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Opening extract from  
**The Accident Season**

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*So let's raise our glasses to the accident season,  
To the river beneath us where we sink our souls,  
To the bruises and secrets, to the ghosts in the ceiling,  
One more drink for the watery road.*

When I heard Bea chant the words it was as if little insects were crawling in under my spine, ready to change it. I was going to crack and bend, become something other. Our temples were sweating under our masks but we didn't take them off. It felt like they had become part of our skins.

The fire broke and moaned in the middle of the room and the arches above the doors whispered. I don't know how I knew that Sam's eyes were closed or that Alice had a cramp in her side. I only knew that I was everyone. I was Alice with her mouth half open, maybe in excitement or fear; I was Sam with his hands in fists; I was Bea swaying in front of us all, her red dress soaked with sweat;

and I was me, Cara, feeling like I was coming out of my skin. Bea's feet struck drum beats on the wooden floor. Her words grew louder. Soon we were all moving and the floorboards were shaking the ceiling downstairs. Wine flew from our glasses and dropped on the floor like blood.

When we stamped around the fire in the remains of the master bedroom we woke something up. Maybe it was something inside us; the mysterious something that connects every bone of our spines, or that keeps our teeth stuck to the insides of our mouths. Maybe it was something between us; something in the air or in the flames that wound around us. Or maybe it was the house itself; the ghosts between the walls or the memories clicked inside every lock, the stories between the cracks in the floorboards. We were going to break into pieces, we were going to be sawn in two and reappear whole again, we were going to dodge the magician's knife and swing on the highest ride. In the ghost house in the last days of the accident season, we were never going to die.

# 1.

Elsie is in all my pictures. I know this because I have looked through all the pictures of me and my family taken in the last seventeen years and she is in them all.

I only noticed this last night, clearing six months' worth of pictures off my phone. She is in the locker room at lunch time. She hovers at the corner of the frame on school tours. She is in every school play. I thought: *What a coincidence, Elsie's in all my photos.* Then, on a hunch, I looked through the rest of the photos on my computer. And the ones glued into my diaries. And in my family photo albums. Elsie is in them all.

She turns her back to the camera at birthday parties. She is on family holidays and walks along the coast. A hint of her even appears in windows and mirrors in the zoomed-in background of pictures taken at home: an elbow here, an ankle there, a lock of her hair.

Is there really such a thing as coincidence? *This* much of a coincidence?

Elsie is not my friend. Elsie is nobody's friend, really. She's just that girl who talks too softly and stands too close, who you used to be sort of friends with when you

were eight and your father'd just died but who mostly got left behind with the rag dolls and tea sets and other relics of childhood.

I've put a representative sample of seventy-two pictures taken in the last few years onto my phone to show to Bea before class. I want to ask her if she thinks there's something really strange going on or if the world really *is* so small that someone can turn up in all of another person's photographs.

I haven't shown the photos to Sam yet. I don't know why.

In the older pictures, my house looks like a cartoon house: no cars in the driveway, coloured curtains framing the windows in hourglass shapes, a cloud of smoke attached to the chimney like white candyfloss or cotton wool. A seven-year-old me playing Snatch the Bacon with Alice on the road in front of it. And there, at the side of the frame, a leg, the hem of a tartan skirt and the heel of the type of sensible brown shoe that Elsie always wears.

Those pictures were taken a decade ago; this morning there is no cotton-wool smoke coming from the chimney, and the hourglass curtains of the sitting room frame the image of my mother hopping on one leg as she tries to wrestle a boot onto her other foot. Alice, outside, stamps her own feet impatiently. She stalks up to the window and raps on the glass, telling our mother to get a move on. Sam laughs from the hallway, invisible in the morning sun that casts everything past the front door in shadow. I push my fists deeper into my pockets and look up at the

sky. There are a few wisps of cloud just hanging there mirroring me, leaning against the side of the car.

Alice is my sister. She is one year older and a million years wiser, or so she'd like to believe (and she may be right; how should I know? I am hardly wise). Sam is my ex-stepbrother, which is a mouthful to say, but as our parents are divorced he isn't technically my brother any more. His father was married to my mother until he disappeared four years ago. He ran off with a biological anthropologist and spends his time studying gibbons in the rainforests of Borneo. Sam has been living with us for seven years now so I suppose to all intents and purposes he is my brother, but mostly he's just Sam, standing tall in the shade of the hallway, dark hair falling in his eyes.

Knowing that getting everyone into the car will take some time, I take my hands out of my pockets and pull out my phone again. I flip through the photos for the third time this morning, playing Spot-the-Elsie like in those *Where's Wally?* books.

I'd never realized that Elsie always looks worried. Frown lines crease her forehead and her mouth makes a little pout. Even her hair looks worried, somehow, when her head is turned. That's quite an accomplishment. I wonder what my hair looks like when my head is turned. The back of my head is not something I see very often; unlike Elsie, I pose when a photo is being taken, and smile.

When Alice's head is turned (when, for example, she is

banging on the front-room window for the twentieth time to hurry my mother, who has forgotten something – her phone, her bag, her head – and has gone back upstairs to fetch it) her hair looks severe. It is dyed two shades lighter than her natural blonde, always right to the roots, perfectly straightened, tightly wound into one of those make-a-bun hair grips and stuck with two sticks. Alice has don't-mess-with-me hair.

My mother's hair is purple. It tumbles down her shoulders in unbrushed waves as she drives, and swings when she shakes her head. Strands of it stick to her lip gloss; she spits them out as she speaks. Today, she has painted her nails the same colour. If it were any other time of year on this drive to school she'd be reaching across to Alice in the passenger seat or fixing her hair, licking the tip of her finger to smooth the edges of her eye make-up or drinking from a flask of coffee like some people drag on a cigarette, but it's coming up to the end of October and Alice fell down the stairs last night, so my mother grips the steering wheel with white-knuckled, purple-nailed hands and doesn't take her eyes off the road. She wouldn't have driven us but she's convinced walking is more dangerous.

'How's your head feeling, honey?' she asks Alice. It's the thirty-second time she's asked that this morning (the eighty-ninth since coming home from the hospital last night). Sam marks another line on his hand in red biro. Every time my mother asks this question, Alice's mouth gets smaller and smaller.

Sam leans over and whispers in my ear. ‘Bet you a tenner Alice screams before a hundred.’ I hold my hand out to be shaken. Sam’s grip is firm and warm. I silently urge Alice to hold on until we get to school.

‘You all have your gloves, right?’ my mother is saying. ‘And, Sam, I’ll write you a note for chemistry. Are you all warm enough? You did take your vitamins this morning, didn’t you?’

‘Sure, Melanie,’ Sam says to my mother. He grins at me. Alice will never last under this onslaught. My mother chances the tiniest peek at her before hurriedly looking back at the road. Alice is carefully tying a silk scarf to hide the bandage around her head. She has darkened her eyes with kohl so the bruise on the side of her face seems less severe. She looks like a storybook gypsy in a school uniform.

We come to the intersection before the school. My mother’s hair whips round as she frantically tries to look every way at once before crossing the light traffic. We crawl past at a snail’s pace. The other drivers sound their horns.

When she has parked, my mother cracks her knuckles and shakes out her hands. She takes off her sunglasses and hands us each a packed lunch. ‘Now, you will be careful, won’t you?’ She gives Alice’s shoulder an affectionate rub. ‘How’s your head feeling, honey?’

Alice’s lips disappear. She gives a short, wordless scream without looking at our mother, and storms out of the car and into the main school building. I slump back in my seat.



‘Cough it up, sister,’ Sam cackles.

When we’ve got out of the car I reluctantly hand over a tenner. We wave my mother goodbye and she drives carefully away. ‘I’m not your sister,’ I remind him.

Sam drapes an arm over my shoulders. ‘If you say so, *petite soeur*,’ he says.

I sigh and shake my head. ‘I know that means sister, Sam. We’re in the same French class.’

When Sam heads for his locker to get the books for his first class, I go find my best friend in the main school building.

Bea is sitting at the back of the library, her tarot cards spread out on the desk in front of her. She likes to read the cards every morning, so she can know what kind of day she’s getting into. Bea doesn’t like surprises. It wouldn’t surprise her to know that the small group of third years sitting a few desks away from her are snickering and whispering behind her back, so I don’t draw her attention to them. Anyway, I’m half convinced Bea can give the evil eye to anyone who insults her.

I take one of my two pairs of gloves off my uncomfortably warm hands (it’s not the weather for hats and gloves but my mother wouldn’t let us out of the house without them) and pull up the chair behind me to face Bea across the little desk. I rest my chin on the chair back in front of me.

‘Elsie is in all my pictures,’ I tell her.

Bea and I automatically look across the library towards the window. Usually by this time in the morning Elsie

will have opened up her secrets booth for the day. The youngest are always the first to come to her, before the bell rings for assembly, before the caretaker opens the locker rooms and the librarian comes out of her office to tell us to get to class. They come one at a time, type up their secrets on Elsie's antique typewriter and shuffle out of the library, heads bowed, pretending to be engrossed in the contents of their school bags. Elsie's box gets fuller and fuller with the things that can't be said. She isn't here this morning, though. Maybe she's running late.

Bea turns back to me. 'What do you mean?'

I take out my phone and show it to her. I point out the mousy hair, the sensible shoes, the worry lines on the brows of every Elsie in every photograph.

Bea takes a long time over the photos. Finally she looks up. Her eyebrows are drawn together and her mouth's a thin line. 'Cara, this is . . .' She shakes her head slightly.

'A little weirder than usual?' I rest the tips of my fingers against my forehead and close my eyes. Bea reads tarot cards and lights candles for ghosts. She talks about magic being all around us and laughs when our classmates call her a witch. But this is different.

Bea goes through the photos again, scrolling, stopping, tapping the screen and peering close.

'Do you think it's real?' I say to her from behind my hands. 'Or do you think I'm crazy? Please don't say both.'

Bea doesn't say anything. Instead, she shuffles her cards and lays them out slowly one by one on the desk

between us. She looks down at the cards, and up at me, and back at the cards again. When she finally looks back at me she's wearing an expression I haven't seen in a long time.

She takes in my woolly hat, my remaining pair of gloves under the pair I just took off, the thick leggings I'm wearing as well as tights under my uniform skirt, the plaster on my finger, the sprain support around my wrist, the vague aroma of echinacea and anxiety following me around like a strange sad cloud.

Bea sighs and nods; she understands.

It's the accident season, the same time every year. Bones break, skin tears, bruises bloom. Years ago my mother tried to lock us all up, pad the hard edges of things with foam and gauze, cover us in layers of jumpers and gloves, ban sharp objects and open flames. We camped out together in the living room for eight days, until the carefully ordered takeaway food – delivered on the doorstep and furtively retrieved by my mother, who hadn't thought how she would cook meals without the help of our gas oven – gave us all food poisoning and we spent the next twenty-four hours in hospital. Now every autumn we stock up on bandages and painkillers; we buckle up, we batten down. We never leave the house without at least three protective layers. We're afraid of the accident season. We're afraid of how easily accidents turn into tragedies. We have had too many of those already.

'Alice fell down the stairs last night,' I tell her. 'All the way from the top. Her head cracked on the banister rail

on the way down. She said it sounded like a gunshot in a film, only duller.'

'Oh God.'

'There was no one in the house. They said at the hospital that she had concussion so we had to keep her awake, walk her round and round.'

Bea's eyes are wide. 'Is she OK?'

'She's fine now. Mum didn't want us to come to school today but Alice insisted.' I take off my hat and shake out my hair, then try to smooth it down. Unlike Alice, I don't dye my hair (also unlike Alice, I am not blonde), and it's too short to straighten, so my perpetually-growing-out pixie cut sticks up in fluffy brown spikes whenever I wear hats.

Bea covers my hands with hers. The pinkie of her right hand loops through the wool of the hat I'm holding. 'Why didn't you call me?' she asks; then, as if to answer her own question, she looks back down at the cards. She clears her throat, as if she's hesitating before she speaks. Then she says it. 'I think . . . It's going to be a bad one, Cara.' She tries to look me in the eye but I stare down at her cards instead. It takes a minute for me to answer.

'How bad?'

Bea touches my gloved hand gently. She says it softly. 'One of the worst.' She turns one of the cards to face me. On it there is a figure on a bed being pierced by swords. I shiver. My knee knocks into one of the desk's legs and I feel a sharp pain. When I look down I see that my leggings and tights have been ripped by a huge nail sticking

out of the wood. A few drops of blood collect around the edges of the tear. I can feel my eyes start to fill.

Bea gets up and wraps her arms around me. She smells like cigarettes and incense. 'It'll be OK,' she whispers into my ear. 'We'll make sure nothing happens to you. I promise. We can change this. And I don't think you're going crazy. We'll talk to Elsie. It doesn't look like she's in school today, but we'll talk to her together tomorrow. It'll be OK.'

I squash down the panicky feeling rising in my throat and take a packet of pirate-print tissues out of my school bag. I blot the blood off my leggings, trying to move my wrist as little as possible. I don't remind Bea that something's already happened to me, even if it's just cut skin from a nail and a sprained wrist getting out of the car last night. It's always like this: things happen and things keep happening, and things get worse and worse. I look back across the library at where Elsie's secrets booth usually is. The empty desk is like a missing tooth.