THE ACCIDENT

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echo

Accidents do not simply 'happen'. They are always the result of an error, either of an individual, a system, or, more commonly, both.

Key Principles of Emergency Medicine (2019 ed.)

The Wise let their Love be a Choice, not an Accident …

Embracing You: A Guide to Life, Love and You

'It wasn't *my* fault!'

Children everywhere

And adults everywhere

It was one of those unimpeachable spring mornings, the type Hobart knew it was pretty good at. The breeze was suppleness and pleasure, the sun obvious but unchallenging. Sandstone buildings shaded electric bikes, school kids scrolled TikTok on buses, and coffee blessed grateful throats. Behind it all stood the mountain, snuggling the little city into the curve between its forest-dim foothills and the wide blue sparkle of harbour.

Four staff members were on duty at the school's drop-off zone that morning. They wore high-vis vests over office clothes. Two had walkie-talkies. Two turned STOP/SLOW signs with a nervous, responsible air. Who could blame them? Cars were bumper to bumper from the end of the narrow street. One STOP/SLOW error would have visited ruination onto many, many bumpers.

Everyone seemed pretty jolly, though. Lots of waving and smiling and mental resolving not to fuss about the little things. In that sort of weather, most of the mums even felt affectionate towards Sandra from the office – there she was, fluorescent-orange jacket neatly velcroed – even though Sandra tended to be hurtfully passive-aggressive if you made the slightest mistake with your kid's photo forms or sports-carnival gear.

That day, it was Sandra's job to harry ('assist') the children out of the cars, and check that the younger ones were right to find their way from the Rapid Drop Zone to the Junior Learning Hub. The senior school kids, of course, knew how to get to their classrooms. Sandra took the opportunity to remind them to put their phones in their bags and keep them there for the duration.

Sandra didn't have a walkie-talkie, so for once, she wasn't the first to know. In fact, she didn't even realise anything had happened until she heard the sirens.

Sirens were rare in that part of Hobart.

NINE MONTHS EARLIER

Chapter One

GRACE

Summer

'Emma,' Grace said. 'We've talked about this.'

Grace both saw and felt stillness settle over her daughter. Then, like a prisoner caught trying to escape, Emma unbent her right knee, stepped out of her lunge and turned to face her mum.

'Emma,' Grace said again. 'Oh, Em. Honey.' Where had *honey* come from? She'd never used that term. It was as if they were in an American teledrama. Maybe she was hoping for the simple, uplifting ending.

'I'm just exercising, Mum!' Emma said. 'Fuck!'

That sort of language might have made Grace smother a laugh, in a parallel universe. Swearing that way just didn't work when your crop-top had slightly too-long straps, and you were standing next to your floating shelf of *Harry Potter* books. 'Emma's going through a phase,' her parallel-universe self could have said, while she sipped a merry glass of wine with a lovably imperfect friend. 'Testing boundaries. Taking risks. Ha-de-ha, I'm dying of stress, pass the bottle, how's *your* mean-ager?'

But nothing much was funny about her daughter at the moment.

'Emma. Sweetie.' What was the perfect combination of words? What phrase set a boundary yet didn't shame? Which sentence strengthened the mother–daughter relationship without endorsing the behaviour?

I accept you exactly as you are, but I wish you were different?

I know you can't help it, but you have to help it a bit?

I am here for you, but I'm not sure I can cope?

'I know you're not to blame,' said Grace. Because Emma had an illness. 'I love you. I want to help you. But as you know, our rules are—'

'What are you even talking about? I am *exercising*! God's *sake*!' Emma brandished her phone, where a beautiful twenty-something in false eyelashes and expensive activewear had been paused mid-knee-extension. 'Seven million VIEWS!' She made the last word loudest, the way she'd done since she was a little girl. *I not TIRED. Me more SAUCE.* 'This is what people *do*!'

'I want to help you,' Grace repeated. 'You know you mustn't exercise alone.' Very level. 'You know what the consequence is.'

Pretend you're at work, she told herself. *When a creature is upset, it lashes out. Just turn off a part of your mind and get on with it.*

'You now cannot have your phone till tomorrow,' said Grace. 'You need to give it to me.' She held out her hand.

'No,' said Emma.

Pretend this is a girl you don't know, from a different home, with a different mother. Pretend there's absolutely no way it could be your fault.

'Either you can give it to me, or I will take it.' She stepped towards her daughter.

Emma held the phone out to the side of her body, away from Grace.

'Emma,' Grace said. Emma – foolish, un-strategic, fifteen-year-old Emma – moved back, literally into a corner. She was now standing next to her laundry basket. 'If you don't give your phone to me, I'll need to take it.'

At work, there was a never-needed protocol for physical confrontation, which Grace sometimes skim-read while she waited

for her computer to get itself ready for action. She would try to use verbal de-escalation, but if that proved impossible then she would retreat from danger and could dial triple zero, and yes, it might be unpleasant, but a calm voice would tell her that help was on its way, and afterwards there would be no sense that *she* had done anything wrong. She would be the *victim*. The *survivor*. The dedicated professional who'd been threatened while healing (or at least, desexing) the beloved pets of decent, hard-working families. She wouldn't be a middle-aged single mum who had no idea what to do and was in a pickle because of her own bloody stupid life choices.

Emma crossed her arms tight against her chest. Her phone was in something like a fist, almost under her armpit.

'Get. Out. Mum.'

Grace paused, then said, 'I'm coming to take your phone now.'

'I don't consent to this,' screeched Emma. She started to run past Grace, towards the door. Grace grabbed Emma's upper arm, stepped behind her and wrapped her own arms and one leg around her daughter. Emma kicked and scrabbled; a sneakered heel made painful contact with Grace's shin. Grace scraped her fingertips around the phone. Music that made her think of drug dealers and pole dancing and moustaches (that troublingly seemed to be fashionable again) started to thump out of it as she yanked it from Emma's grippy hand.

Grace ran into the bathroom, hesitated and then locked the door behind her. The horrible music was louder in there, and it took her a moment to work out what she needed to do to pause it.

Silence.

Grace's reflection in the mirror looked surprised to find itself calling, calmly, 'Try to take some deep breaths, Em.'

But Emma was already sobbing quiet, remorseful tears. The psychologist had said to let Emma self-soothe, though, because

comforting her might reinforce the unwanted behaviour. So, Grace did not speak. (Nobody had really talked about *her* feelings, or maybe it was just that she never properly listened to those bits.)

She turned on the tap, wet one of her hands. Patted water onto her face. She watched as droplets formed larger, odd-shaped puddles on the white vanity. Her kicked shin started to hurt – or she started to notice it – and she sat down on the closed lid of the toilet. She wondered what to do next. She was also thinking: *Please, no. No more.*

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Emma had been an easy baby. She slept through the night from very early on, which Grace had believed was due to their home's calm atmosphere and her own additive-free diet. (She at least knew to keep that belief secret.)

Emma smiled at six weeks, sat unsupported at seven months, and soon became – as her kindergarten report helpfully pointed out – capable of hopping on both her right foot and her left foot. Her psychological development seemed fine, too: she Always showed care and empathy, and Usually attempted to resolve conflict in a positive manner. ('Much like us, then, Grace?' Christopher – Emma's dad – had said with a smile.)

Grace had been prepared to feel like an outcast single mum among the Baxter Street Primary School community, but it was quickly apparent that at least a quarter of the preps had separated parents, and that the teacher was too busy wrangling nut allergies to notice – let alone form an opinion about – the fact that Grace and Christopher had never even been in a relationship.

Throughout primary school, Emma wasn't a particularly fussy eater; she tended not to lose expensive runners; she didn't lie or steal or bite, although she did once yell, 'DICK-BOY!' at a fellow Grade

One kid who'd cheated at soccer. ('That was a bit over the top, Em,' Grace had said. And then – non-shamingly – 'So, where'd you hear that word?')

From the age of six, Emma happily spent every second week at Christopher's place; at eight she had a best friend called Nellie; at ten she got a yellow belt in karate and they went out for pizza to celebrate. Her Grade Six report said she was friendly to her peers, and performed As Expected when forming concepts and generalisations. ('What do you think that means?' Christopher had asked Grace with genuine curiosity. 'At the eleven-year-old level?')

It was when Emma was twelve that Grace started to think something was wrong. At first, she told herself she was just being silly. That was easy enough. There was so much stuff about neurotic women and helicopter parents and mothers who thought parenting was the same as their career and (despicably, it seemed) stuck up too strongly for their child's interests. And she was forty-three, and single, and professional, and Emma was her only child. So, from what Grace could tell, she was almost bound to be an annoyingly over-attentive mum.

That was maybe why, when Emma started being a bit funny about breakfast, Grace had told herself to stop worrying. And also, she'd hoped she was wrong. As you did. She'd *hoped* she was neurotic. She'd hoped she was silly. She'd hoped, for the first time in her life, that she was too emotional and her judgement was clouded. She'd hoped that any objective health professional would chuckle and cry, 'Oh no! Grace! That's perfectly normal at this age! Perfectly! Normal! Goodness me!'

But then – Emma had already turned thirteen – Grace had found herself in a GP's office, with her throat closing and then too-suddenly opening as she'd started explaining about the lunches, and the dinners, and all the stuff before bed, and the doctor had slid the box of tissues

towards her and said, not, 'Don't be silly, you irrational creature,' but, 'Probably good you've come in.'

And there had been a white plastic step-stool in one corner, and a poster about asthma puffers on a wall, and he'd started talking about risk assessment and mood disturbance as if she'd already known all about it, as if her main priority was finding a good psychologist with a not-too-long waiting list, when really what she had been thinking was: *Are you saying my daughter's got something* wrong *with her? Because let me tell you, mate, there's* nothing, *nothing* at all *wrong with my beautiful little girl.*

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'Feeling okay?' Grace said, as they waited. It was four days after the phone confiscation.

The psychologist's office was in a lovely old building, the sandstone-fronted type that everyone said gave Hobart character. Inside, there were quiet corridors, a zigzag staircase with a dark wooden banister, and shinily black-painted doors. Emma's psychologist was behind door number six.

'I'm good. Thanks, Mum.'

Near the chairs where the two of them waited, was a wooden table that always held a miraculously healthy maidenhair fern and piles of pamphlets about things like Feldenkrais movement workshops (Heal from within!), Shakespeare in the Gardens (Experience his most hysterical comedy!) and Bree's Beauty Studio (Achieve your brow goals!).

Often, while Emma was having her solo chat, Grace would find herself wondering how enough people had enough energy to support businesses that provided Feldenkrais and Shakespeare and even, to be honest, eyebrow grooming. All that healing and experiencing and achieving. She had definitely never had a brow goal in her life.

In fact, just how widespread was brow-goal setting?

'Emma,' said the psychologist. 'Grace. Come on in.'

Emma's psychologist – Dr Claire Tait – specialised in eating disorders. She had goal-actualised eyebrows, artfully messy blonde hair and an apparently inexhaustible collection of linen shell tops. She tended to wear them with dull-silver earrings, slim black trousers and wholesome, expensive-looking shoes.

Grace usually wore her work clothes, which involved a dark-green smock-shirt that had *Hobart Animal Care* embroidered in light-green letters on the front, and matching green trousers. Also: pilled black socks and shoes designed for camping. It wasn't so much that Grace didn't care about clothes. It was just that the train of stylish women had swished away from the station right around the time Emma was born, and it was very hard to work out how to get back on board.

'You asked to be squeezed in?' said Dr Claire, with what appeared to be genuine concern. As usual, she was sitting in an easy chair, with a laptop on a swivelling table to her right. Behind her, a large window with leadlight panels along its top opened onto a cluster of silver birch trees. Above them rose the mountain, all unapologetic dolerite and vast wildness. (It was pretty much always around somewhere, though. The mountain – kunanyi/Mount Wellington – was as central, and as complex, as an ageing mother.)

Emma swallowed and seemed about to speak, but didn't, and Dr Claire glanced at Grace, who explained in her most neutral voice that Emma had once again been feeling compelled to exercise alone.

'I see.' Dr Claire nodded. 'Emma?' Her tone was very pleasant. Matesy, almost.

When Emma didn't respond, Dr Claire said, 'Maybe a part of you doesn't want to exercise, but another part is telling you to?'

'At the end of the day, I just think, I have to go to school tomorrow, and … actually, I don't even *think*, I just …' Emma trailed off.

Dr Claire asked a lot of questions, her eyes moving between mother and daughter. Soon, Grace would be sent out. It was surprisingly hard, the way Emma would tell a professional things that she, Grace, wasn't privy to. It hurt her feelings, which was ridiculous.

'And what's going on friendship-wise?' Dr Claire said, at some point.

For the first time, there was a very long silence.

'A few mean kids.' Emma's voice was like a stretching thread of plasticine. She looked at her mum.

'How about if you wait outside, Grace?'

After what seemed like much longer than the seventeen minutes it actually took, Dr Claire invited Grace back in, and as soon as Grace was seated, she said, 'It seems we have some fairly significant issues with bullying.'

Emma's blue eyes were huge and beautiful and surrounded by red skin.

'Oh, Em,' said Grace. Dr Claire was still talking. She was saying things about sense of agency and pervasive problem, but none of her words seemed terribly important right at that moment. 'But what's going on?' said Grace. 'Emma? Sweetie? Is … how's Nellie? Lucy? How are all the girls?'

'I'm not really friends with that group anymore, Mum,' said Emma. 'I'm not really into the same things as them.' It would have been a horrifying speech, so brave and fake-casual, even without the word 'them'.

'Social acceptance is very important for adolescent girls,' intoned Dr Claire. 'Its absence can be harmful, including in the longer term.'

Grace nodded. *Yes*, she thought. *Thank you. No effing kidding.*

Dr Claire said, 'There was a situation where Emma's schoolbag was placed in the boys' urinal. Fortunately, one of the boys returned it to Emma. Her pencil case has had obscene insults and threats

written on it. She received an SMS instructing her to "finish the job", which Emma took to be an allusion to her formerly medically unstable state, an encouragement to end her own life. Texts from young people she previously considered friends, saying, among other things, Kiss.' When Grace looked blank, Dr Claire explained, almost lightly, 'K-Y-S, I meant. It's an acronym for Kill Your Self.'

'Jesus Christ.' Grace spoke quietly, and without meaning to. She wanted to add, *I* asked *you about this stuff, Emma! Just last week, you said Lucy was* fine. *Why didn't you* tell *me?*

She felt like storming into the school office and making a scene. 'How could you let this happen?' she could yell at Min, the pinkish-haired receptionist. 'Take off your CIA-style headset and your fake-perky expression, and lead me to the principal this instant!' (She'd had her doubts about the principal for years, ever since she'd seen him texting during a Year Eight assembly. You could tell from the way he was smiling that it was a non-work-related text.)

Dr Claire was saying things about ongoing fortnightly appointments and sticking with the Family Management Plan approach to Emma's eating disorder. 'But—' She appeared to hesitate, then said, 'Grace, you and Christopher possibly want to consider your options, in terms of Emma's schooling.'

Grace thought about resilience and challenges. She thought about a schoolbag – one with a sparkly 'E' keyring on its zipper, one with a cherished, Christmas-present laptop inside – ending up in a urinal.

If Emma grew up – if she did – and if she ever had a partner who meted out that kind of abuse, Grace would say, 'Leave. Leave now. Leave while you still know it's wrong. Leave, leave, leave, leave, leave.'

Emma was getting out of that school.

Chapter Two

ZOE

Summer

I thought Daniel was acting weird because he was about to propose.

'Zoe,' he said, as he finished wiping the bench. That was one of the weird things. The way he'd jumped up and started cleaning as soon as we'd finished our toast, even though it was Sunday. 'An opportunity has come up for me. A big project.' He made a serious-newsreader face from across the white benchtop.

'Wow, great!' I thought he was about to start talking about grabbing hold of opportunities together forever and all that. I put my coffee down and rested my hands in my lap with as much elegance as possible. This was not a lot. I was wearing an old mauve silk slip, flannel pyjama bottoms and ugg boots.

Daniel draped the cloth carefully over the tap – also weird – and came to sit near me. We were facing the well-swept-by-Daniel outdoor area of our apartment. I thought: *Well, I definitely don't want to end up with his surname.* Dick*son. Eek.*

'It's a twenty-four-month contract,' he said. 'At least. Working on a dam. Big hydroelectricity scheme.' He clasped his hands, regretfully, on the table. 'Near Vancouver.'

'Wow.' I sat up straighter. I – this was so embarrassing – sort of tossed my hair and adjusted my lips so as to look like the best possible let's-take-on-Canada-as-man-and-wife version of myself.

He still didn't open his mouth, so I said, 'I *love* Vancouver. Well!

I did when I was in Year Eleven. North Vancouver, especially. There was this really amazing op shop, thrift shop as they called it, and – well, anyway. Great!'

I gave his thigh a pat, all supportive-1950s-wifeish, and then left another pause. Hands back in lap, spine still straight, trying to be like Keira Knightley when she was doing that humble, interested expression that made her so beautiful you just wanted to die.

Three people had told me I looked like Keira Knightley. They were being nice, because I wasn't that beautiful. Also, I was much chubbier than she was. Not that I thought being chubbier than Keira Knightley was a bad thing, and of course I realised nobody would ever say, *You look like a plus-size, and also not-as-beautiful version of Keira Knightley.* But that would be truer.

Daniel uncrossed his legs. 'I think it's abundantly clear, Zoe, that it'd be foolish for you to come.'

'How do you mean?' I thought he was going to tell me there weren't many jobs for Australian art teachers in Canada, or visas were going to be a sticking point, or most of all that it'd make our plans for a family tricky, so maybe we should go long distance and meet up in Hawaii or New York sometimes. And that then he'd probably propose on a tropical beach at sunset, or in a romantic bit of Central Park with no rubbish or muggers.

'I think you'd have to characterise our relationship as one that's run its course,' he said. 'If we're being honest.'

Goddy-god-god. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Zoe, we have to face a brutal reality.' He tilted his face up towards me: I'd stood without realising it. My chair had fallen over. 'Sometimes situations evolve, and then you realise … well. Zoe. I wouldn't want to impede your prospects.'

'Why are you using so many stupid words?'

I was suddenly talking in a high, angry way. Maybe it was what

people meant when they said *shrieking like a shrew*. As if you weren't allowed to show in your voice that you were hurt or afraid or angry. As if that made you bad. 'What are you actually *saying*?'

'I'm sorry, Zoe,' he said. He did sound sorry. But sorry for *me*, because he was a good, kind man who'd made sure the sink was empty before he smashed up my life. He wasn't devastated. He wasn't upset for *himself*.

I barely realised that I had let my coffee cup fall onto the tiles. The cup didn't break, oddly. Only the coffee spilled. I put a hand onto the back of a chair – not the one I'd knocked over – and properly saw his face. He was watching me with this odd, caring expression, as if he was starring in a 'How to Break Up Well' education video.

'Is there someone else?' I said.

'Nothing's happened,' he replied. But the 'yet' soaked everything in the room.

And then there was a long, tearful time where I screamed things like 'Who is she?' and he answered all my questions in a slow, reasonable way, as if he had spreadsheets that could prove every single point he made. He promised I wouldn't be 'financially disadvantaged', and he said we could keep living together as long as I needed, because the spare room was 'spacious'. As if I cared about the size of rooms. As if he had every right to leave me, because we weren't married, and so he'd never actually *promised* me anything. Even though I was a 24-year-old student when I met him, and now I was a 34-year-old teacher. Even though we had shared friends and a shared lease and a whole lot of other shared things I couldn't even bear to begin thinking about. Even though our lives were, in so many ways, the same life.

The woman was someone from work. She also had an interest in sustainable energy. She was twenty-six. I asked him if she was pretty, and he said, 'Zoe, let's not go down that path.' Like I was being bitchy and insecure and annoying. Like youth and prettiness of *course*

never had anything to do with anything. Like these scenarios were always just about abundantly clear and running its course and hydro-fucking-electricity.

When I finished yelling, and he finished being calm and compassionate, I rang my cousin Claire and told her, and she said, 'Really? *Really?*' quite a few times. Then she pulled herself together and said, 'Well, god-goddy-god-god. I'm on my way.'

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I stood in Claire's kitchen, with my legs apart and my right thumb in my left fist. Claire was making tea. She had a splodge of greenish clay still clinging to the skin near her hairline, because she'd come to get me without rinsing her face mask off properly.

Claire's partner, T-rex, was moving a pile of his folders and neatly rolled computer cords out of their second bedroom. They were both acting purposeful and hushed, as if they were my assistants, I was the US President, and we were all smack bang in the middle of a serious international disaster that happened to be taking place in a very small North Hobart flat.

'I've opened the sofa bed,' said T-rex. He tilted his head towards the teeny bedroom. 'In case you wanted to lie down, Zoe.' T-rex was called that because he was massively tall – around six foot five – and at one point, he'd apparently had enormous gnashy-looking braces. Also, he was vegetarian.

'Thank you so much!' Something was wrong with my voice. I sounded overeager. Super grateful. As if I was the cousin who had to sleep in the worst bedroom of a manor house and do all the icky chores for her rich, well-bred relatives. Maybe I'd been watching too much *Downton Abbey.* In a normal way I added, 'That sounds fine and dandy.'

Fine and dandy, I repeated to myself. The words began to lose all

meaning, but they were the only thing my mind could hold on to. *Fine and dandy. Fine and dandy. Fine and dandy.*

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I decided to keep right on working, even though everyone I knew – especially Mum, and my brother's wife in Brisbane, and even more especially Claire – thought I should take sick leave.

'You *are* sick,' said Claire, helpfully, on the Monday morning. 'In a way.'

Claire was a psychologist, and despite the fact that she was sitting on the edge of the bath, squinting at her own lily-white legs and eating peanut butter on toast, she made her voice sound as if she was giving professional advice.

'I'm okay, Claire.' I spat out my toothpaste and frowned into the mirror. 'Life just throws up challenges.'

'You've suffered a *loss*.'

'I'm aware.' I tried to sound breezy, but failed.

'Well.' She held her toast out of the way while she flipped her whole head up and down to boof up her fuzzy blonde curls. 'It's your choice, Zo. But Lofton School is certainly not going to implode if you take the day off. Nobody is indispensab—'

'I *know*.' I banged my toothbrush, hard, on the edge of the sink. 'And you can stop flicking your hair around. We all know it's nice.'

'You sound pretty angry.' Also very helpfully.

'I'm *fine*! This is just a *challenge*!'

There was silence while I noticed that at this time of the day, Claire's mirror showed up a whole lot of lines around my eyes that my own mirror never had. That made me remember we were in her bathroom, I was using her toothpaste – which was the grainy-tasting, health-food-shop type – and she was maybe waiting to brush her own teeth.

'Sorry.' I rinsed my toothbrush in a thorough, self-conscious way. 'Sorry. It's really nice of you and T-rex to let me stay here, and I'll … get out of your way as soon as I can.'

'Stay as long as you want, Zo.' She'd finished her toast and was sucking peanut butter off her fingers. 'I got cows' milk for you. Not that there's anything wrong with almond, in my opinion.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Thanks. Thanks very much.'

That was when I started crying. I knew T-rex would be able to hear, but I couldn't help it. The wailing seemed to begin at a tiny point inside my chest, and gush out through all my pores and my nostrils and my throat. And even though a part of me knew all too well that there was nothing to be done except to wait for the pain to be over, that part was very tiny and was standing well off to one side. Most of me was just in agony.

Claire tucked me back into her surprisingly comfortable sofa bed and then she rang in sick for me. I could tell that being right gave her absolutely no pleasure, which was one of the many really wonderful things about Claire.