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opening extract from

# Careless

written by

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published by

## Random House

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# Part One

# Lost

# 1

The first night was bad enough. Alone, in the dark, Nicky's resentment was like a great weight that bore down on him. He lay back, closed his eyes and tried to breathe deeply but the hurt of it, the *injustice* of it made him toss and turn until his bed was wrecked and his pillows flung about the room. Later, in the blackest part of the night, he got angry. He fought back. He punched and kicked and threw himself about. That's why things got broken up in his room. His radio clock, his Walkman, his books, his desk, the pictures on his walls.

It just made things worse. Next day people started to stick their noses in. The care workers, the nurse, the doctor. Everyone got worried and Trevor, his new social worker, made a point of knocking lightly on his door at regular intervals saying, 'Everything all right, Nicky?'

Nothing was right. That was the trouble.

He had to pretend it was, though, otherwise he wouldn't be left alone. Daytime was easy. That first day, just after Lesley's letter came, he'd tried to shake it off, to bury himself in other things. It was possible, in Crystal House, to find other people to talk to. He used the

computer and went on the internet and found music websites to trespass on. He went out and bought a magazine and looked idly round the shops, pricing up the music decks and looking at the black vinyls. During the day, the world always seemed like a calm place where nothing too bad could go wrong. It was possible then to see the letter in a different light. *Dear Nicky*, it said, *I'm writing because I don't know if I'm going to see you again.*

It was a goodbye note. That was all. Somebody was leaving him and they were clearing up loose ends. He could even see a funny side to it. The first ever letter he had received that hadn't been typed on official stationery. He had opened it with delight only to find that the nice handwriting concealed a hard truth. It was a bad joke and he had laughed grimly at it.

Lesley had been ill and didn't know if she was going to get better. She'd had to find some notepaper and a pen and write the words down, like a sort of confession.

*You've not had a happy life, I know . . . I feel responsible . . .*

In daylight, when he read the letter, it didn't sound so bad. Sentence after sentence of neat writing, explaining about Nicky's life and why it had been messed up. Lesley had said it was her fault. She had owned up. He felt quite sorry for her.

But on that second night, when the lights went off in the corridors of Crystal House and Nicky stepped into his empty room, he felt more alone than he ever had in his entire life. The door clicked behind him and it was as if he

was standing in a boat in the middle of a silent ocean, the water flat and deep and dangerous.

He let Lesley's letter drop out of his hand, only paper and words he knew, but he wanted it to float away from him so he'd never have to read it again. It stayed there on the floor by his foot, a heavy weight that would drag him down. He snatched it up and took it to the window, struggling to open the catch so that he could throw it out, let the wind carry it away.

It wouldn't open though. He was poised with this bit of paper, wanting to do something dramatic and momentous, to flush these words out of his life once and for all, and he couldn't turn the handle. He stood hopelessly for a moment feeling the laughter bubble out of his mouth, his fingers hanging pathetically on the catch.

Why him? Did he have so little power over his own life that he couldn't even open a window?

There was no clear answer. That's why he turned and looked at his room with rage. He pulled the television from the shelf and rammed it into the glass panes, his voice tearing out of him, his hands and arms shaking with anger. The sound of voices and footsteps running along the corridor stopped him, made him stand to attention, biting his lips with irritation. He'd done it again. Now they would be all over him, Trevor and the others. When they charged into his room he avoided looking at them, his eyes dropping to the ground searching for the letter. Seeing it, by the foot of his bed, he picked it up and shoved it back

into his pocket. He couldn't afford to lose it. It was his proof and somebody would have to pay.

*Dear Nicky . . . You are unhappy because of decisions I made, choices I took. If I had done things differently things may have been better . . .*

It was too late for Lesley though. She would never be able to pay for what she had done.

# 2

The death was expected but the loss was still hard.

They may only have weeks, the doctors had said, so they'd taken her mum home from the hospital in her dad's van. The back had been full of tins of paint and electric tools but they'd cleared a place for Chloe to sit while her mum and dad sat in the front. It had been like an escape, the three of them barely speaking above a whisper, the van speeding along the dual carriageway towards home. It was a wet day and Chloe focused on the windscreen wipers going from left to right, clearing the glass only to have it blurred again by a thousand tiny darts of rain a second later.

They would have to make the most of the time that was left. All three of them.

A hospital bed arrived and was put together in the back dining room where the French doors opened out on to the garden. It fitted in alongside the folded-up table, the armchairs and the Welsh dresser that her mum had bought and renovated some years before. Her dad pulled the hi-fi out of the corner of the living room and set it up on the other side of the bed where her mum could reach

it. She wanted her CDs; jazz music that usually gave Chloe a headache.

Her dad went out especially and bought a small TV with a sleep button.

'Look, Lesley,' he'd said, 'if you fall asleep while watching, the set will turn itself off.'

Her mum had given a tired smile.

'That's handy,' she'd said. 'If I kick the bucket while I'm watching, it'll save on electricity!'

Her dad's eyes had filled up with tears at this and Chloe felt her own throat hot and sore as if it were tangled up with barbed wire.

'Come on! We're not going to sit round and cry the whole time!'

Her mum had been adamant that the weeping would have to stop. They tried. For a while it was difficult, each of them tiptoeing around, blinking back tears, turning away to pat a cushion or collect a magazine. When things got too much there was always the kettle to fill, the dishes to wash, the rubbish bin to empty.

Then things settled and Chloe and her mum and dad adapted to the new life that was centred around the back dining room. It was May so the doors could be opened most mornings as the nurse came on the first of her visits. They had breakfast together, the three of them: Chloe sitting on the edge of the hospital bed balancing her bowl of cornflakes; her dad cross-legged on the floor, his big workboots taking up all the space, his plate on a pile of

books; her mum with a small plate of scrambled eggs and toast fingers.

Then Chloe went to school.

'I want you to go,' her mum said. 'How are me and Dad ever meant to have any time alone if you're always here?'

The nurse, Geraldine, a small Irish lady who wore a heavy cross on a chain round her neck, tutted loudly.

'Now, Lesley, I've told you about that!'

Chloe knew it was all jokes but she put her uniform on and filled her rucksack and set off at the same time every day. As she was leaving one day she stood for a moment at the front door listening to Geraldine's chatter and her mum and dad's voices and felt a great dark hole opening up in front of her. She seemed to lose her balance as if at the edge of a precipice but held on firmly to the doorknob until she heard her mum's voice again, soft and scratchy, agreeing with something that Geraldine had said.

Every afternoon she got off the bus and wondered what was waiting for her at home. She'd use the pelican crossing and walk slowly across the road looking closely at her surroundings as she went. The off-licence, the betting shop, the chemist. Then she'd go the long way round, passing the entrance to the tube station, where the minicabs were all parked at crazy angles, their drivers leaning on the bonnets, languidly waiting for fares.

Her own street was long and tree-lined and some days she counted the steps from the beginning to her own front

door. Six hundred. Sometimes, if she stretched her legs, she could make it five hundred and sixty: more often than not she forgot to count after she got past a couple of hundred.

Every day she wondered if her mum would be awake when she got in. She said those words to herself: *Will she be awake?* but really, deep inside, she knew that she meant something quite different.

She used her own key and always shouted out *I'm home!* as soon as she got in. Then they would have their tea together and her dad would go off for a while leaving the two of them to watch the soaps on the tiny TV. Afterwards Geraldine or some other nurse would come by and get her mum ready for the night. The medicine had to be taken: pills at first, then a drip that was attached to her mum's arm.

There were visitors during those weeks. Her mum's workmates and some family friends. Her grandmother came; a big blonde-haired woman whom Chloe didn't see often. When the visit was over she gave Chloe a crushing hug, her shoulders shaking with emotion. Her dad drove her to the station and waited with her until her Suffolk train came. Her mum had seemed agitated afterwards so Chloe had taken the china out of the Welsh dresser and the two of them cleaned each piece carefully. Afterwards her mum dozed for a long time.

At night-times, when it was just getting dark, she and her mum would watch next door's cat, a skinny, spiteful

creature, walking across the back wall, stopping every few feet to listen hard at something.

'You could lace your boots with that cat,' her mum often said.

The following week the drip was taken away and her mum was given injections.

A couple of days later, as Chloe got off the bus from school, a terrible feeling took hold of her. She looked at the traffic streaming past, at the shops and the tube station and the end of her street. Everything was the same and yet the world seemed suddenly a different place. She found herself running at first, dodging between the cars and sidestepping the pedestrians. She caught the eye of the man at the paper stand outside the tube and he seemed to look sympathetically at her as though he knew something that she didn't.

Turning into her street the noise of the main road died away and she took each step quickly until in the distance her house loomed up ahead of her. Then she slowed down. It was better not to rush. If she took her time she could add minutes to her journey; she could hold back the moment when the front door opened and she would shout *I'm home* and no one would answer.

When she finally stepped into the hallway her mum was gone.

*It was so sudden, Geraldine,* her dad said to the nurse as she left for the last time. *I didn't think it would be as quick as that.*

For a couple of days Chloe and her dad spent a lot of time in the back dining room. They left the French doors open until it got too cold, played the CDs and watched the tiny TV. They ate off plates on trays and stayed in their clothes, not getting changed or washing. Before going up to bed Chloe looked out into the moonlit garden, as quiet and still as a cemetery. Somewhere, in another garden, she pictured the bootlace cat restlessly prowling about.

After the second day her dad became businesslike. He stayed upstairs for what seemed like hours and came down washed and clean in his suit and tie and said he was going to the undertaker's first then the solicitor's. He told Chloe he'd be back later to take her to register the death.

When he was gone Chloe lay on the hospital bed. She buried her face in her mum's pillows and stayed like that for a long time.

The letters of sympathy came every day. They slid through the letterbox and fluttered to the floor. Chloe picked them up and piled them on to the hall table. Sometimes they were addressed to *Mr Michael Cozens* or more often *The Cozens family*.

'More letters of condolence,' her dad said, on the morning of the funeral. He picked up the pile of unopened envelopes and flicked through.

'We'll let the dust settle before we open up these, OK?' he said, giving her a hug.

The funeral was for eleven o'clock but a lot of people came round to the house an hour or so before. Her dad answered the front door and greeted people jovially as though it was some kind of party that they had come for. Chloe found herself leaning against a wall, pressing her shoulder blades into the plaster as though she was physically holding it up. Around her there was a buzz of conversation, the clink of cups and saucers, her dad talking to people, his voice almost cheerful.

When the funeral cars arrived Chloe looked round to see her gran burst into hoarse sobs. Her blonde hair was styled and looked like it had been done at the hairdresser's. *Are you going anywhere nice?* she imagined the hairdresser saying. Her gran looked like she was going to say something to her but instead she blew her nose in a large white handkerchief. Chloe stayed where she was as the mourners put their drinks down and made their way out into the brilliant sunshine. She counted them. Nineteen people had come to the house. There would be more in the church.

For a moment she didn't know if she could move. The wall behind her felt heavy and she had this ridiculous idea that if she stepped away it would topple and fall into the room.

Her dad's face appeared at the door and he held his hand out beckoning for her to join him. Using her elbows she pushed herself away and reached out to him.

A couple of women had just come downstairs from the

toilet and they were following her. She heard one of them talking about the weather.

'A sunny day for a funeral. That's bad luck,' the woman said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' her companion said, shushing her friend.

Bad luck. Chloe almost smiled. She and her dad had just lost Mum. How could their luck be any worse?