

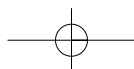
CHAPTER ONE

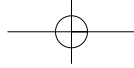
Field of Buds

They say a story loses something with each telling. If that is the case, this story has lost nothing, for it's the first time it's been told.

This story is one for which some people will have to suspend their disbelief. If this wasn't happening to me, I would be one of those people.

Many won't struggle to believe it, though, for their minds have been opened; unlocked by whatever kind of key causes people to believe. Those people are either born that way or, as babies, when their minds are like little buds, they are nurtured until their petals slowly open and prepare for the very nature of life to feed them. As the rain falls and the sun shines, they grow, grow, grow; minds so open, they go through life aware and accepting, seeing light where there's dark, seeing possibility in dead ends, tasting victory as others spit out failure, questioning when others accept. Just a little less jaded, a little less cynical. A little less likely to throw in the towel. Some people's minds open later in life, through tragedy or triumph. Either thing can act as the key to unlatch and lift the lid on that know-it-all box, to





accept the unknown, to say goodbye to pragmatism and straight lines.

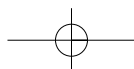
But then there are those whose minds are merely a bouquet of stalks, which bud as they learn new information – a new bud for a new fact – but yet they never open, never flourish. They are the people of capital letters and full stops, but never of question marks and ellipses . . .

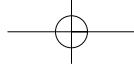
My parents were those kinds of people. The know-it-all kind. The ‘if it’s not in a book or I haven’t heard it anywhere before then don’t be ridiculous’ kind. Straight thinkers with heads filled with the most beautifully coloured buds, so neatly manicured and so sweetly scented but which never opened, were never light or dainty enough to dance in the breeze; upright and rigid, so matter-of-fact, they were buds till the day they died.

Well, my mother isn’t dead.

Not yet. Not medically, but if she is not dead, she is certainly not living. She’s like a walking corpse that hums every once in a while as though testing herself to see if she’s still alive. From far away you’d think she’s fine. But up close and you can see that the bright pink lipstick is a touch uneven, her eyes are tired and soulless, like one of those TV show houses on studio lots – all façade, nothing of substance behind. She moves around the house, drifting from room to room in a dressing gown with loosely flapping bell sleeves, as though she’s a southern belle on a mansion ranch in *Gone with the Wind*, worrying about worrying about it all tomorrow. Despite her graceful swanlike room-to-room drifts, she’s kicking furiously beneath the surface, thrashing around trying to keep her head up, flashing us the occasional panicked smile to let us know she’s still here, though it does nothing to convince us.

Oh, I don’t blame her. What a luxury it must be to disappear





as she has, leaving everyone else to sweep up the mess and salvage whatever fragments of life are left.

I haven't told you a thing yet, you must be very confused.

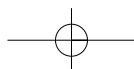
My name is Tamara Goodwin. Goodwin. One of those awful phrases I despise. It's either a win or it's not. Like 'bad loss', 'hot sun', or 'very dead'. Two words that come together unnecessarily to say whatever could be said solely by the second. Sometimes when telling people my name I drop a syllable: Tamara Good, which is ironic as I've never been anything of the sort, or Tamara Win, which mockingly suggests good luck that just isn't so.

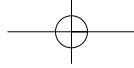
I'm sixteen years old, or so they tell me. I question my age now because I feel twice it. At fourteen, I felt fourteen. I acted eleven and wanted to be eighteen. But in the past few months I've aged a few years. Is that possible? Closed buds would shake their heads *no*, opened minds would say *possibly*. Anything is possible, they would say. Well, anything isn't.

It is not possible to bring my dad back to life. I tried, when I found him lying dead on the floor of his office – very dead, in fact – blue in the face, with an empty pill container by his side and an empty bottle of whisky on the desk. I didn't know what I was doing but I pressed my lips to his regardless, and pumped up and down on his chest furiously. That didn't work.

Nor did it work when my mother dived on his coffin at the graveyard during his burial and started howling and clawing at the varnished wood as he was lowered into the ground – which, by the way, was rather patronisingly covered by fake green grass as though trying to fool us it wasn't the maggoty soil he was being lowered into for the rest of eternity. Though I admire Mum for trying, her breakdown at the grave didn't bring him back.

Nor did the endless stories about my dad that were shared





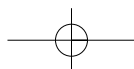
at the do afterwards during the ‘Who Knows George Best’ storytelling competition, where friends and family had their fingers on the buzzers, ready to jump in with, ‘You think that’s funny, wait till you hear this . . .’ ‘One time George and I . . .’, ‘I’ll never forget the time George said . . .’ All were so eager, they ended up talking over one another, and spilling tears and red wine on Mum’s new Persian rug. They tried their best, you could tell, and in a way he was *almost* in the room, but their stories didn’t bring him back.

Nor did it work when Mum discovered Dad’s personal finances were about as healthy as he. He was bankrupt; the bank had already put in place the repossession of our house and all the other properties he owned, which left Mum to sell everything – *everything* – that we owned to pay back the debts. He didn’t come back to help us then either. So I knew then that he was gone. He was really gone. I figured if he was going to let us go through all of that on our own – let me blow air into his dead body, let Mum scratch at his coffin in front of everybody, and then watch us be stripped of everything we’d ever owned – he was gone for good.

It was good thinking on his part not to stick around for it all. It was all as awful and as humiliating as I’m sure he feared.

If my parents had flowering buds, then maybe, just maybe, they could have avoided all that. But they didn’t. There was no light at the end of that tunnel, and if ever there was, it was an oncoming train. There were no other possibilities, no other ways of doing things. They were practical, and there was no practical solution. Only faith and hope and some sort of belief could have seen my father through it. But he didn’t have any of that, and so when he did what he did, he effectively pulled us all into that grave with him.

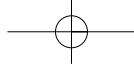
It intrigues me how death, so dark and final, can shine a



light on the character of a person. The lovely stories I heard about Dad during those weeks were endless and touching. They were comforting and I liked getting lost in those tales, but to be perfectly honest, I doubted if they were true. Dad wasn't a nice man. I loved him, of course, but I know he wasn't a good man. He and I rarely spoke and when we did, it was to argue over something, or he was giving me money to get rid of me. He was prickly, snapped often, had a temper that flared easily, he forced his opinions on others and was rather arrogant. He made people feel uncomfortable, inferior, and he enjoyed that. He would send his steak back three or four times in a restaurant just to watch the waiter sweat. He would order the most expensive bottle of wine and then claim it was corked just to annoy the restaurateur. He would complain to the police about noise levels of house parties on our street that we couldn't even hear, and he'd have them shut down just because we weren't invited.

I didn't say any of this at his funeral or at the little party at our house afterwards. In fact, I didn't say anything at all. I drank a bottle of red wine all by myself and ended up vomiting on the floor by Dad's desk where he'd died. Mum found me there and slapped me across the face. She said I'd ruined it. I wasn't sure if she meant the rug or Dad's memory, but either way I was pretty sure that he'd fucked both of them up all by himself.

I'm not just heaping all the hate on my dad here. I was a horrible person. I was the worst possible daughter. They gave me everything and I rarely said thank you. Or if I said it, I don't think I ever meant it. I don't actually think that I knew what it meant. 'Thank you' is a sign of appreciation. Mum and Dad continually told me about the starving babies in Africa, as if that was a way to make me appreciate anything. Looking back on it, I realise the best way to

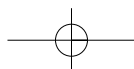


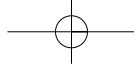
make me appreciate anything was probably not to have given me everything.

We lived in a seven thousand square foot, six-bedroom contemporary mansion with a swimming pool and tennis court and a private beach in Killiney, County Dublin, in Ireland. My room was on the opposite side of the house to my parents' and it had a balcony overlooking the beach that I don't think I ever looked out at. It had an en suite with a shower and Jacuzzi bath, with a plasma TV – TileVision, to be precise – in the wall above the bath. I'd a wardrobe full of designer handbags, a computer, a PlayStation and a four-poster bed. Lucky me.

Now another truth: I was a nightmare daughter. I was rude, I answered back, I expected everything and, even worse, I thought I deserved everything just because everybody else I knew had them. It didn't occur to me for one moment that they didn't particularly deserve them either.

I figured out a way to escape my bedroom at night and sneak outside to meet with my friends; a climb from my bedroom balcony and down the piping, onto the roof of the swimming pool, then a few easy steps to the ground. There was an area on our private beach where my friends and I went drinking. The girls mostly drank Dolly Mixtures: the contents of our parents' drinks cabinets all in one plastic bottle. That way if we took a few inches from each bottle they wouldn't suspect anything. The guys drank whatever cider they could get their hands on. They also had whichever girl they could get their hands on. That person was mostly me. There was a boy, Fiachrá, who I stole from my best friend Zoey, whose dad was a famous actor and so – I'll be honest – just because of that I used to let him put his hand up my skirt for about a half-hour every night. I figured that one day I'd get to meet his dad. But I never did.





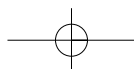
My parents felt it was important for me to see the world and how other people live. They kept telling me how fortunate I was living in my big house by the sea, and so to help me appreciate the world, we spent our summers in our villa in Marbella, Christmas in our Verbier chalet and Easter in the New York Ritz, on a shopping trip. There was a pink convertible Mini Cooper with my name on it waiting for me for my seventeenth birthday, and a friend of my dad's, who had a recording studio, was waiting to hear me sing and possibly sign me up. Though after I felt his hand on my arse, I never wanted to spend a moment alone in a room with him. Not even to be famous.

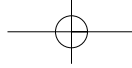
Mum and Dad attended charity functions throughout the year. Mum would spend more money on her dresses than the tables cost, and twice a year she'd pass on the impulse buys she never wore to her sister-in-law, Rosaleen, who lived down in the country – in case Rosaleen ever felt the need to milk cows in a Pucci sundress.

I know now – now that we're out of the world we once lived in – that we weren't very nice people. I think somewhere beneath the nonresponsive surface of my mother that she knows it too. We weren't evil people, we just weren't *nice*. We didn't offer anything to anybody in the world but we took an awful lot.

But, we didn't deserve this.

Before, I'd never think of tomorrow. I lived in the now. I wanted this now, I wanted that now. The last time I saw my father I shouted at him and told him I hated him and then I slammed the door in his face. I never took a step back, or a step outside of my little world to think about what on earth I was doing or saying, and how it was hurting anybody else. I told Dad I never wanted to see him again, and I never did. I never thought about the next day or about the possibility





that they would be my final words to him and that *that* would be my final moment with him. That's a lot to have to deal with. I have a lot to forgive myself for. It's taking time.

But now, because of Dad's death and because of the thing I have yet to share with you, I have no choice but to think of tomorrow and all the people that tomorrow affects. Now, I'm glad when I wake up in the morning that there is one.

I lost my dad. He lost his tomorrows and I lost all the tomorrows with him. You could say that now, I appreciate them when they come. Now, I want to make them the best they can possibly be.

