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opening extract from

After the Death of Alice Bennett

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Chapter One

We've got mafia waiting outside the crematorium.

Sam repeated Becky's dry observation silently to himself. What? What did she mean?

He looked up at his sister, but she had buried her face in Dad's neck for a few moments. Her knuckles were white, gripping his arm.

'Hey . . . Hey. Hold on, lass,' Dad was saying. 'There . . . it's OK. We're nearly done here. Listen, Becky love, I've to talk to folk while they come out. You tek Sam over the way; have a sit down under the trees. We'll go home in a few minutes.'

Sam watched Becky and his dad clenched, holding on to each other. They had just come out of the chapel, the three of them, ahead of all the people. They had this moment, just this moment together. Then it was over and the double doors burst open behind them and people spilled out, a tide of people parting and flowing either side of them, pulling off jackets and loosening ties and dabbing at their eyes with tissues, all heading for the open doors and the sunlight.

Becky took his hand and drew him outside. Hot light blinded him.

'Becky, what did you mean? What's the mafia?'

She didn't answer. Head down, she hustled him past the young men in their charcoal suits and dark glasses who were standing around on the tarmac where the black hearse had swung round in a big circle, and walked them both onto the shaved lawns and under the shady trees. She pulled him down and they sat cross-legged on the grass under shifting spots of sunlight.

Sam watched her mend her face with tissues.

'Forget it, Sam. I was just getting irritable with some of the boys. See them standing around over there in their dark suits and shades? Just because they're at a funeral . . . ' She gave a half-laugh. 'And they were late, so none of them had the bottle to come in.' She stared over at the groups of people standing and talking in the sunshine. 'Mum would have laughed. She taught half of them when they were little boys.'

Sam too looked across to the entrance of the crematorium. So many people. Neighbours. Teachers from Mum's school. Men and women who worked at Dad and Uncle Roy's Firm, *Bennett Brothers Agricultural Contractors and Hauliers.* And the teenage boys in their black suits and dark glasses.

'I know him . . . and I know him, and . . . him.' Sam picked them off.

'Of course you do. Some of them have been to our house. They're my friends in the Sixth Form.'

Sam watched his dad greeting people as they came down the steps, squinting in the sun. Mr Mack came out, wiping his forehead with a white hanky. And Mrs Prythurch who lived two doors down the road and whose husband had died a few months back. Auntie Pam

came down the steps shining in pink and white among all the dull grey clothes, the dark suits.

Becky had slipped dark glasses on and was checking her mobile phone for messages. And there was a message because the silver pod gave out a small double-chime.

Sam blinked in the bright light and noted that he was dry-eyed. Ought he to be crying? He didn't feel like crying. There had been moments in the service when he had felt a kind of dissolving behind his eyes, when different people had come up to the front to read poems or tell little stories about Mum, and when they said things that brought her back to life. They had described her, and he had seen her so clearly in those moments. Like when she laughed with her eyes creased and her head thrown back, her throat exposed, or when she talked over her shoulder into the back of the car without taking her eyes off the road, or when she walked up the stairs carrying a pile of ironed clothes. He didn't feel like crying now. But he felt all pushed-up into the very front of his head; there was something gathered behind his eyes, something waiting.

He had some thinking to do. About all this. And Mum.

Once or twice in the chapel he had allowed a picture in his head: Mum lying on her back inside the long box with the shining handles. Just for a second, then he thought of something else. That wouldn't be his mum. How could she . . . ?

He looked at the Order of Service which was still in his hands, rolled into a tube. He opened it out: *Celebrating the Life of Alice Bennett.* It listed the names of all the people who had walked up to the front of the Chapel and spoken about Mum: Mum as their friend, Mum being a teacher,

Mum being a mother, people who had told funny stories, and read out things they had written about her. Alice Bennett. My mum.

He hooked his chin over Becky's arm and looked up at her. She had pulled a hank of hair back behind one ear and was frowning slightly at the phone in her hand. Sam waggled her arm by opening his mouth and pushing his chin down onto her forearm.

'Oi, Becks, who's it from?'

She didn't answer. He tilted the little screen in her hand so that he could read it. *Lots of love, darling. Thinking of you. xxx*

Sam stared at the message. It struck him that the voice behind the words could so easily be . . .

'Becks? Becky!' She transferred her gaze and looked at him.

'It must be Vanessa,' she said. 'You know, Ness? She's in Lanzarote. She told me she would be thinking of us this afternoon.'

Sam looked at the screen again. There was no name.

'Hey, Becks, you know what I thought just then? Suppose . . . ' He shook her arm gently. 'Look at me, Becky. Suppose it wasn't your friend. Suppose it was . . . from Mum. No. No, listen, you remember that time the other week, we were in the kitchen talking about why dead people didn't have a fax or a TV channel or a website and I said why didn't they and Dad thought it was funny? You remember? Well, I just thought it could be . . . maybe it could be . . . It could be Mum, hey? Just telling us she's OK?'

'Sam!'

'Mum always kept saying about not being dead and being on the Other Side and in the Next World and all that.'

'Sam, stop it, that is such a weird idea.' She was looking at him now, searching his face as if she was trying to see a way through it. 'It's Vanessa. I know it is. She always calls everybody darling. Look . . . ' Becky pressed buttons. 'See? That's her number. She just forgot to put her name.' She shook his shoulder gently. 'Really, it is.'

They walked back to the crowd and were surrounded by the suits and blouses and watchful faces that Sam sensed wanted to press forward and say things. He listened to his sister saying, yes, she had to look after her two men now. But the three of them were also going to look after each other, weren't they? And yes, she agreed, Sam would be needing her more. Mr Mack appeared and squatted in front of him. Sam looked back into his serious brown eyes.

'New class soon, eh, Sam? You'll see all your friends in a few days' time. Will you go shopping for any new things before term starts?'

Sam grabbed at this good idea. 'Yes. I'm going to go into town with Geordie and Driscoll. For new football boots. And a cricket-baseball cap.'

Mr Mack nodded. His bushy ginger-and-brown eyebrows twitched. 'So, then. How am I going to cope, having you and Geordie and Driscoll in my class this year? They're your best friends, aren't they? Aye, and your mum was my best friend—well, her and Mrs Mack, that is. Lucky, wasn't I, having my best friend in the next door classroom?'

Auntie Pam came and pressed a perfumed cheek against Sam's face and said, 'We're off home in a minute.'

Sam found if he stood still people came and talked to him, but if he walked about as if he had somewhere to go they let him pass; so he walked quite fast, stepping in and out of people's shadows. He hurried off across to the grass again and circled a few trees, looking up into the leaves while he swung around the trunk, then he strode back again, in among the many little groups of talking people.

The murmurs fell away suddenly and Sam heard his dad's voice carrying across the heads of everybody. 'You'll come back to ours, then, if you want. All welcome.'

There were nods of agreement, and calls of 'Aye, Derek, ' and 'Course we will, lad.'

Sam was still for a moment. His dad had been enveloped by arms across his back, arms around his neck, heads with closed-up faces pressing into his neck and shoulders. Sam went into a long stare. Bodies shifted around him, bodies passing and repassing; suddenly there was clear open space in front of him, no people. There was sky and up in the sky a wide brick chimney with wafts of grey smoke shunting out of the top and fanning away into nothing in the blue-white air.

Then Becky was beside him; her hand was on his back. She saw his stare and turned to follow it.

'They could have waited, ' she whispered.

Uncle Roy drove them home in the Renault. Auntie Pam sat in the front passenger seat. Sam sat in the middle of the back seat. He had never seen his dad in the back of any car, ever. Now he was pressed up against the weight of his dad's big warm body, his big knee. He looked down

and watched his own hands moving about being busy; they looked smart with the white cuffs showing below the end of his jacket sleeves. He glanced up once and saw his dad looking out of the window watching the residential suburbs of Sheffield sliding past: gates and front gardens and pathways and garages and porches. Other people's lives. People who had no idea what had happened to the family that was driving past.

Becky on the other side of him reached over and captured one of his busy hands and held it. A bit too tight for comfort.

Cars had filled all the parking spaces in the road and some had two wheels up on the pavement. They had to shuffle in through their own front door behind other people. Pam had forged on ahead of the queue, intent on taking over from the neighbourhood ladies who had set up all the drinks and snacks. Sam stood with Becky on the stairway for a few moments, strangers in their own house. People were politely squeezing past each other in the hall on their way between kitchen and the sitting room; Auntie Pam's voice was strident above the hubbub in the front room; the sliding door was open and people were moving out into the garden, taking drinks and plates of snacks with them. Sam pressed back against the wall to let a heavy and perspiring man come down the stairs from the bathroom; people were hesitating in the hall, looking around, and more people were stepping in through the front door.

He felt Becky's hand cupping the back of his head. 'Sam, why don't you go up and take your suit off?'

People in the house. People from Dad's work. People from Mum's school. Becky's friends. Neighbours. Sam

locked the bathroom door, ran a basin of hot water and put his hands into it and leaned forward to stare into Dad's shaving mirror. Around him the house vibrated with bodies and voices. His short mat of hair lay flat on his skull; the sticking-out ears were red because broad slats of sunlight from the window blinds lay across his face and shone on his ears. Wingnut, he got called at school. Wingnut Bennett. Through the open window he heard Auntie Pam calling to someone in the garden.

His sleeves had slipped down and the cuffs of his jacket were wet. Someone was trying the door handle.

This is a party for Mum, he told his face.

The face lifted its chin at him. Oh yes?

Yes, listen. That could be her laugh down below in all that din, couldn't it?

No. It couldn't. Mum turned into that figure in the bed in the hospital with the specially knitted cap on one side of her head to hide the part that had gone wrong.

Yes, but this is Mum's party; these people are all here for Mum.

Mum's gone to the Next World, where there's no fax or website or mobile phones, so she can't get in touch with us.

Dad had laughed at that idea. But what had Mum said?

Mum had gone into the silence.

Back in his own room he shut the door and took off his suit, put on jeans and T-shirt and then went to the window to look down onto the heads and shoulders of lots of people moving about in the garden, holding their cups and plates. She could so easily be there now, walking among them, passing around a plate of things to eat; it seemed the most natural thing to happen next—that Mum's head would appear from the sitting room door

below and move out among all the people. She would laugh, and her hair would swing about; it would bounce or blow around in the breeze, so that she would peel strands of it away from her eyes.

Auntie Pam had got Becky away from everybody down the far end of the garden. Sam could see the two of them down there sitting at the round table, near to the greenhouse. And he could see the clusters of red tomatoes behind the glass. Mum's tomatoes.

He got down on the floor and pulled a large sheet of paper out from under the bed. He upended a box of felt-tip pens and they clattered and rolled everywhere. He drew big swirling lines round and round on the paper. Spirals. Whirlwinds. A staircase. It was satisfying because there were no words, and there wasn't any thinking either. He coloured-in sections, joined up lines, shaded-in blocks in different shapes.

No thinking.

Some time later the door opened and Becky and Dad were there in his room watching him.

'Sam?'

He switched pens, bent a little closer to his picture.

'You want to come on down, son. Have a drink and something to eat.'

'Not hungry.'

'Sam.' Becky was close behind his ear. 'It's the three of us now. Please. We need each other.'

'What for?'

'Pick all the ripe tomatoes in the greenhouse, for a start,' Dad said. 'I forgot about them, last few days. They're fair dropping off the plants.'

Sam looked up. 'Why did everyone keep saying they're sorry?'

He saw a look pass between them. 'What else can they say, son?'

'They're apologizing, aren't they? What for?'

'What they mean is they sympathize, ' Becky said.

'I think it's stupid.' He drove the thick pen into the paper and it tore.

'Come on, Sam. Let's go down and show we're a family, hey?'

He felt gritty. Going down the stairs he turned his hard face up to Becky. 'But we're not a family any more.'