

goodnight,
beautiful

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

sphere

SPHERE

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prologue

He cries all the time.

Even when there are no tears, his eyes have the haunted hollowness of someone who is sobbing inside.

I want to help him but he won't let me near. The crying he does alone, shut away in the room that was once going to be the nursery. He sleeps with his back to me, like a solid wall of flesh that keeps the world out. He talks to me with empty words, in sentences that hold no deeper meaning. He used to weave everything he said with the strands of the depth of his love. Now, he talks to me because he has to. Now, everything he says is flat and meaningless.

The grief is so huge, so immense that he is floundering in it. Swimming blind as he would in a raging sea at night. Swimming against the crashing waves and getting nowhere. Every day he is dragged further down, into those depths. Away from the surface. Away from life. Away from me. All he clings to is the loss. Nothing else matters. I want to take his hand, swim us both to safety. To make him whole again; to soothe his wounds and help him heal.

But he will not reach for me. Instead, he flinches away, preferring to do this alone. He blames me, you see. He blames himself. And he blames me.

I blame myself, as well. But I also blame her. Nova. This is her fault, her responsibility, too. If not for her . . .

Mostly, I blame myself. Mostly, I want him to stop crying, to stop hurting, to stop grieving with every piece of his soul.

I don't understand this loss that he and Nova share. I doubt I ever will. But I understand my husband. And soon, I'll lose him. The one thing I tried to stop by doing what I did, saying what I said, will happen. But this time I won't lose him to another woman and her unborn baby, I won't lose him to her and her child, I'll lose him to himself.

I can see it happening: he's going to drown in his grief, he's going to be pulled so far down he won't be able to break the surface. He'll be dragged down to those bleak, grey depths and will never start living again. And all I'll be able to do is stand on the shore and watch.

She fumbled at his shoes, took them off, and he watched her roll off his sock and then it was cold under his toes. Like in the bath, before his wash, cold.

And there is water.

A big, big, BIG bath.

'This is the beach,' Mummy said.

'Beach!' he said.

'And that's the sea.'

'Sea!'

'Come on, let's get our feet wet.'

He pointed. 'Toes?'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Toes in the sea.'

She took his hand, it was warm like always. Her hand warm, his toes cold. She walked with him to the sea.

'It's going to be cold,' she said.

'Cold!'

Then his toes were gone. No more toes, just sea.

'Whoa!' Mummy screamed – her toes were under the sea, too.

'Whoa!' he screamed.

'Whoa!' they screamed together. 'Whoa!'

Leo, age 18 months

part one

1

‘Hey, Marm.’

It’s going to be one of those days.

I knew it when I opened my eyes this morning. I had that strong pervasive feeling of everything being skew-whiff, off-key. That I’d have to endure a day of it. I was hoping I was wrong as I showered, as I got dressed, as I flicked on the radio to keep me company whilst I stirred porridge and cut up fruit.

But Leo has just confirmed it for me. It’s going to be one of *those* days. Nothing will go right, tempers will be frayed, life will play nasty tricks on me. My seven-year-old will play nasty tricks on me. Or try to aggravate me.

He only calls me ‘Marm’ when he is trying to rile me. He knows how much I hate it; he knows that he could call me ‘Nova’ and I’d hate it less than ‘Marm’. He picked it up from watching American TV shows, their intonation when they say ‘Mum’ (‘Mom’) and every time it reminds me that he could be one step away from saying ‘rowt’ instead of ‘route’, ‘aloominum’ instead of ‘aluminium’. That he could start talking with a stateside inflection.

I stand at the sink, filling the porridge saucepan with soapy water, and through the reflection in the window I watch Leo saunter across the room to the solid oak wood table, climb up on to his chair and settle himself in front of his bowl. He’s going all out to wind me up today. Not only has he called me

‘Marm’, he is wearing his Teen League Fighter costume. On a school morning.

I turn off the tap and spin away from the sink to face him. Fully ingest him in all his glory: the costume is bright green with a detachable red cape that currently hangs at an awkward angle from the corner of his left shoulder by a small square of Velcro. He’s tied on his red mask, which serves to emphasise his huge, long-lashed eyes, just as it disguises part of his face.

He’s a four-foot-nothing, seven-year-old superhero with bulging biceps, rippling chest, six-pack abdomen and sculpted bottom.

Deep breath in, I think. Deep breath out.

I close my eyes. Count to ten. Count the memories that make me love him: two days old when he smiled at me as I held him in the crook of my arm. Eighteen months old when we first stood on the beach and watched the sea foam up to shore and effortlessly swallow our feet, then just as easily spit them out again. Five years old when he took my hands in his and told me earnestly, ‘You’re the best mummy in the world’ because I’d made him cheesy beans on toast for his birthday dinner.

This is the way I have to deal with Leo sometimes. This is the only way to remind myself not to lose it. There are only two people on earth who can slip through the layers of my calm and push my buttons; who can make me shout. Leo is the one who does it most regularly.

I open my eyes. He is still wearing the suit. It is still a school morning. I am still unimpressed.

‘So, Marm, is this all there is for breakfast?’ he drawls, spoon raised, his head on one side as he stares at me.

The blood rises in my veins, heat rushing first to my throat, then to my cheeks. Very soon, I’m going to start crying. If I shout at him, I’ll feel awful and will have to go to my room and cry. If I don’t shout at him, I’ll probably have to do something else like ban him from the PlayStation until the weekend,

which will make him cry. Which will, of course, make me cry – silently, privately, but certainly – because I can't bear to make him cry. Either way, I'm going to be crying at some point this morning if I can't reason with him.

'Leo, you need to go and get ready,' I say, calmly. 'Put on your uniform.'

'I am ready,' he says.

'No, you're not.'

He nods, furrows his brow. 'I am ready,' he insists. 'This is what I'm wearing.'

'I don't want to argue, go and get ready. *Now!*'

'This is what I'm wearing. This is what I have to wear.'

'Leo.' I grit my teeth as I continue. 'Ple—'

DING-DONG! chimes the doorbell. Leo's dark eyes light up as if it's his birthday and he's expecting the usual glut of presents to be handed to him by the postman. He's out of his seat and racing through the kitchen door before I can completely comprehend what he's doing. I dash out after him with 'Don't you—' on my lips.

But even as the words leave my mouth, he is doing what he knows he's not supposed to do. He is reaching up, his wide, chubby hand closing around the knob, and he is pulling the door wide open.

Suddenly the hallway is flooded with light. A brilliant, glorious white light. I raise my arm, use my hand to shield my eyes from the brightness that is drenching the hallway, making everything around us luminescent.

There is no postman on the other side of the door, in the white light. Just a tall, rakishly thin man wearing a white suit with white shirt, white tie and white shoes. He glows with the light surrounding us. His hair is black and neatly combed, with a perfectly straight side parting and a lock of black hair that lays across his forehead; his skin is a pale white that highlights his large, walnut-brown eyes; his mature features are friendly and open. He smiles at me, reassuring and friendly,

then turns his attention to Leo, the smile becoming wider and more affectionate.

‘Are you ready, young man?’ he asks Leo. He speaks without moving his lips. He talks straight into my head, my heart. I know him, I realise. I know him, he knows me, but the full memory of him is out of reach and I cannot place him.

‘Yes,’ Leo says with a nod and a grin. ‘Yes, I am.’ Leo speaks with his mouth.

‘What’s happening?’ I ask.

‘You do look ready,’ the man says to Leo.

‘You’re not going anywhere with him,’ I say.

The man looks up at me again, fixes me with his warm, friendly brown eyes. A stare that is kind but firm. Definite. ‘It’s time, Nova,’ he says, again without moving his lips.

Leo runs to me, throws his arms around my waist, buries his head in the area above my stomach, snuggles me for a moment, then pulls away. ‘I miss you, Mum,’ Leo says, looking up at me, a smile on his face. ‘I miss you lots.’

I reach out to hold him, to keep him near, but I’m reaching for air; clutching at nothingness. Leo is with the man, holding the man’s hand. They are so different, but so similar. I know Leo will be safe with him. But I can’t let him go. How can I let him go?

‘Where are you taking him?’ I ask. ‘He’s not even dressed. Where are you taking him?’

‘It’s OK, Mum,’ Leo says, ‘I want to go. I’m ready. I told you, I’m ready. This is what I’m wearing.’

I shake my head. No. He’s not ready. How can my little boy be ready to go somewhere without me? How? He’s not ready. I’m not ready. ‘I’ll come with you,’ I say.

Leo grins, raises his hand and waves. ‘Bye, Mum. Bye.’

‘No—’

My eyes snap open and I am still – startled and confused – for a moment as my mind scrabbles around, trying to get my

bearings, trying to remember where I am. The room is in virtual darkness; slivers of orange street lighting creeping in through the horizontal blinds, and white light shining in from the corridor outside through the squares of safety glass in the door make it not quite black in here. I was asleep, but I wasn't lying down. My eyes move around the room, finding it full of unknown angles and shapes.

Then I hear them, the bleeps. The rhythmical bleeps in the background that remind me where I am, and my eyes fly to the bed.

He is still here. Still there. Still in the bed. I sit forwards in the chair, and gasp as every muscle and sinew in my back and neck screams in agony. I brush away the pain, trying to see if there is any change, if Leo has moved while I was sleeping.

Leo still lies on his back, his eyes gently pressed together as he remains in that world he inhabits now. That between world: not awake, not on the other side. I sit further forwards in my chair so I can examine his face closer. The dream was so vivid. He'd been active. Walking, talking. Surely that must have translated into the here and now? *Surely?*

His eyes rest lightly together. His lips are soft and slightly parted. His features are smooth and expressionless, not like when he is usually asleep. I can remember in detail the many expressions he has when he is asleep, the way he is animated, his muscles moving and twitching as he lives out as exciting a sleeping life as the one he has when he is awake. This, this sleep, is so unlike him: he is rarely still for long, something always happens to make him light up or speak or want to run around. He never stops for this long.

'*It's OK, Mum. I want to go.*' This time he had taken the man's hand. In the dream, this time, he was really going to go.

My eyes flick over the bed to Keith; his muscular, six-foot-five frame is slumped in the chair on the other side, his shaved head lolling to one side on his shoulder as he sleeps, still wearing his police uniform. He obviously came straight from his

shift and found me deeply asleep because I hadn't stirred when he came in. Usually I'm awake when he arrives, and he asks me about my day before I go home to bed, but today I was spark out. The vague memories of his lips on my forehead, his fingers stroking my cheek, drift across my mind. I'd been out of it, but I'd been aware of him.

I turn back to Leo, wondering if he is aware we are here all the time. One of us always sitting beside him, watching, waiting. Waiting.

Do the sounds of the machines penetrate through to him? What about the hellos, the chats, the books I read, the good-nights? Does he know it's Thursday? His second Thursday here? Do all these little pieces of our reality slither through the cracks in his sleep and make him aware of the world going on around him? Or is he locked away from it all? Hidden. Removed. Somewhere separate. I couldn't bear it if it was like that. If he is all alone and doesn't know I am here, waiting for him to come back.

'I'm ready, Mum. I want to go.'

I rub the base of my thumbs over my eyes, removing the crystals of grit, trying to massage wakefulness and life into my face.

'I'm ready to go.'

After thirteen days of this, I'd have thought my body would get used to being in that chair for hours on end; it wouldn't be as sore and stiff, protesting with long snaps of pain every time I try to move. I get up, go to the bed, instinctively shutting out the IV drips, the electrodes attaching him to machines, and stare down at my boy. My boy. He's been the reason I have opened my eyes and climbed out of bed every day for the past seven-and-a-half years; even when I haven't wanted to, I've done it. My world started to rotate around him from the moment he was born, and now it is off-kilter.

I stroke his forehead with the very tips of my fingers, gently, so as not to disturb him. Even now, my instinct is to be gentle

so I don't disturb him. Even though disturbing him, waking him, is exactly what we want.

His head is shorn, a fine covering of his black hair slowly growing back. They'd done that, clipped and shaved away all his beautiful, thick black curls, eight days ago. His mocha-caramel skin is smooth on his head, except at that point on his lower skull, where they drilled into him to clamp off three blood vessels, to try to prevent a haemorrhage. The operation had been a complete success, they told me.

I'd stared at the surgeon, with his green cap on his head, his mask around his neck, his green operating scrubs surprisingly clean. 'Success?' I'd echoed.

He'd nodded. Explained that the other aneurysm they'd been worried about hadn't ruptured, and was now no longer a threat.

'Success,' I'd repeated, my voice far away and disconnected. Keith had put his hand on my forearm to steady me. That word obviously had different meanings to the surgeon and to me. My boy was still asleep, was still more 'there' than here, he wasn't talking or walking, his eyes weren't open, his face wasn't moving, but still, it'd been a success. 'Thank you,' I'd said as Keith's large, warm hand closed around mine. It wasn't the surgeon's fault he didn't understand what the word success actually meant. It meant Leo would be back to normal. It meant, at the very least, that they would be able to tell me when he would be waking up.

I return to my brown padded chair and curl my legs up under me, rest my head back and watch Leo.

This is the world I live in now. A world where success means this. A world where I know those dreams are born of the feeling, the knowledge that has been stealthily and determinedly uncoiling itself bit by bit inside me every day.

The feeling that maybe Leo is ready.

Maybe I might have to let him go.