

ANNABEL SMITH

WHISKY

CHARLIE

FOXTROT

a novel

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Sitting beside him in the hospital, Charlie is thinking that if Whisky dies, he won't know which songs to choose for his funeral. Whisky is his only brother, more than that, his twin: Alpha, the first born—the brightest star in the constellation, the person Charlie has loved and hated, pushed and pulled against all his life. Now Whisky lies in a hospital bed in a maze of wires and tubes that connect him to the machines that help him breathe, keep his heart beating. He cannot move or speak and his only brother no longer knows him.

But this is no place to begin; in fact, this may very well be the end.

alpha

Looking back, Charlie thinks it began when they were nine years old, the year his mother's sister Audrey moved to Australia. It was a Saturday morning just like any other when she came over to tell them. Charlie's father was playing squash; Whisky, who was still William then, was upstairs. He was supposed to be practising his trombone but he was rebuilding his Scalextric track instead. Charlie knew this because he had gone upstairs to get his *Star Wars* figurines and he had seen William kneeling on their bedroom floor with all the pieces of track out of the box, his trombone in the corner, still inside its case.

Don't tell Mum, William said. Charlie shrugged. He knew his mother would work it out soon enough when she didn't hear William sliding up and down his scales. She was sharp like that. But on this particular day his mother was distracted by what his aunt was saying.

Charlie wasn't listening at first. He was absorbed in orchestrating a furious lightsaber battle between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. It wasn't until he realised that his aunt was doing all the talking, that his mother wasn't saying anything at all, that Charlie began to take notice. You see, his mother usually kept up her part in a conversation. *Vivacious*, that's what people said about her, and although Charlie didn't know what this meant exactly, he knew it had something to do with her talking and laughing a lot. Her silence was a bad sign. It usually meant one of two things. One, Charlie or William or, worse still, both of them had *gone too far*, or two, she had *a bone to pick* with their father.

Your mother's upset, boys, their dad would say when their mother went silent on him and then they would leave the room, knowing an almighty row was on the horizon.

The calm before the storm, their father had joked to them once about their mother's silences and they had laughed, guiltily, not really understanding, but knowing their mother would not find this joke funny. Charlie had never known his mother to go silent on anyone else. He stayed where he was, crouched on the floor beside the armchair, but he stopped the battle between the forces of good and evil and began to listen.

I want to leave England, start all over again, his aunt was saying. I want to go somewhere where people don't know me as Bob's widow, where they don't feel sorry for me or give me the cold shoulder because they blame me for his death. I want to go somewhere where nobody will even know what happened unless I tell them myself.

Charlie realised that both his aunt and his mother had forgotten he was there. None of the grown-ups ever talked about Uncle Bob's death when Charlie and William were around. They wouldn't have known anything at all if William hadn't overheard his mother on the phone, talking to her best friend, Suzanne. Bob had committed suicide, their mother told Suzanne, because Audrey confronted him about the other woman.

Which other woman? William had asked but their mother had glared at him with such intensity that he had let it drop.

When they had asked their father about it later, he had snorted.

Other woman? he said. That's a laugh. Other women, more like it.

This comment had left the boys no closer to understanding why it had happened but their father did at least explain that *committing suicide* meant that Uncle Bob had killed himself, and he even told them how, explaining about the rope and his neck breaking before their mother overheard the conversation and stopped him by saying, Could you *occasionally* engage your brain before opening your mouth?

Now Charlie stayed absolutely still, thinking he might at last be able to solve the riddle of his uncle's death and he felt a thrill go through him that it would be he who found it out. He couldn't wait to tell William.

You can understand that, can't you, Elaine?

Audrey waited for her sister to answer and in the silence, Charlie realised that his mother was crying. They had one of those shiny tablecloths that you didn't have to wash, you could wipe it with a sponge, and Charlie could see his mother's tears sliding off her chin and dripping onto it, plip, plip.

I'm not even forty yet, his aunt said, but I feel like here my life's already over.

This comment was so surprising that Charlie forgot about his mum crying, or finding out the secret about Uncle Bob's death. Of course Charlie knew that Audrey was his mother's older sister. He had never known how much older but if he had to guess he would have said twenty years at least. In fact, Audrey seemed so much older that Charlie tended to think of her as his mother's mother, rather than as her sister. This thought was partly left over from when he was younger and hadn't been able to understand why other people had two grandmothers and he had only one. For a while he had pretended that Audrey was his grandmother and not his aunt. He knew better now, of course, knew perfectly well that his mother's mother was dead, that she had died when he was three weeks old and that's why he couldn't remember her at all. But his idea that Audrey was older had got stuck in his mind.

Once his mother had shown Charlie a photo from Audrey's wedding and Charlie could not believe that the woman in the white dress in the centre could possibly be his aunt. For some time afterwards he had tried to look for that skinny, pretty girl inside his aunt's soft and shapeless face but he had never seen it and after a while he had forgotten to look. But he had asked his mother once how Audrey got so old. His mother had sighed, one of those big long sighs she always gave when she talked about her sister.

She's had a very hard life, Charlie.

To Charlie, a hard life was being a beggar, like in *Oliver Twist*, or your whole family sleeping in one bed like in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. He did not understand how two people who lived in a big house with a golden retriever could have a hard life. Besides, he had heard his mother say lots of times how lucky Audrey was.

You're too young to understand this now, Charlie, but it's been a great disappointment to Audrey, not being able to have children ... she trailed off. Charlie looked at her. She seemed to be looking at something in the mirror. And then the cancer, she said, but she was not really talking to Charlie; she seemed to have forgotten he was there. She was really very young to have a mastectomy, she added, to no one in particular.

Charlie put his matchbox Ferrari on top of his mother's dressing table and made a revving sound. He didn't want to talk about that. His mother had explained it to him before they went to see Audrey in the hospital and it gave him a tummy ache to think about it.

Why else? he asked.

Why else what?

Charlie revved the car impatiently. Why else is she so old?

Well, I don't know, Charlie, isn't that enough? But, I don't suppose Bob's behaviour has helped.

Why? Charlie asked. What did Uncle Bob do?

Oh, Charlie, you wear me out with your questions, she said, suddenly coming to, and she started tidying the dressing table, which meant that the conversation was over.

So Charlie had asked his dad, which was what he always did when his mother's explanations didn't satisfy him.

Did Uncle Bob make Auntie Audrey old? he asked.

Who told you that?

Mum.

His dad looked like he was about to laugh. I suppose you could explain it like that.

But *how* did he?

How did he? I suppose by being unfaithful, I think that's what your mother means.

What's unfaithful?

Well now, I suspect your mother might give me a bollocking if I told you that, boy. Nice try though, Charlie, nice try.

Unfaithful. It had sounded like something important, the way he had said it. Charlie had turned the word over in his mind. Faithful is what everyone always said about his grandad's dog, Tartan, because he always lay down at Grandad's feet and went everywhere with him, even sometimes on the tractor. But why would Audrey want Bob to lie down at her feet? Charlie hadn't been able to make sense of it and William, who was smart with those sort of things, hadn't been able to work it out either.

Thinking about it again, Charlie lost the thread of the conversation at the kitchen table. By the time he'd thought it all through his mum had stopped crying.

Australia! What an adventure, Audrey, she said as she put the teacups in the dishwasher. I suppose we'll have to come out and see you there one day.

Alpha and Omega, she said, when she explained it to the boys. Sometimes their mother spoke like that—bits of other languages, odd lines from plays she had read. Their father said this was because she had a brain but she didn't really get to use it, that it just boggled away inside her head and sometimes funny things came out. She said to Charlie and William that Alpha meant the beginning and Omega was the end and that for Audrey, moving to Australia was the end of one chapter and the beginning of another.

As well as being a new beginning for herself, in a way Audrey's Omega was also Charlie's Alpha. Because before she left for Australia she bought all of them lavish presents, the kind of things they would never have bought for themselves. She took Elaine up to London to see *Cats*, a musical they both had on cassette tape and had wanted to see for years, and she bought their father a crystal brandy decanter. But best of all she bought Charlie and William the walkie-talkies, which were the beginning of everything.

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The first day you do not even experience as a day. There are only minutes knotted into hours in which everything you usually do is forgotten, in which even eating and sleeping are of no importance whatsoever.

They sit in the waiting room, Charlie and his mother Elaine, Rosa and Juliet and Aunt Audrey. There are other people who come and are sent away again—Whisky’s friends perhaps, or colleagues, but afterwards Charlie does not recall who they were. Sometimes he dozes, sitting upright in one of the hard plastic chairs, and when he wakes he cannot remember where he is or what he is doing there. He looks around and possibly it is the smell that reminds him, or the expression on Rosa’s face: he is at the hospital, waiting to find out whether his brother will live or die.

By the time Charlie reached the hospital Whisky was already in surgery. Charlie cannot see him while he is being operated upon, none of them can; all they can do is sit and wait for a doctor to emerge with a progress report. Charlie does not know how long they have been waiting. There is a clock in the waiting room but the movement of its hands has no meaning for him.

So far, what they know is this: Whisky is in a coma. He has a fractured skull, a punctured lung, a broken arm and broken ribs and one of his feet has been crushed. Charlie has no idea of the implications of most of the items on this list of injuries. He attempts to picture Whisky’s foot. He pictures his own foot, the bones whose names he memorised for his human biology exams in high school and has long since forgotten. Crushed, the doctor had said. Other things have been broken, but Whisky’s foot has been crushed. It sounds so much worse. The word

broken somehow holds the promise of something that can be fixed—taped or glued or pinned back together. But *crushed* sounds beyond repair. Charlie pictures tiny fragments of bone all mixed together, an impossible puzzle. He thinks about gangrene, about amputation, briefly tries to imagine Whisky with a prosthetic foot and then just as quickly tries to wipe the image from his mind. He wonders about the impact of this injury on Whisky's surfing and snowboarding. Then he realises that he doesn't even know whether Whisky still goes surfing. He thinks about asking Rosa but when he looks over he sees that she is crying.

When at last a doctor comes out to talk to them, it becomes abundantly clear that Whisky's foot is the very least of his problems. The doctor explains that during the accident Whisky received a blow to the head which caused bruising to his brain, a leaking of the blood vessels which resulted in the brain swelling.

Unlike other tissues, the doctor says, the brain has no room for swelling. It is trapped inside the cage of the skull. The lack of space causes a rise in intracranial pressure leading to a decrease in blood flow, which in turn impacts on the ability of the brain cells to eliminate toxins.

Juliet puts her hand inside Charlie's. He tries to think of something to say to her, something positive and reassuring, but nothing comes to him.

While Charlie has been worrying about crushed bones, a neurosurgeon has been repairing the damaged blood vessels in Whisky's brain, inserting a monitor to track the pressure and a device called a shunt, to drain off the excess fluid.

Charlie remembers seeing a documentary in which a 'trapdoor' was cut into a patient's skull to create more space and prevent further damage from the swelling following a head injury. In the same documentary, part of a brain which was deemed to be damaged beyond repair was cut away to increase the chance of recovery for the undamaged parts of the brain. Charlie supposes that they should feel grateful that Whisky has not been subjected to such treatments. He takes it as a sign that things are not as bad as they might be.

That is until he sees Whisky. For the person whose bed they are eventually led to could be anyone. At least one third of his body is

cased in plaster and most of his head is obscured by bandages. What Charlie can see of his face is so bruised and swollen that no features are recognisable. Worst of all, everywhere Charlie looks are tubes and wires connecting the body to machines, transporting substances in and out, measuring god knows what. Charlie cannot believe that this wrecked and wasted creature could possibly be his brother. No matter how hard he looks, he cannot find anything of Whisky in that hospital bed. He stares and stares and then he rushes to the bathroom and vomits so violently he bursts the blood vessels in his eyes.

bravo

Charlie's next-door neighbour Alison had helped him make his costume for the play. While they made the costume she taught him the words to 'Pass the Dutchie'. Alison was thirteen and knew the words to all the songs in the charts. She was good at things like that. It was also an undisputed fact in the village that Alison was the best at costumes. She proved it by winning first prize every year at the Rose Queen Fete.

The year she moved to Everton she had dressed up as a Rubik's cube. The rest of the kids paraded through the village in costumes that had been cobbled together the night before. They were ghosts with eyeholes chopped out of old sheets; cats with cardboard ears and laddered stockings for tails; miniature brides in communion dresses wearing veils cut from curtain netting. The Rubik's cube caused a sensation and established Alison's reputation.

The idea for the Pharaoh costume had come from a picture in Alison's encyclopedia. According to the picture the Pharaohs didn't wear too much in the way of clothing. Charlie supposed this was on account of it being so hot in Egypt. All he was wearing was a towel wrapped around his waist. But he had a magnificent headdress and a golden collar and when he put them on, Charlie truly felt like a king.

That towel used to be a nappy, William said when he saw the outfit. Their mum said it wasn't true, that nappies were square and the costume was wonderful and anyway, she had given all their nappies to Auntie Sue when their cousin Hayley

was born. Alison said that William was jealous because Charlie had a better part in the play. Charlie thought hard about this. William was better at soccer, better at telling jokes, better at conkers and marbles. When he added it up, William was better at anything that Charlie could think of. It was something quite new for William to be jealous of him and Charlie found that he liked the idea of it.

Besides, he deserved a good part this year. Last Christmas, when they performed the nativity play, Charlie had been given the part of an angel. He had asked if he and Timothy could be shepherds instead but Miss Carty-Salmon had said there were already too many shepherds and that the boys should be honoured to play the angels.

But the angels are girls' parts, Timothy said.

If you took the time to read the Bible, Timothy, I think you would find that the angels were men.

Well then, why do they have girls' names?

Charlie's mother had told the boys that it was bad manners to answer a teacher back. Timothy had obviously been given different advice. In the end it made no difference to Miss Carty-Salmon but Charlie thought Timothy was right. Gabriel was a girl's name and if they were supposed to be boys, why did they have to wear costumes that looked like dresses?

This year the play was a shortened version of the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, adapted by their teacher, the beautiful Miss Parker. All term they had been practising 'Any Dream Will Do', and Miss Parker, who had been to London to see the show, said they sang it even better than the real cast. The main part was Joseph, but the Pharaoh was the second best part and Charlie had spent weeks practising his lines, shouting, Throw him in jail! until his mother said if he wasn't careful he would wear out the words.

The night before, Charlie was so excited he couldn't get to sleep. He couldn't wait for his mum to see that now there was something he was good at; that for once, William wouldn't be

the first, the best, the fastest. But on the morning of the play their mother had a migraine. Their father had a big job to finish. So Aunt Audrey came to watch the play in their mother's place. Charlie was bitterly disappointed.

But as it turned out, Aunt Audrey was a far better audience member than their mother had ever been. She shrieked with laughter at all the jokes, started all the other mums and dads clapping along to 'Any Dream Will Do', and, best of all, when Charlie stepped forward to take his bow she stood up out of her chair and shouted, Bravo! Bravo! Charlie thought he had never been so happy. *Bravo*, he said to himself as he went to sleep that night. Bravo was the word that meant there was something Charlie could do better and he held onto it like it was a lifebuoy.

The night before she left for Australia, Aunt Audrey came round to say goodbye. She told the boys she had a special going-away surprise for them which they couldn't have now, but which would be waiting for them when they got home from school the next day.

Charlie and William ran all the way from the bus stop the next afternoon, rushed out of breath into the house to find their mother sitting in the armchair with Audrey's dog Barnaby at her feet.

Are we looking after him, William shrieked, until he can go to Australia?

Their mother smiled and shook her head. We're going to keep him.

Forever?

She nodded.

Does Dad know?

She nodded again. William and Charlie threw down their schoolbags and did their Zulu warrior dance twice, slapping their thighs and beating their chests before dropping onto the carpet to roll around and bury their faces in Barnaby's fur.

Let's call him Bravo, Charlie said.

No, said William, let's call him Tomahawk.

His name's Barnaby, their mum said. You can't change a dog's name.

Barnaby was a golden retriever with velvet ears and his name was engraved on a silver tag which hung from his collar. He held his right paw in the air when his tummy was rubbed, would fetch a stick or a ball no matter how far it was thrown, stood on his hind legs with his front paws on the bench when the boys were putting food in his bowl. He had a lead but they never used it; they let him run ahead through the fields behind their house, let him get so far away they could hardly see him and then they sang out his name to call him back.

Baaaar-na-beeee! William would call.

Braaaa-vo! Charlie would silently correct him.

They had been looking after Barnaby for three months when he was hit by a car. Charlie was walking him that day and Barnaby was racing ahead as he always did, crossing the High Street, when the car came round the corner from Tempsford Hill. Charlie saw the car clip Barnaby from behind, heard him yelp, watched the car slow and then speed up again. He ran to where Barnaby was lying, panting, his fur already soaked with blood; knelt down and pulled the dog onto his lap, screaming and screaming until someone came out of the pub to see what the commotion was.

Then they were in Mary Partridge's car on the way to the vet; Charlie in the back holding Barnaby, stroking his head, begging him not to die while his blood seeped onto the back seat; Mary Partridge behind the wheel, crying so hard she could barely see the road in front of her.

The vet came out to the car to carry the dog inside.

Hit and run, Mary said to him, what a crying shame.

What's his name? the vet asked.

Bravo, Charlie said. His name's Bravo. Is he going to die?

We'll see what we can do.

Mary sat with Charlie in the waiting room and held his hand

until his mother arrived and then all three of them sat and the waiting went on and on.

When the vet opened the door to the examination room Bravo was lying on the metal bench with his eyes closed, breathing slowly. Charlie stood beside him and stroked his ears and said his name, over and over, so he wouldn't have to listen to what the vet was saying to his mother. When they came over to the bench Charlie's mother put her arm around him and Charlie held his breath.

One of his hind legs is broken, the vet said, but otherwise the damage isn't too bad. He's badly bruised but that'll heal. We can have a go at pinning the leg—he'll never run like he used to but he'll get by. The vet paused. There's a small chance of gangrene setting in, in which case we'd have to amputate. Your mother thinks we should give it a go but she said it's up to you.

The whole time the vet was talking Charlie had been stroking Bravo's ears, looking at his dry black nose, his whiskers twitching. He had thought Bravo would die on the road where the car hit him. He had thought Bravo would bleed to death in the back of Mary's car. He had sat for a long time on a hard chair waiting for the vet to come out and tell them that Bravo had died on that cold metal table while they were trying to put him back together. He had wondered how on earth they would tell Aunt Audrey.

He can't believe it is only a broken leg. He is so relieved he can't speak. Even if they have to cut it off, it will be all right. Three legs are enough; Charlie only has two himself and he finds it plenty. He is laughing or crying, or laughing and crying, it doesn't matter which. Bravo will still be there, wagging his tail, pushing his wet snout into their hands when they get home from school. He'll still be able to catch a ball and hold a stick in his mouth and gulp his dinner down in five seconds flat. Broken leg or not, he'll still be their very own dog, their Bravo.