



*Death of a Friend*

REBECCA TOPE

Allison & Busby Limited  
11 Wardour Mews  
London W1F 8AN  
*allisonandbusby.com*

First published in Great Britain in 2000.  
First published in paperback by Allison & Busby in 2012.  
This paperback edition published by Allison & Busby in 2019.

Copyright © 2000 by REBECCA TOPE

The moral right of the author is hereby asserted in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*All characters and events in this publication,  
other than those clearly in the public domain,  
are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons,  
living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by  
any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,  
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover  
other than that in which it is published and without a similar  
condition being imposed on the subsequent buyer.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 978-0-7490-2566-3

Typeset in 10.5/15.5 pt Sabon LT Pro by  
Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication  
has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced  
from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by  
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

## *Prologue*

Charlie saw the horse coming towards him from the other end of the field. He recognised its rider with some surprise and raised his hand to wave. The bridle path ran along beside the hedge and its accompanying ditch, and the horse trotted easily along the well-defined route.

The rider did not wave back. Instead the horse was urged to greater speed, heading directly for him, until Charlie wondered how it was going to avoid him. But he wasn't afraid. There was no room in him for fear, not with everything that had happened in recent days still raw in his mind. Nina was dead and the shocking horror of that fact pushed everything else out of awareness.

Even so, the thundering horse was definitely going to knock him down if it kept on its course. He looked into the face of the rider and was jolted to attention by its expression. Hatred sat there like a grotesque mask, twisting the features almost out of recognition. Charlie's heart stopped. 'No!' he shouted. 'What are you doing?'

And then he turned to run. He ran into the corner of

the field and turned sharply right, to follow another hedge. There was a gateway only thirty yards distant with the gate closed across it. He could vault over and save himself.

He knew all along he couldn't outrun the horse. It cut the corner, coming at him from the side and rearing up as it got within a yard of the hedge. He saw its muscles working the powerful forelegs and felt his own puny powerlessness. High above his head, the face of the rider flickered, leaning forward, urging the horse to do its worst.

A hoof caught him on the temple and he fell to the ground, dizzy but still conscious. 'No!' he tried to scream again, but the word emerged breathy and low. He looked up, knowing he should be protecting himself – but needing to see the rider's face again, to comprehend this madness. Both front hoofs, their metal shoes brown and heavy with mud, the elegant equine legs above them forming a graceful arc against the sky, came down onto his head.

He tried, even to the last, to believe it was all the horse's doing. All some crazy accident and not the rider's deliberate act.

## *Chapter One*

The task of compiling Nina's death notice fell to Alexis. 'Make it something meaningful,' said Martha. 'Not just *dearly loved sister* and all that guff.'

'Trust me,' said Alexis. 'I'm good with words.'

The *Daily Telegraph* woman made no comment when the copy was telephoned through, except to say that it would cost rather more than three hundred pounds. 'It'll be worth it,' said Alexis. 'Would you read it back, please?'

NESBITT, Nina (aka Nina Cattermole) on Thursday 25 March, from her own sheer carelessness, at the wasteful age of 35. Her younger sisters, Martha and Alexis, will share their diminished lives with her sons, Hugh and Clement, and other family members. Nina was an untamed spirit who believed herself to be invulnerable. We all believed it too. The funeral is on Wednesday 31 March at High Copse Farmhouse, at 12 noon, followed by burial under the great oak tree. Phone Alexis on 01837 565654 for directions. Bring flowers.

The mountain created from nearly a hundred floral sheaves, cushions, wreaths and posies made an impressive display, taking up a large part of the garden. ‘Princess Diana has a lot to answer for,’ grumbled Richmond. ‘What the hell are we going to do with all these afterwards?’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Martha reproached him, softening the words with an affectionate rub just above his elbow. ‘For now, they’re wonderful.’

The lower of the two fields had had to be commandeered for car parking and the hired marquee was not quite roomy enough for everyone to squeeze into. The chipboard coffin, unadorned with false handles or brassy screw-tops, had been painted by Alexis and Clement with abstract red and purple swirls, and rested on trestles at one end of the tent. Outside it was coldly drizzling and a slow steam was rising from the warmly-dressed people as they crammed together, generating a welter of heat and emotion. Glasses of wine were being issued by two village women from a table beside the entrance, but no food was on offer. ‘They’ll just have to go home for a late lunch,’ Alexis said. ‘We can’t possibly feed everyone – especially as we’ve no idea how many might come.’

‘Where’s Charlie?’ fussed Alexis now, stroking a finger downwards between her eyes. ‘He can’t abandon us at this stage. Clem—’ she bent towards her younger nephew ‘—surely you’ve seen Charlie?’

The boy shook his head, then winced as if the movement hurt him.

‘I always wanted to arrange a funeral like this,’ sighed Martha. ‘I thought it would be romantic. It just shows you should be careful what you wish for; it can be so terrible

when you get it. And I've got no idea what we're supposed to do next. I can see the sense in an established ritual after all.' She was standing close to the coffin, where the family had instinctively assembled.

'Nobody's going to know if we get it wrong,' Alexis reassured her. 'Just look confident.'

Richmond was in charge of the marquee and had filled a small corner with equipment for music. He anxiously fiddled with wires and muttered about being given the worst of all the jobs. His large bald head was blotchy, and his round, reproachful eyes darted incessantly from one face to another. Hugh was beside him, looking much more familiar with the gadgetry.

Martha climbed onto the platform they'd erected, almost tripping over her long skirt. It was dark blue, a colour that seemed right for a funeral, but the length was obviously wrong. All the other women had hemlines just below the knee. She stood still and gazed at the crowd. People she had only ever seen in old jeans and anoraks were dressed up in smart clothes which made them barely recognisable. She wished they'd thought to say *casual dress* in the newspaper.

Hugh switched on the sound system and inserted a CD, just as his aunt opened her mouth to speak. A ripple of surprise swept across the faces as the people realised what they were hearing. It was a young boy singing the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' in a slow, pure voice that filled the air with sadness. As soon as it was finished, Hugh played it again, glancing at the crowd defiantly. There was complete attention as the words began to make sense.

*Breathe through the heats of our desire  
Thy coolness and thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;  
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still, small voice of calm!*

The tent itself seemed to exhale in silent reaction to the hymn.

‘What are you going to say?’ Alexis whispered to Martha, as the last line died away. Martha looked at her uncomprehendingly and made no reply. ‘Come on – now you’re up there, you’d better make some sort of speech. Why did you go up there, otherwise?’

Martha shook her head in confusion. ‘Not yet,’ she said. ‘I’m not ready yet.’ And she jumped down again.

Alexis went over to Hugh. ‘Why did you play that? Nina wasn’t one for hymns.’ He turned to look at her, his face stiff with gritted jaws and tired eye muscles. He had discovered that if you kept blinking and squeezing, you could stop tears from flowing.

‘It’s written by a Quaker,’ he told her. ‘You should know that. Charlie said we should play it.’

‘But *she* wasn’t a Quaker.’

The boy just looked at her. ‘She said that’s what she would have been, if she’d been anything,’ he said carefully. ‘And she liked that hymn. She used to sing it. You must remember.’

Alexis pulled a face. ‘She was such an awful singer, I probably wouldn’t have recognised it. Is Charlie here, then? Have you seen him?’

Hugh turned his face away as if the question didn’t



concern him. ‘Nope,’ he said. ‘Why don’t you ask Clem?’

‘I have. Where on earth can he be?’

The older boy glanced over at his brother, but Clem made no response. ‘He’ll be somewhere around,’ Hugh told Alexis. ‘He’s your boyfriend – you should know what he’s doing.’

‘I’ve been busy,’ she frowned, with yet another futile glance around the marquee. She sucked in her top lip anxiously for a moment and then returned to more immediate concerns. ‘So what do we do next? The masses are growing restless.’ It was true: the crowd was unitedly facing the platform, glancing at each other and mouthing questions. ‘A lot of animal rights people. They won’t get difficult, will they?’

‘They’ve come because Mum was their leader, that’s all. They’re just ordinary without her.’

Alexis looked at him with admiration. ‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘I hope they don’t abandon the cause because she’s—’

Hugh’s expression was blank as he turned back to the sound system. His movements were slow and clumsy as if he’d reached the end of a long, weary journey. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said ambiguously and slotted another disc into the machine. Seconds later an Alice Cooper song crashed out, the husky tones bringing a very different set of expressions to the gathered faces.

Martha gestured urgently at the boy to turn the volume down. He ignored her. She stormed over to him. ‘Turn it *down*,’ she hissed.

‘She liked this one,’ he said stubbornly. ‘This is my last chance to play it for her.’

‘It’s loud enough to wake the dead,’ she bellowed at him.

Hugh looked at her, white and bitter. ‘No,’ he shook his head. ‘No, it’s not.’ And he pushed the volume lever even higher.

Angrily she yanked at him and squeezed his arm hard. Rage at Nina crackled between them. Then Martha reached for the volume slider and pushed it down as far as it would go. The throbbing beat died, leaving an auditory nakedness that chilled the crowd. They waited, edging back against the sides of the tent, as far as possible from the coffin. Many had come from curiosity, as much as grief or sympathy, and their confused motives created a sheeplike atmosphere, everyone watching everyone else for a lead.

Alexis took charge, standing tall on the platform and clapping her hands in the waiting hush. ‘Friends,’ she announced, ‘we have no set order or ceremony for this ritual. We want you to make it special by remembering Nina as she really was and helping us to face her death. We ask you to tell us stories about her, what you knew of her, what you liked and disliked. We need to feel that her life was not wasted in spite of her early death. Will you help us?’

A murmur went round. Many people tried to shuffle behind others, afraid of having to speak. ‘Well, I’ll start off, then,’ said Martha, moving forward like someone wading through a lake of blood, and climbing once more onto the stage. ‘Nina was my older sister, so I’ve known her all my life. She lived here at High Copse, even when she was married to Nevil, and had both her children here. For her to die whilst protesting against the fox hunt is something we’re still coming to terms with. It was a stupid accident and we feel no sense of blame towards anyone.’ Here she

paused and looked at Clement, then at Hugh and Alexis. One by one they nodded agreement. 'Nina was an original. We often argued with her, sometimes disapproved of her. But we have no idea how we'll manage without her . . .' She stopped, brushing the back of her hand against her dripping nose, and retreated from the platform.

A man's voice came from the middle of the crowd. 'Could I say something?' he called in ringing tones. Everyone craned their necks to look at him, mostly in vain. Many of them recognised his voice.

'Good God,' Alexis muttered to Clement, who had pushed under her arm and was nuzzling his face against her ribs. 'It's bloody Gerald.'

The speaker proceeded: 'I must admit I find this funeral highly unusual,' he began, with a minimal flare of his nostrils, 'and I might be speaking out of turn, but it does seem to behove me to express my gratitude for what Mrs Taverner has just said. I imagine you are all aware that it was my horse, Shamrock, which dealt Mrs Nesbitt the fatal blow, and some of you may be wondering what happened to him afterwards. Well, I consulted the authorities and the clear advice was that no blame of any sort can be attached to the horse. I will not be riding him to hounds next season, as a mark of respect, but he will remain in my possession and we will do all we can to ensure that nothing so tragic ever happens again. Thank you.'

Glances of approval, cynicism and scorn passed around the marquee, spiced with some subdued hissing from one corner, where three or four young men were gathered. Richmond murmured in Martha's ear, 'Brave of him,

wouldn't you say, Mrs Taverner?' Martha never used her husband's surname and grinned briefly at his gentle jibe. 'Sounds as if some of the activists can't stomach what he said. Or do they want the horse shot?'

She widened her eyes at him in mock apprehension. 'Don't let the boys hear you. They've been worrying about that.' He put a finger over his lips. Briefly she pressed close to him, gripping him tight around his broad chest.

'Now, now, you two,' came a cool voice behind them. 'There's a time and a place for everything.'

Martha met the eyes of an olive-skinned woman. 'Hello, Polly. We were just hoping that your crowd would let Gerald leave with his dignity intact. Does he realise how many people here would like to inflict long and agonising torture on him?'

The woman smiled, her full mouth twisting lopsidedly. 'He's safe enough. We're too upset about Nina for any trouble-making. It's so *awful*, I still can't believe it. I wanted to ask – have you thought of some kind of memorial for her? Something that'll carry forward her name and what she believed in?'

Martha grimaced. 'Like what?'

'Maybe a trust fund for animal rights, or a bursary into research into the suffering caused by hunting – that sort of thing. Everybody here would contribute. You'd have thousands before you know it. Come on, Martha,' she said urgently, 'don't waste the opportunity.'

'I can't just invent something out of the blue and ask people to give money. I'll think about it.'

'Well, Val or I will remind you when you've had a few

days to recover.’ And she moved away in the direction of the hissing youths.

‘*A few days!*’ Martha repeated incredulously. She turned to Richmond. ‘Did you hear that?’

‘You haven’t heard the last of it,’ Richmond predicted. ‘Intriguing girl.’

‘Hey!’ Martha protested.

‘Don’t worry, definitely not my type. But she’s a puzzle, you must admit. I never understood why she deferred to Nina all the time, when she’s at least as strong a character. I often get the feeling she’s playing some sort of game.’

‘Talking about me?’ Alexis demanded, overhearing his last words.

Martha laughed. ‘If the cap fits. No, not you, Polly Spence, if you must know.’

‘Yes I must,’ Alexis shot back. ‘I’ve been keeping an eye on her lately. I think she’s nursing some naughty ideas about Charlie. They’ve been spending a lot of time together.’

Richmond sighed melodramatically. ‘You women!’ he said. ‘You don’t know the meaning of the word “trust”, do you?’

The sisters exchanged cynical glances and said nothing. A swell of conversation began, as moments passed with no further speakers. Alexis pulled at Martha’s cotton sleeve. ‘We can’t let it go at that. Somebody else should say something.’

‘I don’t think you can force them. We haven’t prepared this very well, have we? Even Nina wouldn’t know where to go from here.’

Hugh looked up at them from his place at Alexis’s side. ‘Can I say something?’ he said, gesturing towards the crowd.

‘Oh, darling – yes, if you’re sure.’ Martha was careful to

resist the urge to stroke his cheek. ‘Of course you can. Shall I shut them up for you?’

He nodded and she clapped her hands, as Alexis had done not long before. This time the sound was swallowed up and went unnoticed. ‘Wait,’ she said and went to the sound system. Within seconds a sudden blare of Alice Cooper effectively silenced the throng. Martha turned it off again and nodded towards Hugh without a word. The boy began to speak, his gaze fixed on the far end of the tent.

‘My mother was a very annoying person,’ he said. ‘She talked to my friends as if she was the same age as them. She borrowed my shirts and never changed my sheets. She was a useless housewife. She let my father leave us for months at a time, because she neglected him. Now she has let herself die. But she was a great friend and being dead is even worse than all the other things. Being dead is completely terrible. This funeral is the only way we could think of to be honest about her. Please try to say what you feel.’ His breath all used up, he stopped abruptly and smacked his hand on the coffin next to him. Then he made a fist and pounded it down again and again. Alexis caught him before the next blow and held him to her. The silence was full of thumping hearts and gathering tears.

Two or three others in the crowd contributed anecdotes about Nina, but nothing came close to Hugh’s despairing outburst. Inexorably, attention was dissipated. Yet again Alexis scanned the crowd for sight of Charlie, with no luck. Instead, her eye was caught by a young woman with a very short haircut, who waved at her hesitantly.

‘Isn’t that your friend Lilah?’ she asked Martha. ‘What *has* she done to her hair?’

Martha took a while to follow the precise direction of her sister's nod. Lilah was standing between two older women; an air of self-possession formed an invisible bubble around her. 'I'd better go and speak to her,' she said.

'Remember when we were last at a funeral?' said Lilah, as Martha came within speaking distance.

'Your dad,' nodded Martha. 'Let's hope there won't be any more for a long time.'

'Poor Nina. It's so hard to believe. Den told me about it, of course, as soon as it happened.'

Martha's eyebrows asked the question; Lilah went pink. 'We're engaged now, actually. He's just got into the CID. He was at the hunt on Thursday – he saw the whole thing. It's true, you couldn't blame the horse. It only nudged her.'

'Head-butted, the way I heard it.'

'She was standing so close to it. Silly, really.'

'Very silly,' Martha agreed. Tall and thin, orange hair tied back from her face, the eccentric long skirt hanging crookedly from narrow hips, she looked like a prettier version of Virginia Woolf. 'But it shouldn't have killed her, all the same.'

'Some people's skulls are thin. What did the Coroner's Officer tell you?'

Martha shrugged. 'Nothing much. A freak accident. The knock drove her nose upwards and inwards and caused a massive haemorrhage at the front of the brain which cut off all her vital processes. She lost consciousness within a few seconds.'

'Well you're giving her a lovely send-off. All this . . .' she swung her head in an arc to take in the marquee. 'Amazing.'

Martha leant forward and whispered, ‘We have no idea what we’re doing, to be honest. We let the boys decide most of it, but we all knew we couldn’t use the village church and the impossible Father Edmund. Nor some ghastly cremation. It was a process of elimination, really.’

‘I thought Charlie Grattan must have been behind it. That’s what people are saying. Except he doesn’t seem to be here?’

‘No. Alexis is a bit bothered about that. We’re beginning to wonder if he’s all right. He was so devastated by what happened, he probably can’t face going through all this.’

Lilah nodded doubtfully and Martha caught the implication. She pulled a rueful face. ‘It sounds awfully feeble, doesn’t it? But you don’t know him. He’s hopelessly thin-skinned. I bet he’ll turn up as soon as we’ve got the burial over with.’

‘Alexis seems to want you,’ Lilah observed. Martha turned to see her sister beckoning and obediently returned to the waiting coffin. A subtle change in the atmosphere told her that there was no deferring the final stage of the proceedings. After a short exchange with her sister, Martha came forward and held up her hands, appealing for silence once more.

‘Thank you, everybody,’ she called. ‘You’ve been wonderful and we’re sorry if all this seems rather disorganised. Now I think we must move on. Nina died as she lived, impetuous and impossible to ignore. And I know none of us can quite forget the element of farce attached to her death. Although her cause might have been noble, the way she died was almost ludicrous. There must be a thousand perfectly ordinary ways to die – trust Nina to find



a new one. Now, when you're ready, we'll carry her out to the grave and . . .' *Bury her*, she wanted to say. But the words were too stark and she let them hang unspoken.

Afterwards the sisters and their nephews and Richmond gathered in the kitchen. Alexis tried to phone Charlie, but was told by his aunt that she hadn't seen him for two or three days. 'I thought he was with you,' she said, with a touch of alarm.

'We haven't seen him since Sunday,' said Alexis. 'Don't worry, he's sure to turn up soon.' She put the phone down and frowned at Martha. 'Where the hell *is* he?' she said.

'He'll turn up,' said Richmond, echoing Alexis's own words. 'You must be used to him doing this sort of thing by now.'

'Well, I'm not,' she retorted. 'If he couldn't be here for me, then he should have thought of the boys.'

'We're not *his* boys,' said Hugh. Everyone understood the unspoken thought. Hugh and Clement were the sons of Nevil, not Charlie, close friends though the two men might be. And Nevil had missed the funeral, too.

Alexis looked at each face in turn. Richmond flinched under her gaze and heaved himself to his feet. 'Can't sit around here,' he said. 'Things to do. I ought to see how much damage all those cars have done to the lower field.'

After his departure the conversation returned to Charlie. 'I thought . . . well, maybe he can't cope with what we're doing,' Martha suggested. 'I was talking to Lilah and that seemed a possible explanation. Or could be he disapproved?'

'He'd have said something,' Alexis asserted. 'And he's a Quaker, not a Jehovah's Witness. Quakers approve of more or less anything, apart from violence.' She put a

hand to her middle, wincing and rubbing slightly. 'I'm beginning to be really worried about him. My stomach's gone fluttery. He might have gone off by himself somewhere, all upset. He might be feeling guilty. He was ever so fond of Nina, after all. Just because they argued most of the time doesn't mean he didn't like her.'

'For heaven's sake!' Martha slapped the table and repeated the reassurance she'd convinced herself was true. 'There's nothing to worry about. Charlie's the least of our problems.'

Alexis took a deep breath and worked her head in a circle, easing the tension in her neck. 'It's so weird,' she said. 'Who's going to massage my neck now Nina isn't here to do it?' Both the boys swallowed visibly. The family had made a pact to speak about their mother as naturally as they could, but it was proving much more difficult than they'd expected. Every time her name was mentioned, they all experienced a flash of renewed knowledge of her death, along with the pain and loss, anger and embarrassment that still accompanied it.

'Lilah's engaged to that detective, did you know?' Martha continued, desperate to change the subject. 'The one who tried to revive Nina.'

'What'll happen when she marries him?' asked Alexis, doing her best to play along. 'Will he turn farmer, or will she leave Redstone for her mother to run?'

'God knows.' Martha was sunk into apathetic exhaustion. When the phone rang, she reached a slow arm to where it lay behind her on the draining board. As soon as she realised who was speaking, she came back to life.'

‘Nev!’ she shouted. ‘Where the hell *are* you? . . . Trust you . . . No, it never is, is it? . . . What? . . . When? . . . No, we won’t meet you, get yourself down here on a train and then take the bus. Your sons need you here . . . Oh, okay.’ She waggled the receiver under Hugh’s nose. ‘Talk to your father. He’s stuck in Singapore until tomorrow.’

Hugh took the phone cautiously. ‘Nev?’ he said. ‘What’s happening?’ He listened for a while, unsmiling. ‘We’re all right,’ he said at last. ‘Clem’s here as well.’

Clem moved to take the phone, but Hugh held onto it. After a few seconds he said, ‘Bye then,’ and pressed the Off button before handing it back to Martha. ‘His money ran out,’ he said to his brother with a shrug.

‘It wasn’t his fault,’ said Martha, trying to be placatory. ‘There was a volcano in New Zealand and the flights are all in chaos.’

‘Small volcano, nobody hurt,’ said Alexis. ‘So small it wasn’t on the news. That’s his story and he’s sticking to it.’

‘I wanted to talk to him,’ Clem said reproachfully. ‘He never talks to me.’

Before anyone could speak, the back door crashed open and Richmond stood framed against the late afternoon sky, his eyes bulging grotesquely, chest heaving with exertion.

‘It’s Charlie!’ he gasped. ‘I’ve found Charlie.’