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Brown, Katherine Anne

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‘TREADING WATER’

A Contemporary Novel

Katherine Anne Brown
Student No: 0343398

A novel submitted to the School of Literature and Language Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research).

Johannesburg, 2009

Declaration

I declare that this novel, 'Treading Water', and the reflective essay on its writing are my own unaided work. They are submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Writing (Research) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Neither has been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

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Katherine Anne Brown

13th day of February 2009

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‘Treading Water’

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Prologue

Alison parked near the small flight of concrete steps that led down to the store. There were seven steps, each with a row of parallel lines etched into the concrete along the edge. The store was called The Whole Food Emporium and was on a corner. The parking lot ran along the front and then wrapped itself up around one side. The main area was generally jammed with trolleys and people backing out, so if you were prepared to carry your own parcels it was quicker to park at the side and use the stairs. It was cooler there, too, because a huge elm tree spread its shade over the tarmac.

She was planning to dash into the shop for a few essential purchases only. Milk. Yogurt. Maybe some fruit. Then she could squeeze in a pool session and still be on time to collect the kids. Emma's school day ended at twelve. Luke was officially too young for pre-school and they were only letting him attend with his sister as a favour to Alison until her life settled down. No more than two or three weeks, she hoped. In a way it worked well having Luke there. Emma's friend Kate had left the school a month earlier and Emma had been miserable. Since Luke had started going with her she seemed happier.

Tom was coming by that afternoon to collect a few things and see the kids and she wanted to fit in a session at the pool first. A hard physical workout might dissipate some of her anger. If there was a chance they could work things out she didn't want to say something she'd regret. If she went to the college pool she could dive a bit as well. The boards were always free in the mornings. Diving was one thing she did really well and which always left her feeling better about herself.

Maybe she'd get a few doughnuts as a treat for the kids to share with their father. She glanced at her shopping list.

Her fall took less than a second. She missed the step, slipped and lurched backwards. She felt the harsh smack of concrete under her butt. She yelped in pain and lay crumpled on the stairs in stunned embarrassment, looking up at the tree overhead. She closed her eyes but the image remained: leaves and branches darkly laced against a vivid blue sky.

'Hey, you okay, sweetie? Need some help?' A man in a dark green overall was crouching beside her, his hand extended.

‘I’m fine. Thanks,’ she said, shaking her head. By the time she’d struggled to her feet he’d walked past her up the steps. She followed him, making her way slowly and carefully back to her car. She sat quietly for a moment and then drove herself straight home.

When the weakness was no better the following morning she went to the hospital. After looking at X-rays and checking her reflexes the doctor said there was probably a nerve somewhere that was pinched or compressed, but everything was ‘intact’, so not to worry.

A week later her legs would hardly support her weight and she felt driving was unsafe. When a friend had dropped the kids at school for her, Luke explained it to the teacher.

‘My mommy fell on she bum and hurt she back.’

Chapter 1

She woke to the faint sound of a plastic chair being dragged across the kitchen floor. Emma was again getting her own juice. Em wasn't even four. When Alison was that age her father would bring her a mug of milky, sugary tea and sit next to her on the bed while he drank his own coffee. To let her mother sleep in, he said.

Sleeping in. In her mother's case catching up after late nights. In hers, because she'd hardly slept at all. Some time in the night both children had woken and climbed into her bed. Their small bodies took up a disproportionate amount of space, their night murmurs seeming loud and intrusive. She'd longed for daylight. But now that morning had finally come there was no way she was actually ready to face the day. She was lying on her right side, curled around her hands. How she envied Luke, spread-eagled across the bed and breathing heavily, cocooned in the easy sleep of childhood.

She tried moving her right leg – just a small movement, pulling her knee up. She could feel the smoothness of the sheet, cooler as her leg slid over it. She moved her leg a little further, until she could sense the warmth of the small body next to her. She paused. The leg was carrying no weight, but it seemed to move more easily. Her left leg? Her muscles would be rested. It might be possible. She did the opposite with that knee, trying to straighten it, sliding her heel in the opposite direction. She could sense no difference in temperature. Maybe she'd just moved from that spot, maybe the bed there retained warmth from her body. She pushed her heel a little further. Yes, she could feel it was cooler now, the weight of the bedclothes lighter. Her foot must be at the edge of the duvet. She tried pulling the leg back, bending the knee the way she'd done with the other leg. She wasn't sure whether it had moved or not. She straightened her left arm, gliding her palm along the side of her thigh. There was no doubt the leg was still at an angle behind her. She tried again to bend it, willing it to move. Her hand exerted slight pressure, as if the leg might follow the touch, the way sunflowers moved their heads to the warmth of the sun. She felt a slight movement, a dragging across the sheet beneath it. Maybe, just maybe, she was getting stronger.

But she had to get going immediately because she needed to pee. The process of getting from the bed to the wheelchair and then from the wheelchair on to the toilet had to be completed before her bladder reached bursting point. She tugged the wheelchair up against the bed and manoeuvred herself into it. Her entire upper body felt stiff. Not

the usual twinges like before, after swimming lengths, or when she'd been to a Pilates session. This was the deep ache of strained and fatigued muscles.

Tom had always complained about their old fashioned bathroom having no shower and no separate toilet, but she was grateful for it now. The doorway was wide enough to get the chair in. Just. The wheels had already ground off a few layers of paint. Pale chips lay like dandruff near the skirting. But once the chair was in she could get to the edge of the bath and shuffle herself across to the loo.

'Morning, darling,' she said to Emma, who was peering in at the doorway, her soft curls sleep-flattened on one side of her head.

'I want to come in,' said her daughter.

'Give me a moment. I'm nearly done.' She reached for toilet paper, but the roll was empty. She twisted around and took a tissue from the box on the top of the cistern. When she turned back, Emma was pulling the wheelchair out of the room. The brake wasn't on and it moved easily, sliding into the passage.

'No! Emma, Mommy needs that.'

The little girl continued pulling. 'I want to come in,' she repeated.

'Emma, stop. Bring it back here. Now.' At her sharp tone, Emma did stop. She stared at her mother in confusion. Her bottom lip puckered, giving her chin the texture of a golf ball, a sure sign of imminent tears. 'Darling, I'm not cross. Look, you can squeeze past now. Come. Give me a hug.'

'You come out.'

'Sweetie, you know I can't.'

'You can. Come out!' Emma yelled.

'Then push the chair back to me. Please, darling. Just one push. Please.'

'You do it. You do it,' her daughter demanded, thumping the padding on the arm-rest.

'I really can't …' She didn't know what to do. Crawl across the floor in front of her daughter? Even then, she doubted she could drag herself up into the chair. Or on to the bed. Her upper body was tired and sore. She started to cry. Emma turned and ran. Alison heard the door of the children's bedroom slam, followed by her daughter's muffled howls.

The commotion had finally stirred Luke, who starting calling. 'Mommy? Mommy?'

‘I’m in the bathroom, sweetie.’ She tried to make her voice sound normal. She tugged her long sleeping shirt over her knees and grabbed another tissue to blot her eyes. ‘Hey, big boy, come here.’ He stopped next to the wheelchair. ‘Can you get past mommy’s chair? Good boy.’ He hesitated, as if reluctant to approach her. ‘Luke, come here, darling.’ He squeezed in and put his head on her lap. She kissed his cheek.

‘Want apple juice,’ he mumbled.

‘Of course. But first, can you do Mommy a favour?’ He lifted his head and looked at her. ‘Bring Mommy her phone. The one next to the bed. Can you do that?’

He nodded solemnly and disappeared.

Who could she phone? Felicity had three young children of her own and would be busy getting them fed and ready for school. The nanny the agency was sending was due in half an hour and a call was unlikely to reduce that by much. She should have swallowed her pride and phoned her father a week ago. Unpractical as he was, at least there’d be someone in the house. She wrapped her arms across her chest, holding her sore shoulders and rocking to and fro.

Bridget. If she wanted someone practical there was Bridget. She would have to wait for days. But she was used to waiting. She’d spent hours of her childhood hovering at the front door or sitting on the pavement, filled with the conviction that life would be more fun the moment Bridget and Justin arrived. She felt the surge of that old feeling. Having Bridget around would make everything better. They hardly had contact anymore, but oh God, please, please let Biddie agree to come.

Luke was standing in front of her. He was sucking the thumb of his right hand, the portable phone clutched in the other. He hadn’t sucked his thumb in seven or eight months, not since he was two. She gently pulled his hand away from his mouth and kissed it. ‘Thank you. You are such an angel, my love,’ she said. ‘Can you do me another favour? Go to your room and give your sister a hug. Tell her Mommy loves her.’

She felt calm. She would call Tom. They were his kids too. He’d have to help out, even if only temporarily. She wasn’t going to crawl to the front door to open it for the nanny and Tom was the only one on the other side of it who had a key.

Then, while she waited for him, she would call her sister.

When Alison asked her to come, Bridget answered without hesitation. Of course she'd go. But the instant she hung up she knew it was a mistake.

She wasn't who Alison needed. They hardly knew each other any more. When Alison had come to South Africa with her family on a visit the year before it was as if they were strangers. Ah, the big sister, Tom had said, and held out his hand. The kids had American accents and branded trainers. They made her feel foreign, still the odd one out at their father's house. Even Daniel, a son-in-law, seemed to be more part of the family than she did. She'd thought of inviting Ali and her family to their house for the day. She would cook something special, make an effort to chat. But she heard them discussing how short of time they were. Tom wanted to get to the Kruger Park and Ali wanted them all to go to the Cradle of Humankind. So she never issued the invitation.

She thought about excuses she could give, the problems. A USA visa, for one thing. She'd heard how difficult it had become and might take weeks, by which stage Alison would probably be fine. And if she had to stay more than a week or two she'd miss her exams. And they'd have to cancel the holiday. Daniel would be disappointed. Possibly Tamsin would, too, but she no longer had a clue what her teenaged daughter did or didn't like. Maybe in a day or two she'd call back – explain to Ali that she'd tried, say it really wasn't possible.

She'd been studying when Alison called, but there was no chance of her concentrating now. Donning an apron, she peeled and chopped a butternut squash. Chopping felt good. She grabbed a few chillies that were drying on the window sill and continued, knife flashing. She'd make something spicy … a Thai curry. She paused to hunt in the fridge for ingredients. There was her job, too. A school secretary's post was like gold. It gave her the same holidays as her daughter and the afternoons off. Not that anyone bar her thought of it as a proper job. She ripped the outer leaves off some lemon grass and slashed away at that too. What the hell was Tom thinking of? *He* should be the one there for Ali. And for his children. She didn't want to know whether he and Alison had problems. She didn't want to think about her niece and nephew being shunted back and forth between the two of them. She slammed down the knife and went out to the little garden she'd planted in the back yard.

She felt calmer as she sat on the step. It had rained the night before and scents of herbs simmered gently in the afternoon sun. The granadilla vine had only been in a month and already its tendrils were creeping around the ugly metal of the spiky new fence that separated her from her neighbour, the previous hedge considered too mild a

deterrent to criminals. She picked a basil leaf and crushed it in her fingers. Its sharp fragrance seemed to clear her head as she imagined smelling salts might. She pulled up some coriander, roots and all. It was past its prime but she could use the bottom leaves. She stripped them off slowly. She'd often tried to visualise Alison in her own house. She sometimes fantasised about arriving at Ali's door unexpectedly. Or the two of them planning a holiday together, generally at some exotic island destination. But not this. How could Alison, little quicksilver Alison, possibly be in a wheelchair? How could she manage alone with two small children? It occurred to Bridget that her plans for a reunion had never included the children. But that was where she might be of some use after all.

She walked back into the kitchen just as Tamsin came through the other door. Her daughter wrinkled her nose at the pungent smell of herbs. 'Mom, you know I don't eat anything with coriander in it.' She spoke in a tone of weary despair.

'I know,' Bridget replied. 'There's some left-over lasagna. Or salad.' Tamsin turned and left the room without another word.

The rubbish bin stood inside the door. Bridget threw the herbs away. She was going away for weeks. She'd make something they could all eat together.

Chapter 2

‘Good grief, Daniel, can you believe this? They want to know whether I seek to enter the United States to engage in subversive or terrorist activities. I mean, for heaven’s sake, who would tick yes?’

Daniel looked up from his newspaper, spread across the dining room table. ‘Let’s see,’ he said, reaching across to where Bridget sat, pen in hand.

She moved the form away. ‘I’m quite capable of reading it,’ she said. ‘And of filling it in.’ She pointedly ticked a few more boxes. She was aware that Daniel continued to watch her. Why did she always over-react? Daniel was addicted to the printed word. If there was nothing else available he’d even read the packaging on the breakfast cereals. She’d alerted him to something interesting, so of course he’d want to read the form himself.

‘What else do they want to know?’ he asked.

‘Whether I’m a prostitute or have ever participated in genocide.’ She glanced down. ‘Unlawfully distributed or sold a controlled substance … been deported … am afflicted with a dangerous physical or mental disorder.’

‘If they prove you didn’t answer truthfully, they could deport you immediately, you know.’

She searched his face to determine whether he was teasing, but he seemed quite earnest.

‘They state at the bottom that a yes answer doesn’t automatically signify ineligibility.’ He smiled at that. ‘You have to admit that some of the questions are really bizarre.’ She handed him the application.

He chuckled a few times as he scanned the document.

‘When’s the interview?’

‘Monday. But the woman at the consulate – well, at the little window at the gate, they certainly weren’t going to let me in – gave me a number for emergency visas. They said I could get an expedited appointment if Ali’s doctor sends a letter stating what’s happened and that she needs me there.’ She looked at the clock on the wall. It was what Daniel called his captain’s clock, with a series of round dials that indicated the temperature, whether it was likely to rain and probably the direction the house was sailing in. The clock face was small and had roman numerals for the hours and no

minute hand, so she could only make out that it was close to seven pm. Which meant it would be late morning in Dallas.

'She should be at the doctor now. I doubt they'd get anything to me in time for an appointment tomorrow and they aren't open on the weekend, but I thought I'd send a copy of the letter to the university, in case they give me a sup. In Jan or Feb.' She hoped he'd make a comment, that it would be a pity if she didn't write, that her exams were important. Or that he and Tamsin really didn't want to go on holiday unless she came along. That he didn't want her to go. Yes, that more than anything.

'So, assuming you get the visa, you'll fly Monday night, then? Only really gives you tomorrow to get ready. I'll take the day off to give you a hand, if you like.'

'I'll manage.'

'Of course. You've made a going-to-America list.' It wasn't a question. She always made lists. 'Want to run through it? See if there's anything you can palm off on me?'

She was tempted to turn the offer down. He found her lists amusing. But being organised was the only way she could cope. Particularly when it came to holidays. The camping trips Daniel planned were nothing like the advertisements for caravans she'd seen. Deck chairs set out on grassy banks next to a clear blue lake. Children splashing in the water with a ball. Mum and focussed sipping drinks from tall glasses. How she'd love that. But no, his passion was for hot, arid places with an excess of dust, a shortage of water and as far away from fresh produce and medical supplies as he could possibly get. Living in a tent you could barely stand up in. Washing dishes and clothes by hand in a plastic bucket. Oh, and spending weeks getting ready for it all. Daniel thought preparation was cleaning the windscreen of his old landrover, tinkering with the thing and putting petrol in the tank. She was responsible for everything else. So she had standard lists that she refined from one holiday to the next to ensure they had everything from basics like a can opener or mosquito repellent to little luxuries like smoked oysters on cream crackers. There wasn't much she didn't know when it came to travelling through Southern Africa. But she'd never travelled overseas. And there really wasn't much time. So she fetched her going-to-Alison list and sat down at the table next to him.

'I'll have to get the passport photographs redone. The place I went to trimmed off the white space at the side. The cubicle woman said the pictures have to be square.

When I said white space at the side could hardly matter, she got quite cross. Said the US government knows what it's doing.'

'Well,' laughed Daniel, 'That's a relief. Okay, I can't very well get photos for you. What's the next one? Mast?'

'No, mask. I want to take Ali a mask.'

'Forget it. I hardly think it's a priority at this stage.'

'I know exactly the one I want. At the curio shop in Rosebank. I was going to get it for her birthday anyway.'

'Can't you find something different for a change? Anyway, it's sensible to travel light ...'

'Don't get it then. I'll buy the bloody thing. But I'm taking a mask, Daniel.' Her voice cracked slightly as she said his name and her eyes blurred with sudden tears. She bent her head away from him. She was aware of him getting up. Now she'd finally pissed him off. He'd probably read in bed and she'd have to wait up for Tamsin on her own.

But then he kissed the back of her neck. 'Hey, if it's so important, I'll get the mask,' he said. 'Want a cup of tea?'

She nodded. As he left the room her neck prickled where his lips had touched her, as if a cat's paw still rested there gently.

It was true, though. Alison already had a number of masks that Bridget had bought her over the years. Well, except the first one. That had belonged to their father. It was made of a smooth reddish wood and hung on the wall in his study between two spears. If you held it in front of your face you could see clearly through the slits in its bulging eyes and could poke your tongue through its down turned mouth.

Justin had started a game with it one night when he was eleven. That was when he and Bridget spent the weekends with their father and Ali's mother, Amanda. Not that they really spent time with Amanda. She was always either at a lunch or a cocktail party or getting ready for one. Or on the phone. She was often on the phone. Doing what she called her charity work. Even when she was home, their father was the one to put Alison to bed. But that night he'd gone out with Amanda, leaving instructions that five year old Ali was to go to bed at seven, but Justin and Bridget could stay up until nine and watch a video.

'Who's putting Ali to bed?' Justin asked Bridget as seven approached.

‘The new maid. I don’t know her name.’

‘Doesn’t matter. Listen. Go in and say goodnight,’ he said. ‘Say I’ll come in a minute. Then open the curtains and tell her to look at the moon. And the maid. Tell the maid to look, too.’

‘There isn’t a moon. It’s dark,’ Bridget pointed out.

‘I know that, silly. That’s what makes it perfect.’

He waited in the shrubbery outside Ali’s bedroom window, the mask over his face, his head covered by a dark towel and a torch held at his chin. When they looked out of the window, he switched on the torch, making the eyes and mouth blaze. He turned the torch off for a moment, then on again. The maid shrieked and ran, dragging Ali by the arm, all the way to the kitchen, crying ‘Hyah, hyah!’ She took refuge behind the bulk of Ruth, the cook. While the maid was wailing behind Ruth and Ruth was yelling at Bridget to tell her what was happening, Alison struggled free and dashed across the room to her sister.

‘I didn’t see anything, Biddie. Show me. Show me.’

The kitchen window didn’t have curtains. Justin had crept around the house and now obliged with a repeat performance. That’s what he told Bridget afterwards. ‘I obliged with a repeat performance.’ He said that at first looking in through the window was like watching TV. He could see Ali running around and then everyone looking towards the window. Then Ruth grabbed a pot of stew off the stove and hurled it at the glass and it was like the TV was broken and you could only hear the sound. The howl of the alarm, Ruth and the maid both screaming. Then, when the alarm stopped, someone running up the drive and hammering on the back door. And when the back door opened and light poured out he could see their neighbour standing there. He had a gun in his hand, so Justin decided he’d better give up. He said he kept saying ‘it’s me, Justin’ very loudly in case the guy got twitchy and shot him. The neighbour didn’t say anything, just followed Justin inside.

Bridget hadn’t thought about him getting shot, but with all the noise and commotion she felt relieved when he was standing inside next to her.

Then their father arrived. He always left a number and Ruth called him even before the neighbour rushed over. The neighbour was thanked, Ruth and the maid instructed to go to bed. And then it was quiet in the kitchen.

Justin was leaning against the heavy kitchen table with his arms crossed. The mask and torch were on the table behind him, but the towel had slipped to the floor.

Bridget moved it around with her foot. She was barefoot and the towel felt soft and comforting. She didn't want to look up. Justin wasn't smiling anymore and their father's face looked dark and heavy. She scrunched the towel with her toes.

'That was cruel. I'm disappointed in the pair of you.' He spoke very slowly. It was always 'the pair of them'. Bridget wondered if he'd ever thought of her and Justin as separate people, even when they were babies. They'd been born in the same year; Justin in January, she in December. Maybe when Justin was a toddler and she hadn't yet learned to walk and talk, maybe then her father hadn't thought of her as part of her brother. She had no way of knowing. He never spoke about when he lived with them and she had no memories of that time at all. He left when she was two.

Their father took Alison's hand and drew her away from them. He stroked her hair away from her face. She had fine, straight hair and it immediately fell back. 'And what about your little sister? Dammit, Justin! How could you want to scare her?'

'I wasn't scared,' insisted Alison, pulling away and looking up at him. 'But I didn't see the moon.'

Suddenly it seemed funny again and Bridget knew before looking up that Justin would be trying not to grin.

Their father stayed in a bad mood all the next day. When he drove them home after lunch, Alison wasn't allowed to go along for the ride. They usually bickered over whose turn it was to sit in the passenger seat, but neither wanted to be next to him, so they'd both climbed into the back. Bridget could see his eyes in the rear-view mirror, glaring straight ahead. She moved away slightly, so he couldn't see her. From her new position she could just see the scar above her own right eyebrow. Justin had one in almost the same place, but his went right through his eyebrow, leaving a bald patch where hair wouldn't grow. That was her fault apparently, just as her scar was his. They'd been playing with trucks and had fought over whose had right of way. Justin had hit her with his truck and she'd retaliated. Or it might have been the other way around. They'd both had to go to hospital for stitches. That part she remembered vaguely, because the nurse at the hospital had thought it was awfully funny and had given them jelly babies.

When they reached their house, Dad turned the engine off. He usually just waited until they climbed out and drove off, but this time he came into the house with them. He told their mom he needed to speak to her. She went into the lounge. 'Go outside and play,' he told them as he followed her. He closed the sliding doors.

Justin sat on the passage floor, legs stretched out and his back against the lounge wall. He had long legs and they stretched almost all the way across. Bridget slid down next to him, her back gliding smoothly down the paint. But as she wriggled her bum to get comfortable, her shorts snagged on a loose nail in the skirting board and there was a short ripping sound. She moved away from the nail and felt with her fingers for the tear. There was just a tiny triangle lose. The shorts were new that week and her mom would be upset. Maybe it could be glued back in place.

Justin prised the nail out of the wood.

'You're letting them run wild.' Their father's voice carried easily.

'I do try,' their mom said, her voice barely audible. 'It's not easy, you know, on my own.'

Justin was using the tip of the nail to dig out the polish from around one of the parquet blocks in the floor. The blocks were lifting. There was a damp patch on the wall opposite, where the bathroom was, and each year the patch got bigger and more and more blocks warped and lifted. They used to be able to pull each other up and down the passage on a blanket, but couldn't any more.

'It's not as if I have the servants you do, Kingsley. I have to do everything myself. And I have them all week, you know.' Her voice wasn't much more than a whimper now.

Why doesn't she shout, thought Bridget. If I were her I'd get mad and yell at him.

'Come!' Justin stood up quickly. 'I've thought of a way to make our pool.'

They went out the back door and across the cracked concrete of the yard to the old peach tree. It was an easy tree to climb and from the top branches Justin could reach the garage roof. He pulled himself up and then leant down to take her hand and tugged her until she could swing her leg over the parapet and clamber up next to him.

'Look. It's closed in on three sides already,' he said, indicating the flat roof. 'It's only three bricks high, but I reckon if we fill it to the top it'd be deep enough to float in. We only have to seal up that side.' He measured it out with long strides. 'One, two …'

Bridget heard a car door close and an engine start up. She looked down at the road and saw her father's Mercedes driving away. It was silver but flashed sunset pink as it caught the light between the trees. Her mother stood on the veranda. Bridget could only see the top of her head, but she knew her mother would be crying. Any minute

she'd start calling them, then it would be their turn to hear how hard it was for her, then she'd cry some more and finally she'd plead with them to be good.

Bridget lay down flat on her back. The concrete felt warm and hard. 'Let's not go down until it's totally, absolutely dark,' she said. It was only when Justin was lying down next to her that she remembered the tear in her shorts but she didn't really care any more.

After that day, every time they went to their father's, Alison pleaded for the scary-mask game and generally Justin would agree. Sometimes he'd let Ali sit on his shoulders and hold the mask, the towel covering his head completely. They stayed away from the house, though, waiting in the gaps of the neighbour's hedges for people walking past. Bridget once heard a neighbour complaining to their father about their behaviour, and he replied that everyone in the area knew it was his kids, so it only frightened strangers and probably reduced the crime rate.

As they got older they played less and less often. And when Justin turned sixteen he refused point blank to go for the whole weekend any more. He consented to being there for Sunday morning and lunch, but only once or twice a month. And if Justin didn't go, it was automatically assumed she wouldn't either.

When Ali was seventeen and went to college in the States, she'd taken their father's mask with her. Because of the memories, she said. Every present Bridget sent her after that was an African mask. Some were decorated with beads and some with thick tangled string for hair, but all were made from carved wood with gaps in the eyes.

The one she'd seen in Rosebank was a beauty, with beads worked into the wood down the cheekbones. Whatever Daniel advised about travelling light, this would be her first visit to her sister and she wasn't going empty handed.

Chapter 3

Her appointment with the doctor at the hospital's spinal unit was at noon. Tom had fetched the children before nine and taken them to pre-school and she'd wasted two hours obsessing about what to wear.

She generally spent little time on her appearance, confident in her green eyes and small muscular frame. Anyway, her appearance had always been Amanda's department. Amanda. Alison never thought of her in maternal terms. Her father was the one who fetched and carried, attended parent-teacher conferences and, work permitting, watched her sporting activities. But once Alison reached her teens Amanda had taken a slightly more active role. While she admitted that Kingsley had done an admirable job up until that point, there were some aspects of the venture she couldn't rely on her husband to undertake. So she would occasionally bombard her daughter with offers of manicures, expensive pieces of jewellery and injunctions to stay out of the sun. Providing her with items of clothing was both regular and frequent, and hadn't diminished with time and distance. A parcel would arrive from South Africa every few months with yet another hand-embroidered blouse, a knitted top or silk scarf, the bulk of which now lay scattered on the carpet in Alison's bedroom.

The easiest decision had been the shoes. She'd chosen plain tan lace-ups that wouldn't slip off her feet. She had dug out and put on a flared black skirt with an elasticised waist that was okay. Somewhere in her bedroom there had to be the ideal top to go with it. But she hadn't found it. There were shelves in her wardrobe she couldn't reach. Because she couldn't fucking stand up. So she'd fetched the broomstick and literally swept everything on to the floor. The carpet shimmered in pinks and greens. All of it beautiful. All of it useless. She wasn't on her way to a cocktail party. She was going to a hospital for an assessment. That was the problem. She wanted something colourful, something kick-ass that said … what? Look at me. I don't belong in this bloody chair! It was as though her entire future depended on what she looked like. If her appearance was 'just right' they would find the problem and she could jog home. It was crazy. She felt crazy. She'd tried on dozens of items, doing up buttons, undoing some, pulling at the shoulders, tucking them in at the waist, then pulling them lose. Before ripping off each one and hurling it across the room.

The taxi was due in five minutes. She wheeled herself over the crumpled clothing, aware of the crunch of beadwork under the tyres, and hunted in the kist at the foot of the bed. She rummaged through folded T-shirts and tracksuits. Christ, how many items of clothing did she have that she'd never worn? She dragged out a red T-shirt from a regional competition some ten years back. She shook it open and smoothed it out across her lap. It had the sponsor's name and GO TEAM blazoned across the front. It was perfect.

She squeezed the chair into the bathroom. She couldn't see herself in the mirror mounted on the wall behind the basin, so she held her small make-up mirror in one hand and put on some red-brown lipstick with the other. She'd washed and blow-dried her hair, but it was still wrong. Too mousy and straggly. She should have booked a hair appointment, cut it a little shorter, possibly had a few blonde highlights. She put the mirror down, pulled on the T-shirt and fluffed up her hair with her fingers. She looked in the mirror again, holding it at arm's length this time. She looked okay. She felt the panic subsiding. She could go outside and wait for her ride.

The taxi pulled up as she was locking the door. She'd taken the precaution of mentioning she was in a wheelchair when she'd booked, but they'd sent a small car. The slender young driver, too, didn't seem up to the task. However, he popped open the trunk, opened the passenger door without comment and met her halfway up the driveway.

'Morning,' he said, grabbing the handles at the back of the wheelchair. He pushed her into the street and turned her effortlessly so that she was alongside the open door. She moved forward in the seat in preparation to swinging herself across, but he was immediately beside her and lifted her, sliding one hand under her knees and the other under her arms. Her face was against his and she was aware of his aftershave and the lingering scent of shampoo. He put her down in the seat, her purse still in her lap, collapsed the chair and stowed it in the trunk with the same ease. 'The hospital, huh? No traffic at this time of the day. Plain sailing all the way.'

They travelled in silence. At the hospital he parked behind the ambulances and reversed the procedure with the wheelchair until she was placed carefully in its seat once more. 'You have to go along to those glass doors over there,' he said, as Alison paid him. 'Let me move the car and I'll take you in.' Alison thanked him, but insisted

she'd manage. The sidewalk was flat and there was a ramp up to the entrance. No problem, really.

But as she reached the top of the ramp she smelled dog shit. She stopped. Her instinct was to look at her feet, but as she leant forward she realised it was all over her right hand. She looked down at the side of her chair. There was a smaller metal ring attached to the wheel which you could turn to avoid touching the tyre. She'd been very careful to do that, but she'd obviously driven through a pile of dog crap which had squished out sideways. The mushy orange goo was smeared over her palm and thumb. She held her hand away from her. It stank. Bloody hell. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. If it was a foot she could wipe it on the grass. Grass would take away the revolting stench. She couldn't deal with this. She wanted to be home. She wanted to be normal. Damn bloody dog. Damn bloody *owners*. Maybe it was her neighbour. He never picked up after his mutt. It could have been while she was getting into the taxi. The driver was so quick he mightn't have noticed. Maybe there was crap all over his trunk. Oh God, how embarrassing! She could feel tears prickling at her throat. She drew a deep breathe. It wasn't the end of the world. She could not miss this appointment.

She opened her purse with her left hand and dug around for a Kleenex. She only had one. She wiped her hand first and then used the tissue to flick as much crap off the wheel as she could. Then she folded the Kleenex over so she could hold it while she wheeled herself to a garbage bin. In future she'd wear gloves. Right now she had seven minutes to find a restroom and clean up properly.

It was getting dark. Alison had sat at her keyboard for half an hour and managed only two lines. It was probably the only lines she'd ever emailed where she'd corrected typos and worried about punctuation.

Dearest Dad,

Don't worry!!! Hearing your voice set me off. I'm going to be fine, really I am.

But that was the problem. She didn't know when she was going to be fine. Every time she saw another doctor she got more and more confused. At her initial hospital visit after the fall they'd said the x-rays were negative and she reflexed in all the right places, so everything was 'intact'. What did it mean to be 'intact'? Whole, in one piece? That was true enough. But unimpaired, undamaged? Then she should be getting

stronger. And she wasn't. Was something deep inside her broken? Some part, however tiny, impaired? Or, as the doctor had mentioned that afternoon, was it a case of re-learning how to make the muscles work? Which seemed ridiculous. How could muscles forget how to work? What was that rhyme? Something about a centipede. She googled it quickly. It was called 'The distracted centipede', author unknown.

A centipede was happy quite, until a frog in fun
Said, 'Pray, which leg comes after which?'
This raised her mind to such a pitch,
She lay distracted in the ditch
Considering how to run.

She did feel as though she was lying distracted in a ditch. Lying on her back looking at that pattern of leaves etched against the sky. Not facing reality. She'd put off telling her parents about the fall. She'd waited until she'd asked Biddie to come. And she'd told them about her doctor's appointment. But not about Tom. Christ, she was being an idiot, as if not publicly acknowledging it meant it hadn't really happened.

Was the problem all in her mind?

It was after midnight in Jo'burg when they'd reached her. They'd waited up, leaving dozens of messages on her mobile. But her phone was switched off for the nearly five hours she'd been at the hospital and, even on the taxi ride home, she hadn't given it a thought. Her father had finally resorted to her land line. She could imagine him with a tumbler of whiskey in one hand and the phone in the other, pacing back and forth across the Persian carpet in the lounge. Her mother would be curled up on the couch, flipping through back issues of Garden and Home and saying 'Kingsley, darling, she'll call back when she's ready. Do sit down', while on the other side of the world Alison's land line rang and rang.

Alison arrived home utterly exhausted and all the time she was getting from the taxi to the chair, wheeling herself up the path and opening the door the strident ring went on and on. And she kept thinking 'Leave me alone, just leave me alone' and when she finally picked up and heard her father's voice she burst into tears. He wanted to fly her 'home' immediately. Oh God, it was tempting! She could just give up being an adult for a while. Let some one else take care of everything. Appointments, decisions, the children, what she ate. And her mother could decide what she wore. It would be so easy.

But it was the journey back from being a child to an adult that made it impossible.

She started typing again, the words coming more easily.

It's all feeling a lot better now - I've been on good drugs - and I'm not really in much pain at all but I have been walking less and less well over the last sevral days as my left leg is weak and getting weaker. Did you look at that URL I sent, with the diagram of the vertebra? The theory is that there's a nerve somewhere thats pinched or compressed and its causing pins & needles and weakening muscle control. So the doctor did some strength and sensation testing.

Before he began the tests, the doctor showed her a chart of the spinal cord. The vertebrae were numbered, starting down the cervical region of the neck from C1 to C7, then starting again in the chest from T1 all the way down to T12. Then came the lumbar region, the lower back, where the doctor suspected her problem was. L1 through L5. Below that was the sacrum, S1 and S2 and finally the coccyx. The lumbar region was where most back problems occurred, he said, because they carry the most body weight and are subject to the largest forces and stresses along the spine. Not that that was Alison's problem. Hers was in all likelihood caused by trauma. The fall had probably compressed the intervertebral discs, causing a swelling that pinched the nerves as they left the spinal cord at each vertebra. When the swelling went down things would get better. And a cortisone injection would help the swelling. They just needed to determine where to inject.

It's like that puzzle we all did together, remember? That who owns the zebra thing. In the house next to the house with a horse, they smoke Dunhill and in the middle house they drink milk and eventually by trial and error you get the answer because nothing else fits the facts you've been given. Well, it sounds a bit like that. Extension of the toes is controlled by the nerves from L4, L5 and S1, whereas flexion is L5, S1 and S2. So you work backwards from where there is or isn't sensation or movement to determine precisely where the damage is. You'd be good at it!

Flexion, she was told, was when the joint angle decreased, such as closing the elbow joint when lifting a hand to the shoulder. Straightening was the opposite. Abduction was the movement of a limb away from the body, like lifting a straightened arm. Adduction was the opposite. So he made Alison move her legs and feet in various

directions, stretching and contracting various muscles. Flexing and straightening, abducting and adducting.

She typed even more quickly.

He said that everything was consistent with damage at L4. That's where the nerve is that goes to the quadriceps muscles. And that some stuff ws a bit of L3 but that is likely due to those nerves being so near the inflammation at L4 that they were a little bit affected to.

Sorry, I'm rambling. It's been a long day and Tom and the kids will be back soon.

Which was a lie. Which she wouldn't think about.

How had she ever been able to dive? She closed her eyes, imagining herself on the board. Three steps and a jump and she was somersaulting, stretching, every muscle flexing or contracting. It was all about timing and focus, her coach said repeatedly. Timing and focus. And she'd got it right. Her muscles had responded smoothly, every one in sync. Occasionally, at the local swim club, when it was Tom's turn to ensure the children didn't drown, she still dived for pure pleasure. She revelled in that single second of weightlessness. But the highlight was always the moment of water entry, her body lengthened, muscles taut, slicing down through the surface and then rolling leisurely away under the bubbles, water flowing through her hair and sliding past her limbs. Sensation streaming to her mind – fluid, soft as a mist.

How different to be lying on an examining table. Solid. Immobile. Sensation now in anxious bursts. Cotton wool brushed lightly over the skin of her hip, thigh, knee and down to her toes. Did the pressure feel the same? Here? And here? Then the touch of cotton wool was replaced by tiny pinpricks. Where there was an incomplete injury to the spine, the doctor said, you retain some sensation below the level of the injury. It varies tremendously. Like Alison, many people with incomplete injuries could move one limb more than another, feel in parts of the body they couldn't move, or function better on one particular side. Or, since different nerves control the sensations of touch and pain and only the 'pain' nerves cross over at the vertebra, you could feel pain only on one side but touch only on the other. Could she feel this? Could she feel that? It became difficult to concentrate. Her legs increasingly felt as if they were no longer part of her body at all. As each hour slipped by, she felt less and less 'intact'.

I've had the cortisone injection and I should start getting stronger. It'll be a relief to get out of a wheelchair. He also said he'll talk to my therapist about getting a "knee cage" so that I can walk. He asked me "what do you think about a walker, wouldn't you rather try that than crutches?" I said it didn't sound very sexy. Man, the thought of cruising around on my walker makes me giggle and groan at the same time.

Actually, the thought of cruising around, even with a walker, was very appealing indeed. If her left knee could be locked, even enough to help her balance, then the right leg might be able to take her weight. Never mind cruising, it would be fantastic simply to be able to stand. Once she could pull herself up and keep her balance, she could move herself unaided from the wheelchair into the car or on to the couch. Her mind roved over various seats. The toilet. A chair in a restaurant. The peculiar shape of a bicycle saddle. A swing!

He feels pretty confident that with some therapy I will start walking pretty soon. It'll be physio, physio abd more physio. So don't come yet, Pops. For the time being let's keep to the plan of meeting in the new year somewhere exotic for my 30th. Some quiet island where we can pig out on shellfish and mom can find a worthwhile project to keep the entire population occupied. And I'll let you spoil the kids rotten. Which right now is the last thing they need! They're behaving like little monsters. I'm hoping Biddie's no-nonsense approach will get them back in line. It will be GREAT having her here.

I'll keep in touch with how I'm doing. My right leg is feeling good so I think things should start improving soon.

Love you!

Ali

She pressed the Send button. Once he got the message she knew her father would pour hours into researching spinal cord injuries. But the information both of them needed wasn't available.

Fatigue overwhelmed her again. And she was hungry. When had she last eaten? She felt a craving for something rich in fat and starch - what she thought of as comfort-food. Something like macaroni cheese, although there was no way she could summon the energy to make it. She'd have to order pizza again.

She let her head sink. The GO TEAM on her chest was upside-down and distorted. She regretted the choice she'd made now. It would probably have been more appropriate to wear something subdued. Was that what you did in a wheelchair? … keep your mouth zipped and wear beige?

Chapter 4

Bridget had presented herself at the consulate on Monday morning an hour early for her appointment, an hour which was taken up with queuing to be allowed entrance. By lunchtime she had been interviewed and it was decided she would not be a threat. Her fingerprints were scanned and she was told to wait. She moved to the side of the gigantic room, closest to where she'd seen passports being given back. The chairs were all taken, but a man sitting on a table shunted up and offered her a seat against the wall. He was about forty, blue-eyed, with cropped hair. It was well after one o'clock and Bridget was hungry. She'd brought along a packet of cheese sandwiches so she dug them out of her bag. She noticed him glance at them and offered him one, which he accepted. She took out the text-book she'd brought along to read, kept that on her lap and tucked her bag behind her.

Her companion told her, with his mouth full, that he was a pilot with SAA. 'Someone else used to handle this sort of paperwork crap,' he said. 'Now we all have to waste an entire day.'

'I know,' she said. 'I've been here since ten-thirty.'

'Is this your first time?' He twitched an eyebrow in a manner that suggested a wink.

The two of them, strangers, both greying, were perched snugly side by side and Bridget felt an urge to giggle. 'Yup,' she said. 'And if I get the visa I'm leaving tonight. First time out of Africa, too.'

'Ah, virgin voyage. Lucky you. Everything new and exciting then? Package tour?' There was a hint of disdain in the suggestion.

'No,' she replied quickly. 'I'm going to my sister. In Dallas. She's had an accident.' She immediately regretted mentioning Ali. It gave her the uncomfortable feeling of being disloyal. She should have made something up. Kept it fun and un-real.

'Did you tell them that in the interview?'

'What?'

'That your sister's in hospital.'

'Yes.'

'Get a bit emotional?'

'Actually, yes.'

‘Well done, you! That’ll help. Children?’

‘Two. Both little. That’s why she needs me there.’

‘No. You.’

‘A daughter.’

‘How old?’

‘Sixteen,’ she said.

She liked the look of surprise that flashed across his face. ‘Child-bride, huh?’ But then he added, ‘Or just not very prepared for your first times?’

Shit-click. Someone had told her once that was what it was called when you were watching TV and reached the moment you’d had enough – shit – and changed channels – click. She turned away from him and opened the text book. Without her reading glasses, the text was too blurred to read. She dragged her bag on to her lap, unzipped the side pocket and took them out.

‘I bet you get ten years.’

‘Sorry?’

‘They’ll give you a ten-year visa. Mark my words. Minor child. Married.’ He pointed to her wedding ring. ‘Don’t look so worried. I’m not hitting on you. That was my name just called and I’m on my way.’ He hopped off the table. ‘Thanks for the sandwich. And I hope your sister’s okay.’

She moved a little away from the wall and shifted her bag into the space he’d vacated. She put on the glasses and kept her eyes down at the book. She thought about what he’d said. No, she was not very prepared for her first times, sex or travel. She’d thought about travel long before she’d thought about sex. *Overseas.* At school that had been the grand plan for so many of them. *The moment I’ve got my degree I’m going overseas. I’ve always fancied Greece / Aztec culture / New York.* More recently friends who were planning their travels would rave about particular guide books. She would look through them when she and Daniel browsed the local bookstore. The books were crammed with information, what to take, what to see, condensed history, geography.

Now, finally, she was about to travel and her only source of information was her sister. Bring jeans and T-shirts, Ali had told her. Bridget was hitting Dallas weather at its best, she said. If it got cold, there was a cupboard full of jackets in the hall. It wasn’t as if they’d be going out. Oh, and Pro-nutro for the kids. Luke had developed an addiction on his visit to SA. And Jelly-tots and Fizz-pops, the latter cherry flavoured if possible, but definitely not apple. None of it was as Bridget had imagined. This was to

be her first trip overseas and what was she taking? Sweets and old clothes! To Dallas. All she knew of Dallas was that Kennedy was shot there and they had a football team. And on the way back she'd get to spend all of nine and a half hours in London. In jeans and T-shirt. Alone.

She heard her name and hurried to the counter. Once her passport was handed over, she moved away, against the wall and looked at her visa. The pilot had been right. She'd got ten years. The full-paged multicoloured visa had been glued into her passport. Her photograph was printed in monochrome to the left of a watermark of the Abraham Lincoln Memorial statue. Her photograph had managed to capture a certain likeness between them, emphasising her bony angularity and prominent nose – and a very stern expression. Well, if that had tipped the balance in her favour, she was grateful. She tucked the passport into a plastic folder behind her international driver's licence and the dollars her father had given her.

The hundred dollar notes bore a photograph of a purse-lipped, lank-haired Franklin. If she had to resemble an American president she was relieved it wasn't him.

She always drove the last few blocks to her house slowly. They lived half a kilometre from the local high school that Tamsin attended and her daughter had recently insisted on walking home. So Bridget would time her trips home from work or the supermarket to arrive back ten minutes before Tamsin. It gave her a chance to see who was in the neighbourhood. Today Tamsin should have been home before her, but it did no harm to be careful. There was a young black man approaching their property. She slowed the car to keep him a few houses ahead. Properties in the suburb were small, but the walls around each house were high and most had electric fences. He was well dressed and keeping a steady pace, but looking into the gardens through the gates. He walked past their gate and turned at the corner, away from the route Tamsin would take, so Bridget opened the gates with the remote and pulled her car into the carport.

'Tami?' she called once she was inside the house. There was no reply. There was also no school bag dumped in the entrance hall and the front door hadn't been left unlocked. The door to her daughter's room was closed. Bridget opened it and stood in the doorway, looking in. Until a year before the room had been immaculately neat and Bridget a frequent and welcome visitor. Now the bed was unmade and clothing piled high on the chair. There were shoes on the desk and books on the floor. It was as if this,

too, was foreign ground. And she knew that if she applied for entry here it would be denied. She closed the door, went to the bathroom and washed her hands.

She heard Tamsin come in and met her halfway down the passage. Her daughter smelt of mint.

'Damn it all, Tamsin! You've been smoking. You promised you had quit.'

'I did.' Tamsin shrugged. 'Then I started again.' Bridget started to respond, but Tamsin cut her off. 'Did you get your visa?'

'Yes. And I leave tonight. I .. '

'Great. You'd better pack.' Tamsin started to edge past her.

'I have. I'm ready to go.' She'd packed the previous evening, wanting to keep the afternoon clear, hoping to spend it with her daughter. She'd imagined them having coffee together at the mall. 'I want to take you through the camping stuff.'

'I promised Si I'd be at his house in an hour. Help him set up. We've got a practice tonight.'

'I'll be gone for three weeks. I thought you'd come to the airport.'

'I'd rather say a decent goodbye here.'

'Which conveniently won't interfere with your plans.'

'Oh, Mom. I talked to Dad last night. He agreed. He probably wants you to himself. Look. Give me five secs to change and I'll meet you in the garage.' She ducked into her bedroom and closed the door.

Bridget took the Landrover keys from the rack, unlocked the garage and squeezed along the wall to the driver's door. She unlocked it with difficulty and climbed into the driver's seat. The car smelt of dust and open spaces. A tennis ball hovered in front of the windscreen. It was strung from the rafters so that if the vehicle was stopped with the tennis ball grazing the glass there was space for a row of crates to be stacked in front of it. Daniel had planned the current holiday to be in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park. Now, instead of going as a family, he and Tamsin would be going without her. Tamsin's protests at spending her holiday in what she referred to as a backwoods area had dwindled once it would be just her and her father. Bridget backed the Landy out into the street. She checked all the doors were locked and looked up and down the road in preparation for crossing. When she looked through her own gates, she stopped.

Tamsin was dancing on the driveway. She was wearing a tight black top, cut away at the armholes, white bra straps showing across her shoulders, baggy tracksuit

pants clinging low on her hips. She was looking down at her feet, her long brown hair falling forward, hiding her face. Her thick-soled trainers were drumming in silence on the concrete. She was totally absorbed, as if she was hearing music that drowned out everything else. It was the way she danced when she used to do ballet. But with ballet one movement would flow into the next in fluid, graceful transitions. Now the positions of her feet she'd practiced so sedately flashed in quick staccato bursts. She was no sooner on her toes than she was on her heels, her knees no sooner open than closed again. She had spent years mastering control of her body, only to discard it. Her hips swayed, her shoulders shook and her head bobbed. At a competition the previous month, when Bridget had watched her daughter dance to the thumping beat of hip-hop, she'd hated it with all her soul. But now, with Tamsin moving alone and in silence, it was suddenly mesmerising.

Tamsin looked up as the gate opened, saw her mother approaching, and stopped.

'It looks great, hon. Really. What movement … step were you doing?'

'It's called the Crip Walk.'

'Crip? As in cripple.' The shuffling, ungainly movements took on a different dimension. Her thoughts flew to Alison and she felt indignation flare.

'No. The Crips were a gang. In the US. The walk was a way of dissing your rivals. Look. You could write someone's name. I'll do a B.' Her feet bounced from one angled V-position to another. 'And then cross it out.' Her body shuddered as her feet jerked backwards and forwards, erasing the imaginary letter.

'Are there gangs in your school?'

'Jesus, Mom! I've told you. Hip-hop has nothing to do with gangs now!' Tamsin's body had become rigid. She leant forward, her expression suddenly fierce 'We dance, mom. Okay? It's a *dance*.' Then she spun round and walked, briskly, into the garage. 'Come on. If you need to tell me your wonderful system, let's get it over with.'

Suddenly Bridget longed to be gone. To be on the plane. Going somewhere she was needed.

She unpacked the stack of crates so that all three were side by side on the floor. 'Dad will still have to buy the perishables, the fruit and veg and so on,' she said. 'I've given him the list. But everything else is packed. Whatever you'll need for tea, coffee and breakfast is in here. Lunch. Supper.' She pointed. Tamsin watched sullenly, still panting slightly. A greyhound reluctantly leashed in after a race. Bridget was aware

she'd hoped for some approval. How could she think Tamsin would care how many clean dishclothes were packed? Or that her daughter might imagine she'd need something from the small suitcase filled with antiseptic, plasters, bandages, pills for everything from constipation to diarrhea, even a broad band antibiotic.

'That's it, really. You'll find everything you need. There's a list of the menus for each day in the breakfast crate.'

Tamsin picked one up. 'What happens if tinned tuna is scheduled for lunch on Wednesday but we feel like eating it on Monday?'

'Then go for it. If you eat all the non-perishables first you might land up with rotten stuff for the last few days. But I'll be on the other side of the world so it's not going to bother me,' she answered. 'When you're ready to say goodbye I'll be in the kitchen.' She strode back into the house.

But, when the moment came, Tamsin hugged her and clung to her for moment. 'I love you, Mom,' she said. 'Give Aunt Ali my love. She's lucky to have you.'

Bridget gathered up Tamsin's hair in her hands, feeling its warmth. Then she moved her hands to Tamsin's cheeks, still as soft and smooth as when she was a baby, and kissed her on the lips. 'Look after yourself, my darling,' she said.

Tamsin was gone by the time Daniel came to take her to the airport. He wanted her to check in three hours before the flight, then have dinner with him. He'd fetched her plane ticket from the travel agent and been to the curio shop.

'Sorry, Bridg,' he said. 'The mask you wanted was sold. I bought another. They've bubble-wrapped it and put it in a sturdy box, so you don't have to take it as carry-on luggage. Do you want to unwrap it and see?'

She shook her head. 'No, it'll be fine. Thanks for getting something.'

'I bought a couple of things for the kids, too. A mobile for Emma.' Little dancing figurines made of grass twirled as he held it up. 'You'll be there for her birthday, won't you?' Bridget doubted a mobile would be high on the list of favoured birthday presents for a four-year old and said nothing. If she had time she could look for something at Gatwick or Heathrow. 'And I got a set of wooden animals for Luke.' Dozens of palm-sized animals were packaged in a clear plastic bag with a label stating 'Animals of Africa'. They were crudely made and not to scale. Buck of indeterminate species were the same size as elephant and only distinguishable from zebra by the lack

of stripes burnt into the wood. The giraffe had over-long, spindly necks with cheetah-style markings and the rhino had blunted horns and slender legs. She doubted a single creature would be able to stand. But she thanked him again and tucked both gifts in beside the boxes of Pro-nutro.

Once she had her boarding card in her hand they found a table on the mezzanine level, where they could see the panel of lights flashing boarding information. They both ordered fish and chips, but Bridget was unable to eat.

'Do you want to phone Tami before you go?' Daniel asked.

Bridget shook her head. 'I don't want to say goodbye again.' She'd ordered a glass of white wine and took a sip. It tasted acidic. 'Daniel, she said you gave her permission not to come. To go to dance practice instead.'

'Ja, I did. I didn't think you'd mind. You're the one who says airport goodbyes stink. Why?'

'Just checking.'

'Why do you keep feeling the need to check up on her?'

'Oh, come on Daniel! Because I'm worried. The smoking. Lying. She's changed … is changing.'

'Of course she's changing, Bridg. That's what being an adolescent is about.'

'You know what occurred to me today? That it's like a metamorphosis. They disappear into this cocoon and you know strange things are going on. She's spun this world of dance, clothing … of … of attitude … around her. And I have no idea whether a butterfly will ever emerge when it's over.'

'What? As opposed to a moth?'

'Oh, I wouldn't have a problem with a moth, if that's what is meant to be. A proper, fully developed moth. But have you ever thought how weird a caterpillar must look on its way to becoming either?'

'Well, there's your answer. Trust in Nature, in genetics. How long it takes might vary, but the end result is fine. Don't interfere.'

'But what if the changes stopped at one of those bizarre life forms? No, don't laugh. It really scares me. I could cope with it all if I had some guarantee.'

'You have to trust her.'

'She's not alone in that cocoon, Daniel. She's in there with other kids.'

'Black kids. Is that what's bothering you? That her crew, as she puts it, is mainly black?'

‘No. That’s unfair!’

‘Bridg, I’ve taken them home on occasion. They’re thoroughly nice kids.’

‘Maybe the ones you’ve met. What bothers me is that a lot of the time we have no idea who she’s with.’

‘She’s sixteen. We have to allow her some freedom. Anyway, her judgement is sound.’

‘Is it? I’m not so sure. Peer pressure is a strange thing. There are kids at my school who are already damaged. We’ve had incidents with drugs, and with violence. With *twelve*-year-olds, for God’s sake. In a so-called good area. You’re bloody naïve if you think her high school isn’t riddled with them too.’

He leant across and covered her hand with his. ‘Relax. For most of the time she’s with me she won’t even be able to use a cell phone. You go take care of your sister and I’ll take care of our child. I promise.’

Chapter 5

Alison pulled the wheelchair up against the couch, engaged the brake and shifted herself across. She took the printout of father's email from where she'd tucked it into the elastic of her skirt and placed it beside her. Then she manoeuvred the chair away, so it was behind her and out of sight when she lay down. She adjusted a cushion behind her head, punching it flat so her neck wasn't at an acute angle. Her feet were in the patch of sunlight that slanted in through the glass.

As soon as she was still she became aware of a rustling sound in the room. It was intermittent and it took a few minutes for her to decide a moth was trapped behind the only painting in the room. Was an etching classified as a painting? It was black and white sketch of a bird by William Kentridge, given to them as a wedding gift by her father. Either way, Tom hated it. He said it belonged in a biology text book. He preferred her father's wooden mask, which she'd hung on the same wall. The moth's desperate papery fluttering agitated her, but she couldn't summon up the energy to get back in the wheelchair to free it. Why hadn't the idiotic creature sought refuge behind the mask instead, where it had an escape route through the eyes or mouth? She scratched at a mosquito bite on the inside of her left knee.

The moth had finally stopped struggling and the silence in the house now felt oppressive. She missed Emma's chatter and the percussion of bangs and crashes that marked Luke's exploration of the world. When she'd asked Tom to help with the children he'd been delighted. He'd take a week's leave, longer if need be, he said. He'd been house-sitting for someone who was away for a month, but he and the children would move in with his mother. Wasn't it lucky for her his mom still had a large house? No, lucky for him, Alison thought. He'd have a built-in baby sitter and wouldn't have the burden of cooking and laundry. She was convinced his mother had kept the double-story house in the hope of her beloved only child coming back one day. But Alison knew the kids would be delighted. Emma's second birthday present had been the construction of a playground in her grandparents' back yard, with a jungle gym, swings and slide – painted pink, at her request.

Alison's fingers were still rubbing at the bite. She moved her hand across her thigh. Was the feeling different to before?

She picked up the email and read the first few paragraphs again.

Darling, I really do hope you are well on the road to recovery. Can't wait for you to have Bridget's support. BUT I'm still worried you might not be getting all the medical care you need. I've been doing some research of my own. I'm concerned you still have pain and that the 'weakening' you mention is progressive. I've spoken to a neurologist here and he has some concerns too. He's worried that the cortisone wasn't given immediately. He would want more tests – nerve tests and the MRI to check higher up the spine just in case. He might also check spinal cord fluid.

Yes, honey, I'm interfering, but better safe than sorry. I've put money into your account and I want you, beg you, to see a neurologist immediately. I understand you feel you don't need me there right now, but at least indulge me on this. It's important.

She closed her eyes and tentatively touched her skin in various places. Each time she returned to the same area the sensation seemed less intense. Was that just imagination? She tried to flex her foot, then her knee. Nothing. But she could feel the warmth of the sun on her feet. That was good. Even the sense that she'd soon have to haul herself up and pee was good.

When the doorbell rang she opened her eyes with a start.

'It's open,' she called, assuming it was Felicity.

But it was Tom who walked in. He had a gleaming-hair, freshly-shaved look, as if he was dressed for a date. He was carrying a bunch of flowers which he held out towards her. They were long-stemmed roses. Red. The symbol of love and fidelity. When she made no move to take them he said 'Oh. I'll put them in water.'

Alison could hear noises of cupboards opening and closing, water running. She tried to remember why red roses were linked to love. In her teens she'd had a craze for Greek legends and she was sure one of them had something to do with red roses … and Adonis. Maybe Tom knew that. She'd never thought of Tom as an Adonis before, but elements were there. The sculptured blond beauty and easy smile. And, it now seemed, the inability to stay with one woman. For, as far as she could remember, Adonis shared his time between two goddesses. But if that were the case where did the fidelity part come in?

Tom was standing in the doorway. 'Want a glass of wine? I see there's a bottle open.'

'No.'

'Mind if I help myself?'

‘It probably isn’t stuff you’d be prepared to drink.’

‘It’s fine.’

He went back to the kitchen.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would have to go shopping. Buy a really good bottle of wine for Biddie and her to share. And something special for supper. But something that didn’t require too much preparation. Grilled steak, perhaps, with baked potatoes and salad. Was there any chance Biddie had become vegetarian? Maybe it would be safer to stick to chicken. She could roast it. Or keep it all simple and buy ready-cooked, except that it was always deep fried. Jeez, she was getting hungry.

Tom came in and put the vase of roses on the coffee table. He’d poured her wine anyway. He put her glass on the table in front of her and sat in the chair opposite. When had that become his usual place? They used to share the couch. He would sit upright with his feet on the table and she would lie with her legs across his thighs. She tried to think when they’d last sat watching TV like that. They were still doing it when Emma was a toddler. Alison could remember Em trying to push her mother’s legs away so she could have her father to herself. Now Tom sat in the chair instead, even after the kids were in bed. He would swivel the chair to watch TV, so she would see him in profile. Was it an indication that they’d already been growing apart, even before Luke was born?

Now, however, he was facing her, leaning forward.

‘Your hair suits you slightly longer. It looks great.’ She met his gaze but didn’t reply. ‘Ali, I’m really sorry it happened. And I guarantee it won’t again. I love you.’ He was gently swilling the wine around in his glass. The wine he’d poured her was between them on the table. It seemed like a peace offering, temptingly close. She could just reach out and take it. She could spend the next few weeks having fun with her sister during the day and having Tom back in her bed at night. He said he loved her. He would take care of her. She could relax and concentrate on rehab.

Maybe she should. Having Tom back would be one less thing to deal with. And maybe her body would respond to the routine of her previous life. It could be possible. Lack of tension could ease the constrictions; messages would trickle through and then start to flow.

‘Anyway,’ Tom said, leaning back in the chair and taking a swig of wine. ‘The situation isn’t good for the kids.’

‘The *situation*?’ She stressed each syllable of the word. ‘What *situation*? Me not walking or you screwing around?’

‘It was a once-off. You make it sound like it’s something I do all the time.’

She actually had no idea whether it was what he did all the time. He often worked late and she never questioned it. It was a colleague of Tom’s who’d told her about her husband hopping into bed with one of the other delegates on a conference.

He was gazing at her intently. ‘She came on to me, I promise.’

She believed him. Because it would have been easy. He and the woman happened to be in the same hotel. That made it all so convenient. She would have batted her eyelashes at him, laughed at his jokes, anything to show he wouldn’t be rejected. All it took was a stroll to her room. Or his – it would have made no difference. And he probably thought there’d be no consequences. She was unlikely to be demanding afterwards. And he certainly didn’t expect his wife to be told. It was just a short-lived, uncomplicated fling. So dammed undemanding. Maybe if he’d actually chosen someone, actively pursued her, planned a seduction, put more effort into it all, she’d be less angry with him. No, it wasn’t even anger anymore. It was more like a burning disappointment.

He was cradling his glass of red wine, red roses at his elbow and it struck her how inappropriate the colour was for Tom. Red wasn’t for love, it was for passion. Tom, with his pale hair and pale eyes, lacked fire in his blood.

‘Nothing’s ever your fault, is it, Tom? If you miss a deadline it’s a computer glitch or the printer jammed. If you’re running late it’s because some other asshole is blocking the road. Why do you do that, by the way? Sit in the traffic? Why don’t you ever swerve off into a by-road and find another route?’

He looked at her in confusion. ‘Ali. Please. What the hell has that got to do with it? I’d like to come back. Can we stay focussed on that?’

‘No. I don’t think so. I’ve got enough to on my plate right now.’

The wine swilled round and round, edging to pink as it swirled against the glass. ‘Crazy as it is, maybe your accident wasn’t a totally bad thing…’

‘Fuck you, Tom!’ She jerked herself upright.

‘Oh come on, Ali. I only mean it might give me another chance. You need me now …’

‘I don’t need you. Bridget arrives tomorrow.’

‘And after a couple of weeks she’ll leave.’

‘I know. And I’ll face that when I have to.’

‘Look, I didn’t put that well. What happened to you is totally shit. I’m sorry. I really am. Have the doctors …?’ He paused and Alison could sense how hard it was for him to ask. ‘Have they given you any indication of how long it’ll take? You know, before you’re okay… when you’ll be walking again.’

She’d deliberately kept information to a minimum. He had no bloody right to know. But she could feel her resolve weakening. It would be wonderful to tell him she didn’t have a clue, to confess how bloody frightened she felt, to cry on his shoulder, have him stroke her hair. She could ask him to get her an appointment with a neurologist. *Better safe than sorry.* And he would. He was still her husband, the father of her kids.

‘Ali, I’ll fetch your sister from the airport for you. I could take the kids along and … ’

‘Felicity is going.’

‘She doesn’t even know what Bridget looks like.’

‘How many people fit her description? Anyway, Felicity said she’s taking a chalk board with Biddie’s name on it.’

‘Can I move back when Bridget leaves, then? Come on, Ali, it would be better for everyone. I don’t think you’re being reasonable …’

‘I don’t know! Jesus, Tom, just give me some space. I need to think about it. I’m not in a very *reasonable* frame of mind. So don’t – just fucking don’t – sit there feeling sorry for yourself!’

He stood abruptly, colour flaring in his cheeks. Leaving his empty glass and her full one on the table he walked to the door.

‘Oh, there’s one other thing, though.’ He turned and looked at her. ‘There’ll be four of you and the wheelchair. Would you like to swap cars? Take the big one? It’ll be easier.’

‘Oh. I hadn’t thought. Yes. Thanks.’

Without speaking he picked up the keys hanging on a hook near the door and replaced it with the set he took from his pocket.

Chapter 6

Bridget had twice before flown locally to visit her mother and waited with anticipation for the takeoff. She loved the build-up of power as the plane seemed to crouch at the end of the runway in preparation for flight, the sense of something spectacular about to take place. Then there was a fast shuddering release as it launched itself forward, screeching down the runway.

But this time as it took its glorious lift into the air blood poured from her nose on to her blouse. Even in the half-light of the cabin the red splotches were vivid on the blue and white stripes. As a child her nosebleeds had been regular and dramatic. They happened without warning, but were painless and she'd liked the drama of them, lying on her bed or in the sickroom at school with ice packs or damp cloths at her nose and the back of her neck, her school exercise books with blotches in various stages of brown discolouration. Justin's nose never bled and she felt as though it made her different. Fortunately, when she left primary school and started to find her nosebleeds embarrassing, they became less frequent and rapidly petered out altogether.

But this was as bad as any she could remember. And she was unprepared. The pack of tissues in her handbag was stowed out of reach in the overhead compartment. Buckled into an upright position, all she could do was tilt her head back, feeling warm air from the overhead jet blowing directly on to her face and warm liquid seeping down the back of her throat. She was in a window seat and turned away from the man next to her so she could wipe the blood from her upper lip. She succeeded only in smearing it on the back of her hand. The man looked like a rugby forward and seemed totally unconcerned by the mess. He handed her his airsick bag.

'Lean forward as much as you can,' he told her. 'Let the blood drip into the bag. It'll clot more quickly.'

'No, I'm fine. It's better like this. Really.'

'You'll choke,' he said.

'Thanks, but I'm used to them,' she insisted, chin in the air.

He lumbered up the moment the plane started to level, while the fasten-seat-belts light still glowed. The passengers around her craned around to see what was going on.

‘All I need is a tissue,’ Bridget said, as the stewardess loomed over her. ‘They …’ At that moment a blood clot slid into her throat and she gulped it down with the words. ‘Stop quickly.’

Immediately the stewardess assumed responsibility, shifting people around the almost full aircraft to vacate the centre back row. She led Bridget, a wad of paper towel clutched to her nose, along the aisle and made her lie down. She gave her a pillow and a blanket and brought her a paper cup of cold water.

Bridget stayed on her back while the bleeding slowed. People walked past on the way to the toilet. Some glanced at her with sympathy. Others, seeing her lying across four seats, with obvious resentment. She pulled the blanket over her stained top and closed her eyes. Almost immediately the stewardess touched her shoulder and asked in a hushed voice whether she was okay.

‘It’s over,’ she replied. ‘I’ll clean up.’ But when she tried to wash her face in the tiny basin, the flow started again. She gave up and lay back in her makeshift bed. When food was served she ate propped up, invalid-like. She made no effort to read or watch the little TV screen in front of her. She could see a couple of people down the isle adjusting pillows at their necks in preparation for sleep. The aircraft had been airborne for hours. So, a while before, far below, she had left southern Africa for the first time.

She could hear the background drone of the engines and the hum of wind as the huge chunk of metal was forced through the air. There was still the clink and clatter of the meal being cleared away, water flushing in the toilet directly behind her. Wafting around her was the sour smell of leftover food and the astringent odour of warm bodies. But Bridget didn’t mind. You could sit in a movie and see what someone else had seen, hear what they’d heard. But no one had yet come up with a way to make you experience what they could smell. Smells were reality.

There was a first time for realising that, too.

She was in matric. The last month of winter still held the city firmly in its cold, scratchy grip. It was the last day she ever played hockey. She stayed after school to practise for the final match of the season. She was the captain of the first team, but the coach took her off after ten minutes, saying she was playing with no enthusiasm. She was aware her weight loss had started rumours of an eating disorder. If she stayed to the end of practice there would be offers of sandwiches, biscuits or sympathy from team-mates. The coach would want to speak to her. So she left and cycled home.

It wasn't unusual that the house was empty. She'd felt it badly when Justin had first left for the army, but this was different. She stood in the dining room and tried to work out what had changed.

Then it struck her. It was the absence of smells. There were no fresh flowers, no lingering aromas of cooking. She couldn't think when there had last been a wash-day, with the smell of sun-drenched towels or linen steaming under the iron. There was dust on the table and window sills, lying so still it was devoid of any odour at all. She walked into the kitchen and took the least shrivelled apple from the three left in the fruit bowl. She bit into it and held it close to her nose. Even that seemed reluctant to part with its sharp sweet fragrance. She opened the fridge, but it was virtually empty. She hadn't felt hungry in ages, but she was suddenly ravenous. There was a half-empty jar of marmalade and a bottle of mint sauce that had been there since the previous winter. No milk, but a large chunk of cheese, too hard and mean to allow a single molecule to rise into the air. She ate it, washed down with a cup of instant soup.

She went to her room and sat at her desk, staring at a diagram of a flower in her biology text book. Prelims were coming up and she had to make summaries. She wrote a heading on a blank sheet of paper. Then she doodled flowers; daisies with loops for petals and stylised tulips with sharp points. She tore off the sheet, scrunched it into a ball and tossed it into the waste paper basket. She took another sheet and drew fruit; heavily cross-hatched strawberries and bunches of perfectly round grapes.

She realised from noises in the kitchen that her mother was home.

'There's no milk,' she said, watching her mother as she scooped coffee powder into a mug. Her mother looked shrunken. Anxiety gnawed at Bridget's gut along with her new hunger.

'Oh. I won't worry, then.' But her mother poured hot water into the mug anyway and then stared into the steaming black liquid with surprise. She put the mug on the counter. 'I don't have time anyway.'

'And there's nothing for supper.'

'Get something, would you, Biddie? I should be back in time to eat with you. '

'I don't have money.'

'Take some from my bag.' She looked around the kitchen. 'I must go to the bathroom.'

The handbag was on the counter and Bridget hunted through the purse. Not a single note or coin. She emptied everything out. Used tissues. Keys. A few pens. But no money. She was packing things back when her mother returned.

'There isn't any cash.'

'Don't worry then, darling. I'll pick up something on my way home.'

But she didn't. Biddie was sitting in front of the TV when she walked in. The newspaper had a section on easy meals with mince and she was reading through the recipes. Her mother stood in the doorway, her handbag clutched to her stomach.

'Justin sent you a message,' she said.

'Mom, please don't… '

'He says good luck for the exams.' The room was cold. Bridget stared down at the paper. 'I don't know when I'll receive anything again.'

'Go to bed, Mom.' When her mother didn't move she said it again, more sharply. 'Go to bed!'

She knew her mother would be asleep in minutes. She would climb into bed still fully dressed, without turning off the light. And without eating anything. No matter how long Bridget stared at the easy meals, it wouldn't turn the pictures into real food. If she asked her father for money, she'd have to tell him her mother was going mad.

She tossed the newspaper aside. Once she'd made a decision everything seemed easy. Her mother didn't stir when she took the car keys and credit card. No-one stopped to ask for her license when she drove to the all-night superette and the cashier never glanced at the signature on the slip.

When month-end brought the accounts, she ignored them and the card was still not declined. While her friends fretted over schedules of study, she read cookery books. She burnt incense in the lounge. She made curries and thick soups. Maybe, just maybe, by the time spring came the aroma of the first jasmine blooms, or the tang of crushed garlic and chopped coriander would bring her mother back.

The seat belt light lit up again. An announcement stated the plane was going through turbulence and seat belts should be fastened for their own safety and comfort. Bridget was now very comfortable indeed and reluctant to move. She could hear cabin staff moving along the rows. Now that she was no longer causing a disturbance they left her alone, unfettered.

The remainder of her journey occurred as flashes in a continual stream of movement.

Heathrow. Arriving refreshed. Queuing at enquiries. How do I get to Gatwick? You could walk. Ah, jus' teasing you, love. Bus is straight through those doors. One's about to leave. And if you miss it, another will be close behind.

Gatwick. Announcement: Luggage left unattended will be removed from the terminal building and blown into a thousand pieces. Wheeling her bag into the ladies toilet to change. Realising her bag was closed with a plastic grip and everything sharp that could be used to open it was inside. Washing her top in the basin. Standing in her bra, moving the fabric of her blouse back and forth under the gush of hot air designed for drying hands. Avoiding the stares she got. Dashing into a few shops. Then trouble boarding. No signature in the designated place at the back of her passport. Moving her aside. Where exactly are you going? What is your sister's home phone number? Waiting. Final boarding call for her flight. Did she have another document with both a photograph and a signature? Yes, her driver's license would do. Escorted onboard.

Finally, *Dallas*. Stopped by another customs official, asking where she was from. Anything to declare? No. Nothing perishable? Answering very carefully; breakfast cereal, sweets … uh, candy. Biltong? And she repeating it, for Tom had called it beef jerky even when told he was eating kudu. Biltong? Then answering very quickly in case the official thought she was lying. No. You sure? Yes. Letting her proceed. A smiling woman with her name on a board. Being hugged by Felicity, Alison's friend. Driving along motorways through flat countryside. Then into a suburb where the houses were unfenced, all facing the road across small patches of green lawn. Felicity slowing, stopping at one of the houses with a porch at the front door. Well, here we are then. There she is. A woman sitting in a wheelchair on a little porch at the front door, her skirt hiked up above her knees. Tanned legs, barefoot.

Alison, crippled, earthbound. But recognisable by her perfect skin.

Chapter 7

Alison watched her sister climbing out of the car and pausing with the tips of her fingers on the side of the car roof. Suddenly everything about her, the gesture, her long, lean body and short wiry hair, reminded Alison so much of Justin she felt a tremor run through her. Then Bridget was running across the lawn and memories came flying ahead of her – Bridget laughing as she chased her hat along a windy beach, Bridget brandishing a hockey stick as she charged after a ball. Then she was up the three small steps in a single leap and at Alison's side.

But as she stopped there was an awkwardness about her. She paused before giving Alison a kiss and then hugged her only briefly.

'Oh, Ali,' she said, her voice gruff. She seemed unsure whether to stand or stay bent over the chair. Alison reached up and ruffled her hair.

'Come on. We'll go and sit inside.' Alison said.

'I must get my bag,' said Bridget. She turned quickly and strode back across the grass.

Felicity had taken Bridget's suitcase from the trunk. 'Hey, bag lady!' Ali yelled. 'Are you coming in for a drink?'

'No,' Felicity shouted back. 'I'll leave you two to chat.' She handed Bridget her suitcase and handbag and blew Alison a kiss. 'Ciao. I'll call you in the morning.'

'Thanks a mill, Flick.' Alison waved. Then she turned the chair on the porch and wheeled herself inside. The front door opened directly into the lounge. Bridget followed.

'You must be desperate for a cup of tea.'

'Coffee,' said Bridget. "I've become an addict.'

'Dump your bag in there.' Alison pointed to a door on the right. 'It's officially the study, but it has a bed in it. I'll give you the grand tour on the way to the kitchen.'

She manoeuvred the chair down the narrow passage. She heard the dull thump of the suitcase on the bed, but only realised Bridget was behind her when the wheelchair was being gently pushed forward. She rested her elbows on the armrests and let her hands relax in her lap. 'The kids' room is next to yours and then there's ours. Well, mine now, I guess. You're welcome to share it, but I thought you might need a

bolt hole. The study has no cupboards, so use whatever space you can find in the other rooms. I'll happily toss Tom's stuff on to the sidewalk.'

'Jeez, Ali. I'm sorry. Have you had a chance to discuss it?'

'Yes. I'll give you all the gory details when I've had sufficient wine. You never had much time for him anyway, did you?'

Bridget didn't answer. Alison had memories of her sister being talkative as a child, arguing with their father and Justin over Sunday lunch, lying on the grass telling her detailed stories of what had happened to friends at school and characters from books. But now her sister would retreat into silence if she disagreed with something being said or simply didn't want to discuss a topic further. 'Unfair question. Forget I asked. Okay, stop here. Bathroom. No decent shower, unfortunately. You have to douse yourself with the hand-held thingy. Doorway cunningly offset just enough so you don't look directly from the front door down the passage to me perched on the loo. I can manage the whole procedure except for closing the door.' She turned and smiled. As she angled her head to look upwards her eyes flicked across Bridget's shirt. It was stained and crumpled. 'Do you first want to wash and change?'

'There's no hurry.'

'Then … once we've got a cup of coffee into you … I want to ask a favour. I want to see whether I can handle the bath.'

'Great. I'll help you,' Bridget said.

'No. I need to do it myself, as Emma would say. I just want someone available as backup. Tom'll have the kids home in an hour and I'd rather do it before they get here. All you need do is lie on the couch.' She stretched out her hand and Bridget squeezed it. When she let go Bridget pushed her slowly forward again. 'This is the laundry area because the kitchen,' she indicated to the right, 'is too tiny to fit appliances into. Then straight through the dining room is the lounge and you're back to where you came in. Emma and Luke chase each other in circles down the passage and right through here so get into the habit of walking clear of the runway … oh Jeez, Biddie.' She took control of the chair and swivelled it around. 'Do you want to call Daniel? I never thought of it.'

'What's the time in Jo'burg?'

'What's it matter? He'll be glad to know you've arrived. The phone's on the desk in your room. Talk as long as you like. I'll get the coffee going and put out the mugs.'

‘I can do that first.’

‘This much I can handle. Go!’

As she heaped coffee into the filter she could hear Bridget’s muted voice from the study. She’d never had a house guest before. Her parents always stayed at a hotel. Despite the effort of manoeuvring from side to side and back again to straighten sheets she’d enjoyed making up the bed and when she’d shopped the previous day she’d bought a red flower in a pot and put it on the window sill.

She left the machine dripping into the glass container and prepared for her bath. She hauled a stool from the laundry on to her lap and carried it to the bathroom, tucking it into the space between the door and the bath. Then she fetched clean underwear and a lightweight tracksuit, closed the lid of the toilet and put the clean clothes on it. On the floor was a net bag containing plastic bath toys. The side of the bath was cluttered with others. She started adding them to the bag. There was a bright yellow duck that held bubble bath and she picked it up and shook it to see whether there was any left.

‘I bought you something from duty-free.’ Bridget was standing in the doorway, grinning at her. She held out a green package tightly wrapped in cellophane. ‘I doubt it will foam as well as the ducky stuff, but should smell better.’

‘Oh Biddie, thank you. That’s my best!’

‘Why don’t you hop into the bath straight away and I’ll bring coffee through here.’ A look of embarrassment flashed across her face. ‘Sorry, Ali … I mean, telling you to hop. Shit.’

‘Oh for heaven’s sake, don’t get all bloody sensitive about it. I doubt anyone ever actually hops into a bath. Anyway, how’s Daniel? And my gorgeous niece?’

‘Fine. Getting ready for the holiday. They leave tomorrow. Anything I can do?’

‘Nope. Just the coffee, thanks. Then take time out. You’re going to need it.’

She lent across and turned on both taps. She opened her gift and added a dollop of the thick gel to the water. While the bath filled she took off her T-shirt and bra. Then she pulled her skirt and panties down as far as she could and moved her body from side to side as she tugged them over her hips. Once she was naked she moved herself to the stool and then shifted over so she was partially supported by the stool as she sat on the corner of the tub. She experimentally tucked one hand behind her, pressing down, and stretched the other across. Yes, that should work.

Carefully, so she could maintain her balance, she hunched over and gripped her right calf. She lifted the leg, laying it briefly along the edge of the bath and then placing

it into the water. The cold enamel she was straddling felt hard and uncomfortable, but she forced herself to go slowly. She moved her grip to the left leg. It was weaker than the right and she knew it would be more difficult, but it was still heavier than she'd anticipated. She succeeded in lifting it, but couldn't straighten it completely. Her ankle caught on the bath edge. She wobbled for a second and then flopped sideways into the water. She heard her own bleat of alarm, was aware of jerking her head forward to protect it, of water sloshing from the bath, the flash of memory – dark leaves and bright sky. Then she was safely in the water.

Bridget came running from the kitchen. 'Ali? Ali, are you okay?' She skidded slightly on the wet floor as she yanked the wheelchair from the room.

'Yes.'

'Really?'

Alison lay back in the tub. Her knees were pink-brown islands in the froth. She could feel the water buoying her, lifting the weight from her bones. 'Really,' she confirmed. 'Yes. Definitely. It's a pity you missed it. I was like a walrus plunging off the side of a rock.'

'You don't make a very convincing walrus.' Bridget smiled. 'Except for the noise. That definitely could have come from a walrus. A little, distressed one.'

'The dog says woof. The cat says says meow. I have no idea what a walrus says.'

'It's a cultural gap. We'll have to work on it. Are there other towels?'

'Plenty.'

Bridget pulled a towel off the rail and dropped it on the floor. She crouched down and mopped with a few swift movements, then wrung the towel out over the basin, bundled up all the damp items and carried them out. She returned with coffee and put the mug on the stool. She sat down on the toilet, on top of Alison's clothes, facing her.

'You know what?' she said. 'I never saw you learning to dive. I only ever got to watch when you were perfect. But Tamsin did gym and I was always at her practices. She never did anything new without someone nearby. Spotting, they called it. Ali, I … I haven't a clue what to do.' She paused and tears glinted in her eyes. She stood up abruptly. 'But I'm here. I'll spot for you. In other words, when you need to get out, for God's sake call me.' She bumped against the door jamb as she hurried past.

Alison pulled the other towel from the rail and pressed it to her eyes, forcing back her own tears. When she felt calm again she tossed the towel on to the stool and adjusted the hot water to a trickle. Warm eddies brushed against her skin. The scent of forest and herbs swirled around her. She wanted to stretch out fully, to float. But the bath was too small.

Chapter 8

Bridget carried her coffee through the dining room to the lounge. The two rooms were joined, forming an L-shape, and had large windows. From the dining room she could see the house next door, and from the lounge the houses across the street. The dining room area was uncluttered, but the lounge seemed to double as a playroom. There were piles of toys and books everywhere. She stood in the middle of the room, making sure she could hear Alison in the bath.

Why did she feel a sense of panic? Alison was in the bath, safe. Tamsin was with her father. She had always felt that if she imagined every possible dreaded event, if she gave them form and kept them vivid in her mind, then they couldn't be somewhere else doing damage. She'd done it when she used to watch her sister dive. As Alison stood on the end of the board and took a final deep breath before taking the first step of her hurdle, Bridget would tense. She would anticipate where Ali might slip, the moment when she would be tumbling and could hit her head, how she might fall awkwardly in the water. Magical worry, Daniel called it. It was illogical. Of course she couldn't prevent bad things happening. She knew that. Oh boy, she knew it all too well. But never once when she'd watched Ali dive had she hurt herself. And then, when she hadn't thought of her sister in months, she'd come to harm. The accident, the one-in-a-million chance of it, was something she would never have predicted anyway. But there was still the lingering belief that if she really were thorough enough she could protect those she loved.

She sat down on the couch, her hands clasped around her mug. She was tempted to call Daniel again. Their conversation had been unsatisfactory, what she thought of as a housekeeping conversation; polite enquiries about health and flight details. Her answers were short; she was fine, the flight was fine, Alison was cheerful, but they hadn't had a chance to talk about her legs. He told her he'd bought Tamsin her own pair of binoculars and she said it was extravagant, surely Tamsin could use hers? Now she wanted to call him back. She wished she'd brought her mobile, that she hadn't allowed the possible expense to outweigh all other considerations. She wanted to lie on the couch, tell Daniel that actually the binoculars were a good idea. Chat to Tamsin. Which was ridiculous. They never chatted even when they were together. But at least

she could tell Tamsin to have fun. She could ask Daniel to give her some extra holiday money.

She sipped her coffee. She drank up to six cups of instant coffee a day, but this was filtered and far stronger than she was used to. But despite the bitter taste it was welcome. She leaned back. Soft light poured into the house. Then she noticed the mask on the wall. Justin's mask. She thought about the tour Ali had given her. There was no sign of the masks she'd sent her sister. The house was small and the generous windows left little wall space. But she was sure it was because Ali didn't like them. She sat upright again. How many had she given Ali? Five? Oh God! Ali had sent her a woollen pullover she'd worn for years, a necklace that had become her favourite, a towelling dressing gown with her initials embroidered on it. And every time she'd sent back an unwanted … an unimaginative … gift. Thank goodness she hadn't had a chance to give Ali the latest one. She'd have to find something else. Something really special. She'd wait a few days, see what Ali needed.

There was a sound of car doors closing and she looked out the window. Tom was back early. She leapt up and called down the passage. 'The kids are home, Ali. Don't get out. I'll be with you in a mo.'

Tom and the children were framed by the glass front door. Tom had his back to her and was holding Luke by the hand. From the back Luke reminded her of Alison as a child, with a chunky build and shiny brown hair.

Emma was standing at the bottom of the steps. On the lawn opposite a slender blonde girl who could almost have been Emma's sister was waving to her. An older boy was cycling up and down the driveway.

'Daddy, can I go play at Susie's house?'

'You'll have to ask your mom.'

'Please. Please. Just till it gets dark.'

'Emma, I said you must ask your mom.'

Emma stood on the lawn looking across at Susie. Tom walked towards her, took her hand. For a moment Bridget felt as though she were on the other side of that door, being delivered home by her father, journeying between one family and another, having to adjust to a different set of rules. And Emma didn't have an older brother. At least she'd had Justin. She felt a flush of hatred for Tom, for his good looks and confidence, for having a family and not taking care of it. She usually felt gauche and clumsy around him, but the emotion steeled her. She opened the door before he knocked. Emma had

let go of his hand and was still hanging back, her attention on the activity across the road.

'Hello, Tom.'

'Hi, Bridget.' He leant forward as if he might kiss her. She dropped quickly to her haunches and stretched out her arms to Luke.

'Hi, Luke. I'm your aunty Biddie.' Like a lizard flicking itself behind a rock, Luke tucked himself behind his father, shielding his body from her, but keeping his gaze fixed on her face. Bridget squeezed his shoulder gently and stood up. Face to face with Tom, she could see the hurt in his eyes. She gave him a quick hug.

'The kids look great,' she said.

'They are. Em, say hello.'

'Where's my mommy?'

'She's in the bath, darling.' Bridget smiled at her. 'Do you want to go and give her a kiss?' Emma squeezed past her, avoiding contact, and ran down the passage.

Bridget picked Luke up. He squirmed and put out his arms to Tom.

'I can stay if you like,' said Tom. 'Give them supper …'

Should she invite him in? If Tom was prepared to make an effort, she could, too. But if that was what Ali wanted she would have done it herself. She settled Luke on her hip, her arm firmly around his waist. 'We'll be fine. Thanks. I … I'm sure Ali will call you.'

She closed the door. Luke had his thumb in his mouth. Tears ran down his cheeks.

'Let's go see Mommy, sweetie. She's got bubble bath. When she's out you can share the bubbles with Emma. Would you like that, hmm?' She kissed him. He smelt of vanilla milkshake. As she walked she used the bottom edge of his T-shirt to dry his tears. In the bathroom, Emma was kneeling beside the bath, scooping up bubbles with her hands. Alison was leaning forward, rinsing her hair with the hand-held shower attachment.

'Hey, Mommy, look who I've got here,' said Bridget, putting Luke down beside his sister.

Alison turned off the water and smiled at him. 'It's my favourite boy,' she said. She made no effort to wipe the water from her face. Bridget grabbed a towel and held it out in readiness, but her sister didn't seem to notice. She'd forgotten how comfortable Alison was being wet.

‘And I’m your favourite girl,’ announced Emma. ‘Can we watch TV?’

‘Do you want to as well, honey?’ Alison asked Luke. She gently pulled his hand from his mouth and dotted it with foam. He nodded. ‘Okay then. But just for a little bit. Until I’m out. Take Luke with you, Em.’

Emma sprang up. When Bridget dried her hands she submitted without protest. Then Emma took her brother’s hand and held that up for drying, too. He trotted next to her as she led him from the room.

‘Right, spotter,’ said Alison. ‘I’ve got this sussed. My right leg can still shove pretty well and I’m going to trust the towel rail. One hand here pushing,’ she put her left hand on the edge of the bath, ‘and the other pulling.’ She stretched her right hand above her shoulder and gripped the towel rail above her head. ‘I only need to lift my butt from here to the corner. Sling the towel on the stool, sis.’ Bridget did as she was asked. ‘Thanks, stay right there.’

‘Wait. What if the rail comes lose?’

‘It’s pretty solidly bolted to the wall. But if it comes out, I’ll just slide into the water again.’

‘Just a minute,’ said Bridget. She couldn’t visualise what Alison was going to do. The TV was blaring. She wanted to check on the kids first. She wanted to be able to breathe properly. But before she knew it Alison had seemingly without effort glided out of the tub and was sitting on the side.

Alison took the towel from the stool and starting rubbing her hair. Her legs dangled together in the water, a few silver bubbles clinging to them, glinting like scales. Bridget stared at her naked sister as though she had been transformed into an enchanted, semi-human form. She was relieved when a howl of outrage from Emma gave her a reason to leave the room.

Chapter 9

As she wheeled herself down the passage she heard Bridget's precise, clipped voice. 'Okay then, Miss Emma. You have two choices. One. You don't bath.'

Alison stopped the chair, caught between fleeing back to the bathroom and hurtling into the lounge to prevent Emma having a total meltdown. Jeez, her sister could be dogmatic. It was her first night with them. Why couldn't she cut the kids some slack? She pushed herself forward. She'd take over, insist Bridget take a break, do the bubble bath thing herself. Bridget had, after all, been travelling for something like twenty hours.

'Then I'll tear you apart like a lion.' Bridget was towering over Emma, her hands raised, fingers curled into claws. Then she grabbed Emma and swung her upside down, growling as she buried her face in the girl's tummy. Alison tensed, expecting her daughter to howl, but Emma chortled. Luke, however, was pressed against the wall, watching his aunt with the startled eyes of a small buck. When he saw his mother he rushed to her and pressed himself against her legs.

Bridget put Emma gently back on her feet. 'Or, second choice. We get you washed quickly and you can open the present I bought you in London.'

'What is it?' asked Emma.

'That's a surprise. You can only see it when you're in your pjs. Okay?'

'Yeah.'

'Do you need help getting in the bath?'

'No. I can do it. Come, Luke,' she called as she trotted down the passage.

But Luke was climbing on to Alison's lap. His knees dug into her thighs, giving her the same electric sensation as being hit on the 'funny' bone in an elbow. She fought an impulse to push him off. 'Biddie! Take him.' She lifted him up as much as she could.

'No, Mommy, no!' he pleaded, wrapping his arms around her neck.

'You're hurting me, Luke. Biddie, *please*.' He screamed and clung more closely. 'Sweetie, let me get on the couch, then you can lie with me.'

Bridget leaned across and prised his hands from behind her neck. He yelled and thrashed in his aunt's arms. Emma appeared in the doorway and flung herself at Bridget, pounding her around the knees. 'Leave my brother alone! Leave him!'

Bridget was now gripping Luke around the waist with one arm and fending off her niece with the other.

'Emma!' Alison smacked her hands together with all her might. 'Luke!' A second clap successfully halted the crying and yelling. 'Enough!'

There was a moment of total silence. All Alison seemed aware of in the room were hands. Her own palms were face up on her lap and stinging like mad. Luke's hands were dangling in mid-air. Bridget's were clasped around his waist. Emma's were still fisted. Then noise filtered into the room. She could hear the voices of the children across the street, a car driving past. Her gaze shifted to Bridget's face. Bridget's lips were clenched and her forehead creased in a frown. She realised to her amazement her sister was not about to join the weeping and wailing, but was suppressing mirth.

'I'm sorry, Ali,' Bridget spluttered, giving way to open laughter. 'I know it isn't funny. But … well, it's not quite the welcome I had in mind.'

'What? You expected hugs and kisses?' Alison could feel her own tension dissolving into giggles.

'Good grief, no. But maybe not an all-out attack.'

'You're funny,' Emma said. She forced an uncertain laugh. She had backed away from Bridget and was watching her warily.

'I guess I am.'

'And you talk funny.'

'I do?'

'Yes!' Emma doubled over with the pleasure of certainty.

'Actually, Em,' said Alison, 'you're not being very polite. Go on, hop in the bath and then you can have Auntie Biddie's present.'

Luke, still suspended in his aunt's clutches, gave a shuddering intake of breath. Emma looked at him. 'Can Luke come?'

'No. I think Luke needs a cuddle.' Alison propelled herself towards the couch.

'I need a cuddle also.'

'Definitely. But bath first.'

'But Mommy …'

Alison turned and faced her daughter. 'No arguments. I can see the dirt on your knees from here. Off you go. I'm counting to three. One …two …'

She waited until Emma was shuffling reluctantly from the room before she shifted herself across to the couch. She patted the seat next to her and Bridget put Luke

down beside her. He immediately tried to climb on her lap again. ‘No! Listen to me, Luke. You sit *next* to me, not on top of me. You can put your head on my lap but not your whole body. Okay? Now, do you want to choose your own story or should Auntie Biddie choose for you?’

Bridget moved to the toys furthest from them and crouched down, her back to them. She’d left an open route to either of two other piles. Luke slipped off the couch and dashed to the nearest. He grabbed a book in each hand and hurried back. Thankfully he didn’t try and climb on to her again, but sat beside her, back upright and feet jutting forward. He put the books on his lap and opened the top one. He had his father’s long lashes and they still glistened with tears. She put an arm around him and nuzzled his neck. He hunched his shoulder and pulled away.

‘Read,’ he instructed.

Bridget stood up. She had separated the books from the toys and stacked them alongside on the floor, arranged from largest to smallest. She put a few stray puzzle pieces on the coffee table. ‘Shall I supervise Emma in the bath?’

‘She’ll be fine. Just check she’s actually in. You might need to add some hot and stir up the bubbles. Then can you put supper on the table for them? There’s chicken in the fridge. And potato salad and coleslaw. The kids will each have half a glass of milk.’

‘What can I get you?’

‘Nothing yet. I thought we’d eat later. Thanks, sis.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘No, actually, *you* are. Very, very welcome indeed, despite the onslaught. I’m saving up the hugs and kisses.’

Bridget smiled across at her, and her eyes lingered on Luke. It was if a faint mist had clouded her eyes, softening her features. When she was growing up Bridget had spent all her time with Justin and his friends. She was always in the middle of a rowdy group of boys. Daniel had been one of the crowd, but Alison never thought he’d be the one Bridget would marry. She’d been wrong about that, just as she’d been wrong about thinking her sister would have sons, lots of loud, noisy boys of her own.

‘Read, Mommy,’ said Luke again.

‘Once upon a time there was a little boy called Luke,’ said Alison. ‘And he lived happily ever after.

Bridget picked up an empty coffee mug from the table and left them alone.

‘Read properly,’ he said, pushing the book into her hand and finally relaxing against her.

Chapter 10

Luke sat upright in his chair. His lower lip was level with the table, his chopped up chicken and salad a few centimetres in front of him. He could have slid the food directly from the edge of the plate into his mouth, but he battled gamely to lift each piece with a spoon.

'Should I get you a cushion, sweetie?' Bridget asked. She realised she was hovering over him and sat down.

His eyes stayed focused on his food and he shook his head. He was dressed in teddy bear pyjamas and despite his concentration a high percentage of his food was landing on the bears. Emma, however, hadn't eaten a single morsel. She was kneeling on her chair, leaning over the book Bridget had given her. It was on the table next to her plate. She had looked through it quickly before supper, but Alison had forbidden her to touch it while she ate.

'What's it about?' Emma asked.

'A gruffulo,' said Bridget.

'What's a gruffulo?'

'If I tell you it'll spoil the story.'

'Eat up, Em and Aunty Biddie will read it,' said Alison. She was propped up with cushions on the couch.

'Are all the pictures puzzles?'

'No, just the big ones.' Bridget had been delighted to find the book. Tamsin had loved puzzles. These were made of hard cardboard and each had twenty pieces fitting snugly into a full-page frame. Tamsin was doing more complex ones at four, but Bridget decided that even if the puzzles were too simple for Emma, the story was great.

'Please can I take one out now, Mommy?'

'Eat!' replied her mother.

Emma filled her mouth to capacity and then battled to swallow. She eventually opened her mouth to show the food was gone.

'I had enough,' she said.

'I urso,' said Luke. He put his spoon on the table. His food was equally divided between his plate, his mouth and his pyjamas.

‘Finish your milk, both of you, and you can climb down. Em, are your hands clean? Ask Aunty Biddie to read first so Luke can listen. Then you can do one puzzle before bedtime.’

Luke gulped the last of his milk and climbed off his chair, shedding bits of food. He ran to Alison and curled up next to her with his head on her lap. Emma leapt from her chair and carried the book to the lounge as if it were fragile. Bridget doubted she had even touched her milk.

Bridget sat on the floor with her legs stretched out in front of her and her back against a chair. Her niece positioned herself next to her in an identical manner. Emma opened the book so it spanned both their laps.

Luke had put his thumb in his mouth. Alison was gently stroking his back. His eyes were flickering open, then closed. Bridget’s own eyes smarted with fatigue. According to her internal clock she’d been up most of the night. Despite the large print of the children’s book she could have done with her reading specs.

When she’d finished the story she looked down at Emma. Emma was gently touching the picture of the mouse on the front cover. Bridget tapped the mouse’s head with her forefinger. ‘That’s a very smart mouse, huh?’

Emma looked at her earnestly. ‘But is there really a gruffalo?’

‘No,’ said Alison firmly. Bridget wondered whether her sister felt the book was a bad choice. Too scary. When Ali was little her choice of stories was about princesses and fairies. But Bridget and Justin delighted in frightening her with tales of fictitious creatures. They made her put her ear against the supports of the power cables that ran alongside the river and said the humming noise was the bobbity-shooties that lived inside and had little carts that shot along the wires. One might come shooting out of the poles at any moment, they said. And then there were hissups that lived in the toilet bowls. When you flushed they got really angry, because they had to hold on to the bend in the pipe as the water rushed past. You should never sit on the toilet too long, or look into the bowl, and always, always be ready to run when you pulled the handle down.

‘But there *could* be a gruffalo,’ said Emma, staring at the picture on the cover.

‘No, your mom’s right. There isn’t.’

‘Not even in Africa?’

Bridget grinned. ‘No, not even in Africa. Shall we do the first puzzle?’

Luke’s eyelids were still, but not quite closed. Emma pulled the pieces from the page and spread them on the carpet. She didn’t start with the edge and Bridget resisted

the impulse to help. After many unsuccessful attempts Emma joined a few pieces, but quickly lost interest. She started to break out another puzzle. All the pictures included the mouse or gruffalo and once they were muddled Bridget knew they would most likely be added to the heap of discarded toys. So she took the book and pressed the pieces of the second puzzle back into place.

'Let's finish this first. Look, there's his other hand … his other paw.'

'No, I don't like that one.'

'Shall I put it back then?'

Emma turned away from her, stood up and went to her mother. 'I want to lie with you.'

'Gently, Em. Don't wake your brother. Come and lie on the other side.'

Bridget re-assembled the puzzle in place and put the book on a shelf. She sat in the chair opposite.

'Thanks, Sis. It's a nice story,' said Alison.

Emma hadn't fought sleep the way her brother had and was already breathing deeply. Both of them had their eyes closed. 'We should have put them to bed properly,' said Alison. 'They haven't brushed teeth or anything.'

'Does Luke wet the bed?'

'No. But I need to establish routine.'

'Today was hardly routine. And they need time to adjust to me.'

'And me,' said Alison. Tears shone in her eyes. If she weren't buffered by the children Bridget would have gone to her, hugged her. 'Were you strict with Tamsin?'

'I guess. Bedtime was always at the same time. And always a story and a song. Well, until she was about Emma's age.'

'I never heard you sing.'

'Lucky you. The music genes skipped right over me.' It had never before occurred to her that her mother was musical, not her dad. Justin must have got his talent from her. She had no memory of music in their dad's house. 'I stopped singing to Tam when I realised how important music was to her. One night I asked her what song she wanted and she said anything but Puff the Magic Dragon 'cause that was her favourite.'

Alison laughed and the tears were gone.

'I'll carry the kids through. Then can I grab us some food?' asked Bridget. 'I'm famished.'

‘I’ll take care of it. I need to move. And I promised wine. As you can see I already have a glass. Courtesy of Tom.’

‘I’ll pass on it tonight. I’ll barely make it to bed as I am.’

Bridget turned back the beds in the children’s room, making the assumption that the duvet with navy blue bears was Luke’s and that with princesses was Emma’s. She took Luke first. If sleep had a scent it was that of body-warm cotton pyjamas. It was a smell devised to melt your heart, make you forget the dinner on the floor and the chaos in the bathroom. She leant close to him as she pulled up the duvet, breathing it in.

When she returned to the lounge, Ali asked her to move the wheelchair up against the couch. She waited while Ali gripped its closest arm, pulling herself backwards to the edge of the couch, then leaning out, over the seat, her arms behind her at awkward angles. Bridget could see her hands pressing downwards, her muscles bulging. For an awful moment her body seemed no more than a damp dress, dangling on the hangar of her shoulders. Then she was seated, moving away.

She turned quickly to lift Emma. She was heavier than her brother and less compact, too suddenly all dangling arms and legs, difficult to hoist on to a shoulder. And she was only four years old. Oh God, she thought, I’m not strong enough. What if something happens, if things get worse, if I need to lift Ali?

When she was flopped on to the bed, Emma opened her eyes for a moment and stared up at Bridget, then to her aunt’s utter relief, turned over and continued sleeping.

Alison had supper dished up on plates and had pulled her wheelchair up to one end of the table. ‘Remember when focussed was in charge? Sit up, shut up and eat up. I suggest that’s what we do.’

‘Not a chance,’ replied Bridget. ‘I can handle the sitting and eating part, but since we’re on our own we can talk with our mouths full.’ She pulled the nearest chair to the corner of the table, as close to her sister as she could get. When she sat her legs were up against the wheel of the chair. She’d always been taller than her sister, but the lower level of the wheelchair emphasised the disparity in their heights.

‘What’s the plan for tomorrow?’

‘I’m going to start rehab-ing like crazy. I’ve an appointment at nine, so we can drop the kids at school and go straight there.’ The level of the table meant she had to eat with her elbows at an awkward angle, a parody of little Luke.

‘Ali, will you manage? Don’t you need to give yourself time?’

‘I won’t be able to do leg lifts and stuff like that but if I start in the water that removes the gravity factor. So it’ll all be water therapy at first ’cause I’m pretty weak.’ She took a swig of wine and held it in her mouth before swallowing, as if thinking carefully about her next words. ‘If those muscles are there and getting ready, I think a good therapist can help me find them. But …’ She put down her glass and speared a piece of chicken with her fork. She stopped with it halfway to her mouth, her eyes fixed on it.

‘But,’ Bridget prompted.

She put down her fork and pushed her plate away. ‘Dad says I should see a neurologist. Insisted on it. I phoned this morning and can’t get an appointment for three weeks. Shit, Biddie, it would really help to know.’

‘Surely your doctor can organise an appointment? Say how urgent it is?’

‘He’s trying.’

Alison’s hands, usually so under control, fluttered above the surface of the table, as though unsure of where or how to settle. Bridget leant forward to put her own hands over her sister’s and in the process knocked over the glass. ‘Oh God, I’m sorry.’

‘Hey, it’s okay. The table’s wood,’ Alison said as Bridget got up quickly and dashed into the kitchen. ‘Jeez, Biddie, relax!’ Her sister’s voice carried clearly after her. She grabbed a dishcloth from the sink and squeezed it dry. She looked down at her hands. She was always so bloody clumsy. Large and clumsy.

She returned with the cloth, but Alison had already mopped up with paper napkins. She handed Bridget the soggy wad. ‘Biddie, we both need sleep. You look like death warmed up and I can’t wait to stretch out and put my head on a pillow.’

‘I’ll just pop the dishes in the washer,’ said Bridget.

‘Leave them. I guarantee they’ll still be there in the morning.’

Night-time calm had finally crept into the house. Bridget had bathed, skipping the bubbles in favour of speed. But despite her fatigue she lay awake. She longed for Daniel to be lying next to her. He always slept on his side and sometimes when she couldn’t sleep she would move close to him and he would bend one knee over hers. The weight and warmth of it would ease her into slumber. How she longed for it now.

It would be early morning in South Africa. He and Tamsin would have left the house. Not knowing exactly where they were made the distance between them seem even greater. She hadn’t called and now she couldn’t speak to either of them.

She concentrated on her breathing, tried to clear her mind. Her body ached with fatigue. But it seemed as if her mind was suspended by a tangled thread of memories and thoughts that stopped her dropping into sleep; her leg up against cold metal spokes instead of her sister's warm flesh; the image of Luke and Emma lying with their heads on Alison's lap; the memory of tucking her own daughter into bed. She should have given Tamsin a sibling. Maybe she'd have had another girl. Why had she listened to her mother anyway? *They fuck you up, your mum and dad.* Her mind was spinning. Images of Luke blurred into memories of Justin. Lying with him on the warm concrete of the garage roof, still believing in the happily-ever-after.

Chapter 11

She woke to strong sunlight filtering into the room. The digital clock read 7:04 and there was no one in the bed next to her, though both children had crept in during the night. She could hear Emma's voice from the kitchen saying something about more milk. It could almost have been a normal morning, except the voice answering Emma was her sister's, not her husband's. And, a very big *and*, she couldn't leap out of bed to join them in the kitchen.

'Good morning, you lot,' she called out. By the time she'd pulled herself upright and tucked her big pillow behind her, Bridget was in the doorway. She was barefoot. That, at least, hadn't changed. Her sister had never worn shoes indoors, even in mid-winter. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Not bad,' Bridget answered. 'I still feel a bit groggy, though. Hung over, as if I really klapped the wine.' She looked it, too, with dark rings under her eyes. She leant a shoulder against the door frame. She lifted one foot and pulled it up behind her, the way runners did when they were warming up. 'But I'm told jet lag doesn't last forever. Can I bring you tea? Coffee? Breakfast in bed?'

'Nothing to eat, thanks. Far too early. But rooibos tea would be great. Little milk. No sugar. It's in the black caddy with pagodas.'

'Good grief, you must travel back from SA with a ton of stuff. Rooibos, Pro-nutro, Marmite …'

'Bovril actually. I hate Marmite'.

Bridget smiled. 'I love Marmite. Hate Bovril. Probably depends what you grew up on. Not that it makes much difference, I guess. Black goo on toast. Very British.'

Ali wondered for a moment whether there was only Bovril in the house when she was growing up and whether Justin and Bridget only had Marmite in theirs. When they ate together it was always at their dad's and she couldn't remember what they all put on their sandwiches. And she wondered why it suddenly seemed important that she did remember. And why she felt the need to give her children Bovril at all.

'There's a shop that sells all that stuff. But it's miles away, so I only go when we run out of Pro-Nutro, which Luke can't live without, as you know.'

‘He’s tucking in now. And Emma’s used up half the box in a single helping, so there’s not much left. And precious little milk, so I’d better rescue some.’ She straightened up. ‘I can’t find coffee, by the way.’

‘We don’t use instant. But there’s drip or push-down. There should be everything for that on the counter.’

‘Right,’ said Bridget.

When she brought the tea she put it on the bedside table, kissed Alison lightly on the cheek and strode out. It made Alison feel like a child again, home from school due to illness. She wasn’t. And she should get up. She was a mother with two kids she hadn’t said good morning to. But Bridget, as usual, had everything under control. So she stayed put, sipping her tea. She picked up the remote for the TV and cruised through the news channels. One disaster after another. Fires out of control, floods, starving children. She switched off and reached for the wheelchair.

Bridget sat in the coffee shop at the rehabilitation centre. She’d expected it to be a hospital, but it was more like a sports complex. Outside was a jogging track, winding its way through trees and lush gardens. A couple of people were walking and a lone runner was keeping up a steady pace as he did lap after lap after boring lap. Alison had suggested she go jogging, which was weird as Bridget had never jogged in her life. And even if she had, she would certainly have avoided it that day. It was hot and humid and the wooziness she’d felt that morning and assumed was jet lag had developed into a thudding headache. She’d had two cups of coffee before they’d set out and didn’t feel like another, but the coffee smell permeating the room was appealing whereas the tea she’d ordered was nothing but a teabag dunked in a cup of hot water.

The shop was bright and airy, but lacked colour. There wasn’t even a magazine or newspaper left lying on a table. After the chaos of the morning the sterility was almost welcome. Emma had eaten virtually nothing again and they’d had a battle over how Emma would dress for school. Emma had wanted to wear the same clothes she’d had on the day before, clothes that had lain in a heap on the bathroom floor all night. Bridget had tried praising other T-shirts and dresses, promising to wash and iron the items under dispute in readiness for the following day. But Emma refused to be persuaded. Then she insisted on brushing her own hair and left a rat’s nest at the back. Alison, finally dressed and ready, had hugged her crumpled, unkempt daughter and

didn't seem to notice a thing amiss. Luke, on the other hand, did everything he was asked as though terrified his aunt needed only a minor excuse to kill him.

But she'd felt she'd been coping until they left the house. Suddenly Alison had seemed to tense, not trusting Bridget to keep the wheelchair on track down the makeshift ramp next to the steps, asking her to check the route to the car for dog crap, worrying about the children dashing into the road. Then, when Bridget had tried to lift her into the car, she hadn't lifted Alison's bum far enough on to the seat. She'd thought her sister was okay and straightened up. But Alison was slipping down, only just managing to clutch the handle above the door. She clung there and Bridget had frantically grabbed her around the thighs and shoved her in.

After that nothing seemed to go easily. She'd battled with the catches on the kids' car seats, the quick-release mechanism on the wheels of the chair, the adjustment to move the driver's seat forward. Even driving was difficult. Whatever served as an autopilot in South Africa didn't function here, where they drove on the right hand side. She had to concentrate when turning corners, constantly aware of a tendency to swing across the traffic. It had been a relief to hand the children over to the teacher at school. She'd brushed off the enquiries about how Ali was doing with an apology that they were late for a therapy session.

Ali had seemed better once they'd arrived at the complex. She checked that Bridget had assembled the chair properly and then she got herself out of the car and into the building on her own. She said they'd meet in the coffee shop when she was done. Half an hour to go yet. Well, a minimum of half an hour. Being late was a family trait and Ali was just about as bad as Justin. He'd never cared about time. He'd sit and play his guitar until focussed hooted and only then would he throw some clothes in a bag.

She got up and asked for a glass of water. There was a selection of Danish pastries under a large glass dome and she bought a custard one. She ate it slowly, breaking the crust off section by section until only the filling remained. It was very sweet, but soft and buttery and made her feel slightly better. So she bought another.

The pool looked like a stage, raised about a metre from the ground and with a ramp leading up one side and steps up the other. The only indoor pools she'd seen before were competition ones and this was far smaller, only two or three times the size of the

average domestic variety. The room, however, was filled by it. Although the ceiling was of normal height, it seemed low and oppressive. Her therapist, Sean, was already in the water. All she could see of him were his powerful shoulders and dark cropped hair. He beckoned her to what would have been centre stage, where a solid column from floor to roof was equipped with a hydraulic lift and phone. He had met her at reception and as he'd led her through to the change rooms he said that judging from the reports, he was sure water therapy was just what was needed.

There was someone else in the water, a young girl, with a woman therapist about Alison's age. The girl seemed reluctant to get her face wet, screwing up her eyes. An elderly man sat in a wheelchair, staring at the floor.

'Need a hand getting in?' Sean asked.

'I'll be fine, thanks.'

From the light plastic wheelchair she'd been given in the change room it was easy for her to shift herself across to the edge of the pool. She turned and lifted her legs one at a time into the water. It was body temperature and smelt faintly of chlorine. She realised what she thought was a single column was actually two, and a wide staircase with shiny metal railings led into the water between them. From where she sat she could look straight down to the base of the staircase. To her left were underwater parallel bars.

Sean stood in front of her and put his hands around her waist.

'I'm going to lift you in and tow you to a seat. You're a water baby, I gather, but your legs will drag you down, so I don't want you trying to do anything on your own just yet.'

One summer Bridget had decided to get a life saving certificate and Ali spent the weekends pretending to drown. 'This time you're a good swimmer, but just exhausted, okay? You do everything I say.' And Bridget would swim up to her and tell her to remain calm and lie on her back. Then she'd drag Ali around the pool by her chin and shoulders. One hundred or two hundred meters, whatever the current requirement was. 'Now this time, when I get near you, you panic and you grab me.' And Ali would yell and fling her arms around her sister's neck. A hand was clamped over her mouth and nose and instinct kicked in and she pulled her sister's arm away and clung on to it. Then Bridget would turn her on her back and round and round they'd go.

So now she calmly let Sean pull her past the second column to a ledge running along the side of the stairs. When she sat there, the water reached her waist.

‘I need to find out what movement you have in your joints. It’ll be greater here because water decreases the force of compression. So don’t be disappointed if you can’t get the same range when you’re lying on the bed or anything. Let’s start with the stronger leg.’ He put his hand on her thigh. ‘Keep your knee still and lift your ankle. Okay, relax. Once more. And again.’ She repeated the movement with her left leg. Sean walked to the side of the pool and fetched what looked like a simple life jacket and put it over her head. ‘Lie back. I’m going to stretch you out.’ He put one arm under her waist and lifted her hips with the other. ‘Can you push your legs apart? Good. Close them. Now put your feet against my chest.’ He held her ankles. ‘Bend your knees. Push away. Again. Bend. Push. And again.’ Then, while she sat on the ledge, he removed the jacket and swapped it for what turned out to be small weights, which he strapped to her ankles. ‘We’re going to warm up those muscles with some water walking. Put your hands on my shoulders and lean on me as much as you need to. I’ll go backwards. ’

Alison took a careful step. Her left leg dragged. But buoyed by the water and with Sean’s firm grip on her upper arms, she was walking!

And after those few blissful minutes she was happy to do whatever Sean instructed. Again and again and again.

‘Higher! Higher!’ yelled Emma. Her T-shirt was a red blur as she soared.

‘Keep holding tight then.’

Emma leaned easily into the rhythm of each arc. Luke was swaying gently on a second swing alongside. They were the only kids in the park, which was a pity. They could have done with the distraction of other playmates. Bridget’s headache had progressed to a slight nausea and she longed to sit on the bench in the shade.

Her sister had come back from her water session exhausted and Bridget had persuaded her to rest. The park had been Emma’s idea. Apparently Luke sometimes napped in the afternoon but once the park was mentioned there was no chance of him staying behind.

The park was four or five blocks from the house. They had walked along the pavement, Emma and Luke hand in hand until they stopped to examine pecans fallen from a neighbour’s tree. A woman, a faint image behind a window of the house, called out that the children could have any they found. Make a pecan pie, she said. Emma and Luke started gathering immediately, afraid that fetching a packet or collecting them on

the return journey would allow someone else time to share the spoils. But they found only eight nuts in total, so it was going to be a very small pie. The pecans had been carried two in each hand, placed carefully on the sand at the edge of the play area and then forgotten. Over the suburban sounds of distant traffic and the occasional bird call came a steady stream of instructions from Emma. Chase us, watch this, swing me. The outing had been a good idea, though. The children were using up energy and Ali would be restoring some.

She and Daniel discussed it once, when Tamsin was Emma's age; how much energy it took to get through a day. Daniel felt everyone had a fixed allotment, some days you might get a bigger helping than others, but it was always limited. When you were ill you consumed energy fighting the infection and shouldn't expect to cope with normal activities. There was a good reason people used to stay in bed not only the day they had a temperature but the day after as well, he said. But she'd made a joke of it, saying it wasn't doled out to individuals at all, but family units. You didn't have to wonder where children got their energy; they had a mechanism that sucked it from their parents. You only had to look around – the more energetic the child, the more exhausted the parent.

'Okay, Em. I'm not pushing anymore. It's time to go home.'

'Five minutes.'

'You've already had five minutes. More, actually.'

'One more minute, just one more.'

'It'll take that long to slow down.' She moved behind Luke and kept him moving slightly as the sweep of Emma's swing tapered. But Emma managed to keep up a certain momentum with the movement of her body.

'That's it, sweetie. I'm stopping you now.' She grasped the sides of the seat and brought it to a halt. Emma slipped off, her hands still clinging to the chains, but her legs trailing in the sand. She let go and landed gently on her bum.

'You pushed me off!'

'Em, I did not push you off.' She pulled Emma up and brushed the sand off the back of her shorts. 'Tell you what. Go and fetch the nuts and we'll stop for a milk-shake on the way home.' She was glad she'd put a twenty dollar note in her pocket. Her emergency money.

'Starbucks?'

'If that's the place we passed, then yes.'

‘Purple milk! Luke, we can have purple milk.’ She grabbed her brother and hugged him. Bridget hoped purple milk wasn’t as poisonous as it sounded.

The parking place outside the shop was reserved for the disabled. On the tarmac, painted in yellow, was a logo showing a stick figure tucked into a simple curve representing a wheelchair. Bridget tried to recall whether it was precisely the same logo used in South Africa. She’d seen it often enough, but couldn’t remember whether the figure had an arm or not. Anyway, it was useful to know they could park there if they came by car.

The children pushed open the door and ran straight to a table near the window. At the next table a man in a suit working at a laptop looked up with apprehension. There were no waiters, so she went straight to the counter.

‘What can I get you?’ asked the youngster behind the counter.

‘Two milkshakes please. Um, whatever flavour purple is.’

‘Sorry, maam. No milkshakes.’ She stared at the board. The need for a seat and a coffee was now all-consuming. ‘Frappucino comes close, I guess. Iced coffee,’ he said, when she still didn’t react.

‘Grief no. Something for the kids.’

She realised there was someone behind her. ‘Oh. Sorry, you go ahead,’ she said and walked to the table where Emma and Luke were kneeling on their chairs and looking out of the window.

‘I’m sorry. There’s no purple milk.’

‘There is. Daddy buys it for us.’

‘Honey, the man says he doesn’t have any.’

‘It’s in the fridge.’

‘Em, come and show me.’ Emma climbed off her chair and led Bridget back to the counter. Alongside it was a curved, glass-fronted section containing snacks. In the front were small boxes, purple, labelled vanilla milk. ‘It’s lucky I brought you along, clever girl,’ she said to Emma. ‘I have to pay first, then I’ll bring it to you.’

She moved back to the cashier. ‘Two boxes of vanilla milk and a cappuccino.’ She dug her money from her pocket.

‘Wet or dry? With wings? Venti? And pumpkin spice is in, for Halloween.’ She looked up at him. He was grinning at her. ‘You’re not from around here, are you?

‘No. South Africa. And very much in need of a cappuccino. Large. Tasting of nothing but coffee.’

‘Coming right up.’

She paid and took the purple milk to the table.

‘I want to open my own,’ said Emma.

‘I urso,’ said Luke.

By the time her order was called out and collected the children had the paper stripped from the little straws attached to the boxes and inserted into them. They sat quietly, sipping their milk. She asked Luke for a taste. It was strongly vanilla flavoured and only slightly sweetened, so was unlikely to interfere with their appetites for supper.

She estimated what the coffee would cost in rands. It was expensive. Particularly since you had to get it yourself and were then given it in a paper cup. She disliked the sensation of paper against her lips. Were Starbucks doing it to eliminate washing up, or was it part of product branding? Whether you sat down or walked out with your purchases the Starbucks’ name and logo were prominently on display. She looked at the logo more closely. Framed by two fish tails was a woman wearing a child’s dress-up crown, with a curtain of wavy hair covering her torso. Since it was unlikely to be a princess on her way home from the fish market, she presumed it was the upper view of a double-tailed mermaid. She stared at it, just as she’d stared at Ali emerging from the bath. But Ali had been surreal and sensuous, whereas this mermaid was sanitised, unfertile, not even her navel visible. And the question slid into her mind of whether Ali was now capable of enjoying sex.

‘Come on,’ she said, uncomfortable, ‘it’s time to go.’

Luke put his pecans in his pockets and let her hold his hand. They walked back out over the disabled logo – a stick figure, devoid of gender altogether.

Chapter 12

When they arrived home Emma pushed open the door and ran down the passage shouting. ‘Mommy, Mommy, Auntie Biddie pushed me off the swing.’

The spark of injustice Bridget felt was rapidly extinguished by the realisation that her headache was gone. She’d carried Luke the latter part of the journey home and now put him down and closed the front door. She was surprised Alison left it unlocked. If programs like *CSI* were anything to go by, murder was part and parcel of life here, too.

‘Emma, don’t jump on me.’ Alison’s voice from the bedroom was sharp.

‘But Mommy ...’

‘Please get off the bed.’

‘But I fell, Mommy. I fell on my *bum*.’

‘You’ll be fine.’

‘What if my legs also don’t work?’

‘Don’t be silly. They are working. Go and get some juice or something.’

‘We had *purple milk*!’

Bridget and Luke reached the room. Alison was lying on her back on the bed. She didn’t seem to register their presence. There was no greeting. No smile.

Bridget shooed the children to the lounge and plonked them in front of the TV.

‘I’d rather they didn’t watch TV,’ Ali said as she returned. She had curled on her side, her back to the door.

‘It’s an animal programme,’ Bridget replied. It was actually the cartoon channel but under the circumstances *Cow and Chicken* or *I am Weasel* was close enough.

Bridget sat down on the edge of the bed. She rested a hand on Ali’s feet. They felt cold. Cold feet, warm heart. That was Ali. She would store up her treats, lemon creams and toffees, to share on the weekend. She ran her fingers up the side of Ali’s calf. Ali used to like her back tickled, too, just as Luke did. Angel fingers, she called them.

‘You okay? Not cold?’

Ali’s eyes were closed and her answering murmur was non-committal.

There was the sound of the TV, a mower somewhere in the neighbourhood, a dog barking. Bridget’s fingers glided up and down.

Propped up on the pillow on the other side of the bed was Vanilla Gorilla. He had been Alison's favoured toy all her life. His arms were joined together and Ali would sometimes loop them over her head and wear him draped down her back, his legs dangling and his tail appearing to belong to Ali herself. His scrawny appendages were now threadbare and grubby. Ali's limbs, however, were still sleek with the milk chocolate sheen that even now made Bridget breathless with envy.

She remembered the exact day that envy had crept up and consumed her. It was a Saturday, mid-summer, sunny. She had gone with her father to watch her sister in a competition. Half way through the afternoon she bought a frozen orange on a stick and was walking past the smaller pool, where the divers practised. She approached the steps just as Alison pulled herself out, water streaming down her arms and legs, hair slicked back. She had rushed up to Bridget and kissed her, pleading for a taste of the ice lolly. Bridget took a large bite and passed over the rest. She spent the remainder of the afternoon observing the people around her, staring at their arms and legs. She knew from biology class how skin functioned as a barrier. But it was also like a packaging, she thought, hiding what was inside. In older people the veneer had worn thin and you could see the veins, swollen with blood, the sinews grown thick. Her own skin concealed all that, but it was blotched and freckled. It needed protection of its own. So she wore a hat, and one of Justin's long-sleeved shirts. Neither was flattering. But it never mattered what Alison wore. Even naked, she was gift-wrapped.

For a few minutes while Bridget had stroked her legs, her sister had lain still. Then slowly Alison turned on to her back and faced Bridget, but with an unfocussed gaze. Their father used to call it being in a 'dwaal'. When your eyes don't line up properly with the holes, he said.

She took Bridget's hand and held it. 'Rather don't, Biddie. It feels a bit weird in places.' She closed her eyes again. 'I guess I feel a bit weird all round right now.'

Bridget waited.

'Felicity came past. I told her about needing to see a neurologist and she said why didn't I tell her sooner? Her sister's one. I knew she was a doctor but assumed she was gp. Anyway, Felicity called straight away. Apparently the first thing we have to do is rule out anything scary.' Her voice trailed off so the final word was barely distinguishable.

'Is that what she said? Scary?'

‘It’s what Felicity told me. With all that, you know, don’t worry, just routine kind of stuff. I didn’t speak to her sister. I’ve an appointment tomorrow.’

‘That’s good, then.’

Ali had said it would help to know, but Bridget had grave doubts. What Ali wanted was reassurance that everything would turn out well. How could you cope if you looked into the mists of the future and saw darkness there?

‘You okay to stay put for a while? Emma’s running on empty. I’ll do something about supper.’

‘We could get take-outs.’

‘Let me hunt around the cupboards and see what there is.’

‘I’ll help.’ There was no enthusiasm in the suggestion.

‘Really? When did you ever long to be in the kitchen?’ She smiled, but again Ali didn’t respond.

The cupboards weren’t bare, but they were certainly unexciting, containing nothing but the basic necessities. There were plenty of eggs and cheese, though. And onions and tomatoes. She dragged out some cornflour and put it on the counter, which was cluttered with tea and coffee paraphernalia and boxes of breakfast cereals. She packed a number of items from the counter on to the shelves above it to clear some working space.

She could do a soufflé. The children might find it fun. But although she hunted through the cupboards there was nothing suitable to bake it in. But she found a casserole dish which gave her another idea. She wiped the little plastic table and chairs standing under the window and quickly prepared what she needed.

‘I need a helper. Yes, Emma, you would be perfect. Luke too. There’s a lot to be done. TV off. We are going to make … macaroni cheese! All volunteers line up. That’s it. Luke, behind your sister, arms at your side. Chin up. No, Emma, no smiling. This is serious business. Ready? Quick march. Forward. Left, left, left, right, left. Halt! On the count of three, sit. One. Two. Three. That’s it. Break those strips of cheese so they can go in the sauce. Yup, real small. Of course you can eat it. How else will we know if it’s right? And you have to check that cheese goes with tomato. Those pieces there. Good, huh? Don’t worry. We’ll cut more if we need it. And let’s see what else we’ve got in the fridge. What other things could be good with cheese? How about strawberry

yoghurt? No? Peanut butter? I've never tried it myself, but it could be fantastic. Come and look in this pot and tell me if you think the water is boiling fast enough.'

Before her therapy session, Sean had told her she'd suffered a shattering injury. People said they felt that way. *I feel shattered*. She'd possibly said it herself. But she hadn't thought about it before. It was something glass did when it hit a hard surface. There was something final about it, something sudden and sharp – a single disastrous moment and it was all over. The pieces could either be patched back together or they were thrown away. But the damage was done. She felt she wasn't as much shattered as she was crumbling, losing bits of herself piece by tiny piece. When something crumbled you didn't know when it would end. It could go on and on until there was nothing left at all. She had convinced herself things could only get better, that she was in the process of piecing herself together. Instead, each day it felt as though something more were being taken from her, fragments of her mobility, her independence, her role as a mother. Her dignity. Her marriage? Had Tom's infidelity really shattered it or had it been crumbling for some time and she hadn't even noticed?

And the people she cared about were feeling the effects. *What if my legs don't work?* How much was Emma really understanding of what was going on? She should get up, comfort her, reassure her. But she couldn't bring herself to move.

She sobbed for a while – softly, her face buried in the pillow, so that Bridget wouldn't hear and come in. And she kept her face in the pillow when, over the course of the next hour, Bridget did come in, bringing snippets of information and offers of sustenance. The kids were in the bath together. Did she want to read them a story? Would she like a glass of wine? Dinner? Not even macaroni cheese? Then, after Emma and Luke had crept in quietly and kissed her and had gone to bed, she sobbed again, more bitterly than before.

Her sister was beside her, stroking her hair. 'Ali, is there anything I can do?' She shook her head. 'Do you want me to phone Dad? Or your mom?'

'No. Please don't.'

'Do you want something to help you sleep?'

'No. Just leave the passage light on.'

Chapter 13

'We've got quarter of an hour to spare. I need a few things from the chemist. Would you mind? It's in the next block. Turn right there.' There were three disabled parking bays in front of the store, all empty. Bridget pulled the car into the right hand one. 'I'll get out, but I'm afraid you'll have to move the car. You can't park here without one of those signs that hang from the rear view mirror.'

'It's only for a short while – and it's pretty obvious you're in a wheelchair.'

'It doesn't matter. Without the sign it's still illegal. We haven't got South Africa's devil-may-care attitude to the law.'

My attitude, is what she means, Bridget thought with annoyance. Given the choice, she would have left the car right where it was. There were three bloody bays, after all, and it was precisely what they were there for. The day was airless and already her head felt heavy. She didn't want to move the car. But she didn't want to say it either. Alison's mouth was set. Thin lipped, Justin would say. 'Can you get one? A parking sign, I mean. It would certainly be a help …' She wondered whether Ali would think she resented the effort. 'For shopping,' she added. 'If we have the kids.'

'I don't know. I'll ask at the doctor's.'

She extracted the chair from the boot and made sure Ali saw her checking the wheels were clicked on correctly. Her sister pulled herself into it, quick, efficient, flicking off the brake and wheeling away. No fleeting glance that flashed a thank you.

Bridget drove around the parking area a few times without finding a place. She finally saw a couple walking to a car and followed, waiting while they loaded their packages, fastened their seat belts and discussed the state of the nation and God knows what else until they backed out. She almost longed for someone to attempt to steal the spot so she could yell. They had all been on edge that morning. Emma had helped her make scrambled eggs and much as her niece seemed to enjoy the process of breaking shells and yolks, she'd turned up her nose at the final product. But Bridget had drawn the line at her wearing the same clothes for a third time and told her they were already in the washing machine and soaking wet. So Emma had flung herself on the bed in tears. Bridget announced she would pack some clothes in a bag and deliver her to school in her pyjamas. Alison emerged from her bedroom and took over. When Emma

was dressed and brushed without fuss they both looked at her as though she were some kind of malevolent ogre.

She finally parked without incident and walked to the store. It was air-conditioned and a welcome change from the humidity outside. There were multiple aisles bearing dozens of choices of brands in each product. Shelves upon shelves of items for cleaning and pampering yourself, row after row of containers of pills. All for what? To make you beautiful, keep you young and healthy, help you sleep? Ali was in the middle of the store, a basket on her lap.

'Can I help? What else do you need?'

'Nearly done. I'll meet you at the check-out.' The annoyance dug itself in a little deeper. If Ali felt her purchases were private and Bridget was unneeded she could have stayed in the bloody car. Mind you, there were probably laws against that too. She strode up and down the aisles until she found some headache tablets.

Ali was already in the process of paying by the time she got to the tills. Bridget took a ten dollar note from her pocket. 'What do you need those for?' Ali asked.

'I've got a headache.'

'Why didn't you say anything?' Ali picked up the packet and added it to her purchases. Bridget handed her the ten dollars

'Forget it,' said Ali, pushing it back to her. Bridget folded it and returned it to her pocket. Then she picked up the parcel and followed as Alison wheeled herself out.

'Wait,' Ali said as Bridget prepared to lift her into the seat. 'Let me make sure I have a grip on the handle.' She stretched up with her left hand and grabbed the handle above the window. 'Okay, shove,' she said, smiling. Bridget made no attempt to smile back.

Since Alison hadn't been given any indication of how long the appointment might last and it could extend beyond the time the children needed to be collected from school, she told Bridget to drop her off at the doctor's rooms and she'd get a taxi home. It was important the children were fetched on time.

So Bridget stopped at the local store and bought what was on her list. She'd decided on sausage and mash for supper, with a plate of sliced salad goodies – cucumber, peppers, carrots. The fruit and veg were stacked up in large colourful piles. Every single piece seemed perfect. The bananas were of uniform size, uniform curve,

uniform colour. Tomatoes were deep red and glossy, each with a few bright green leaves around the stalk. An excess of perfection. Did it all come from the farms so totally flawless or was there a selection process? And what on earth did they do with it when it started to rot? As she carefully chose a few items from the top of the heaps, she thought of the vendors in the Jo'burg streets, with their tiny stalls and their own small piles of fruit also meticulously arranged. She had never bought from them.

She moved on to the prepared meals and sauces. Pestos and pasta sauces, marinated olives and mushrooms, all waiting to be decanted into plastic tubs. It did make cooking 'from scratch' seem like a waste of time. But bangers and mash it was going to be.

She was still back at the house with over an hour to spare. She downed a couple of tablets with a cup of coffee. She started a new list and put instant coffee at the top. She had been quite truthful when she told Emma her clothes were already in the washing machine, but she hadn't started the cycle yet. It was a huge machine, a top loader with a twenty-minute cycle. She stripped the linen off the children's beds and added it and all the damp towels to the load. Then she stripped Ali's double bed. Vanilla Gorilla watched from his chair. She grabbed him, tucked him into a pillow slip and included him as well. While everything washed, she vacuumed, almost running, a damp cloth in one hand to wipe surfaces as she dashed past.

There was no washing line. She stood staring into the back yard with damp linen in her arms, as though the lack was nothing but a trick of the sun. She bundled what she could into the tumble-dryer. The environment could be someone else's problem for a while.

Driving was getting easier. She was at the school without thinking of it. She joined the end of the queue at the collection point. She was intrigued by the collection process, teachers checking who was next and fetching the child concerned. So by the time a vehicle reached the front, the child was ready and waiting to be helped in.

'Who are you collecting?'

'Emma and Luke.'

'And you are …?'

'Their aunt.'

''Scuse me?'

'Aunt. Ant,' she said, reverting to the American pronunciation. It occurred to her Emma and Luke pronounced the word the South African way. She noticed the

teacher speak to someone else, obviously checking that no abduction was taking place, and then Emma and Luke were led out.

She served them leftover macaroni for lunch, as a picnic. She couldn't find a blanket, but there was a pile of swimming towels, so she spread them out on the lawn. It was peaceful. Emma chatted about her teacher, her friends, that she'd told about 'Aunt Biddie' at news time. Probably about being pushed off the swing, thought Bridget, able to feel amused at the thought.

'And you, honey, what did you do?' she asked Luke.

'A picture. For Mommy.'

'She'll love that.'

She set up the sprinkler and suggested they strip to their underwear and play in the water. She watched them from the kitchen window as she peeled potatoes, prepared the crudités and kept the tumble dryer busy. After half an hour of running and jumping both kids were pink on their shoulders and blue around their lips. 'Come on,' she said, wrapping them up in towels. 'Let's get you dressed and I'll make you hot chocolate. Would you like that?'

She tuned the TV to National Geographic and let them sit on the couch. She folded the laundry on the dining room table, from where she could see them, a clean and fluffed-up Vanilla Gorilla squeezed in between. Also the road beyond. So when she saw the taxi draw up, she dashed out to meet it.

'What did the doctor say?' she asked, as she pushed Ali up the ramp to the front door.

'Nothing much. They took blood and did MRI scans all the way along the spine. And a few more nerve tests. We have to wait a couple of days for results.'

'No indication at all?'

'She said it's definitely nothing obvious. Whatever has happened is atypical.'

'Did you ask about the parking sign?'

'No.' Ali manoeuvred herself through the door. She stopped when she saw the children sitting on the couch, spoke without turning to look at Bridget. 'I told you I didn't like them watching TV.'

'They've been there for all of ten minutes, Ali. Just while I was finishing off the cleaning.'

‘I don’t care that much about a clean house.’ Ali wheeled herself over to the TV and switched it off. The silence was sudden and complete, not even a murmur of protest from Emma or Luke.

‘You know what, then?’ said Bridget. ‘You entertain them for half an hour. I’ve got things to finish off.’ She leant over and picked up the folded towels.

‘What happened to you, Biddie?’ Alison’s voice was low, but there was a sharpness to it.

‘What happened to *me*? What do you mean? Today?’

‘No, of course not. Years ago, when you finished school. When did housework suddenly become the focus of your life? You were going to university. You could have played provincial hockey. Suddenly you’re playing housey-housey for the rest of your life. Worrying about … well, things like *that*.’ She pointed to the towels. ‘Hell, Biddie, folding things so their corners line up! Needing everything so … so totally organised. So totally under control.’

Bridget felt as though there was frost in her chest – cold, spiky, making it hard to breathe. She pressed the towels tightly against her breasts, as though the layers of cotton might provide a shield. ‘You know exactly what happened.’

‘I don’t. You never talk about it. Never! What changed?’

‘Dear God, Ali, *everything* changed. Justin died! You remember that, huh? He was my brother.’

‘He was my brother, too,’ Ali said.

‘Half-brother,’ said Bridget, knowing the words would hurt.

‘I don’t …’

‘This is not the time to discuss it.’ Bridget started to walk past her, into the passage, but Ali moved the wheel chair to block her way. Bridget pointed to the children, sitting on the couch, as mute and wide eyed as Vanilla Gorilla. ‘No, Ali. This is *certainly* not the time.’

Anyway, what was there to talk about? Justin died and no amount of talking would change that.

Talking stopped for days after his death. In her mother’s house the silence was absolute. At her father’s there were meaningless snippets, an occasional word dropped into the hush.

Then someone arrived from the army and she had listened from the kitchen while he explained to her mother that Justin would have a military funeral. Even though his death was due to a motor-cycle accident, late at night and not on the base, he was still considered to be on active duty. They could have the funeral in their own church, of course, and their own priest could conduct the service, that went without saying, but the army would officially be in charge of the deceased until that time and the coffin would be delivered with a military escort. If there was anything they could do, anything at all, she only had to ask.

So they all waited in the church for his body to be brought to them. She sat at the front, her mother on one side of her, her father on the other, with Ali next to him and then Amanda. They had all been waiting there for half an hour, in silence. Nobody spoke, but she could hear people shuffling behind them. The pews were hard. Her new white blouse felt tight and uncomfortable. She stared at the flower arrangements at the front of the church. They were hideous, the flowers pale and stiff and sticking out at unnatural angles.

Someone in a uniform came and leant down to talk to her father. There had been a problem, he said quietly, and the coffin had been taken to the wrong church. He was really sorry, but it would take another ten or fifteen minutes to arrive. The minister must have been told as well, because he walked to the pulpit and told the congregation where would be a delay due to unexpected circumstances.

So Justin was going to be late for his own funeral. And she knew how funny he would think that was. And suddenly the laughter was welling up. She put her hand over her mouth to stop the giggles, but it didn't work. It was like flushing a toilet you didn't know was blocked, all the shit and paper coming up and filling the bowl and you know it's going to overflow and you look down at the horror and there's nothing you can do to prevent it.

Everyone could hear she was laughing when she ran from the church. And then she was shivering and crying and laughing at the same time. Walking around and around in a circle. And then her father was in front of her. He put his hands on her shoulders. 'Dear God, Bridget! It's your brother's funeral. Come back inside. And control yourself! Do you hear me? Control yourself.' And he gave her a single shake and walked away.

But she couldn't go into that church and face the people or the flowers – so she sat down on some steps. The wind had become icy. She pulled the sleeves of her blouse

over her palms and pressed them against her eyes. She felt she was splitting open. She was aware of someone sitting down next to her, putting a jacket over her shoulders. The jacket smelt of Justin and for a few moments she didn't want to open her eyes – it was so good to think it might really be him. And when she did open them she saw the same army trousers Justin was wearing when he left, the same shoes. Only it wasn't him sitting next to her, it was Daniel. The warmth from the jacket seeped into her, down, deeper and deeper, burrowing through the cracks inside her.

They sat there together, without touching, until the hearse arrived.

Chapter 14

She stood at the kitchen counter, her hands on the pile of towels. Emotions should be that tangible. The longing for your brother? Old. Useless. Toss it away. Your feelings for your husband, your daughter? You won't need those until you get home. Fold each one as small as possible and pack it in your suitcase. Your sister? Ah, this might take some effort. Try and smooth it out.

Brother? Half-brother? She didn't think of the difference as genetic, as anything physical at all. Yes, she looked more like Justin than Alison did, but she knew full siblings who bore little resemblance to one another. It was nothing like that. Relationships were all about experiences. They were built up from sharing, piece by tiny piece and day after day, year after year. They all three shared a father, so they knew the weekend versions of one another. And the weekend Justin was alluring, full of charm and music. He would mimic and poke fun. A born entertainer, their father said. But she knew the weekday Justin, the boy who would cry on the walk home if he missed a goal at soccer and who needed the dustbin in place to make sure the bedroom door couldn't blow closed at night; the adolescent who came home from school with alcohol on his breath and his wit turned acidic. For years they'd shared everything; from toys and bathwater and packets of jelly powder to mutters in the branches of the peach tree about the awfulness of parents. Because more than anything what they'd coped with together was their mother – the anxious, lonely woman who seemed to do nothing but cook and clean without ever taming the chaos of her house or ensuring a meal on the table at appropriate times. Bridget had needed Justin for that. Alison wasn't part of it, so how could she understand? But maybe Ali was right …maybe the telling of it was better than not sharing at all.

Someone walked into the kitchen. She turned with a start. Images and thoughts came in a single burst – unlocked door, high heeled shoes, the children unattended, crimson red hair. The realisation there was no cause for alarm was there almost before the moment of panic itself, the initial jerk of her arms quickly translated to the offer of a handshake. 'Hello. I'm Bridget.' But her voice was someone else's and her heart was racing.

'Would you organise two coffees, please.' The woman said and walked straight out again.

Bridget's confusion focussed in a stab of betrayal. What had Ali been saying about her? I'm coping well, but I have my sister, my half-sister, here and … well, you know how hard that can be? Or would Ali have told them before about her estranged, complicated sibling? No. She pictured the woman's face. This wasn't someone indignant on behalf of a friend. Or someone who had taken a dislike to her. This was someone who felt no connection to her at all. She was simply not worthy of a greeting. Yes, that was it! The woman thought she was the maid. Brown eyes and brown, curly hair. Mexican? How wonderful. How much better it made her feel to think there was racial prejudice in her sister's kitchen in Dallas, Texas, USA.

As she walked into the lounge with the tray, the woman looked up at her. Thick mascara. Dark lipstick. 'Is it de-caf?'

It was Ali who answered. 'I've only got de-caf. I was planning this whole de-tox thing. Diet. Exercise. Get myself looking stunning to impress Tom. Ironic, huh?' She caught Bridget's eye, patted the couch next to her.

'Oh God, caffeine withdrawal!' said Bridget, as she put the tray on the table. 'The headaches. If I'd known I could have saved you the aspirin money.'

'Ellen, this is my sister, Bridget.'

'We met in the kitchen. Well, sort of,' said Bridget, 'I only got your order, though, not your name.' She sat next to Alison, leaving space between them. A united front. 'Milk? Sugar?'

'Neither, thanks,' said Ellen. Had there even been a flicker of embarrassment? 'So … um, Bridget, how do you like Dallas?'

'I'll give it couple of days before making up my mind.' She pushed a mug of coffee across the table.

'But you'll be trying to get a green card while you're here.'

'No.'

'There are ways and means. I suppose Alison could say she can't manage without you.'

'I'm sure she will. Ali, where are Emma and Luke?'

'Playing across the road, at Donna's house. She said she'll bring them home.' Alison had slipped into an American accent. Was it conscious? She'd been in Dallas twelve years, married an American. Was she adjusting her accent now, for Ellen, or had she been adjusting it before, for Bridget?

'When they come back, I'll take them to Starbucks.'

‘They make great coffee, huh?’ said Ellen.

‘Yeah. And don’t you just *love* the paper cups?’ Bridget replied. ‘Well, I’ll leave you two to talk. Must get back to the kitchen. Washing and cleaning to finish off. Mundane tasks, but someone has to do them.’

Ellen was the wife of one of Tom’s colleagues. She and Alison chatted a little at work functions, once been at a business dinner together, but never to each other homes. Tom said Ellen didn’t have enough to do. She was always ‘dropping in’ at the office. No doubt there was gossip circulating about Tom and Alison and the possibility of gleaning some additional morsels had brought Ellen sniffing around.

Ellen had tried to pry details from her. When would she be, um, up and about? How were the children coping with the, um, situation? She had leant forward for each reply, each curt assurance that everything was hunky dory. Now Ellen was telling her about a distant cousin who had post operative complications and was comatose for weeks and then woke up with a complete personality change. This, presumably, was to make Alison feel better about her lot.

She wanted to be across the road, at Donna’s, watching the children play. She wanted to be in the kitchen with Bridget, folding laundry, slicing onions, whatever would make peace between them. *I don’t want you here, Ellen. Go away!* If she were a friend Alison could ask her to leave. Or ask her to help. Oh God! That might become her yardstick; a friend was someone who could land up helping you off the loo, pulling up your panties for you – or dragging you naked out of the bath.

When Bridget had come in Ali hoped she would stay. Ali felt it would be easier to say out loud to someone else, even Ellen, what she wanted Bridget to hear – that having her in the house made it easier to cope. But Bridget, as usual, had her own agenda. Even as children, when Alison suggested activities Bridget would sometimes just shake her head and say ‘I don’t play those games. No.’

‘Well. Thanks for the chocolates, Ellen,’ she said. ‘And I hope things improve for your cousin. I must go and give my sister a hand. It’s been years since we cooked together. Can’t miss the opportunity.’

She pulled herself into her chair before Ellen could try and offer assistance, manoeuvred herself through the front door. There! See, I’m up and about. And look, my children are playing happily on the lawn opposite. *Now go away. Leave us alone!*

Alison hoped Bridget would suggest she go with them to Starbucks, but she didn't voice the desire, aware of the additional effort of taking her along. The next day, first thing, she would get the disabled token for parking. She went into her study – Bridget's bedroom; everything, even the flower in its pot, still exactly as it was when she'd prepared it. She moved the chair aside and pulled the wheelchair alongside the desk. She called the doctor's rooms. The letter she needed would be typed up immediately. She sat looking out of the window. Her neighbours must be out; their dog was keeping up a monotonous bark of boredom and loneliness. She emailed her father, told him she'd seen the neurologist and was waiting for results. It's bloody miserable weather here, she wrote, then looked in amazement at the hard sunlight outside and deleted the text.

When Bridget returned she was still the perfect au pair. Polite, efficient and constantly asking Alison's opinion. Did she want the children bathed if they'd played in the sprinkler? Would they all eat together? But her eyes lingered on Alison and there was something in her attitude that made Alison think again of a dog, sitting on command, but waiting for a door to open so that it could rush through. Christ, we all need to get out, she thought.

Suddenly Bridget drummed her hands on the table. The children looked up, poised between laughter and alarm.

'Give us a bash … at the bangers and mash … my mother used to make,' she sang. Emma and Luke looked delighted and there was, finally, an openness to Bridget's smile.

'Not *my* mother, that's for sure,' said Alison. 'The only sausages I ever saw in our house were those little cocktail ones stuck on toothpicks and ready to be dipped in mustard. And most definitely not mashed potatoes.' She cut Luke's sausage for him. Emma had speared hers on a fork and was eating it as a lollipop.

'Mine did. Frequently. We had standards for different nights … until she gave up cooking altogether. Sausage and mash was Tuesdays. With frozen peas. Mind you, when I say standards you never knew whether you'd have to slice up the mash with a knife or scoop it up with a spoon.'

'My mother insists she once cooked. Emphasis on *once*. Shortly after her marriage. Dad criticised something and she never tried again. Em, cut your sausage, darling. He, of course, denies it totally. Says he probably said something like pass the

salt and she was simply looking for an excuse. Anyway, they were out so often Ruthie cooked mainly for me.'

'Jellies and fairy cakes! Boy, we envied you.'

'What's a fairy cake?' asked Emma.

'A cup cake. With icing on the top …'

'Pink. With a cherry. We'll make some,' said Bridget. 'We'll go shopping and get everything we need. Wouldn't that be good? For your birthday.'

'Like a birthday party?'

'Why not?'

'Mommy, can I have a party?'

'I don't know, Em.' A party would mean eight or ten children. And their mothers. 'Maybe you can take two or three friends and we'll go somewhere special. MacDonalds …' She saw the horror on Bridget's face and flashed her a warning glance. 'We'll talk about it tomorrow, okay? Come on, bunnies. Eat up. I'm going to read the stories tonight. You can choose one each. We'll read them in your room, after you've brushed your teeth. I'll come and help in a minute.'

'I can do it myself,' insisted Emma. 'And Luke can.'

'Wonderful. Off you go then.'

She put her plate on her lap. Bridget took it from her. 'You stack and I'll clear,' she said. She was wiping the table when Luke returned to the lounge. He took Vanilla Gorilla from the couch. Emma, close behind, tried to snatch it away. Luke, however, had a firm grip on a leg, so she tugged at an arm.

She left the cloth on the table and wheeled herself into the fray. 'Em, you can have a turn later. Your brother picked him up first.' But Emma held on. Both of them started to scream.

'Emma, let go! One. Two ..

Emma released the toy and thumped her brother across the head. He howled more loudly. Emma fled down the passage. 'Emma!' She pushed herself rapidly in pursuit. Emma ran into her room. When Alison got there Emma was crouching between the beds. 'Emma, come here. Right now!' Emma closed her eyes and covered her ears with her hands.

Shit, shit, shit. She turned the wheels with angry jerks. Bridget and Luke stood in the middle of the lounge. Tears streaked Luke's cheeks, but he clutched his prize with determination.

‘Little hellion is between the beds where I can’t reach her. Go and get her for me, Biddie.’

‘And then what?’

‘Whatever you damn well like.’

‘Ali, they are your children. Your rules. Tell me what you want me to do.’

‘Oh God, Biddie,’ she wailed. ‘I don’t *know* what to do.’

‘I’m quite sure she’s misbehaved before. What did you do then? Or,’ Bridget spoke more slowly, ‘what would Tom have done?’

‘Time out. In her room.’

‘For how long?’

She thought for moment. ‘Five minutes.’

‘And when it’s all over, does she still get the story?’

‘Yes. But she’ll miss Luke’s. I’ll read to him now. Here.’

‘I’ll get her. You tell her all that.’

Bridget strode down the passage and into the children’s room. When she appeared again, she was carrying Emma, gripping her around the waist so she faced outwards and her flailing fists and feet did no damage. As they turned into the lounge, Emma grabbed the edge of the door frame. Bridget put her down and prized her fingers lose.

‘I hate you!’ Emma screamed. ‘You … you a … horrible! I wish you’d never, ever come here. Go home! I want you to go home!’ She started to bolt again, but Bridget grabbed her. She was kneeling on one knee, her arms around Emma. Her lips brushed against Emma’s hair. Of the two of them Bridget looked the more distressed.

‘Emma,’ said Alison calmly. ‘You do not hit your brother. And you come when I tell you to. Do you understand? Look at me! *Do you understand*?’ Emma nodded. ‘So it’s time out. Five minutes in your room. But first, apologise to Luke.’ Emma said nothing. ‘Okay. Then you’ll have time out until you do. And *then* you’ll have time out for hitting him and for running away. Got that?’

Emma nodded. Bridget released her and she ran to Luke and hugged him. ‘I’m sorry, Luke,’ she said with such sincerity that Alison was tempted to change her mind.

‘That’s good, darling. Now off you go. Five minutes.’

‘No, Mommy! I’ll be good.’

‘Yes. I know you will. But in your room.’

Bridget stood up and held out her hand. Emma ignored it. Her aunt's looming presence had the desired effect, though, and Emma turned. As she passed Luke he pressed Vanilla Gorilla into her arms, then tucked his thumb into his mouth and watched her carry the toy away down the passage.

Chapter 15

They sat in the calm of evening suburbia; children sleeping and dogs made silent by kibbles and company.

'How are you feeling?' Alison asked.

'Fine.

'I don't want fine. That you're fucked up, insecure, neurotic etcetera I know already.' Alison grinned. 'How are you, *really*?'

'Headache's gone. Thank you, Starbucks. Little sore around the shoulders, I guess. Gravity taking its toll.'

'So will you please take it easy? Biddie, seriously, if I wanted a maid I could have hired one.'

'I thought it wasn't an option here.'

'It is.'

'Your friend Ellen didn't greet me when she came into the kitchen. She thought I *was* your maid.'

'Well, if the shoe fits.'

'You bitches hang out together a lot, huh?'

'I might not be able to chase you, but I could certainly drive over your foot with a wheel. She's not a friend. A work acquaintance, more Tom's than mine, actually.'

'Oh my God, not the woman Tom … that Tom …'

'Ellen? No, definitely not. I don't even want to think about it. God, I need wine. I need wine with an urgency that is somewhat worrying.'

'I'll get it,' said Bridget.

'No. Getting you a glass of wine will be a way of saying thank you and I'm sorry you had to be in the middle of it all. Oh, Biddie. She's never been like this.'

'Oh, Ali. She's not even four years old. And living in a pretty chaotic world right now.' She smiled as she touched the scar on her forehead. 'She didn't even draw blood. Bit of a wuss by South African standards. At that age Justin and I were sending each other to casualty.' Alison had heard the story before, but it made her feel better anyway.

It was a good wine. She should have opened it earlier and let it breathe. Right! When you had time for niceties like that you knew your life was under control. She

rummaged in the kitchen drawer for a corkscrew. Somewhere they had a fancy one, a kind of flip-over flip-open gadget that made the task simple. She looked at the shelves and up at the cupboards. Bridget had re-arranged the kitchen. Shit! No. No, she would *not* think like that. Even if she knew where Tom's fucking fancy gadget was she couldn't reach it. And that wasn't Bridget's fault. If she called out, Biddie would come running. Be thankful for that. She went to the drawer again and took out the old corkscrew, the kind that made her think of a gymnast in the way it lifted its arms when you worked its body into the cork and then drew up its body when its arms moved down. Only her gymnast was sadly out of training and barely dragged the cork half-way. She tried to finish the task by holding the bottle in one hand and tugging with the other, but the cork didn't budge. What did she used to do? Other than hand the bottle to Tom? She played the motion in her mind. Grip the bottle with her knees. With muscles that contracted. Abducted or adducted, or whatever it was they used to do. She could feel tears building up. Quickly, she laid the bottle, corkscrew and all, in the hollow between her thighs and holding the glasses in one hand she wheeled with the other back to the lounge. She put the glasses on the table.

'No. Don't take over, I'm seeing this through. Getting a cork out of a bottle is a life skill. Next time the screw thingy goes in all the way. Right. I'll hold the bottle and you pull.'

Her sister pulled. Suddenly the whole chair was lurching forward. She let go and Bridget fell backwards on to the carpet, her back against the coffee table. The brake! She'd forgotten to put the brake on the chair. Bridget lay on the carpet giggling, the bottle still unopened beside her.

'It's a bloody conspiracy. If you want me to go, you can tell me outright.'

'You're not going anywhere!'

'No. I think I'll stay here for a while. On the floor. Taking it easy, you know. Tomorrow I'm getting a scrum cap and shin pads. Toss me a pillow.'

Alison reached for one of the pillows piled at the edge of the couch. 'You can take a turn in the chair. You have no idea how people will avoid touching you.'

Bridget's face turned serious. She started getting up. Ali grabbed a second pillow and let herself tumble down beside her sister. She pushed the coffee table out of the way and wriggled herself alongside Bridget. They tucked the pillows behind their heads. Their hands were next to each other and they intertwined their fingers. She could feel the warmth where their calves and shoulders touched.

‘Do you know,’ said Bridget, ‘that you have dead insects in your light fitting?’

‘Of course. I put them there. I swear if you clean them out you’re on the next plane.’

‘We should be lying outside looking at the stars.’

‘And itching from the grass and being chowed by mosquitoes.’

‘Romance is dead.’

‘Definitely.’ Her gaze moved down to the mask on the wall. ‘Biddie, what you said about Justin, him being my half-brother …’

‘It was mean.’

‘No. I understand. I know how close you were. But I want to explain. About the masks you sent. They’re all in a box in the garage. They’re beautiful, but I couldn’t bear to look at them. When I look at that one and remember Justin I can deal with it. Of course I’m sad, but it happened and I can think of the good times. I put a few of your masks up in the beginning, but when I looked at those I felt nothing but miserable. Because in a way I lost you too. And that hurt even more.’

When Bridget spoke it was as if she had to force the words out. ‘I was busy. In matric.’

‘But you were still there sometimes on a Sunday. And you hardly talked to me. And then without telling me anything you were getting married.’

‘Yes.’

‘I was thirteen.’

She felt Bridget squeezing her hand. ‘I know. And you were great, Ali.’

Thirteen. She was finishing her first year of high school. Bridget had arrived in the middle of the week, just after Dad had come home from work. Alison had stood at the door with a glass of juice in her hand. If anyone came down the passage she could pretend to be taking it into the study. Her father was shouting, so it was easy to hear him, but she had to strain to hear her sister.

‘You’re seventeen, for God’s sake, with your whole future ahead of you. What happened to going to university? I presume you’re pregnant.’

‘No.’

‘I’ve never even heard of this man you intend to marry?’

‘Yes, you have. He was a friend of Justin’s. Daniel. They were in the army together.’

‘Didn’t he have the balls to come here with you? No doubt he’s got balls though, or you wouldn’t be in this mess.’

‘I’m *not* pregnant, Dad.’

‘Then I can’t see the hurry, Biddie.’ His voice was quieter. ‘So the guy is what? Nineteen? Eighteen?’

‘Eighteen. And please call me Bridget. I don’t want to be called Biddie anymore.’

‘Why not, for heaven’s sake? Christ! I have no idea what’s going on. You are both so young. Biddie, don’t rush it. He won’t be the only one to ask you…’

‘He didn’t ask me. I asked him, and he agreed. He wanted to do the formal asking-for-my-hand charade, but I said no. You can meet him when he comes to fetch me.’

‘Biddie … Bridget … this, well, this sudden decision, is it to do with your brother’s death? It’s only been five months. Maybe you need to talk to someone. A counsellor …’

‘I talk to Daniel. And he talks to me. And *listens* to me. I’m marrying him, Dad. I didn’t come here to discuss it, I came to tell you. I’ll take whatever steps I have to … elope if it’ll save you the bother or embarrassment, but I thought you might actually like to be there.’

Suddenly the door opened. Alison stepped back, sloshing juice on her dress. Biddie rushed past her, into the kitchen. Alison followed, but more slowly because she was carrying the glass. Biddie had gone out the back door and was sitting on the bench.

‘You want some juice?’

‘No thanks.’ Biddie was crying, very quietly, tears only, not sobbing and with her nose streaming the way her own did when she cried. She put the glass under the bench and sat down.

‘Biddie, I was listening at the door and I think it’s cool you’re getting married. I really like Daniel.’

‘I’m glad.’

‘Do you want me to call you Bridget?’

‘I’d prefer it. But I don’t mind. Not from you.’

‘You’re not really going to elope?’

‘No. Though it would be easier. I certainly don’t think Dad gives a shit one way or the other, but a wedding might be good for my mom.’

Biddie was hunched over. Her hair was loose and strands were blowing across her face and sticking to the tears on her cheeks. She scraped her hair back and twisted it, then tucked it into the collar of her shirt.

'Can I be your bridesmaid?'

Bridget turned and looked at her. 'Yes. Thanks, Ali, I'd like that. Yes. That would help a lot.'

Even at thirteen she'd been aware of being more involved in the wedding than Biddie was. She suggested what colour dress her sister should wear, what flowers they should carry and Biddie said yes to everything. She and Daniel came to dinner a few times and her father persuaded them to wait three months, so the wedding was at the beginning of February. It was Alison who had pointed out that most of Biddie's friends would be away at 'varsity by then and Biddie said that suited her perfectly.

They went with Biddie's mom to a dressmaker. Biddie didn't even seem to care what she wore. She kept saying 'whatever you like' when her mom asked her. The dressmaker complained that Biddie was getting thinner between one fitting and the next and it was just as well the wedding was soon. The only thing Biddie did that made her mom mad was having her hair cut short. Alison had been to one of Biddie's hockey matches and Biddie was the tallest girl on the field and had the longest hair. Biddie's hair was darker brown than Ali's and when it wasn't tied up for school it curled wildly over her shoulders and halfway down her back. But she had it cropped and her mother said it would be impossible to make her look pretty and feminine, the way a bride should be.

The wedding was in a beautiful small hotel near the Magaliesberg. She stood behind them in the chapel and saw how Daniel couldn't take his eyes off Biddie and she totally understood how you could just suddenly love Daniel. She sat at a table next to his mom, who was very quiet the whole time and when she told her what a wonderful person Daniel had married his mother smiled.

By the next Christmas Tamsin was born, which made her an aunt at fourteen.

Watch your sister for a few years, her father said when she told him, and decide at what age you want to be a mother.

Tamsin was sixteen. What if she came the following year and said she was ending her education to get married? Even a year before Bridget would have said it was

impossible, that she understood her daughter. She wasn't like her mother, and Daniel was a fantastic father. But Tamsin too could come strolling out of the fog of adolescence with a husband by her side and a baby in her arms.

She stared up at the dead insects. It was like lying in the dentist's chair, needing to focus on something to deal with the pain and discomfort. She wanted to clear them out, to watch them disappear in a swirl of water.

'I've never considered it before', she said to Alison. 'But Dad, in his way, was great too. It must have been hard for him, but he gave Daniel a chance.'

'Do you see him often?'

'No. The occasional dinner, Sunday lunch sort of thing. Tamsin likes being there. She gets on well with your mom.'

'And yours?'

Bridget tried to think how to answer. All her life she'd avoided talking about her mother. 'This is where we drink that wine.' She propped herself into a sitting position, pulled out the cork and poured. Alison pushed herself upright. They clinked their glasses. 'We see very little of her. She's living in Natal, near Howick, on a small holding. Part of some meander or other. It suits her. Meandering. And potting. I mean, that's what she does … makes pottery angels and fairies.'

'Yeah, I can see her being happy doing that. She was sort of fey herself.'

Fey. The aptness of the description chilled her. Not in the whimsical sense that Alison probably intended, but with its connotations of someone clairvoyant, someone doomed.

'I have a picture of her before she married. She was gorgeous, Ali – sort of soft and dreamy. But vulnerable. She never recovered from having two children so close together … certainly her marriage didn't. Which for her was the same thing, I think. Justin and I were pretty shit to her, particularly in our teens … we thought she was pathetic. But she was actually a good mom, and she continued to think we were … we were great. When Justin died she couldn't cope at all. And I was so messed up I wouldn't even let her hug me.' Despite the warmth of the evening she started to feel shivery. She took a few more gulps of wine and was glad Alison stayed quiet. 'So she started going to séances. She would come home and tell me she'd received messages from him, messages that were for me. Sometimes it was about things we'd done together. I started to wonder if he'd kept a diary and she was reading it. When she was out once I searched both their rooms.'

‘God, Biddie. And you didn’t you tell anyone at all? Dad? Friends?’

‘No. I felt ashamed of her. I kept thinking she’d … pull herself together, snap out of it. I was scared she’d be put in a home.’

She needed a jersey, or a rug. Or more wine. She filled her glass again. It was difficult, this process of telling. But she stumbled on, trying to explain how she’d filled the house with scents.

St Josephs’ lilies were expensive. But it was almost summer and they were her favourite flowers. So she bought three bunches. She wanted her mother to notice, so she put them in the middle of the dining room table. Her mother saw them the moment she came in.

‘Oh Biddie, lilies? I can’t believe you bought lilies. Did you know they’re the flower of death?’

‘No! Fuck, Mom, does every bloody little thing have to do with death? This is wood.’ She grabbed the edge of the table with both hands. ‘A dead tree, Mom, but it functions as a *table*. And a flower is a *flower*. Look at it. Smell it. It’s beautiful …’

‘And it should remind us of the restored innocence of the soul at death.’

She kept her grip on the table, pressing down on it, feeling it solid and steady beneath her hands. ‘Death? Yes, Mom. Exactly. Justin is dead.’

‘But his soul continues, Bridget.’ She was still looking at the flowers. ‘Lilies. Fresh scents draw good spirits. I’m sure you sensed that. Yes, you’d be good, I should have thought of that. I haven’t received messages from him for days. Oh darling, come with me.’ Her mother turned to look at her and stepped closer.

‘No. Mom, you stay with *me*. Please don’t go any more. Please.’

‘You haven’t got your period have you? Menstrual blood draws demons.’ Bridget drew back, repulsed. She had an image of her mother in some dark space, with frenzied spirits around her. Demented. And her mother wanted her there.

‘We’ll protect you.’

She heard something about a white light. And she thought of Daniel. He had taken her out the night before. They had gone to a pub. There had been music and noise. They had laughed. There was a hen party and a group of young women were dancing together. The bride-to-be had a white veil pinned to the back of her head. For a

while she stood outside with a cigarette and in the dim lighting and smoke the veil had shimmered white around her head.

Her mother was talking about oil, anointing with oil. Maybe it was the Lord's prayer. He anointeth me with oil? She waited.

'Oh darling, please. Please come with me.'

They couldn't protect each other, couldn't help each other.

'No. Never,' she said. 'Go, Mom. You'll be late.'

Alison had one arm over her shoulder and was stroking her hair. She felt … cherished. It was such a lovely old-fashioned word. She had her hands wrapped around the glass on her stomach. The glass was empty. The bottle was, too.

'Sometime, I think it was at the funeral, Daniel said I should let him know if there was anything he could do. So I phoned him and asked him to marry me.'

'Just like that?'

'Well, he did say *anything*.'

'But you don't think he was expecting something like, um … hi Daniel my mom's off her rocker will you marry me?'

'Of course not. I had to let him know who he was talking to. So it was more like, um … hi Daniel, this is *Bridget*, my mom's off her rocker … oh, and I'm going off my rocker too … so will you marry me? Yup, it was more like that.'

'But, Biddie, he said yes. If he hadn't loved you he wouldn't have said yes.'

'He didn't have much choice.'

'Oh fuck that. Marrying someone isn't exactly like agreeing when they ask for a lift down the bloody road or something. Of course he had a choice.'

'No, not Daniel. You don't understand. He can't even pass a mongrel in the street without feeling sorry for it. We nearly ran over a dog once. A really ugly dog, with a drooping tail. And sparse, patchy fur. And fleas. It looked like it hadn't eaten in days. I wanted to take it straight to the SPCA. But oh no, not Daniel. We had to take it home. He was happy to feed it, clean up its mess, take it for walks. Jeez, how that mutt loved him. It would follow him from room to room and lie at his feet and gaze at him adoringly. It stayed thin and cringy, but he'd stroke it, brush it, tell it what a good dog it was. You see what I mean? Daniel wasn't the sort of person who could have said no to me.'

‘You don’t see a difference between picking up a stray dog and a wife?’

‘You can only have one wife? Well, only one at a time, but you can have more dogs. Legally. But not in our house. I wouldn’t allow it. I said no more dogs.’

‘What? There’s no difference between kindness and love?’

She tried to think. They were different. You could be mean to someone even if you loved them and you could be kind to someone you didn’t love. But where was the boundary between them, kindness and love? If you were a compassionate, caring person, then you’d automatically be kind when someone, some creature, was really desperate, genuinely in distress. But living with them, being good to them all the time? Was that just kindness, or did that cross the barrier and become love?

‘I don’t know,’ she said aloud. ‘But I don’t think I’m kind. Not kind enough. When my mother needed me most I left. And do you know I browsed through ads looking for a home for that dog, but they were all for animals in *need* of a loving home. And I thought, maybe … well, maybe I landed up in a loving home and I just didn’t want to share it.’

‘That’s it. God’s truth! Talk about *dronk verdriet.* I don’t even know if there’s a translation. I’m putting you to bed.’

Her head began to clear. Alison was sitting up next to her. The wheelchair was on the other side of the room. Alison was staring at it, frowning, so obviously trying to make a plan that Bridget started to laugh.

‘Oh yeah?’ she said, ‘you and whose army?’

She leaned across and hugged her sister. Alison was kind, too. And so easy to love.

If Daniel had a choice, then did it follow that he loved her? But he had married her. And they had gone away together. They hardly knew each other, that first time, in the fisherman’s shack, with sea spray misting the windows.

They’d arrived after lunch and put their bags in the bedroom, sliding awkwardly past each other in the cramped space. They changed quickly, back to back, into swimming costumes. Outdoors they were more relaxed. But they kept to activities that required little conversation. They’d swum in a gulley and investigated the rock pools, until she could feel she’d had too much sun. So she said they had better go inside.

Daniel stood outside the back door and lit up a cigarette, watching a small tortoise battling its way around a broken plastic crate. In the bedroom Bridget took off

her bikini top, rubbed after-sun lotion on her shoulders and pulled on a T-shirt. She walked from the bedroom as Daniel was coming in. They bumped into each other and she drew away. But then she stopped. He smelt strongly of tobacco, but as she moved closer she could smell the sea on his skin and in his hair. And when he kissed her he tasted of it. She was submerged once more in brine. His hands were under her shirt, moving up her spine. Touching her waist, her shoulders. His fingers trailed currents that made her flesh spark and sizzle. Her head was spinning. She was on the bed, light from the window flickering around her. The currents flowed deeper and deeper, jolting her to liquid. Pure fluid now, whirling. And then so softly, gently, she returned to solid form.

She lay next to him, her head on his chest, as the sunshine inched from the room. Had he whispered, then, that he loved her? Maybe it was just the susurration of the waves and his uneven breathing. His arm became heavy and slipped from her shoulder. She pressed herself closer to him and put her hand on his stomach.

And she lay there thinking she'd been wrong. Scent had no power at all, not when compared to that of touch.

Chapter 16

She was the first one in the house awake. How long since that had happened? She would get Emma her juice, Bridget her coffee. Her arms were getting stronger and she coped with the drag of her legs more easily on the transfer from bed to chair. Her movements were more automatic as well, hands manoeuvring the chair with almost no conscious effort at all. The rubber of its wheels made little noise on the floor, but enough to mask the sound of bare feet, for as she reached the kitchen, she realised Bridget was behind her. She had to move into the room before being able to turn the chair and look up at her sister.

'Good morning, Biddie. You look chipper. I thought you might have a headache, or a touch of morning after flu.'

'Nope.' Her sister smiled. 'I get drunk easily and recover easily.'

She filled a jug with water. Bridget made no attempt to help, but hoisted herself on to the counter, long legs dangling.

'OK,' Alison said, as she poured the water into the kettle. 'Plan for the day. Kids to school and straight to the doctor to get the letter. It's almost on the way to therapy. My session is only forty-five minutes, so we'll have plenty of time to get the parking token. And for that we have to go into the admin building in the city centre, which is great 'cause it'll give you a chance to see Dallas proper, so to speak. Not that it has many attractions, but I'll show you where Kennedy was shot.'

'That's an *attraction*? Is there blood?'

'As a historical site, you idiot.'

'The grassy knoll.'

'Ah, your education's not as lacking as I'd feared.' She glanced up at Bridget, realising what she'd said might be taken as criticism. But Bridget looked unconcerned. Sitting on the counter in her pyjamas with the light from the window tangled in her hair she seemed sixteen again, as she was before Justin died, before she married.

'And talking of grass…' Bridget said.

'I know. The arboretum. Today's the day. We'll go this afternoon.'

'*And* about that lack of education. I've been studying for about four years now. Doing a BA through UNISA. Majoring in History.'

'You sly devil, you. You've never said a thing.'

‘No. I haven’t been at all communicative, have I? I’d planned to write finals at the same time Tamsin wrote matric.’

‘That’s fantastic. And then what? Study further?’ She started as the phone on the wall above her rang. She reached up for it. ‘Hello.’

‘Hey, Ali, how are you?’

‘Daniel! I thought you were in the middle of nowhere.’

‘I am. I’m using a buddy’s satellite phone. Thought I’d check up on how you two are doing.’

‘It’s *great* having Biddie here. How’s the holiday … no, wait, this’ll be costing a fortune. Here, talk to Biddie. I’ll get your news from her. Love you both.’ Bridget sprang off the counter and took the phone, her eyes shining. Alison left her in privacy and went to pee.

Good news and bad news, she thought as she sat on the loo. Bad news: the urge to pee came more rapidly, giving her little warning that her bladder was full. She hoped it wouldn’t get worse. She’d speak to Sean about whether there were exercises that could help. Good news: she managed this process more easily now too. Not only getting the chair into the room and scooting along the bath to the loo, but handling her clothing too. In the long T-shirt she slept in it was easy, but even in a skirt she’d discovered she could pee by moving her panties to one side rather than taking them off.

When she returned Bridget was saying goodbye. ‘Tamsin wants to say a quick hello,’ she said, passing over the phone.

‘Hi, niece.’

‘Hi, ant,’ replied Tamsin.

‘When are you coming to visit us in Dallas? On your own. Seriously. How about the moment you’ve finished matric?’

‘If I pass, you mean?’ Tamsin laughed. ‘Like, as a reward?’

‘Exactly. We’ll make your grandfather buy you a ticket.’

‘Cool.’

‘It’s a deal, then. I’ll call you the moment you’re back in Jo’burg. Cheers.’ She turned to Bridget. Her sister looked thoughtful. ‘Sounds like they’re having a good trip.’

‘Yes. I haven’t heard Tamsin that enthusiastic about anything in years.’

‘That’s wonderful.’

‘I guess so.’ Biddie seemed on the point of elaborating when Luke called from the bedroom. She poured a few inches of juice into two mugs and grabbed the handles. ‘Bloody hell,’ she said. ‘Why don’t wheelchairs come with cup holders? I’ve heard certain models of foreign cars have to be specially equipped with them to make them saleable here. For God’s sake, Luke’s baby buggy came with one for him and one for whoever was pushing. How come nobody’s taken up the cause for wheelchairs?’

Bridget took the cups from her. ‘Lead the way,’ she said.

Yes, it was wonderful Daniel and Tamsin were having a fantastic time.

Daniel had told her with pride how well their daughter was coping. Apparently one of the party lost a tow bar, so he’d hitched their trailer to his Landy. He’d come round a corner into a patch of soft sand and skidded slightly. The trailer flipped clean over. ‘In the rear view mirror I saw the top come off the trailer, spraying equipment and groceries everywhere. Not much damage, ’cause of the soft sand. But broken egg and dirt over everything. It was lucky you weren’t there, Bridg,’ he’d said. ‘You’d have done your nut! While I straightened the top and fixed the hinges Tam just sat using bog roll to wipe egg off oranges and plates and things, calm as you please. Then she shared out our stuff so they wouldn’t be short.’

She felt, again, as she did so often, that Daniel would be better off without her.

Alison went up to the doctor’s consulting rooms on her own, leaving Bridget to mind the car again. But by that afternoon they should have the parking token and would be able to park outside any building they chose to.

The counter was guarded by a small woman. She had sharp features and intense eyes and made Alison think of a terrier. Alison asked for the letter and the woman handed it over.

‘Are the results back yet?’

‘The moment they are, I’ll let you know and we’ll set up an appointment.’

‘You think it’ll be today?’

‘I doubt it. The normal delivery time is around four, but it’s Friday and Doctor will be at the hospital by then.’

‘I could phone you for them.’

‘No. She’ll want to see you personally and discuss everything. So it won’t be before Monday.’

‘Could I meet her at the hospital then? If they come. If it’s good news it’ll be quick … and … and save me the anxiety of waiting all weekend.’

‘Honey,’ said the woman, suddenly looking at her with sympathy, ‘it won’t make much difference in the long run.’

As she waited for the elevator, she looked at the envelope lying on her lap. It wasn’t sealed, just had the flap tucked in. She took her gloves off, opened it and read the contents. Under the length of time it was valid for the doctor had written, in clearly legible characters, *Permanent*. The doors opened and she wheeled herself in, pressed the button. She felt a sense of vertigo as the elevator dropped, a sudden disorientation. When she reached the ground floor she stayed motionless, staring out at the empty vestibule.

After a while she returned the letter to the envelope. She would not think about it. She could make it through a single weekend.

‘We’re going to do something different today,’ Sean told her. ‘Not in the pool.’

‘I thought I wasn’t ready for anything other than water therapy yet.’

‘You’ve got good upper body strength, so I think you are. I want you to stand up.’

‘There’s no way I can stand up.’

‘With help you can. And I believe you must. If you don’t, you’re going to start having trouble with your bladder and bowel. Gravity works wonders. Also, you need to get some weight through your long bones to prevent loss of bone density,’ he continued, as he led her down a corridor. ‘And getting you off your butt will prevent pressure sores.’

The damage couldn’t be permanent, then. Sean thought she was ready for something more. And he would have a better idea than a doctor who hadn’t yet examined her.

The room she followed him into was large and airy, with white walls and a floor of honey-coloured wooden planks. It was sparsely furnished. In the left hand corner was a wide low bed with a padded plastic top. Along the opposite wall were parallel bars and at the far end was a contraption that she presumed was what would support her as she stood – padded stocks below what, from her low vantage point, looked like a small high table. She went towards it.

‘Whoa! You’ll have no chance with your hip flexors the way they are now. First we have to loosen up your joints. Ankle and knee as well. Let’s have you on the bed.’

She took of her shoes and noticed Sean was doing the same. She lay on her back, her head on a pillow. Sean knelt at her feet and lifted her right leg, supporting it at the knee with one hand and pressing her toes away from the heel to flex her foot. She felt the stretch as a pins-and-needles feeling all the way up the back of her leg.

‘Tell me when it gets uncomfortable. Still okay? Good.’ He released the toes and then bent the knee and pushed it towards her chest. After a moment or two she felt an ache in her lower back and told Sean, who slowly straightened the knee again. ‘Better now?’

‘Fine.’

He lifted the entire leg up, keeping the knee joint straight. The leg moved easily through more than ninety degrees. ‘Say when.’ Suddenly pain shot through her thigh and she yelped. ‘Guess that counts as a when.’ Sean released the leg, but the pain continued. It felt all consuming, like a cramp. Her leg was rigid and shaking.

Sean cradled her leg while pressing along the muscle from the knee upwards, holding it between his thumb and fingers for a while and then moving an inch further up the muscle and squeezing it again. ‘It’s gone into spasm. I’m afraid it’s common,’ he said. ‘There’s what I want to do, what you want to do, and what the muscle wants to do. It might happen more during therapy or exercise, but might also come at any time. I have a patient who says her leg will suddenly kick out and go stiff when she’s at the supermarket. Very embarrassing.’ On the next pinch it felt as though he’d pressed a release button and the leg relaxed.

He bent both knees up towards her chest, curling her so that her butt lifted off the bed.

‘That feels good,’ she said.

‘Yeah, it’s a different angle for the spine. This next one can be uncomfortable. Tell me if it hurts.’

Her legs were still curled up, but her back was flat again. Sean held the one knee in place and moved the other out sideways, pushing it down slowly and gently, moving her legs apart.

‘Ow! Yeah, it hurts here,’ she put her hand on her pubic bone.

‘Does it pull, or is it more of a pinch.’

‘It pulls. In my groin.’

‘Okay. This side then.’ He went even more slowly.

‘When!’

Sean went through the procedure with the other leg, again manipulating first the ankle, then the knee, then the hip. Alison was tense, expecting the same reaction, but that leg co-operated fully, not objecting to any of Sean’s pushing and pulling.

‘Over on your stomach,’ he said. Face-down, her range of movement was more limited and caused no discomfort at all.

‘That’s enough for now. Put your shoes on and get back into your chair and let’s get you standing.’

As she laced her shoes she looked at a clock on the wall and was amazed to see that nearly half an hour had passed. She wheeled herself to the standing frame, where Sean, still barefoot, was making adjustments.

‘Stop there. Right. Let me get your feet in place.’ Sean pushed the chair forwards a little and tightened a wooden heel plate behind her shoes. ‘Shift forward.’ She moved to the edge of the chair until her knees were tucked into the padded semicircles that had made the contraption resemble stocks. There were two metal arms at the level of her waist and Sean took what looked like a broad belt attached to one of them, and tucked it behind her before fastening it to the other.

‘It feels like my butt’s in a sling.’

‘That’s exactly where it is.’ He picked up a remote control. ‘The sling will pull you up into a standing position. Ready?’

He pressed a switch on a hand control and her butt was pulled up and forwards, lifting her upper body towards the tray. Her heels were gripped and so were her knees and she felt herself toppling backwards, but immediately Sean was behind her, supporting her upper back.

‘Can you lean forward a bit more? Good. Now use your hands to steady yourself.’

She put her hands on the flat table surface that was now in front of her. Sean moved to the side and looked her up and down.

‘You need your hips stacked above the knee, knee above ankle. How do you feel? You don’t feel you’re falling backwards?’

‘No.’ She felt tall. Normal.

‘Ready to play catch?’

She thought he was joking until he appeared in front with a ball in his hand. ‘If you just stand there the blood will drain from your head. You’ll start to feel faint.’ He threw the ball and Alison caught it and threw it back. ‘Moving your upper body keeps the blood there.’ The ball was going back and forth between them. Sean had stopped throwing it directly at her and was tossing it first to her left, then her right. ‘It also challenges your balance – builds up your core muscles.’ He moved to the side and threw from there. Then to the other. Alison could feel heat flooding her cheeks.

‘That’s it for today. The moment you feel strong enough I want you to stand at home, every day. I’ll give you braces for your knees … hold them straight. Strap them on when you’re in an ordinary chair. You’re light enough that someone strong could help lift you into a standing position at a table. But if you can’t manage it like that, we’ll get you a standing frame.’

‘Okay.’

‘Next time are you up for a short cycle ride? We strap your feet into the peddles. You have levers rather than handle bars and your arms do most of the work, but it’s great for circulation.’

‘Bring it on.’

As she wheeled herself out she passed an open doorway. The room beyond looked like a small gym. She could see a woman much her age walking on a treadmill. Well, more like plodding on a treadmill. She was suspended in a harness from an apparatus similar to the one Ali used to be strapped into when she was learning a new dive.

Put more effort into those legs, Ali. Concentrate! You need far more height before you start your rotation. I want you to try again with one somersault less. And come out more quickly this time.

The woman seemed tired, despondent – one foot slowly lifted and placed, then the next. Her arms hung limply at her sides. Ali felt the warmth in her face intensify and turned away quickly.

This time, thought Bridget, when she’d dropped Ali off in front of the rehabilitation centre, she’d walk in the gardens. It would do her good. She parked the car and turned off the ignition. Then she saw the envelope which Ali had left on the seat. The flap was open, the letter not quite in. Bridget picked it up. It wasn’t as though it was really

confidential. She slid the letter out, scanned it quickly, then pushed it slowly, awkwardly back in.

Permanent? What had Ali actually told her? Almost nothing. That her legs were weak and she needed to concentrate on therapy. But she made it sound positive. No, Bridget had just assumed it was positive. Ali had said something about if the muscles could be made to work. *If*, not when. Then she'd gone for more tests.

Had Ali been keeping information from her? Keeping her at a distance? She could understand that, she was a master at it herself, but it wasn't Ali's way. More likely Ali hadn't told her because there was nothing she could do.

She leaned back in the seat, a feeling of helplessness draining her of her will to move. It was a feeling she knew all too well. She could never make things better. She made pathetic gestures. Like handing out food to the beggars at the door or the traffic intersections. And coming half-way across the world to do what? Cook and mind Ali's children for a few weeks?

Ali herself hardly needed her. She could pull herself out of the bath, get in and out of the car on her own. But the children? She thought about her own mother, able-bodied, battling on her own with two babies. And she thought of her father. Okay, so it wasn't easy coming home to a house filled with wet nappies and weeping, but things would have improved. He could have stayed for Justin. For her. Even for a few more years. Children grow up quickly.

There *was* something she could do. She had to make Tom see that. She had to persuade him to come home.

There was a rap on the window. Ali was grinning up at her.

'Having a little nap, huh? Not quite as frisky as you thought?'

'Oh God, Ali, I'm sorry,' she said. 'I lost track of time.'

'No problem. I could see the car from the entrance. But you'd better shake before taking on the motorway.'

She followed Ali's directions, forcing herself to concentrate on the multi-laned motorway with enormous trucks thundering past. She'd never seen vehicles that large moving with such speed. Then she was cruising through the streets of central Dallas.

'I've never thought of it before,' Ali said, 'but it's not that different to Jo'burg, huh?'

'Oh, but it is. Not the buildings, I guess, but the whole feel. Everything so orderly. There's no litter. No pedestrians. Well, a few, but no hawkers.'

‘I *loved* Jo’burg’s hawkers. I think it’s fantastic you can buy things without getting out of your car. I bought avos and naartjies every day till Dad banned any more from entering the house. But the best was all the creatures made of beads and wires. I bought every pink flying pig I found … all of three. But I came back with a flock of sheep. I mean, hell, to make loops of beads look cute and woolly is quite brilliant. I shouldn’t have given them all away. I’ll commission you to start a new collection.’

‘Sure.’

She would need to get her hands on Ali’s phone, for Tom’s number. That would be easy. Ali had a new phone with GPS and she’d already expressed an interest to look at it. Then she could call him from the landline in her room. She needed to keep as close to the truth as possible. All the lifting was taking its toll and her shoulders ached. Ali would understand if she said she needed a massage. Or she could say she wanted to shop for a present for Emma.

‘Hey, you, slow down. You need to turn left soon. And if you look to your right that’s the grassy knoll. You can’t see much heading this way, but I’ll direct you back on the other side. Great, there’s a parking right there. We can go in together.’

Then she was pushing her sister along a corridor. Maybe there was a global similarity to municipal building; long corridors and dark wooden counters with queues. Well, maybe here the queues weren’t as long or the wood as dark. And in South Africa nobody wished you a nice day. Had the woman even thought about what she was saying? *Ah, in a wheelchair, I see. And permanently. Yeah, you qualify for disabled parking. Here you are. Have a nice day!*

Actually, it was a nice day. Clear and hot. That was a problem. And Ali wasn’t tired. The conditions for the Arboretum were perfect.

Chapter 17

They parked right outside the store. The Whole Food Emporium. She was minding the car and Bridget had taken the kids in to choose their lunch. Bridget was allowing take-aways. She watched them going in through the doors, Luke with his hand in Biddie's and Emma skipping ahead. Then her eyes were drawn to her left, to where she'd fallen. The hard plastic rectangle hanging from the rear-view mirror was blocking her view of the stairs. Unless she moved her head to one side or another they were hidden behind the disabled logo.

Her mobile phone rang. She glanced at it, saw a number she didn't recognise and ignored it. Within seconds she received an sms. When she saw it was the same number again she opened it. *Call me urgently. Ellen.*

Tom! Something must have happened to Tom. She was surprised by her own tangle of emotions as she flipped through the call register to get Ellen's number. Oh God, she hoped he was okay. Her little car didn't have the ABS braking he was used to. Or had she driven him to do something stupid? He'd tried to make amends and she'd refused to have him near her.

'Ellen? It's Alison.'

'I have some good news for you.'

'Good news?'

'Yes. We had a meeting of our women's church group this morning.' Ellen paused, seeming to expect a reply.

'Uh-ha,' she muttered.

'And we're going to help you out. Provide meals for you.'

'Meals?'

'Yes. We'll take turns. Every second day, but even that should make things much easier. Oh, not on weekends, so Monday, Wednesday, Friday. We decided that would be best. And we're starting today.'

'No!'

'Oh, it's a pleasure, I assure you.'

'Ellen, I mean no.' She could hardly bring herself to speak. 'No. As in I do *not* want anybody bringing me food. It's a very kind idea …'

'And we're delighted to help.'

‘But I don’t want you to. Other than being in a wheelchair … for the moment … I’m absolutely fine. Anyway, I have my sister here.’

‘And she looked exhausted, poor thing.’

Poor thing. She could imagine the conversation. Everyone sitting around discussing them. No, discussing her. Even *her* poor sister looks exhausted. Feeling sorry for her. She was the poor thing. *Poor Alison*.

‘Ellen, I don’t need help. Please. No meals.’

‘Enough. You’re being a silly billy. Phoebe is first on the list. She’ll have your dinner there at 6:30 tonight. I thought that the best time with the children.’

‘Ellen ... Ellen!’ But the line was dead. She dialled again. Number busy. ‘Shit!’

Why was she so rattled? What Ellen had done was kind. It was thoughtful. And it enraged her. Had she somehow been attracting pity? Had she brought this on herself by not responding to all the calls and messages to see how she was coping?

When she went out in the wheelchair she attracted attention – and she hated it. Yet she’d been able to stand on a diving board in her skimpy swimsuit, aware of all the eyes on her. Sure, she’d been younger, trimmer, but it wasn’t only that. She was doing something that required skill and hours of practice. She was doing something worthy of admiration. If she failed, if she ruined a dive and landed awkwardly in the water there might be a moment of pity. A moment, no more. Temporary, fleeting. She could handle that. But not, dear God, not permanently. If she became *Poor Alison* the tag would seep into her soul and destroy her.

Pity. Was that part of her reluctance to see Tom? She saw pity in his eyes, where she should see … what, guilt? No, she didn’t want guilt. What she wanted to see again was admiration.

Alison had looked angry on the drive home. The moment the children had run outside to eat their lunch on the lawn she rounded on Bridget.

‘I’m taking you out to dinner. I’ll ask Tom to take the kids. He hasn’t had them all week.’

‘Okay. That’ll be nice.’

‘We need to be out of here before six. I don’t want Ellen, or her friend, bringing us food. I texted her saying we’re going out for dinner and we will.’

‘Did she offer?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why ever not?’

‘Because I won’t, I absolutely won’t, be poor Alison.’ Ali had always given her emotions physical expression. She was quick to kiss and hug those she liked. When she was angry she paced and waved her arms. But now, contained by the wheelchair, she was only able to punctuate her speech with choppy motions of her hands and small jerks of her shoulders. ‘Oh. And a party, for Emma’s birthday. I think it would be a good idea.’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘Tomorrow. In the morning, before all the little monsters get tired. You can make all those fairy cakes and jellies and things you talked about.’

‘Ali, there’s not enough time to organise a party by tomorrow morning.’

‘The afternoon then. We can keep it simple. Hell, never mind the hand-made stuff, we’ll buy everything we need.’

‘That’s not the point. Nobody’s even invited.’

‘I’ll do it this afternoon.’

‘After the Arboretum?’

‘We can go next week. Anyway, if Tom has the kids we can make it a surprise for Emma. He can drop them back for the party.’

‘Surely he’ll stay for the party?’

‘I wasn’t going to invite him. Bad enough having a dozen kids and all their parents without making anything awkward.’

‘Of course you have to invite him. You don’t have a choice. He’s Emma’s father.’ She crouched in front of her sister, gathered Ali’s hands and held them. ‘Ali, calm down. Go outside and sit with the kids. Get some sun on you. I’ll take the kids to Tom and then we can talk.’

‘Tom will fetch them. I know he won’t mind.’ Unable to move her hands, she seemed to deflate.

‘I’ll drop them off. I’d like to dash to the shops, find a present for Emma and maybe look around for something for Tamsin.’ The lie came fluently, but she could not look her sister in the eye.

‘You don’t have to rush. I need to phone people. I have some talking to do.’

When she glanced in the rear-view mirror, she could see Emma's reflection. Her niece was sitting quietly, staring out the window. Luke was buckled into a baby seat, but Emma sat on a bolster, the seat-belt high across her chest. It was ironic that she was driving children to visit their father. She'd considered leaving Daniel so often, freeing him to choose someone else. But she'd never done it because of their daughter. She kept putting it off, telling herself she'd do it when Tamsin was in her teens; then when Tamsin was able to drive and could come and go as she pleased, not be ferried back and forth between one house and the next; then when she had a degree and a proper job so that Daniel wouldn't have to support her. Always planning it for Daniel's sake, always putting it off for Tamsin's.

The ten minute drive to Tom's mother's house had taken her to a very different suburb. Here the houses were huge, double-storied buildings with gardens dominated by magnificent trees. Some had picket-style fences, more to mark off the boundaries of their territory than to keep anyone out. But as with Ali's area the properties were all open to the road, not a wall or electric fence anywhere.

She turned into a cul-de-sac and at the end she could see Tom waiting for them. Her mother would often take them to their father's, but never once had he been waiting outside to greet them. It had always been Ali.

The driveway curved to the right to bypass a large tree. She stopped in its shade. As she got out of the car Tom walked across the lawn, moving towards her through patches of sunlight and shadow, and she tried to get clear in her mind what she wanted from him.

By the time she had Luke unbuckled Emma was hurtling across the lawn. Tom picked her up and kissed her as he whirled her around, then let her rush on towards the house. Tom's mother came down the steps from the porch. She was a tall, slim woman and was dressed in a smart grey trouser suit, her short blonde hair swept back from her face. Bridget had met her at the wedding and she was as well groomed now as she was then. She bent to kiss Emma. 'Come on, darlin', you run into the kitchen,' she said. Emma disappeared indoors and Tom carried Luke up the steps. Luke had his arms wrapped around his father's neck and Tom whispered something that made the little boy laugh.

Damn! She'd forgotten Tom's father had died when Tom was young. His mother was a successful businesswoman and had never re-married. She hadn't thought this through. How could she presume to come to him and preach about the

responsibilities of fatherhood? She couldn't do it. She would just get back in the car and drive away. What had to be resolved between him and Ali was personal, none of her business.

Then Tom's mother turned to face her. Her eyelids were heavy and gave her eyes a hooded look. 'I gather the two of you are planning a night on the tiles.'

'Good grief no, I don't think we're up to that. Just dinner.'

'I'd appreciate it if Tom is given notice of when he'll have his children and not have them dumped on him only when it suits your sister.'

Bridget met her hard, blue gaze. 'Actually, I don't think the situation my sister's in suits her at all.'

'Well, she sure can be stubborn. It would make it easier for everyone if she could put this behind her. Oh, I don't mean the paralysis, an' of course I pray that will pass quickly, but keeping Tom out of his own home.'

'I think Tom has something to do with that.'

'And he could handle it if you'd had the good sense not to interfere. I sure was surprised when I heard you were coming.' Bridget was vaguely aware of Tom approaching. His mother seemed to sense it and lowered her voice to an icy hiss. 'Anyone estranged from their own family should know better than to interfere in someone else's.'

'You wanted to talk?' Tom said. 'Shall we …'

'No.'

His eyes flicked to his mother as Bridget turned and walked back to the car.

She slammed the gears into reverse and backed out, battling to keep the large vehicle on the curve of the driveway. Why the hell was she worrying? She'd like to put deep, muddy car tracks across the woman's beautiful lawn.

She turned at the end of the cul-de-sac and felt the pressure of tears. A loud hooting made her realise she was on the left of the road, the wrong side. She swerved across to the right and parked.

What was going on between Tom and Ali wasn't her fault, so why was all that anger, that hatred, directed at her?

Interfering? She hadn't interfered. Ali had asked her to come. But estranged? Was that the opinion of this cold, bitter woman – or was it Ali's?

She didn't feel like going back to her sister's house. Alison had made it plain enough she had things to do. But she didn't want to shop either. She had no idea what

to buy for Emma. Not that it mattered. The child would most likely be inundated with gifts.

Actually, she did have a gift. She could give Emma the mobile Daniel had bought. She could imagine the delicate figures twisting in the breeze at Emma's bedroom window. Ethereal. Dancing the way Tamsin used to dance.

Alison had invited Tamsin to visit. She wished she could, right now, swop places with her daughter. Let Tamsin be in Dallas for her cousin's birthday and she could be in the middle of nowhere, lying quietly in a tent beside Daniel.

The moment Alison was alone in the house she sat at her desk, a shoulder holding the phone to her ear, leaving her hands free to jot down messages, make lists, and occasionally wheel herself from one room to another when she felt she simply had to move.

She'd asked Emma who her special school friends were, who she played with. Dylan, Emma had replied. She'd been so pre-occupied with her own problems she hadn't heard about Dylan. Who else? Just Dylan, 'cause I'm going to marry him.

Dylan would be coming. So would seven of her friend's kids, excluding Felicity's three. That made eleven, ranging from Luke's age up to eight or nine years old. Oh God – and their parents. She had to be bloody mad.

She managed to call everyone back who'd left messages over the previous ten days. Sorry for not returning the call earlier. Life was hectic. She was fine, coping well, thanks. She'd know more the next week and of course she'd let them know. And they'd get together soon.

She was writing an email to her dad when Biddie returned. She called out a greeting and when Biddie didn't come into the room, she completed and sent the message and went to find her. Her sister was standing at the window, looking out, her arms folded.

'Kids happy to be dropped off?' she asked. Biddie nodded but said nothing. 'Did you invite Tom and his mom to the party?'

'No. I didn't get a chance. Your mother-in-law was not exactly welcoming.'

'She's got a sharp tongue.'

'I'll say. She made me feel like I was personally responsible for breaking up her son's marriage.'

‘Forget her. She’s probably looking for someone to blame. She’ll protect Tom at all costs and you’re a safer target than I am, because I’m the mother of her grandkids and there’s no chance she’ll jeopardise her relationship with them.’

Biddie was still facing away from her. ‘Oh, and apparently I’m “estranged”. Is that what you think? Did you tell her that?’ Her arms tightened and her shoulders hunched forward.

‘Of course not. It’s probably because you were quiet at my wedding.’

‘What do you mean, I was quiet?’ She finally turned.

‘Well, you were. It didn’t bother me, Biddie. You’re always quiet at family things.’

‘What ‘family things’? Other than the wedding we’ve hardly had any family things since you left.’

‘Before that, Biddie. And before Justin died. I mean all our lives.’

‘That’s not true. I join in conversations … I find things to say.’

‘Let me be more particular, then. You’re quiet about things that really matter. I knew nothing of what went on between you and Justin. Or your mom. Or Dad.’

‘I never meant to exclude you, Ali. But I doubt either of my parents gives a damn.’

‘I don’t know about your mom, but Dad does. You just don’t give him a chance.’

‘I guess … No, maybe you’re right.’ She unfolded her arms and her shoulders lost their tension. ‘But if your mother-in-law comes tomorrow I’m bloody well not speaking a single word to her.’

‘Don’t fret. The invitation would’ve been pointless. Wild horses couldn’t drag her to a kiddies’ party. But she’s great with the kids. She’ll organise her own birthday tea for Emma. Come on, we have to get ready. Why don’t you have a long soak in the bath? You never know when you’ll get another chance. Go on, use the special bubble stuff you brought.’

Chapter 18

‘If you could fulfil your wildest fantasy, what would you be?’ asked Ali. She was framed by a mishmash of fabrics, which stretched away behind her in whorls of colour. Her hands brushed over fragments of vivid-hued lace and velvet, feathers and fur and shiny leather.

In many ways, thought Bridget, one of her fantasies was fulfilled already. They had sat outside at the rough wooden tables of The Oyster Shack, with broken shells beneath their feet. Not quite the exotic island destination of her dreams, but the two of them had sat laughing over plates of clams and oysters, fizzy with the warmth of the evening and frosted glasses of draft beer.

Now they were at the prostitute stop. Well, that was what the girl had called it. Ali had seen someone walking past wearing knee-high white boots and had called out to ask the girl where she’d got them. They had followed her directions, not knowing what to expect and amazed the store was still open after ten o’clock. It was as though someone had kitted out a warehouse as an enormous dress-up box for grown-ups. The walls were covered in shelves laden with masks and wigs and the floor was a mass of costumes hanging on bars, pressing against one another in their queues. You could be whatever turned you on; a creature of nature or a creature of fantasy; soldier, sailor, rich girl, poor girl, bad girl, thief.

She tried to show some enthusiasm for Ali’s sake, but she’d never wanted to pretend to be anyone else. Ali had always been different, able to imagine herself in any role. She was the one destined to soar.

‘Ah! Now this is you,’ said Ali, pulling a G-string panties and bra set from a drawer. ‘No, don’t look. I insist you try it on.’

They beat their way through the racks of outfits to the tiny makeshift change rooms in the corner. Ali shepherded her into one. ‘Close your eyes.’

‘I won’t be able to see what I’m doing.’

‘I’ll help you.’

‘But the door’s open.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. No-one can see you if your eyes are closed. Anyway, you have to keep your own broekies on underneath. Lift this leg. Now this one. Okay, pull this over your head. Turn around. Ta-da!’

There was no mirror. When she looked down she saw that the bikini she was wearing was completely sheer, with three black widow spiders appliquéd at strategic points.

Alison gave a low wolf whistle. 'You look stunning. Daniel will have a heart attack.'

'He sure will. He has arachnophobia.'

'This will cure him. I guarantee he'll want to get his hands on those.'

'He could be so traumatised he'll never come near me again.'

'Absolutely no chance. Anyway, it's decided. I'm buying that as a home-coming gift for your beloved.'

'Okay. But then I get to choose an outfit for you.'

'Nothing sexy, considering my situation.'

'You have no choice, Ali. You have to be *The Princess Bride*.'

Ali looked at her, deadpan.

'As you wish.'

Soon they were lying together in Ali's double bed, the portable telly on a table at their feet. Ali was wearing an ornate tinsel crown and they were watching the movie for the first time in well over ten years.

'Here it comes,' Ali said. '*True love is the greatest thing in the world except for a nice mutton, lettuce and tomato sandwich*. Ah shit, Biddie. I used to think that was funny.'

Bridget was lost in the movie and her reply was automatic. '*Life is pain, Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something*.' Then she turned and felt a flush of mortification at her tactlessness. 'Oh Ali, I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. It's actually spot on. It's comforting to realise the importance of a good sandwich.'

Alison remembered every scene and every word of the film. When she was about eleven or twelve she would ask her father to hire it every month or two. She liked it best when it was just Biddie and her, lying top to tail on the couch. Occasionally Justin watched with them, enjoying the swordfights, but openly scornful of everything else. She knew Biddie was secretly scornful as well. Sometimes there was a cutting edge to her 'as you wish, Highness.'

When she'd first arrived in Dallas her life had seemed a fairy tale; her success at diving had resulted in an all-expenses-included scholarship, she was winning trophies, she was the centre of attention. But her classmates didn't consider her one of them. She was from Africa and was expected to be different. It was as though they resented her looking like them; they wanted her to be dark skinned and with hair in Topsy plaits. They were confused by her fluent English and her 'British' accent. Her roommate once said 'I'm sure if I woke you up in the middle of the night you'd speak normally'.

She would listen to the other first-year students drawing friendships from past connections. Where did you go to school? You must know my cousin / friend / sister's boyfriend's brother. She had no links. She had been re-born in a sense that had nothing whatsoever to do with religion. It was as though she had only just started to exist.

She worked hard to fit in. She picked up the vowels, attuned herself to the nuances and phrases. She trained harder, spent longer hours in the gym and at the pool, became even more competitive. And gradually she started to feel she belonged. She had her first American boyfriend. Their first few months together were great. Then one night she was lying with him on the sofa, his hand sneaking on to her thigh. 'You don't feel like American girls, you're more firm,' he said. So she chucked him out, because he wanted her to be foreign and she wanted to belong.

She loved the ending of the movie. Not, as Biddie assumed, because Buttercup rode off with her 'true love', but because, after Buttercup had spent years waiting in acute loneliness, she rode off in a group.

She'd never before tried to explain it to Biddie. Biddie had no idea what it was like to be on her own. She'd had Justin. And then she had Daniel.

Biddie had listened, lying quietly beside her sister. She'd watched Ali learning to dive. She knew the effort behind her success. But all the years when she herself seemed to do nothing but plod forward she'd never once considered that on the other side of the world her sister had to work hard to keep buoyant as well.

'Why'd you stay?' she asked.

'I have an American husband. American children. Tom would never leave and he'd never let me take them.'

'No, Ali, not now. Then. When you finished. 1999? South Africa was over the worst. We were all still euphoric.'

‘Because then it would have all been for nothing. The separation, the effort.’

‘It was hardly nothing. You had a degree. And you had a home. Dad would have loved nothing better than having you back. And your mom.’

‘It would have felt like giving up.’ Ali’s voice was flat. Then she gave a bitter laugh. ‘Inconceivable, huh? If you know what I mean.’

‘Ali, you giving up on anything has always been inconceivable.’

‘I don’t know. I might bale on Tom.’ She screwed up her face and swallowed a few times. Bridget took her hand and squeezed it. ‘I’m too bloody tired to work on a relationship on top of everything else. I can’t, Biddie. I just can’t.’

‘Ali, you can. It’s whether you want to. But of course you can. You used to put in hours and hours of practice so someone could hang medals round your neck. This is important. Anyway, they’re Tom’s kids, too. Let him do the work.’

‘Wonderful. Keep him around for the children. A marriage of convenience. I don’t think I want that either. Fuck, Biddie, I don’t know. I’m too bloody tired to think straight.’

‘So don’t. Go to sleep. You can think tomorrow.’

‘Tomorrow will be hectic.’

‘Don’t tell me. Shall I turn off the light?’

‘You don’t want to watch the movie again?’

‘Oh my God, no. *Definitely* inconceivable.’

Chapter 19

Ali's eyes flickered. Justin once said watching Ali wake was like watching the evolution of mankind. She would open her eyes and all you saw was primordial soup. Then you could see the synapses start firing and could watch the slow development of intelligent life.

Her sister seemed to wake more quickly now than she had as a child, but still Bridget saw with amusement her sister's initial blank expression, the slow recognition, the lazy smile. That was followed by a husky 'good morning'. Then there was the beginning of an uncurling, a stretching of her body. Then Ali froze, her eyes widening with a look of panic.

'What's the matter?'

The answer came as a hoarse whisper. 'Biddie, I can't move my neck.'

She focussed on the pen on her desk. No, it was in her hand. Her right hand. Everything else seemed to blur away from it.

Motion sickness. Look at the horizon, find a bluegum, a windmill, ignore the closer objects hurtling past, ignore the lurching of your gut and the road being dragged below you.

She was still holding the pen, writing. Janet. The doctor's name was Janet. The phone was in her other hand. She was telling Felicity she needed to see Janet urgently. Writing the number. Now Biddie had taken the phone and was dialling. Yes, Biddie was saying, they would get to the rooms immediately.

She could twitch a shoulder, flex her hands, tilt her pelvis. She could, although awkwardly, move her body backwards or forwards, side to side. She could not straighten her neck.

She shifted her gaze to the flower on the window sill. It was wilting from lack of water, its green stem hunched, red petals drooping. Yes, Bridget was saying, Alison was quite capable of sitting up. Yes, her speech was fine.

No, her speech was not fine. Words lay jumbled in her lopsided mind. Dark leaves bright sky … husband children … arms hands …. moving wheeling …

Bridget sat in the waiting room. Waiting and helpless. She hated hospitals; they were places of anxiety and uncertainty. Nothing was ever in equilibrium. No, not only in hospitals. Everywhere. Everything, always, was in a state of flux. She knew that. But if change was inevitable she wanted it to be slow and manageable. She wanted it to be simple; a straight path from grub to butterfly, a single road to travel.

She wanted the quiet of her herb garden, the scent of fresh green things. She wanted to be home. She wanted to hug her child. She wanted Daniel to hug her.

And the thought rushed back again: *she wasn't who Alison needed*. But the feeling it evoked wasn't the same as when Ali had first phoned her. It was as though her sister was a different person then, a stranger. The feeling didn't rip away something deep inside her the way it did now.

She took Ali's mobile from the bag and called Tom.

'Hi, Ali.' She could hear the lift of his voice as he said the name.

'No. It's Bridget.' She gave him a moment to recover. 'Tom, when Ali woke up this morning she couldn't move her neck. I'm with her at the doctor now. Can you come?'

'Give me the address,' he said.

She felt unsteady sitting on the edge of the examination bed with her legs dangling off the floor and nothing to lean against. 'Can you shift back a little? Good.' The doctor moved behind her and put her hands on Alison's back, at waist level, her touch firm and confident. Calm. Breathe in, breathe out. In. Out.

'Try and lean forward, bend from here. Now straighten up slowly. Have you had any pain? Headaches? Tingling or pins and needles in your hands?' She could feel fingers pressing along her spine, up into the nape of her neck, then working their way down into the muscles of her shoulders. The fingers had stopped roving, were digging in. 'Tell me what you were doing yesterday, anything you don't usually do.'

Images flashed through her mind; taking the children their juice, travelling on the motorway, waiting in the car, the steps, Ellen's phone call …. 'Phoning,' she said aloud. 'Holding the phone with my shoulder? Oh my God, holding it with my shoulder for over an hour.'

The doctor was still behind her. 'That would certainly do it. You've strained this muscle here.' Ali could feel the knot contract with pain as the doctor ran her fingers

along it. As the pressure was released the pain evaporated. ‘It’s a stiff neck. A physio session will get the muscle out of spasm.’ The world was coming back into focus. A crisp, bright, off-centre world. ‘Or acupuncture, if you don’t have a problem with needles.’ The intercom buzzer interrupted her. She handed Ali her shirt before she leant across her desk to answer it. She said nothing but ‘come in’ and turned her attention back to Ali.

‘The results came back yesterday. Do you want to discuss them now?’

‘Yes.’ Each button was slipping oh so smoothly into its allotted gap.

‘That was your husband arriving. Would you like him to be with you?’

Biddie must have called him. She would really like her father there. And her mother. But, yes, her sister would be good. And, sure, why not Tom?

It was Tom who lifted her back into the chair, but it was Biddie who wheeled it to the desk and sat close beside her.

‘There is some really good news. There are no tumours and you don’t have multiple sclerosis or transverse myelitis. In other words, you are unlikely to get worse. But after that the results get complicated.’

She lay with her face tucked into the hole in the bed. The physio had put a dozen needles along her shoulders and down her back. One had stung going in but most had simply tap-tap-tapped into place. Now she lay with a heat pack covering her upper back. In a few more minutes her head would be square on her shoulders again. Bob-bob bobbing along. She had simply put a muscle into spasm. It was not serious. It was reversible.

Her legs, however, lay on the end of the bed, feeling distant and foreign. It was strange to think there was nothing inherently wrong with them. It was what went on between her head and her legs that was a problem.

When she’d first gone to the hospital and told the doctor there of her weakness he should have examined her. He’d merely looked at the results of X-rays and her reflexes and had been satisfied. Instead of admitting her he sent her home. He had not given her a cortisone injection to prevent further swelling. Swelling caused pressure and pressure did more damage. That lack of treatment was a mistake.

She had gone back to the hospital and been sent to the spinal unit. The doctors there had done a scan. It showed a bulge at L4, in her lower back. They had assumed

that was the problem. Not being able to flex her hips had nothing to do with L4. So that assumption was a mistake. She had told her father it was like a puzzle; who owns the zebra? Something to be worked out intellectually, trial and error until you thought you had the right answer. But someone should have got up and starting ringing bells, knocking on doors, not stopping until they saw the zebra for themselves.

Wishful thinking! That was far too simple. There was no zebra – nothing solid and tangible. There was no answer. Further up her spine, somewhere between her shoulder blades, at T4, something was blocked. Maybe when she fell she hit another step, causing a contusion there too, a bruising in the spinal cord. But possibly the problem was vascular, the flow of blood not reaching what Janet had called a watershed area. No matter how many tests she went through only time would tell whether messages would ever flow past that vertebra again. Something had definitely gone wrong. And it might be irreversible.

The doctors had made mistakes.

Falling was a mistake.

Tom having sex with another woman was a mistake.

Biddie had asked her whether they should cancel the party and she'd said no. For somewhere in the maze of messages that flowed through her, wherever instinct came from, she knew the biggest mistake of all would be not finding something on the horizon to focus on and keep going.

Chapter 20

They had left Ali at the physiotherapist's rooms and gone to shop. She would have preferred to do it alone, but there had been a hurried discussion of what store was closest and who would pay and Ali had insisted Tom accompany her.

Tom drove a compact sedan car and Bridget sat beside him feeling increasingly uncomfortable. They'd never had a one-on-one conversation, never slept a single night under the same roof. He was her brother-in-law, the father of her only niece and nephew and yet she felt no connection to him at all. If he and Ali split up she wouldn't miss him. To all intents and purposes he was a stranger. And there was something sensual in sitting in a small car next to an attractive stranger. It was reminiscent of first dates and drive-in movies. She was aware of his long elegant fingers close to her thigh every time he changed gear. He volunteered nothing and the longer the silence lasted, the more difficult it became to find anything to say. She was relieved when he turned into a huge parking lot, swung the car into the first vacant spot and turned off the ignition.

'I intend to get back with Ali. As soon as possible,' he said, turning to look at her.

It was what she wanted to hear, what she'd gone to his mother's house to ask him for. But that was when she thought Ali's paralysis was temporary. Why was he saying it now, when he'd just heard Alison might never walk again? Was it simply for practical reasons? Of course if the mother of his children was in a wheelchair the family would need him. But he hadn't been faithful while Ali was able-bodied. What sort of a marriage would it be now?

'Why?' she asked aloud.

'I don't think that's any concern of yours.'

'I'm her sister. I have a right to know.' The words sounded more pompous than she'd intended and Tom reacted immediately.

I haven't seen much evidence of your sisterly involvement until now.'

The sun was overhead and heat poured in through the windscreen. She felt as though she were choking from lack of air. But she wasn't prepared to open the door, in any way signal she was ending the discussion. She felt blindly for the window winder,

then realised the windows were electrically driven. With the ignition off the button she pressed had no effect.

'Please open the window.'

'Open it and you'll hardly breathe for the bugs that'll fly in. That's the one thing I really liked about Johannesburg. The lack of bugs.' He continued to look at her, but now with the same appraising stare his mother had. 'Go home, Bridget. You have enough of your own problems to deal with there.' He hadn't said it unkindly, but abruptly enough to indicate it was the end of the discussion. He got out of the car and stood pointing the locking device at the door, waiting for her to climb out.

They walked to the front of an enormous store that had the appearance of a warehouse. A blast of cold air billowed over them as the doors opened. He took a trolley from the end of a long row of them linked together. 'I suppose you've thought of a theme?'

He paused before the last word and she hated the disdain in his voice.' Yes. Africa,' she snapped. 'We'll give them all a chunk of bread with peanut butter and a mug of tea and tell them to be grateful for it.'

'Ouch. So you're not just annoyed with me then, but with Americans in general?'

'No. I mean, yes. Yes, Americans in general, but you in particular.' She grabbed the trolley from him and pushed it towards the nearest aisle. 'Shall we get this over with?'

'Together? Or do I get sent out on forays?'

'Whatever you prefer.'

'I'll stay then. I can't wait to see what you have in mind.' They were walking down an aisle between rows of fizzy drinks. 'Presumably Coke is a definite no-no.'

'Not at all. Get two-litre bottles and we'll serve it in paper cups as highly polluted water.'

He stayed alongside as she swung the trolley into the next aisle. 'Potato chips?' he asked. 'What'd you call them? Crisps? Really popular here. Could they be, um, dry leaves?'

'Sure. Get those pretzel sticks, too. The twig-like ones. The thinner the better.'

They wound their way round two aisles of biscuits and small packaged cakes. 'Have you ever watched Alison eat a lemon cream?' Tom asked suddenly, holding up a packet. She nodded. Her sister had always done it the opposite way to Bridget and

Justin, eating off the biscuit and leaving the filling exposed and intact. ‘Can we add these?’

‘Only if you can find a link to the “theme”,’ she replied.

‘You’re buying raisins,’ he accused, indicating the packet she’d added to the trolley.

‘Someone once gave Tamsin a packet labelled buck poo. She loved it.’

‘Cool idea, but Emma is turning four. I doubt any of her guests can read.’

‘So you’re saying it’s actually a shit idea. Put them back then …’ She saw amusement light up his face and couldn’t help smiling herself. ‘Look, Tom. I actually haven’t planned a thing. All I thought was that Emma might like to make cup cakes. And ice them in pink. But there’s no time for that.’

‘Friends and junk food will make her blissfully happy. You don’t have to make a special effort.’

‘I need the distraction. If I don’t stay busy I’ll go crazy.’

‘So let’s keep going. I tell you what, then. If we’re sticking with a stereotype of Africa, I’ve been wanting to build a sandpit for Luke. We could have a touch of the Sahara in there as well.’

She thought of the set of wooden animals Daniel had sent for Luke. Out of proportion and wonky-legged, they were still confined to her suitcase. But with their legs buried in sand even the giraffe and rhino would be able to stand.

Bridget finished mixing chocolate icing and put the bowl on a tray. She ripped open the cellophane packaging of some chocolate muffins and heaped them alongside. Her niece had been more than willing to abandon fairy cakes in favour of mud ones, particularly when told that application of icing would be done by the guests. She walked out into the small back yard and hesitated, reluctant to intrude. Emma was rushing between her mother, who was blowing up balloons, and her father, who was letting her hammer nails into the nearly completed wooden box that was to be the sandpit.

‘Daddy, can we stick the balloons on the side here?’

‘I think they’ll get popped very quickly there, Em.’

Luke was following Tom, proudly holding the nails. He stayed so close to his father that every time Tom leaned over to position a nail in place, their two blonde heads touched.

Luke was chatting. Actually chatting. ‘You need one nail now, Daddy? Daddy, can I hold the hammer? Look, it’s like a boat. Can it be a boat, Daddy?’

It seemed idyllic, but she had yet to see Ali and Tom make eye contact or hear them say one word more to each other than was necessary.

‘Ali’ she asked, ‘where are the masks?’

‘In a box in a back corner of the garage.’

She dragged the box out and opened it. As she unpacked she propped each one against the wall. There were five of them. They glared unblinkingly into the bright Dallas sunshine. What had she been thinking? There was no way these gloomy objects would have appealed to Ali. And there was no way they served as fitting memorials to Justin either.

‘They are mournful, aren’t they?’ she said to Ali, who had wheeled herself alongside. ‘Maybe they’ll be too scary anyway.’

‘A little scary is very appealing to kids. Anyway, it’ll be broad daylight. Pass me that damp cloth and I’ll clean them up.’

Bridget went back inside and fetched the presents Daniel had bought. She took the mobile and animals to Tom and the kids, who were too involved in tearing open packets of sterilised sand to pay them any attention.

‘Here’s one more,’ she said, handing the wrapped mask to Ali. ‘The final one, I promise.’

Ali removed the tape and bubble wrap. The mask was of a boy’s face, with a headdress consisting of the torso of a disdainful cat flanked by vertical spikes. The headdress was adorned with dozens of shiny copper triangles. The face was studded with copper, too, giving the appearance of bright freckles along his chin and cheeks and over his button nose. Ali picked up a little card included in the wrappings.

‘Ceremonial Bambara mask – Mali,’ she read aloud. She turned the card over. There was nothing on the back. ‘I wonder what ceremony it’s used for.’

‘Whatever it is, a cat obviously isn’t supposed to jump on your head.’

Ali laughed. ‘You’re right. He looks very surprised. Maybe that’s what’s being celebrated. Surprises.’

‘Not always a cause for celebration though.’

‘No. But he doesn’t look as though he’d be fazed for long. He’ll be up to mischief again in no time, cat or no cat. Thank you, Sis.’ She blew Bridget a kiss. ‘Won’t you put him in my bedroom? The kids aren’t getting their hands on this one.’

She felt she should tell Ali she hadn't chosen it, that it was Daniel's choice. But it didn't seem to matter. If she saw it now she would buy it without hesitation. It was perfect for Ali. And it was a good gift because she also wanted to keep it for herself.

Chapter 21

Dylan was the first guest to arrive. The path to Africa was via a small gate at the side of the house. It was marked with arrows, drawn by Emma on post-it labels, quantity more than making up for lack of size.

In deference to the heat the Sahara was in partial shade. Tom had nailed leafy branches, sourced from his mother's property, around its perimeter. After some debate it had been positioned in the middle of the yard, so that the dining room chairs and coffee table, adequately covered in junk food, could be lined up along the side fence. It was difficult to turn the wheels on the grass so she got as far as the table and squeezed the wheelchair in beside it.

Dylan handed Emma his gift. He was a stocky, moon-faced boy, half a head shorter than Emma. He looked at the animals set up in the sand and kicked off his shoes.

'No, Dylan, don't play in the sand.' Dylan had been followed through the gate by a man so obviously his dad that Alison looked from the one back to the other a couple of times. They were both dressed in white T-shirts and long shorts, both with cropped dark hair. The look was better on the four-year old than on the adult.

'The sand is brand new and guaranteed sterile,' she told him.

'Guaranteed? Well, that's fine then. I'm Malcolm, Dylan's dad.'

'Alison. Emma's mom.' He leaned over and shook hands with her, showing no surprise at her being in a wheelchair. 'Are you dropping Dylan off or would you like to stay?'

'I'll stay, if you're sure that's okay.'

'What would you like to drink? Tea? Coffee? Something stronger?'

'Coke would be good.'

He didn't offer to help himself and Ali felt his eyes on her while she poured the coke and stretched out her arm so he could take it from her.

Felicity came through the gate, dragging her three-year old son behind her. He was sobbing. Her older son was already examining one of the masks and her daughter was giving Emma a large, wrapped parcel.

'Sweetie, I heard from Janet. I'm so sorry. Why the hell can't everyone do their jobs properly? I'll come and chat in a sec. Rory's had an accident and wouldn't get out

of the car. Can I hunt out some of Luke or Emma's clothes?' She went through the kitchen door into the house.

'I heard about your accident from my wife.' Malcolm sat down on the chair beside her.

'Not the same kind of accident.'

'God, of course not. Sorry.'

'I don't remember meeting your wife.'

'She probably heard at the school.' He shifted forward so he could look more directly at her. 'To be honest, that's why I came with Dylan. I thought it would give me a chance to speak to you. In case there was malpractice.'

'And you felt a children's birthday party was the right time to do this?'

'No. Not immediately now. I'll call next week, make an appointment.'

'Have you managed to look at my medical results yet?'

'Please Alison, don't make a snap judgement on this. It's worth talking it over. I've handled a similar case, someone who had a bicycle accident because of a broken storm drain cover. He also retained some strength in his legs, but his life was never the same.'

She could see Tom handing the older kids some towels, helping them drape them over their heads.

'You have no idea of the future,' he continued. 'You'll want to be financially independent.'

He leaned back as her friend Marie dashed up and kissed her on both cheeks. 'Hi, gorgeous. This all looks fantastic. Where's the birthday girl? Is there anything I can do?'

'Grab something to eat and drink. Then come and sit down.'

'If you lose more mobility you could require assistance with daily activities – you're much more likely to have complications like urinary tract infections. What work d'you do?' Without waiting for an answer, he rushed on. 'Are you sure you can continue? You could land up without wages, benefits, pension.'

'I tripped and fell. I can't blame anyone for that.' But she was thinking of the mistakes … the hospital, the doctors at the spinal unit.

'That's what we need to find out. The cyclist got a nine million settlement. You have far less damage, but we're still talking a couple of million for medical and attendant care and another couple for loss of earnings.'

‘How much did he keep of the nine million?’ Felicity’s voice was clipped and angry. She had Rory on her hip and swung him to the ground as she stopped in front of Malcolm. The little boy rushed to the food table.

‘Seven.’

‘So the lawyers made a tidy profit then? My sister’s the neurologist who’s treating Ali, by the way.’ Malcolm started to extend his hand, but when Felicity kept hers rigid at her sides he drew it back again.

‘And she’ll have insurance,’ he replied quickly.

‘How long did it take? Tell Alison. The legal proceedings, from start to finish. How long?’

‘I’m not sure. On average it’s a couple of years.’

‘In this specific case?’

‘Eight, maybe. But there were complications. And it was a very large settlement.’ Tom had joined the periphery of the group and Malcolm took the opportunity to turn away from Felicity and address Alison directly again. ‘Oh, and there’s no payment due unless we get you compensation.’

‘But I gather there’s no guarantee that even if she’d been given the right treatment she would have recovered fully,’ said Tom.

She’d taken painkillers before the party, but now it felt as though her numbness was radiating from her legs through her body. She could hear young, high pitched voices squabbling over possession of a giraffe, older children wailing as they swooped around the lawn, angry words hurtling around her. Injuries. Normal progression. General negligence. Legally accountable. She wanted to get up and walk away.

‘Biddie. Biddie!’ Her sister made eye contact from the other side of the sandpit and understood immediately. In a few strides she was in the middle of the group.

‘Time to sing happy birthday. Felicity, can you get your kids to help me here. We need candles stuck into four of the cupcakes and lit. Tom, I think Emma’s inside opening presents. Could you get her?’

She watched Biddie getting everyone organised. Efficiently marshalling kids and adults alike. Chatting, smiling, but making no connections. You have no idea of the future, he’d said, as though it applied only to her. But she knew Bridget would be going home. Whether it was in a day or a week or a month, it made no difference. She would go back to Daniel and he would be happy to see her.

She loved movies that ended with a leap into the future. Fast forward to everything wrapped up – this person together with that, someone else revelling in redemption, the villain captured and put away. All issues resolved. All pigs fed and ready to fly. How tempting it was. Skip all the therapy, skip the relentlessness of feeding, cleaning, clothing her children. Fast forward two or three years. Luke would be at school. She'd be financially independent …

And to have the millions in the bank she'd have to be confined to a wheelchair.

She'd been good at the routine of training, working her body to the point of exhaustion. And for what? How had Biddie put it? To have someone hang a medal round her neck. How little it seemed to matter now. But if she could walk again, it would be worth the regimen of exercise, of standing every day, building up her muscles. What chance did she have of success with someone dangling such a reward for failure?

'Come, Mommy, sing!' said Luke.

Chapter 22

Alison was relieved when people finally started to pack up and leave. Bridget doled out the masks to the older kids as rewards for going away, although it was the adults she was keen to get rid of. They had spoilt what would otherwise have been a highly successful occasion. On the other hand she wasn't looking forward to being left alone with Ali and Tom and no activity to provide distraction. Ali had wheeled herself to a place on the concrete slab outside the back door, out of the way of the bustle of chairs and glasses being returned to the house. Deep in thought and motionless, she had the air of an old woman sitting on her stoep in the afternoon sun. However much her sister seemed in need of comfort, she had no idea how to give it while people she didn't know were still milling around.

She walked down the driveway removing the sticky labels with their arrows. Actually, which direction was Africa? The real one. It was late afternoon and she looked around to see where the sun was and realised Luke was behind her.

'Up,' he instructed, putting his arms above his head. She lifted him on to her hip, delighted he'd finally initiated contact with her. 'The doggie's crying,' he said. He spoke softly, with his mouth close to her ear, as though sharing a confidence. She could see the neighbour's dog sitting at the palisade gate, its mournful woof so regular she had been unaware of it.

'Yes, poor doggie, it is. I think he's lonely. His family has gone out.'

'He wants to come here.'

'I'm sure he does. He's a bit late for the party, though, isn't he?'

'He can eat cake.'

'Shall we let him come and have what's left?' The remnants of the food, scattered on and around the table, were all that was left to clear away.

'Yes.'

When she unlatched his gate the gangly brown creature looked up at her with large anxious eyes. She tentatively held out her hand for him to sniff. 'Come on,' she said.

'Biddie! What the heck are you doing?' Ali said, as the dog slunk after them into the yard.

‘Indulging my devil-may-care attitude to authority. There’s not enough left to make him ill.’ She handed Luke a half-eaten cup cake. ‘Keep this one for him,’ she said. ‘He can have it when he’s back in his own yard.’

From his vantage point Luke watched, enthralled, as the dog vacuumed up the crumbs and chips from the grass and, when no move was made to stop him, proceeded to the table itself.

Alison watched the dog assisting with the clean-up. While Biddie was no doubt defying a number of municipal bylaws along with the rules of good neighbourliness, it did have its funny side. What had Malcolm said? She was going to require more assistance with household activities. And at least she didn’t have to feel guilty accepting aid from a dog. She and her friends always helped one another after social events, but not only hadn’t she done her share, she knew she’d no longer be able to reciprocate. Or not in the same way. At the moment even the two small steps to the kitchen defeated her. She would have to get a ramp put in.

Felicity marshalled her kids around the chair. ‘I must get my monsters home. All of you, say thanks to Alison. Mike, please buckle Rory in for me and I’ll be there in a minute.’ She waited until they were out of earshot. ‘Sorry I didn’t keep my mouth shut, but of all the cheek, using his son to tout for business. What a louse! Janet’s been sued before and it wasn’t pleasant.’

‘Janet wouldn’t be involved.’

‘I know that. But it’s still difficult to stay uninterested.’

‘Disinterested,’ she replied automatically.

‘Yes, Teach,’ said Felicity, bending over to kiss her. ‘You take care now. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

If she did have to support herself, she might be able to get a job teaching. English had been one of her majors. She enjoyed taking words apart more than putting them together. Dis-interested. Not a lack of interest, but a removal of it, allowing you to judge fairly. There was something noble about someone who was disinterested. Yet she’d always thought of ‘dis’ as such a negative prefix. Dis-inherited. I was going to give you my worldly goods, now I’m not. Dis-abled. You had an ability and it’s been removed. It was worse than never having it in the first place.

She thought of other words as Tom carried the coffee table past her. Discomfort. Distrust. The negative connotation was there all right. It did feel as though he'd taken something from her.

Disengage?

Could she separate herself and her children from Tom? Throughout the party her eyes had sought out Emma and Luke and Tom was always close by. Even while chatting to the other parents his attention was on them.

Biddie closed the gate, Luke still straddling her hip. 'Do you want to come inside?' she asked.

'In a moment. Thanks, Biddie. For the party and everything.'

'Sure.'

Biddie and Luke went indoors and the garden was silent and empty. The sandpit was the only memento. 'Looks like that's it then,' said Tom, standing beside her.

'Yes.'

Tom took the handles of her chair and swivelled her round to go up backwards. She slammed on the brakes but he dragged the chair up the steps into the kitchen

'I wasn't ready,' she snapped. 'When I want help I'll ask for it.'

'You never do. That's your problem.'

'What? That I don't act helpless?' The chair was dragged across the floor a few inches before he seemed to realise the brake was on. She released it and spun the chair to face him. 'You have no idea! *Being* helpless is the problem. A bloody big, all-consuming problem.'

Tom was right on top of Bridget, who was loading the dishwasher. She immediately slid the tray she was filling back and flipped the door closed. 'I'm taking the kids to the park. I'll be gone an hour,' she said, as she strode out the room.

He backed away a little. 'I'm not suggesting you have to be helpless. Or even that you are. Shit. Why must you go to extremes? I'm saying it should be possible to do things together. Simple things. You want to know why I sometimes took my time coming home? Because you were tired, the kids were tired and …'

'Fucking hell, Tom. If you had two little kids to look after all day you'd also be tired.'

'I know that! I'm not saying you shouldn't be tired, but that you take any offer of help as criticism. If you haven't bathed the kids and I suggest we do it you say they can skip a bath. If you haven't cooked, we don't do it together, we get take-outs.'

She heard the front door closing, Emma's voice insisting on a new doll being taken along.

'You can take over any time you fucking well like.'

'I don't want to take *over*, I want to do things *with* you. You don't let me.'

'I don't let you? So that's your excuse, is it? The reason you went off to … to … do things with someone else?'

'No. There is no excuse. I know how close I've come to losing you. But I don't want to. Despite what's happened to us, and to you, I want to be part of this family.'

'Doesn't sound like you thought it was much of a family before.'

'I'm saying it could be better. It's worth trying to make it better. Ali, I know your father pretty much brought you up and my mother certainly had no help, but it can involve two parents, you know.'

'Two of us involved? Tom, look at me. I don't know how involved I'll be. You could be doing it all on your own anyway.' She could feel tears running down her cheeks, all restraint leaving her body in a warm flow, so that she was shaking with sobs.

Tom leaned over her. The feeling that she was trapped in a place he wouldn't be able to reach was so strong she didn't bother to hold out her arms to him. But he lifted her up, out of the chair.

Sex had always seemed so easy, bodies moving smoothly, skin on skin. But the awareness of each other was between them now, like a layer of clothing they were unable to remove. Tom had rolled her on top of him and she was thinking I can't do this, I can't do this. Then it was as though well known music was starting to play and her body responded to its rhythm with movements that were choreographed and practised. She knew where her arms and hands belonged on his chest. He knew where she liked to be touched, running his hands down her spine and on to her buttocks. She was able to move her hips. She was able to feel sensation deep within her. But everything seemed slower than before, her mind not quite free of her body. She had a memory of that moment of pure weightlessness as she dived, another of her therapist guiding her through the water. Then all thoughts were overwhelmed by the wonder that Tom, no longer careful of her, could be enjoying her body.

She was reluctant to move afterwards, so while Tom dressed hurriedly in anticipation of the return of the big sister, she stayed in bed and watched him. *Love*

unillusioned. What were the lines? *That what is truly loved is truly known. Now in that knowledge love unillusioned is not love disenchanted.*

Not disenchanted. A double negative making a positive. Oh yes. There was always the possibility that something taken away could be returned.

Chapter 23

She could move her neck and her arms. Sunday was a day of rest, so maybe she could skip any attempt to move her legs.

She thought of morning routines. It must differ from house to house, town to town, country to country. Someone was bound to have done a survey, calculated the percentages of those who started each day by sipping hot drinks, or reading the papers, having sex, leaping out of bed to milk the cows or walk the dogs. It would no doubt vary from weekday to weekend, from summer to winter … and through all the ages of man. She could no longer remember the last time her father sat beside her, or the last morning she set off at dawn to the pool.

She needed to establish a new routine – starting immediately, before she dwelled on how good it would be to wait for her sister to bring tea or the kids to bring their morning chatter to her comfortable bed. She twisted around and managed to open the kist at the foot of the bed. She hauled out a pair of tracksuit pants, which she pulled on. She started with her right leg, the stronger one. Lying on her back, she bunched the fabric of the pants at the knee and drew it towards her, dragging her knee to her chest. She hugged her leg with her right arm and used her left hand to pull her toes away from her heel, timing one minute by the bedside clock. Then one minute pushing the toes in the other direction. She gripped the fabric further up and, as best she could, pulled the knee straight and tugged the leg in an arc over her head, hoping that no muscle would go into spasm. One minute. Pushing her knees apart. Another minute. Then the other leg. Then turning over and pulling both heels to her butt. Minute after minute.

Flexing and straightening, abducting and adducting.

Tom arrived early. She hadn't wanted him to stay the night, but suggested he join them at the Arboretum for the morning. After he'd left Biddie had teased her, saying that from the evidence of her T-shirt on inside out it didn't seem to be a marriage of convenience after all. Maybe, she'd replied – but maybe she'd rushed into something she was not ready for yet.

She was sitting on a dining room chair, strapping on the knee braces. She'd turned the chair sideways so he could stand behind her as she faced the table. Bridget had volunteered, but she wanted this to be done by her and Tom alone. If he genuinely

wanted to be part of her life he needed an idea of what he was in for. She explained the procedure she had in mind. The previous day he'd picked her up with ease, but this was trickier, for he would have to lift her from behind and, without any equipment stabilising her lower limbs, would have to ensure her hips were directly above her knees and her knees directly above her ankles.

'Ready when you are,' he said.

She drew a breath. *Timing and focus.*

Then she saw Emma and Luke watching silently from the doorway, still in their pyjamas.

When she'd slipped in the bath on Biddie's first day with her, her sister had said she would 'spot' for her. So as she prepared to stand she expected Biddie to stay close by, hovering anxiously, anticipating the worst. But instead her sister moved to stand beside the children and Alison realised they were the ones Biddie had been spotting for all along – positioning herself to prevent them getting hurt, gently guiding them forward. It was not so much her but her children who had someone looking out for them. And it had given her a breathing space.

She looked down at the table.

'Okay,' she said. 'One. Two. Three.'

She was upright. She put her hands flat on the surface. It was too low to provide the support she'd had in the physio rooms. Without the stabilising effect of the sling behind her, she was acutely aware of the possibility of falling backwards or toppling sideways and could feel panic mounting. 'No, Tom! Don't move away. Put your hands out a little, almost to the side. Yeah, there. Great.' She'd need to find a higher surface, or put something heavy on the table so that she could support herself more on her forearms than on just her hands. She started to feel slightly dizzy. She had to move her upper body, keep the blood flowing.

'Biddie, quickly! Can you find a ball to throw to me?'

She tried moving her hands on the table, and felt Tom's adjust his grip more firmly. *Focus*. *Focus!* Out and in. Out and in.

Biddie arrived back within moments carrying a small, bean-filled bunny. Alison steadied herself and lifted her hands to chest level. 'Throw,' she said. Biddie threw and she caught it, threw it back.

It was enough.

Bridget could hardly believe they were actually on their way to Arboretum. She sat in the back between Luke and Emma, trying hard to match the high spirits of the family around her. When Ali had stood she'd battled not to cry. Her sister had been like one of those blow-up dolls weighted at the bottom and moving helplessly from side to side in the wind. She realised Tom was talking to her, telling her that although the Dallas winters were mild, they experienced sudden cold snaps and in summer not only the rainfall but the temperatures were erratic, so the gardens were stocked with plants of 'extreme fortitude'.

They parked outside the entrance and Tom left her to help Ali with the chair while he paid for their tickets. There was a cluster of buildings around the gates, but they headed straight past them. Then she walked into the gardens themselves. They were even more beautiful than Ali had led her to believe. She'd been once with Daniel and Tamsin to Kirstenbosch. There the gardens extending up the sides of Table Mountain were bigger and more dramatic. She'd been impressed that a hundred years before someone had seen the potential in a spectacular but wild and overgrown estate and taken steps to preserve and perfect it. It was different here. There were no mountains. It was not part of a magnificent scenic expanse. Everything was more formal and cultivated, with wide, paved walkways. But someone must have planned the entire landscape years and years before. There were lawns leading down to a lake, and fountains and ponds and paths to more private enclaves – and everywhere an abundance of flowers massed in vivid hues. But what amazed her were the trees. Huge, beautiful trees that had most probably out-lived whoever had planted them.

The previous term a speaker had come to her school to talk about 'visions of the future'. Not being part of the teaching staff, she hadn't attended but she'd heard it discussed afterwards in the staffroom. The premise was that kids who succeeded were those who had some idea of where they would be in five years time. She'd been sceptical. In a country where change was so overwhelming no one could be expected to see five years into the future.

Now she saw it differently. It didn't matter that you couldn't see *the* future, you had to see *a* future. You needed a positive image of a destination you were heading towards. It didn't mean you couldn't see the obstacles, but it did mean you could see the advantage of overcoming them. Her sister was able to do that. It was what gave Ali her strength.

She sometimes thought about leaving Daniel. She sometimes thought he might leave her, but she'd never really envisaged a future that excluded him. And despite her worries, there was no future that didn't have her daughter central to it either. And now her sister was there as well. She could picture Ali walking off a plane in Johannesburg … or her sister might be an 'assisted' passenger, still in a wheelchair … she would have to allow for that possibility. She'd phone and send postcards so the children wouldn't forget her. And she would be waiting at the airport to meet them all. During Ali's visit they would spend a weekend together, just the two of them. She would find a country hotel in the Magaliesberg, no more than an hour's drive away, a place with trees and a river. Even if Tom wasn't there, Daniel would look after the kids. Or her father. She could ask him to do that.

She'd fallen behind and hurried to catch up. The children had run ahead into an alcove. Luke was sitting and trying to untie his shoelaces. Em was already barefoot, flitting at the side of a fountain. Ali spoke to Tom and he had to stop and lean down to listen to her.

Then Alison rolled the chair forward. On one side of her the children were whirling around, laughing, catching their breath as the spray hit their faces. On the other side Tom stood swinging Luke's shoes by the laces. Suddenly everything - the water, the sun catching the spokes of the wheels as they turned, all the circles and spirals - made the scene liquid, as though Ali was moving through eddies, only her body steady as her arms wheeled her ahead. No longer treading water.

Alison was outside on the front porch, watching her children playing with the neighbour's daughter on the lawn opposite. Luke had screamed and clung to his father when Tom left, and the neighbour had come to the rescue. Bridget carried a chair outside and put it beside her sister. She hoped the kids would last at least ten minutes more. Or even five. They were tired after the day out and bedtime was likely to be fraught. And already the mosquitoes were starting to arrive.

'Did you manage to get on the web?' her sister asked.

'Yes,' she replied.

'Biddie, please sit down. You're giving me a crick in the neck.'

'Sorry,' she said as she sat quickly. 'Ali, I've changed my flight.'

'What?' Ali had looked down at a mosquito hovering above her knee. She brushed it away and stared at Bridget.

‘I’m going home tomorrow evening.’

‘Good God, Biddie, why?’

‘I’m going to join Daniel and Tamsin for the last part of their trip.’

‘You *hate* camping. You said they were managing perfectly well without you.’

‘They are.’

‘So why, Biddie? Please stay. God, I don’t know how I’d cope without you.’

Biddie smiled at her. ‘Apparently it’s good business advice that if someone starts to become indispensable you should get rid of them quickly.’

Ali didn’t laugh. ‘You think you’re in the way, huh? My bloody mother-in-law got to you, didn’t she?’

‘Well, yes, she did. But not about being in Tom’s way, even though there may be some truth in that. It was what she said about me being estranged. That was true. I do keep to myself. And I don’t make much effort with my folks. And maybe not enough with Daniel and Tamsin. Anyway, what I’m trying to say is I’m not running away …’

‘I never said …’

‘Let me finish. I need to …’

‘Your exams?’

‘Shh. No. I wouldn’t write them now anyway. I suppose it’s fundamentally me and Daniel. I want to surprise him. I want to know if he’s missed me … if he really, really wants to be with me.’

‘Biddie, you’re being ridiculous.’

‘Then I’ll find that out too.’

‘But I don’t understand the urgency. Seriously. What’s a week or two?’

‘Or a month or two? Or next year? Or when Tamsin leaves home? I’ve always been putting it off. Anyway, the timing’s good. He won’t be distracted by the all the usual things he has to worry about … global warming and economic meltdowns and stuff.’ And, she thought to herself, maybe it was the only time she’d have the courage, while her own problems no longer seemed overwhelming compared to her sister.

‘You can’t be talked out of it?’ Ali asked.

‘No.’

‘Even if I cry?’

She seemed on the verge of doing just that. ‘Oh God, Ali, please don’t. Shit! I feel awful. You will be okay, won’t you?’

Alison blinked a few times before she nodded.

‘Okay then,’ she said. ‘If I let you go, you promise you won’t keep Daniel from sorting out all the other important stuff though? The economic crisis and all?’

‘I promise. And you can come to the airport and I’ll let you cry then .As I leave.’

‘Of course.’

Opposite Emma was absorbed in a game with the neighbour’s daughter. It had an element of follow-the-leader, in which one of them would jump or spin and the other follow for a while, then leadership would swap and the next activity would be to roll on the lawn or jump over Luke. He was sitting, unperturbed, steering a small truck through lines drawn in chalk on the concrete slab driveway. He looked across and waved to his mother. Ali smiled and waved back.

‘Same gene pool, same environment. And look how different they are. It’s amazing. Yet they get on so well … when they’re not actually beating each other up.’ She stretched across and touched the scar above Bridget’s eyebrow. ‘You should know. I guess that’s siblings for you, huh?’

‘Did you hear about the experiment where they twinned electrons, or photons or something, so their spin was matched and then moved them apart … and when they changed the spin on the one, the other one automatically changed as well?’

‘Good grief. How?’

‘That’s the point. They don’t know.’

‘And you think siblings are like that?’

‘I haven’t a clue.’ But she did think it. She didn’t elaborate. It would make her sound as crackpot as her mother. Yet she’d felt it with Justin. Not in perfect sync like the electrons and certainly not all the time, but it had happened. She’d once gone with Justin to the school to time him for a 400m race. She stood in the middle of the field as he sped around the track, the purple of his T-shirt blurring against the green foliage beyond him. In science she’d been taught about atoms and planets and she’d often wondered how, between all those tiny participles and enormous bodies of matter spinning in those perfect orbits, life could be so chaotic and unpredictable. But as she watched Justin running, it had seemed for a moment they had both been in harmony, not only with each other, but with everything about them. And at the Arboretum she’d had the same feeling with Alison.

Alison was grinning at her. ‘So what you’re suggesting is we twin a couple of electrons and you take one of them with you. In your pocket, maybe? You can talk a lot of crap.’

‘I *knew* you were going to say that.’