

Introduction

I am in my late forties. I have lost grandparents, friends, a father, a child. Grief has run through my life like thread through fabric; at times gossamer-thin and barely there, other times weaving thick, clumsy darns across the rips. In my grief, I am a mother, a child, a sister, a wife, a woman, a friend.

I am also a writer. I have touched on grief in everything I have written, because grief has touched every part of me. I write to make sense of the world, and of my place in it, and I write to find people who feel the same way I do. I write in the hope that my words will resonate with others; that they will read a line over and over and say, *This. This is how I feel.*

My novels circle around the subject of loss,

yet I have never written explicitly about grief. About how it feels, about the shape of it, the awfulness of it. About its changing nature, its patterns and passing.

I have never written about *my* grief.

It has always felt too big to tackle without the filter of fiction; too dangerous – like looking directly at the sun. What if it blinds me? What if, once my eyes are locked on it, I can't look away? For a long time, I managed my grief by compartmentalising it. It is a skill honed during my years as a police officer, when carrying the emotional baggage from one job to another would be damaging to all concerned. I parcelled my emotions into neat bundles and locked them away until I had the space and strength to unpack them.

I have not always unpacked them.

Some moments – some feelings – are so hard and so heavy, they stay in their boxes, like the nostalgia we cart around from new house to new house, filling our attics and garages and under-stairs cupboards. Relics of another time;

baggage we no longer need. We have not touched it for years, yet we can't quite sever ourselves from it. It is a part of us.

If I wrote about my grief, I thought, I would have to unpack the boxes. I would have to take out my feelings and examine them, one by one. It could break me. It *would* break me. And so I continued to touch on the subject lightly, through my characters, like a child who pushes someone bigger and braver in front of them.

Yet here we are: at the start of a book that is very much about grief. You and me, staring at the sun.

As it turned out, the catalyst for writing wasn't grief itself, but the absence of it. Four years ago, halfway through the fourteenth anniversary of my son's death, I realised what day it was. I had known the date, but the significance had slipped into the recesses of my mind, the way it does when you've promised to be somewhere, or to do something, but can't remember where or what.

The penny dropped at the garden centre, midway through the serious business of choosing the perfect Christmas tree. The scent of pine needles was heady and comforting, and I stood for a moment in this temporary indoor forest, surveying my emotions, as though I were a first-aider at the scene of an accident, running my fingers gently from one side of the patient to the other, checking for fractures. How did I feel? How serious were my injuries? Was I still breathing?

I was.

My son Alex was five weeks old when he died.

I find myself unable to give you a simple cause of death. The tipping point for an elderly man with terminal cancer might be organ collapse, or malnutrition, yet we'd still blame cancer for taking him. A young woman killed in a car accident might have a fatal head injury, yet the cause of her death is surely the crash. My son was born at twenty-eight weeks and – if not exactly hale and hearty – his prognosis

was good. Better, in fact, than that of his twin brother, who went straight onto a ventilator; machinery keeping him alive, where I had failed. Both boys exceeded expectations, gaining weight and feeding well, avoiding the myriad health problems associated with prematurity.

Consequently, Alex's rapid descent at three weeks old was unexpected and terrifying. Tests revealed the presence of pseudomonas – a bacteria that falls under the benign-sounding umbrella 'hospital bug', as though it's something one can easily shake off. And perhaps he could have done, had he not been premature, had he not weighed barely three pounds, had he not, then, developed meningitis.

Did he die from meningitis?

From the subsequent brain haemorrhage?

Or from the decision my husband and I ultimately made, to bring an end to his suffering?

Death, like life, is rarely straightforward.

In the days following Alex's death, I was continually surprised to find myself still alive. It seemed

impossible that my body could continue to function when I was experiencing what felt like multiple organ failure. My extremities were numb and tingling, as though my blood had taken one look at the distance required to travel there and decided against it. Something crushed my chest: my ribs surely broken, my lungs a fraction of their usual size. My breath came shallow and jagged, each inhalation briefer than the one before; each exhalation harder than the last. A dark cloud seeped into my brain, like ink through a blotter, fogging my thoughts and weighing down my limbs.

In short, I was dying.

And yet I did not die, and there were times when that felt like a second cruelty.

Over the years, my grief has changed shape, its jagged edges softening to something easier to carry. It has altered its behaviour, becoming less demanding, less needy. Without exception, these transitions have happened while I've been looking the other way, the way a train journey

swallows the miles when you're absorbed in a book. I looked up on that fourteenth anniversary, surrounded by Christmas trees, and realised I had travelled further than I'd thought possible. I hadn't woken that morning with heartache so overwhelming I couldn't speak, as I had every year before. There was no longer something pressing on my chest, making every breath feel like my last. My grief was still present, but it no longer consumed me.

It has got easier.

It will get easier for you, too.

That's my promise. It's a small thing to write a whole book about, isn't it? But I've found that listening to something once isn't enough to believe it, especially when your head is telling you something else entirely.

It was your fault.

You should have done more.

If only,

If only,

If only . . .

More – much more – on that later.

There is nothing magic about fourteen years. If you're suffering with loss right now, that feeling is real and raw. It could be three years, or seven, or twenty, before you wake without grief lodged in your throat. I know how much it hurts. But I know, too, as intimately and surely as I know grief itself, that you will not always feel this way.

We can try to analyse grief. We can herd our emotions into clearly labelled stages. We can discuss the science behind the physical pain we're feeling. But grief is bigger than that, more wilful. It follows its own path. Over the years I've learned not to fight my grief, but to be mindful of it. To accept it as part of me, just as I accept the creaks and scars; the grey hairs and the lines.

This book is structured around a series of promises: my commitment to you that the sun will rise again. It is a conversation, not a lecture; a story of hope, not loss. It's a book to return to when you're hurting; to give to a friend when

you don't know what to say. A book to pick up when you need a gentle voice to keep you company. There are eighteen promises, one for each year I have now lived without my son; each year I have grown around my grief.

Few people talk openly about death, and I remember feeling so lonely in my early grief. I didn't know if I was 'doing it right' – if what I was feeling was normal – and I didn't know where to find the answers.

The short answer is that whatever you're feeling is normal.

The longer answer is this book.

On 10 December 2020 – the fourteenth anniversary of Alex's death – after we'd chosen a Christmas tree and driven home, I shared my thoughts online. I wanted to offer hope to anyone still at the start of their journey through grief, to reassure them that it wouldn't always hurt so much. I wanted, too, to mark the moment for myself. It felt like a milestone. An achievement, even – because grieving is an active act, not a passive one.

Several years later, I still receive messages every day in response to that post. I have read tens of thousands of stories, from people all over the world, in different phases of grief. I have cried for those who see no way forward and been gladdened by those who are not only surviving but thriving. I replied to as many messages as I could, and when I couldn't keep up, I wrote this book. For a while, the words I'd posted on Twitter were enough. They had reached almost twenty million people, and I knew from the responses that they'd provided comfort.

But there was more I wanted to say.

I wanted to add to the promises I'd made and supply practical suggestions to accompany them. I realised I was finally ready to unpack my own grief and consider which elements were universal. My son would have turned eighteen this year and it feels right to be working on something in his name; a coming-of-age for my grief, instead of for my boy.

I am thinking, too, how hard I found it to

be online when my grief was at its peak; that a poorly worded comment or a misplaced advert could derail me for days.

But a book . . .

A book contains only what it promises on the cover. There's nothing sliding into your private messages or jumping into your timeline. A book hands the power back to the reader.

And so this is my journey through grief, but it's yours, too. In every corner of the world, every minute of every day, people are mourning loved ones. Grief is universal. But just as our experiences of death are different, so, too, are the emotions that follow. Your grief is as unique as you are – as unique as your relationship was with the person you've lost – and whatever you are feeling is valid and true. I have focused on the elements of grief that seem to be common to so many of us, based on the messages I received. There will be pages you will want to read over and over; in which you'll place book-marks or pieces of torn paper, or handwritten notes in the margin. *This. This is how I feel.* But

there will also be chapters where the words don't speak to you in the same way – where you feel as though they're talking to someone else entirely – and that's okay, too. Skip over those pages, and don't for a second worry that you're doing something wrong by not feeling the same way I did. We all grieve in our own way.

I am not a bereavement expert. I am no different to you, except that – perhaps – I am a little further along this journey neither of us wanted to take. I couldn't have written this book immediately after my son died, but I wish I could have read it. I wish I'd had something to reach for at the precise moment I needed it.

Over the years, I have read many books on grief – and tried to read many more. Soon after I was bereaved, at the time I most needed to find solace in a book, I found instead overwhelming lists of things I should be doing. I found impenetrable psychology in dense paragraphs that tried to explain why I was feeling the way I was, when the reason was really quite

simple. My son had died. It didn't help me – not then – to understand how cortisol was flooding my brain, or how my prefrontal cortex (the part responsible for decision-making) had temporarily retired. What I wanted to know was that it would get better. That I wasn't alone.

Your friends and family will reach out to you on special days – Christmas, anniversaries, due dates – but the closest of friends can't always predict the triggers that take even you by surprise. A chord in a song you heard on the last holiday you took together; the drift of a perfume you once found on your pillow every day. The swish of someone's hair; a glimpse of a scarf in a shop window. A pair of shoes, a photograph, a wine label. Daffodils.

This book is for those moments.

You may find, as I did, that it is impossible to concentrate for any great length of time. For this reason, there is no overarching narrative in this book – no obligation to plough through a hundred pages of dark times before hope

emerges. You can read the book in the conventional way, from start to finish, or you can draw courage from a single chapter. When even that feels overwhelming, the list of promises on their own might bring you comfort.

However you read it, I hope it helps. I promise you – and I will keep promising until you believe me – it won't always hurt like this.