots were on your music stand.’

‘I’m so grateful. I love it so much.’

‘That’s not why though.’ He wrinkles his forehead up and under the dark fringe that almost touches his eyebrows. “La Follia”, the madness, that’s the song that plays in my head every time I see you walk into a room.’

He looks down as he says it. It isn’t intended as a boast; he’s almost embarrassed at the intimacy, the romance. ‘Right, make yourself busy, darling. I need to change these filthy trousers. I want to shower too. Will you be okay? I won’t be more than fifteen minutes.’

‘I’ve got plenty I need to do,’ I say. ‘I haven’t checked the shop emails all day.’ I don’t want him to be distracted worrying about me, so I mention these mundane things with a calm I don’t feel.

I open the laptop with the noise of David’s shower, the water playing on the tiled floor, in the background. The sounds of having him nearby make me feel content, loved.

When I’m in France, my laptop home screen shows the headlines from Metronews; it’s not too highbrow for my feeble French and translating the stories helps me develop my

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language skills. I need no translator to understand the front-page story of this evening.

CCTV images capture the grainy shape of a man on the Metro track. It could be anyone. I click through to the story, '*L'homme mystère*' and '*héros du soir*' are pretty clear, even to me. I manage to decipher that the young woman is fine, that she fainted in the heat and is eternally grateful to David for saving her.

There is a Paris-wide appeal to find the man and thank him for his bravery. The news has been dark and miserable lately and what David did seems to have given Paris an antidote. A banner flashes up across the bottom of the screen '*Qui était-il?*'

None of the pictures are clear enough to be certain that it's David. The crowds were heavy, but one can certainly see that the man is unusually tall, with thick dark hair and an elegant light-coloured suit. No one would be able to see his smaller, unremarkable girlfriend or pick her out by her ordinary short hair, feathered around the fringe and sides, or her neat green skirt.

Lower down the page I notice a grainy still with a black square across it, and inside the black square, a white arrow. My fingers are tense on the keyboard. It is a video clip from the station's security system.

When I press play, David is bounding up the escalator, unmistakably David for anyone who knows him. Behind him, inelegant, and not nearly as fast, a small woman in a bright-coloured skirt scurries to keep up.

Anstey Harris

Anyone would know it was him, us. You can see by the way he glances back that he has a vested interest in the woman behind him. Anyone could tell we are a couple.

Even his wife.

Even his children.