

# THE HIDEAWAY

Sheila O'Flanagan



# Chapter 1

There was a long queue at the car rental desk and I was at the back of it.

I'd congratulated myself on being first off the plane and thought I'd be first in line at the rental desk too, but I'd forgotten there would be other flights into Alicante airport and that those passengers might also be hiring cars. Now it seemed that everyone who'd landed that evening was in the queue ahead of me. And it was moving at a snail's pace.

I was standing immediately behind a family of four whose flight had arrived nearly three hours late and who were feeling very cranky about it. The little girl, aged about two, was holding on to her mother's leg, whimpering pettishly, while her slightly older brother was aiming his bright-green plastic laser gun at the waiting adults and whooping 'gotcha' every couple of seconds. The parents were venting their annoyance in equal measure at the airline and the car rental agency, asking each other why it was taking so bloody long to hand over a set of keys. The last comment was pitched loudly enough for everyone in the line to hear, and there were plenty of approving nods as well as a few mutters of 'bloody disgrace' from the waiting hordes.

The two people currently at the desk had been there for at least twenty minutes. If everyone ahead of me took that long, I'd be waiting for nearly two hours. Which would mean that it would be after midnight before I got my car, and at least another hour before I reached the Villa Naranja. So my time on the ground would be practically as long as the flight itself – longer if, as I feared, I got lost.

'You won't get lost, Juno,' Pilar had assured me as she'd highlighted the route on Google Maps. 'Once you're on the road to the house, you'll be fine. The hardest part is the turn just before the town because it is quite sharp and easy to miss in the dark. But you'll know you've passed it if you end up in Beniflor.'

'Is there a hotel nearby if I do lose my way?'

'Not in Beniflor itself,' she replied. 'But there's a lovely one about fifteen minutes past it. La Higuera. Small, but very chic. Even though it's expensive it's always booked up. Honestly, Juno, you'll find the Villa Naranja, no problem. Don't worry.'

I wasn't exactly worried, but despite my limited budget I wished I'd opted for the chic and expensive option, at least for tonight. I supposed that if things took too long, I could always drive into Alicante city, check in to the first hotel I saw, and leave looking for the Villa Naranja until the morning when it would be bright and everything would seem better and easier. Even as I considered it, I told myself not to be stupid. The drive was straightforward enough and I was perfectly capable of finding a country house, even in the dark. I was a strong, competent woman, wasn't I? It might be true that both my strength and competence had been called into question of late but I shouldn't be such a . . . a

## *The Hideaway*

. . . the disparaging word I was about to call myself was lost as, out of nowhere, the pain and the grief enveloped me like a tidal wave, literally knocking me sideways. I gasped an apology as I bumped into the mother in front of me.

‘That’s OK,’ she said. ‘It takes it out of you, doesn’t it? Travelling. And all this hanging around is ridiculous. Sometimes I wonder if going away on holiday is worth the hassle.’

She kept talking without waiting for me to answer, which was just as well because I wasn’t listening to a word she was saying, and I couldn’t speak anyhow. My throat had constricted and there was only room in my head for my anguish. The problem, of course, was that I had no right to be anguished and no right to be in pain. Yet it caught hold of me when I least expected it, and wouldn’t let me go.

Without wanting to, I was replaying the moment I’d heard the news. The moment I’d seen the photograph flash up on the screen and my life had been turned upside down. I was utterly unable to stop the memories or the images filling my head. It was all I could do not to cry.

The queue moved forward again.

‘We’re staying at my sister’s.’ The woman’s voice broke into my thoughts. ‘She has a place in Altea Heights. It’s beautiful. Views of the sea. Lovely terrace. And a private pool.’

‘It sounds great.’ My voice came out as a croak but she didn’t seem to notice.

‘Oh, it is,’ she told me. ‘Sadly, we won’t be able to come this time next year. Cooper will be in school then, and they fine you for taking them out in term-time now. It’s ludicrous. Everyone knows the airline companies scam you on flights during school holidays.’

*Sheila O'Flanagan*

'It's the nanny state at work,' said her husband.

I nodded in agreement. As a single woman just past her thirtieth birthday, school holidays were irrelevant to me, but I understood her frustration.

'Are you on your own, then?' She looked at me, inviting conversation.

To my enormous relief a second window at the rental desk opened at that moment. The queue split and hustled forward and I didn't need to answer. To avoid any possibility of talking, however, I took out my phone and looked at it. But I already knew the most recent message would still be the one from Pilar, sent just before I boarded the plane in Dublin.

*Slight problem. Mum didn't get to the house today so electricity is still off. No fresh food either but there is coffee and tea. Best pick up something at airport for snack and brekkie. Hope you have great time. Px*

I'd bought two extra Danish pastries on the flight. They'd looked soggy and unappetising even before I put them in my bag but I didn't care. I wasn't hungry. I wouldn't be hungry in the morning either. I'd lost my interest in food along with almost six kilos in weight over the past couple of months. I knew that I couldn't really afford to lose any more. I've always been on the slender side, and dropping almost a stone didn't really suit me. But the last thing I cared about was how I looked.

I scrolled through my other messages, even though I told myself not to. I stopped at the last one in the conversation with Brad.

*Tonight's dinner location. Joining them shortly. Love you. Miss you. Bxx*

The wave of grief hit me again. I clenched my teeth and

## *The Hideaway*

tightened my grip on the handle of my luggage. At that moment, it was the only thing keeping me upright.

A final move forward and then it was my turn at the desk. I gave my details and was handed the keys to a Ford Fiesta, which the rental agent said was on the third floor of the car park. I thanked him, and walked towards the exit. The family of four was still at the desk. The little boy was bashing their suitcases with his plastic laser gun and the father was arguing with the agent about the insurance excess charge.

The car park was busy. I checked the bay number for the Fiesta and strode along one of the rows. The dark blue car was where it was meant to be. I gave a sigh of relief, popped the boot open and hefted my case inside. I opened the door and slid into the seat before I realised I was on the passenger's side. I got out and walked around to the driver's door.

I'd driven on the Continent before, so left-hand drive didn't bother me. The first time – in France with my closest friends, Cleo and Saoirse – had been a little scary, but after the initial anxious minutes I'd been fine. I'd been the one to do most of the driving through Europe with Sean, my fiancé, a few years later. Sean became my ex-fiancé after that trip, although it hadn't been on account of my driving. It had been on account of him deciding he wasn't ready to marry anyone. Or at least that he wasn't ready to marry me. Of course I'd had broken relationships in my life before Sean, but I'd never felt as devastated as I'd felt then. All the dreams and plans of the life I'd expected to lead had come crashing down around me. I'd felt battered and bruised and despairing. Humiliated, too – though I tried to tell myself that it wasn't a reflection on me that Sean had changed his mind. And better at that point than after we were married. Still, it was

a difficult few months. But I'd got over it. I'd rebuilt my life, advanced my career and moved on. Now my heart was broken all over again, and this time it was much, much worse. This time I didn't know how to get over it, I didn't know if I'd ever recover.

I took a deep breath, then put the Fiesta into reverse and eased out of the parking bay. It was good to have something to concentrate on, something to pull my mind away from the dark places it still wanted to go. Besides, I like driving. I'm a better driver than Sean ever was. I'm alert and confident and I don't let myself be bullied on the road. That was why Cleo and Saoirse always made me drive on holidays. And I honestly didn't mind, because I like being the one in control. I'm much better at giving orders than taking them.

I hadn't been on holidays with the girls since I'd started going out with Sean. But after Brad, Cleo had asked me if I'd like to go away for a weekend with her. To a spa, she suggested. Somewhere top-notch. Somewhere I could be pampered.

'I don't deserve to be pampered,' I'd told her in a voice that was tight with the effort of not crying.

'It wasn't your fault,' Cleo protested.

'I know. But it feels like a judgement somehow.'

'You've got to give yourself a break, Juno,' she said.

'They didn't get a break, did they?' I asked.

And Cleo hadn't said any more about pampering.

'At the roundabout, take the second exit.' The female satnav was a welcome distraction from my thoughts.

I concentrated on my road positioning and followed her instructions. Most of the route to Beniflor was by motorway,

## *The Hideaway*

which made things fairly simple. I like motorway driving. I like putting my foot down and giving the car its head.

But I didn't put my foot down too heavily in the Fiesta. I was afraid to drive too quickly. There was a chance I might burst into tears, and I didn't want to be travelling at 120kph when that happened. Nevertheless there was a tiny, tiny part of me that thought driving off the road and into oblivion had its merits.

I fixed my eyes on the road ahead. I wasn't going to think like that. I'd had those thoughts in the darker days but I'd told everyone that I was much better now. The thing is, I wasn't, not really. The reason I was here was because I wasn't at all better, and because I couldn't do my job properly. Because I'd felt obliged to hand in my resignation before I did something really stupid. And before they fired me.

I was really good at my job before. I know women aren't supposed to blow their own trumpet and say they're brilliant at anything – like driving, or our jobs. We're meant to be self-deprecating and modest and put it all down to luck rather than being super-capable. But I was one of the best radiographers at the private hospital where I worked, and I knew it. I knew it because the patients said so. The staff said so too. And I loved my job so much, I was always trying to improve my skills and to make the experience better.

The patients are the most important part of my work. They're either nervous or in pain, or both, when they come to radiology. A big part of what I do is to make them feel relaxed. But how could I make anyone else relax when I was as tight as a coiled spring myself? And how could I be cheerful and positive with them when I was unable to come up from the depths of my own misery?

I tried, I really did. But it was asking too much. One day, after I'd finished an ultrasound of a young woman with abdominal pain, I burst into tears right there in the room beside her. The patient, not surprisingly, thought I'd seen something terminal in her ultrasound, and she burst into tears too. She was utterly inconsolable and wouldn't believe that she wasn't about to die.

Afterwards, I was called in to see the head of the department. Drina O'Driscoll is in her fifties; she's cool, professional and a role model for everyone in radiology. She looked at me without saying anything. I handed her the letter and she placed the envelope on the desk in front of her.

'I know you've had some personal issues, Juno.' Her voice was steady. 'I realise they have affected your work.'

I was gripping the edge of the seat with my hands in an effort to keep my composure. I wondered what she knew about my personal issues, and how she knew it.

'I'm very sorry,' I said. 'I shouldn't have allowed a private matter to affect me professionally.'

Drina looked at me from grey eyes that were soft with kindness.

'We don't live in a bubble where everyone can come into work and shut out everything else,' she said. 'It would be nice if we could. But we can't.'

'I totally traumatised the patient,' I said. 'She could sue us.'

'Hopefully she'll be so relieved her ultrasound was clear that she won't.' Drina smiled slightly. 'Having a health scare can change your perspective quite a bit.'

'Even so,' I said. 'I was totally unprofessional.'

'And now?' asked Drina. 'How are you now?'

## *The Hideaway*

I indicated the envelope with my resignation letter inside.

'I'm not a safe person to be around,' I told her. 'You can't afford for me to be on the team.'

'I see that you need some time away.' Drina shuffled some papers on her desk. 'But I hate to lose someone as skilled as you.'

'That's the thing.' I tightened my grip on the seat. 'I'm not skilled any more. I've lost it. I may never get it back.'

'You haven't lost it, and there's no question of not getting it back,' Drina said. 'I suggest that you take three months' unpaid leave. We can use agency cover for you until then. If, after that, you still feel you can't cope, we'll replace you.'

It took a few minutes for her words to sink in, and then I felt the tears well up again. I choked them back.

'I thought you'd be pleased to get rid of me,' I said.

'Get well, Juno.' She handed me the unopened envelope. 'Come back better.'

'Thank you.'

I stumbled out of her office and went to the hospital café. Cleo and Pilar, two of the other radiographers, were waiting for me. We're a tight-knit bunch in the radiology department, and they'd been there to pick up the pieces when I'd made a show of myself.

'That's a great outcome.' Cleo's words were encouraging. 'I'm sure you'll feel completely different by the end of the summer. What will you do?'

I shrugged. 'I don't have any plans. Just stay home, I suppose. Think about it.'

'For God's sake, Juno, you know I'm totally supportive and everything, but you can't spend three whole months with nothing to do but think about it.' Cleo looked at me in

horror. 'You'll go mad. You're not the wallowing sort, and you don't spend time thinking about stuff you can't change.'

'I won't be wallowing,' I objected. 'I'll be . . .'

But Cleo was right. Thinking too much had got me into my current situation. I needed to figure out how to stop thinking and start living, not continually analysing my choices and wondering how things could have been different.

'You should do something new,' Pilar said. 'Something creative perhaps. Like writing a novel or learning to paint.'

For the first time since I'd left Drina's office, I smiled.

'The only writing I'm any good at is technical reports,' I said. 'As for painting – well, unless it's a wall, I'm hopeless.'

'It doesn't have to be painting or writing,' Pilar pointed out. 'You could just as easily do rock climbing or white-water rafting.'

'Or I could sit at home and read,' I said. 'To be honest, that's all I want to do. Be on my own. Do nothing.'

'This is an opportunity,' said Cleo. 'If nothing else, Juno, you should go to counselling.'

'Oh, please.' I snorted. 'I don't do counselling.'

'There's no need to turn your nose up at—'

'I have an idea!' Pilar sounded excited. 'You could stay in my grandmother's house. And you could read as much as you like and go for walks and explore my country.'

'Huh?' I looked at her.

'My grandmother's house,' repeated Pilar. 'I have told you about it before. It's in a small inland pueblo on the Costa Blanca. Not completely remote but on its own. Nobody has lived there since she passed away last year, and I know my parents would be happy to rent it. You could sit in silence and let the sun and the sea and the orange groves heal you.'

## *The Hideaway*

‘D’you really think so?’ I asked, as I imagined the bliss of a warm evening on the coast with the scent of orange blossom in the air. Where I wouldn’t have to meet people I knew and could grieve by myself without pretending that my sorrow was over something else entirely.

‘Of course,’ said Pilar. ‘My mother would love to have someone stay there. She feels bad that it’s empty.’

‘Where is it exactly?’ Cleo licked her fingers as she finished her croissant.

‘It’s in the hills but not too far from Benidorm,’ said Pilar. ‘Beniflor is a rural community but there are also quite a lot of foreign homeowners in the neighbourhood. My grandmother left her house to my parents when she died, but it’s difficult to sell. Most of the foreign buyers want something on the coast or with views of the sea. And they want modern homes too. Grandmother’s house is old-fashioned. It has views of orange groves and the mountains. It’s not what they’re looking for. And for local people, well, there are some who would take the orange groves – one of the local farmers harvests the oranges – but they don’t need the house. So it is still on the market but unloved in. My mother spends occasional weekends there but it has become a little . . . a little . . .’

‘Neglected?’ suggested Cleo.

‘Yes.’ Pilar nodded. ‘And I know this distresses my mother because she would like to keep it nice for my grandmother’s sake but she lives now in Valencia, which is about an hour and a half away, and she cannot simply visit whenever she likes.’

‘All the same, she might not like a complete stranger staying there,’ I said.

'You're not a stranger, you're a friend,' said Pilar. 'She would be happy, I promise you.'

It was appealing but it seemed like an easy way out. Why should I get to spend three months in some country idyll – even a neglected country idyll – while everyone else was working? I didn't deserve it. It would be totally wrong.

That was what I said to Saoirse when she came home that evening. We shared an apartment which was close both to the hospital and to the accounting firm where she worked.

'Three months in the sun!' cried Saoirse. 'You'd be crazy to say no.'

'All the same, I don't know if I should. It's like being rewarded for—'

'For crying out loud, Juno, don't be ridiculous!'

'But—'

'No buts. You need to get away. You really do.'

I looked at her uncertainly.

'You can't say no,' she said.

So I said yes.

And that was why I was driving along the AP-7 at midnight to a place I didn't know.

Alone.

It was exactly an hour later when Jane, as I'd christened the very prim-and-proper-sounding satnav, jolted me out of my thoughts by telling me to take the next motorway exit. I dragged my mind back to the present and followed instructions that left me on a wide deserted road. I shivered slightly, very conscious of my solitary state and suddenly spooked by the fact that, apart from the car's headlights, the only other illumination was from the crescent moon, half hidden by

## *The Hideaway*

scrappy clouds in the sky above. The road ahead looked completely different to the Street View version on Google Maps but I reassured myself that it was only because it was dark. I was on the right track, all I had to do was listen to the satnav. And then Jane directed me on to a narrower, twisting country road, lined with orange trees. At least, I thought they were orange trees. The sliver of moon had disappeared behind a thicker cloud, so it was difficult to tell.

I slowed down. Jane remained silent but, according to the screen, I was supposed to stay on this road for another five kilometres. There were occasional dots of brightness in the distance, which I supposed were house lights. Perhaps they were the foreign homeowners Pilar had talked about. Or perhaps they were the local residents who wanted her grandmother's oranges but not her house. Or ghosts moving around the countryside.

I tried not to think about ghosts. It should have been easy because I'm a rational, logical person who decided a long time ago that there is no such thing as an afterlife or restless spirits or any of that nonsense. People who claim to get in touch with the departed are charlatans. My view has always been that when it's done, it's done. But things had changed for me over the past few weeks, and I wasn't in complete control of what I believed any more. At that moment, alone in the middle of the unfamiliar countryside, the idea of ghosts roaming around the place wasn't half as fanciful as it was when I was safe at home in my apartment. And besides . . .

Get a grip, woman! I interrupted my own thoughts as I changed gear. Just because it's dark and lonely, you don't have to lose the plot completely.

I slowed to a near crawl when Jane told me to take the

next left, because I was afraid of missing it. I hoped this was the difficult turn Pilar had spoken of, and when the Fiesta's headlights picked out a sign pointing to Beniflor, I sighed with relief. I drove forward cautiously.

'You have reached your destination.'

Jane sounded particularly self-satisfied as I brought the car to a halt in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing in sight. Not a barn, not an outhouse, and certainly not a two-storey house matching the photo that Pilar had given me.

'Great,' I muttered. 'I hate satnavs. I really do.'

Given its isolated location, it had been impossible to enter the exact address of the Villa Naranja, so I guessed Jane had just dumped me on the road that led to it. Or at least had dumped me on the road that led to the road that led to it, because I knew the house was down another narrow track. Pilar hadn't been able to show me the track on Google Maps because it wasn't mapped.

A sudden glare in the rear-view mirror almost blinded me as another vehicle drew up behind me. My heart began to thump as the plot of every scary movie I'd ever seen raced through my head. I was resigning myself to being dragged off into the dark night by a marauder or a ghoul (or both) when, with an impatient toot of the horn, the driver of a white minivan swept past me.

I exhaled with relief as its rear lights disappeared into the distance. I gripped the gear lever, to stop my hand from trembling, while edging the Fiesta forward again. After about a kilometre, I spotted a narrow dirt track. I turned into it, hoping that I wasn't making a terrible mistake. The satnav's directional arrow showed that I was driving through the middle of a field. It certainly felt like it.

## *The Hideaway*

I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of my actions when I suddenly saw two white pillars looming in the distance. Between them was an enormous iron gate. A metal arc over it had been fashioned into the words 'Villa Naranja'. To one side of the pillars was a smaller pedestrian gate. I sighed with relief and stopped the car. Then I took out the fob that Pilar had given me, pointed it at the gate and pressed. Nothing happened. I pointed and pressed again, more firmly this time, and then a yellow light on the top of the left-hand pillar began to blink and the gate rolled slowly back.

I drove through, stopping to press the fob for a third time. The gates closed behind me. The scrap of moon, which had appeared from behind a cloud for an instant, disappeared again. I shivered slightly. No matter how dismissive I wanted to be about ghosts and spirits, the general spookiness of the situation was beginning to get to me.

I followed the gravel driveway to the house, which was partly hidden by a couple of tall pine trees. Then I brought the car to a gentle halt in front of the whitewashed building.

Even though Pilar had shown me some photos, her grandmother's house was bigger than I'd expected. It was two-storeyed and rectangular, with a terracotta roof and a chimney at either end. There were three full-length windows on the first floor and two smaller windows on either side of a wide door that led to a narrow balcony running along the entire width of the house. The downstairs windows were protected by grilles and the upstairs ones were shuttered. In the car's headlights I could see pink and purple blossoms against textured walls that flaked in patches, while the dried petals of an unruly bougainvillea had fallen from a pergola that sheltered a wide tiled patio.

As Pilar had said, it looked neglected, although that might

have been as much to do with the eerie lighting from the car headlights as anything else. I switched off the engine but left the lights on as I picked up the fob. There were a number of metal keys attached to it as well as the electronic device for the gate.

I selected the correct key (a splash of bright-pink nail varnish identified it) and, feeling like a jailer, put it into the keyhole of the grille that also protected the front door. Once that was opened I unlocked the main door, which creaked slightly as it swung inwards. A warm fugue of air hit me and my mind was once again flooded with images of ghosts, spectres and the plots of old horror movies where awful things happened to stupid girls on their own in the dark. For someone who was always accused of not being in the slightest bit imaginative, I was being incredibly silly. I needed to wise up, I thought, as I allowed my eyes to adjust to the dim light. I needed to take control.

Pilar had told me that the master switch for the house electricity was in a panel just inside the door. I waited for my vision to adjust to the light inside the house and then saw the plastic cover. I pulled at it and it came away in my hand, which made me cry out in surprise. The sound echoed around me. I took a deep breath, put the cover on a nearby shelf and then looked at the switches. I flipped the bright-yellow one and a low hum filled the room. I identified the source as the huge fridge in the corner of the room. At least that meant there was power. I looked around for a light switch and saw one on the opposite wall. When I pressed it, a fluorescent bulb in the ceiling buzzed and flickered and then came on properly. The harsh light didn't make things more welcoming, but being able to see properly definitely made it less eerie.

## *The Hideaway*

I went outside and switched off the car lights. The last thing I wanted was to drain the battery and end up in total isolation without any form of transport. I opened the boot, took out my case and bumped it up the step into the house before closing the door behind me. After that, I looked around.

I was standing in a room that ran the length of the house. On one side was the kitchen and on the other a dining area. The kitchen was basic – comprising the fridge (which was now gurgling alarmingly), a gas hob and a separate electric oven that I reckoned had been installed sometime in the eighties. There was also a Belfast sink and a range of cupboards that seemed to date back even further. At floor level, the storage was simply shelves with blue gingham curtains in front of them, and the walls were covered in blue-and-white tiles with an intricate Moorish design.

The dining room was equally dated, and the walls here were painted a rather dull mustard. There was an open fireplace in the end wall which was stained black with soot. The table was pine and so were the chairs, the seats of which were straw. A wooden standard lamp was positioned in one corner, the cream lampshade slightly askew.

The floor was covered in rustic tiles – terracotta, like the roof. But it was clean, if dusty.

I moved in further. Between the kitchen/dining area and the back of the house was a square hallway with a staircase. I left my case at the bottom of the staircase and walked into the next room. It too ran the length of the house and was obviously the living room. Back in the day, when the farmhouse had been a family home, it had undoubtedly been fully furnished, but all that was there when I arrived was a

three-seater sofa covered in a fairly hideous neon-orange fabric (which clashed with the mustard walls), two armchairs with the same fabric, only this time in faded yellow, and a rectangular coffee table on which had been left some Spanish newspapers and magazines as well as a couple of unused ashtrays and – bizarrely – an empty glass. The newspapers were two months old and the magazines were gossip magazines from the previous Christmas.

The fireplace in this room was at the opposite end to the one in the kitchen/dining area and was equally marked by soot, although this one had a basket of logs on the floor beside it, as well as unused logs in the grate itself. A faded print of a coastal view hung at an angle on the wall.

There was a double door leading out of the house from the living room but I didn't bother opening it. Nor did I look out of the windows. Stupidly, I was feeling spooked again. Despite the total silence, I felt as though someone was inside the house, watching me. I told myself not to be ridiculous as I straightened the crooked print on the wall; then I went back to the kitchen door and made sure it was securely locked from the inside and that the bolt was in place. I opened one of the windows to allow some air in and switched off the harsh fluorescent light, before turning on the standard lamp instead. The glow was softer and more relaxing, but I still couldn't quite get over the feeling of being watched. As I made my way upstairs I felt the need to remind myself yet again that I didn't believe in spirits or ghosts or things that went bump in the night. And it didn't matter that I was alone in the house in the middle of nowhere, because being alone was perfectly safe. After all, being alone couldn't hurt you. Other people could.

## *The Hideaway*

There were six rooms upstairs. Four bedrooms. Two bathrooms. And a cupboard for bedlinen, which also contained a motley selection of old, but clean, oversized T-shirts and cotton shorts. The first doors I opened led into unfurnished rooms, but the next contained two unmade single beds and the fourth had a king-sized bed with bedlinen neatly folded and placed on the mattress. When I turned on the light a ceiling fan began to rotate slowly, although it didn't actually cool the warm air, just moved it around.

I was suddenly overcome by tiredness. I put my handbag on the small dressing table and opened the window. I left the shutters closed and slipped out of my skinny jeans, which I threw on to the tub chair in the corner. I unfolded the bedlinen. It was crisp and clean, with a faint scent of lavender. I made the bed and fiddled with the ceiling fan so that it stayed working when I turned off the light. Then I lay down and closed my eyes.

But even though I was exhausted, I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned and finally reached for my phone again. This time accessed my voice messages. It was the only one he'd ever left for me.

*I wish I was there with you.* His voice was clear and strong.  
*I wish I had my arms around you right now.*

I wished he had too.