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A Silence So Loud

A Novel by

Fiona Taylor

Twenty Four Years Ago

All the times my mind took off, out of control and full of memories of this place, I never really believed I'd return. Even now, walking across the wide beam boards and occasional metal grill that I recognise as a landmark of my youth, I feel uncertain. Was that my life? Or was it someone else's; a movie I watched perhaps?

Just ahead, Frank walks with one arm across my, our, daughter's shoulders. It's winter; the crowds are fewer and the wind is strong. The sounds coming off the roller coaster, the Ferris wheel and the giant green dragon swing are hijacked by the whip in the air. Only fragments catch my ears, shards that splinter on my tearless soul. Walls to my left are gaudy and cartoonish; purple, yellow, green, red and blue slabs that aren't part of my memories. 'Pacific Park' says a sign that's held in place by a thin purple octopus. At least I think it's an octopus.

Umbrellas with multi-coloured segments break up the wall slabs, and are valiant in the wind. Beneath them thin winter crowds examine things I'm not interested in. Vendors in Lilongwe have hessian and discarded plastic sheeting to shade their goods, but they do contain the odd piece of treasure for me.

Far ahead, well beyond where the quay strikes free of the entertainment park, is the end of the jetty. I can make out the thin sticks that are probably fishermen's rods. On one side of them is a building with a yellow Bali roof. On the other is one that looks more functional, but whose antennae look like a ships masts. Were they always there? Beyond all of that, the Pacific is the same creature I remember.

-oOo-

This morning Frank and Chiara were with me when I buried my parents. Afterward there was what Deidre Parrimore would call 'a civilised tea', held in the house on Teakwood Drive where I grew up. People gathered in the dining room and we opened the sliding doors to the view over the pool and across the hills of Brentwood. Once there was a pair of ducks that came to us in summer every year. They hung around the poolside; sometimes they had babies. There's no sign of them now of course.

What I'm feeling must be grief, but I'm not sure exactly what for. I loved them in a way that required distance and poor communication. That wasn't my fault. Perhaps I'm sad I never shared Chi with them. Never thought that they deserved to know her. And now she's about to get married, and I hope she doesn't want to hold me far from her. Keep her children from my life.

What an appalling thought.

I try not to feel sad when I watch those two ahead, moving through strangers and not waiting. They stood on either side of me at the service, and later at the graveside. Each took one of my hands, and I was so glad. Later they poured coffee and iced tea, sliced cake, spoke to people they don't know. I watched Chi examine a few photographs in that minimalist house. There were some of her and me.

-oOo-

They move into a small nook on the pier, and Chiara bends at a telescope. It points out to where the sea is a dark green that reminds me of my mother's emerald necklace. That hateful glittering thing; it's part of my current malady, if I allow myself to think about it. Despite the weather there are people on the beach; some in bathing suits, others with their pants rolled up.

A plastic liner ruffles in a bin to my right, and a woman in three quarter pants and a cardigan wobbles past me on her bicycle that has bright yellow mudguards. People are taking photos in various places, and I have the urge to explain that this is a place of illusion. What they're seeing and trying to capture isn't real. I stop and look back, and a woman with a beige and black zig-zag shirt and bright pink sneakers almost collides with me. She mutters something and carries on, a turquoise backpack bumping on her shoulders.

The wide part of the wharf, with the amusement park settled squarely on its stilts, isn't quite the same as days gone by, but the profile is. These days the roller coaster coils are orange, and the carts are orange and yellow. Two flags flutter from its peaks, one the US flag, and I can't make out the other. Such patriotism; I don't think I feel that any more. The Ferris wheel is like a white spoked bicycle wheel; its cars alternate in red and yellow. Otherwise I'm pretty sure its unchanged. Like most things, it's the exterior that fluctuates. I wonder whether the same could be said of me. I've spent so long pretending to be someone, I really couldn't say for sure just who I am any more.

There certainly weren't as many bicycles in my day. Such variety; fold up ones, upright ones with baskets and white wall tyres, racing bikes. A blue tandem flies along the promenade, and I know Frank and I would never have gotten far on one of those. Father taught me to roller-skate on that boulevard.

I turn as Frank looks back at me and smiles. He assumes I'm okay because I haven't cried; because I'm not crying now. I keep telling him I'm fine, and that'll do for him. Of course if pressed, I wouldn't be able to say what I want from my husband. To explain this desire for him to probe, to behave in a way that I've never known or wanted him to. Decades together, and I still think of the unspoken slights and slices.

Which speaks to my own sins against him. Against Chiara.

A rush on the roller coaster and screams. Buttered popcorn: a scent from my youth. I ate ice-creams and tried kissing boys in this caricature, where now there are no shadows, just solid blocks of colour without nuance. I kept it all out of Mother's watch.

They're dead, and my eyes are dry. Perhaps that's what my guilt is about. The fear that Chi may not cry at my funeral. That she may never remember the sandwiches I made her, the times I kissed her cheeks just because I could. Will she ever know how it hurts to be a mother, to love her like I do?

If Frank cries at my funeral, I wonder whether he'll have regrets, and if so, whether they'll be about the things he did do, or the things he wished he'd done.

Someone's holding my hand. It's not Frank because he's still ahead with Chi, pressing one eye against the telescope. She talks to him as they look out, and the wind makes snakes in her hair. I try to see whose hand this is, but I can't shift my eyes. Can't move my body from the course it's locked into: looking and walking straight ahead. I can only feel this hand. Big and warm. Dry. Firm. I think I hear words.

Frank and Chi have finished with the telescope, and they walk on. I try to turn; to look. My position remains fixed and the noise of the people and the amusement park drown out what I'm certain are words from the owner of the hand.

A hot press balloons in my chest. Starts off small like a kernel, but pushes out, bulging up my throat. I hold on to that hand as my husband and daughter keep walking on, not looking back. I bend over, coughing up tears and sobs. There's a metal star embedded in

the wood at my feet, and my eyes splash drops on it. A cold wind whips at my legs, but my body is scorched.

Two Years Ago

I wake up.

The mosquito net droops over our bed, trapping last night's heat. No matter how often I get Margaret to wash it, this net holds a sense of hot dust over me. Something is burning out there in our suburb, or perhaps in the bush on the fringes of Area Ten. It's acrid signature catches in my throat. A thrush pecks at its reflection in the glass of the bedroom door that leads out to the garden. Tapping out an argument against itself. The little fountain in the birdbath that Frank set up for me gurgles its endless song. I'm soaked. Menopause scorched over me years ago, so this is just Lilongwe's summer. Maybe it's malaria.

Or it's a heat generated by dreams of warm hands, and a voice that calls my name.

Hello Betty.

Frank breathes a rough sound in his sleep, like an engine. On his side, facing the other way.

Chapter One

"Where's Mom?"

Frank hugged his daughter, his mind snagging momentarily on how she smelled as a little girl; dusty and sweet. There was no trace of it today, only something foreign. Perfume probably. Betty would know that stuff. They released each other and stepped back, and the airport crowd pushed back in return.

To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. "At home; she was a bit tired, so I came on my own."

He detested this airport with its press of flesh and stale air. If he could trust Betty to drive, he would've left this to her. Chiara shouldered a backpack and he took the handle of her suitcase. Bright purple luggage: her mother's daughter, for sure. He followed her out the glass doors, her tie-dyed shirt a beacon. She paused on the pavement outside.

"God, it's hot." She flapped at the front of her shirt with one hand.

He led the way over the zebra crossing, cicadas singing out a buzz that sizzled just beneath his skin. It was always this way with Chi. Her accusations beamed out from things like tie-dyed shirts.

The truck shimmered in a haze of Malawi summer-on-metal. He lifted the suitcase into the open back, then pressed the remote, folded the hem of his t-shirt over his right hand and lifted the lever on his door. He ducked into the heat and reached across to open the other door, but she was already there.

"Thanks Dad." She reached for the window button.

He hurried to start up the engine and cranked the air-conditioner switch, refraining from saying that it couldn't work properly if her window was down.

"Once the hot air has cleared I'll wind it up." She pushed fingers through hair that was damp at her scalp.

He manoeuvred the truck past the old ticket booth and out onto the road. Her hand patted his knee and he smiled. She was so like Betty.

"It's good to have you home."

"Dad, I've been living in Jo'burg for twenty two years."

"Makes me feel so old."

They were quiet for a beat, and he slowed the truck as they approached the boom manned by two policemen. Well, one was a woman. What was the best way to say that? How would Chi put it? A police man and a police woman. What a clumsy mouthful. The police people waved them past, their eyes half-lidded.

"I know what you mean though," she said, tendrils of hair snaking around her head, gesticulating in the wind. "It's your home."

He nodded and tapped his thumbs on the steering wheel.

"How are things in Jo'burg?" he asked when they stopped at the T-junction to the main road.

He looked left and right, not making eye contact with her as a truck heaved along the intersection, trailed by its own emissions and several cars. Chiara wound up her window and sighed.

"All good," she paused. "No boyfriend, if that's the question."

Almost forty five; that was old for a woman to be single. Well, widowed. Not what he'd envisioned for his little girl. The cherub who used to adore him; who used to rush to the door when he arrived home in the evening, words firing out of her as she told him about her day. She wanted to give him every detail back then.

He eased into the queue behind the truck that laboured under bales of tobacco. Probably on its way to the factory. Outside the ground was baked hard beneath a cloudless sky, and goats lipped at the roadside fringe where cast-off water made for a bit of grazing. He knew where every patch of huts lay. Where the vendors sold their racks of rats on bicycle spokes, or between two sticks. Peeled goat carcasses hanging from hooks on a line. He'd stopped the car once when Chi was little, and bought a rack of rats, meaning to be funny. She mourned over their pierced and burnt bodies, the patches of singed hair on their corpses.

A cyclist teetered and swerved in front of the car, and he remembered in time not to swear or hoot.

"So, tell me how she is, Dad."

"She loses a bit of time occasionally, she seems confused then. I can't let her drive anymore."

"Have you taken her to see anyone else?"

Frank shook his head.

Chiara exhaled and turned her head away.

"She doesn't want to see anyone else. I had to trick her into seeing old Dr Trevor as it was. She doesn't want to travel, and she says that she likes spending time with this Shiloh."

"You're talking as though Shiloh's real. I reckon she's been listening to the weird names that movie stars give their kids. She needs to see a neurologist. Why won't you bring her to Jo'burg to see one?"

"She won't go. You try talking to her. She says Shiloh told her it's a waste of time."

Chiara slumped against her window, cupped her chin on her left hand and looked out. Outside women with blank faces and cracked heels sat selling mangoes, and dogs scuffled in the dust. Tired cars sidled on and off the tar road, seemingly without concern about the traffic already on it. He suspected her thoughts had nothing to do with all that.

A crow flapped across the windscreen, and Frank braked hard. He pushed the car back into gear. He didn't know what to do about Betty. That was why he asked Chi to come in the first place.

They turned left into Area Forty Three, and drove along the easy quiet roads to their house. At the gate he hooted, and a few seconds later Chance opened up for them, pulling back the green metal gates, with the dogs slobbering at his side. Chiara said nothing about hooting for the gardener. Probably quite a few things she was biting her tongue over.

Betty came into sight, moving as though nothing was different, beaming at her daughter, admonishing the dogs that leaped in excitement as though they themselves weren't decrepit. No nonsense with a dog. If it's mind went a bit strange, you didn't have to share embarrassing conversations about imaginary friends.

Shiloh. Where the hell had she pulled that name from?

She was kissing Chiara, exclaiming over how thin she was. Like life was normal.

"Hello darling," Betty said, appearing at his side of the car and pecking him on the cheek, giving his arm a quick rub.

He followed them into the house, pushing past the dogs with Chiara's suitcase and muttering his hellos to them. When had Betty's back thickened like that? The contrast with Chiara's frame shocked him, made him feel sneaky and mean. When he'd first met her, God, she was licking an ice-cream…

Things were different now, that was for sure.

He deposited the suitcase in Chiara's bedroom, where nothing had changed in all the years since she left home. Betty's shrine to their only child. A mosquito net hung in a quiet knot above a pink duvet that had faded to almost white. If he sat on that fabric, it would probably tear. A framed photograph of Michael looked out from the bedside table. It struck him that he'd never seen a photo of Michael in Chi's Jo'burg apartment.

The carpeting smelled damp; Margaret had probably washed it. A yellowed Queen poster was stuck to the wall above her bed, oiled signatures from decades-old Sticky Stuff marking its four corners. He doubted Chiara even noticed it anymore, and he was suddenly tempted to take it down. Instead he clasped his hands in front of him, and answered Betty's call to tea from the veranda.

"Coming!"

He walked back down the passage and through the lounge to the veranda, allowing the gauze door to snap back in place.

"Just a quick cup. I must get back to the office."

His words floated unanswered. Betty poured. Margaret must've made the tea and brought it out while he dawdled in Chi's room. He wondered whether Margaret had smiled to see Chiara, the woman she'd helped to raise. It took a lot, in his opinion, to crack the scowl on Margaret's face.

"There you go, darling," Betty said to Chiara.

She passed another cup to Frank with a smile, and then sat.

"Chi was just saying that she's not too busy at work, for once; that she may stay on a week longer. Isn't that wonderful? We must go to the cottage for a weekend. Are you able to this weekend, Frank? Or next?"

'Chi' like 'Key'.

The dogs panted as he swallowed. Cicadas buzzed, like seasonal tinnitus. He never knew how Chiara would react to the idea of going to the lake. Not that they'd go all the way around to Monkey Bay. Chi would probably never go back there. Just to Salima, where they leased the cottage.

"Why not this weekend?"

Chiara's face lifted and she nodded, looking happier at that plan than she'd seemed to see him at the airport. With a bit of luck Shiloh wouldn't put in an appearance at the cottage. Or perhaps it would be good if she, or he, or whatever, did make an appearance. Maybe Chi would get an idea of just how things were.

"Will we have the boat? Will we be able to go across to Bird Island and snorkel?" She placed her cup in its saucer and sat forward.

"For sure."

Betty beamed; he swallowed the last of his tea.

"I'd better go," he said, standing up, "see you after work girls."

Chiara's face tightened, and he remembered how it annoyed her to be called a girl. So many words she didn't like seemed to be popping around in his mouth, pressing against the gates of his lips, bursting out like naughty children.

He kissed the two women and headed back through the gauze door. Their voices started up again, low and yes, girlish, behind him. He paused in the shadows of the lounge, but couldn't make out their words.

-oOo-

Heading back towards the factory, he thought about how he discovered Shiloh. How, on what had seemed like a normal day, Betty wasn't home when he returned. Margaret told him that she'd taken the dogs for a walk, and there was nothing unusual about that, aside perhaps for the fact that she wasn't home to meet him. That was at about six in the evening.

By seven he was concerned, and took the truck out to look for her because her cell phone rang uselessly on her bedside table when he tried her number. He imagined that perhaps one of the dogs had done something stupid and got lost. Or she'd met up with one of the other expat wives and got talking and lost track of time.

She wasn't that far from the house when he did find her, sitting on a rock near the dam. He missed her the first time he drove past, expecting to see her on the actual road, not thinking that he'd need to sweep a torch through the reeds to find his wife.

She didn't seem to notice his approach, even though the dogs leaped up at the sound of his voice as he tramped through the long grass to reach them. Betty was singing something, and he couldn't make out the tune and nor did he care to. Only once he was a couple of metres from her, the beam of his torch full on her face, did she turn and smile as though it was the most normal thing in the world for them to meet there. In the dark.

"Hello darling," she said, just as she did when he got home most evenings.

"Betty, what the hell are you doing?"

He hadn't registered his anger until she spoke. Or perhaps the anxiety that built up in him as he drove around Areas Forty Three and Ten only evolved into anger once he found her. He wanted to grab her by the arms and shake that bovine look off her face. Scream at her.

"I was watching a movie with Shiloh," she said, apparently surprised at his question.

-oOo-

His hands sweated against the steering wheel, and he loosened their grip. Tears were beading at his eyelids and he was breathing hard. He focussed on the problem waiting for him at the factory. The thresher on one of the lines wasn't running smoothly, so he'd been told on the phone as he waited for Chiara at the airport.

Now a threshing machine he knew how to fix.

Chapter Two

Foodworths gets more expensive every time I shop here. I give a few kwacha to the man who carried my groceries out, get in the car, and think about Frank's lectures on locking car doors. If vehicles weren't so expensive in Malawi I'd suggest getting one of those newer ones that lock as you start to drive off. Not that it would stop anyone getting into the car when it was stationary.

There's a man sitting in the passenger seat, smiling at me.

"Hello, Betty."

"Hello."

This is interesting.

"I'm Shiloh." He extends a hand, and I shake it. A warm dry hand.

"Do I know you?" Something about the way he greeted me…

I quite like the look of him. Is he…thirty or so? Everyone seems young these days. A bit of a five o'clock shadow (at mid-morning!) He's wearing soft-looking jeans and a beige t-shirt. Sandy hair, not too long but not so short that his face looks severe. In fact, he's altogether quite a creamy looking fellow. What a nice face, kind-looking. If he was a bit older I'd consider him for Chi. She'd hate that, but he's too young anyway. Something about him seems familiar, and I try to tease at who he is, but come up empty-handed.

He runs his palms along the dashboard as though savouring the feel of it, and looks back at me. "May I ride with you a bit?"

"I'm only going back to the house."

"Suits me." And he clips his seatbelt in.

I forgot to start the car.

"All strapped in," he says.

I laugh, feeling silly, and start up the car. I reverse carefully so as to avoid drivers like Deidre Parrimore, who always drives too fast. Here she is now, shooting her car into the empty parking to us right this moment. How that woman avoids accidents is a miracle. I lift a

hand in a little wave to her as I straighten up and change gear. Glad I'm not out there having the usual demonstration of British elocution. My little salute will do. Hypocrisy is part of our expatriate game.

"Deidre should be more careful," says Shiloh.

At least we're in agreement on that point. "Sure I can't take you anywhere in particular?"

"Wherever you're going will be fine."

"Are you from here?"

"From close by."

So familiar. Lord knows my memory is cobwebby enough for him to be lost in there somewhere. Maybe Chi would remember him. I consider asking him about his parents but stop myself. He knows Deidre Parrimore; of course he's from around here. If I stop ferreting, the memory will ease out of its own accord. It always does.

I'll ask Chi when we talk next. If I can get the Skype thing to work. She gets so impatient, I feel a little anxious even thinking about it. Our last conversation (the screen was blank by then; our connection couldn't cope with our voices and our faces) still plays in my head. If I could do it over, would I be able to converse to her satisfaction? Would she still tell me, five minutes in, that she needs to go?

My busy lawyer daughter, always moving so quickly. Life is a big hurry for her; no wonder she likes Johannesburg so much. That place scares me half to death.

Such a nice-looking boy; frankly I'm surprised at not remembering him. But by the time I get to our gate, Shiloh has left. I didn't even hear the car door click.

I think about him all day. I can't help going back to the car and staring at the passenger seat, hoping to recapture the sense of him. Margaret narrows her eyes at me when she finds me in the garage, gawping in at the front passenger window.

"Phone call for you," Margaret says, but her face says something else entirely. Margaret is the queen of vibes. Funny word that, vibes. Seems it's making something of a comeback. Makes me think of pungis and, well, lots of things. I have to hold back a chuckle as I go inside.

-oOo-

It's evening and we're having our usual drinks on the veranda. I don't mention the incident to Frank.

I only ask, "Do you know anyone named Shiloh?"

He says he doesn't, and then wrinkles his forehead and says that I asked him about the name a few years ago, when those movie stars had their baby and named her Shiloh. He teases me about being fixated on film stars and their offspring, and I let the comments slide. Some things just aren't worth getting into.

"I think it's a beautiful name," is all I say.

When Chi calls (it's better on the phone than trying to skype), she says that she doesn't remember a Shiloh.

"Mum, for God's sake, why did you let a stranger in your car?"

"I didn't. Anyway, he knew me. And Deidre."

"He spoke to Deidre?"

I clear my throat, wishing I hadn't brought it up. It's just that I can't get Shiloh out of my head.

"I'm sure we'll see him when you next visit."

"You're not making any sense."

I could tell her that there's an awful lot in the world that doesn't make sense, but she of all people knows that. If it did, she wouldn't have left. She'd be here in Lilongwe. Michael would still be alive, and I'd be a grandmother. She'd be a little less angry at the world, at Frank, at me. How did that precious creature, the one whose vomit, pee and crap I used to clean up, come to despise me this way?

-oOo-

It has been a month, and I'm starting to think that Shiloh's visit was a one-off. Friends say that they don't know anyone by that name. I didn't dare ask Deidre whether she noticed Shiloh in the car. I'm tired of those women anyway. Two-faced bitches.

I sit on the veranda with my after-lunch coffee. Flying ants fluster out of a hole in the ground close to the swimming pool, not far from where I sit. They're a sure sign rain is on the way, and not a moment too soon. Lilongwe is parched beneath a layer of dust, and I feel the heat thrum against the city. It's always like this in November. Everyone's just a notch more tired, grumpier than usual.

Margaret is clanging pots and dropping utensils in the kitchen. In her mind's eye the countdown has begun. Every year the shadow of Margaret's maize crop throws peaks and troughs across our home, a cyclical temper from fields far outside Lilongwe. The rainy season looms, and the eclipse begins, a shade-cloth spreading across our lives. Right now, the need to plant her seeds is driving her every breath. The resulting fever culminates annually in storm clouds across our home: great clatterings in the kitchen and the occasional burning incident on the ironing board, or in the pot. There will be a respite once the seeds are sown, but it's only the eye of the storm. As the little green heads curl from the soil, the anguish will build again. I guess it's easy to underestimate what this is in her life, especially now that she's a widow.

Birds are arriving to feast on the oily insects as they squeeze free of the earth and flutter on short-lived paper wings. Weavers and sparrows have suspended their veganism for the afternoon, and a coucal squats closest and largest, his bill snapping.

"I love watching this," says the woman sitting in Frank's chair.

I don't jump exactly. But I'm at a loss for words; caught up in staring at my visitor. At her cropped white hair, at her eyes hooded with loose skin. Rheumy blue eyes, as the novels describe them. Gnarled hands jewelled only by age spots. Despite the heat she's wearing a grey cardigan that seems to have suffered too many washes. She brushes stiff fingers across her slacks, as though dusting off crumbs.

"Hello Betty."

Those words squeeze at my heart.

"Shiloh?"

She smiles.

I put down my coffee.

“Am I going mad?” My words sound like dust settling on a window, and I’m not sure she hears.

“Do I look like madness to you?”

I pick up the mug once more and drink, keeping an eye on Shiloh. She says nothing, but she keeps smiling.

“You disappeared last time.”

“Yes, that happens.”

“Will you stay longer today?”

“If you’ll let me.”

That’s nice; I like the sense that it’s up to me. I allow the positive caffeine feelings to percolate and mix with the warmth of Shiloh’s visit.

“I love watching this too,” I say, thinking of how the seed-eaters morph into carnivores briefly for an annual nutritional boost.

“Poor Margaret,” says Shiloh, shifting in her chair but keeping her gaze on the insect feast.

I think about Margaret for a bit, and everything that she is to me; and I turn to share, but Shiloh has gone.

-oOo-

I don’t say anything to Frank about Shiloh the man in his thirties, or Shiloh of the shabby cardigan. Nor do I mention Shiloh the little black girl with dry knees and big white teeth who keeps me company for five minutes while I pot seedlings, and then is gone.

Such short visits allow me the luxury of intervals afterwards, before Frank’s return from work; time in which to absorb the whole thing, to harness what feels like a delicious secret. Margaret is suspicious though. She comes out into the sun just as Shiloh the little girl slipped away from me and my seedlings. Margaret asks who I was talking to, and I almost answer truthfully.

-oOo-

My mouth says nothing but my heart is full of Shiloh. It's like a game. I find myself peering at new faces for too long. A beggar at an intersection is no longer someone I pretend isn't there. I came close to making a fool of myself when Frank brought a new customer home for dinner the other night. But he never said the words, despite the encouragement I tried to show the man from Philip Morris when Frank went off to get another bottle of wine.

I decide to take the dogs for a walk, even though I don't really feel like it. I want to get out; my brain is fidgety. The shadows have lengthened but the gate is warm from a day's beating by the sun.

"Hello, Betty."

I knew it!

His toenails are yellow and chipped, and now I know for sure that I'm the only one who sees him. The dogs don't even bother with a sniff, never mind a growl or a bark. Granted they're old, but he's right there. Right in front of us. I catch my breath, bite my lip.

"Hello, Shiloh. I like what you've got on today," I say, feeling clever.

He does a little twirl and the rags lift as he does so, showing thin hairy legs and his ribs. And I'm not at all clever. Why does he look different each time? How does he decide what shape to take? This feels like some sort of lesson, and I can't help a touch of resentment.

He stops, his face close to mine. I return the stare, certain that I'm looking straight at madness.

"Why are you doing this? Why am I seeing you?"

"Let's walk and I'll talk."

He turns my shoulders in the direction of the dam, but doesn't link arms with me. We walk beside each other and Ziggy and Wolf shuffle behind. Arthritic dogs still love a walk.

"You're ill, Betty. There's stuff going on that's going to incapacitate you more and more, and eventually your body will die."

I watch his lips, dry thin things that they are, and stop walking. What a thing to say! My knees buckle, and I feel Shiloh's hands cup my elbows.

"Don't be scared." His voice is far away.

The universe flares as I hang in Shiloh's hands, with my jaw slack. My heart leaps, angry and careening in the unbridled commotion of the cosmos. Atoms, dust, that's all I am. My tongue flaps at words my brain hasn't made yet.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," he says.

"I have a daughter, and a husband…"

"Come, come," he says, pulling me upright. He drags out a chair from the side of the road.

I sit, put my head in my hands and cry. Because I know it's true, I feel the certainty of it tightening. The thing that's wrong with me is nodding in affirmation, a tremor that runs at a low voltage through my whole body.

I'm sick. I'm dying.

He stands next to me, a warm hand on my back as snot and tears leak from my face. Ants bustle on desiccated earth at my feet, occasional tears bombing into their midst. I see my feet as though for the first time. Encased in my old walking shoes, they seem to shiver with a desire to escape their carapaces and march bare on the ground. They want to feel the crunch and the sharpness.

I think of Chi crying at my funeral.

I sit up and dab my face with a tissue that Shiloh hands me. A cyclist rides past, his saddle creaking with the shifting of his legs, a load of charcoal on his pannier making the job difficult. A pair of women walk in the other direction chattering in Chichewa; they call a greeting to the cyclist. A lilac-breasted roller sits on the telephone wire that loops between wooden poles on the other side of the road. He fluffs his feathers, shakes himself, and looks across at me with one eye.

My back stiffens with a fresh thought.

"I could see a doctor – a specialist. I'm American you know, Shiloh; I could get good treatment if I go back to the States. They can fix so much these days. And there are… you know, experimental groups I could join. Ones where they test new drugs and procedures…"

"I'm sorry you're scared. But it's not something to be fixed. You can go to the States, or Jo'burg, see specialists there. They won't find anything, and you'll just waste time."

"How do you know?"

"I'll be with you all the way through this," Shiloh said. "However you choose to do it."

"That's nice," I say, but really nothing is nice, and I start to cry again.

"We can have fun doing this, if you'd like."

Fun? Like?

I blink through tears and want to ask what that means, but I'm scared of the answer. Instead I say "Okay." It's a mantra of sorts.

"When you've shed your body you'll wish you hadn't wasted time being so afraid. I call it body fear. Be glad of the chance to spend time with Frank and Chi and Margaret. Not chasing after answers you won't find with doctors and hospitals. Come, let's walk some more. Down at the dam there's a nice place to sit and we can watch a movie."

"I'm not in the mood." I get to my feet, feeling like my heart isn't pumping blood properly anymore.

"You'll like this one. It's your film. The start of it anyway. I put it together myself."

So I give it a go. We sit together on a rock, on the other side of the heavily-reeded section of the dam. A more comfortable armchair I'd struggle to find. A cinema screen rises and blocks out the view of the mildewed walls that lock away expatriate and ambassadorial houses. Dark creeps across the dam, and I sink into my rock chair. A sense of Shiloh slides over me, and it's warm, almost sweet-smelling.

On the screen I watch Chiara's wedding, from exactly my viewpoint on the day. But now I'm just an observer. Did Shiloh film this using my eyes, and then edit it so only the best parts are mine to watch?

Chiara, beautiful in the soft focus of evening, swathed in chiffon and barefoot on the beach at Monkey Bay; her hair tamed, she's swearing oaths to the man she loves before God and sundry. The sun sinks as choreographed, and Chiara and Michael glow, suspended in a time without sadness.

My flesh prickles. I rub my arms and look at the skin. In the light from the screen I make out that my arms and hands are smoother. I touch my face. The slackness has retreated enough that I can feel it.

“Is this permanent?”

“Nope. Just for while the movie’s on, you’ll be the age you were when it happened. Popcorn?”

“Oh. Yes please.”

I can’t resist looking at my hands again as I reach for the box he hands to me from behind his chair.

“May I un-press pause?”

“Oh! Sorry, yes please.”

Thank goodness he paused the film. It’s sacrilege to waste time looking at an illusion of younger skin and reaching for popcorn when the Best of Memories is being played. I just hope the screening doesn’t show the moment I received the call from Deidre Parrimore to say that Michael had been in an accident. That his car had been hit by a fire engine that was out of control coming the wrong way in the traffic circle near Foodworths.

Chapter Three

Chiara always fell asleep on the trip to the lake.

And yet, what did she do all those years ago when they drove out to Monkey Bay for her wedding? It was chaotic, the truck loaded with wedding paraphernalia and the road out to Monkey Bay so bad in those days. And on top of that there were the frayed nerves, the sulking and snapping that were all apparently the due of the bride.

Frank didn't remember Betty being like that at their wedding. It was a blur, a rush against time. Perhaps as a groom at the dawn of the seventies, that side of the wedding was never his to observe.

He glanced at her profile as she swayed next to him in the car. She was keeping an eye out for the first baobab. As though the ancient tree might have crept one bend in the road closer than it had been all these years.

"I'm gonna be first this time, Frank." She said it without turning her head. Her fingers concertinaed a patch of her dress in her lap. He wished that she'd wear something other than those wretched crimplene things. Even those kaftans she first brought out to Malawi would be better.

"Never."

He felt his own smile, caught the citrus of the scent she wore.

"Certainly no challenge from the back," said Betty, and she twisted in her seat to look back at their daughter. "Some things never change."

Frank felt his throat constrict, and he swallowed. He wanted to reach out with his left hand and rest it on her thigh today. It would be out of character, and Betty would be surprised. So he kept both hands on the steering wheel, aware of a faint itch.

It was strange that Betty didn't seem agitated about Shiloh's apparent revelation about her sickness. At moments he thought he sensed some sort of languorous melancholy in her, but it was always fleeting. He sighed.

Betty reached out and rested a hand on his shoulder, in the way that he would've liked to touch her. "Don't be sad, Frank."

A hot rush sprang at his eyelids and he clamped his jaw. Over the next crest he saw the tree.

"The baobab!" Betty retracted her hand to give a little clap.

How much longer would she be able to recognise the baobab? How many trips did they have left? Was she really sick? How dare she refuse to see a specialist?

"You're not being fair, Bet. This bloody Shiloh, who's not even a real person for God's sake, is dictating something that we should have a say in. He or she, or whatever the bloody hell it is, doesn't know what treatments are out there or how clever these specialists are. Or what your condition is. What if it's a simple matter of a tablet a day? Or an operation? It's ridiculous."

Betty's hands dropped. "Please, Frank."

"Do you think this is fair on us?"

`"I should never have told you about Shiloh." Her words were like a fist, tightening around his chest.

They sat staring ahead. Frank wished he could get his hands around Shiloh's neck and squeeze.

"I didn't need to be told about Shiloh to know something was wrong," Frank said after a few minutes.

He felt the right to forge ahead. To lay a few cards on the table in front of a wife who was being uncharacteristically determined. It was time to be sensible. Even Chiara would be on his side with this argument. He wished that she'd wake up. Betty made no reply.

"What do you think happened when I had to come and fetch you from the nursery? You couldn't find your car, and it was there in the parking lot. Right in front of you. And what about the dinner for the Philip Morris people? You knew they were coming for weeks. You spoke to me I don't know how many times about the stuffed fillet you were planning. What a bloody fiasco."

He'd arrived home with a squadron of customers, only to find his wife in front of the television in her pyjamas and no meal prepared for anyone. Tears were running down her cheeks and her mouth was crammed with popcorn.

The first words she'd forced past the popcorn were, "I miss Carolyn."

Betty stared ahead in the direction of hills made hazy by the heat, and the huts and people that freckled the roadside. He wondered whether she was thinking about the pedestrians and cyclists they'd always had to be so careful of on this road. Maybe she was off somewhere with Shiloh, watching a movie.

"Please Betty. Let's go back to the States and see a specialist. Or even just to Jo'burg. Chiara will set everything up for us. A quick trip. Have some tests done, and find out what this is. Find out about treatment. See what we can do to fix it."

So now he was begging, using almost exactly the same words as when they left Henry Trevor's consulting rooms weeks ago. Before he called Chiara and asked her to come home. Dr Trevor had been vague and rueful, twisting his hands and muttering about things like tumours, a virus, dementia; apologising for the fact that he was only a general practitioner. Betty said little then too. Her face stayed blank, as it did now.

He rubbed his forehead and then changed gears as he slowed the car to turn right at the T-junction where the main road met the boundary of the Livingstonia Hotel. He crept forward on the dust track of road, catching glimpses of the lake when he allowed his eyes to flick left at Betty.

Beyond the windscreen, heat encased Salima as it languished at the lakeside in a stupor more soporific than Lilongwe's. The white slab of the hotel's boundary ended, and fenced lakeside properties continued the line. Pedestrians walked at the side of the dirt track, feet barely leaving the ground. Outside the shade of the trees that lined the road in patches, scrub grew in clumps out of a grey powder soil. A brindled dog observed their progress, lifting its nose as they passed.

The steering wheel was heavy as he turned the car in at the gate they never bothered to close. Their cottage was a low white construction they'd leased from Mr Mutaleeb for over twenty years now. Mr Mutaleeb didn't particularly care for maintenance. Frank and Betty initially made certain facts such as leaky faucets known to him; Mr Mutaleeb responded with placatory noises and left things as they were. Frank took to maintaining the premises himself

and deducting the cost from their lease: a course of action that initially met with protest, but in time settled into unspoken agreement.

How was it that something as mundane as a relationship with the wealthy Pakistani storekeeper was so easy and changed so little in all that time, and yet his connection with Betty changed in what seemed like a moment? A flash of time in their long slow path, and suddenly there was something wrong in her head, and their worlds were sliding, grinding against and away from each other.

Her brain was lying to her, so she had no mechanism to question it. She was like some sort of science fiction robot that couldn't be rebooted.

-oOo-

He turned off the engine. Arnold, the gardener cum housekeeper for the cottage, was nowhere to be seen. They sat in the car in silence for a few seconds, as though each of them was preparing to say something.

A creak issued from the back seat, and Chiara said, "Excellent, we're here."

She pushed her head through the gap between his seat and Betty's. "So Dad, were you the first to spot the baobab?"

Betty looked down at her hands, and Frank reached across and patted his wife's knee. "Your mother beat me to it this time."

Betty bobbed her head and made a small sound without opening her mouth, and Chiara laughed.

"Well done Mum. I reckon you were just letting him win all these years to keep him happy. Come on parents. Let's get onto that veranda. There are gin and tonic ingredients in the cooler box, and they're not going to drink themselves."

Chiara snapped open a door and Frank heard her move to the back and unlock the tailgate. He looked at Betty, but she shifted and opened up her own door; his hand slipped from her lap. He looked at his wrinkled hand as it lay on the seat for a heartbeat, and felt surprised at the age spots. How had he got here? Could he define the little turns, the incremental adjustments that led him to this very moment?

"Come on, Dad!"

He moved out the car and around to the back, where he reached for a crate and thought about easier things, like the fact that he really should have phoned and made a plan for Arnold to be here to help them carry this lot into the house. Hell, it was hot.

As he carried a load around the side of the vehicle that ticked and cooled in the shade, he passed Betty who was making her way around to collect more luggage. She returned his look, and the pity he saw there almost took his breath away. They stared at each other as Chiara called out from the kitchen window.

“Dad! I can’t make GnT’s when you’re holding all the lemons in that crate.”

He wanted to tell Betty that he loved her and that he was afraid, but she dropped her gaze and moved on. So he continued into the house, towards a daughter he didn’t understand, and away from a wife he thought he had, before Shiloh showed up.

Chapter Four

Is that Shiloh?

A slight vibration at the fringe of my senses. I push the feeling aside. If it's really Shiloh, my resistance won't work for long. The visits increasingly leave me confused and thick-tongued, especially once Shiloh leaves. Here at the nursery, it's not the time or place for weirdness. I pay for my seedlings and try to ignore the gist of urgency seeping into my nerves. Best not to even take a peek into the coffee shop and see who's there. The cheque takes an age to write out. My hand grinds along the paper, and the pen is heavy between my fingers. I tear along the perforation and try not to look up. But the teller isn't interested in me anyway.

Out in the heat and brightness of Lilongwe, I allow my eyes to adjust before I try to locate the man who took the seedlings to my car. A middle aged woman, wearing an apron and flour dust stands at my side. A new employee at the coffee shop perhaps.

"Hello Betty."

Que sera, sera…

She takes my hand, and we sit on one of those metal benches with curlicues that's more comfortable than it looks. I've tried to persuade Frank of this, but he isn't interested in anything that doesn't look comfortable. The hedge behind us separates the nursery from the parking area, and drops shade over us. It's an unlikely, but really rather lovely spot. Shiloh pulls out one of those small hand-held television screens.

"It's called a Walka," she says.

The fabric of her apron, beneath its dusting of flour, has owls all over it. I remember when my skin was like hers; creases that were only hints of the folds that now strap my features. Except that of course as we sit here, my skin is pulling itself tighter.

We eat jelly babies out of the giant apron pocket, and start to watch a film. The screen enlarges and fills my vision, almost sucking me up. I'm back at Bishop Mackenzie in the days before it was awarded International School status. I'm standing in for a teacher who's gone back to the UK to have a baby. Before me, a cluster of expatriate children fidget in the

dim classroom, mosquitoes flitting beneath their desks. I can practically hear the ticking of their brains as they shimmy through the hot school day.

I can smell it this time. The dessicated scent of the room's crevices, sun cream on sweating children. Waxy crayons on crusty paper. And my skin again; tauter, more elastic even than it was at Chi's wedding.

Chiara.

The bell chimes the end of school, and she appears through my classroom door. Her adolescent face shines as she lolls against my desk and gives short answers to questions about her day. My heart quivers at the immature lace of that voice in the classroom twilight. Her skirt is too short for these days under Kamuzu Banda, and I tug at my own long skirt. Her socks are rolled down too low. I want to clad her in armour for what the world holds in store.

She's growing away from me, lengthening and stretching out into the world. She'll move to boarding school this September, all the way down in Blantyre.

Our walk to my car feels like an eternal one. My legs seem unable to stretch across the distance; the puppeteer holding my strings is clumsy, and my pulse is too fast. But it hardly matters because Chi is at my side and talking. Talking, talking, talking at me, in a way that I know will come to an end someday. One day she'll stop confiding in me. A time is coming when she'll realise that I can't give her the answers to cruel twists in her world. When she'll shrink from everything, everyone. I won't be able to shield her from that pain, and she'll retreat. My precious child will curl into herself and I'll probably never be able to prise her out.

Her words roll around and over me, a caress that's all the sweeter for being finite. It doesn't matter that I can't see the car, and that the scenery is awash with features I don't recognise. The path roils, a long brown snake, and the trees bend and curve around us, writhing and twisting to the golden filament of my daughter's voice. All I care about are her delicious twelve-year old declarations, drip, drip, dripping into my soul.

-oOo-

This is why I try to keep Shiloh at bay. This person who strolls in and out of my life is like sugar. Sugar and opiates. When I have a taste, I struggle to recover. All I want is Shiloh. I'm more alert for signs of Shiloh than I am for Frank or Margaret. It takes me days to wean

away; not that I ever do completely. How can I possibly, when the world is only in full colour when Shiloh is here? I feel so unsure of myself. It's quite possible I've muted the colours of my own life over the years.

Elyssa dreamed in these colours. I killed her years ago; that's why only Shiloh can bring me colour now.

-oOo-

The Philip Morris team is coming for dinner. I'm alone in the kitchen, which I don't like. Alone with two wet beef fillets, and an idea of stuffing them with feta. I've never been great on this front, and I miss Margaret. Among other things, she's my saving grace when it comes to customer dinners.

A knock on the kitchen door. It must be Chance with some request or other. Honestly, I wish he'd just get on with garden things without involving me. Whenever I'm distracted I mess up the cooking. My fingers don't even want to touch the moist flesh.

But it's not Chance. It's a man who looks like the Swedish Chef from The Muppets. In a blue and white striped shirt; chef hat and pink bow tie.

"Hello Betty." Caterpillars of hair roll above his eyes and over his ears.

"Was he your favourite Muppet too?" My heart is skipping away from the fillets.

"Hurdeebur." Shiloh walks in, waving a wooden spoon.

I want to touch that ovule of nose; is it made of skin?

"Margaret's away," I say instead. "Some family emergency, and now that Shadrack's gone…"

"But you think it has something to do with reaping maize." The wooden spoon waves.

I'm suddenly pleased that Margaret's not here.

"Well, I'm here to help you out. Go and have a bath and get comfortable. I'll throw a few things in the oven, and when you're ready we can watch the next movie."

"What about the dinner party?" I don't know why I ask.

"I'm in charge."

Can he cook? Shiloh can do anything. I don't feel like caring about the slimy fillets and the laying of the table. I don't want to fuss about the small talk that I'll have to engage in with Frank's customers. I have a problem that can't be diagnosed; my time is precious. A bath would be nice, but I worry that I'll return to the kitchen and find Shiloh gone.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Not at all the sort of voice I'd associate with the Swedish Chef. But I always understand Shiloh perfectly. I pause.

"Go." The wooden spoon wags in the direction of my bedroom.

I scamper down the passage, my head all light and excited. No time to loll around in the bath. Instead I shower, wondering what episode Shiloh has for me this time. But as I lean against the white tiles to scrub my feet, their chill seeps through my skin and into my heart.

I start to dress, and feel the silliness of it all. The Swedish Chef in my kitchen; what the hell is that? My race to get back to the kitchen, back to Shiloh, back to the Best of Memories, feels like evidence of my own madness.

My body gets heavier, as though gravity is strengthening. I can't bear the thought of dressing in the outfit I planned for the evening. Pulling on my dressing gown, I'm barely able to tie the belt. My legs are leaden. It would be ridiculous to go back to the kitchen, to that silly puppet-man. I'm so tired. If I can just lie on the bed for a minute, maybe five, I might liven up enough to face them when they all arrive. And Shiloh will have left. I sit on the edge of the bed, turn and fall into the deepness of it.

-oOo-

There's a knock on my door.

"Betty?"

"Go away."

No sound from the door, but suddenly he's beside me, a current of air where there had been none. I can't bear it if he's still the Swedish Chef.

"Open your eyes."

I lift myself up on one elbow. He sits beside me, heavy and warm, smelling like freshly mowed grass. He's a young man. Early twenties maybe. Lean and strong, not silly and stuffed-looking. I start to cry.

"I'm so afraid."

"I know." He pulls me close.

I lie my head in his lap and cry until the tears stop. Shiloh runs his fingers through my hair, softly, as though he's had practice with that sort of thing.

"Do you want to watch that movie?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you do."

He carries me, all the way from my bedroom at the one end of the house, through to the TV room at the furthest side. I turn my face into his chest, and keep my eyes closed as we move, aware of his strength. I breathe in lungfuls of him, knowing that he's real because of that verdant scent and the torque of his muscles. He places me on my favourite couch, switches on the television and sits next to me.

"Popcorn?"

"Yes please."

There goes my skin. I run slimmer fingers across a smoother face. My hair is thicker in my grip. I pull at it, enjoying the tug against my scalp.

"You're only a bit younger than the last time we watched."

Shiloh inserts popcorn into a mouth that makes me think of the stain burst berries leave. I stare at him.

"Watch the film."

The older I've got, the more time I've spent watching TV. You could say I've wasted a lot of time that way. But what's an expatriate wife with no child at home to do? There was only so much Bridge and Mahjong to play. Only so much tennis with the other wives. So I face the television at Shiloh's instruction.

On the screen I'm walking down a road. But it's the road close to our former house, the one in Area Forty Three, where we lived before Frank got his promotion. I recognise the direction I'm taking; I'm going to Carolyn's house. Carolyn left years ago, taking my secrets and any desire to maintain friendships with her. Movie stars are more fun, and I can switch them off when they become tedious. If only Deidre Parrimore had an Off button.

"You're sniggering."

I put my fingers to my lips, conscious of a yearning to stain them with berries.

Back to the television, and I can't figure out why I'm walking in this scene. Lilongwe is hot, and I've never been one to take a walk in the middle of the day, even with the dogs. There are no dogs in sight; I never take Ziggy and Wolf to Carolyn's because of Carolyn's own dogs, and her ancient cat. The screen is blurry, and I hear my own breathing.

Was I able to hear sound the last time I watched with Shiloh? It was more of a feeling than a consciousness of hearing anything. This time I listen to my breath catching; I feel the stumble of my feet against the loose stones, the wetness on my cheeks. Down the roadside, through the dip into the bridge across the dambo. Up again, marching towards the loop road. Into the shade of the trees that line the road where Carolyn's house sits, fanning out from a bend in the road. Such a funny-shaped property. Such a weird beat to my heart. As though something is very wrong.

And of course it's wrong.

"This is meant to be the Best of Memories," I whisper.

"You called it that."

"I don't want to watch anymore."

Shiloh doesn't say anything, but squeezes my hand. My heart flaps at my ribcage, and I feel my hand sweating against his. So I grip harder and keep watching, cramming popcorn into my face with my free hand.

The gate handle resists my grasp, and I feel the pinch of its sudden release, wanting to yelp again, all these years later. Carolyn's dogs rush and jump at me. Aging little yappy things that Carolyn hauled out from the UK. My steps swat them aside. Up the double track of Carolyn's driveway, with its clipped grass centre. Manicured iceberg roses stand sentinel to my distress. Carolyn is coming to me, jogging and somehow still ladylike, one hand

clutching the fake pearls at her chest. Tears rolling down her made-up face. And we meet like lovers in her driveway, crashing at each other and sobbing. The stuff of Hollywood. Shiloh's hand is still tight, still holding me there.

"I don't believe it," Carolyn is saying.

Words won't form in my mouth. I hold onto my friend as though I can't stand on my own. Perhaps I can't. Her voice is a balm after all these years.

I look away from the television and out the window, but the story stays with me. Shiloh's hand is gone, but I'm distracted. The intensity of that day and the time that followed still hurts, albeit more gently these days. Days, months and years of forcing that injury to heal, of ignoring the festering beneath the scab. The scar tissue is thick and hard, and I've run a finger across it from time to time.

I'm still glad that I never showed Frank.

That day I invoked my own code of silence and swore Carolyn to it with me, cruel as that felt to both of us. How she argued! Tugged at my will, shook me almost to the core with her reasoning.

You have to confront him!

But that was because she didn't know my own darkness. So I told her, the words dribbling out of me in a shameful trickle. A Brentwood pool house with a kitten-heel shoe, an emerald necklace on the neck of a denialist, pungis, Assisi; out it all oozed. And Carolyn became the only person who really knows me. My heart hammers now, like it did that day on the Area Forty Three Loop, and I will never have a friend like Carolyn again.

Chapter Five

Shadows stretched fingers out toward the lake, and the water quietened to short frills on the sand. Frank sat on the veranda, watching his wife and daughter out on the beach. They sat with their backs to him. Rays of a gentler sun glanced off their backs, their legs stretched out on the beach. Gin and tonic in glasses at their sides.

Out over the water, lake flies swarmed in a column. The spiced scent of bougainvillea swirled at him, mixing with hints of fish and fresh water. A mosquito sucked at his calf, and Frank slapped at it. He drained his glass and stood, hiked up his shorts and decided there was no reason he shouldn't join them. Theirs wasn't a secret society, for God's sake.

A cigarette would be great. Strange that all these years later the urge swept up and took him by surprise. There was no tobacco in the cottage, and the irony made him smile. So he picked up his glass, went into the kitchen and poured himself another G'nT. This time he didn't measure anything, just splashed the gin to a level that pleased his eye. Cracked open the tonic, the sweet variety that only the Malawians made. Malawi tonic and Malawi gin. Nothing like it anywhere else on earth.

After all these years, he still wasn't sure whether he loved or hated Malawi. Gin and tonic, now that was part of the love. More than forty years living and working in the place, and yet he had only been granted permanent residence ten years ago. Perhaps it wasn't hate; more like exasperation.

The sharp little blade Betty brought on every trip carved through the lemon. Slices that were wedges really. Not too thin. He wrangled the juice from one, twisting the peel, bursting the cells, freeing the skin oils into his drink. Could've been a barman. Lived out in the Keys. If he'd done that, he'd never have come out to Africa in all likelihood. If he'd seen this far ahead, would he've made different decisions? Maybe he wouldn't have come out to Africa to help establish the factory; perhaps he wouldn't have made that trip to Italy to the Assisi operation either.

Maybe a Frank with a slightly better perspective would have abandoned the engineering degree and sloped off to Florida to indulge a love of hot places in the good old US of A. The idea of sloping off anywhere made him laugh aloud.

No Assisi visit would've meant no marriage to Betty. No Chi. He pushed two ice cubes out of the tray and slid them into the glass. Now it was too full, so he leaned over the table and slurped up a sip. Delicious as nicotine. That was what he was telling himself today, anyway. The glass was beading and slippery in his hand, so he supported its base with the other. Stepping out into the late afternoon light, he thought perhaps he should've offered to refresh their drinks too. But then they hadn't invited him down to the water's edge.

A shard of Chiara's laughter speared back in his direction, and he saw that she was now reclining on her elbows, head back, and Betty was looking across at her, also laughing. Sounds that made his heart warm. He kept walking. Across the rough lawn, thick-bladed and unkempt (he would have words with Arnold about the state of it tomorrow), and onto the beach, rough and grainy on feet used to work boots. He paused and took another sip.

"Hello darling," said Betty.

A breeze lifted wisps of her hair.

"We were wondering how long it'd take you to join us. What were you doing?" said Chiara.

There were grey streaks in his daughter's hair, and he wondered why she didn't colour it. He couldn't remember the last time he noticed her wearing makeup. Didn't women her age feel the need to spruce themselves up a bit as age began to dull their features? Betty did. Perhaps it was part of Chi's don't-give-a-shit thing; the one that started after Michael died. Still, he couldn't picture this bohemian with unkempt hair sitting behind a desk making lawyerly decisions. Frank sat and stretched his own legs out in front of him, and buried his hands in the sand as buttresses.

He thought of saying that he'd been watching them and decided against it. "So, what have you two been talking about?"

"This and that," said Chiara. "We'd just got onto insects in Malawi, and Mom…"

Betty snorted, and brought a hand to her mouth.

Chiara continued, a small laugh of her own breaking the cadence of her words. "She couldn't say 'flies'. Couldn't remember the word, or couldn't get it out, whatever. She started buzzing instead…"

Chiara broke off and was quiet, but now lay fully on the beach, her body shaking. The sand would be getting into her hair; there was who-knew-what filth in it. The story wasn't the least bit funny, but he was listening to it out of context.

He took a big mouthful of gin, leaving it there for a moment before allowing it down his throat. He knew from the days when he'd chewed tobacco, that the thin membranes lining the mouth allowed quicker absorption into the bloodstream. Perhaps that would work with the gin. Maybe he'd find Betty's buzzing amusing.

Betty also lay back, and he wanted to pull her up. To remind her of the chicken bones and other rubbish they'd discovered in that sand over the years. Instead he looked ahead at the little waves that rushed at the shore, short manes dissipating as they fell away to nothing.

A fisherman approached in his dugout to their left, slipping across the waves, guiding himself with a pole. He was singing, a sound that reached them in a distorted pitch. Frank understood only certain words in Chichewa, the words that made working in a factory alongside a Malawian workforce a little easier. Not that many Malawians were willing to talk to him in anything but English. He would attempt Chichewa, and they'd answer him in English. Probably because his attempt was awful. Whatever the reason, his desire to learn had flopped and died, like the feeble thing it was.

Words. They were slippery eels at times. Betty's struggle with a word as simple as 'flies' bothered him though. In a country like Malawi, the word was automatic on a person's lips. Flies were a constant, right through the cooler dry season. A barbeque was an exercise in fly-control. Only once had Frank and Betty cooked fish outside. By the time it was ready, they were hounded indoors, a battalion of tiny bodies beating against the gauze door at their retreat. Flies were omnipresent. Their name did not escape a person living in Lilongwe.

The fisherman slid out of the canoe, gliding waist deep into the water. He pulled his craft alongside him, lifting a hand in greeting.

"Moni." Chiara never forgot the language Margaret had taught her.

Betty said nothing, but she was watching the fisherman too. Frank lifted one hand in return.

Perhaps it was a figment of his frightened imagination that she was losing words as well as time. Betty was a woman who spoke as much as any other, and in Frank's experience,

that was quite a bit. He mulled over the idea of her vocabulary, wondering whether it had seemed to shrink recently. Maybe it was his imagination, but it seemed she spoke less once the hallucinations started. He thought of her silence in the car on the trip to the lake. In all likelihood that was the result of anger. Or even pity. But what if it was because of fewer words at her disposal? What if Shiloh was stealing the very sounds that came from her as well?

"Frank?"

"What?"

"You were growling, Dad," said Chiara, sitting up. "You two make a great couple. Buzzing and growling."

They all laughed, and Frank wondered whether any of them really thought it was funny.

-oOo-

The following morning they rose, damp from a night without air conditioning. No generator, and another power cut.

"Mr Mutaleeb will never put in that generator, Dad."

"Well, I can't afford one that'll sit idle out here most days. Chances are it would be stolen anyhow."

The kettle whistled on the gas hob and Frank poured into the mugs. "Where's your mom?"

"She went out earlier. Said she wanted to drink her coffee on the beach. Watch the sun come up."

"I don't know how she drinks coffee in this heat."

Chi laughed.

"What's funny?"

"Like tea isn't as hot as coffee?"

Frank shrugged, extracted the teabags and threw them into the bin. He could hear Arnold outside; it sounded like he was taking the cover off the boat.

"Let's join her," he said.

The sun had already removed any hint of dew from the grass. He reminded himself to speak to Arnold about the general state of the place. No sign of Betty. Not even under the wooden umbrella he'd put up a few years ago.

"She must've gone for a walk," said Chiara.

The sun was shining directly at them, glaring at their hesitation across a winking lake.

"I'm sure she's fine, Dad."

"We should make sure. You go inside and check again; check the back as well. Stay at the house though, in case she comes back. Call me if you find her…"

He patted his pocket and turned back to the house, remembering that his phone was on his bedside table. He could hear Chi trotting behind him.

"Dad? She's fine, isn't she?"

He didn't answer, but took his phone from the bedroom table and turned, bumping into Chi.

"Dad?"

"She's probably fine, but we have to make sure."

He was using his crisis-at-work voice. Like the time Shadrack got his arm caught in the thresher. It was meant to be off. The whole line was supposed to be switched off for maintenance. There was blood everywhere and Shadrack was screaming and the other workers were bellowing, and only Frank thought to shut off the line and use his voice to lower the hysteria. Shadrack… Sometimes he really did hate Malawi.

Chiara looked at him. He took her hands in his.

"Nothing bad will happen to her out here. If she's having an episode, she'll just be a bit lost, that's all."

Chi nodded.

"You stay and keep an eye out here. I'll call if I find her…"

He walked out of the house, telling himself not to run while Chi was watching. Which way? He paused at the beach, and decided on left, towards the Livingstonia Hotel. No particular reason. He simply wouldn't be surprised if she was at the hotel…in her pyjamas. With Shiloh.

He wouldn't get angry.

The sand was oddly cool against his feet. Waves hissed at his ankles, then slithered back. He thought of bilharzia, and the times they were treated for it as a family. His heart felt tight, as though his ribs were all that stopped it from exploding. Everyone went through this…times when events, decisions, choices led to a sense of threat.

Something sharp pressed back at his foot, and he swore. He hopped clear of the water, then sat in the sand and examined his foot. There was a small cut. He looked around, but there was no sign of whatever had caused the damage. It must be a piece of glass, well hidden among the grains.

The cut wasn't something that could be left, and certainly shouldn't be subjected to the lake water. Damn Betty. And Shiloh. He stood and decided to continue to the hotel. He hobbled on and felt the sting in his foot test his resolve. A pair of youngsters sat on the sand, their backs to the wall, and tittered at him, saying something that was surely unflattering in Chichewa. His nostrils were actually flaring, he could feel them. He spurred himself on with muttered expletives.

"Bloody shitting little fuckers."

The snarl of his own voice made him angrier, as did their laughter as it eddied behind him. The sun was already hot on one side of his face. Unreasonable as his anger might be, Frank allowed it to blossom.

He saw her. Back to the water, sitting on an upturned dugout and watching children play soccer in the sand. With one of those balls that kids created out of plastic and rubber litter, bound with rubber bands he guessed. He'd looked at one properly years ago out in the farming areas up in the north… where exactly had that been? Cassie was with him. He remembered her beautiful hands on the ball, turning it. And her smile.

Betty clapped her hands as a goal was scored. So Shiloh wasn't here.

"Hello, darling," she said with a wave.

Frank told himself to loosen his shoulders and unclench his jaw.

“Why are you limping?”

He sat beside her on the grey wood, and she moved her coffee mug from the sand to accommodate him. He could see no trace of yesterday’s attrition in her face. She rubbed his shoulder.

“Piece of glass, I think.” He lifted the injured foot across his other knee for her inspection.

“That needs cleaning.”

“I thought that you might be out here with Shiloh.”

He berated himself the second the words were out, hating the way he couldn’t resist them. She shifted a few centimetres and looked back at the children, who had reached some sort of hiatus in their game.

“Let’s get you back home and sort out that foot.”

He wanted to say that he hadn’t meant his words unkindly, but that wouldn’t have been true. Instead he stood, and remembered to take out his phone to tell Chiara that her mother was fine. Betty looked out at the lake as he spoke. As soon as he’d finished, she began to walk back, not looking at him.

He didn’t know if he could bear this; didn’t know how long this rift would last between them; whether it could be repaired. Did he have it in him to deal with her failing mind? To look on with love, as bits of her that he loved crumbled away and left who knew what?

He caught up with her and reached for her hand. She’d know what such a gesture meant from him. She glanced his way, and a corner of her mouth curled. He’d thought about leaving her years ago. Caught up in the scent and tautness of another, younger pretender. His breath caught at the memory of being lost in that. Immersed the youth and beauty that had begun to fade in his own body, and that he saw slackening in Betty. A time of clichés and delusion, and he hadn’t given a damn. He’d quite literally fucked his brains out. And he’d wanted to carry on like that forever. As though he would never tire, never grow old while he was with Cassie.

Still… He hadn't confessed; hadn't run off with the girl. Broken all the rules, yes – and condemned himself to the guilt of the unconfessed. At that time he'd been like an addict. Never could he have imagined that he would give it up. Trips to the US with his addiction at his side. Trips within the region, examining, designing, educating… Thrusting himself into a girl he was teaching all sorts of lessons, although God knew she'd taught him a thing or two. A wonderful thing or two. Glorious and frightening.

Her father put an end to it. A man only three years older than Frank, and a customer. A man with the power to take Frank's job, and who'd made the threat clear. How dare Frank take advantage of his position as his daughter's mentor? Cassie's father had raised such a stink, the whole of Lilongwe knew what was going on. So how the hell Betty never knew was nothing short of a miracle.

Carolyn would've known. He'd never understood women. But he convinced himself that Carolyn didn't tell Betty out of some sort of loyalty to her friend, or because (was it possible?) she felt that it was none of her business. Carolyn never said a word to him but she certainly got frosty. Stared at him with a meanness in her eyes that made her message clear. He didn't care at first. He almost hoped that she would say something to Betty to save him from bringing it up.

Later he'd woken up some nights, sweating at the notion that Carolyn would say something after he had called it off with Cassie. All that worrying and stress, and here was Betty now: losing her mind, and still unaware of his affair with a girl in her twenties that lasted almost half a year.

It did raise the question: had he ever been that blind about her?

"Betty?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry, my love. That was mean. I'm on your side you know…"

She stopped then, her back to the water and her face softened by the shadow. "Are you Frank?"

He nodded, unsure of exactly what she was encompassing with those words. A soft peppery scent curled between them. Bougainvillea again. Frank sighed it into his lungs, and

they walked again. Betty's hand dropped from his, and she lifted it to wave at Chiara. She walked on ahead of him.

Chapter Six

I feel so mad at Frank. As though all the resentment I boxed when he was screwing that Cassie girl has popped its casing. But I keep it in my head because it's my secret. The fact that I know about it – knew at the time – and never said a word to him. And my reasons were good ones, I think. I'm starting to feel a little less sure of that actually. But why now?

What's this sense I feel growing, that I care less about the things I thought were important just a few months ago? May I blame it on Shiloh? Probably a good thing that I'm losing words. Some, not all of them. And not always. It helps to keep my mouth shut. Frank seems suspicious, in that slightly irritated way of his. Some words buzz in the corners of my head but I can't get to them.

Chiara's also getting on my nerves this morning. A stroll on the beach with my morning coffee, and she thinks I should be committed. Or that I should at least 'see someone'.

The fact that I was hoping to find Shiloh makes me madder. I thought she'd come sit beside me on that dugout, and show me a movie on the hotel wall. I thought that the fisherman yesterday was him. I thought I recognised the song he was humming: China Cat Sunflower; makes me think of when I was pregnant. When I was pregnant and realising the need to be Betty. Betty, trying to forget Elyssa. Elyssa loved songs like 'China Cat Sunflower', and could never have been a decent wife or mother.

But Malawian fishermen don't hum Grateful Dead songs.

Now my child is humming that Neil Diamond song, 'Shilo'. Because of course, I'm loopy, and I must've invented an imaginary friend to cope with the fact that I'm losing my mind. I want to tell her to stop, but can't think of the best way to say so. I could just tell her to fucking stop it, but I don't curse. The correct words and the way of structuring them are elusive, and I seem to lack the energy to catch them. So she hums on.

We're preparing a crate for the boat. We're going across to Bird Island to snorkel. I slam the cutting board onto the counter because I have to stop her. She looks at me, and her eyebrows are question marks.

"You okay?"

"Stop that humming. Please."

She puts down the butter knife and moves closer to me. Puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Mom?"

"You're…you're aggravating me. Trying to be clever…"

"What? Is it my voice? The song?"

"Of course it's the damned song."

There. Surprise. She turns me to face her. Cups my chin in her hand and lifts it. I can smell tinned tuna on her fingers, and I think of how much I hate the sogginess of tuna sandwiches. Tears come, and I really can't bear the idea of a mushy sandwich for lunch.

"You don't like Neil Diamond all of a sudden?"

I sigh and wipe my eyes with the heel of my hand, distancing myself from the smell of her fingers.

"Just 'Shilo'. You're trying to aggravate me."

I sense that 'aggravate' isn't the word I want, but the one I'm looking for refuses to be found.

"It wasn't 'Shilo'. It was 'Song Sung Blue'."

She says it softly, as though her sentence is some sort of discovery. I want to say that her betrayal is unfair, but Frank walks into the kitchen. I love these two, but they're driving me crazy.

"Nearly ready?"

"Almost," says Chiara, and her face and her words are bright.

Her eyes seem a bit damp. Frank looks at me and I shrug. He and Arnold have got the boat ready it seems, and I feel my spirits pick up. Bird Island is small and rocky, and stinks to high heaven because of the guano. But the snorkelling around it is great. And you get used to the stench. I put the board and a few last things in the crate, and I realise that I'm humming.

What are the words to this song? Something about a young child with dreams. A lonely child, I suspect.

-oOo-

The water seems choppier than yesterday. I'm holding my hat down over my ears but the rest of the brim flaps at my head; it's noisy and it stings. Frrrrrrapp…app..app…My hat wants to take flight, and I don't blame it. A beautiful day out on the water; the colours are strong, and the wind is playful. I wouldn't mind taking flight myself. Except that I long to snorkel, and that's what this is about.

Bird Islands draws us in with a reel that seems to be bouncing. I'm glad of my sunglasses as this day sparkles out at us. Chiara is grinning back at me, and gives a thumbs-up. I return it, and of course control of my hat is jeopardised. Funny for both of us. The boats engine prohibits conversation, which I can't say I mind. Words, words, words! Where are they sneaking off to? I should be worried I guess, but instead I find the need for Shiloh more pressing.

The whine of the engine lowers, and we coast on a wave towards rocks white with bird droppings. A fish eagle eyes us from the top of a tree, but it's the cormorants who've make this snowy stench. They're everywhere: in the trees and on the rocks, heads lifted, pale waistcoats strapped on. Making a racket at our approach. The fish eagle gives one flap and takes off. The waves from our earlier speed have caught up with us, and now rush past at the rocks, chuffing at them in playful slaps.

Chi pinches her nose. "My God, it never gets better does it?"

But I can see how happy she is. Frank's in the water, and busy anchoring the boat. Chi and I offload the cooler box, the crate and the bag of snorkelling kit. Which is what I really want to get busy with. It seems an age since I last swam here. Chi flaps a towel across a rock.

"You getting in already, Mom?"

"For sure. I don't want to get any hotter."

She slips off her dress and is still neat in her bathing costume for a woman her age. Perhaps it's the look of a woman who has never given birth, but I think that it has more to do with genes from her father. I try not to look at her that way – to see us in her. It doesn't seem fair.

I pull off my dress. It's the same old one I've worn over bathing suits for decades. It's embroidered with bright coloured birds, and I remember how happy I was to find it in a shop in the Johannesburg Duty Free. I toss it onto the closest rock.

My fins are stiff from lack of use, and I wet them and my mask. Spit in the goggles and rub it around, and I can feel Chiara's smile. I smile too. Frank is catching up with me; we'll be in the water in no time. I rush it, and slip in my haste. Frank grabs my wrist, but then uses it to pull me back so that he's in the water first. I laugh and jump after him, my mask and snorkel in one hand.

I love this rush of water. Cool but not cold. I pull on the goggles and position my snorkel. And I duck beneath the water's skin, pushing away the sounds of dry land and air. I am lighter, nimbler, freer. In a perfect world I wouldn't need to come up for air. Cichlids flutter about me, their colours flashing and subsiding with the dapples the lake casts. When we've eaten I'll come down again with a fistful of bread squeezed tight and hard, and they'll come to me for a snack, if I don't flap about.

Frank is diving under the boat. Typical. He'll be looking at the parts that are difficult to get to on shore. Checking that Arnold has been doing a good enough job. It must be a bind at times, to be so driven to ensure everything is in good working order. My condition must be driving him crazy. I need air. I dolphin up, but don't lift my face from the water. Instead I push the air out with the remains of my breath, spitting out water, and breathing in the outside as an exchange.

And down I go. The rocks down here look like they tumbled into the sand a million years ago, longing to be more a part of the lake. To have these little disco fish shimmy around them too. Purples, blues yellows, I can't keep track of their iridescent swishes.

Wait.

Was that something else out there? Something grey? We've never seen a hippo in this part of the lake. I surface as Frank does, and I pull out the snorkel, knowing that the press of my goggles pushes out my lip and distorts my voice.

"Did you see that?"

He shakes his head and takes out his own snorkel.

"Something big and grey." As the words come out, I wish them back.

"You sure?"

"No." But I am pretty certain.

"What's going on?" Chi calls from her rock.

I wonder about her love life, and some of her destructive tendencies.

"Nothing. Just over-excited."

She lies back down, pulls her cap low over her face. She must be hot as hell. I grin at Frank, then replace my snorkel. Puff out the excess water. Big breath, and down. I kick hard toward where I saw the grey thing. My legs aren't as strong as they used to be, and I feel my thighs wobble in my own current. There's nothing here. My hair catches up to me as I slow and make a full turn under the water. It used to be such thick hair.

Further from the rocks there are very few cichlids. Reminds me of *Finding Nemo*. I watched that with Carolyn and her granddaughter one year when her family was out from the UK for a visit. For the cichlids, the rocks are the reef of protection. Out here, away from the island, there are….what? Hippos? Crocs? Never in all our times in Salima have we ever seen either.

I go up to breathe again, and wave at Chi, who isn't paying attention. I feel a flux that's not mine, a faint wave of motion beneath the water. And with it, my nerves sizzle. Do I tuck my legs in? How would that help? Do I scream for Frank and Chi? I duck my face into the water, and once again whirl in place. Nothing. But the water is a little murkier because it's deeper out here. I wonder how fast I could swim back to the rocks.

A deep breath, and I head under. Down to the sand; and I feel my ears clear when I swallow. A shadow passes over me and there's a scream in my throat, and of course it goes nowhere. I can't see this thing. I spiral again, feeling my arms tire in my efforts to stay down at the sand. And I see the grey again. It's circling me, and I turn at its pace, trying to make out my mystery creature. No sharks here, but it's not a hippo. Is it a dolphin? It can't be. This is fresh water. Ancient Rift Valley water, about as far as you can get from the sea. I need air, but I want to see it. We're both rising to the surface, and my nerves settle. I bob to the top but keep my face in the water, watching.

I think I know what this is.

It's close now, and indeed the tail is long and grey, very much like a dolphin. But midway up the torso the shape changes, and I'm being circled by a mermaid.

I laugh into my snorkel and hear a small fountain of water spurt out and crash back onto the lake surface. Her hair ripples behind her, and it's the colour of a full moon. Beneath the water her skin is silvery, but she breaks the surface and smiles at me as the water drips.

"Hello, Betty."

I'm so happy that words escape me.

"Isn't it a beautiful day?"

I nod, and feel as though I might cry.

"Shall we swim together?"

She takes my hand, not waiting for an answer. I have just enough time to pull in a breath, and she drags me down with her. She's fast and strong. Her tail powers us along, and she tucks me beneath her torso with both hands. I worry that my snorkel will dig into her trunk. And then I worry that I'll run out of air before we get to wherever she's taking us. But why on earth do I care about that? With Shiloh I can do anything. I wouldn't be surprised to learn I've grown gills since she pulled me under.

Sand dunes on the lake bed rise and fall as we speed by. I see a hippo; a real one, not a shadow in the waters. Its legs trot a small under-water rhythm as it moves along, ignoring us. There are bigger fish, grey and silver. They look like they'd be good to eat. Perhaps they're chambo. Perhaps I'm out of my mind, but it doesn't feel like it.

We slow down, and I'm fine for air. She pulls me upwards, back to the surface. We're at another, smaller island. I pull the mask from my face and rub around my neck, behind my ears.

"You haven't grown gills," she says.

Her nose is slightly aquiline, and she's tugging at something beneath the water. It's her tail. She's pulling it off and stepping out of the water on two legs. She's wearing some kind of grey body suit. Space age meets dolphin, and yet… I feel that I know this face too. I know and like this face, but I can't scrape it out of my memory. Not that I care.

She has the body of an athlete. Strong. And she's sure-footed, leading me by the hand up rocks, pulling me with a vigour that's infectious. She looks back and her smile is a conspiracy between us. That's part of what I love about Shiloh. When I'm here with her like this, I wonder if maybe she knows me even better than Carolyn does.

There's one short rather scrubby tree at the top of our island that throws more shade than it ought. We sit beneath it on a bean bag that's the colours of a sunset. I've never been a big fan of bean bags, even in the past, back on the commune, when they were all over the show. I like something that supports me in the right places. And this one does. I look out over the lake, and I can't see Bird Island, which is a relief.

"Something so relaxing about looking out over water," says Shiloh.

I don't say anything because she knows I agree. She holds a glass towards me and I take it with a breath of happiness. Piña Colada. I haven't had one for a good thirty years. More. My body is young again; young enough to want this drink.

"You gave these up a long time ago," she says.

"That was silly of me."

Shiloh has one too, and we gaze out across the water as it merges with the sky, and they blend and pale into a wide screen. The air is beautiful with the promise of pineapples and coconut. I'm excited.

But then I'm anxious as I watch Frank's fortieth birthday party in progress. My right hand is clutching the glass, my left making a fist with Shiloh's free hand. I'm squeezing I know, but I'm not concerned about hurting a woman this powerful.

"There's nothing here you don't already know. Don't forget your drink. Little sips."

Shiloh's right ,of course, although as I move through the faces that are dim in the night of our garden, I know that she is there. Incredible that it still hurts this much. That burn is back in my chest, and I can feel my breathing change. She stands beneath the monkey puzzle tree that the people who lived in the house before us planted. I always wondered why they planted an exotic tree in this place where indigenous trees do the job so much better. Not that we ever cut it down. Too many trees are cut down in this country.

Earlier, Chance and I put up little fairy lights in all the trees closest to the house, and now she stands splendid and lissom in their glow, which seems particularly soft on her skin.

She sips at her drink, talking to people who are my friends. I watch, and words crowd behind my clenched teeth.

I may just ask her if the rumour I heard this morning is true. That she's screwing a married man so much older than her. It's as much of a cliché as this Piña Colada. I down it, and feel Shiloh's squeeze. Frank is nowhere to be seen. Margaret emerges to my right, gives me a look, then takes a platter of canapés to one of the tables. I don't know whether she's scowling because she hates being here, or because of what she told me about Cassie and Frank this morning. Carolyn's in the group with Cassie. She laughs, and I feel betrayed by my best friend, even though she cannot possibly know. Carolyn would never keep that from me.

I go to look for Frank, and he's behind the bar that hogs most of the lounge area. He looks like he's swaggering. Like a pirate. Like a bad pillaging pirate. I'm out of breath, panting. Sweat moistens the armpits of my dress, and I lean against the doorway. Thrum, thrum goes my heart, and the blood beats out a march that doesn't seem to reach my head.

A hand grabs my arm, and it's Margaret. She pulls me upright, whispering into my ear with her heavy accent that I must pull my socks up. Where did she learn a term like that? She removes my Piña Colada and suggests I've had too much to drink. But I haven't, although I do feel sick. She tells me I am stronger than this. But I'm not, I'm really not. Her giant bosom pushes me forward. I guess that since her husband died, she had to be strong or die herself. She's an irresistible force, a tsunami at my back.

My eyes roll up and the ceiling is full of swirls as the light reflects from the decorations and the silly disco ball I put up this morning before a nasty crack came from a rumour that I don't believe, that I really just can't believe. I mean he just wouldn't, not to me, ever. I was his first, his only love. He meant that, I know he did, and we're going to the grave as one, we absolutely are.

This isn't payback.

Remember our Piña Coladas? The times we got drenched and didn't care? Our life, our baby, all the reasons not to leave, not to escape?

Chapter Seven

Discovering Shiloh had been a shock, but this was even worse. It was only when Chiara woke from her doze and asked where her mother was, that Frank realised anything was wrong. Searching the entire island had been fruitless. Then he remembered that Betty mentioned seeing something out in the water.

A crocodile? A hippo?

They scrambled to the boat and circled the island, each bump of wave resonating against the erratic beat in his chest. He couldn't tell from her face whether Chiara also feared the worst. What was the worst anyway? That Betty disappeared before her illness took her mind and left her body? He tried to shut that away. The wind gusted and the waves chopped at the boat, and he wondered about emergency rescue services in Salima. There probably weren't any at all.

Chiara's lips were pursed. Perhaps it was just that the engine was too loud to shout over. Or that their search was taking up all her powers of concentration. But maybe monstrous thoughts were bothering her too.

A small island came into view, really just a steep nodule of rocks with a dash of foliage as a cap. Frank didn't remember ever seeing it before, and steered the boat towards it. The waves tossed the boat and he thought of stories he'd heard about the fierceness of lake storms. There was Betty at the top of the island, lying back over the rocks as though she was on a feather bed. How the hell did she get there?

He powered the boat down and steered with care, unsure of where the rocks lay beneath the water.

Chi called out. "Mom! Mom!"

But if Betty heard, she didn't act like it. Frank could see that his knuckles were white on the steering wheel, and he thought that he really should calm down for Chiara's sake. No matter her age, it wasn't right that she should witness what was in his heart. Or hear the poisonous words gathering on his tongue.

So he said nothing, and left the shouting to Chiara. Betty sat up once Chi was off the boat and scrambling to her mother's side. She actually smiled, as though finding her daughter on this scrap of rocks was the same as finding her on the veranda.

He didn't want to hear about Shiloh, or how she'd got to this spot, or what movie they'd watched together. Frank couldn't be on Betty's side. Chiara was right: she needed to see a neurologist in Johannesburg, and soon.

-oOo-

Betty stopped talking to Frank once he informed her of the new plan. She didn't quite behave as though he wasn't there; his place was set at the table and he was fed and watered. She still examined the injury to his foot, and replaced the dressing. All her conversation was routed through Chiara, and occasionally Margaret. Frank couldn't decide which he enjoyed the least. Chiara was the one making the plans with the specialist in Johannesburg, but she was still spoken to, and was the primary means of Betty's communication with him. And Margaret…well, she was the one running the day-to-day household functions, and the one now informing him of the associated minutiae.

"The light switch in the pantry is broken." Margaret delivered this in a monotone, her eyes half-lidded.

"Thank you, Margaret. I'll sort it out when I get a chance."

Margaret sniffed and turned on her heel, head erect, as though moving away from a bad odour. Frank was certain no other domestic worker among the expatriate households had the audacity to behave this way. One day he'd get to the bottom of it. Hell, maybe he'd just fire her. But not now.

When it came to speaking directly to Betty, it was trickier. She behaved as though she couldn't hear him, so Frank spoke to Chiara.

"Does your mother understand that we're leaving tomorrow?"

"Have you explained to her that this Dr Van Wyk isn't a quack? That he's going to carry out proper scientific tests on her? That they won't hurt?"

"Has she packed?"

And Chi's answer: "Yes Dad."

Their daughter was being noticeably patient. The conversation between Betty and Chiara seemed unchanged, which seemed unfair given the fact that Chi had been pushing for this all along.

"Why am I the bad guy?"

"Probably because you changed your mind on her."

-oOo-

On the day they were booked to leave, Betty and Chiara got in the truck with him, rode to the airport, and got onto the aeroplane without any drama. Even at that point he felt Margaret's glare at his back. Not that he wasn't used to Margaret's scowl. What he couldn't get used to was the sense that something simmered in his wife; and he fretted that the plan was going to be tested in some way. But she sat beside him on the aeroplane, staring at the flight magazine or dozing. Never engaging him in conversation, but not acting up.

Chi spent most of the trip looking out of the window, probably glad she was heading back to Jo'burg. Occasionally she chattered at them, maintaining separate conversations. He didn't like it when she got like this. It seemed she was trying to compensate for the frost between her parents by being overly cheerful, an attempt she carried off awkwardly. She must be exhausted by them. And now they were going to invade her space. Poor child. They should stay in a hotel, but she wouldn't hear of it.

The plane touched down, heavy and confident. He liked that; he'd considered aeronautical engineering before swerving off on a bursary that offered quicker, bigger money. It meant working for the company that took him to Assisi. And Betty. The way she'd looked at him over her ice-cream that day…

She replaced the magazine that he wasn't sure she'd read. It was more likely a convenient place to direct her eyes. Passengers rustled, switching on cell phones and unclipping seatbelts before the sign went off. If they knew the stuff he did, they'd sit still. He leaned back and closed his eyes, waiting for the sensation of the plane's halt, then unclipped himself and pulled out his phone. Emergencies at the factory didn't wait for his convenience.

Chiara was sitting upright, and he knew she wasn't enjoying the wait; she seemed penned in against the window, unable to stand. Frank stayed in his seat as others pressed into the aisle. It was going to be the same at passport control. And the same at the carousel. It was

always the same at O. R. Tambo; the sense that he should be running somewhere, galloping in competition with this press of humanity.

-oOo-

"I like that airport," said Betty as the taxi drove them out onto the freeway.

They were the first words he'd heard from her since Lilongwe. And it was a strange opinion to offer, because Betty had seemed shrunken and overwhelmed in the gleam of ORT. Her eyes had been wide and her head kept swinging from side to side. As though she wasn't completely sure where she was. When she'd gone into the Ladies with Chi, he'd wondered whether she would find Shiloh in there and disappear. But out she came, wordless and startled-looking.

"Me too, Mum."

Frank felt he should say something, but didn't. Chi turned from the text message he'd heard her clicking at, and looked at them from the front passenger seat.

"It'll take five minutes to sort out your room. I hope you'll be okay in there."

"Of course we will."

He felt relieved at having something to respond to. God, it was so tiring being this stiff with his own family. Gin would be nice. Betty stared out of the window and he looked at the side of her ear. Something in the thin droop of its lobe made his chest burn. He wanted to put his hand on her lap, but knew that at best she'd ignore it. He wondered how he would behave in her position, but his imagination wouldn't go that far.

-oOo-

Nothing had changed in Chi's apartment that he could see. Perhaps the minimalism was a reaction to the out-dated clutter of their Lilongwe home. Betty had always been a squirrel, and after so many years it had ceased to bother him. But these clear surfaces and clean lines were soothing. There was barely a clutter of anything, and he liked it. Neutral colours. It felt fresh. Their bedroom was muted in versions of grey, with pale green and blue scatter cushions on the bed. Not that he liked scatter cushions. He knew Betty found the décor cold, but she said nothing about it today. Nor did she eat any of the curry take-away.

She seemed to be retreating into a kernel. A shrivelling nut with nothing to say. She came in from the bathroom, her arms slack at her sides from the old cotton nightie he knew so well. It looked like the same one she'd worn all their marriage, but that couldn't be right. She didn't look at him. Just climbed into the other side of the bed, lay down and turned off her light. He did the same, and wondered whether she was also lying there awake. Thinking of truths she'd like to tell him. Or of days gone by.

She'd been happy, he was sure of it.

Sounds of the city's insomnia percolated from the outside, and he thought of the quiet of Lilongwe. Of how in the dead of night, the dusty suburbs uttered little aside from a chance owl hoot, or a dog's complaint. Occasionally they heard the strange yip of hyenas, when the dogs in Areas Ten and Forty Three fell silent.

He liked that about Lilongwe, the fissures of wildness that crept in despite the clutter of its human inhabitants. The birds were riotous, pecking at their reflections in the window any time from four in the morning in the summer. Snakes were everywhere. The most animated he'd seen Margaret was on a Saturday morning when she discovered a house snake in Chi's bedroom. How she'd muttered when Frank swept it into a bucket and took it out to the compost heap; it did make him wonder whether she bludgeoned them from that point on and said nothing to him.

Not like Betty, who drove her snakes in buckets out to the dairy farm near the presidential palace to set them free.

He realised that he was smiling in the dark. She was brave. He took that for granted. Rolling onto his side to face her, he spoke into the dark.

"Bet?"

But she had nothing to say to him.

-oOo-

There were eleven missed calls and a pile of messages on his phone the next morning. Frank chewed on expired bran flakes and considered whether it would've been better to send Betty down here with Chiara.

Chi had touched his arm in the kitchen as he was looking for something to eat, and was about to say something to him when Betty came in. Now, as he chewed, he felt sure that

she wanted to encourage him. The milky mess in his bowl seemed like an act of penance somehow. He pushed it away and watched Betty sip her tea.

"We need to leave in thirty minutes," said Chi.

He looked at his watch and nodded, thinking about toast with a nice slab of butter and a load of strawberry jam. Betty got up and started to clear the table.

"I'll do that Mum."

Betty shook her head, then said, "I want to."

"You've barely eaten a thing though."

Betty smiled at her daughter and continued taking plates and cups through to the kitchen.

"We can pop into a coffee shop after the appointment," he said.

Betty dropped a piece of cutlery in the kitchen and Frank rose from his chair.

"It's fine," she called. "Nothing broken."

Chi closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. Frank reached for the cereal box and the milk to take them back into the kitchen, hoping that the specialist had just the perfect little pill for Betty.

-oOo-

Sandton Medi Clinic was a short distance from Chi's apartment, and she drove them there in her powerful car that smelled of new leather and authority. The seals on the doors were excellent, and the air inside made him a little nauseous. That, and being a passenger on the back seat. Betty sat up front, and Frank thought he could hear her humming, but the sound was too soft to distinguish a melody. He sat forward and watched her fingers tap on the armrest of her door. Chi braked and pressed at the horn.

"Bloody taxi!"

"Why do they call them taxis?" he asked. "They're little buses, aren't they?"

She caught his eye in the rear-view mirror. "They're a bloody menace. Drive like lunatics."

He sat back and observed the gang of taxis in the lane to his left. It was like a jostle in a school food queue. One of the commuters in the one closest to him met his gaze, and he gave a small wave. She grinned back, and flashed a palm at him.

So, this was the Chiara they didn't get to see. He doubted that tie-dyed shirts and unruly hair ever featured in her meetings. Her face was made up today, and he felt sure that she was ruthless and smooth-haired in court. Were there people who hated her? Surely a fancy apartment and a new Mercedes with an engine the size of this one's meant at least a degree of compromise on the ideals she used to voice at the dinner table.

Back in the day, he and Betty had muttered to each other, but never questioned her directly when she left Malawi after Michael's death and returned to university down here. Did her LlB and slid into the corporate world. It seemed like an act of self-flagellation. Yet here she was all these years later, apparently making a success of it. She manoeuvred the car into one of the clinic parkings and unclipped her belt. It slid past her face with a faint nylon zing.

"Come on," she said.

-oOo-

They passed through automated front doors, and the aroma of coffee teased Frank's nostrils. A woman in a dressing gown and slippers shuffled across his path and into the coffee shop. Kamuzu Central Hospital came to mind: about as different an experience of hospitals as it was possible to get. If there was any reason to see a doctor they always went to the company clinic, or they came down here. But on the day Shadrack got his arm caught in the threshing machine, they took him to KCH. Which was a mistake. But he'd assumed that a trauma of that magnitude required surgeons and blood replacement. And it had. But KCH was not the place to find either on that day.

Frank remembered screams echoing down the dim corridor when they left Shadrack's body there that night. They scuttled out of the derelict ER building, escaping the sight of his corpse and the metallic smell of it, and those wails seemed to chase them. Frank ran then, feeling the rush of those screams at his back. It was only once they were in the car and fleeing into the night that someone said those sounds had come from Shadrack's wife.

Chiara led the way up a flight of stairs and then along a corridor to the right. Their steps were muted by plastic-looking tiles, and he couldn't see any wards. Only what looked

like private doctor's rooms. Chi led the way through a glass door that had Dr Van Wyk's name and credentials etched on it.

He held the door open for Betty, who walked through and peered at the other patients waiting on the sofa on the left. He had to squeeze past her to get to the desk. She shrank from his touch. The room was stuffy although he could see an air conditioner on the wall. Chi was talking to someone on the other side of a high wooden reception desk.

She turned back to them and said, "Let's sit."

But there was only space for one of them to do so. None of the other people made eye contact with them. One of them had what looked like pieces of Blue Tack in her hair. Frank saw Betty staring at the same thing.

"Dad, I think you and I should go down to the coffee shop and wait for Mom there. They'll run tests on her before she goes in to Dr Van Wyk, and those'll take a while. We can come and check on her, but Maude here says she'll call on my cell phone when they need us."

Frank held his breath while he considered this. He turned to Betty.

"Will you be okay here on your own, Bet?"

"Fine," she replied, eyes locked on the Blue Tack woman.

"Come and sit over here." He directed his wife into the free seat.

She remained standing, still staring, so he pulled her arm. She pulled back and glared at him, then sat. Frank moved to the desk and leaned over.

"Are you Maude?"

An overweight woman in a blue uniform with red lapels seemed surprised. Then she smiled and her eyes looked as though they were made of glass.

"Will my wife be alright if we leave her here for a bit? It's just there are no seats and…"

"Mrs Thomson will be fine here. I'll keep an eye on her."

The phone at her side rang before he could ask how on earth she'd watch his wife from behind that great hulk of wood. Chi was waiting for him at the door, and flicked her

head impatiently. He stepped away, thinking that perhaps those disconcerting eyes were especially perceptive. He put a hand on Betty's shoulder. She didn't look up.

Chapter Eight

If I could convert my thoughts into anything like eloquence, I'd really give those two hell. But I can't, so here I sit. Alone. Trying to share air with strangers, in a stuffy waiting room that looks like it was decorated in the seventies. Everything is tired, including the other patients and the fat receptionist behind the desk. This is supposed to be a fancy private clinic, or at least that's what Chi said. There's an air conditioner on the wall, but it's not on.

I have a tune that won't leave my head, and I can't remember the words. I don't want any meaningful looks from anyone, so I try not to hum, it but it's persistent. I thought the woman with the sticky stuff in her hair might be Shiloh; there was a look about her I thought I recognised. But no. The eyes are dull. I wonder whether her family blunted her with love and insistence. If she ever knew anyone like Shiloh, I doubt she still does.

Perhaps that's what they're doing to me: killing Shiloh. I won't make it if they do. I must breathe slowly and try to calm down. The air's very thick in here. What happens if I need the bathroom? Who'd notice if I get up and walk out the door? Could I get past the coffee shop without those two noticing? There must be another exit.

"Mrs Thomson?"

She's leering at me through green eyes over that monstrous desk. I look at her; try and smile. I can look like a person who doesn't need these tests, if I concentrate.

"Go through to the room on the other side here, and Carol will help you."

Do I know this Carol? Maude is leaning over the top of the desk, pointing down a passage to her right. Her arm is like a bats wing. The tunnel she's pointing at must've just opened up; it wasn't there before. This is probably the point where they try and flush Shiloh away, but I can't think how to respond. I don't think I'm strong enough to fight them off.

"Shiloh, where are you?" I whisper the words.

"Sorry?" asks Green Eyes.

Her gaze seems to reach out and squeeze me around the chest, and I have to concentrate to draw breath.

"Nothing." I keep the tone breezy, I hope.

I turn the corner, and it occurs to me that Dr Van Wyk's rooms are a warren. A maze to lose your mind in.

"Left again, Mrs Thomson," calls Bat Winged Green Eyes.

So left I go, and I want to cry because it's too late. Shiloh will never find me here. I hum that wretched tune instead.

"Mrs Thomson?" asks the woman inside the room.

I haven't been called Mrs Thomson this many times in a single day before. She's younger than Chiara. She could just about be Chi's child. My granddaughter. I take control and don't shake my head to empty it of these thoughts. Instead I nod, because my tongue feels thick and unwilling to engage.

"Hi. I'm Carol," she says. "I'll be doing your EEG now, and then when you've seen the doctor and finished with the MRI and anything else he wants, I'll attach a portable one for you to wear for twenty four hours. It has a little pack that you wear on a belt; not much to it. Were you told about that one?"

"Um," I say.

That Green Eyed woman said something, didn't she?

"Come hop on this bed for me."

I want to tell her I'm beyond hopping onto what seems like a hospital bed, but she seems nice enough, and there's a step, and I can get onto the bed without any trouble. There's a computer at the one wall, with a chair I assume is hers.

"Now Mrs Thomson…"

"Betty." I don't like to interrupt, but it's getting a bit much, even for me. Still, I'm pleased to get a word out my head and off my tongue.

"Betty. I'm going to fit you with this cap."

She holds up a netted cap, and I wonder whether my response to it is part of the test. To one side, on a table, there's a pony tail of wires linked to a black box. It makes me think of our DVD player at home. The black box is connected to her computer. She's going to take a peek inside my brain. And she's probably going to interfere with any chance I have of meeting Shiloh again. My suspicion about this is so strong, I feel the weight of it just behind

my eyes. I want to ask, but I don't think I can trust her. I can't even trust my own husband, or my child.

I smile at her.

"Once the cap's on, I'm going to put some cream on your head in the spaces that these holes leave."

She holds up the cap and I peer obediently, while my pulse tap dances, and the lead behind my eyes threatens to pull my head to the floor.

"It's just to help with connectivity. Then I'll fix these nodes to those spots. It won't hurt a bit. I'll ask you just to lie and close your eyes. It's important that you don't roll your eyes around…"

She jabbers on, but my brain is no longer receptive to the atrocious proposal she's making. I smile and try mustering an air of serenity. There isn't a soul to be trusted. I lie back on the bed and she fits the netted cap over the thinness of my hair, and starts to dab cream through the holes. Cold blobs to blot out the only colour in my world.

Shiloh, where are you?

"Oh damn."

I open my eyes at her strange words.

"I'm out of gel. Sorry sweetie. I'll be two ticks."

I blink and nod, and maintain my feeble senior smile. She leaves the room and the door clicks behind her. How long do two ticks take? I begin to hum, and suddenly the words are in my head, so I close my eyes. I hold out my hand, like the song says, ready for Shiloh to take me, to lead me like a sightless child.

There's a shuffle next to me; the gel storage must be close by. I open my eyes, and there's a black man looking down at me. He's wearing a hat with a short brim. It makes me think of fishing hats, but this one is red, which I suspect is the wrong colour for fishing. Are fish colour blind? He has a toothpick sticking out the corner of his mouth, the corner that's lifted.

He removes the toothpick and says, "Hello, Betty."

I sit up, my chest tight with an emotion there are no words for. He takes my hands in his.

"Don't cry." His voice melts the cold cream blobs on my head.

"I thought I'd never see you again." My face feels like I've splashed it, my tears are so thick.

"Carol won't take long to find where I put the gel. We need to hurry," he says.

I have no reply. Instead I stare at his jeans and white t-shirt, and the scuffed All Stars on his feet. He has lovely hands.

"Follow me," he says.

I can't wait to see how we get out of here. He steps forward, a little hunched over, and opens the door a crack. Looks out and then looks back at me and winks. Steps back and takes my hand in his, and leads me out.

We don't turn right towards Bat Winged Green Eyes and her reception. We go left down the little corridor towards what must be Dr Van Wyk's office. I follow the red hat, slightly bent over myself. A delicious sense of adventure percolates, pushing away all the fear that started after the film on the island. By the time we step into that office, I've got a good dose of euphoria mixing with the electricity that was already there; and I can't remember the last time I felt this good.

We are the ultimate team.

Only Shiloh and I are in the room. Dr Van Wyk must be up to something else. His room is cluttered with paperwork. No computer. No fancy Shiloh-sucking devices. Just loads and loads of paper files, and books pressed up together like prisoners on his bookshelves. A table to one side of his desk sags beneath the weight of paper files.

As we slip past, I see graffiti on this side of the wooden desk. An entire corner has been written and drawn on. There are some pictures and words that have been gouged into the surface.

Sheila died of boredom waiting for Dr V…

I don't have time to linger over whether Dr V returned as she was carving, or whether she tired of the work it took to cut the angry square letters into the wood. Shiloh is pulling me

into another side room, which has a door of its own. And it lets us out into the corridor. Shiloh turns and gives me a high five. But we're both silent. This despite the laugh that roars in my head. We stand straight, square up our shoulders and walk like calm people, back towards the stairway that I came up with my family.

What will I do if I see those two downstairs?

People pass us without a glance. Nurses, doctors, civilians. Shiloh says nothing to them, and nor do I.

At the bottom of the stairs Shiloh turns left instead of going on straight past the coffee shop. We wind our way down yet another corridor, and I think of Alice in her Wonderland. Down here there are fewer people, and only closed doors on either side of us. Until we get to a swing door on the left. The sign says EXIT, which makes me happy. We push it, and walk into a knot of smokers in dressing gowns on the other side. Their smoke casts a blue grey pall, a secret shroud, over their guilty huddle. Malawi's economy ticks over on their habit, and I want to thank them. The only one to make eye contact with me is a woman who holds her cigarette between limp fingers and blows out a lungful. Her gaze barely takes me in, and I give her a wink before I realise I need to catch up with Shiloh, who's striding towards the hill of the parking area.

He has my handbag, which is a good thing because I don't remember forgetting it. Before the rise of the parking bay, he stops and I catch up.

"You can't run around with that thing on your head." He pulls the cap off me with his free hand, and is gentle.

I'd rather lean into him than run up this hill. He throws the shrivelled version of the cap into the foliage in the flowerbed beside us.

"Ready?"

We're on the greatest adventure of my life, and the hill no longer seems much of an obstacle, so I say I'm ready, and he takes my hand. It's a while since I exerted myself this way, but with my hand in Shiloh's, I am Wonder Woman. He slips the toothpick out his pocket and back between his teeth. Throws me a grin and we slip along the kerb that leads to the boom at the top of this hill.

Yellow black, yellow black. I can smell the freshness of the paint, and try not to lose my footing on the narrow verge. No making eye contact with people driving out of this place, or the man in the closest ticket booth.

I wonder whether we'll get out of here. I haven't had a chance to watch a film yet and there are people everywhere. We both look straight ahead and walk to the left of the boom as cars idle in a queue up to it. I'm thinking about the fact that people might remember us.

"They don't even know you're missing yet." Shiloh tugs me left once we reach the top, and we're out of the hospital grounds.

Exhaust fumes ooze and catch at my throat, and there's a vendor who smiles and lifts an orange in my direction. She has rooted her makeshift shop inside a flowerbed, and lilies lift their arms around her.

"No thanks," I say, and scamper to keep up with the man in charge of my adventure.

Shiloh catches my hand again and we cross at the traffic lights. The little green man disappears mid-stride, and a red one stands still as we get to the middle of the road. We walk on, and cars are creeping forward, even though it's not green for them just yet. I think of Chiara's impatience. Mind you, Shiloh's in quite a hurry. He's marching us toward a group of people on the side of the road, just beyond a low railing that looks like it has been scraped by a few of Chi's errant taxis. My pulse skitters.

The anticipation is delicious.

We stop at the small crowd. Shiloh removes his toothpick, and looks over my head in the direction we just came from. Is Frank behind us? I don't want to look. So I run my fingers through my hair, and find patches of the slime Carol started to dab between the holes of the net. I tidy them as best I can, and am about to rummage in my bag for my little hand mirror, when I see Shiloh lift his hand and step off the pavement. One of the taxis Chi is so frustrated by is moving quickly in our direction, and up leaps my pulse. But Shiloh steps back and we don't board the taxi when it stops. Quite a few other people do though.

"It's not going our way," he says, still looking back in the direction of the Clinic.

"Where are we going?"

"MTN station to start with. Then we'll head over to Park Station."

I know Shiloh could fly us there, or pick me up and run all the way, should he so wish.

"I don't wish," he says. "It's more fun this way."

His hand goes up, all five fingers splayed, and this time the taxi that pulls up seems to meets his requirements. He steps forward and slides the side door open. Standing aside, he motions for me to climb in, which I do with an agility I thought I'd forgotten.

"Go right to the back."

This vehicle sure has seen better days. It's little more than a shell, and there are panels missing in some places on the sides. The floor seems thin, and I step over a patch where it has rusted through. I catch a glimpse of Johannesburg tarmac. A piece of ceiling fabric flaps a lick across the top of my head. My handbag hangs from the crook of my elbow as I shuffle myself into a window seat on the back bench.

I think of Grandma from the Giles comics Carolyn loaned me years ago. Her eyebrows raised when I told her I'd never encountered them before. How astonished would she be to see me now? And what would Margaret think? Shiloh sits next to me and it's clear he's enjoying himself. The plastic of the seat is hot beneath my legs, and it's cracks bite at skin through my dress.

Another woman takes up a seat two rows ahead and to the right. I look to the front and can see the rear-view mirror shaking in time with the vibrations of the vehicle. From all the way back here, and over the hammering of the vehicle itself, I hear the stutter of an indicator shorting. Tic, tic, tic; this battered taxi is sharing my adrenaline rush.

It's hot in here. The sun beats directly at me, so I push open my window a fraction and inhale city toxins. It doesn't matter because I'm dying anyway. Music starts up, and I hear the faint crackle that tells me it's a radio station. A car hoots behind us. If it was Chiara, I doubt she'd look inside a taxi for me.

-oOo-

Our driver tucks us into the traffic and we shudder away from Sandton Clinic, Dr Van Wyk and the Green Eyed Monster. A breeze from outside slips in like a kiss, and I close my eyes for just a second. Then open them, because I don't want to miss a thing.

"We need twenty two rand," says Shiloh.

I pass my handbag to him and catch the gaze of the driver in the shiver of the rear view mirror. He gives me a thumbs up, and I return the greeting. Shiloh passes a handful of cash to the woman seated ahead of us and she in turn passes it to someone ahead of her. And so the fare makes its way to the driver, whose gaze has left mine. His hat is the same style as Shiloh's, but his is beige, with white skulls and cross bones on it. My kind of pirate. He lifts his left hand, like a waiter with an invisible tray. The cash meets his palm, and he leans slightly while placing it. Seems to me he doesn't even check it. He hoots, parp, parp, parp, then flashes the same hand signal Shiloh held up on the kerb, to all the potential passengers out there. I feel the urge to sing.

About how when no-one else is willing, Shiloh always is.

Chapter Nine

It was decent coffee. And a slice of cheesecake was going a long way to making up for Chi's bran flakes.

"I feel bad leaving your mother in there."

"Me too. Although it's probably a relief for her. It's not like she's been particularly happy with either of us since Salima."

Frank nodded, swatting away the shadow in his mind. He liked Johannesburg, but enjoying even a pleasure as simple as this coffee while Betty was waiting to have her head examined made him feel guilty. He kept thinking of how she was when they first met. The woman who'd licked her ice-cream at him that day in Assisi was a far cry from the Betty in Dr Van Wyk's reception. Was it years of housewifery and motherhood that simplified her? He felt chastened at his thoughts, at the very idea that she'd been dulled over time.

"Mr Thomson?"

Frank followed Chi's eyes and half-turned in his seat. It was the woman from Dr Van Wyk's reception. The one with green eyes from behind the desk.

"Maude," he said.

"Um, yes." She was clasping her hands at her chest. Her fingers were swollen in the clasp, and she leaned toward him, like he had some sort of gravitational pull. "Mr Thomson, have you seen your wife?"

The guilt rolled back with a new tinge. Something like fear. Chi was pale, her shoulders stiff.

"What's happened?" he asked.

"I'm sure it's nothing serious. We thought that she might've slipped off to the Ladies. Or come down here to join you…"

Frank stood, and Chiara scraped her chair back. Maude's clasped hands leaped to her chin, and she bit her bottom lip with small teeth.

Betty was missing.

"You obviously checked the Ladies," said Chiara.

Maude nodded.

"Where else have you looked?" Frank's voice came down a long tunnel to his ears.

Yet another episode; it was like being hijacked. Each one made him feel porous; he might just crumble at this rate. Frank felt each thought like a shock, snapping around his skull as he waited for Maude's answer. Something terrible was happening to his wife. Her disappearances were becoming increasingly wild and unpredictable; not like Betty at all. Well, not like the Betty he married. Admittedly the first time they met had been strange… the way she'd disappeared into the streets of Assisi, and that hadn't been the same at all. Had it? She'd been a fairy creature who lit up a day and the best night of his life, then vanished. Until... When she came back into his life it was to change it forever.

But since then there'd been no flightiness. Until now.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"They can't find her anywhere?" Chi's statement came out like a question.

He knew she was asking whether he was paying any attention at all. Whether he cared. How could he ever explain?

"How the hell did you lose her?" he asked the woman.

Maude was wringing her little hands and shrugging, and Frank expected a return accusation to come out of her mouth.

But all she said was, "I'm so sorry. The attendant ran out of gel, and she left her in the room for a couple of minutes. Not even…"

"She must've walked right past you." Surely, surely this wasn't happening here? Not in such a dangerous city. An elderly woman, on her own…

"No. I think she went out the other way. Through the Doctor's room." Maude's words trailed.

Chi's face was still, and Frank imagined a stream of lawyer thoughts ripping around behind her eyes.

"What's your plan now, Maude?"

The woman shifted her body in his direction. She couldn't know his thoughts could be so sinister when he was this polite.

"I'm going to alert the hospital security, Mr Thomson."

"So what are you standing here for?" Chi's voice was high and loud.

Maude nodded and hurried across to the reception area where she spoke to a tall man behind the desk. If he was flustered by what she said, he didn't show it. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and spoke into it.

"Oh God!" said Chi. "What are they doing? Where's the urgency in this place?"

The man spoke to Maude again, and Frank took Chi's hand as he watched the back of Maude's head nod. They looked like a couple discussing what to have for lunch. Frank clenched his free fist, wishing he could punch someone. He tugged Chi's hand and marched toward them.

`"I want to see Dr Van Wyk!"

Maude turned hastily, hand on her chest, and Frank wanted to swat that hand and its pretence at panic.

`"Sorry?" she said.

"I want to see the head of security," said Chi. "Immediately."

"If you'll both wait here, I'll see what I can do."

"No, Maude. Take me to Dr Van Wyk this minute. And tell that man to get the head of security to meet my daughter here. Now."

The reception area hushed, and movement paused. Heads turned in their direction. Frank wanted to roar at them all; scream and shout and maybe even punch some of them. Instead he followed Maude through a passage with a sign that said *Emergency*.

-oOo-

The woman behind the ER desk was not intimidated.

"I need to see Dr Van Wyk this minute!"

"He's dealing with an emergency, sir."

"This is an emergency! My wife disappeared out of his rooms. She could be anywhere. She might've been abducted. This is negligence on his watch. I need him here this minute. Right now. I don't care what he's dealing with. Tell me where he is and I'll get him myself…"

"Sir, sit down, or I'll call security. You may not go in there without permission."

He strode past her desk, hating her words and her deadpan face. Nothing in the two rooms to the right. He found the entrance he was looking for on the left, a plastic world of curtained cubicles and people in blue and green scrubs. A sharp scent of disinfectant. He would start with the curtain to his right.

"Sir." A tall man in security uniform took Frank by the elbow. "You may not come in here."

"I must see Dr Van Wyk. My wife…"

"Sir, come with me, or I'll have to restrain you."

"Restrain me? Restrain me? My God! What will it take for someone to understand what's going on here? My wife has disappeared from your hospital. And no-one is sorting this out. She could be anywhere…"

The other man turned Frank around by the shoulders, and Frank wrestled himself away. "Don't you touch me. Don't you dare…"

"Sir.."

"Stop calling me sir!"

"Dad."

Frank turned. "Chi. They won't let me see Dr Van Wyk."

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't even know Mom. Come."

He followed her out the ER, through its small reception area and a cluster of coughing and limping people he hadn't noticed before. They stared at him, and he set his jaw. Why the hell had he wanted to see the damned doctor? The man hadn't even seen Betty, didn't know her from a bar of soap. Couldn't give a shit. No-one could.

Chi led him to a tall man who stood in the main lobby near the coffee shop.

"They say they're still searching, but so far no sign of her," said Chi.

"Lots of places to lose yourself in a hospital," said the man. "But if she's here we'll find her."

"Do you even know what she…" Frank stopped talking as a security guard approached.

"Sir," said the security guard. "I think I found something."

"Something, or someone?" said Chi.

The security guard stared at Chi and then at his manager. The man nodded.

"I found a patient who may've seen the woman we're looking for. The patient was having a smoke outside and she said a woman matching the description we have, came out the door…"

"Did she speak to her?" Chi's words were sharp.

"She said the woman was wearing a white cap with some hair sticking out in places." The security guard gestured at imaginary tufts of hair above his own cap, before continuing. "And she said the woman winked at her, and walked very quickly up the path. Like she was in a hurry."

"Was she with anyone else?" Frank pretended not to see Chi's raised eyebrows.

"She didn't say."

"I hope you checked the outside area and didn't just come to us," said the other man.

"The rest of the team is out looking for her on that side of the property. We checked it earlier but we're looking again."

-oOo-

They didn't find her. One of them did find the net cap, hanging like a middle finger from a cycad. There the trail seemed to end. No-one else had seen her at the clinic. And there were so many places to hide. Or to get lost. Or to simply curl up in with Shiloh and watch a movie. There were additional blocks of private medical suites that weren't physically attached to the main building. Frank and Chiara joined the search, parting fronds and peering into parked

cars, but Frank stopped after a short time. His heart was beating fast, as though urging him in a different direction.

"I don't think she's here anymore," he said to Chi.

They were standing at the entrance of the furthest north block, in the shade of a mini subtropical forest. A wide green pond trembled beside them.

"She has to be. No-one would've let her out. Where would she go? She doesn't know Jo'burg at all. I doubt she even knows how to get back to my apartment." Chi's voice seemed on the brink of tears, but her eyes were dry.

There were damp patches easing out of Chiara's armpits, and Frank dabbed at his own wet brow. For a few seconds, he felt the ground shifting.

"Dad? You okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a bit hot."

"Should we go inside and wait in Dr Van Wyk's rooms like they asked us to?"

"I can't sit while I don't know where she is!"

"Don't shout at me, Dad; I'm also scared."

"Sorry. Sorry, Chi." He ran fingers through his hair, wishing inspiration would replace the creeping sense of despair.

"She has her handbag, doesn't she?"

Frank nodded. It was so hot, but there was no time to sit down. Betty would get so far away he might never get her back.

"Have you tried calling her cell phone?"

"First thing I did," he replied, thinking about how a person could escape this place.

"No reply?"

"Didn't even ring. Either it's off, or out of battery."

"Shit."

It was shit. It was a nightmare. But Frank stopped and watched as cars trawled in a queue towards something on the other side of a red brick wall. He walked toward them.

"Come on, Dad."

"Just a minute. Come see this."

He heard her sigh of impatience, but for the first time he had a sense of what Betty might've done. He reached the brick building, and it was as he'd thought. There were two sets of boomed exit points on the other side. Chi stood beside him when he stopped with his hands on his hips. They observed the twin queues of exiting cars, and the cubicles that housed the boom operators.

"If you were in a booth, would you notice an old lady walking out on the other side? She'd be walking over there in the shade, on that piece of kerb. Can you see on the other side there?"

"I can't see."

"Come." Frank pulled Chi in front of him and pointed at a gap between the cars, "Can you see? The kerb over there, it's painted yellow and black. If you were manning the booth, there'd probably be a vehicle blocking at least a part of your view. You'd be dealing with the person on the car, checking the ticket, collecting money, giving change…"

"Oh dear God." Chi's voice was low.

Frank didn't wait to see whether she followed. He stepped through the closest queue and went to the window of the farthest booth. "Hello."

The thin man inside was turned away from him, pushing a ticket through a machine while a car idled at Frank's left. The driver's window was down, and a grey-haired woman watched Frank. She seemed unsure of whether to reprimand him, or wait for something interesting to happen.

The ticket man sat up and started he saw Frank. "Excuse me, sir. I must help this lady."

Frank stepped back. He had to stay calm; there was no way the man could know how important this was.

"That will be six rand," said the booth man to the white haired lady.

She held out a brown-spotted hand knotted with veins, but her reach was short and her eyes were on Frank.

Frank took the coins from the tips of her grip and transferred them.

“Thank you, sir,” said the booth man, while the woman continued to stare.

The boom lifted and Frank wondered when she was going to stop staring and move her old Toyota.

“Ma’am…”

She shifted her gaze to the booth man, lifted a hand in acknowledgment, and set about arranging her gears and riding her clutch.

“Sir, can I help you?” The booth man ignored the woman and stared at Frank.

“Did you see an elderly woman walk past here earlier? About this tall? Wearing a blue dress?”

“With a black handbag and her hair would’ve been messy.” Chi’s head was now also in the cubicle window.

“Excuse me,” came a voice from behind them.

Another woman, this time closer to Chi in age and in a large BMW.

Chi turned, and before the words were out Frank saw that her body was taut, and her face was red. “This is an emergency. You sit there and be quiet.”

The BMW woman opened her mouth, then closed it and sat back.

“I’m not sure,” the booth man was saying. “Maybe I did. It’s been busy and I wasn’t looking at pedestrians, although… yes I think I did. She was walking quickly for an old person, and I had cars lined up…”

“Which way did she go?” Chi’s voice was clipped.

The booth man shrugged. “Hey, I’m not even sure I saw…”

Chi didn’t wait, but stepped out ahead of the big white car and across to the other side. “Okay Dad. You picked the right direction on the beach in Salima. Time to do it again.”

“That was a guess.”

“Dad!”

“Left.”

She turned her back on him and marched along the concrete paving in the direction of a large intersection. Pedestrians bustled and dawdled. Garbage billowed out of a cylindrical cement bin. A large woman wearing shoes from which her feet were spilling stood to their left in an exchange with a vendor. Chi skipped briefly onto the road to avoid her, ignoring the push of traffic as she did so. Frank's breath sounded sharp in his ears, but no-one looked at him, and Chi was fine. He looked at the fat woman, who was laughing at something with the woman seated behind the makeshift table.

"Chi!"

She ignored him and stood at the corner, looking up and down the intersection, her head lifted to see above the throng of cars.

"Hello," Frank said to the women at the table, which was actually a wooden box. In a flowerbed.

"Hello." Their heads inclined toward him at the same time.

This wasn't the time to allow the shrillness in him to spill into his voice. He smiled and so did they.

"I'm looking for my wife. A white woman about my age. I think she might've come this way a bit earlier."

The fat woman shook her head but the other one stood, easing her joints into place.

"Yes, I saw her. I thought she was going to buy an orange, but then she said no and she went over there. To the other side of the road. I watched her because white women don't walk here. They only drive. And then she surprised me – shooh! She really surprised me."

She shook her head and laughed, a soft sound that barely lifted above the groan of the traffic. Frank's hands itched in his pockets, but he breathed in and smiled in return. His foot was tapping, but otherwise he was in control.

"What did she do?"

"She took a taxi!"

"She did what?" Chi's exclamation came before Frank could register that she was beside him again.

"Yo, yo, yo. She caught a taxi. She knew what she was doing. The first one that stopped, no she didn't want that one. The next one, yes that was the one. I watched her. She went right to the back of that taxi. I could see that blue dress in the back window."

Chapter Ten

This taxi driver is skilled!

He's breaking a bunch of road rules and sometimes things get a little precarious, but there's measure to his push and shove; he knows his rivals. Reversing against the traffic to get to a customer had me worried for a moment, but no-one died, ha, ha. I can only admire the way he throws the vehicle across more than one lane to collect a pedestrian holding up an open hand on the sidewalk.

MTN station please.

Passenger deposits are a little less chaotic, but no less inconvenient for the cars behind us, as we stop without warning. Shiloh holds my left hand and we observe an exchange of passengers. In the corner of my eye, his toothpicks swivels slowly.

If the braying drivers outside could witness the efficiency and method from inside, they'd be more impressed. A conveyer belt of palms float the fares forward. No one pauses to examine the money. We're loaded to capacity, and I can no longer make out the driver's face in the mirror.

Outside the window, the scenery keeps changing. Flashes of light industrial give way to suburbia, then tired offices. I drop my head and look out the other side as we approach an intersection. *Pink*, says one sign. *Burberry*, says another, which has me confused for a moment. But really, do I care where the hell I am? High walls hint of something that the rest of us might like on the other side. First World rubbing up against Third; no wonder things get exciting in this place.

The radio is loud in the taxi, and there's some sort of a song I don't like on it. Modern music. The man in front of me has fallen asleep, and his bald head rubs against the shivering window, wrinkling his scalp and leaving a creamy deposit on the glass.

"Hold onto your weave," says the radio, "Things are about to get cray –ay –zee!"

I believe her.

I wonder what Frank and Chi are doing, and I feel bad. But only briefly. Shiloh squeezes my hand.

Our driver takes us through an avenue of trees that doesn't belong in Africa, and I wonder whether I'm dreaming instead of watching a film today. Our driver jostles for lane space with a small white car on our left. We win; we have nothing to lose. I'm too warm and the motion of our journey makes me rest my head on Shiloh's shoulder.

When I look up again, we're pushing our way over a bridge, and I see a big freeway below us. We fly over it, and I'm reminded of the Herbie movies. Over, over we go, and across into another city, a place I've never been. The streets are wide, and a police van draws alongside us. A passenger wearing a luminous jacket sits in the front. I wave and smile, but she doesn't acknowledge me.

The style of everything has changed outside. High rises loom to my right and if I dip my head, I see what look like parks on the left. As we turn right, the road narrows and apartment buildings stretch skywards. A million satellite dishes flower out of their sides, all facing the same way. I wonder whether they're all looking at the same thing.

Close-up, it's not pretty out there. Lots of litter, not much paint on the walls. I see a sapling pushing out of a fissure in the concrete; it seems a hopeful act. Graffiti swathes art on jaded walls. A cement bin seems to have burst, and its contents lie as spillage for pedestrians to dodge. There's trash everywhere. A group of policemen stand around a white car with its trunk open. There's a goat on the sidewalk, tethered to a parking metre. A wire cage containing live chickens stands beside the billy goat.

We turn right again and slow to a halt. Ahead there's a garbage truck in the middle of the lane, and on the other side of the road I see a shop with the red and white promise "Taxi Rank Take Aways" above the heads of passers-by. I'm salivating. We're easing between the truck and cars parked on our left. I'm not sure we're going to make it, but Shiloh seems relaxed, so I take a deep breath and watch. I see the driver's hand pull his side mirror flat against the vehicle, and we ooze through the gap.

I breathe out.

We're in a queue of taxis, and there are yellow signs everywhere on the other side of my window. "Move to the world-class MTN network". I check my cell phone, and it's dead.

"Better to keep it off," says Shiloh.

I agree. He's the only one I want a conversation with. We're idling along within the crowd of vehicles, beneath the cover of some sort of large shelter with fluorescent lighting. A docking station for taxis. Hundreds of them in here. We're like bees, returned to the hive. There are policemen around, pistols strapped to their hips.

I feel invisible as our taxi creeps beneath the glow of the rank. More rubbish crowds against the paving. We've stopped and I hear the metal slide of our door. The van tilts as our fellow commuters make crouched exits.

The air is little stale outside.

"Come on."

He takes my hand and leads the way through patches of people, most of their steps quickening as they regain their sense of purpose. Like a CBD re-boot. Ever since Carolyn explained it to me when she helped me with my computer, I've liked that term a lot. Carolyn has beautiful hands that float across a keyboard.

We move towards the sunlight, emerging through yellow signs that are like flags on the pillars. They re-stamp MTN on my mind; they know I'm increasingly forgetful these days. Vendors form small islands where a traveller can collect a cigarette, or a pair of sunglasses. Or some fruit. I think of the woman who wanted to sell me an orange outside Sandton Clinic. The crowd of vendors thickens up, as does the merchandise. On the other side of us there is a mall, and vendors crowd the steps to its entrance too.

"Buy your underwear here, madam!" He is big and very dark. His accent seems odd.

I grip Shiloh's hand tighter.

"Lots of Nigerians here," says Shiloh. He's smiling at the big black man, so I guess the abundance of Nigerians is either unimportant, or just interesting.

"I don't need underwear today, thank you," I try to say, but it seems my words only work when I direct them at Shiloh.

Another man swerves at my side, encouraging me to buy a coat. Why on earth would I want what looks like a wool trench coat in this weather? Shiloh is laughing, so I do too.

"Are we at Park Station?" I ask, pleased I remember the name.

"Not yet; it's not too far from here."

We move on. A police van stands half on and half off the pavement, like a dog with its leg cocked. There are policemen examining a table of mangos, and I'm not surprised. The fruit looks like it was coloured in with a five year old's favourite crayons. They don't look up as we pass, and we approach an intersection. No-one cares about us here.

"Legit" reads a store on a corner, and the old instruction to drink Coca-Cola is in all the usual places. There's so much competing for my attention: laughter, shouts, an underlying scent of rot, crowding adverts for cell phone networks, hair weaves and fast food joints. Especially those of the chicken variety. A sign says "Park Central", but I trust Shiloh to lead the way. He holds my hand as we jump a small puddle and cross the road. My mouth waters. I have a yearning for beer, which isn't like me.

"Heineken or Castle Lite?" Shiloh asks.

I just laugh again. My head feels frothy, like I've poured champagne in there. There are palm trees ahead in the distance, and I'm not sure this is really downtown. Unless we're in Beverley Hills.

Left we turn into another alley with vendors to the right, and scuffed shops to the left. *Linear Market*, says yet another sign, and yes it is indeed linear. People are dense all around us. I see a Zulu headdress I think would suit me, and I love this sense of the whole world in one place. *Surgery Dokodela 1st Floor* is on the other side of the alley, but one thing I don't need is a doctor. So I keep my eyes on the right, where ahead there are red pointy spires.

"The Bridge Mall, not Park Station," says Shiloh.

This place is full of wondrous shopping. Watermelons pile up next to pairs of thongs, each shoe with a whorl of animal hair at the toe-piece. I wonder whether it would be too much to pair the headdress with the thongs. I'd need a different dress, or maybe some cow skin pants. I bet they have it all here somewhere.

Noord Street Butchery. Not really what I'm after, although they may have the cow skin I'm thinking of. Is this yet another taxi rank on our right, or is it really all one giant station?

"People call this Wanderers Taxi Rank. You can see the vehicles are bigger. This is where the Zimbabweans and Malawians catch taxis back to their countries," says Shiloh.

I wonder how far that is, how many people are squeezed in at a time, and where they put their luggage. Do they take some of these mangos with them? Perhaps they take home headdresses and thongs as souvenirs.

Ahead of us is a square entrance to a building that says *Park Station*. We've arrived.

"Not quite," says Shiloh. "We need to walk through this part to get to the Gautrain section."

Whatever that is.

Above the entrance to this new building is a rectangular blue sign. An alien Lego piece that says prasa, and there's code language to give aliens directions, a secret script beneath the title.

"Come," says Shiloh.

But I stop because there's a logo on the blue sign that catches my breath. It's round with opposing patterns, and I feel my eyes shiver. I know this; it's an eye. The big round eye of the boomslang I used to catch sight of outside the dining room, in the tree next to the trampoline. Frank always laughed at me and said it wasn't the same snake each time, but I know it was. A slender slider with wide eyes, who watched me. I watched back. I couldn't go into that giant cave of a dining room without looking through the glass doors for the guardian snake. Now it's back, a round stare from the Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa. I smile at it and so does Shiloh. But he pulls me onward, and the eye passes over us. So we move away, out of the boomslang's gaze and through secret alien tunnels.

I feel the city's pulse taper as we move into this quiet grey place where the sun doesn't shine on the few mango vendors who trail in here. It's cool now, but there's no-one selling trench coats or underwear. Only fruit. The hall is wide, but only a few people walk through it, and I wonder what frightens the others away. It could just be the lack of sun.

On either side of us I smell the chicken I'm longing for; KFC and Chicken Licken call to me, but Shiloh guides me on by the elbow. Debonairs Pizza. I wouldn't say no to that either. And then on the left I see the boomslang again, its eyes repeated across swing gates to yet another tunnel.

"That's the way to the trains," says Shiloh.

But they can't be trains we want to catch because we walk on past them, and the snake eyes follow me. They know how much I long for chicken and beer. This is an interminable tunnel; it's like being inside the belly of my snake. Then into the great hall we walk, and I'm definitely getting weaker. Is this another place, or just a wider part of the same maze? I catch glimpses of places to eat, and a foreign exchange booth.

Up an escalator we ride. I'm feeling dizzy, and watching the scales of the escalator makes me worse.

"Just there," says Shiloh, pointing to the left of where we're riding up to.

Buffalo Bills, says a sign on a building within this building. *Action Bar and Café*. I don't want action. It's beer and chicken I long for. The snake's white scales gleam above us. I don't see any sign of a movie theatre. This is more like Grand Central Station, although a whole lot more modern. There's a feeling here I recognise from Chi's apartment, but not quite, because the snake is here.

I peer over at the level below us, and watch people lining up to buy tickets at booths that say things like Intercape. Some people sit. Others swarm like ants, all of them with individual missions. Going places. Jobs to do; people to see. I wonder whether they even see the people to the left and right of them. There's a big screen down there and I wonder whether that's where we'll watch the next movie. I'm a bit wary this time. I'm not in the mood to swoon over my Pina Colada.

"Come," says Shiloh, stepping off the escalator.

YOH! YOH! YOH! says a big billboard on the far side of the building, and I'm feeling overwhelmed by all these signs and the potential they have for me.

And then I see why Shiloh pointed at Buffalo Bills. Castle Lite and Heineken on the menu. Green and white umbrellas, because maybe this alien place has its own sun. I feel like running to this strange building within a building. Wasn't there a film a few years ago about alien cowboys? Little red stars on the logos are there to guide the aliens in. I hear Shiloh laugh as I trot to the closest table.

Despite the rush of the station, only one other table is occupied, and that by a single man who ignores us and stares into his beer. I guess another world stares back at him. Perhaps he's also waiting for Shiloh. Normally these metal chairs are uncomfortable for an

old girl like me, but today they don't present a problem. Shiloh swivels my chair to face the wall, where there's a big picture of a Heineken bottle.

I want to tell the waiter I'd like beer and chicken but it's difficult, so Shiloh does it for me. I don't know what Shiloh orders because the Heineken poster is fading to black. And this time I'm watching still pictures sliding from right to left. A Heineken-sponsored slide show. Of Chi's birthday parties out in the garden, next to the swimming pool, around the trampoline. The dogs follow Chi as she tramps beneath the trees. As she sits in a wheelbarrow while Chance pushes. As she stomps after him in the pink gumboots Frank brought back from a trip to Singapore. Frank has messed up often, but he does love his daughter.

The waiter places our order on the table. I don't make eye contact though, because I don't want to scare him.

I'm watching this reel of memories through the boomslang's eyes. From up in the trees, where the tips of the branches knit in the cool canopy of our Lilongwe garden. I can smell the damp earth where Chance placed the sprinkler earlier. And then the pictures of Chi fade.

I swill my beer the way Frank used to, back in the bad pirate days. It slides in a cold welcome rush down my throat. But Frank's not in this picture. The chicken tastes of salt and oil, and it's incredible. Thank goodness the plate is piled with it.

A film starts. Seems to me the snake is watching from the darkness this time, still up in the trees. It's another party on our veranda, but this time it's only women. They're my friends; no mistresses or pirates.

I see Carolyn. She's so young, and it comes back to me, that warm pleasure at seeing her. Where am I? It is my house after all. The snake slides down the tree toward the women, and their excitement pulses across the earth. There aren't too many options when it comes to entertaining ourselves in Lilongwe in the seventies, so we're creative. Especially after a long hard season, when our husbands have worked themselves into a state of stupefaction in that damned factory.

Shiloh takes my clean hand and squeezes, and today I squeeze back. I remember this party. There were no Pina Coladas, but there was sangria. Margaret said earlier that it's ugly when women drink too much. I'm guessing it's not as serious when men fall about pissed. I

don't see her at this party. She will've abandoned us in disgust. Gone off to her cottage, safe in the knowledge that I won't have to deal with any drama. No; this party is a precursor to Cassie the Slut.

The snake slips in closer, sliding across the veranda floor, which is a dangerous thing for a boomslang to do at a party. Particularly a party for women. The relationship has been a little strained since the days of Eden, ha, ha. We slither into the lounge, eyes just off the floor. There's the pirate bar. Up a bar stool. We look in at the other side of the bar. That's my reflection in the mirror. I have hands and no scales. I'm drinking the punch as though I'm dehydrated. A parched desert of a woman. Music comes out loud and strong from Frank's speakers.

Gerry Rafferty is parodying paranoia, and I think I understand how funny that is; sangria is helpful that way. Carolyn is beside me, and even though I've slipped in here from the trees outside, she's my friend.

We sing along, about being scared in case we fall off our chairs. And it makes us very funny; much more so than the others in the room. Hemmed in, as we are, by clowns and jokers.

We're off our barstools and dancing on the slippery parquet. I could kiss this woman whose soul and mine are losing any sense of constraint, yeah we're all over the show. Others are joining us, and I hardly spare a thought for little Chi who's asleep down the passage, or for Frank who's out of town. Again.

We think we're funny and cool, making all this noise and leaping about. Someone takes her shirt off and starts whipping it around like a lasso. Deidre Parrimore. This is hilarious in a country governed by Kamuzu Banda, where women are forbidden from wearing trousers and short skirts. Sangria fuelled rebellion, and we're encouraged by Gerry and Joe.

We're down to our panties by the time we're back to being scared about falling off our seats. There's no need for words, we head for the door like a school of fish. Stealers Wheel softens as we lope towards the swimming pool, squealing like we're twelve.

I jump as high and far as I can, my breasts heaving and dragging in response. The water cups around me. I can hear little bubbles, and I open my eyes. Chlorine stings but the scene is worth it. A universe of sparkle and foam is backlit by the house. Legs and bums,

hands clawing. I don't want to surface and re-enter the other world . I want to stay down here among fairy whispers in the water, and the lunacy of effervescence on my skin.

But I have to go up to breathe.

The music has changed, although I can't tell what the song is now. Carolyn is sleek as a seal over at the steps, and I smile at her. I go back under, sculling with my hands to stay down. She dives towards me and I'm surprised at how well I can see her down here at night. Her smile is a cascade of bubbles, and the light is silver on her skin. I want to kiss that skin but I don't, because that's just the sangria.

Yeah, I'm all over the show.

Chapter Eleven

"An open flat hand."

"The signal for the MTN Station. Isn't that what she said?" Everything was moving quicker than his brain.

"None of this makes sense," said Chi.

"We must go to the police."

"They'll tell us she hasn't been missing long enough. Come on, let's go there ourselves."

"How do we know she didn't get off somewhere else along the way?"

"We don't." Chi turned, and all he could see was her back as she marched toward the clinic.

Part of him wanted to jump in a taxi himself and trace Betty's journey. But logic said Chi would be quicker with her big German engine, and her lawyer brain.

"If we took a taxi ourselves we'd see her if she stopped along the way…" His words trailed behind his daughter, evaporating without a response.

The orange seller smiled at him, craning her neck as he approached. A gleam of big white teeth and crinkled skin around her eyes. He stopped and turned. Crouched at her makeshift table, feeling the stretch under his foot where the lake wound was healing.

"Did she go all the way to the MTN Station?"

The woman shrugged, and her smile disappeared. "You should go in the taxi."

"Dad, come on!"

He stood and wiped at the corners of his mouth with one hand. Chi tugged his arm.

"Is she in danger?" he asked the vendor.

She shrugged again and gazed out at the traffic, as though tired of his questions and the fact that he wasn't going to follow her advice. He stood and followed Chi, but his mind itched.

"We can't fool around in taxis, Dad. They take too long and God knows where Mom is by now."

Her car unlocked and he got into the passenger seat, pulled the seatbelt across him and watched as Chiara keyed in a destination on the GPS. Betty floated between his synapses like a nymph.

Elizabeth of Assisi; she'd also been elusive. It'd been unreal, the way she gave so much of herself to him in just a matter of hours, and then slipped away. And then, of course, she re-appeared in the most quietly explosive way. For him at least. He'd been mesmerised, and then shocked; horrified actually.

They turned through a large intersection and the car gave an instruction to continue straight for the next four kilometres.

Chi braked hard behind a taxi, pressing down on the horn. "Fucking move, you moron!"

Frank's seatbelt bit across his chest, and he felt an impulse to weep. To escape his daughter and her big car, and hunt for Betty on his own. He breathed out slowly.

"Are you okay?" Chi asked.

"Sort of."

"We're both upset." She patted his knee, her eyes still on the road.

He nodded, and looked out at the traffic on either side of them. Chi kept changing lanes, accelerating in spurts, pressing the horn. The desire to scream at her to stop it was like acid in his chest. Instead he focussed on the traffic. The bloody wretched cars that slowed them down. Even the most frenetic days in Richmond weren't as bad as this, were they? Richmond, Virginia: that was so long ago. Perhaps he was out of touch; maybe it was every bit as bad as this.

All the same, Johannesburg was a big foreign city for an elderly woman to disappear in. A woman who was losing words, and possibly a few other things. How would she explain herself? How could she ever protect herself in this violent place?

"Dad? Dad, don't cry…"

He put a hand over the one Chi placed on his thigh. Her skin was dry. It was his turn to be at a loss for words. He opened his mouth, but only a gasp came out, so he shut it again, thinking of the impulsive conversations he and Betty used to have. Usually on a road trip; out to the lake, or to Luwawa. Occasionally to Liwonde. Sallies that always reminded him of what drew them to each other in the first place. That sparkle was forever lost from their conversation. He felt nauseous, and opened his window a fraction.

"Dad, you know what that does to the air con."

"I feel sick."

She slowed the car and turned into a fuel station. Brought them to a stop with the indicator still clicking its soft authority.

"Take a deep breath. Should I take you back to the apartment and do this without you?"

He shook his head. The indicator ticked on, but she sat unspeaking and looked at him. The girl he'd bought little pink Barbie gumboots for on a trip to Singapore. He'd found them in a market while looking to buy himself silk shirts. She wore them until they had to be thrown away.

"You shouldn't have to deal with this," he said.

"What do you mean? She's my mother…"

"I know. But it's my job. Really. You shouldn't have to deal with doctors and having us here to stay, then her running away like that. Me sick in your car."

Her phone rang. The screen on the dashboard changed from a map to a picture of a phone and a name: *Tim*. Chi glanced at it, then cut the caller off.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This is a family thing, you know that. It's what we do."

"I remember the day you stood by yourself for the first time."

"Dad, for crying out loud. This isn't the time for that. Mom's out there somewhere. Downtown Jo'burg; I mean, shit. The more we piss around the further she gets. Do you even understand…?" She ran her hands through her hair.

"It was Margaret. She taught you; she had so much patience. She used to hold your hands and sing you this song. How did it go?"

"Fuck." Her expletive was drawn out, like a sigh.

She moved the gear stick and the car pulled forward, bigger and stronger than Frank. He felt as though he was shrinking in the seat. He pressed the button and the window eased up. Looking out, he saw the rise towards Sandton City, then the slip road past the sign to Tara. Who decided that such a pretty girl's name was appropriate for a sad, frightening place? Or at least he assumed it must be, given how alarming he found mental illness.

He closed his eyes and pictured a little girl with pigtails and pink Barbie gumboots running out to his car as he got home.

-oOo-

Chiara fought the traffic through streets that widened and narrowed, flinging expletives at the car window and pressing the horn with a violence that made Frank tired. He realised she'd put the hazard lights on, but couldn't remember her pushing the button.

Who was Tim?

Suddenly the suburban road disgorged them onto a bridge, and they sped above a freeway. Frank looked down at the beading line of cars below them, and the nausea returned briefly as they swirled left and down into the same traffic.

"I hope this bloody GPS is taking us the right way. I'm sure we should've gone straight…" she said.

He was no help at all.

She slid the car left and right, leaning forward and angling herself in a crouch across the steering wheel. Her wrists seemed too slim to be guiding this lump of hurtling metal. The taxi ahead of them moved slowly through the bend down to the freeway, and Chi made a sound without opening her mouth, a sort of strangled scream. The taxis brake lights came on.

She pressed the hooter, and kept her hand down. The vehicle ahead moved slowly onto the freeway.

"Move over, you fucker!"

He didn't. Chi pressed the horn again, accelerating and braking in quick succession. She looked left and Frank found himself sitting bolt upright and forcing his head back into the headrest, as she checked the wing mirror on his side then flung the car into the shoulder piece of the road. He wanted to remind her that this was illegal.

Instead he said, "That's it, Chi."

But she wasn't paying any attention. Instead she was pressing on the hooter continuously, and shouting at the taxi and its inhabitants as they went past. The other vehicle issued angry sounds of its own, and Chi slipped the Mercedes ahead of the taxi in a surge that pressed Frank into his seat. Back at the clinic he'd been filled with panic, but now…He wondered why he wasn't as furious with worry as his daughter; perhaps the force of her anxiety took away his own.

The freeway curved, and to the left he caught a glimpse of the Wits sports fields and one of its entrances, and he wondered what memories lay in that campus for Chi. He looked at her again, and her lips were working although no sound was coming out. She was talking herself through her manoeuvres on the road, her eyes darting between the car mirrors and the tarmac. It was as though he wasn't there.

What did she get up to in her free time at Wits? Or had she hidden away in the libraries, licking the wounds of widowhood and burying herself in legal cases? He scratched around in the trove of his memories. It would've been an interesting time to be on that campus. But he had no memory of her ever discussing it. They'd been so afraid of things that might hurt her after Michael died. Maybe they'd missed out on knowing her in the process.

"Did you ever get involved in politics on campus?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Don't worry. I…" He shut his mouth; she wasn't listening.

Wits disappeared behind a grey slab of concrete, and they sped beneath a bridge, then slid left onto a side road. Everything was so crazy and dishevelled. Maybe it would be best if Betty was never found. Or if she was dead. If she slipped off with Shiloh and never returned.

And he could be left with only good memories of their lives together. Memories took on a weighted importance with age, it seemed in that moment.

"I just can't deal with what might be happening to her out there."

Chi's words slapped him to sense.

"She'll be ok," he said without thinking.

"How the hell do you know that? Shit Dad, sometimes it's better not to speak."

"I know," he said, shaking his head and looking out the window. He wished he could escape the strangeness of his mood; recover his own sense of urgency. Why the hell wasn't he more frightened?

Outside the CBD flaunted a grimy pulse. He sat upright. Was Betty really out there? This wasn't the Johannesburg he knew. He could feel the thrum of it through the window as Chi slid the car into a crawl through offshoots of the main road. She remained crouched low over the steering wheel, but now her lips were still as her eyes scanned the sidewalks and buildings. One ways and alleyways, buildings towering and then dipping, colour and the promise of noise everywhere.

Inside the cool angst of Chi's car, the GPS was saying something in its Sky News voice, and Frank realised that they were drawing up to a taxi rank. Other taxis filtered in with them, shuffling in impossibly close. One sidled alongside, leaning toward Frank as the driver eased along with two wheels on the paving. He squeezed in ahead of Chi's car. Music drummed; it was hard to tell exactly where it was coming from, or whether it was only coming from one source.

Frank tugged at the collar of his shirt, but that wasn't the reason for his claustrophobia. The rank was coated in MTN advertising. Which reminded him. He checked his phone. Nothing. Vendors thickened up along the walls. He'd been to the downtown market in Lilongwe with Betty only once. The density of human flesh, the press of produce on racks and in hessian sacks, the heat and flies: it had all overwhelmed him and he'd retreated to the car after telling her to hurry up.

"Police," said Chi, and slowed the car even more.

"Is it safe to get out, or should I just ask through the window?"

"Perfectly safe."

She turned the car into a space behind the police van. Frank climbed out and the door clunked and clicked behind him. A sound from another world.

There were three officers, one with his back to Frank, his left arm resting on the roof of the vehicle and one black boot crossed over the other. The other two were facing in Frank's direction, but were locked in a conversation triangle. Black straps on their belts kept holsters snug. He couldn't see any paunches on these guys, unlike some of the metro cops he'd seen near the clinic in Bryanston.

Chances were good at least one of them saw Betty if she'd come this far. A soft hint of rain misted against his face, and he wiped at it. He hadn't been aware of clouds moving over.

"Hello Officers." The air was heavy, pushing its way into his voice.

The one with his back to him dropped his arm from the vehicle and turned, as the others looked his way. "Yes?"

"I'm looking for my wife. Did you see an older white woman passing here today? In a blue dress?"

As though there were any other white women around to distinguish her from.

"Where you from?" asked the closest one, with a push of his chin in Frank's direction.

"Malawi."

"You don't speak like a Malawian."

In the distance behind the man was a billboard with a joyous face and the merits of joining the MTN network in thick black letters.

"I live there but I was born in the US."

"Your wife is also American?"

"Yes."

They spoke a few words of what he assumed was Zulu, and nodded at each other. A smell of grease and chicken rose above the vague notes of decay, and reminded him of the early days of living and working in Charlotte and Lexington. Night duties in factories made

interesting by moonshine and chicken legs, shared with seasonal workers from the mountain areas. Man, those guys could drink.

"She was here."

"My God, really? This is great! Thank you, guys. Thank you. Was she with anyone? Did you see which way she went?"

The one had turned his back on Frank again, and the other two conferred for a couple of words.

"That way. She was alone." The speaker pointed up the road, past the vendors.

She could be anywhere. "Uh, did she keep going? Did you see her turn?"

The man shrugged. "Maybe she went right at the road."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot, guys."

-oOo-

"What did they say?" Chi leaned forward across the passenger seat as he opened his door.

"She was here!" he explained, twisting in his seat without closing the door. "They saw her head off that way."

Chiara sighed, and ran her hands around the steering wheel, as though looking for directions on some mental map. "It's a bit vague."

"Chi, come on! She won't be that far ahead of us. We have to try find her. Let's go." Why the hell couldn't he and Chiara hit the same note with this? Had she given up now?

"You must move your car." It was the policeman who'd spoken to him just minutes before. He had a hand on the roof and his head was ducked into Frank's doorway. There was a wet patch at his armpit, and Frank re-directed his eyes.

"We're trying to find my mother, Officer," began Chi.

"I understand, but you cannot park here."

Frank saw his daughter give a pointed look into the rear-view mirror, where taxis clamoured in knots around a variety of road signs, and he put a hand over hers.

"No problem, Officer, we'll move now," he said.

Chi sat back with a puff of breath.

“There’s a parking area around the corner on the left. Some guys there will direct you,” said the policeman.

“I bet they bloody will.”

“Sorry?”

“We appreciate that, thank you, Officer.” Frank didn’t look at Chi as he spoke.

The man stood back but Frank didn’t close his door.

“Chi, you follow his directions and park, and I’ll walk that way. I want to look around.”

She didn’t reply, just pressed the start button and looked ahead, so he got out, shutting the door behind him. The car growled a little louder, then slid away. The policeman scrutinised him, thumbs hooked into the belt loops of his pants.

“This woman, your wife. Why is she alone?”

“She’s not well. In the head… You know, she’s confused?”

“Confused? Why aren’t you looking after her properly?”

“No, you don’t understand… Look, I have to go and find her…”

“You want help?”

“Yes.” Frank stopped and thought, could he trust these people? He’d heard so many stories about corruption. How was he supposed to know who to trust? “I’ll give you my cell phone number, and if you see her, you can call me. Okay?”

The other man nodded, his face expressionless. Frank recited his number and the policeman pressed buttons on his own phone.

“Your name?”

“Frank. Thomson.”

By this time the other officers had joined them and were watching as the man typed into his phone.

“All good?” asked Frank, conscious of time passing.

The policeman nodded.

“I appreciate that, thank you, Officer.”

Frank gave him a smile and didn’t receive one in return, so he gave the men a small wave, and moved along the pavement in the direction Chi had taken. Not that there was much room to walk with all the vendors crowding the space, and trying to sell him women’s underwear.

“For your wife.”

“Your girlfriend!”

“Even for you!”

They were expecting his smile and guffawed, then became earnest when he stopped. And yes, they’d seen Betty. She didn’t buy anything, sadly, but she went that way. Yes, yes, such a happy lady. She smiled with them, but then she was suddenly in a hurry and she walked away, to the intersection over there. She crossed the road, then she went right.

In a hurry? Where the hell was she going to, he wondered. He pushed through the clamour of people and reached the intersection. He looked right and paused at the infinite number of choices she could have made.

The Just Imagine Bar.

Exactly the kind of place she’d go with Shiloh. And it was on the path the vendors had directed him. Chi would be parking just a little further on. The music pulsing from the doorway was tinny with treble.

“You looking for chicks, mister?” said a man seated on a dilapidated chair outside the entrance.

“Uh, no thanks.”

He hooked his head into the dark, then stepped inside, allowing his eyes to adjust. Sourness and stale air caught in his nostrils. A youngster looked up at him with a tilt of his head, and then returned to his lone game of pool. Two others battled in a game of foosball, their hands spinning and crashing.

Frank walked up to the one playing pool and cleared his throat, thinking as he did so of what a cliché he was. The guy ignored him, and Frank was about to speak when a woman's voice came from a corner beyond the pool table.

"Can I help you, mister?"

It came out meester, with a throaty tuck at its finish. Was she French?

He moved closer. "Yes. I'm looking for my wife. She's…"

"She's gone away?"

"Yes, she's disappeared…"

"Oh shame, baby."

In the gloom he could make out the fleshy press of her lips as they formed the words. Lips that might've feasted on cherries and not had the juice wiped off. Amazing lips. The fullest he'd ever seen. His eyes adjusted, and her breasts heaved against a vest too small for its task. Her skirt rode up thighs that crossed as she perched on her barstool.

"Well no. What I mean is…she's lost I think." There seemed to be a lot of saliva in his mouth and throat.

"Lost? Oh… poor woman." She stood as she poured out the syrupy words, and Frank stepped back. She was right up against him, hooped earrings glinting in the shadows. Her breath was sour, and her heels were high.

"I can help you find what you're looking for…" Her right hand tucked in at his crotch with a deftness that made him gasp.

He bent forward and she slipped her head against his neck and folded her tongue into his ear.

"Dad!"

He stepped back, wiping at the side of his head, and the woman detached herself. One corner of her mouth was curled.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I came in… I thought your mother…"

"What? You thought my mother what? Who's this?"

Frank couldn't look at Chi. He cupped his hands against his crotch and tried to bring Betty's face to mind.

Chapter Twelve

It must be the first time Shiloh has stayed after a movie.

Although I suspect this is significant, I'm too pleased to question him about it. The greasy chicken has left me full, and I hide a burp that's sour with beer behind one hand. I wipe my hands on a paper napkin and wonder whether there are bits of chicken stuck between my teeth. Detritus in my mouth after a meal seems to be an increasing affliction.

"Your teeth are fine," he says.

I swallow the last of my beer and look at him. There's definitely something else we'll be doing. The bill is on the table; it must've arrived while I watched the movie.

I lick the taste of hops from my lips and ruffle the hair at my neck, thinking about the party in Lilongwe. This body feels so different to the one that dived in the pool that night. It occurs to me that I've shed several skins in my time. Elizabeth, Lizzy, Lib, Elyssa, and the long slow mutation of Betty. Poor Frank. He has been a bastard in his time, but I'll probably never tell him about my own lies. About how one night with him provided me with the solution to a tricky situation. If I'm honest, I started to hatch the plan as soon as I spotted him in Assisi. The cold of the ice-cream gave me a certain clarity. Elyssa was in a pickle, and she got herself out of it, committing suicide in the process. Death to Elyssa! Dowdy on with Betty! It was better for everyone that way. God knows how it would've gone with Elyssa.

"Indeed."

"You knew Elyssa?"

"Elyssa the Gloriously Troubled? Of course. I loved her. And the others. You're not surprised."

I'm not. I loved Elyssa too. Sometimes I think I loved her more than the others.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. One movie at a time."

I look at the bill. Parts of the writing look like Mandarin. Shiloh lifts my bag from the floor and says, "Fifty two rand, including a tip."

I scuffle around in my purse and I can feel Shiloh's eyes on me. "I'm worse after each movie."

He lifts his eyebrows and his nod is small. “Yes.”

“I’m scared.”

“That’ll wear off. It’s just body fear.”

I put the cash on the table, unhappy for the first time since escaping the netted cap. The waiter moves across to our table, and I sense relief in his smile. I want to tell him he needn’t have worried; I was always going to pay. My tongue is too thick and uncooperative to form the words, and only a mangled sound is pushed from my lips. He looks startled and takes the cash quickly, as though nervous I might lash out. Or bite.

“Let’s go. I want to introduce you to Hope. You’ll spend tonight with her.”

That sounds like a good name. I hope she’ll understand me, ha, ha. I get up from the bar stool and the waiter retreats further into his shadow. I wonder whether I got a bit animated while watching the movie. I felt animated, that’s for sure.

Shiloh takes my hand, and lightness seeps into my body. It’s cool in the station and through the windows and glass doors I see what looks like rain. This pristine cave is too much. I want to get outside. Perhaps Hope is out there, in the rain.

He takes me by the hand, but instead of going outside, we press on toward yet another tunnel. This time I see light at the end of it though. That’s funny. The tunnel ends and we step outside beneath a covered walkway. We’re walking toward an even more modern building with a pointed, slightly sloping roof. The rain beats down on either side of us, kicking up from the red brick paving and wetting my ankles.

There’s a tall blue sign on the left that says *Park Station* at the top, and it lists the eateries we passed back inside. It doesn’t mention Buffalo Bill’s. At the very bottom though, there’s the prasa word again. I pause, caught in the stare of my snake’s eye.

“Betty, we need to go.”

I carry on, trying to ignore the eye. There are some pretty tall buildings further on, to the left. One is tiered in white and grey, like an alien cake. Another pretends to be a rocket for those aliens, blocked and linear, with panels that probably come loose when it escapes the atmosphere. The sky beyond them is leaden. They disappear from view as our pathway takes us beneath the modern roof and toward another entrance.

"She's right there at the doorway. It's her home time."

I focus on the figure at the entry. She's pulling one of those collapsible umbrellas from a large red and pink bag. The bag is a hideous plastic thing, but her face is smooth mocha. She smiles at me as her face lifts.

"You're still here?" she says.

Shiloh must've said something to her earlier, because this is the first time I've met this angel-face. I look to him, but he has left. So I stop, a little giddy. I want to tell her that Shiloh was supposed to introduce us. People are walking thickly around us, and I move to one side, my body not quite as clumsy as my tongue.

"Are you okay, my dear?"

She's beside me now, and places her free hand on my arm. I start to cry, which makes me furious because as much as I may have behaved so in the past, I am not a feeble person. So I nod at her because I'm as okay as I'll ever be now.

"Betty." I've said it, thank goodness.

"Hello Betty, I'm Hope."

Yes, I know that. She's wearing a name badge, and Shiloh told me. My problem is that she's not exactly putting her arm around me and telling me Shiloh told her all about me, and that we're going to have a lovely relaxing evening together at her house. Is that what I'll be doing? He did say something along those lines. At least I think he did.

"Are you lost, Betty?"

Am I? I don't feel lost, but I wouldn't know where to go to from here.

"Do you want me to call someone for you?"

I shake my head. I sure as hell do not.

"Do you want me to give you directions?"

I shrug. I have no idea what I'm meant to do to be honest, Hope. But I think I'm meant to be with you. So I smile and grasp the hand she placed on my arm. I cup my other hand over our grasp, and my smile is easy to keep because I feel so happy when I'm holding Hope like this. She's still but her eyes are busy, looking right into my face.

"Shiloh told me," I say, immediately feeling better, even though the words come slowly.

"Who?"

I mustn't be afraid. It's just body fear.

"Shiloh." There. It came out in two syllables, but I was able to say it again.

Now those beautiful sloe eyes are screwed at the corners. Don't let the fear get you, Betty. It's body fear. I point at her as a means of encouragement. She sighs and she's obviously bewildered, and probably a bit vexed. She was on her way somewhere. Bodies moving in and out of the station usher across rainy air from beyond the modern roof.

"You want me to take you somewhere?"

I point at her again. My handbag is heavy on my arm. I preferred it when Shiloh was carrying it.

"You want to come with me?"

It seems there's a touch of disbelief in her voice, but I can't abandon this opportunity. I nod as enthusiastically as I can, and smile. Probably a bit of a crazy look, but she seems to be getting the idea.

Hope removes her hand from my grip and walks to the point where the rain comes down. Opens up the umbrella and then offers me her free hand. The shelter of it is too small for the two of us, so I shift to one side because I don't care about getting wet. It's warm out here and I refuse to believe that a soaking would be bad for me. I've done what Shiloh said to do, so I'll be fine.

As we walk I tip my head slightly and let some drops in between my lips. My feet splosh through damp patches of paving. The smell of uncollected rubbish and tired bodies is being sluiced away.

Acid rain; people used to talk about it all the time. Is that what this is? Perhaps it'll eat me up from the inside. It'll help with Betty's erosion, because I do feel her sliding off me. When you take the wildest elements out of an Elyssa, you're left with a Betty. The lobotomised version, some might say. I had to put an end to Elyssa, I really did. There was no

sane way around her situation, or her self-destructive nature. But oh man, she knew how to live for a time. It was fear that brought her to her knees. Body fear.

I start to laugh, my head back and the rain dropping over my face. Hope looks at me, and her face is kind.

-oOo-

This building is very tired. Instead of looking clean from the rinse of this rain, it looks resigned. Outside there's no grass beneath the tree that stands to one side of the flagging to the doorway. It's just red mud, a slippery veneer over what's probably baked hard beneath.

There's a rainbow shimmer on the red step to the door where something greasy was deposited. A rainbow promise. Hope takes my elbow as we step up. We huddle in the short fringe of the entrance while she fishes in her bag and then places a key in the security gate. It squeals as she pushes it back, and I wonder whether the rainbow was someone's attempt to fix that squeak. It's the sort of thing that can drive Frank crazy. He would never leave residue on the floor. A baby's wail or its poopy nappy are chasms he struggles to bridge. This despite the precious thing on the other side. He needs some sort of pole vault really, poor Frank.

The stairs make me realise I'm less fit than I thought. Not that I've ever been particularly sporty. But a couple of flights of stairs never felt this challenging. A grimy signature on the walls tells of others who've found this arduous. Or just been careless.

Hope is far more capable than I am. Up, up she goes, then pauses to look back at me. Sometimes she smiles. And then we're in a corridor, the same brown streak and pits on the walls on either side of us. My heart hammers from the exertion; I must be coming down with something. She unlocks a door that may've been a uniform green at some point, but which is now shell-shocked and peeling in various colour layers. As though there has been some sort of prolonged war game going on here. Vietnam in a door.

Inside things are threadbare and curtains are drawn in tired loops. It's all very brown. It's a commune, something I still find familiar. There are three other people in here already. Hope introduces me. My tongue is heavy and un-cooperative, so I hold up a peace sign. They'll get that, I know. A man with a paunch and a beer holds up his can in my direction and smiles with big yellow teeth. The women seem less interested.

I'm over the idea of living in communes, and I'm wondering who's looking after Chiara while I'm with this lot. She's a prickly little thing and doesn't take easily to strangers. I see her stare at Frank with those solemn eyes sometimes, and my heart freezes.

Please love him.

And I see him stare at her across that void of nappies and wails, and sometimes I feel weak.

This has to work.

"Betty, come this way." Hope's voice is soft but clear.

I nod at the others as I weave a path through them. Strange bunch. Maybe they're stoned. They should be listening to The Stones (ha, ha) or The Grateful Dead, instead of whatever's squawking on that television set. They don't seem to understand what constitutes a mood enhancer.

Not that I think about those things any more. I'm Betty the wife and mother. No longer skippin' through the lily fields, although occasionally I've been known to jump on a bus to never-ever land. I allow Elyssa's ghost to hum such lyrics at times, and it's okay because Frank wouldn't know them anyway. This apartment smells like hot wax, and I don't think there are any windows open. I wonder why.

Hope's room is small. Not designed as a bedroom, more like a bed-sized cupboard. The single bed looks like prison-issue, as does her linen, but she's so kind that I'm not saying anything (even if I could persuade my mouth to form the words). My face must've told her though.

"This is what I can afford. You don't mind sharing a bed?"

Normally I would, but Hope is a gift. A beautiful chocolate-wrapped reward of freedom. From what, I'm not quite sure, but all my senses tell me this. She speaks exotic yet perfect English, with a soft touch. She's wiping at me with a towel, and I remember that I'm soaked.

There's a Bible on the floor beside her bed, neat and square in the little space next to the wall. A set of shelves close to the door stacks clothes. I want to ask her why she lives like this.

"I am Zimbabwean."

I nod because apparently that's an explanation. Quite what it explains is a slippery thought, but it may come if I'm not forceful. The mattress feels thin when I lean on it, but what do I care? This is where I want to be tonight.

"I have two children," she continues, as though realising she can tell me anything because I'm not someone who'll repeat it.

"They're with my mother in Bulawayo. Only ten and six years old. A girl and a boy."

I keep nodding, and feel like one of those bobble-headed dogs some people put in the back window of their cars. I wonder why they do that. Is it to entertain those of us behind them in traffic?

"The bathroom is down the passage."

Do I smell bad? I have nothing to change into, and I have no idea where my toothbrush is. My teeth can rot for all I care. It must be so I can use the toilet. And suddenly I need to pee. My head bobs more vigorously, and she moves aside so I can get out the door. I look left and right, but I have no idea where the toilet is. Hope takes my hand and leads me a few metres to the right.

"No one is in there. You can go. I have a gown for you. Maybe your dress will dry in the night."

The bathroom is olive green and beige, ugly in an endearing way. Sort of like the mutt my father brought home when I was about twelve. We actually called her Mutty. It's a relief to pee. Must've been storing this up for a while. What on earth have I been drinking?

Bucket loads of rain.

I wash my hands and look in the mirror, which is pocked and rusted in spots around the edges. I look past that, and scream. Something terrible has happened to me. To my face. To the hands that reach to touch that face in shock. The acid rain has bleached and melted my skin. And my hair. Oh dear God! Hope is next to me but she can't help. I should've stayed under the umbrella with her, and never ever have let those drops between my lips.

Chapter Thirteen

Hours of fruitless searching followed the Just Imagine incident; hours stained by Chiara's revulsion. Stores, cafes, alleys and stairways were investigated, and all the while the event in the bar sizzled in Frank's chest. He hadn't done anything wrong, he kept telling himself, while reminding his brain to watch out for a blue dress and grey hair. Pools of water gathered on unprotected sidewalks as the rain persisted. Lights came on, creating haloes in Frank's vision.

He watched his daughter questioning people, apparently oblivious to the soaking she was receiving. She seemed unflagging, but no-one else remembered a white person coming this way, never mind an older woman. He longed for a bite of the fried chicken he seemed to smell everywhere, but he'd committed enough offence for the day. He wasn't going to be the one to suggest a break for sustenance.

They worked their way back along the oily streets towards the taxi rank. Perhaps someone else would remember seeing her, or had spoken to her. More questions for the traders who now huddled against walls to escape water where they could, plastic sheets shielding their wares against the patter of a million drops. Chi stood with her hands on her hips, droplets winding down her features.

"What the hell do we do now?" She lifted her face as though asking the heavens.

Frank knew better than to answer.

"You looking for the white lady?" A black man in jeans and sneakers stood between Frank and the wall.

"You saw her?"

"I think so. In her sixties maybe? Black handbag?"

"Yes, yes!" Chi was at his side, water beading off coils of hair at the side of her face.

"She was heading into the station. Park Station, maybe even the Gautrain. A while ago. Looked like she had a plan. She was walking fast for a lady that age."

"Oh God. Which way is this station?" said Chi.

The man stood taller, rubbed his hands together and said, "Not too far. I'll take you."

Who was this guy? Why was Chi so willing to trust him? But Frank didn't say the words. Instead he lengthened his stride to catch up with them. What did he know? Perhaps Betty was at the Gautrain station.

-oOo-

But she wasn't there. They searched until Frank thought the map of the place would be etched on his brain forever. Any other time he would've taken the time to marvel at the cleanliness and efficiency of the place, but he was too plagued by guilt and fear.

One good thing emerged from this phase of the hunt: he and Chiara were in agreement that Betty would in all likelihood have caught the Gautrain and headed north. She had cash, and apparently the desire to travel. After all, what could she possibly have wanted in downtown Johannesburg? The idea that she may have caught a train from the main station and not the Gautrain was one neither of them was willing to talk about.

Where was that guy who'd seen her head in this direction anyway? They realised that since they'd started their hunt of the station neither had seen him again. Frank didn't voice his fear that the man had another motive; that perhaps this was some sort of decoy. Instead he walked with Chi back to where the car was parked, and said nothing as she pressed instructions into the GPS. They were drenched, and sat dripping in the car, wordless. He wondered whether she felt the exhaustion that gnawed at his bones.

But Betty wasn't at the next station, Rosebank. Or at the shopping mall across the road from it. At least as far as they could tell. The mall was vast and the task improbable, but Frank said nothing. They walked and searched and spoke to security people, to shopkeepers and till personnel. The place was a warren, and every neuron in his head seemed to be shouting at him to stop wasting time. So tired. He was just so damned tired he felt he could lie down beneath the glare of the mall lights and fall asleep, evening shoppers marching around him.

She wasn't at the Sandton station either. Chi parked her car on the first parking level, and down they went into the ticket area. The Gautrain cards they'd purchased at Park Station served yet again for them to ride down into the bowels of the train lines where Betty wasn't. Down, down, down; the pitch of the escalators seeming to become increasingly steep. No sign of her anywhere. Here in the northern suburbs it wasn't something extraordinary to see an elderly white woman in a blue dress. People seemed surprised at being spoken to, at

having their reveries interrupted by such a question. Chi and Frank rode the escalators back up in silence. Then stopped as they stepped outside into the twilight.

"We need to search the mall."

"There's another mall?"

"Just up this way."

He followed her left up the road that ran along the station's walls. He felt tired of trying to keep up with his daughter. Tired of trying to make up for what she thought she'd seen in the Just Imagine Bar. He allowed himself to fall behind her as she turned left again and marched towards the mall entrance. They walked into the Sandton City mall, and Chi stopped.

"This is impossible." She turned around, and walked. As though he wasn't with her.

-oOo-

He glanced at his daughter as she swung the car out of the Gautrain parking and into the night's traffic. If he was somehow able to creep into her brain and grasp the thoughts firing away in there, he wondered what he'd find. Probably nothing he'd enjoy.

Her profile was so uniquely hers. Well, of course it was. It was just that he was amazed that someone could be so different to her parents. The mystery of genetics: that he and Betty had created a blend that smudged their own profiles and created this new creature. How many times had he stared at the enigma of his daughter and wondered these thoughts? And it always brought him back to the fact of her feet. Flat as pancakes, just like his. Betty had those weirdly high arches that made for easy identification. He didn't know anyone else whose footprints weren't joined between front and back. Pity he wasn't able to track her with them here.

What was Betty thinking right now? Was she aware of what was around her or was Shiloh leading her along a transcendental route?

Who are you, Betty?

Did I do this to you?

Of course not. There was something terribly wrong with her brain. Even Shiloh was in agreement on that point.

A splash of water against the underside of the car. It sounded like it came from the other side of a vault door. The windscreen wipers kept sweeping.

What were you like before I met you?

He must've thought about that before. Betty was a wholesome American girl, calm and quiet. Who went off like a rocket in the sack; or at least she had in the early days. She'd dressed a little strangely back then, but that hadn't lasted. He wasn't sure whether that was her own decision, or because in some way he'd rinsed her invisible over the years. No, he hadn't done anything of the sort. He wouldn't do that to another person, least of all his wife.

He hoped that whatever else was going on out there, she wasn't hurt or afraid.

"We have to report this to the police," said Chi.

For a moment, he thought she was referring to the Just Imagine incident.

"Yes, of course." He cleared his throat. "Which station?"

"Sandton, I guess. It needs to be as close as possible to where it happened. Wait. That means Randburg Station."

The difference meant nothing to him. Chi's thumbs were doing a little tap on the steering wheel, and he hoped she was focussed, what with the weather and the frenzied traffic outside. A car slipped into their lane ahead of them without indicating.

Chi braked and his seatbelt pulled in against him. It whirred then released him as the car moved forward.

"Fuck." Chi seemed unfazed with her expletives.

He couldn't imagine saying that word in front of his own father. He realised he hadn't spoken to his parents about Betty's condition. Albert and Virginia were getting on now; really frail in fact. It wouldn't help anyone to tell them.

Chi was still pressing the car horn. An arm slipped out the other driver's window, it's middle finger raised in salute. Chi released the pressure on the horn. He wanted to comfort her but didn't know how.

-oOo-

The police station was nothing like its equivalent in Lilongwe. Frank had been into the latter a few times over the years for reasons varying from reporting an accident to bailing out a factory worker who'd been too exuberant on Kuche Kuche or Chibuku after pay day.

For a start, this place had automatic sliding doors at the entrance. And they worked. Fluorescent lighting was unkind, but no bulbs were missing or expired. The floors were tiled and not in need of repair. The paint wasn't peeling off the walls in layers. At the reception desk, the constable was in position and didn't ignore them as they walked in. Chairs set against the wall and in front of individual booths weren't broken or chipped; they didn't even appear to be unhygienic.

But the constable could only tell them it was too early to file a missing person's report. Betty was an adult who'd left of her own volition. There was no medical report to back up her frailty. Constable T. H Tshivhula made some notes with a careful hand, pausing at intervals to ask Frank to continue to explain events that took place. An act of kindness rather than an official report; Frank could feel it in the man's words.

Frank sat on the other side of the booth on a fixed stool as a light bulb fizzed above. Behind him, seated with her back to the wall, Chi was making phone calls. The sliding doors purred, and steps and shouts followed. The constable looked up, his writing hand paused from its scratching.

Potential energy.

"I've got proof man. I've got fuckin' proof here on my phone."

A white man crossed the threshold, but he wasn't the one talking. It was the big black guy behind him, holding up a cell phone like a piece of evidence.

"I want to file an assault charge against this arsehole," continued the phone-wielder, his voice a shout.

"Be my guest." The white guy turned left towards a door.

"Where you going, you fucker?"

The white guy kept walking, and the other one stopped, his bulk less certain. He turned to the reception desk, where another constable had appeared. Constable Maphanga, according to his name badge. Frank turned on his seat and glanced at Chi, whose phone was now out of sight. She raised her eyebrows at him, then returned her gaze to the scene.

"Can I help you?" asked Constable Maphanga.

"I want to lay charges against that bastard. The one who went through that door over there."

Another black guy appeared through the sliding door entrance. A smaller blurred version of the one holding up the cell phone. Maybe he was his brother. He flapped an arm in the direction of the reception desk, eyes half-lidded.

"That fucker assaulted us. Where's he?"

"Right here."

The white guy appeared behind the reception desk, next to Constable Maphanga. He reached a hand across the counter, as though to shake hands.

"Detective Marais."

"What the fuck? You a policemen? You… you corrupt bastard!" His hands splayed on the desk, and Frank could see spittle spray from him. The cell phone lay on its side as though abandoned in the face of this revelation.

Policemen and women drew in from nooks Frank hadn't noticed. The place had gone from quiet to packed in less than a minute. The white detective was surrounded by black comrades in uniform.

"Move back, please," said the detective.

"I want to lay charges." More spit.

"No problem. Just step back and we'll process…"

"No, no, no." The lazy-eyed cohort stepped closer, his mass blocking Frank's view of the first guy. He reached into the inside of his leather jacket and pulled out a pistol.

Frank turned to Chi and realised that from her angle she couldn't see the gun. He tried to mouth the word, but stopped at the expression on her face. He turned back to see that the detective had a pistol out too.

"Just stay calm."

"You're a corrupt fucker and I won't be calm. Come over here."

"Put your gun away."

"No way. You come outside with us. Now."

Frank wanted to move. To get across to Chi and pull her outside and into the safety of the big sedan. The room had taken on an acrid scent, and he guessed this was what his own fear smelled of. Constable Tshivhula had left his position opposite Frank. The bulb continued to sputter and blink.

"Put your gun away. Sir."

Even to Frank's ears the words sounded like a taunt.

"Fuck you."

The shot was a crack, not at all the sound of a gunshot in the movies. And Frank was at Chi's side without thinking. His arm around her, pulling her into him as though he could somehow protect his daughter. She whimpered. Another shot. God it was loud. If they could stay quiet no-one would notice them. Stray bullets and ricochets were the worry.

He was hungry as hell. And he wanted a coke. A freezing cold one with a bucket of KFC. A Zinger burger; he'd seen the billboard advert that morning.

Chi's hair smelled of coconuts. Or at least what cosmetic companies thought coconuts should smell like. He felt the tremor of her shoulders at his chest. Someone was screaming and still Frank clamped himself over his daughter. She wasn't the one bellowing, but she was breathing and that was all he was interested in for now. If he could just maintain this cocoon…

"Sir? Sir?" Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Frank unfurled, conscious of his sweatiness. Chi raised herself from beneath him, her face waxy in the fluorescence. She had badger eyes; he recognised the look from Betty's cooking in the early days. He wanted to wipe the mascara with his handkerchief, but remembered that Chi hated the very concept. He used a thumb, and they watched each other as a constable's voice told them everything was okay. That the gunman had been arrested and they were safe. Frank couldn't grasp what safety meant in this place.

There was blood on the floor not far from them, and a woman approached it slowly with a bucket and mop. Was she allowed to do that? Wasn't it tampering with evidence? An

ambulance would surely be on its way for whoever had bled on the floor. Chi was talking at him, saying they should get the hell away from here. Words, words, words. Frank wondered whether Betty was sleeping.

-oOo-

They sat upstairs in the KFC across the road from where Betty had escaped by taxi, elbows resting on the white plastic table. Chi gnawed on wings. Frank chewed on the burger he'd been thinking of, his stomach already responding with an acid revolt. Outside the lights and sounds of the traffic intersection carried on like life was normal. Further out, past Chi's head, the lights of Sandton City shimmered with promise.

"I love you, Dad."

The acid kicked down on the PH scale. Words so delicious, they hurt. He felt a flush creep up his neck. He was the one who'd had his ear sucked and his crotch manhandled just hours ago; he had to tread carefully.

"I know you do, honey. I love you too."

There was grease around her mouth.

"I just… We don't say those things to each other."

"We don't."

"We should. I can't remember the last time I said it to Mom. And I do. I love her so much, and I'm afraid… You know what I mean."

He nodded, and it seemed easy to maintain eye contact.

"It's so damned frightening, this whole thing. It's like she's turning into someone else. And I think that she might be dying. I don't know what to do to make it better." She cried as she spoke.

Sprigs of hair had broken free of the restraint she'd put on them – some sort of bun. She put a hand to her face, and the other held wing bones in limp fingers. He returned the burger to its box, and licked his fingers before wiping them on his hanky. Then stretched his hands across the table and held her forearms.

"Chi, this is life. It's okay. We don't need to control everything. You can't fix this. Nor can I."

Words formed and welled out of him before he understood what he was saying. And yet it was the truth. The need for control was consuming them. What were their attempts doing to all of them? And yet… they couldn't ignore that there was a chance she could be healed. Maybe it was a tumour that could be removed. Or a pill that could be taken.

He stood and moved a chair beside her as the sniffles evolved to sobs. As his daughter shook in his arms he thought about his responsibilities. He thought about control. About courage. About fairness and love.

"Your mother is my responsibility, Chi. I'm going to do the right thing by her. Do you trust me?"

She leaned out of his embrace and reached for a pack of tissues from her handbag. Blew her nose hard, the way she had when she was ten. He removed another tissue from the pack and wiped her eyes for the second time that night. Swiped it around her mouth, removing the chicken grease.

"What do you mean?"

"C'mon Chi. I'm your Dad, and I'm telling you that I'm going to take care of your mother. Perhaps it won't be a conventional way. You should trust that I love her too, and that I'll do the right thing."

Sitting up, he watched her pull back Chiara the Lawyer. "Dad?"

"What do you think the right thing is, Chi?"

"To find her for a start. Then get her back to Dr Van Wyk, and find out what we're dealing with."

"That's not what your Mom wants."

"She's not capable of making any decisions about that."

Come back to me Chi. "Think about it at least. Going through this again, if we find her. What will she do next time?"

Chi paused. "We'll stay with her in the room, through every step of the process. We'll get the neurologist to promise he'll damn well be there for the appointment, no waiting. He owes us that at the very least."

Frank was quiet.

“Come on, Dad. We can’t pretend there’s nothing more we can do. We can’t ignore this and hope it’ll just go away.”

“I know it’s not going away. This thing’s going to kill her.”

“You don’t even know what it is.”

He didn’t reply because she was right. And he didn’t want to spoil the mood that had mushroomed out of the shooting.

“What a day,” he said, returning to his seat and burger.

Chiara retrieved her chicken wing and hesitated. “Unbelievable. A ridiculous day. My mother ran away in a taxi, and my father and I survived a shootout in a police station. I have dangerous parents.”

Her shoulders began to shake, and Frank felt a squeeze in his stomach. Worse than indigestion from the Zinger. But she was laughing. Then he was too. They dropped their KFC into the paper boxes and laughed as tears rolled down their cheeks.

Chapter Fourteen

I hear a goat bleat, and I wake up on a small bed. Thin mattress. A woman with the skin of a Caramello Bear is going through my purse.

I want to say, What you doing? but instead a sounds travels through my nostrils while my tongue lies like an indolent seal in my mouth. I'm not angry with her; I suspect she has some sort of right to be doing it, but I don't know what that is. Her head gives a little hop and she turns to me, eyes wide. Chocolate drops in vanilla casing. She looks delicious.

"Betty."

That's me. Who the hell is she though? This room is minute. Stuffy.

"I was just looking through your handbag…I'm sorry, but you were sleeping and I thought I might find someone's name, or number…"

I bob my head because she seems to need reassurance. I follow up with a smile, and wonder where the heck Frank is. And where the hell I am.

"See? Here's a book." She holds up a notebook and I think I recognise it. "May I look in it?"

I concur. All this head-bobbing seems my only way of communicating.

She thumbs through pages in a book I don't recognise. The bag is mine, I think. Looks like it's been through the mill though. What on earth did I get up to last night?

"Looks like shopping lists mostly." Her tone is disappointed.

"Frank?" The word is slow to come out, and it's supposed to be preceded by Do you know….

She looks at me and her face seems to flatten, like a dog that's not sure of what your next move will be. Her head shakes in the negative.

"Margaret?" She must know Margaret surely.

She shakes her head. "Betty, my dear." She breaks off and sighs. "I have to get to work. I don't want to leave you on your own. There must be someone looking for you."

"Frank."

"How do I contact him?"

I shrug. Then I catch a glimpse of Frank's number behind my lids.

"Nnnnnnn." It's there. I know this. "Nine nine nine nine……six six six six"

I knew I knew it. I open my eyes. Caramello Bear doesn't believe me. Her eyes are fixed and that yummy face is slack.

"That's not a phone number."

Well, I think it is. But I'm not getting onto an argument. I suck my lips in, and realise I'm hungry. And I need to pee.

"Wa…Wee?"

Her eyes open wider, as though something has flashed behind them. Did I do something to her bathroom last night?

"Wait. I think there's someone in there. Let me check."

This must be a commune. It's all going to take some explaining when I get home to Frank. Margaret will be looking after Chiara. Unless it's Sunday. Oh shit. Is it Sunday? A party on a Saturday night it must've been. Oh shit, oh shit. Please let Frank be in the country.

But I'd never go to a party without leaving Margaret in charge of Chi, and she wouldn't leave her 'til I got back, so I must calm down. I can talk my way out of it if Frank's in town. Can't believe I've done this. Frank must be away. I don't do this when he's in town. Never ever.

Okay. Here's my bag. Can't see my shoes. Here's a funny pair. Tired-looking but they fit. My feet look awful, but I can't think about that now. Let me get home first.

She left the door open a fraction, and I step out, a frisson sizzling through me. A gentle shock at not recognising anything. There's what seems to be a lounge area down the passage to my left, so I tiptoe towards it.

This is the brownest room I've seen since the commune, and even that had a few things we draped around the place in our more inspired moments. This is just brown. And it

smells like wax and old air. I cross the mud room and get to the door. Undo the latch and bolt, and ease out.

That's really what it feels like: as though I'm slipping into fresher air. And I'm only in a passage, not even outside yet. Down the stairs. This place could do with a revamp. Not that I'm the model home-maker. My body joints feel like they've been welded, and even in this dim light I see my hands are in a similar state to my feet. I'm like this building.

Outside the air reflects a rinse that must've happened recently to judge by the dampness on the paving and the swirls of mud that have nestled in patches. The concrete steps to the paving seem a bit treacherous. A youth I hadn't noticed 'til now steps forward and offers a hand. His cap is on backwards, and I can see the band of his underpants above the droop of his jeans. A miscreant with manners. I give him my hand but reserve my smile.

"Hello, Betty."

"Ah, Shiloh. You're looking disreputable this morning." My heart gets warm.

His lips flare into a grin and a flash of big teeth. "You sleep well?"

"I guess so. Bit odd this morning, waking up not sure where I was. Sweet thing, that girl."

"Hope. She was trying to help."

"I'm beyond help."

"Hers, yes you are."

"So what are we up to today?"

"I was thinking of a movie."

"Original of you."

"Kinda my speciality."

"You do it so well."

We're walking arm-in-arm, and the slippery paving and these strange streets are less ominous. There's a stench coming off the garbage in the puddles on the sides of the roads, and I can't see any road signs. The city is waking. Light is gaining strength and making a soft orange glow against the walls of the apartments all around us. There is birdsong, and when I

look up I see a small crow-like bird perched on one of the thousands of satellite dishes on the porches that rise skyward on my right.

In Lilongwe the birds are awake before dawn, some of them already tapping at their reflections in our bedroom window at four thirty in the morning. We could get rid of the security light, but Frank won't hear of it

"This isn't Lilongwe."

"No," says Shiloh.

Drops fall from a tree we pass under; the residue of rainfall I don't recall. Shiloh guides me right around a corner onto a road that slopes downhill, between a drawer chest of high rise buildings

"I'm worried about leaving Chiara," I confess.

"She's fine. So's Frank."

We cross streets, walk along more streets. Shiloh is saving me from the grip of an apocalyptic city. There are few humans about, and they walk with heads down through buildings that have changed from orange to grey. Shops are closed behind peeling grills. Towering to our right is an enormous screen with the silhouette of a pole dancer. She's promising in a purple hue.

The odour of irrigated garbage clings to my nostrils. Grimy slabs of wall everywhere with patches of old paint jobs and some artwork. I've always quite liked graffiti; I think I understand the frustration of trying to get a point across when no-one will listen. I might try writing or drawing the next time my lips and tongue won't cooperate.

"It doesn't work that way." He smells like Old Spice, which makes me wrinkle my nose. "I thought you'd like it."

"I do. Or I did. I sometimes wonder whether Frank has been rubbing it on someone else."

Shiloh nods with a thoughtful look on his smooth face. He looks a bit like… what's his name? The youngster in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air*?

"Will Smith," he says.

"I love that programme. I still need to pee. And I'm starving."

"We're about to sort that out."

-oOo-

The theme tune to *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* hums in my head, and then Shiloh is singing the words and dancing at my side the way Will Smith does in the song, and I laugh. But that hurts because I need to pee so badly. I pause to catch my breath and stop myself from wetting my pants. Somehow I make it, although it's hurting by the time I realise we're approaching a building that makes no sense. It's modern and white. Sharp angles and smooth sweeps. A building made by a mathematician. A sliver of unease rises through me. But it should be okay. Earlier, streets ago I think, we saw a snakes eye on guard, which makes this whole city a safe place I reckon.

Beneath the roof, I spy another snake's eye at the bottom of a blue sign to my left, and I know I'm correct. We step onto an escalator and ride down into the belly of state-of-the-art. There are normal stairs to our left, and I'm glad we didn't take them. Each jolt of a step threatens my bladder. We ride down beneath a blue sign that talks of a MEGA BONUS and R600 MILLION IN PRIZES. I wonder what R600 is.

I relieve myself in a space-age bathroom in this wonderland that may have been drawn for the Jetsons. In fact, I may well already be inside a film with Shiloh, and this time it's a cartoon. I'm surprised Shiloh is allowed into the Ladies, but actually I shouldn't be surprised by the stuff Shiloh gets up to, or this place. I wash my hands carefully, trying not to be mesmerised by the robotic taps and their ability to measure my water use.

Shiloh guides me away with a hand cupping one of my elbows.

"May I get something to eat?" I ask.

"No eating on the Gautrain," he says.

Well, I don't want anything to do with the Gautrain.

He laughs. "It'll take us to breakfast."

Ha! That's my kinda language. This Gautrain better be quick.

We move across the hall and join a queue. To our right there's another queue, and I watch those people slotting cards into machines that look like those new-fangled ATMs, but bigger. It can't be a Sunday then. Most of these people look like they're off to work.

A woman in front of me has a pram. At least I think it's a pram. It looks like a space pod on wheels, but inside I spot the chubby feet and tiny sausage toes of a baby. The little toes have a prehensile grip on the bar at the front of the pram, and I think of Chiara. This mother is quick, despite the paraphernalia. I'm pretty good with Chi, but have no idea how anyone with more than one child manages. I mean, they demand so much attention. I keep thinking I might drop her. Or leave her at the market because I get distracted.

Proficient Woman moves off, her slips and ticket in the same hand that's pushing the pram. For all I know, the pram has a motor, or can read her mind or something. I step toward the cubicle to explain what I need, and there's Hope.

I grin at her through the glass, which has a perfect circle cut out of it.

"Betty! I was so worried. Why did you go?" She sits forward, her face close to the glass, and I can see concern on her pretty face.

I want to tell her that I'm sorry that I was so rude, leaving the way I did. The best I can do is shrug. Smile. I point at her and lift my eyebrows.

"Yes. I'm actually a teacher, but this is the job I got here."

I nod.

She smiles, and I relax. "It's not bad work. What do you need?"

I use hand signals, and I'm so relieved that it's Hope on the other side because she gets me. Shiloh murmurs that I need a ticket to the Sandton Station, so when Hope offers that choice I nod. I wonder whether my neck muscles are becoming fitter with all the nodding that's required of them. If I'm not careful I'm going to end up with a bulging neck, like a bull. The only strong part of me. Hope tells me to slot my debit card into a little metal mouth with a keypad. My heart beats harder because I can't remember the pin.

"6421," Shiloh whispers in my ear.

"I hope you find Frank; and Margaret," says Hope. "Good luck Betty."

I give her a thumbs up and a wink; I can do that at least.

-oOo-

This Gautrain has no pulse. Smooth and clean. Downy-voiced words come out of speakers. I have no idea how the Proficient Woman got her Pram Pod through the alien trap doors that

tried to stop me getting onto the platform. Shiloh said nothing as I pushed and kicked. I had to be helped by a black woman in a black uniform, who looked at me as though I was the alien. My heart was in my mouth, which is probably not a bad place considering there are no words in there.

I just followed the crowd after that, even though Shiloh was at my side. The train doors weren't a problem, thank goodness. Doors that open and close as though they're saying "schluck". We've entered an episode of *Star Trek*, and I'm surprised Shiloh's ears aren't pointy. And that we're not wearing those weird onesies; I'd look so awful in one of them.

"No-one looks good in those things," says Shiloh.

He sits beside me, which I'm grateful for as I don't want a stranger that close to me. I have the seat at the window because I want to see what we pass by once we get out this dark station. We wait. People dawdle in, apparently unrushed and comfortable with being down in this deep dark tunnel. Outside there's a glowing poster of a silly man who's emptying two bottles of Sprite. He's holding them shoulder height, pouring them, and laughing. What a waste. I could do with a drink.

A sign sends speckled orange writing along a panel in front of us. Words I don't understand. There are people speaking another language around us, so I guess the sign's for them. The train starts to move, and I straighten.

But there's nothing to see. We fly through blackness, and stop in what looks like the same place. The silky voice says this is Rosebank, and so does the sign outside, but I'm not sure that's correct.

The train fills up at this stop. Shiloh keeps a hand on my knee, and I'm glad of the seat. Quite a few people have to stand, and I have a feeling that whatever I did to myself last night means I wouldn't cope with the motion. I wish at least some of it would come back to me. The fun parts.

-oOo-

We disembark at the Sandton Station after yet another swoop through darkness. It lasts only minutes. Same again. If I wasn't with Shiloh I'd feel like someone was trying to trick me. We leave the train, and rise through interminable levels of escalators. The higher we rise, the steeper the escalators, and the faster they go. We may be catapulted through the roof. Each

time I think we're at the end, we turn and step onto yet another moving staircase. Were we really so deep in the earth? I feel my nerves rise as I approach the trap of those flap doors, but I tap the side with my new card as the black uniform said to, and I'm through.

I'm dizzy, but the ride isn't over. One last escalator, and we're up and out, into the world again. I never thought I'd be so pleased to see clouds and sky.

"Catch your breath. Just a little way to go."

Easy for Shiloh to say. I doubt he did anything like whatever the hell it was I did last night. People move quickly past us, huffing at the fact that we've paused right at the top of the stairway. Shiloh takes my hand, and we move like a pair of snails toward a road. There's something huge being built on the other side. A great yellow crane swings slowly across the top of it. Shiloh tugs me left. But I want to lie down here and watch the crane.

"There are great egg and bacon rolls in here," he says.

And there's no resisting that promise. I follow him into a little shop where Shiloh orders the rolls and some coffee, and I hand over my card. I forget my PIN and Shiloh reminds me. I can barely get to the little table, I'm so famished and weak.

I bite, and it's glorious. This is so good I could do it all day. I feel egg yolk slide from the corner of my mouth. Shiloh wipes it away with a paper towel. I swallow, then fill my mouth with coffee. This must be what heaven feels like. Shiloh laughs. I slurp and chew and swallow, and I couldn't care about the manners I was taught. What I do care about is this being over. I'm sad to get to my last mouthful. Perhaps we could have another.

"Save room for popcorn."

"Take my arm again," I say, as Shiloh stands.

We start up the cement hill, and the sun is already insistent on my right arm. Delicious aromas creep in from my left, and I see a Krispy Kreme stall.

"Where are we? Not in the States surely? I don't want to be back there…"

"Hasn't been here long. Krispy Kreme colonies everywhere now."

I am incredulous; the planet did some sort of crazy manoeuvre while I was sleeping.

"Can you believe it?" laughs Shiloh.

He removes his arm from mine and puts a hand at the small of my back, giving me a mysterious boost. Up and left we walk, toward a sprawl of concrete and glass.

"I don't like malls much."

"This one has great cinemas. Decent popcorn too."

-oOo-

It's not as much of a tussle as I expected once we're in. But I'm tired again, so we stop and look into the occasional shop window. Nothing's open yet, and I can't see anything I'd like to buy anyway. Behind the glass it's mostly colour and sparkle. So are the clothes of the people passing us by, many of them talking into hands that are cupped to their ears. So many spiked heels this early in the morning, I feel exhausted at the sight. Such a lot of fitted clothing. It's a wonder anyone can bend over in this place. Perhaps they don't. I need to pee again.

"There's a place at the cinemas."

Thank goodness. Coffee goes right through me. More escalators. Feels like we're headed back down to nose up with the Gautrain. Buttered popcorn. It's like a tidal wave at my nose, and I think of boardwalks, Ferris wheels and kissing boys. I won't think of the sea, or how it reminds me of emerald necklaces.

Shiloh directs me to the Ladies, and I leave him to sort out tickets.

-oOo-

Free of my troublesome coffee, I shake too much salt and vinegar sprinkle onto my popcorn. Shiloh does the same, and I wonder whether it'll make him cough like it does me. And whether his tongue will burn for hours afterwards. There's no-one else here aside from the sales people and cleaners, and they don't seem concerned about us. I wonder whether I should get chocolate to add some zip to the high I'll get from the coke.

"I'll get us some," says Shiloh.

I leave Shiloh to sort that out, and sit in a large comfortable sofa that backs up against one wall. I'm starting to warm to this mall. A woman mops at the floor with a strange thin sponge at the end of a pole. I'm amazed at this cleaning device. It's clearly a much more efficient system than the one I'm used to. The wielder of the device, I come to realise, isn't

watching where she's cleaning. Instead her expression implies I'm the most interesting thing she's seen in a while.

"The movie doesn't start for an hour." Her words come out in a blurt.

"No problem."

Shiloh appears behind her and motions with his head in the direction of some numbered rooms.

"Let's go in," he says, stuffing chocolate into the pockets of those dreadful pants.

-oOo-

We're the only people, and the theatre is dark and stale with last night's discarded popcorn. My shoes make a staccato of sticky sounds. Shiloh makes no such noise. He glides like a boomslang. We sit as close to the middle as my eyes can measure. There's music, a continuation of what was playing in the lobby I think. Shiloh's whistling along with it.

Frank annoys me when he whistles. Never in tune and way too loud. I mentioned that to him once, and he smiled at me as though I'd paid him a compliment. And he's been doing it ever since. What a heedless memory he has. When Shiloh whistles, it's as though he's a part of the ensemble, and my heart wants to sing along. About wanting to fly; I know I could with Shiloh.

The curtains slide back and the screen glows. I look back and up at the projection slot, but there's only a light and the usual dust fairies that play in the film before it reaches the screen. I can't see anyone up there. Shiloh gives me a nudge and I face forward.

I don't want to be on my back; it feels like the worst position to deal with this. I should be walking, standing, squatting. Anything that would keep me perpendicular to the ground; that would allow gravity to help me. Instead this baby is being dragged across each vertebra in my spine. So that the doctor and nurses can have a convenient glance at my vagina at will.

Frank isn't here. Not even in the country. But then, do I really believe he should be? This is my situation. My parents are in some waiting room outside. They drove me here. Maybe Father isn't waiting any more. But Mother is. It was hard enough for him to hear that his daughter was knocked up. Even my clever plan wasn't enough to help him. I guess he hoped, despite everything, that I'd be a virgin til he died.

Another contraction. Oh my God! No screaming. I got the lecture from the starched witch when I was admitted. No need for all this unladylike screeching some girls indulge in. I have a stick they've given me to bite on. Like the dog-bitch I am. Bite down and deal with it, whore. More and more, like fucking tsunamis. I can't help it: I yell. And when she comes in, face purpling up, I tell her to go to hell. After all, the father of the creature clawing its way out of me isn't here to yell at.

It subsides and I have a little time to catch my breath. Apologise. Make sure the wedding band is evident.

Your daddy doesn't even know this is happening.

I wonder whether anyone has been able to reach Frank. Whether Father is thinking about time zones and not disturbing Frank's sleep. Is he sleeping? Is he on night duty? Is he thinking about me?

I'm learning a new lesson here; life is full of them these days. I didn't know, for instance, that when you're certain you're about to die of pain, you can be given a bigger, longer dose of it. That there are people who stare at your vagina during this and measure its preparedness to disgorge another member of humanity.

I had no idea that starting a life would bring me close to death. Because surely I'm dying. Being torn apart. I can see the cracks where I'm breaking up. I hear it. Crrracckk. Rrrriiippp. My body is turning grey and splitting like a shell to let out a kernel. They think it's about my vagina. My scalp peels and cracks and my arms snap away. They can't see because their heads are all stuffed between my legs. Crammed into the space where my feet are strapped into stirrups. But I've come away from those legs, that groin. I slip away, off the bed. Across the floor, up onto a cabinet, where I coil and cry out in relief that the pain is over. That I'm dead and I can't hurt any more.

Except that of course I'm not really dead. I can see that baby as they lift it, like a slimy prize. It has grey goop on it. Something is fished out of its mouth, and it's given a smack. A smack! The burn that rises through my armless legless lipless self doesn't come from a dead body. The pull is too strong. I glide down while they get up to who knows what with that precious gooey creature.

I’m quiet and lithe, so they don’t see me. I slide back into the broken pieces and will them back together. Back, back, back we go. Patch it up best we can. Just a bit of time and you’ll only find the cracks with a magnifying glass. If you know where to look.

Chapter Fifteen

Frank wondered whether he'd slept at all.

The line between wakefulness and restless dreams was blurred by the advent of birdsong. He suspected that once he'd hit on the decision to attempt prayer, sleep had come. Nothing quite as soporific; nothing quite as desperate. He sat up, swung his feet to the floor and thought of coffee and whether Betty was alive. Hurt even. Images that had loomed over him through the night chased back, and he felt acid at the back of his throat. He shouldn't have eaten anything with the name Zinger.

A knock on the door.

"Dad?"

"Come in."

A rumpled version of Chi put her head around the door, then pushed it open and entered with two mugs.

"Coffee?"

He smiled at her despite the heaviness in his chest, and patted the space on the bed beside him. "You used to come into our bed every morning."

"I remember."

She sat and he took both mugs from her and put them on his bedside table. She leaned her head on his shoulder. His daughter smelled of vanilla. The heaviness in his chest swelled up his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"D'you think she's okay?"

"I dunno, kid. Even if she's okay, she's not really."

Chi sighed and rubbed her face. "I didn't sleep."

"You should've come here. At least we could've talked."

"What do we do now?"

He thought about that. There had to be something they could do other than sit and wait for the requisite number of days to pass before the police would help.

"What about calling Dr Van Wyk and asking his advice?" he said.

"Good idea. And I'll make a few other calls. This can't be the first time someone mentally unstable has disappeared in Jo'burg."

Frank tried not to flinch at her choice of words. Although of course that's exactly what Betty was. Unhinged. Erratic. Nuts. The words rolled around in his head, like samples for him to taste. He tried them out, and felt mildly queasy.

Chiara stood, and he followed her into the lounge. He wondered where her friends were and why she wasn't calling any of them. Did she have friends? Who was Tim? He considered her slim silhouette and thought of how little he knew of her life, and then of the first time he'd seen her. When Betty flew out to join him in Lilongwe with a pink churlish bundle. It seemed unreal to him now that he was on another continent when she was born, and that her first months were spent with her grandparents and not him. He had to work of course; such things were out of his control.

He couldn't recall anyone using the word 'bonding' back then. It was a term he remembered studying in materials science, not something referred to between fathers and daughters. As he thought of putting an arm around her, she moved away and began talking into her phone. Something that was almost pain pulled him back from his musing. Outside the day was unfolding; the sun glared at him off beams reflected from someone else's window. A fly tapped and buzzed from the other side. He stared out across hills spattered with jacaranda flowers, and a horizon crowned by high rises and towers. What was Betty doing out there? He hoped Shiloh was keeping her safe.

"He's with patients. She'll get him to call me."

Chi was talking about Dr. Van Wyk. He nodded and looked into his mug, where coffee was turning grey.

"Can I buy you breakfast?" He couldn't face any cardboard cereal.

"I'm not… Yeah okay." Her smile seemed tired.

-oOo-

Chi's driving was no less inspired despite her fatigue. As Frank stared into the windows of passing taxis, she vented her rage at their interpretations of road etiquette.

"Were you ever tempted to move?" he asked.

"Where would I go?"

"The States?" He knew better than to suggest Malawi.

"Too hard."

"Harder than this?"

Her mouth lifted as though about to smile. "I know this. I understand it. It would be too much to move there and try and get to grips with whatever frustrations I'd find in the States."

And there would be some, he was sure of that.

"And I'm too old to do any conversion now; I'm not interested in more studying, more exams."

How could his little girl be too old for anything?

"And I'd be too far from you and Mom."

"We'll probably retire there."

"You still feel American after all these years? Would Mom leave Lilongwe? What about Margaret?"

"We lived without them before."

"You were different people."

He had no answer for that. He didn't believe that he'd been too different, but when he tried to think of the pre-Malawi Betty, he couldn't put her into focus. They'd discussed retirement; he was past the official retirement age by a long way already. But not once had he thought of what it would mean for his wife. He rubbed at his chin and realised he hadn't shaved.

"What was Mom like before you had me, Dad?"

"She was…" He couldn't say freer. What was she?

“Happier?”

Was she? “No. She was just… I dunno. Younger I guess.”

Chi stared ahead.

“She used to wear a lot of that tie-dyed stuff that you like.”

“You’re kidding.”

He laughed. “It was the era.”

“Not for everyone surely.”

“You end up following a trend without realising it most of the time. Like looking back at old photos and seeing that you had eighties hair in the eighties, even though you thought you weren’t following the fashion.”

“So did you wear bell bottoms?”

“I didn’t go shopping for them, but if you look at photos, my pants were flared.”

“Hippie.”

“Never.”

“Was Mom?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, maybe she was a bit that way before we met.”

“That’s weird.”

“I don’t think that she was ever a real one. You know, the ones that lived in communes and did drugs and rallies and Woodstock and stuff.”

“No real hippie could transition to those frocks.”

“You don’t like her clothes?”

“I like them on Mom.”

He thought about that. It did seem Betty had been wearing the same dress in different colours for over four decades. Pleated skirt. Buttoned bodice (was that what it was called?) with a collar. Even in the heat. He seemed to remember Betty saying something about Carolyn laughing at her dress sense.

"Do I dress funny?"

"Well, you've done the same thing as Mom I suppose. Stopped changing fashion trends once you got to the eighties. In Mom's case, maybe the fifties."

"Kinda kills my theory about being carried along by the fashion of the day."

Chi turned the car into the parking beneath Sandton City, and Frank longed for Betty in a blue frock.

-oOo-

The coffee shop was actually a restaurant tucked into the recesses of the couture section. Frank had never been there before and wondered whether his daughter shopped for designer work wear. Surely the tie-dyed stuff wasn't from around here. Even the breakfast was stylish and all the cutlery silver. What were they doing eating in this place while Betty was missing?

"I can't finish this, Dad."

"Me neither."

"Perhaps we should go to my office. See if my people there can help us out."

"I thought you called your office."

"I did, but being there with everyone there is different."

"You're right."

So he paid the bill and they made their way through shining fashion corridors to where the press of people grew thicker once more. He scanned for blue and found plenty, but none in the right shade. And none of it was moving the way he needed it to. She'd been at the Gautrain station, if they could believe the downtown guy who directed them there. Where would she have gone? Or stayed? He stopped, and a man walked into him.

"Dad?"

"I should've phoned the bank. They can trace her purchases."

"Why didn't we think of that? Call them now."

She took him by the elbow and guided him into a booth in a Häagen Dazs cafeteria. It was like stepping into a little piece of American turf; they should've come here in the first instance. He was overwhelmed by a desire for ice cream. Instead he sat at Chi's instruction, and typed into his list of contacts. Inhaling a promise of cold sugar, he found the number.

"Rocky Road?" Chi asked.

He nodded and pressed the dial icon.

Flashes of blue continued to pass by as he went through the motions on the phone. Chi returned with top-heavy cones, and he licked at his between words. He was almost finished the ice-cream by the time the call was over.

Chi looked at him.

"They'll call me back." His mind was on Betty and ice-cream, but it made no sense to explain that.

She nodded, then licked her fingers and wiped them on a paper towel. "Let's go to my office."

-oOo-

It wasn't far away. He understood why she'd know about the fancy coffee shop when he realised she could walk there with a client. The building was shaped like a wave about to break, and he thought about how Betty wouldn't like it. It would trouble her that the lifts had to go straight up what looked like a crooked building. And he wouldn't bother to explain it to her. He might've explained it in those first days of ice-cream and Italian sunshine.

Inside the building he was surrounded by metal struts and glass, and only the most essential brickwork. It felt as good as the Rocky Road to his soul. His daughter worked from within a tribute to the art and genius of humankind. A lift transported them several levels without a hint of nausea, but his stomach clenched at the sight of his own surname up on the wall as they entered the reception of her offices. When had Chi shucked off Michael's last name? He'd known the fact of it, from her email address, but the reality of her in this context seemed slightly shocking to him. There was no room for dishevelment in these offices.

The receptionist looked cool and professional despite the fact that Chiara was tie-dyed and woolly-haired. She gave Chi a sheaf of papers: messages that had been kept for her return. There were people he didn't know who depended on his little girl. People who relied on her to… what? Guide their companies through the murky waters of South African corporate law? Snip marriages into lesser partitions of themselves? Evade the taxman?

Frank lifted a hand at the woman as they walked by and got a smile in return. He patted the cell phone in his pocket, willing it to call with information on where Betty had been spending money. It stayed silent and cold.

Ahead of him, Chi was stopped by a man who stepped out of a room on their left. Their heads leaned in together over what looked like a tablet. The man scrolled with one hand and turned his head back to Chi. Seemed to ask her something. Frank paused and watched.

Chiara stood with her legs slightly apart, one knee bent a fraction. Hands in pockets. She said something back, lifted her shoulders in a barely discernible shrug, then nodded. The man smiled at her, but her head had turned back at Frank. She gestured with one hand that he should follow her. Frank walked past the smiling man who wasn't introduced, and into an office.

On one wall was a large painting that he couldn't decipher, although he liked the colours. The wall opposite was clad with books, thickset and hard-backed. He looked over her desk at a full view of real estate that dipped and glittered against the greenery of the city's northern suburbs.

He thought of the cracked cement of the CBD, and the damp scent of the woman at the Just Imagine Bar. He thought of Betty in her blue dress, which would surely be rumpled by now.

He tried to remember what she'd been wearing when they met in Assisi. She was sitting on the stone wall on the road leading up to the Basilica di Santa Chiara. Until that moment he'd thought he was heading to the Basilica of St Francis; not that he'd really been concentrating. His mind was full of other things that he wasn't sure of now. Perhaps he was thinking about how the company factory was taking longer to update and streamline than he'd anticipated. Which meant his stay in the pensione that sat in the middle of the wheat fields of Bastia had been prolonged. Which meant that on a Sunday he decided to sightsee for lack of something better to do.

But surely he wouldn't have been thinking about that. It was more likely he was thinking about the reasons for the delay. The fact that the line in the factory wasn't running smoothly and he couldn't get to the bottom of it. Was it an issue on the blending line?

And then there was this woman, this girl, sitting on the wall eating an ice-cream that wouldn't have been Rocky Road. There were olive trees, grey-green in the sun behind her, and beyond that the façade of the basilica. It was almost white in the sun, and she looked so cool in the shade, twirling her tongue around the lip of the cone. She looked straight at him and the corners of her mouth curled as she licked.

"She was wearing jeans and a tie-dyed shirt. It was blue and purple…"

"Dad?"

He turned to explain, and saw three other people in the room. His eyes were adjusting to the gloom behind the window, and he wanted to explain to the dark shapes that his wife was different back then. She wore hippie clothes and was a sexy ice-cream licker. That she may have changed to suit him. He wasn't sure. Instead he waited.

"Dad, this is my team. This is Chrissie and Bert and Ed. They're going to help us figure out what to do next. Everyone, this is my Dad, Frank."

He stepped forward and shook their cool hands, and thought about his old-fashioned clothes and his outmoded hair. They offered him no assurances aside from saying they were pleased to meet him. The five of them sat at the coffee table on one side of the room, and the feel of the Spartan chairs surprised him. He felt supported and confused.

There was coffee on the table. Someone must have brought it in while he was reminiscing. Chi talked with her team, and they nodded as she explained events and left out the Just Imagine incident. She was in command. Nobody's daughter. A woman steering her own ship. Her team was deferential but professional. They nodded and took notes as she spoke smooth words, her spine erect. As though her body believed it was no longer wearing the tie-dyed shirt. As though her hair was smooth and bunned at the nape of her neck.

Her voice was a silk ribbon that wrapped and tugged the story into place. How incredible that meeting the woman who smouldered over her ice-cream outside Saint Clare's Basilica had led to this moment. To this child of theirs. He wanted to reach out and take the hands that rested on her lap and only occasionally lifted in a gesture to match her words. He

wanted to pull her up and waltz with her through the corridors of her offices, while telling her of the events that led to her very being. To tell her of his enchantment with a girl who licked her ice-cream at him. Of how she'd said hello with an accent that had made him ache because he was that desperate for home and hadn't known it. That he'd sat beside her on a whim and listened to her tell the story of Santa Chiara. Poor Saint Clare, who exchanged her rich robes for the drabbery of a nun. Or something like that. He'd been trying not to focus on the fact that this American enchantress wasn't wearing a bra.

Was that the Betty he married? The wearer of blue frocks? Could he ever tell his daughter these things that flowed through his head as the words in the room puttered and dipped? Was there a time to say that he, the most staid of southerners, had met this ice-cream licking creature from Los Angeles and fucked her that same night? That she slipped away from him while he slept and ran back to the parents she was travelling with, so that in the morning he woke up and thought that the whole thing had been a dream. A dream that left a scent of spice and vanilla on his sheets and against his skin. Until that day his only sexual encounters had been with Mary Lou on the day of his graduation (a fumbling hasty affair that left him flushed and her unhappy), and with a secretary at work whose husband was failing to assuage her libido. No-one had touched him like Elizabeth. Waking up to find her gone left his mouth dry and his chest aching. They didn't exchange phone numbers.

It was two months later when he was back in Richmond that he received the call. Elizabeth wanted to meet him. She'd remembered where he worked and tracked him down. They had dinner in a restaurant overlooking the James River; the place was long gone now, he was sure of it. He couldn't remember the name. But that was where Elizabeth broke the news that she was pregnant.

He stood. "I'll be downstairs. Call me when you're ready."

"What are you doing, Dad?"

"Getting some air."

Chapter Sixteen

The ache is still with me as we leave the cinema.

The tears and rips that no-one warns you about. Someone should've told me; my mother, anyone. She probably didn't say anything coz she wanted it to be part of the growing-up experience she thinks I need. Like marrying and having a baby would bash it all out of me: all those things that she and Dad hated so much. Her in particular. Like I did stuff to torment her. Anyway, it hurt. And that angry little person who snapped and cracked her way out of me could just do the same to me one day.

But I will be different.

"You okay?"

"A bit sore. Stiff."

Shiloh inclines his head, and the peak of his cap bobs at the back of it. It's a strange look, that and the droopy pants, but each to his own. The frock I have on is worse; must be hospital issue. Hospital issue shoes too. Revolting. It's all comfortable though, and I guess that's the point.

"Where's my baby?"

"She's safe."

"I want to call her Chiara. After the place I met Frank."

"I know. You hungry?"

"Thirsty."

"Too much salt and vinegar on that popcorn."

I'm grateful for an escalator that takes us up, up, up. All that disassembling and reassembling has left me rigid and with a sense that I may start bleeding through fault lines any minute. Shiloh guides me to a place that sells ice-cream, and it takes me a moment to realise it's a Häagen Dazs outlet. I love Hagen Daaz. So I get some Rocky Road with my bottle of water. Shiloh doesn't want anything but he holds my water once I've drunk some, and I set about the ice-cream.

"Kind of a speciality of yours."

I look at him as I lick.

"Ice-cream eating."

"I'm no slouch at dealing with a cone." And I feel defensive about my love of sugar. About what it might mean for my baby.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. You're just worried."

"Well?"

"You were never addicted to opiates. They're the ones that sometimes cause people to use sugar. To compensate."

He knows. Of course he knows.… I only tried that once, long before my little red baby was ever conceived. I couldn't have hurt her. Could I?

"I told you she's okay."

"In every sense?"

"She's human. She's not perfect."

I want to be sick. To throw Hagen Daaz and popcorn all over the floor of this shiny place.

"Elizabeth. Everyone has stuff to deal with. It's part of life's design."

"Oh fuck," I say, and I feel weak despite the sugar. "What did the weed do? I mean I stopped as soon as I knew…"

He smiles and shakes his head. "Stop it."

I take the bottle back and swallow down the rest of the water, but I know this thirst will never be slaked.

"And when I said that about the ice-cream eating, I meant what you did to Frank."

I feel a smile. When I saw Frank watching me on that hot, hot day; the gelato was melting so fast I could barely keep up. Surely I didn't hatch a plan there and there? I did. God forgive me, I know I did.

He may as well've had stars and stripes tattooed on his forehead. Dockers and Rockports. He came strolling toward the basilica like a dazed worker bee, not a tourist. He was my father, just younger. Daddy issues some might say, but mine were of a different sort. I felt sexy in that moment. That startled look of his... Like he'd fallen over Aphrodite while he was thinking about gathering pollen. And I was so inspired by that; by his face.

I wrapped my tongue so he knew how I could lick him, if he'd just stop. Just take the time to talk to me. Let me tell him about the Blessed Santa Chiara of Assisi. And what was he doing there, so American and all alone? Taking time to do the tourist thing in Assisi on his time off? Off from what? Lick. Engineering work in a factory? A factory where? Lick. Bastia? Where the hell was Bastia? I'd show him Saint Clare if he'd show me Bastia. Lick. Lick my arm where the gelato dribbled.

"I was inspired," I say.

Shiloh laughs, then says, "You were something, that's for sure."

"I wasn't high."

"Elizabeth, I know that. I was there."

He sure as hell wasn't there looking like this. I swallow the tailpiece of my cone, which is delicious. My hands are sticky and Shiloh gives me a damp cloth.

"Let's go," he says, and shuffles out of the plastic booth.

I follow, conscious of how many people there seem to be suddenly. Shiloh takes my handbag in the crook of one arm, and holds my elbow with his other hand. He's good at sensing where I need support.

A woman pushes by as we enter the echoing corridor. Her hair gleams small rainbows of what might be oil, and her pants are impossibly tight. Like green skin. She makes me think of a Rough Green Snake, and I suspect she has shed recently because she's so shiny. Those high glossy shoes squeak as their heel tips smack the tiles. I wish I had breasts that bounced with such enthusiasm instead of these heavy things that hang like udders.

What did Frank say about Rough Green Snakes that day we found one in his garden? Our garden (we were married by then, and my belly was pushing out, ready to shed too). It was just before he was sent out to Malawi. He said that Rough Green Snakes turn blue when

they die. I watch her as she marches through the throng, speaking into a hand cupped at her ear, her handbag swinging from the crook of an elbow. She's far from blue.

Frank. He's in Malawi, and I don't even know whether anyone has told him about Chiara. He'll like that name. He'll be surprised she arrived this early.

I wonder.

"Come on." Shiloh moves my elbow. Gently. Gentlemanly. Like Frank, only not dressed like Frank.

The tiles are slippery, but these sensible shoes keep me steady.

"Are we going to fetch Chiara?" I like the way her name catches at my cheeks, then rolls along my tongue. Like a hit of sherbet.

"We're going there now."

It seems to take forever, and I keep needing to stop. I look through windows at strange merchandise. It feels like being in a movie about some bizarre imagined future, this place. So many shiny things and such strange garments. Of course it's always funny to look back at those movies and see how wrong they were about the future. A teenager passes us by, wearing a tie-dyed shirt, and I grin at Shiloh.

"One of your own," he says.

I nod, although my neck is a bit stiff. I should be resting, after what I've been through. Shiloh pulls me to one side and puts an arm around my shoulders. Tucks the other behind my knees, and lifts me like I'm a child. Or a baby. And I close my eyes and turn my head in toward his chest, which smells like a garden in spring, after rain, when the sun comes out and warms it. His movements rock me and I doze, thinking of Frank's garden and the Rough Green Snake that was so docile, and didn't care when Frank picked her up. He was so gentle. Like he cared about every fragile snake bone and scale in that thin, thin body. And he showed me that burnished, serious little snake, lifting her so I could see her yellowy belly and keeled scales, before releasing her with soft hands into the bush where we found her.

"Down you go."

I touch down. Concrete, not greenery, but it's a soft landing just the same. I look at my hands and swallow back panic. I'm not repairing well. I'm not exactly blue, but I'm certainly not shiny green.

"You're okay," Shiloh whispers in my ear from behind me.

I lean back into him and breathe in as much as my lungs will take in one go. The paving here smells clean. Like it was washed recently and now the sun is drying it off. Cars drive by, and I catch their greasy odour. Hear their growls.

I open my eyes and the sun is high, pulsing down on me. I push away from Shiloh and step forward on the sidewalk, between high waving buildings that are checkered and don't seem real. I remember walking down the aisle, Chiara in my womb. The size of a peanut or something. Why did I agree to the fuss of a traditional wedding? I should've insisted on a registry office with Frank and me in the clothes we wore in Assisi. Weddings seem to be all about the parents. And I can see Albert now. He seems older than at the wedding. Tired. He's sitting on a step outside the security booth to one of the perilous buildings. What's he doing here? Did Father call them? To tell Albert and Virginia that they're grandparents today?

He's looking around, like a person who's just arrived at a bus stop. I catch his gaze. Is he drunk? Where's Virginia? He's standing and walking towards me, hands out. I can do with the help. I'm stiff and tired, and Shiloh seems to have disappeared.

"Betty." His voice is loud, almost a shout.

His hands are hurting mine, his grip is that tight. I wish he and his wife would call me Elizabeth. Betty: I don't know if I can bear the suburbanness of it.

"Ow." I pull away and feel cross, then remind myself of the good news I have for him.

I want to tell him he's going to love this baby that I've cracked out into the world. The sentence is right there. I try to cough it up.

"Pink," is all that comes out of my mouth, and my tongue manages to make two syllables of it.

I look at him, hopeful he can translate. His mouth is open, and he says nothing. Just looks at me. The betrayal of my tongue is bad enough, without the realisation I've never been alone with him before.

"Pink…bay…bee." Did it. How can it be so hard to tell him about my child, when it's so urgent?

He just swallows and looks like he's about to cry. Dear God, the man is a moron. I'm not sure I want him near my baby. Where is Chiara anyway? Where did I leave her? How do I get back there?

Maybe he can help. I try to stare my intentions at him, and he takes my hands again, but this time he's more gentle. His eyes are watering. He's be blown away, I guess. The whole idea of Chiara. How beautiful she is in that wrinkly baby way. Even though she's more red than pink if I'm honest. I hope the nurses cleaned her up before he saw her. I squeeze his hands, this poor man who is so overwhelmed by his new situation. I smile to encourage him.

"Betty? Do you know who I am?" he says.

"Bert." Aha! Of course I know who you are, old man.

I want to tell him the name of my new baby, which I think is both beautiful and clever, although I don't think I'll share the specifics of what it means to Frank and me. He pulls me against him, which seems unlike the man I met for the first time just a few months ago. Who seemed so sceptical about me, as though he knew what I really was. He smells good, and I like the fresh cotton feel of his shirt. It reminds me of Frank and the shirts he likes to wear.

"Frank knows?" and although I'm thrilled that words in my head have come out of my mouth for once, they feel hot as they return to me in this hug.

"Yes. Yes, Frank knows."

I step back; this hugging with my father-in-law is getting weird. I want to suggest that we go and see the baby, but once again my tongue is a lump. A noise comes through my nose instead.

He sniffs.

I noticed that sniff in Frank before he left; it must be genetic. Or some sort of learned habit. I must say something about it. But of course I don't confront Albert about how annoying it is. He holds back the lift door for me. I enter and turn. I watch the doors close and the numbers change. I like this lift. It's smooth and doesn't seem to tilt despite what I know

about the building we're in. And it's like some sort of space rocket. I can't be sure we're really moving, but we're probably heading out of the atmosphere by now.

I wonder where Virginia is. Not that I want to see her. Our encounters haven't been successful to date. She was definitely less enthusiastic about me than this man. Stared at me with fish eyes. Kissed me with starched lips at the wedding. Said maybe three words, but I could see she was thinking plenty. A rangy thin suspicious woman. I imagine Albert would've been fine from the start if she hadn't whispered her misgivings in his ear. Because I think that's what she does. Burbles tales to other people and stares with dead eyes. I don't think she'll be as emotional about little Chiara as her husband is. I'm surprised he's here without her. Maybe he ran away.

We don't need Virginia here. If I have my way, I'll pack up my baby and head to Malawi without seeing her, and we'll be safe there. Oceans away from people with reservations about me and my baby.

"I can't believe I found you," he says. His voice is low, and other people are joining us in the lift.

It's taking too long to get up to whichever floor it is they're keeping Chiara on. I hope the redness has faded. That she looks a little pinker, and not so angry. She must be hungry, and I'm conscious of the great sagging breasts beneath my gown. I cross my arms and lean against the rail, staring at the space-age numbers as we climb, wishing he would stop staring at me.

The lift halts and the doors slide open without a sound. It's very cinematic.

"This is us," says Albert.

He steps forward, excusing himself to the small crowd we have to pass through. I wonder whether Frank will also develop a belly that hangs over his belt when he's his father's age. I want to thank Albert as he holds the lift door open for me again, but give him a smile instead. He seems a bit startled.

This doesn't look much like a hospital, and I wish Shiloh was here. Shiloh could explain things I feel too shy to ask this man about. And my tongue is loose when Shiloh's around.

Chapter Seventeen

Before Chi came to visit, before any of this Betty drama blew up in their faces, a CD cover had been left in the factory tea room. It caught Frank's eye because of the colours, and then his attention was trapped by the bird's eye view it depicted of a person meditating. As it turned out, it belonged to one of the young interns out on vacation work from the University of Carolina Chapel Hill. When he saw Frank looking at it he launched into an exposition using terms like "psychedelic downtempo", not understanding that Frank was simply mystified at the variations in what humans found interesting. It was now, while escorting a wife who didn't recognise him, through corridors that didn't belong in his real life, that Frank thought he might have some insight into that album cover.

Betty was back. She was safe, if a little scruffy. But she couldn't speak properly, and she thought he was his father, and that Chiara was a baby. At least that's what he thought she thought. She didn't smell bad, but she did smell different. Like she'd used another woman's perfume or deodorant.

He was guiding her back to her daughter, but not the one she had in mind. He considered bundling her out the building and running away with her, back to Lilongwe. To a place where he could shelter her from things he couldn't name, but was suddenly afraid of. Where was Shiloh taking them?

"Mom! Oh my God, I can't believe it. Dad, how did you find her?"

He shouldn't have brought Betty here. He should have taken her somewhere, to a café perhaps, and called Chi from there. Explained before actually bringing the two of them together, unprepared for each other. He watched Betty. Chi had her hands on her mother's shoulders, and then she was hugging her, seeming not to notice that Betty was standing stiffly, arms at her side. Betty looked at Frank, and he gave her a smile that he tried to make encouraging. She lifted one hand and patted Chi on the back. Like a puppet, Frank thought. She kept her eyes on Frank.

The others were there, Chrissie, Bert and Ed, forming an audience to this one-sided reunion. Crisp and politely curious, standing with hands clasped. Smiles not too wide. They would save their true expressions for later, out of range of Chiara.

Frank knew for certain it had been a mistake to bring Betty up here. They should be somewhere else. Away from eyes that had never seen her lick a gelato, and ears that had never heard her talk about St Clare's Basilica. Away from anyone who'd never had her help with homework and grazed knees. All their judgement would be based on this tired version of her. This scuffed and incoherent shadow, who was looking for her baby.

"She was walking along the pavement outside," he said instead.

Chi stepped back again, her hands still on Betty's shoulders, her eyes narrowed. "Mom?"

Betty frowned and glanced at Frank again.

"Dad?"

Now they were both looking at him. Chrissie, Bert and Ed too.

"She's having some difficulty talking," he said, hoping he wouldn't have to explain the rest in front of Chiara's committee.

Chi looked back at her mother. "Are you hurt, Mom? Can you show me a sign?"

"Let's get her to a hospital and have her checked," said Frank, thinking there would be a chance to explain in the car.

"I'm so glad we found you," said Chi, her voice quieter.

She pulled Betty to her again, but this time her mother resisted, and stepped away. She shuffled closer to Frank, her arms clutched across her chest. He thought he heard her groan, a low sound that seemed to come through her nose. He wasn't sure. But the look on Chi's face made him wonder if he was the only person on Betty's side.

-oOo-

Even in Chiara's car, Frank wasn't sure he felt safe. Betty sat in the back seat, and he wondered whether he should be beside her rather than in the passenger seat beside Chi. But he needed to speak to his daughter. To really communicate.

"She doesn't recognise any of us."

"She seems to know you."

The car pushed out into the light, and up through the exit ramp.

"She thinks I'm my father." He tried to say the words softly, and leaned in toward Chi.

Chiara was silent as she turned the vehicle. Frank looked over his shoulder, but Betty was craning her neck, looking out at the buildings on either side of them. Her hands were smoothing her dress across her thighs in a rhythm he wasn't privy to.

"So whatever happened to her out there has pushed her over the edge. She's lost the plot completely, is that what you're saying?"

He didn't have an answer. Chi handed her phone to him.

"Find Dr Van Wyk's number on there and press dial."

He shuffled through the unfamiliar phone software and managed to do as she asked. The car resonated with dial tone.

"Dr Van Wyk's rooms."

"I need to speak with Dr Van Wyk please."

"He's with a patient at the moment."

"This is urgent. It concerns Mrs Thomson, the patient who escaped from your rooms two days ago."

"Please hold."

Air blew cold across Frank as the hold music wallowed around the car. Again he looked at his wife, and this time she looked back at him. Her face was expressionless but tears ran down her cheeks. He reached around with one hand and touched her knee.

"It's okay," he started to say.

"Dr Van Wyk," interrupted a voice from the car speakers.

He wanted to tell Chi to turn the volume down, but she was already talking.

"Chiara Thomson here, Dr Van Wyk. I have my mother in the car and we're on our way to Sandton Clinic now."

"You found her? Oh thank…"

"We're bringing her in for a medical examination at the ER. I trust you'll be able to help us while we're there?"

"Yes of course…"

"I'll call you when we arrive. We're on Sandton Drive, coming up to William Nicol now."

"Well I…"

Chi cut him off and accelerated.

"Pink," said Betty's voice.

-oOo-

This time Chi pulled up in front of the emergency rooms at the clinic. She switched off the vehicle and got out.

"I need a wheelchair, please."

Frank opened his door, and there was already an attendant moving in their direction with a wheelchair. Frank opened Betty's door and she looked up at him, so he gave her his hand.

"We're going inside," he said, hoping his voice gave her at least some reassurance.

Her mouth opened but she didn't try to speak. She took his hand and pulled herself out the car. The man with the wheelchair positioned himself beside her and she seemed nonplussed.

"It's just hospital procedure," Frank said.

He helped her into the chair, and rubbed the hand she lay on the armrest.

"Pink," she muttered.

"What's pink?" asked Chi.

"You are."

Chiara looked down at her shirt.

"You, when you were a baby. At least I think that's what she means."

Chiara lifted her hands and cupped them behind her head. She sighed. “Take her inside.”

She turned and re-entered her car, presumably to go and park it. Frank wheeled his wife through the doors to the emergency rooms, where it seemed no emergency was taking place. He tried not to think of the last time he was in there.

Two women were talking behind a high reception desk. He parked Betty next to the chairs where no other person was waiting. He positioned the chair so she could watch the television on the corner wall, even though it was showing a children’s programme. He supposed a high percentage of the traffic through here was made up of children. Betty looked up and stared at the screen. For a moment it seemed that only her eyes were alive. That the rest of Betty was a shell; not really her at all.

“Can I help you, sir?”

He turned and now there was only one woman behind the desk. At least it wasn’t the one who’d called the security officer to escort him out of there. He explained that he needed to have his wife examined. That she had disappeared for a night, and they weren’t sure what had happened to her. The head behind the desk appeared unfazed by this, and he supposed she heard and saw stranger things. She told him to fill in a form attached to a clipboard, which he took with him to a seat beside Betty. He could still make out the unfamiliar scent in wafts around her. He was part of the way through the form when Betty tapped his knee.

“Hngh.” Again the sound was nasal.

He thought of her trapped in there. His wife was slipping away, and she couldn’t tell him about it. Couldn’t say she loved him. Couldn’t recognise him. He took hold of the patting hand.

“It’s okay.” It wasn’t, but he didn’t know another way to tell her he loved her, and he was going to take care of this. “You’re going to be checked by a doctor, and then… I can take you to see the baby.”

He was angry with himself as soon as he said it, because of course he couldn’t do anything of the sort. And yet…

The urgency in her drained away. He could see it disappear from her eyes, and she smiled at him.

"Bert."

"What's she saying, Dad?"

Betty sat back in the wheelchair as Chiara walked in. Her face became expressionless as she glanced at the daughter she was looking for, and then reverted to the cartoons. Frank motioned to Chi, and they walked to the doorway together. A man in a pair of overalls was smoking a few metres away, and Chi swatted at the air. Frank thought about saying something about how people like him had paid for her education, but there were more important things to talk about.

"I think it's best if we play along with her," he started.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she thinks she's just had you. She thinks that I'm Albert, your grandfather, and that you are a baby. And she's looking for you. But you, the adult…" Frank tilted his head toward Chi, "She just doesn't know you like this."

"We can just explain…"

"I don't think that'll work."

"Mr Thomson?" The receptionist was calling.

Frank went inside.

"Please take your wife down this passage and into that furthest room on the right. A sister will be with you in a minute."

"We need a doctor," said Chi.

"Yes, she'll see a doctor. The nurse will take some preliminary information first."

Chi sighed. "Dr Van Wyk is also coming down to examine her in a few minutes. Please make sure you direct him straight to us."

The receptionist kept her gaze on the clipboard that Frank handed to her and nodded. She must deal with people like them every day. He pushed the wheelchair and his wife down to the room. A nurse was already inside. She took Betty's blood pressure. Her words were soft and kind, and she clucked when the story of Betty's escapade emerged. She crouched beside Betty and placed a hand over hers.

"Where did you go to, my dear?"

Betty looked at her and smiled, as though she was about to explain the whole thing. She said something that came out like the word 'hope'.

The nurse stood and smiled at Frank and Chi. "I'm going to take her to be examined. You're welcome to stay with her, because although it won't hurt, she might get upset."

"You stay with her, Dad. I'm going to chase up on Dr Van Wyk."

She kept calling him Dad, but Betty didn't seem worried. Frank followed the nurse as she wheeled Betty out into an adjoining ward and to an empty bed.

"Can you get onto the bed by yourself my dear?"

Betty stood, kicked off her shoes, and got onto the bed. The wheelchair really hadn't been necessary, but Frank had been trying to keep both Chi and Betty calm. Pretty soon he was going to need to make a choice between which of the two he would appease. The nurse drew a curtain around them, and said that a doctor would be with them shortly. Betty closed her eyes and placed her hands across her torso. Laid out like a corpse. Frank felt his own chest tighten. Sweat broke out across his forehead and palms; a thousand ants skittered across his fingertips, and then across his palms.

"Betty," he said, squeezing the word from between his teeth.

She dozed on.

Something stabbed his chest, and Frank fell to his knees, holding onto the bed with one hand. Still the ants spun about. He couldn't get air into his lungs, and the pain zig-zagged behind his ribs. He was having a heart attack, he knew it.

"Dad! Dad!"

He heard the curtain protest across its railing, and Chiara screaming for help.

-oOo-

Frank never passed out. He was fully conscious as he was taken to his own bed, laid out like a corpse himself. Machines on trolleys, oxygen mask and medical personnel en masse. His own curtain drawn around the scenario. The ants subsided and the stabbing stopped. It took some time for the commotion around him to do the same. He tried to speak several times, but the mask made it impossible for anyone to decipher his warning that Betty was probably

making a run for it. All he managed was to steam up the mask. Chiara was nowhere in sight. Hopefully she was with her mother. All they needed was for Betty to head off in a taxi again.

Frank tried to slow his thoughts down. He thought about that first night with her, Elizabeth, as she'd introduced herself. Smooth and lithe in his bed at the pensione in Bastia. He couldn't remember them saying anything to each other. The memory was of them sliding against and into each other in that room, in the small hotel in the middle of fields of green wheat. With the town of Assisi looking down at them from its hill. He could feel his heart relax. His lungs measured their intake. Elizabeth kissed him slowly.

When they'd entered the ER he noticed that there were none of the smells that he associated with hospitals. The stench of bleach and disinfectant that normally caught at the back of his throat were absent. But he could smell them now as these people dealt with him. He pulled the mask off and the smells sharpened.

"My wife?" he asked, mask in hand.

"Where's his wife?" said one of them.

"Next bed."

"In the bed?"

"She's the one we admitted. He had this attack while he was with her behind the curtain."

"Hello?" he said.

The nurse who had taken Betty to her bed said "Mr Thomson, your wife is fine. She's just in the next bed."

"Is she still? She tends to run away. Escape."

The nurse placed the mask back over his face. "You relax. I'll check on her."

"Mr Thomson?"

He nodded from behind the mask at the man who seemed to be in charge.

"It looks like you had a panic attack. I'd like to keep you in for observation though. According to preliminary tests this wasn't a heart attack, but I want to be sure. So we're going to admit you and see how it goes. Okay?"

Frank nodded because although it wasn't okay, he had no idea what else to do.

The nurse came back through the curtain. "Your wife is fine, Mr Thomson. They're examining her now, and your daughter is with her."

"I'm here, Dad." Chi's head appeared from behind the nurse.

"You can take that mask off, sister," said the doctor as he moved out, past the curtain.

This was possibly even worse than one of the awful TV programmes Betty loved.

Chapter Eighteen

I don't understand why it's Albert who's helping me out here. Where are my parents? Their disapproval has always been obvious, but I never thought they'd abandon me. They made such a fuss about the whole commune thing, I would've thought they'd at least stick around to show their approval of my married maternal status.

Doddery old Albert will have to do, although I don't know if he's up to the task. Seems this situation has sent him over the edge. Or at least into the hospital bed on the other side of my curtain. If my tongue would co-operate, I'd offer him some words of comfort.

Reassurance seems to be what this wiry-haired woman in a shirt I rather like, wants to offer me. She's blathering on about how it's all going to be okay, but she hasn't said a thing about my baby. Wish I could figure out who she is. She calls me Mom occasionally, so I guess she's one of the nurses who knows I'm a mother now. In which case I'd appreciate it if she'd stop her handwringing, and go get Chiara. How I'd love to be able to say my child's name. Have it roll along my tongue and out into the world the way it did when I said it to Shiloh.

Where is Shiloh?

The doctor is now examining my vagina. There's nothing dignified about childbirth, that's for sure. Everyone staring between your legs, even after the event. I guess they're checking up on the damage. It was quite a business, all that cracking and snapping. The hand-wringer has disappeared. I'm not sure she is actually a nurse. A bit nervy. And there's no way nurses are permitted tie-dyed shirts and their hair in that state.

They finish up between my thighs, and tell me Dr Van Wyk will be along shortly. Another damned doctor. I want my baby. I sit up and the hand-wringer appears.

"Sounds like you're all good, Mom. No sign of… anything bad."

What? Like my vagina may've gone bad?

"Dr Van Wyk should be here soon, and Dad's okay. They say he probably had an anxiety attack."

Oh. This must be Frank's sister. Why did he tell me that he was an only child? So. I guess Frank has his secrets too, although somehow I doubt they're as shocking as mine. I wonder what her name is. Perhaps she could find Chiara for me. I swallow and close my eyes. Focus on the words I need to say to her.

"Pink." Dammit.

Frank's sister juts her jaw out and looks irritated. I focus again. I know that I can do this if I go slowly.

"Chi.."

"Yes! Mom, yes. Chiara." She says this with one hand on her chest. She's overcome by emotion.

I nod. A lot. I don't know who told her the baby's name, but I'm thrilled. Now she can go and fetch her. But she doesn't; she hugs me. I'd like to bite her shoulder. Instead I pat the back of this needy creature who seems to be my only channel to Chiara.

"Can I get you something to eat? You must be ravenous."

I'm not fucking ravenous. My fists sweat in a clench and I think about how good it would be to have a joint right now. Inhale a fat one, and exhale the desire to take a swipe at this useless woman. If she goes to get me something to eat, I'll at least get rid of her for a while. So I nod, because I can't enunciate fuck off. If she goes out maybe Shiloh will come help me.

I swing my legs off the bed. These poor legs, and the hinges that hold them to me. Releasing Chiara has taken its toll, and everything is more work than normal. I slide off the bed and onto the cracked swollen feet that seem unable to heal. I leave the comfy shoes; I'm not going anywhere that'll make my feet dirty, and I like the cool floor against my skin.

The curtain slides smoothly on its rail, and on the other side I don't see anyone. Voices sound from around the other side of a wall, but they seem calm. I heard his voice from the left, so I move to that curtain. But the bed's empty. Where's Albert? I look around and rub the back of my neck, which is stiff and a little uncooperative. Albert told me he'd take me to my baby. I know he did. Or was it Shiloh?

"Shiloh?"

But he never comes when I call him. Or not right away at least. Do I have time to get the shoes? I think I do. I slip them on. They're perfect for these disfigured feet, and it's pleasing that the hospital cares that much. These clothes look like nothing on earth, and I stop. It's the thought of Georgia Rain and Andromeda seeing me like this. And Rhiannon. And Wolf Song. Moonjava and Ziggy. And Starr.

But I won't think about Starr.

I'm crying, so I wipe the tears with the back of my wrinkled hand, and focus on finding Chiara. I can't afford to think about what Starr would make of this broken bloated body. I don't know where they keep the babies. Where do I even start?

A woman passes by the curtain I've opened. She has her head bent over a package in her arms. It's wrapped in blue, so I know it's not Chiara. All these little packages look alike to anyone but the mother, so I suppose that differentiating by gender blanket is one way of minimising mistakes.

My tongue is dry and thick. I push it around in my mouth, but it won't let me ask this woman, and I'm too stiff to chase her down. To find out where Baby Central is.

"Mrs Thomson?" says a woman who is standing in uniform just metres away. Something tells me she has been watching me for a while.

Her skin is dark, and her hair is a mass of tight shiny curls. She scratches at it, one finger extending from a fist at the back of her head. As though it's one very specific, tiny spot she needs to scratch.

"Pink." Shit.

"Mom? What the hell are you doing?"

There is no escaping Frank's frizzy sister. The handwringing is over though. She speaks at me in a hiss, and then her shoulders slump. I sense she's too quick for me to get away from. I won't try and say anything because she doesn't get it. I try a smile, and I can see her relax.

"Thanks for watching her, sister," she says to the shiny brown spy. The she turns back to me. "You been looking for babies?"

Maybe she does get it. I lose the smile, and nod. I want her to know I mean business.

"For me?"

I shake my head. I'm tired of humouring her.

She sighs. "Are you looking for your baby? For Chiara?"

I can't quite believe it. My cheeks are wet with tears as I nod. How can it be that this annoying, uptight creature suddenly gets me?

"She's not here, Mom. Betty, I mean. She's…um…"

Is this a trick? I stare hard at her. Let her know I'm not putting up with any nonsense.

"I think Dad, Frank, no… Albert… He knows where she is."

Do I trust her? She keeps shifting her words, but I don't really have a choice.

"I got you a sandwich," she says, as though that has any bearing on the matter at hand.

I look at the plastic packet she holds out to me, and I take it.

"Let's go find him. He can tell us how to find Chiara."

We go down a passage and across a foyer, moving slowly so this stiff body can keep up. We approach lift doors, and one is already open for us. In we go, and the air is stale in here. It's just the two of us. She leans forward and chooses a number, and I think about putting the packet down. I don't want the sandwich, and I certainly don't want to be carrying anything I don't need. I move back into one corner and bend my knees while I watch her. She's staring at the numbers as they change on the panel above the doors. I release the packet as the doors open.

"Here we are," she says and exits while she keeps one arm across her side of the doorway.

She links arms with me and she smells good. Why didn't I notice before? There's something familiar about her scent. A perfume I've smelled before perhaps. This floor looks much the same as the rest of this warren. The scratchy carpet is loathsome; it catches on the bottom of my shoes and tries to hold me back.

Frank's sister deals with the woman at the desk. This one is taller and a good deal more cheerful than the one who was spying on me. We're at some sort of a fork with this desk of hers, and she directs us to the channel on the right, and tells us the number of the

room to enter. I don't bother to remember it because Albert's daughter seems to have a handle on things. She pushes a door open, her actions slow, as though she's worried about what might be in there.

"Dad," she says.

Then she stands to one side and encourages me to enter by inclining her head. Inside Albert is sitting up in bed. There's a small television set angled at him from the roof, and again I think of how kind they are in this hospital. It really doesn't seem like the place where I released Chiara from me at all. Are we in a different hospital? Are they all wasting my time?

"Betty," he says, and he seems pleased I'm here. He holds out a hand to me.

I go across to him and take his hand, and I'm really sorry he's not well, but I don't want to be here if this is the wrong hospital. When Virginia gets here, I must summon the words to explain to them both that my name is Elizabeth.

"She's looking for her baby, Dad."

He looks up at his own daughter, and somehow his eyes are sad without his face changing expression. Should I be worried?

"I'm going outside for a minute," she continues. "Dr Van Wyk is downstairs and I need to let him know where we are."

Something about this makes me edgy. Does Dr Van Wyk have my baby? Does he know something they're not telling me? What has happened to my baby?

"Pink!"

"It's okay, Betty," says Albert, who's still holding my hand. "Your baby is fine. Her name is Chiara, right?"

I nod and feel a little calmer. Albert's nicer than I remember. There's a lot about him that reminds me of Frank. And how lucky I was to find him. Just when the world was falling apart, when I thought the whole fucking thing wasn't worth carrying on with, Frank came strolling along. While I was consoling myself with a gelato, my saviour pitched up. I'm pretty sure Albert wears Dockers and Rockports too. Was Virginia rescued by Albert?

"I'm going to find a way to get you to her. I know that she's okay though. They say she's beautiful."

I stare at him. Who are they?

"Your parents. They called me. They told me she's beautiful. They've got her."

Why do they have her? What are they doing with her? Are they going to steal her? Was that their plan all along? Because they think that I'd be a bad mother, is that it? I can hear myself panting.

"No, no, it's okay. Don't worry. They're just looking after her 'til you get back. Okay? They're just waiting for you because… they knew you needed to go out. They knew you needed to go and… uh… they knew that you needed to go and… see Shiloh, and that you'd be back after you saw him."

He knows Shiloh.

He locks eyes with mine. My lungs are lighter, and my chest seems to be opening wider. I hadn't realised it was so tight, so closed up. Who would've thought Albert Thomson, of all people, would know Shiloh? I move closer to him, hold both his hands in mine and I kiss him on the forehead. I think he wears the same aftershave as Frank.

Chapter Nineteen

Her lips were papery against his forehead, but they pressed hard.

Frank lifted his arms and hugged his wife, but the embrace was uncomfortable because of all the wires and tubes attached to him. Even though she'd fled from him for two days and a night, then returned with virtually no words, her body felt like home to him. Even though he'd disgraced their marriage, hugged and fucked someone younger and firmer, the soft give in Betty was where he needed to rest.

The tubes resisted as he rubbed her back, thinking of times he'd traced the undulations of her spine as she lay dozing on the beach, his fingers pushing at a film of sun screen. He could almost smell the coconut oil, hear the incessant rush of waves, see Chi stabbing at the beach with her plastic spade, with a ring of sand around her mouth…

But reality was the smell of antiseptic that rubbed up against the vague unease a controlled climate caused him. And the smells of his wife. She was hugging her father-in-law; he understood that. He wished he could present her with the baby she was searching for. Wished Shiloh would make this easier for her.

She stood back and brushed the front of that blue dress, the same way she had in the back of the car on the way to the hospital. Then she looked at him, and she was girlish behind those crêpey eyes. Somewhere behind the filminess was the woman who'd seduced him. For years after they were married he watched her and marvelled at the fact of her in his life. And their child, the solemn creature who hung on his words until she became wise enough to know he wasn't to be trusted.

He could see the effort in the wrangle with her tongue. He tried to conjure up the sound of her voice; what it felt like to receive her words. Were there signs he'd ignored in the past? Had he been quick enough, or had his boredom with his wife made him insensitive to the signs a better man would have spotted? If he'd been quicker, would there have been a point at which this could have been avoided?

There were so many times he'd wanted to stop the flow of her words. The persistent chatter that greeted him when he got home in the evenings. When all he wanted was to sit with a cold one and let home seep in. When Chiara's words were everything, and Betty's

were an itch he wasn't allowed to scratch. She'd sit with him out on the veranda, sipping at her wine and letting forth a stream she'd stored up through the day. He had wanted to ask why she didn't spend her words on Carolyn, on all those women she played bridge with, on Margaret. But all he did was sit with a mouthful of beer and think about the factory. Or Cassie.

"Don't speak," he said. "When we've seen this doctor Van Wyk, we'll make plans to see Chiara. He'll probably also want to run some tests on you…"

She retreated, drawing her hands up against her chest. Her eyes flickered around the room.

How the hell was he meant to do this? Perhaps the neurologist would be able to help. Medication maybe. Ways of pacifying her. Perhaps there was an operation, or even just a tablet or two a day that could rectify everything. Why had he waited so long?

"He's a good man. There's nothing to be afraid of."

There was no retreat. No cure. He'd left it too long. The Betty he was watching now was as lucid as she was ever going to be. He focussed on keeping his breathing measured. No good having another panic attack

"Take a seat over there. That's it. Would you like a drink? Some water?"

It was a relief when she shook her head. How could he help her? Mind you, she could still pour herself a glass of water. His foot itched where the cut from the beach at Salima was healing; the scab was flaking and catching on the sheets. He'd had a conversation with her then, on the day he cut his foot. Proper words, strung together meaningfully. What the hell happened in the time it took his foot to heal over?

-oOo-

The door opened and Chi entered, followed by a man. There was nothing to indicate he was a doctor. No white coat or stethoscope around his neck. Perhaps his instruments were in the black briefcase he carried. Because this had to be Dr Van Wyk. A wiry man with stooped shoulders and a nebulous moustache. His hair was little more than a fringe clinging to the sides of a dome. His cheeks were defined in a way that gave him a malnourished look. Frank considered himself a person who didn't dwell on anyone's appearance unless it was important to do so. It seemed unavoidable with Dr Van Wyk.

The doctor rubbed his hands together as though cold. Chiara introduced him to Frank, and when Frank sat up to shake the man's hand he realised Dr Van Wyk was already looking at Betty, still rubbing those hands. The sinews on his forearms seemed like wires in a robot. Frank wanted to catch his daughter's eye, but she was focussed on her mother.

"Betty? This is Dr Van Wyk," said Chi.

Frank was grateful for the kindness; that she'd stopped saying Mom. That she had remembered in the first place.

Crouching at Betty's side, Dr Van Wyk laid a hand on top of hers, and she pulled away. The doctor's words were soft, shying away from Frank. So he leaned slightly off the bed, trying to catch them.

Betty's nostrils flared; not a good sign. Frank could see her throat work, and wondered whether she was trying to say something, although probably not, because her mouth was closed. Lips pursed. She looked up and caught Frank's gaze, and he thought she may be reading his mind; understanding that he was concerned. The man kept speaking but she stared at Frank. He wanted to smile, to give her some sign of encouragement, to show her everything was okay. But he found himself simply looking back at her.

"Dr Van Wyk?" Chi's voice seemed uncertain. As though she too sensed this was going badly.

The doctor lifted a hand at Chiara without turning his head. And then he stood, bent forward and took Betty's hand again.

Betty started to scream. A nasal sound, although Frank could see that her mouth was open. Wide. She leaned forward and beat Dr Van Wyk about the head and shoulders with her fists, before he flinched in retreat. She stood, hands balled, and roared her strange noise at him. Then she looked at Frank again with tears on her cheeks. She became quiet and stood, panting without making a sound.

Frank pushed himself upright and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Come. It's okay. Come, yes that's right. Sit on the bed, here with me." He could see the doctor watching them.

Chi stepped forward, and said, "Mom?"

Betty moved to Frank's side, standing next to where he sat. He could smell some sort of disinfectant on her he hadn't noticed earlier. Her breath came in little gasps. He took her hand in his. She squeezed him and began to cry again.

"I'll need to sedate her," said the small doctor in his quiet voice.

"No, I think she's had enough for today," said Frank.

Betty sat and leaned against him. She sighed. Chi said nothing, but her cheeks were wet too.

"I understand. I'm sorry it's come to this. Perhaps we give her a chance to recover before I see her again?" said Dr Van Wyk.

Frank nodded and did his best to smile at the man. The television in the ceiling muttered a commentary as Dr Van Wyk left the room and Chiara followed him, closing the door behind her.

Frank wiped his wife's face with the corner of a sheet. It was stiff, starched like the whole room. The walls gleamed at them, and the sterile eyes of the windows glared that all was lost. Betty kept her head on his shoulder.

Chiara returned and sat in the chair where her mother sat earlier, put her head in her hands and cried. Betty slid off the bed and moved across to Chiara and put a hand on her daughter's back. For an instant Frank wondered whether his wife could see through the mist to where her child was. Perhaps there was something firing in those neurons that made her reach out in an act of comfort. Chi sat upright and reached for her mother's hand, and held it between her own. She looked at him, her hands still encasing Betty's.

"I never got to say goodbye. One day she was there… And now I'm one of those people speaking in clichés..."

"Don't say that. What did you discuss with the doctor?" A prickle of discomfort flared at talking about Betty while she was right in front of him.

"To bring her to his rooms when we're ready. He'll make sure to see us straight away."

Betty sighed, and he wondered what she made of it all.

-oOo-

Chiara took Betty away to begin what he assumed would be a long process of being discharged from the emergency rooms. He wondered how they were together. Whether Chiara was able to keep up the strange version of logic dictated by her mother's mind. Did she remember to call her Betty, not Mom? Could Chi ever truly liberate herself of the need to insist on reality?

She'd never been a parent. Chiara had never entered the imaginary world of her own child, and it seemed to him that would make it harder for her. He thought of the times he'd sat on the floor in her bedroom, sipping imaginary tea from tiny flower-patterned plastic cups Betty found in the market. The way she'd swiped her hair back from her face, tucked it behind an ear, and checked to see whether the tea was to his liking. He couldn't help sniffing at the rough blue carpet they sat on; it always seemed damp in the summer months, the odour catching at the back of his throat. Betty would look on from the doorway, smiling.

Frank watched the television through the night, trying to escape the panic that seemed to be pressing a tide in his chest. It was important to control himself if the doctor was ever going to free him from his prison of tubes and wires.

A nurse shuffled in, the bustle of her uniform sounding more urgent than her actual movement. She turned down the sound on the monitor, but it's scribbles remained a menace in his peripheral vision. What were they saying?

-oOo-

By the time the doctor arrived in the morning, exhaustion had rendered him curiously relaxed. Frank glimpsed the man observing charts and machines, then closed his eyes.

In his dream he sat with Betty at the restaurant overlooking the James River. The name of it… was no longer important. The river winked silver flashes behind her head, far down below them. Boats chuffed to and from the direction of the city, which looked like a painted backdrop; like one of those cities in a Star Wars movie. He watched her mouth, the one that had sucked at the ice-cream in Assisi. Her lips were plump with the words she was offering him, flirting around teeth an orthodontist must've seen to. Her tongue flashed pinkly behind them, and he wanted to lean across the table and sink into that mouth with his own. She was pregnant. No wonder her lips were plummy. He could listen to the music of the words that came from them forever.

-oOo-

“Your signs are all clear, Mr. Thomson. Just a panic attack.”

Frank opened his eyes, his ears still reaching for Elizabeth’s voice. The doctor was tapping a chart that he looked down on. He turned his eyes to Frank and raised his eyebrows, as though he’d had a glimpse of Frank’s dream. Frank pushed himself upright and tried to tune out the mumble of the sports channel.

“Thank you,” he felt obliged to say.

“I’ll get the paperwork started and you’ll be out of here by lunch time.”

Frank almost thanked him again, but nodded instead. Betty probably felt like this most of the time. He didn’t care for other people’s opinions; he just wanted to get out of the hospital with its shiny sterile surfaces, and nurses who shouted outside in the corridors.

A different nurse came in and removed the tubes and wires. This one was smaller, her little hands deft and assured.

“I’ll let you know when it’s time to get dressed,” was all she said.

-oOo-

He emerged from the bathroom in his clothes from the day before, and Betty was sitting on his bed watching the television. A soccer game was on, and she appeared transfixed. Was she changing personality too? Betty had never given a sports channel more than a few seconds’ glance. Tiredness sucked at his skull. As though his mind had been over-exerted with amateur psycho-analysis. Of himself, of his wife, of his daughter. He could picture his brain, worn smooth by this activity, and he longed for his factory.

Sitting beside her on the bed, he felt his age and was glad his wife didn’t seem to be feeling hers. Betty turned and smiled at him, then placed a hand over his. He allowed himself to think she was happy. That she was losing her ability to speak, but wasn’t experiencing the tragedy. He had to trust this was what the press of her hand was telling him; that it was what it had been trying to tell Chi the day before.

The blue frock was gone. In its place were a pair of loose black pants and a yellow and green tie-dyed shirt. A pair of Crocs sandals on her feet. She caught his eye and grinned.

What did it matter, he wondered, if he was to simply enter her world with her? He smiled back at her. “Nice outfit.”

She wiggled her feet and nodded, and something like a laugh came from her nose. She smelled like Chiara today.

"You ready, Dad?" Chiara's hair was loose, and she too wore a tie-dyed shirt. Hers was blue and purple. A slimmer cut than her mothers. Tight jeans on her narrow hips. She stood in the doorway.

"Did you go shopping?" he asked, ignoring her question.

"Oh, yes. When we got home yesterday Mom…Well, Betty wasn't happy with the clothes she found in her cupboard." Chi slipped her hands in her pockets and leaned against the door frame.

"Thanks, my girl." He walked across and pulled her into a hug that she didn't resist.

"She was sifting through my shirts, so I took a guess…" she whispered.

"World's best daughter."

She lifted her head and smiled at him.

Chapter Twenty

Part of me is locked. Not just the words, it's something bigger. The thing is, there's danger involved in unlocking it. Words are jammed when I'm with these people; I can almost feel where they stop. Just above my eyes, in the middle. They lodge there and then… well, I don't know. Maybe they disintegrate. Or it could be there're damming up in there, and any second they'll burst out and flood the place. I'll drown these two with a deluge of unclogged speech.

But there's a shadow that's also stuck. I suspect Shiloh's the one who can dislodge it, but I'm afraid of what that means. Sometimes, when I close my eyes and relax, I catch a glimpse of a grey wraith in my head.. At first I thought it was the baby, but it isn't. I have to find my child before this silhouette takes over.

In the meantime I've discovered Frank's sister's name. Key. I like that, and sometimes I quite like her too, even though she's a bit wired. Not the Key Starr likes.

Key, he says into the phone. And I know he's jonesing.

She does seem a key to certain locked things. Like the way she just got that I needed real clothes. That I couldn't maintain if I spent another day in that hospital smock. And those shoes. I've discovered she's a Yo Yo herself – I saw the clothes in her cupboard, and look what she's got on now; so there's some sympathy there. I guess that's also what I've become, now that I've put myself back in the system. So we're a pair of Yo Yo mamas. If she wasn't so tense, I'd ask for her help with the shadow.

But I can't do that. Cool as she is in some ways, in others she's a downer. Like yesterday, asking me over and over, *What happened to your words?* Like I fucking know, lady. And the way she calls me Mom. There's only one person who gets to call me that, and she can't talk yet. And I can't find her.

Where's Chiara?

And Shiloh?

Albert has no more tubes. He must feel freer.

The three of us take the elevator, and come out in the same place. Am I stoned?

Walk, walk, walk on rough carpet. I know it's coarse even with my ultra-modern far-out sandals, coz I feel the scratch against the soles, through the rubber. I slow down; my mouth waters as I drag my shoes.

Key pulls my arm and tells me to come on. Could be we're on our way to the baby ward, so I'll sacrifice the shoe drag this time. I pull my elbow from her hand though. That whole bossy vibe is getting me down.

She opens a glass door, but I don't get to read what's written on it coz she's standing in the way and flapping a hand at me and Albert. He stands back (that's where Frank gets his manners) and lets me in first. He's square, but he's okay.

I can hardly breathe in here.

Wilted people drape over chairs, and there's a big slab of wood, with a wood giant behind it. Wide green eyes in her giant face. Eyes so big she seems shocked. Hope she's not so stunned she can't remember where she put my baby. I give her a wink to help her relax. Eye to eye, so to speak, ha, ha. But she just keeps bobbing that head above and below the wood, like she's playing peek-a-boo.

I'm going to play peek-a-boo with Chiara. And what's that other game I've seen people play with their babies?

Round and round the garden…

Key leads me down a warren. No more rough carpet here. My shoes squeak.

Squeak, squawk. I twist my foot as I make steps.

Into a school teacher's room. Why're we seeing the teacher? Chiara can't even hold her head up yet, let alone go to school. Files are flopped all over the show, and the teachers desk has graffiti all over it. This must be the teacher for naughty kids coz this desk is pitted with words. I can't make them out, but they look fierce.

I sit in the kid's chair, and Key sits in the one next to me. I don't know where Albert is. Back with the wilted people maybe. Is this a remedial teacher?

Round and round the garden,

Like a teddy bear,

One step,

Two step…

Fuck; it's the Quack. The snake charmer. I stand up and try to scream, but Key takes my arm.

"It's okay, Mom…Betty."

I'm not your mother, and nothing is okay. The clothes, the nice talk, were just a trick to get me back to the snake charmer. Where's my baby? Did he kill her?

"Mrs Thomson, it's okay." His voice is a flute.

I mustn't listen. I cover my ears and chant so the sounds from his pungi can't charm me. If I let myself be mesmerised, I'll never find Chiara.

Something stings my arm, but I don't dare to look or slap at it. I must keep chanting if I'm to save us. Mosquitoes, bees, wasps, bumble bees…

Whoa, this is the deal. Like, the moon is in the seventh something-or-other, and I feel the planets pulling in together, aligning like it says in the song. He's not so bad, my snake charming, whispering man of harmony and understanding. I feel his sympathy. My trust abounds.

He holds my hand and I follow him to golden living dreams.

An angel crowns me with gossamer, and away fly all the falsehoods and derisions.

Filaments are attached to my crown, and I'm tuned in to their mystic crystal revelations.

Then up we go to a chair and tuning wires, and they open up my mind's true liberations.

And I soar with the charmer. His pungi is hidden, although I hear it still. We float, float, float to a space capsule. He tucks me in, puts a finger to his lips. Tells me to be still. I enter the capsule, a time machine to the creature of my womb. If I lie still, If I'm mellow, I will feel the pulse of her. I will not panic, although I'd like some real light. Some sunshine.

C'mon everybody, you know the words! Let the fuckin' sunshine in.

Swirls of pink and red, but I may not touch them. I have to be very still. Pink, red and the grey of a shadow. The shadow is swelling, and the swirls of colour are fading. I smell

cold air, and it goes up towards those mystic revelations. I must stay still. Very, very still, or they'll disappear completely, and then I'll never find my baby. So I lie and breathe so softly that the shadow can't grow, and the pink and the red glow and whirl in slow motion with the cold air.

-oOo-

Rain pelts the glass of a big window, and I think of how some of the righteous things get rained out, or rain-delayed. Not that I was ever going to make it to Max Yasgur's farm, whatever the rain did that weekend.

The muscles at the top of my left arm are stiff. Is that from carrying Chiara? Left arm, left hip, left breast. My parents always insinuate that my behaviour makes me a leftie. My head aches and my mouth feels like I've had my head out the window, like a dog with its tongue lolling in the wind. I'm crispy dry.

I sit up, and there's no sign of Chiara. Not a crib, not a pram. I wonder where I put her then. She must be due for a feed from the weight of my chest. I was close to her, I know it. I wonder what Starr would make of my gigantic chest. My breasts have their own pulse.

I'd better find her and sort this out.

Why isn't Shiloh helping me?

I think of the shadow, and remember; my search is my own. I get off the bed, even though my feet suggest it's not a good idea. I must've teleported back to Key's place. Didn't know I could do that on my own. Ha! I probably don't need Shiloh. Thank goodness coz when Shiloh comes…I dunno, but something's gonna happen and I know I won't like it.

I hear voices dampened by walls, and I should go and see what's up.

I don't like this getup. Somebody's grandma left her nightie on me. That Key – did she do this? My hands. Someone sucked the juice from my veins, and my legs are cracked still. So much went into getting Chiara out of me, and now… Where the heck is she?

I like the clothes on the chair, over here in the corner. My head hurts like hell, even though I'm not normally like this the day after. The day after the night before. I don't think I'll get to hear Starr say that ever again, and that makes my nausea worse.

I can't think about the long length of him. Those John Lennon glasses, his beaded headband I love to run my fingertips across. The soft brown of his crazy frizzy hair, and the roughness of his beard. That's always a surprise: how hard his beard is. Like it's a bit mad at me. Starr is never angry.

These clothes fit me well, and I'm careful not to look at my skin. It only makes me anxious, and negative waves hold back my healing. I leave the granny nightie on the chair. Like a carapace.

I follow the voices.

Voices without bodies, getting louder. But not loud. Low, low words.

I stop before I see the bodies, and listen.

"…keep wondering whether there were signs I missed…" A man's voice slows to a mumble.

A woman mutters, and then her words become solid. "…so quick. I mean one day she was there, talking… Well, she was still seeing Shiloh, which wasn't good, but at least she knew us. Spoke to us. Got words out properly. I don't know what happened on that escape she made, but it took her away."

The other person talks in a man-voice, and I wonder whether it's the television I'm hearing. Then the woman speaks again.

"I know it's selfish, like I'm making it about me. But it feels like part of me is going with her. Things she won't be able to tell me. I never asked, and now I can't. She was the first person to see me. To hold me. She knew me before I was born. She knows – knew – things I can't ever recall for myself…" This woman's voice is wobbling. Jelly words.

"I can tell you those things." His voice is clearer.

No reply from the woman's voice.

"Does it help to know that in her head it's all about you? That her whole purpose is to find her baby?"

I can relate to this programme about finding babies. So I go into the room to watch. But the TV's off and it's Key and Albert sitting in there. Trying to fuse their heads together.

Steam is coming out of two mugs, and I could do with coffee. And advice from that TV programme before I go find my baby.

"Hee," says my mouth. Coffee. Childbirth damage to my tongue.

"Mom?" Key looks like there's a monster on my shoulder.

I swat both shoulders just to be sure, but this chick is highly strung, so I'll just play it cool. Albert sits up straight, and I watch him clock in a smile. He's a clever one.

"Betty, hi. You okay?"

I tap my head coz it's still throbbing, and some pills with my coffee will do the trick.

"Sore head?"

I nod. I'm sick of nodding. Nod, nod, bob my head. Do a little dance like a good girl.

"I see you like the clothes."

Well, I like them, but… what the hell. I tap my finger against my skull again. Key gets up and goes to the space kitchen. White and shiny silver grey. She'd get on well with my parents. No wonder she wants me to dance like a good girl. I follow her and there's a smell of chemicals in here, under the beauty of roasted beans. Man, I gotta let them know I need coffee with my pills.

"Hee." I point at the mug that Key has brought into the kitchen with her.

She looks up from the drawer she's scrabbling around in, and I repeat myself.

"Coffee?"

I nod. Fuck.

"Paracetamol?" She holds up a pill box.

Whatever you've got honey. Hand it over. I nod; grit my teeth. Enough now; my head hurts.

She taps two white tablets out the box and places them on the black of the counter while she pours coffee. It comes out of a space machine in the corner of this cool, cool counter. Someone has dragged this stone up from under the ground, where it's damp and chilly. I run my fingers along the smoothness of its edges. There's nothing like this in the

commune, where everything is lumpy and above ground. A little in need of a wash, as my mother might say.

Key passes me a mug with the two pills.

“You look good in your new clothes,” she says.

Starr would recognise me in them at least. “Naaar.” Oops.

She laughs. “Come on, of course you do.”

I smile, glad for once that I can’t make myself intelligible when it comes to these people. They confound my tongue. She’s right though; I do look better in these groovy threads.

The pills are sweet, and the coffee just the way I like it. She catches on quick.

“When you’re ready we’ll head out to Dr Van Wyk,” she says.

I twirl the fingers of one hand in my hair, which is thin and limp. Who knew that producing a child could leach a woman like this? And then I think of the leech that Dr Van Wyk might be. He got me with that pungi, for sure, but I enjoyed the ride. I shrug. What do I care? If he really is supposed to help me, maybe he’ll take me to Chiara. Could be she’s actually there now. Was she there all along?

I must brush my teeth, make a good impression. I want to go now.

I down my coffee, bare my teeth at Key to show we’re on the same page, and head for the bathroom. Don’t look in the mirror, coz that’s a downer. Paste on the brush. Wet the paste under the tap without looking at the skin that wants to be shed from my hands. Scrub the fangs, but no too hard coz I don’t want more damage. Splash some water on the face I refuse to look at. No-one looks their best when they’re shedding.

Chapter Twenty One

The need to keep Betty calm didn't require discussion. But for some reason she no longer seemed concerned at the mention of Dr Van Wyk. She moved quickly to the bathroom, as though in haste to prepare herself for the outing. It was quite possible she'd forgotten about the doctor and the events of the day before.

"I must get better at calling her Betty. Damn, after forty something years of calling her Mom…" Chi stood with her hands in her jeans pockets, looking out the window.

Frank laid a hand on his daughter's shoulder, thinking how much easier it had been to reassure her when her concerns had been scraped knees and bee stings. How on earth could he help Chi with her mother, when he had no idea how to cope himself?

"What do we do if it's a tumour? Or Alzheimer's? What if we're never getting her back?"

He dropped his hand as defeat laid a heavy press on his shoulders. They were close at last to finding out what this was, and he suddenly didn't want to know; he just wanted to go back to an easier time. Which got him thinking about when the heck this damned thing took over Betty's brain. Was it as recent as last Christmas? What about Easter? They'd been up in the Nyika highlands, and he'd congratulated himself on the feeling that they weren't even in Africa because of all the rain and mist, the ceaseless log fire at the lodge. While he'd sat at the hearth with a whisky in hand, smug with the sense that it was a relief to be there with his wife, had some cells in her brain already imploded? There was every chance that as he looked over at her aging face, telling himself how happy he was to be with the woman who'd slogged through life with him, she'd been secretly distracted by Shiloh's whispering. Shiloh was probably his punishment for Cassie.

Betty had smiled at him across the flicker of the old fire. She hadn't spoken; she just raised her own whisky glass at him. He chiselled at the memory, tapping for clues he may have missed at the time. Her parents had died earlier in the year, and she kept saying she was okay.

"Dad?"

He looked at Chi again.

"What is it? Why are you looking like that?" she asked.

"I just… I had a thought about your mother. You know, her parents died last year."

"I came to the funeral."

"Mmm."

"Well?"

"D'you think that triggered this?"

Chi's face became troubled. "That was ages ago. Long before there were any signs. I'm sure that's not the reason…"

He nodded, but his mind kept brushing against the fact that Betty hadn't cried. Not when they died, or at the funeral. But there had been dreams. Whimpers in her sleep afterward.

"I never spoke to her about the dreams she had."

"You're not making sense." Chi's tone seemed impatient.

"Every time I asked, she insisted she was fine. But when we got back to Lilongwe she woke me sometimes, crying in her sleep."

"That's normal."

Chi was probably right. And if he started on that tangent, there was no end to the list of things that could've started all this with Betty. How the hell was he to know? Maybe it was the sound of Margaret clanging pots in the kitchen. Or the stress of living with him. The heat of Lilongwe. Long term effects of insect repellent on her skin. Malaria! How many times had Betty had it? Had she ever had it? He couldn't remember her ever being ill, never mind having malaria. He felt a growing unease at just how much he didn't seem to know about her.

-oOo-

Familiarity was not making Dr Van Wyk any easier to understand. Was it frugality that made him keep the avocado carpets, worn as they were by the steps of decades of mind-weary patients? Where was the computer? Did his wife know that the curtains she'd tossed out

thirty years ago still graced his office windows? Were there plans to recycle all those paper files one day?

"Mr Thomson. Ms Thomson…"

Dr Van Wyk's entrance from behind them was another thing Frank couldn't figure out. Where was he when they were ushered in from the reception? In one of the other rooms, like the one they examined Betty in? In the wards with other patients? How did anyone know what was going on? It seemed unlikely that this leprechaun of a man even had a cell phone.

They shook hands, the doctor's palm clammy against Frank's. Maybe there was no wife.

"Please. Sit."

There were three chairs this time, so Betty sat between Frank and Chiara. The doctor scuttled to the other side, where he seemed dwarfed by the vastness of his desk. He sat. Pulled his chair closer to the table; leaned his elbows on it and pressed his fingers into a steeple. Frank felt the stale air rustle in his lungs.

"So now…" His eyes slid to the file open on the desk in front of him, and he moved a page before returning the hand to its companion.

Chiara's chair creaked.

"We did all these tests, as you know…"

Frank felt his stomach muscles slacken as the doctor recited the tests. He half-expected Betty to say blah, blah, blah, but of course she didn't. She sat as though rapt. What tectonic shift had created this new attitude?

The man had stopped talking; he sighed.

Oh shit.

"I don't know how to tell you this…"

Chi's chair creaked again, and the air got hotter. Frank cleared his throat.

"We…well, we can't find anything conclusive. Not even any indication of why the dramatic loss of speech you described…"

"Excuse me?" said Chiara.

Betty began to groan, and to rock in her seat.

"Come over here and I'll show you," said Dr Van Wyk, rising and apparently ignoring Betty.

Her groans waxed and waned, but her face appeared serene, so Frank followed Chi and the doctor into a small side room. It was where he'd tested Betty's reflexes the day before. Where her legs had obediently flicked out in response to his knee taps, as though she was really quite normal.

Dr Van Wyk placed a series of x-ray-type pictures on a lit screen for them to examine. Betty's brain. Home to Shiloh and other secrets. He also had a file on a side table with graph readings and charts. He was talking and referring to what was up on the screen and what was on the table, and Chiara was peering at both, a hand occasionally resting its fingertips on her mouth.

But Frank couldn't hear the doctors words because his head was full of the groaning and humming in the other room. There was something about the sound that made him think about that song. What was it called?

Aquarius.

-oOo-

"We can't just leave it at that."

"What do you suggest then?" Frank clutched the grab handle as Chi took the corner.

"Another neurologist. More tests. Whatever it takes."

Frank suppressed a sigh as the vehicle slinked into the garage, then stopped. Betty was doing her groaning hum again, and as the interior lights came on he glanced at her in the mirror. She was smiling and looking back at him. He unclipped his seatbelt and remembered the packet containing the sedatives from Dr Van Wyk that nestled in the foot well. For times when Betty became distressed. He wondered what sort of a father considered slipping one into his daughter's coffee.

Chi was already helping Betty out of the car by the time he reached the door, and they focussed on getting her to the apartment without speaking of anything meaningful.

"Coffee?" Frank asked once they were inside and Betty was in front of a soapie. Was it even in English?

"Thanks," said Chi.

He made three mugs, conscious of making Betty's just the way she liked it. Or at least the way she'd liked it when they were first married. He wondered whether she still had a headache. Glancing out across the counter, he caught her captive expression. She didn't seem to be in any pain. He stirred the cups, and longed for the heat and slowness of Malawi. For the oiled familiarity of his factory. He tapped the spoon on the lip of a cup, then popped it into the dishwasher, head up, the way Chi liked it done.

He took Betty's mug across to her and she gave him a smile before returning her attention to the programme, which was in fact in Portuguese. How the hell did Chi end up with such a channel? He ran a hand through Betty's hair. Her scalp was barely covered and he looked at the pinkness of it. His was the same. So it was true, that stuff they said about age returning everyone to a state of babyness. Pinkness.

"Thanks for the coffee, Dad."

He moved back to the kitchen counter and sat opposite his daughter. Lifted the mug to his own lips and considered whether he really did like coffee. Was it just the little high it gave him that he really enjoyed?

"We need to think about where to go from here. I'm going to call…"

He reached across the table and placed a hand over hers, stopping her words.

"Don't call anyone. I'm not taking her to see any more doctors."

"You can't do that." She pulled her hand out from his. "You're responsible for her. How the hell can you stop now just because this is all a bit frustrating?"

"How long are you going to carry on for, Chi? Dr Van Wyk is the best, isn't he? Isn't that what we were told?"

"I don't give a shit what we were told. Saying that there was nothing conclusive, that this must be sort of dementia…maybe… That's just not good enough."

"It's good enough for me." He tried to keep his voice low.

"Well, I'd expect nothing less from you, Dad. Caring for Mom has never really been your forte."

He sat back and told himself not to respond. Coffee swirls crept into his nose.

"She might not be worth the effort for you, but she is for me, and I'm going to get to the bottom of this."

"Chi, I'm taking her home. Tomorrow."

"You bloody well won't."

He looked at her, words simmering at the back of his throat.

"Dad, you can't do this."

"I'm not doing it for me. You've seen what all this does to her."

"She was fine with Dr Van Wyk yesterday. How can you say that?"

"Think of how she was before that. Before she got used to him. She'll be like that with the next one. And the next one. And the one after that."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, come on, Chi."

"No, you come, on Dad. Do the right thing for Mom, just this once."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"Actually, I haven't got a clue." He pushed his mug away and felt his jaw bunch.

Chi stood up from her stool and leaned on the counter. "Like when you screwed a woman my age. For months. And you just acted like everything was normal. Just hunky dory. Good old Frank, just getting his rocks off now that his wife is getting a bit too old for his taste."

"I…"

"I…" She pulled a face in mimicry, and he felt a rock slide slowly across his chest.

"How did you…?"

"Carolyn. She told me one day when I was back home and Mom was crying in the bedroom and I didn't know what the fuck was going on." Chi sat again and looked out across the counter, past him.

"Your mother?"

"You think she didn't know? How stupid are you Dad? She's the one who told Carolyn. Margaret's the one who told Mom in the first place. Or at least Margaret's the one who confirmed her suspicions. I can't believe you thought she didn't know."

"She never said…"

"What did you want her to say? Darling, won't you please stop fucking that girl?"

"Chi…"

"What Dad? What are you going to say that could possibly persuade me you care enough to put Mom first?"

"I've made mistakes, but I…"

"Please." She got up and walked out the room.

His nerves were flayed. He tried to breathe evenly and slowly. All these years he thought he'd got away with it. That Betty never knew. And Chi… His throat was closing. All the years of glares from Margaret. And Carolyn. Veins on the back of his hands roped blood as though nothing was wrong. His heart seemed to be pumping a little faster, but not out of control.

He stood, pushed the stool away and turned to his wife. She was peering forward at the screen, her neck extended, like a tortoise. He'd done this to her. Driven her brain to the point where it just gave up. She turned her head and winked him. Lifted one hand in a peace sign. He walked across to her and sat, wrapped one arm around her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her ear.

She looked at him with a frown, then patted his knee before returning her gaze to the screen.

-oOo-

Chi went out for the rest of the day. Frank hoped she wasn't looking for another specialist; booking appointments, getting advice from strangers. He made lunch, confirmed their flight for the next day, followed up on emails and messages on his phone. There was trouble with the blending line, and customers were due in less than a week.

Every time he looked at Betty, took her a sandwich, or made her a drink, his heart scraped across his guilt. He made Chi's favourite for dinner: spaghetti and meatballs. He hadn't cooked in years and the result was rusty. By eight o'clock there was no sign of Chi, so he and Betty ate in front of the television. Betty spilled meatballs down her front and he cleaned her up. She didn't like it when he wiped at the front of her blouse, and she took the damp cloth from him. Her wipes were clumsy, her eyes averted. There was mince caught between her front teeth.

He offered to help her clean herself up after dinner, but she looked at him with a face that showed how inappropriate the suggestion was. So he stood outside Chi's bathroom while his wife completed her ablutions, careful not to let her know that he was there, but unable to move away for fear he might not hear her if she fell or hurt herself. Then he said goodnight as she tugged the duvet over herself on one side of Chiara's bed.

-oOo-

It was close to midnight when he heard Chi at the door. He sat up, considered briefly whether it was wise to speak to her after their last conversation, then stood and walked toward the door. He opened it carefully, still unsure of his decision.

He heard a giggle, then "Shhh!"

Was she talking to him?

"You can't stay…" Chi's voice was low.

A man said something back to her and she giggled again. Muffled. Frank imagined his daughter's head against this man's chest.

"They won't understand." Chi's voice was clearer.

Frank heard the door click closed, and crept back to his own bed.

-oOo-

Frank and Betty left the following day. Their flights needed no changing; he hadn't had any idea of how much time they'd need when he booked the flights, but had got it right just the same. Probably the only thing he'd got right on this trip.

In the seat beside him, Betty's fingers tapped on the armrest, and she nodded in time with a tune in her head. He wished he knew what the music was; knowing the song might give him some sort of rapport. He thought about music she liked. After yesterday he thought it might be *Aquarius*, but he wasn't sure. When he tried to pluck songs from his brain, all he found were the tunes he loved, the songs of his life. Were hers the same? His memories were of her singing along with the music he chose.

He leaned toward her; brought his head closer to hers as she looked out the window. She smelled the same as Chiara again today.

"Sweet Caroline…" he tried.

She turned. At first she seemed worried, as though he'd interrupted something important. Then she laughed. Soundlessly at first, and then with a raspy flourish, as though he'd shared a joke and not his favourite song.

Chapter Twenty Two

I like flying.

I think Frank'll be happy to see his dad. At least I hope he will be. I don't know how I'd feel if my dad just pitched up without warning. Not the same thing, I guess. And Albert can be a bit weird. Like the wiping-my-boobs incident. Probably nothing, but not really right.

Key said something about everybody already being in Malawi, and that I shouldn't worry about anything. Vague words. I mean, is my baby there? She must be. Everybody must include Chiara; they know I'm looking for her.

How were we separated? So many questions that this paralysed tongue won't let me ask. I don't know whether that's coz of the birth, or some sort of delayed effect from the weed. I know what Shiloh said, about the effects of grass and all that, but maybe it's had some sort of delayed reaction on my tongue.

Where is Shiloh?

You always come when no-one else will.

So where are you?

Albert's breath is hot on my neck in this cool machine. He's too close and…I don't believe it, he's singing the wrong song. Is he joking? Is he trying to taunt me?

I look at his face, and weirdly, I think he's trying to help. Maybe he wants to distract me with this song they say is about little Caroline Kennedy. I'd never've guessed that once separated from that bitch of a wife, he could be like this. That he'd know the words, even if it's the wrong song.

I stop laughing coz his face stops being happy. Instead I smile at him, then look back out the window coz the clouds are huge and lumpy, like big piles of cotton. And I'd rather watch them than try and explain anything to Albert, who seems pained a lot of the time. I mean, he's kind, but he can be a drag. And I'm so damned tired of smiling to make people feel better.

As much as he wants to understand, he just doesn't get it. He can't get how a cold-dead-fish-eyed doctor can transform into a groovy pungi-fox. A fox-trotting magic carpet cat. And the paralysed muscle in my mouth can't help him.

Out the window I see red earth with clumps of green rushing to us. Like the ground is coming up, not us going down. We bounce as we make contact, and I laugh. I'm bending forward, the seatbelt biting into my hips. Makes me think of rides on the roller coaster at Santa Monica Pier. Sunshine and learning to kiss. I don't scream though.

"You okay?" asks Albert.

He's smiling, so the question isn't serious.

"Pink?" I'm getting tired of trying to say my baby's name and only getting this stupid word out.

He understands. His smile loosens, but he says, "We'll find her."

I don't like the edge in his voice, and I hope my trust isn't misplaced. My body's taking its sweet time about healing, and I think of her with every breath. How can she be okay if I'm not feeding her from these pendulous dugs that become heavier with every passing hour?

We line up to exit the tube, and my hands itch at the idea of pushing my way out of the heavy hot thing it has become. Shuffle, shuffle. No urgency.

Albert rests his hand on my right shoulder, and I suspect he wants to siphon my impatience, but all he's doing is adding to my irritation. Heavy hot hand. At the exit I manage to step free of him. The heat outside is a body blow. How do we breathe in this place?

A building isn't that far away, but with this body and the beat of the sun, I'm glad of the bus that slouches nearby. Into its nooks we push, and I face a ripe armpit. I shouldn't be repulsed; the commune was certainly a mess of rancid bodies. How often did we wash? Did I wash? Was there a bath? A shower?

The caterpillar-bus swerves and we lean into each other. A baby complains. I look around.

"That's not her," says Albert.

He smells so good. He and Frank must be close; you don't choose the same aftershave or deodorant of someone you don't like. My mother's a die-hard wearer of Arpege. I'd rather smell like the rancid armpit than wear that.

-oOo-

Inside the building the temperature isn't much lower than on the tarmac. And it smells like someone pissed in the corner. Albert seems to know everyone in this crowd.

One of them says, "Hey there, Betty," and I smile, feeling a flush of happiness that Frank told people I'm coming. He must've given them a description and everything. So I can't look as bad as I feel if they can recognise me. It's like the way they say anorexics see themselves in the mirror. The human mind is really weird.

I chase off the thought that I don't deserve Frank; that I don't warrant the life I'm shuffling into with Albert as my guide. I won't dwell on the notion that this is all a huge deceit. Away with you, uptight thoughts that reek of Arpege and glitter like an emerald necklace!

We pass by the booth we queued behind, which is a relief coz the man behind ours was suspicious of me. He rolled his eyeballs and squinted at me, like he knew I should be holding a baby; maybe he even knew I'm a liar. I dodged eye contact and looked down at my feet, which I was frightened to see are in even worse condition than when I last looked. Anorexic, anorexic. The shoes are great. Key knows how to shop, I'll give her that.

I run my fingers along the fabric of my new shirt. It matches my pants, which are cool and loose. Such foxy threads, although I don't know how much tie-dye Frank can take, given the David Attenborough scene he's got going on.

I don't think Albert knows about David Attenborough, but I bet Frank does. I'll have to be careful about bringing that up. He'll want to know how a California girl got to know about a BBC person. Although of course I could always say it was through my parents. I sure as hell can't say that Starr loved to smoke a joint and watch a film he had from who-knows-where up against the wall. Elephants in Tanzania…

A battle-weary snake with chipped and broken scales heaves cargo in an endless loop. Occasionally it stops, seeming to consider whether the effort is worth it. I feel for the snake as it shifts in awkward bursts, carting suitcases that don't seem to be ours.

Then Albert finds them. He's observant; another trait he shares with Frank. And our cases are a match. Genetics are freaky.

And now, just as I think we're free, a woman in uniform wants to look in my suitcase. She has a white stick, and her shirt strains at its buttons. Her bosom is too much for it, and I want to sympathise with her. Maybe she has a baby that needs feeding too. Her eyes are heavy, and I reckon she'd rather have a nap than poke at my new and old clothes with her stick.

Albert closes up the case, and I feel embarrassed that he has to tuck in a cavernous bra to avoid shutting part of it out. I long for the bra-free days of the commune.

Or do I? This is my life of choice. And when I get Chiara, it'll be worth it. I can fuck a guy who wears Dockers and Rockports, no problem. I will suckle a baby, maybe have another. I'm not much of a cook, unless you count cookies. And I've sworn off the variety I'm best at.

-oOo-

There's a carnival atmosphere as we make our way out the other side. Excitement and a sense of expectancy in the dark faces that surround us. Not only do they like this place, though the air is rank; it seems they're hoping for something here. Maybe the snake back on the other side is meant to deliver an item or a person they've been waiting for.

Albert doesn't seem to like all this too much. He's pushing ahead as though this is a swamp to evacuate. If I didn't need to get to Chiara, I'd quite like to hang around for a bit. See what the crowd is waiting for.

There'll never be a Woodstock for me. Missed due to unforeseen circumstances, not that I could've afforded the trip to New York. Still. It won't kill me to know that there'll be no psychedelic live rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner* for me. I'll get my three days of peace and music on my own, out here. Holding Chiara. Not thinking about Starr.

Albert loads up the suitcases and we drive away in a big red car. Hot as all hell in here with the windows closed. He twists dials on the dash in this oddly futuristic machine, and I worry that he's going to crash it if he doesn't watch where we're going. I close my eyes. Lean my head against the headrest and enjoy the gallop of cold air that the dashboard spews at me.

-oOo-

A car horn is going. I sit up, sure there's something dangerous going on. But the car isn't moving. We're parked in front of a green metal gate. Albert looks at me.

"We're here," he says, but he's looking at my chin.

I touch my face; I've been dribbling in my sleep. I wipe it away and think that what with the drooling and bra-trapping in the suitcase, he must be wondering what the hell his son has got himself into. Too late now, Bert. Married and with a baby; no getting out of this little knot I've tied for us all. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

The gate's pulled open by a black dude in overalls, the top section of which has been rolled down so his chest is bare. The right thing to do in the heat out there. Two ancient dogs waddle around. I didn't know Frank has dogs. He must've inherited them with the house. Funny, he didn't mention them on the phone or in his letters. He did write, didn't he? I tuck the thought away for later.

Albert drives in, and the dogs run with stiff happy-looking steps along my side of the car. I like dogs, and I'm glad that these two live here. We stop and I creak out. The dogs snuffle around me; one jumps up, and I'm pressed back against the heat of the door. Its breath is hot and fetid.

"Ziggy! Wolf! Get down."

Is he kidding me?

That can't be right. There's no way Frank knew those names; I've never told him. And these dogs are old. How old do dogs get? They look like they're ten, maybe older. Must be a coincidence. I'll freak out if there are more. If Andromeda, Rhiannon, Moonjava, Georgia Rain are here… If Starr is here…

Or is this a test?

When I tried my new clothes on, back at Frank's sisters place, I made a mistake. Before I could help it, I started to say how much better Starr would like me in these new clothes. But the words didn't come out properly. Did they? In my head it sounded like I said *Naaar*. That's all.

Did I say stuff in my sleep? I shared a room with Key, and I can't be sure of her. I wonder whether she stayed up while I slept, and listened to me betray myself. What did I say?

"Betty, it's okay. These are your dogs. Yours and Franks. They're good dogs. I mean, they're idiots, as you can see, but they won't hurt you. They love you."

They've never met me before.

Albert has them under control, and I watch for signs of a test. A man like Frank doesn't name dogs Ziggy and Wolf. The names of men I shared the occasional spliff and a shag with. Before Starr and I…

They're old. It's possible the people who gave Frank these dogs named them. I look at Albert. I don't think he's lying, but I can't be sure. Maybe Key told Frank about what she heard in my dreams, but didn't tell their father. Perhaps she phoned him. My heart is galloping.

"Betty?"

I can't help thinking this man is honest. He's holding the dogs by their collars, and the guy who opened the gate for us takes them from him. He calls me Madam.

My mouth is dry, and there's the scent of dust in my nose. I stand upright and push away from the car. There's sweat all over me, and I think I probably smell like the armpit on the bus.

A black woman comes out the front door. She's fat and moves slowly in her uniform. There's a cloth tied over her head, which must be to keep the dust off. Her walk is a roll, and she wipes her hands on the apron that fronts her outfit. She's like something out of one of those movies about the South. She keeps her eyes on mine, and I see a rush of things understood. Did she name the dogs?

"Madam." Her accent isn't from the deep South.

Did I smoke something? Am I still sleeping in the front of Albert's truck? I start to laugh.

"This is Margaret," says Albert.

He sure knows a lot about all of this; it can't be his first trip out here. But Frank only moved out recently, after we got married. My brain aches with all the acrobatics. Margaret stands with her arms folded and looks at me, knowing eyes gone stony. Just one step away from cold-dead-fish eyes. I must be careful.

Does she have my baby? I step forward, and her arms unfold. Are those scales falling from her eyes? Her head tilts, as though she's waiting for something from me. A sign. A code word perhaps? I have to give the baby password.

"Pink?" says my mouth.

Chapter Twenty Three

The new worker picked up the vernier callipers, and Frank held his breath. The man unsheathed them from their soft leather casing and placed the cover back on the bench. Frank straightened, turning to face the man directly. He moved closer as the man tapped the callipers against his left hand.

"Don't…" Frank lowered his tone. "Don't do that to them; they're very delicate."

The man raised his eyebrows, then turned away, so Frank felt obliged to shift in order to observe his next move.

"What's your name?" Frank attempted, leaning in.

He mumbled something in return, and then used the head of the callipers to hit a piece into the lathe.

Frank snatched the callipers. "Fuck man! Do you have any idea? Of the cost of these? Of what they're supposed to be used for?"

The man looked back at him and shrugged.

"Get out. Don't come back in here without my permission. Idiot."

A glare, and the man turned away and walked out the tool room. Frank picked up the callipers and stroked the head with his thumb. What a pity it people were needed to maintain machinery. Most people didn't love machines. Didn't care about them in any way.

Frank followed his father into the industry. He'd been offered the chance of a degree financed by the company, and taken it with both hands. In theory, he should've gone further; yet here he was. Some might say he was a rung lower on the ladder than Albert was in his time. Never mind that Albert only worked in the US; the comparison would always be made. Frank wasn't unseen in Africa; the supply of tobacco was too great out here. Beautiful flue-cured Virginia, and Burley style tobacco that loved the red soil and heat of Malawi. Irresistible for large American processing companies, who planted processing factories and sent out their experts to run them. Huh. Like some sort of not-so-subtle re-colonisation.

Only, they weren't as elegant as the original British version, and barely tolerated by them or the actual locals. Normally this stuff didn't get to him. He didn't care about the snide

comments and sneers. Knowing the British expats sneered at them wasn't the end of the world. Being American, that was part of the deal. The Deidre Parrimores could be ignored, joked about even.

He swallowed and felt the moist air thicken in his lungs. So used to the tobacco-infused humidity that he'd stopped coughing years ago. *Factory Fuck*, was what they called men like him. No more succinct way to explain how he could barely bring himself to do the desk time required of a manager. When he was in his office and not designing, he shuffled paperwork, calculators and stationery into ever-neater, ever-squarer positions on his desk. Then he escaped to the machines. More than once Betty had suggested he was part machine. A man with a metal heart, tinkering in the factory while Margaret dealt with his wife.

And she was now an ordeal. A crying uncommunicative shell of Betty, who paced the house and the garden in search of her baby. Elizabeth, locked in Betty's body, and with only her father-in-law and Margaret for company. Deidre Parrimore had been to visit once, according to Margaret. That would have been no act of friendship. Hers was rarely anything but the garnering of tinder for the gossip fire she liked to keep glowing. He felt a smile at the thought of Margaret's likely intervention on the scene. And felt the smile recede at what Deidre would have passed on to the community about her findings.

Time was the strangest thing. If he'd known things back then… What would he've done if he'd realised Betty knew about Cassie? He slipped the callipers into their sheath and returned them to their outlined spot on the tool board he'd drawn up and insisted on maintaining since the day he came out to Malawi to assist with the installation of the second processing line.

How was a man meant to apologise to someone who couldn't recall his misdemeanour?

"Sorry," he whispered to no-one.

Frank swallowed against the strangeness in his throat, and turned back to what he'd been doing before the calliper issue. He slid the bearings back into place, clipped and clicked the parts together, his mouth watering a little. The art of understanding how far to push a part, pieces of a part, before anything had to be replaced. Without compromising the running of the line at the height of the season. He walked out into the main hall of the factory and paused to run a finger along the frame of the redrier.

Looking up he caught sight of Kingsley, bent over the threshing machine, and thought of teeth that could eat you alive. The line was comatose of course. Anaesthetised for annual repairs and maintenance. Just as he'd thought it was all those years ago when Shadrack went up there to do the same job. He watched Kingsley.

He hadn't been able to have a decent conversation with Chiara since they left Johannesburg. Each attempted call left him feeling sticky and misunderstood. And full of questions he couldn't ask about the man who'd brought her home that night.

He shook his head, impatient with his own brain.

"You okay, sir?"

Kingsley approached him, particle mask dangling at his chest.

"Fine."

"How's Mrs Thomson today?" Kingsley rubbed his hands on the thighs of his overalls, rearranging grease and tobacco dust.

"Okay, thanks. You finished there?"

Kingsley laughed. "No way. Going for lunch now. Plenty more to do; this line had a hard year. You okay?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Just…one of the new guys was saying something. Wants to lay a complaint with HR."

"Tell him to go ahead. We can discuss him using vernier callipers as a hammer."

Kingsley sighed. "You coming to the canteen?"

"Just now."

Frank patted Kingsley's shoulder as he walked away, and wondered where he'd left his own mask. He needed to discuss Kingsley with Walter. When Frank retired, it would be good to have a Malawian take over the factory management. Hell, he should take over now; he was certainly better at some things already. The mask was just a small example really. Health and safety, from the mask and earphones down to the steel-tipped boots.

Frank had allowed the whole Betty issue to distract him on all fronts. If they moved back to Richmond, he'd miss Margaret, that was for sure. And there was the issue of how often Chi could or would visit. Could he cope with the Americanness after all these years?

"Even you have to eat, Machine Man."

Walt.

There had been a time Frank considered leaving the company because of Walter Penney. A better man he'd be hard-pressed to name, but he was Michael's father.

When Michael died, worlds had imploded all around Frank. Chiara's, Betty's, and of course that of his boss and friend, Walt. A man seasoned by grief. His wife, and later his adult son, had both died. At the time, Frank thought it kindest to leave, to give the man at least the relief of not having him as a reminder every day. Walter shredded his resignation letter.

"How's Betty?"

Frank nodded, conscious of sucking in his lower lip as he did so.

"Why don't we have Christmas lunch together?"

Frank hadn't thought about Christmas. That would be an added reason for Margaret's testiness. He didn't know whether she'd been able to reap her maize crop while they were in Johannesburg. There was a good chance the continued pot-clanging was not only the sound of her disapproval at Frank, but also at the fact that her crop needed attention. He was so damned tired.

"Your place or mine?"

"Would Betty be okay coming to me?"

Probably not. "Fine I'm sure, thanks Walt. What can I bring?"

"Your lovely wife. C'mon. Let's hit the canteen."

-oOo-

Christmas turned out pretty much the way Frank thought it might. Betty was not lovely in any sense of the word. When he'd finally persuaded her to get in the car, she'd done so with folded arms and turned her face to the window.

Since their return from Johannesburg, her attitude to him had declined as she correspondingly became more trusting of Margaret. Whether this was because her condition left her unable to trust more than one person, or because Margaret was working some sort of vendetta against him, was hard to know. And of course, none of his promises about finding her baby or her husband had come to fruition. He wasn't to be trusted. Hell, even he knew that.

When they stopped in Walter's driveway, she refused to leave the car. Her body formed a kernel, hunched in the seat.

"Leave her," said Walt. "She'll come out when she's ready."

Frank considered the prospect of eight days without Margaret, and turned into the house with his friend.

"Doesn't feel much like Christmas, does it?"

"I didn't get you anything," said Frank.

"Me neither. No crackers or festive meal. Cold meats and salad leftovers."

"Beer?"

Walt laughed, and placed a hand on Franks back. "Of course."

They sat in the shade of Walt's veranda, which was still pretty hot, and drank Carlsberg Greens as they looked out over Walt's pool and the slope of the garden beyond. The plastic chair sucked at the back of Frank's legs and flies buzzed fatly around their heads.

It was a great house, Frank thought. Should have a wife in it at the very least. And kids or grandkids. He thought of the sweetpeas Walt's wife had been renowned for growing, tendrilled antitheses to the raucous indigenous Malawian vegetation. Her flowers used to catch at his nostrils, reminding him of candy at the corner store of his youth. Betty always had Jenny's sweetpeas in their entrance hall in the season.

Melissa the dog panted and lolled a long old tongue on the other side of Walter. She snapped her jaws at a fly, and a blob of saliva hung from one of her flues. He remembered laughing with Betty about who the hell called a dog Melissa. She'd been a puppy when Michael died. Frank could smell her from where he sat.

"You also thinking of the old days?" Walt took a swig from his bottle.

"Jenny's sweetpeas."

Walt nodded, the beer still in his mouth, billowing his cheeks. He swallowed. "She sure grew the hell out of sweetpeas. And she could garden…"

"Who was that other one who sometimes won those garden competitions?" Frank asked, knowing the answer but asking anyway.

Deidre Parrimore. Mrs Britain, defender of The Realm.

"Oh God, that awful woman. Can't remember her name off the top of my head. I'm getting like Betty."

Frank looked ahead and said nothing.

"Damn, sorry Frank. I didn't mean that the way it came out…"

"Hey, no. It's fine. I guess we're all getting that way, a bit at least."

It was a pity Walt said it though. Not because it was offensive to Frank, but because now there was a crackle of discomfit between them. Walt rubbed Melissa's head.

"Damn dog, your breath stinks," he said, and the two men laughed as the old Labrador smiled.

Frank looked out at the heat of the garden again, over the swimming pool and across the lawn that seemed to pulse humidity at them. At the flowerbeds that seemed unchanged since Jenny's last directive. Frank eyed the glass of Carlsberg Green for floaters and thought about Chance. Was he following the last instruction Betty was able to give him? His stomach grumbled, and he silently cursed Carlsberg for allowing a brewery in Malawi.

"Hungry, or just under fire from the Green?"

Frank smiled. "Not sure."

"Well, food's ready anytime. Betty must be getting hungry by now. And hot in the car."

And as if on cue, she came into view. She must've come around the outside of the house. Something in her stride made Frank sit upright, put his beer down. Her walk believed that she was eighteen. When she did hobble, it was as if she'd stepped on a thorn, not stumbled on an arthritic knee. Her carriage seemed to deny facts, and he wasn't sure he'd

been aware of that before. He thought he understood what was happening to her mind, but this translation was new to him. She was smiling.

"I reckon she could do with a drink," said Walt.

"Nothing alcoholic." As if she was a child.

Walt rose and Frank continued to stare across the winking pool. He could make out the pink line in the parting of her hair. She stopped and bent over, out of sight. He stood, and the old dog shifted and moved across to the pool and lapped up a drink. He still couldn't see Betty. The dog shuffled onto the top step and then pushed out into the water. Her head bobbed along the surface, disembodied by the glare on the surface.

"Melissa! Get outta there! Damned dog. Chlorine gives her eczema…"

Betty's head had popped up at the sound of Walt's voice. As though she'd heard something important. She peered in their direction, her hand against her forehead to shield her eyes.

"Hey, dear girl, here's a drink for you…" called Walt, moving toward her.

Melissa looped back toward the pool steps, with low grunts that matched her paddling.

Call her Elizabeth.

There were flowers tucked behind Betty's ears. And he saw her then: her hair a long rippled sheet, sun-kissed and gleaming. Jeans that sat low on her hips and snug against her thighs before flaring to the ground where the heel tips would be frayed. A blouse decorated in brown and orange chevrons. It ballooned and sucked in a past west coast breeze. Her lips parted in a smile across perfect teeth as she watched Walt approach. She extended a tanned arm that was slender and girlish, and full lips parted in speech as the song of cicadas buzzed in Frank's ears. Melissa grunted.

What did the wide soft mouth say? It lipped the glass Walt gave her, and in the corner of his eye Frank caught the diamonds Melissa shed as she shook herself. Their flash turned his attention, and when he looked back, it was Betty clutching the glass with two grizzled hands. Her head bent stiffly as she sipped.

Walter returned up the slope, wiping his brow and huffing. There was smoke in the air; it smelled of burning plastic. The scent of old wet dog merged with it and Frank felt light headed. He sat and took another swig of the beer he didn't trust.

"Doesn't look like she wants anything to eat," said Walt, expelling a puff of air as he fell back into his chair.

"What did she say?"

"Mink. Or was it pink? Or something like that. Maybe I should've put bitters in her soda."

Chapter Twenty Four

I don't remember the days being so hot back in LA – and we were always going on about the heat. I feel myself flagging. Slowing down despite this important quest that seems to suck the very juice out of me.

At least Starr doesn't know what I've done.

And Frank? Sometimes I get this grip; it's like all the mellow is flushed out and I… dunno. I have this feeling Frank has her, and he knows, and now I'll never find them.

But it can't be true.

Much as he tries to pretend, it's Albert who's the bad guy here. Some freaky Charles Manson type who'll have me humming 'Helter Skelter' and killing people. Virginia's probably already dead, though can't say I mind. Did my parents tell them the truth? Is that what this is all about?

My heart screams when I think this stuff, and I need some killer weed to get me through it. Past the idea that my folks, the deceivers, told them she's not Frank's baby. And Frank has left me to Albert, like some sort of atonement. I'm waiting for the moment he tries to ball me, the filthy old pig.

All these days of waking to my dark angel's care have been a blessing, coz I know that time under her wing is when I'm safe. But there are days he stops her coming. Like today. Maybe she takes an angel's leave of absence. I watch him then, coz mostly he chooses those days to hang out nearby. Mainly, he acts like he's doing his own thing. Like he's a busy guy, not a dirty old man waiting for a shag, imagining that I don't watch him back.

Waiting for him to make his move.

Sometimes he takes a swim while I sit out on the veranda, jonesing for my stolen child. And then I might forget to maintain, my mind floating off on ways to get out of this sweating hole, to get back to where I think she might be.

Then I'll see his eyes.

Just above the rim of the pool, looking at me. I have to shift then, knowing it's not safe when a crocodile is watching you.

-oOo-

This morning my Margaret angel wasn't there when I woke, and I knew to be on guard against the plastic man. Even though I'm so tired. Wish I could remember what Andromeda told me. All that stuff about Kundalini and chakras. I want to reach for that energy her lips spoke of, but I just can't, I'm so bummed. Thought I slept the whole night, yet I wake up like this.

What did he do to me?

Weed. A bag of peak experience, that's what Starr called it. To take away the dark shadow that never shows itself, but never leaves either. Just lurks in the spaces behind my eyes and my heart. This thing I don't know, but which I fear more than Albert.

Sometimes I wonder whether Margaret is Shiloh's partner. I can't ask. She never says. When I first saw her there was something… The way she said *Hello*. The word I long for almost as much as I ache for Chiara.

But it didn't happen. She sings to me sometimes, in words I don't understand, and I think they might be the words of angels. But she speaks to me in English, although her accent is Angel. She's not Shiloh coz she's not a shape-shifter, but I know I can trust her. She talks about Chiara like she knows.

"Chiara will find you."

"Chiara misses you."

"He keeps you from Chiara."

It's not often she says my baby's name, but I feel my soul flutter when she does. Her dislike of Albert is a scent my nose picks up.

So here I am, in this far-out garden where I think I might find some weed, or at least some flowers for my hair, ha-ha. These plants steam and drink and stretch in the heat. Albert said it's Christmas Day. I sure as hell don't believe that. But I do sense that the day is in some way special. That there could be something in this day that's good.

I see the exact ones, and although their stems ooze a little sap when I snap them, I know they'll look great. A little stickiness behind my ears is a small price to pay. A phrase I learned from my mother, who loves to tell me that the price I'm paying is really pretty

minimal given the alternative. We agree for once, although the plan has gone somewhat awry – another far-out phrase from the team of Uptight Hypocrites that are my parents.

I'm thinking these flowers make me a groovy member of The Gentle People, when someone calls my name.

"Elyssa!" shouts a man's voice, and there are other words, but I don't catch them.

I stand up and the sun makes a shadow over the house ahead, so I shade my eyes coz I want to know who knows my special name. They all call me Betty or at best Elizabeth here, except for Margaret, who doesn't name me.

A man walks out the shadows. He's the one who lives here; he came to the car when we arrived. I had no idea I could trust him. There's some splashing in the pool but I can't make out who it is coz it's on higher ground than I am. Probably Albert, looking for a place to spy on me from.

"Here you go, my dear," says this old guy.

He hands me a glass of what looks like cola. His accent is similar to Albert's: southern. I'm guessing Virginia, maybe Kentucky. I give him my best smile and take the drink. It's cold and sweet, and I could give this old cat a kiss. But he's Albert's friend; I haven't forgotten.

"You hungry?"

I shake my head. I could just drink this stuff all day.

"You wanna come up and sit with us? In the shade?"

I shake my head again, and a fly buzzes. Comes down to investigate my drink.

"Can I get you anything honey? Anything at all?"

"Pink," my mouth says.

I could scream coz there goes a chance to get my baby. Should've paused, taken a breath, thought before I let my broken mouth open.

-oOo-

The ride back to Albert's house is yeasty with his beer breath. I wonder what I could beat him off with, coz if there's one thing I get, it's how inhibitions fall with booze. At the big green

slab of gate he stops the car and gets out, as he did when we left. Opens the gate. Gets back in. Drives us through.

The garden elf isn't here today.

I walk straight up to the front door. Ziggy and Wolf don't jump at me. They know I've had enough; they were always good like that. I have to put my hand on the wall to stop from falling. There are spots in front of my eyes. Too much sun.

"You okay?"

I nod but don't look at him.

He fumbles around at the door and gets it open after a time. The fat old dogs move out my way as I walk into the dark cool of my prison. It's musty in here, and as I step down the three steps that lead off toward my bedroom, I'm not sure whether it's dust mites I catch sight of in the light from the bedroom windows, or the sparkles of small Christmas angels.

"You hungry?" I hear him call from behind, but I ignore him.

Can't remember the last time I tried to answer him. I close my bedroom door and sit on the bed, feeling safe at last. I wonder whether Margaret will be here when I wake tomorrow. My belly growls, and I know the drink wasn't enough. Not that I care. A little deprivation could shrink this jelly belly.

Georgia Rain told me about jelly belly. How your stomach goes when you've just had a baby. Her baby died. She was singing that Grateful Dead song, the one about knowing someone has to die.

And I feel not just tears, but the ripping of the muscles in my heart, my soul, whatever the fuck you want to call it. I am broken, and still breaking, into millions of pieces. Coz I know for sure I'll never find my baby. I lie back. I give up.

-oOo-

"Hello, Elyssa."

I open an eye. Every colour in the room is brighter, warmer. Beside me is a golden woman. She can't be more than thirty, and her skin is like pouring caramel. Her face isn't beautiful. The nose is too long, with a kink about halfway along; her eyes are a little too far apart. She is exquisite.

"Shiloh." It comes out of me as an inhale. A mouth, a life, resuscitated.

She leans in, puts her slender arms around me and I'm encased in vanilla and molasses, with a hint of honey. Her embrace locks out the fear and sucks back the shards of my heart. I feel my spirit clicking, slipping, curling back into a single thing.

My hands pull back into the shape I know. My knees regain their strength; their power returns like warm soup down a throat. My back is stronger, waist tighter. Belly firm. I fill vigorous lungs with the breath of her, and return her embrace.

"Where have you been?"

"I was always here."

"I couldn't see you."

"You shut me out."

"Never!"

"Your quest shut me out."

And I know that's the truth.

"Are you the shadow?"

"You know I'm not." Her voice is silk in my ears.

"My baby?"

"She's fine."

"May I…?"

"No."

The repair work shivers, then holds. My tears leak onto the shoulder of a dress that's the colour of starling eggshells. As silken against my cheek as the voice of its wearer. I close my eyes and soften my brain.

"You got a movie for me?"

"Yes."

"Popcorn?"

"Of course."

"Can we watch in here?"

"Wherever you like."

I sit up and look across the room. "That wall's a good place to watch on."

"It's perfect."

"My skin…"

"Look in the mirror."

I stand, and my legs are so potent they almost jump me to the ceiling, and I laugh. "Whoa!"

Shiloh smiles. I walk to the cupboard and open the door where there's a full-length mirror I usually dodge as much as I do Albert. But today it's nothing to avoid coz I'm beautiful. My hair is thick, pushing out of my scalp in serpentine waves of gold. There's a band of beads around my head and my skin, God, it's flawless. I touch my lips. My soft pink full lips, and I could kiss that mouth. I do. I press hot lips against the cool glass, and I hear Shiloh laugh again. A laugh made of honey.

I turn, and I can feel my body glowing. Like I'm some sort of pulsating creature, powerful and sharp. Shiloh stops laughing and her face goes straight.

"Come, sit." Her hand is on the space on the bed beside her. Long fingers make the slightest of indents.

I sit after I place pillows against the wall for my back. I may have youth on my side, but I don't want any uncomfortable distractions. The long fingers hold out a card box of popcorn that smells of the beach and the pier, and I wonder whether there's enough in there for me.

"You won't get to the bottom, I promise."

The wall across from us crackles and I swear I can hear the click and whir of film reel up above our heads. The edges of a rectangle of light on the wall blister, as something like joy and fear simmer in me. Shiloh's hand rubs my shoulder, but I can't look at her coz the screen is clouded by the gloom of the digs. The room is pungent with sweat and air that

hasn't moved in a while. Georgia Rain and Andromeda are sitting on the carpet with me, propped against cushions, like I am.

My mother would say it's a good thing there's not enough light to show up the filth. So far the grime doesn't seem to be doing me any harm. There's a lone bulb above us, but it's glow is lethargic, even though it's bare.

I'm not going to use words like lethargic anymore. Even in my head. I'm going to talk like these people. My new family, as of now. The New Me is a groovy laid back chick. Free of parental and any other bonds.

Far out.

Andromeda is rolling a joint and I'm not afraid of sucking on someone else's wet mouth space. Part of me is trying to act like my mother, all jittery and angry-scared. Glittery and sharp like emeralds. Trying to sanitise the moment, rein things in. Deny the truth.

I take the joint from Georgia Rain, who's already had a drag. It's moist. Maybe next time I'll help them make marijuana cookies rather. I suck on it, but not too hard coz I don't want to cough. No point exaggerating how green I am to all of this. I taste nothing. I suck again, harder. Cough. But it's not bad. Relax back into the cushions.

Nothing's happening.

"You need a free name," says Andromeda.

I know she can't be saying that to someone with a name like Georgia Rain. I take the joint back, suck again. Cough some more.

Maybe it doesn't work on uptight Brentwood girls. Girls with Jane Austen names.

"Liberation takes lots of small turns, sister."

I remember a book a teacher once read to us about a wood sprite. Was I even five years old?

"Elyssa," I say.

Georgia Rain pulls on the joint, passes it to Andromeda and looks at me with lazy eyes. Opens her lips and a smoke genie oozes out. "I like it."

I like it too. And I plan to let the smoke out like she does.

"Far out." I act like this all means very little to me. As though I've shed the skin my parents cocooned me in, pinned me down with.

More sucks, fewer coughs, and the joint is sizzling down. I hope it's not the only one they have coz it's taking me a long time to get anywhere.

A beautiful creature is with us. Where did he come from? He's long, and I'm longing. A flourish of hair is wild and glorious, pouring down behind his shoulders. There's a band around his head, and it's so intricate I start to cry.

"You're so beautiful," I say, and it's a process getting the words out through the crying and the lips that have the elasticity of a brick.

He smiles and in the gloom his yellow eyes glow and crackle. His legs stretch out in front of him on the carpet, which I can't smell any more. I touch my nose to check, and there's a lump on my face where it used to be. A smooth keeled extension of my face without any feeling in it.

I lay my chin, which no longer has any definition, on the ground. I slide across toward him, the Elyssa scales shedding the dead Elizabeth skin. I'm slithering on muscles I never knew I had, and my tongue flicks out at him.

"And who are you, my foxy serpent?" he says, reaching out to stroke my head.

Elyssa is a mellow hiss that I slide his way. I slide up and around him, put my forked tongue in his mouth.

Chapter Twenty Five

He didn't want to force Betty out of what was now her bedroom. Even though it was evening on Christmas day. Even though he was lonely enough to want her with him on the veranda, despite the fact that it wouldn't really be Betty there. He could've sat with a suspicious hippie and been kind of satisfied.

Frank poured a Jack Daniels and picked up the phone. Took it with him onto the veranda, and told himself he didn't care about the mosquitoes. Malaria would be the least of his troubles. He pressed the speed dial and listened to the call tone catch up with his fingers.

Perhaps she was busy. He sipped his drink and decided to wait it out, leave her a message.

"Happy Christmas, Dad."

"Hey, Merry Christmas Chi. Had a good day?"

"Yeah, it was okay. Lunch with the other singletons. Now watching a movie."

Was the lover one of them? "On your own?"

Her laugh was soft; he suspected she was annoyed. "Yes, Dad."

"You shoulda been here with us."

She was quiet for a second, then, "You're right. How's Mom?"

"Uh, she's okay. Healthy, you know. And happy, when she's with Margaret. Took a shine to Walter."

"Easy to understand. How's he?"

"He's fine. Very well in fact."

And so the conversation went; as though Betty wasn't demented and Walter had never been Chiara's father-in-law. As though Chi wasn't still angry with Frank.

Are you happy? Do you love him? Do I have the right to ask whether you're doing the right thing?

They drifted through the niceties of a Christmas phone call, and he knew there were as many things she wanted to say as he did. But not today. Instead they said goodbye, and he wondered whether she was also holding her phone in her hand, thinking about the price of words.

A wagtail bobbed on the patch of grass between the veranda and the pool. He eyed Frank as though questioning where Betty was. The bird had a foot missing, and Frank remembered something Betty said once about a mite that crippled them. Was that right?

A few drops of rain fell and lifted the scent of earth to his nostrils, but it didn't amount to much. Drops evaporated from the pool's edge as the sun slipped away. The wagtail and other birds went to their safe places. He needed a refill, and it was stupid to be outside with no insect repellent on this time of day.

Frank moved inside and the gauze door snapped back into place behind him. The sound kicked up memories of Chi getting her fingers caught in the one at the old house. How she'd cried! They'd taken her to Henry Trevor, who'd pronounced her bones intact and provided her with a couple of the sweets vendors sold at the side of the road. She'd been…six?

He held onto the top of the bar as memories cascaded around him. Parties in this room; the thrill of having Cassie and Betty in the same space. Here, where so many of Chiara's birthday parties had tumbled out across the lawn, faces muddied with cake and salty powder that gave them rashes… Michael asking him for Chi's hand in marriage across that very bar-top one humid Sunday evening.

What had Chi thought of that?

He sprayed Peaceful Sleep on his ankles, and the fumes chased away the ghosts on the bar stools. Jack Daniels splashed tawny and patriotic into his tumbler. To hell with the Parrimores and the rest of the Union Jack wavers who thought him too brutish to recognise their sneers. He switched the iPod on in its port, and smiled at the idea of sitting on the dock of the bay.

The Jack slid warm down his throat, and got hotter. He turned up the volume and moved back out to the cool of the veranda, after making sure all the windows were wide open. Just like they'd done in partying days. Sat down and lost himself.

-oOo-

He woke with the subtlest of sound shifts behind him. It wasn't a change of song; it was something else that carried its own mood. A hint of feet sliding on the parquet flooring. He turned in his seat, careful not to stab his head on the open window (as Chi had done and required stitches for, when she was about eighteen). He hadn't switched on any lights aside from the low ones of the bar itself, but it seemed Betty was in there. Was she looking for something? She was shifting from side to side.

She was dancing. She was twisting with Chubby Checker.

Frank stood, careful not to disturb her. Not that she looked like she'd be easily distracted. Head down, neck extended, arms out, twisting across the space between the bar and the lounge furniture. She shifted as the twisting took her, gradually turning until her back was to him, all the while moving to Chubby's encouragement. Had the song brought her out of the room, or was she already on her way out, and just decided to break into a dance? Where was she?

There was half an inch of Jack Daniels still in the glass, and he threw it back, sliding back to where the song took him. Chapel Hill. It was hard to remember whether he was half-way, or closing in on his final exams. One thing he knew for sure: he was wondering whether he could get Jeanie Alice to go all the way with him. Jeanie Alice. What a rare creature she was. A woman at university was somewhat unusual then, but mostly it was her willingness to accompany him to the occasional film. Even though he'd been a ham fisted and sweaty groper. He wouldn't go back there for anything.

Or would he?

What if he'd stuck it out with Jeanie Alice? Or she'd allowed him to, more to the point. It got him wondering whether he'd still have allowed himself to look twice at the girl licking her ice-cream in Assisi. Jeanie Alice had great tits. Or so they'd promised, behind the barricade she strapped them into.

Betty's silhouette continued to shuffle as Jeanie Alice looked back over her shoulder at him from nineteen…sixty two. Dear God. That time they'd all gone to the beach, there must have been six of them packed into the car. On their way somewhere in Outer Banks – Kitty Hawk? Kill Devil Hills? Names that used to be right at the tip of his tongue, easy for him to grasp and examine. Now his mental fists came up with only wispy traces of Jeanie

Alice in a red and white checked bathing suit, with tits that thrust out like missiles. He never did get in her pants.

Henry Mancini was crooning and it brought Frank back to the James River and the fact of Betty, Elizabeth, telling him she was pregnant. There might've been a moon. No, it was day, because he remembered her mouth in the light. The lips that had spoken of a change in his fate. Straightforward Betty, who never lied to him.

Except… she knew about Cassie, and never said a word to him. It was hard to figure out what that meant. Had he ignored her, browbeaten her, belittled her? Made her feel so unimportant that she couldn't confront him? Was her silence a lie?

Of course she probably had her own secrets. What hadn't he recognised all these years? He thought of the way she smiled at Walt the day before. He sighed and put down his glass.

On the other side of the wall, Betty's dance had slowed.

Frank walked inside, thinking he wouldn't mind if he never heard the sound of the gauze door slapping back again. He left the lights low and took his wife by the shoulders. Turned her to face him, without being forceful. She moved without looking up and leaned against him. And they danced in what he thought might be a slow agreement of better days gone by. The way she leaned against him, relaxed against his chest, Frank thought that just maybe…

She went off to bed when Abba took over; that was Chi's fault, not his. Back to the spare room, although she hesitated at the door. He stood next to her, the bedside lamp in her room offering them only suggestions of each other. Perhaps he was just a shadow to her. Or had there been a glimpse of promise in their dance?

-oOo-

Boxing Day, and still no Margaret. Betty's door remained shut well into mid-morning. Frank left it, afraid that the murmur of hope might die if exposed to daylight. And yet… What if it was real, and not knocking on the door meant missing out on something that might only have a short window?

He washed the dogs, working up a good lather in the old fur. He wondered whether he should get a puppy when Ziggy and Wolf were no longer around. He and Walt could get one

each. The old dogs shook out the excess water in turn, just as Melissa had the day before. Ziggy teetered, then grinned and joined his friend in the obligatory dash-and-roll of wet dogs. Stiff spines and arthritic legs remembering the antics of youth.

Frank considered showering, but didn't trust himself not to stand outside Betty's door with his hand raised, ready to knock. So he swam instead, hoping each time he surfaced to see her on the veranda. In her chair. Funny that even now she still sat in the same chair. There had to be some of his Betty still in there.

He slid below the water's surface, feeling the cool rush into his ears and nostrils. He opened his eyes to the wide sterile basin. A shadow moved above him and he pushed up, heart quickening.

Wolf.

Her choice of names for their dogs confused him. Wolf was sort of understandable, but Ziggy… some memories seemed more difficult to retrieve these days. It was like some things had been locked in a rusty box without a key. Was she a Bowie fan? He should be ashamed of not knowing.

Cassie loved Guns 'n Roses; they'd listened to plenty of it in the apartment she used in Mama Kasamiya's. They'd agreed on a dislike of curry, and laughed at the way the British expats were so fond of places like The Blue Ginger and the Causerie, where they ate and sweated in the heat and humidity of Lilongwe. Cassie cooked for them when he could make an excuse not to be home.

He tried not to wonder whether Chi ever get to eat out in public with her lover. Surely she wouldn't repeat her father's mistakes. She wouldn't betray a woman the way he had. This wasn't the time to remember that risk was part of the pleasure.

He pulled himself out of the pool, Wolf panting at his side and wagging his tail. Ziggy shuffled up alongside, and gave his hand a lick.

Cassie licked him more than once.

Betty had licked that ice-cream.

He stood, his mind rolling with mouths and tongues, and things he couldn't prise from his brain. Ziggy and Wolf. A melting August day in Umbria that culminated in Chiara. Flashes and slow turns.

He walked inside still wet because he hadn't remembered to bring a towel. Feet slippery on the parquet where hours ago he'd danced with the woman who used to eat ice-cream. He walked to the kitchen, opened up the freezer and leaned into the frost.

There it was. *Jive*. Betty's favourite. Personally, he didn't care much for ice-cream. Too many fillings in his mouth to make it pleasant. He pulled out the tub. It was crusted with ice, but it was definitely the one. Strawberry. The lid peeled off with a crack, and the scent of cold sugar snapped in the December heat. He swallowed back his body's response, and searched two drawers before finding the scoop.

He curled three spoonfuls into a bowl. Didn't she have something to sprinkle on top? Nothing in the fridge. In the pantry, far back and crusted with dust, was a small plastic tub labelled *Eileen's Hundreds and Thousands*. Frank shook the tub and opened the lid. Looked like what he'd known as jimmies as a kid. Back before fillings, they were great on ice-cream. He was generous with his sprinkling.

He paused. Then made the same arrangement in a second bowl. Dried himself with a towel in the laundry, and pulled on a t-shirt and shorts Margaret hadn't yet ironed. Picked up the bowls and two spoons, and headed down the passage. This could go badly, in which case he wouldn't need to eat the pink ice-cream.

Her door was still closed, which meant he had to put the bowls on the floor. The carpeting smelled a little musty, like it always did in the rainy season. He knocked. Nothing. He tried again.

"Betty?"

A faint scuffle behind the door, then silence. He bent down to pick up the bowls, wondering whether it would be such a bad thing if Wolf and Ziggy got some sugar. It wasn't as though they had their whole lives ahead of them.

The door handle creaked, and Frank felt something electric in his belly. He stood, bowls in hand, as Betty opened the door wide and looked at him. Her hair was in disarray and her eyes half-lidded.

She smiled, and he wanted to weep.

"Ice-cream?"

She nodded and stepped back, as though inviting an old man into her bedroom for an ice-cream eating session was the most natural thing in the world. The covers on her bed were thrown back, and she pulled them over and smoothed them, her nightdress lifting up the back of her thighs as she did so. Old lady thighs that made a lie of the smile she'd given him.

She sat on the bed and reached up for a bowl. Her back was against the wall and her feet stuck out at the end of the bed. Her toenails needed cutting. Margaret would need to see to that. The room smelled of talcum powder. He sat beside her and cold seeped into his palms from his own bowl, as he watched his wife lick one finger and lift the topmost jimmies to her lips. She caught his stare and smiled again. Was she blushing?

"They're the best part," he said, and copied her.

Her shoulders hunched and shook in a silent giggle, then she looked at him and swallowed a spoonful of the ice-cream. Her face became serious.

"Good?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. Smiled and sighed.

So he took a mouthful too, and didn't flinch as the confection crackled against mercury. Instead he grinned and pretended he loved pink ice-cream that claimed to taste like strawberries. In the place in his chest where he'd felt electricity just minutes earlier, there was something warmer.

She patted him on the arm, and her lips tried to say something. Rolling her eyes, she tried again, and a sound like a groan came from her. She pointed at him and raised her eyebrows.

"I'm Frank."

Her eyes stayed on him for a moment, and he wondered whether he'd said the wrong thing. Should he've said that he was Albert? But then the corners of her mouth lifted, and with her free hand she gave him a thumbs-up.

She had no idea who he was, but she wasn't afraid of an old man named Frank who gave her ice-cream and called her Betty.

Chapter Twenty Six

My parents never let me eat ice-cream. Sometimes I manage to sneak some at the pier with Carol and the gang, but not often. So when this lovely old fellow (who has to be the grandpa Mother talks of but never seems to visit) came in with some for me, I knew that what I suspected when we danced last night was true: we're friends.

Mother said she'd send me away for a spell if I didn't start behaving, so I guess this is it. I must've fallen asleep in the car on the way over. And I guess Father carried me in and put me in this room.

This ice-cream is delicious. It is the brightest pink, and with jimmies… I wonder whether Grandpa used to give Mother this stuff. Or maybe he only spoils a granddaughter. You hear of that. How strict some people are with their own children, and then so lenient with grandchildren. Not that I have much experience with such situations. One day, I'll give my daughters pink ice-cream with jimmies sprinkled on, and I'll climb into bed with them and eat some too.

I will listen to my daughters, and I'll believe them.

I wonder whether Mother told him why I'm not speaking. Why they brought me here. I wonder whether she even told Father. Why doesn't he ask? Sometimes when he looks at me, which isn't often, I think he must know. He's not a stupid man.

I reckon a single question, to Grandpa, won't harm my vow.

But my body doesn't allow me to form the words. Only a weird sound happens in my throat. This is a strictly enforced code of silence. But he doesn't seem shocked, so I guess it's okay. Being with him and eating ice-cream, I feel like smiling all the time. Even last night when I went to find out where the music was coming from, I could tell from the way he just started to dance that he knows me. No words, just dancing.

I feel safe for the first time since it happened.

There's no need to ask whether Grandpa believes me. He eats girly ice-cream even though he hates it, because he knows I like it. Is Grandma still alive?

He gives me a kiss on the forehead and takes my bowl.

"Nothing like ice-cream for breakfast," he says, and winks.

I wink back, although my eye is a little sluggish.

"You come out when you're ready," he says, and leaves the room.

Last night I stayed awake for a long time. I tried to figure out how I got here, and why I feel so tired. Mother probably had me sedated; she's a fan of calming medication. Although my mind seemed to be moving quickly, making my heart beat fast with crazy thoughts, they were all blurry ones. But I knew I was safe because of Grandpa. He's not saying anything about What Happened though, and I guess that's not stuff that Grandpas deal with.

It's what a Mother, or even a Father should help you with.

My heart's doing that thing again. And although I won't speak until something happens to unlock me, I wonder whether my heart will scream loud enough to shout out the truth anyway.

Shi-loh.

Shi-loh.

Am I the only one who can hear it?

"No Lizzy, I hear you always."

Shiloh is a boy my age. His brown hair is parted to one side, and he looks like someone I'd like to go the prom with. Smooth creamy skin. Like I could take my ice-cream spoon and scoop it up. I run my fingers against his cheek, and it's as perfect as I suspected. His sweater is white with a blue snowflake pattern across the shoulders, and the zipper is done up to the top. Like he's dressed for the cold.

My pajamas are now the dress I saw in the window at Macy's. The one Mother said she'd get me, if I'd just stop telling fibs. That was even before It Happened. The dress is dark pink and the bodice fits me in a way I thought I'd like, but which actually makes me nervous. The skirt has a scallop pattern at the hem, in a lighter pink, and the hoops of it push the skirt up. The hem I used to like now makes me think of a mouth with teeth. And I'm wearing the white shoes with little kitten heels I was wearing that night. I thought they were pretty when Mother bought them for me.

"I hate these shoes."

"Kick them off." Shiloh's voice is as smooth as the cream of his cheeks.

His eyes are hazel with flecks of green that make me think of emeralds. But not the sharp cold emeralds in Mother's necklace. These are warm, yellowy green ones. I push the shoes off my feet and hear them drop to the carpet. My toenails could do with a trim.

"I know you believe me. You and Grandpa."

"Yes."

I start to cry at these first words out my mouth since It Happened. And I've wondered at times if it's the reason that Mother doesn't believe me. She thinks I'm Being Hysterical and Seeking Attention, in the way that sixteen year old girls are sometimes prone to be. Because I cry when I talk about this stuff.

"Why doesn't she believe me?"

Shiloh says nothing.

"How can she trust him over me?"

Shiloh's eyes stay on me, but still his creamy voice is silent.

"Now I can't trust her. Or Father. I can't even tell them about…" I want to say that they're supposed to protect me, to believe me always, but the crying has stopped my words.

Shiloh moves closer and puts an arm across my shoulders. "You're okay, Lizzy. I'll help you, and this will stop hurting so much."

"When?" My nose is running, and he offers me a tissue.

"You're normal, I promise. In time, you'll have fun again. You'll marry and become a mother."

"No more pain?"

He smiles and rubs my hand. "I never said that."

I laugh through the snot and tears. And I know the movie won't be fun.

"No it won't. But I'm here. And I have popcorn."

I nod. It's like waiting for a spanking when I was little. Knowing what's coming is another kind of punishment.

We settle back and watch the wall, where a screen rolls down. The stuff Shiloh can do! I shove as much popcorn as I can into my mouth. My nostrils have to work harder. My heart lopes along, then picks up the pace.

-oOo-

I must've fallen asleep at some point, which is a miracle. All night my body lay in shock, rigid on the bed, waiting for some kind of sense. Hoping that it would really wake up, and laugh at such a horrible dream. But wakefulness only brings a shadow that hints at something awful.

Then the memory. The zoom-ins on the worst of it. The sounds of panting, and the flash of different greys among the shadows. Bracing myself with both hands.

My vagina contracts, and I put my hand down there, knowing that I'm broken. It feels tender, but otherwise the same as before. I sit up and examine my fingers. No blood. I go to the bathroom, where the underwear I washed last night hangs on the towel rail.

I did a good job. There's barely a stain.

In the mirror, my reflection is the same as it was the day before. And the day before that. The gymnastics behind my ribs say it isn't so, but there's nothing to show for what happened. Even my lips, that he chewed, look fine. A little fuller. Pink.

Did I imagine it?

My dress is in the laundry basket, where I put it last night. I hold it up. The dress of a sixteen year old virgin. I throw it on the floor and move out into the passage of the house I grew up in. My home, until last night. Now I have no idea of what's really mine any more.

The carpeting is soft on my feet, like it used to be yesterday. There's the usual aroma of vanilla coming out the guest bathroom, but it smells rotten today. Ahead there are still empty and part-empty bottles of wine and prosecco on the dining room table. Glasses in the same condition. The mess the adults have left soaks the air, and everything is stale and foul. In a chic way that Mother always seems wordlessly proud of.

Maria will be in at nine. To sweep it all up, wipe it clean. And we'll carry on as before.

I slide the glass doors open and move out to the poolside, where the ducks have brought this year's ducklings. They're good parents, but they still they lose a few, sometimes all of them, each year. The babies make little peeping sounds in the clean air as I move around the other side of the pool, toward the pool house. Far out on the other side is downtown LA. It's not real, just a backdrop. A childhood lie, just like everything else. And I'm definitely an adult this morning. The tiles are cool against my feet.

Between my legs there's a throb, and I wonder whether I'd have felt it if I wasn't thinking about what I'm heading towards. I pucker my lips and they do feel bruised. Why don't they show it?

I push the door open. The wood grinds against the floor, and a cloud of mosquitoes flits up and away from me. How can the air have grown so stale in just a few hours? Or was it this sour last night? I try to slow my breathing, and move inside. There's only the one small window, but I don't want to switch on the light. I don't know if I can bear it's glare.

It all looks the same. How can that be? Two chairs still in place. Hooks on the wall. The webs in the corners. No cracks and breakages to confirm my nightmare. I expected… What? The throb between my legs almost disappears, and I can't believe what I dreamed up. How could I? I sit in the closest chair, and rest my head in my hands. My hair grows out of my scalp, the same way it did yesterday. My knees look the same. I feel so strange. Like part of me moved out of my body and can't get back in place again. A broken puzzle. I'm sick. Mad.

Mother was right.

My heel brushes against something smooth, and I look down, between my knees. In this light, I can't be certain, but who am I kidding? I pull out first one and then the other of the new white shoes I wore last night. The ones with the little kitten heels; the shoes that made me feel like a woman. I hold them by the straps with my fingers. Behind them, dust fairies dance in the light from the little window.

I stand, and the throb is back. My chest is squeezing closed. I walk to the window and examine the shoes. They look normal, aside from one small drop of blood on the front of the left one.

The shoes fall to the ground, because I no longer have arms, let alone hands or fingers. I slip to the floor on the length of my belly, and wait there, a stunned creature for

only seconds. Then I slide across the cool smoothness of the concrete, around the menace of the door that bites against the floor. Back onto the tiles bordering the pool; they feel better against my belly than they did against my heels.

My tongue is a forked guide. It tells me the ducks are ahead to my right, and that they will come every year, at nature's bidding. They'll bring their babies and care for them, lose some of them, and die themselves one day. They'll simply keep working at it.

I move into the house, where Maria has arrived. Her handbag is on the counter. She's surveying the carnage of the party with her hands on her hips, and doesn't notice my passage along the shadow line. It's more difficult to move along the carpet, but not impossible. Bits of skin come off as I wrestle along the pile. I don't mind sloughing the lies off. A healthy shedding leaves an almost complete skin behind. There's nothing whole in what I leave on Mother's carpet. I told her before; I told her a thousand times.

Uncle James is an Important Client.

My tongue flares at the vanilla, and I pause. This is a dangerous place for a creature without limbs. The wool pile and the fragrance of deceit make me fearful, make me question my own writhing. They bring into doubt the ability of my scales to ease me forward and pull me out of the path of destruction. My tongue flickers, and I realise that moving in this direction will lead me nowhere.

If I carry on down the passage, to where they lie sleeping off the excesses of the night before, I will destroy myself in the attack. If I squeeze past the Necklace of Evil, without cutting my underbelly on her diamonds and emeralds…If I sink my fangs into the apples of their cheeks, if I somehow get them to acknowledge good and evil, what then?

My tongue is full of the heat and scent of danger.

I slide forward, but then turn left into my own burrow. The muscles beneath my scales feel stronger against my carpet, away from the stench of vanilla and ruin.

Yes, I have bled and lost. I curl up the leg of the bed.

I'm not the first to suffer this, I'm guessing. The sheets are easy to slide across. I plan to be one of the ones to survive it though. The lip of the sheet curves back on itself, and there's the faintest trace of my own body heat that I coil into beneath the sheet.

I will wait. My voice will hibernate in protest, and I know that she for one will know why. There will come a time when I can escape, and my freedom will cost them something too.

There is not one bit of old skin left on me. In the gloom beneath the sheet, my scales gleam.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Would she ever come out of there? Frank took the bowls through to the kitchen and thought about the girl he'd eaten ice cream with. He hoped she wasn't alone as she took this trip backward through her life; he actually wished Shiloh was there with her.

Outside the dogs snuffled around near the washing line. Two blue-headed lizards Chi had christened Posh and Becks, lived in the tree on the other side of the clothes line. Old age was no deterrent to Wolf and Ziggy; their ambition to catch the lizards was as strong as when they were puppies. That's what we do, Frank thought. We keep going with our nonsensical plans, because we have to have something to strive for. Sometimes though… we don't strive forward. What did it mean when striving took a person backward?

He thought about Betty, and in his mind's eye was the image of a young woman in Assisi, and then the face of the woman in the bedroom down the hall. He switched on the kettle, wanting to counter the sweetness of the ice cream with coffee, and tried to think of her face in the intervening years. There were memories a-plenty, but her actual face was in none of them. The milk bottle beaded against his fingers, and he almost dropped it. Unscrewing the cap, he realised the milk was sour. Had been for a while.

Well, if he didn't buy milk, this was what to expect.

He needed to remember Betty's face in those intervening years. Where were the photo albums?

Betty used to keep UHT milk in the storeroom. The pantry bulb was gone, and he wondered how long that had been the case. Perhaps Margaret never went in there. Maybe she wanted him to discover it for himself.

At least the torch in the drawer worked. He flicked the beam around the food shelves. There were sufficient supplies in there to last them… Well, there was a lot of stuff in there. It was important to keep stocks in a place like Lilongwe. On one of the higher shelves the beam glanced against the milk. Well within the expiry date. Grimy though. How did dirt get into a pantry? He could smell mould too.

Sipping at the coffee, Frank thought about how it didn't taste the same as when Betty used to make it. How long was it since she last made him a cup? It probably just came down to the milk. She was still in the room. What the hell was she doing in there?

And where were the photo albums?

Taking the cup with him, he moved through the lounge, past the bar, and into the strange little alcove Betty had made into her study. They'd never really known what to do with the room. Too small for a pool table, and too big, really, for a study. Yet now, as he stood in the archway to it, Frank realised his wife had filled the room. Over the years, book shelves he didn't remember entering the house, had been put up against the walls. And who had put up those other, higher shelves? Who had hung all these pictures?

Her desk was in the furthest corner, with an ancient computer screen hunched across its top. The box part was on the floor, and Frank wondered whether the thing even worked. It must do, because Betty was always talking about email and Facebook. Well, she used to.

He put the mug on the desk and switched the computer on. It hummed and the screen went blue. A white circle turned, and after a few seconds he realised it was going to take a while. So he retrieved the coffee mug and swivelled in the chair. A patch of framed photos sat at eye level on the wall to his right. Chi at her graduation. Frank walking Chi down the beach on her wedding day. Did it bother Chi to have these photos on the wall? Perhaps she'd never been into this little nook. A few of Chi's class photos, and one picture of Frank and Betty, taken on the day they married.

There was dust on the frame, and his fingers left a mark as he traced their faces. They'd been different people. Optimistic from the look of it. He couldn't remember how he'd felt, and the look on his face told him nothing. Just a guy smiling with blank eyes. Had he been frightened, or just too stupid to realise the implications of his new contract?

And Betty? Not much to tell there either. Still much like the ice-cream girl, but with styled hair and makeup. His mind's picture was of a cosmetic-free face, and therefore prettier and not dated. But these weren't the pictures he was looking for. It was the Betty of the years in between he couldn't put an expression to.

The chair gave a squeak as he stood, and its little wheels rolled it back against the wall. A soft clunk. The albums weren't difficult to spot. He ignored the wedding book, and pulled out the others. Nine of them. It must have taken her ages to put all those photos in

there. A drip feed of glued memories. Grime had become sticky on the covers, courtesy of age and humidity, he guessed. He carried them through to the bar in batches, and then gave each cover a wipe with the cloth he kept there. Then he wiped the stickiness off his hands.

He switched the iPod back on, and found a placemat for his coffee. Elvis spoke to his suspicious mind.

He began with the album on which Betty (it must've been her) had written the number "1" in blue. And so he learned that their memoires, post-wedding of course, began with Chiara's arrival. And they were very sanitary pictures. Mother beaming over a swaddled infant in a hospital bed. Who took that photo? He'd been in Malawi, barely conscious of being a father. And this was still the face of the Elizabeth he married. No different in any distinguishable way from the ice-cream licker in Assisi. Maybe chubbier.

Photos of a little Chi in their first family home, all in black and white. Getting film had been a challenge in those days. Mostly they bought and developed it in South Africa when they took holidays to the coast. Or sometimes when they went back to the States, which Betty had never been keen on.

Where was Betty?

Was she the only one who ever took photos?

He kept turning pages, and some pictures slipped out of position, freed by aged glue and pages that no longer compressed them in place. The stiffened cellophane was unable to carry on with its task, so he shuffled the pictures into the front of the album and trapped them there.

Some albums were in better shape than others, but not one of them showed Betty's face. Occasionally there was a picture with her in it, but her head was turned, or the angle failed to show her features. Or she was out of focus.

It was like she'd done it on purpose; tried to avoid the camera. If that was the case, why? Why the hell couldn't he remember that in-between face? The features of the woman who shared his life from the time of her pregnancy until she'd become the old woman behind the door in the passage. Why hadn't there been more babies? Was this the first time he'd asked himself that?

Where was the Betty in her thirties, forties, fifties even? There was no evidence of her in the albums, and in his own recall, her face was blank. He kept paging, his hands as angry as his mind. Faster and faster they moved, his fingers picking up a thickening layer of the greasy dirt, his chest giving up the occasional cough in response to the small flakes of detritus that flurried as he turned the pages. But on the few occasions Betty participated in a photo, she turned away from him.

He slammed number nine shut. Years of dust dived in parabolas. He sneezed and his skin itched. His coffee cup remained half full, its contents now grey and unappealing.

The factory would be running today, but he couldn't leave Betty. Part of him felt he was entitled to this anger, although he wasn't certain why. At the same time he had a growing sense that he needed to move carefully. No, it was more than that. He had the feeling that any deeper an inspection of his past might reveal where he had not moved carefully, and where he might have trampled and crushed as a result.

Was he the only one?

What had Betty trampled in her time?

Was it necessary to know?

Why was he thinking about this stuff?

Maybe it was an inevitable consequence of age. Or circumstance. He probably wouldn't be troubled by all this had Shiloh never come to town.

Outside, beyond the glare of midday, Ziggy and Wolf were now sniffing around the bird bath. Posh and Becks had evaded them yet again. They were now probably after the frogs that croaked all night and drove him crazy. In the days when the Parrimores used to be their neighbours, he would fill a bucket with those frogs and lob them over the wall at night.

It had made Betty laugh, but he couldn't picture the laughing face.

The stench of burning plastic crept into his nostrils and fed his anger. Then he remembered her smell. What was that perfume he used to buy her in the duty free shops? Opium, yes that was it. Oh God, he remembered buying it for her on a trip he'd taken with Cassie…

Betty moved like a shadow through the lounge, her old lady legs moving with a different kind of caution, as though she wasn't sure what she was moving towards. He sat up and placed number nine on top of the other albums. She stopped at the sound, turned her head and smiled when she caught his eye. Waved with a hand that suggested uncertainty, but also…what looked like complicity. As though she was exploring, and he was in on it with her.

Frank stood, abandoning the need to find Betty's face behind the plastic sleeves as he wondered whether she no longer liked the hippie wardrobe of Chiara's choosing. Perhaps a nightie were simply more comfortable. Chi used to slouch around in her pajamas on weekends as a young girl.

He took her hand and guided her past the snapping gauze door and out into the garden, where Ziggy and Wolf came to sniff at her bare toes. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth as she watched them. There was no Opium smell about her. She moved to the top step of the swimming pool, and the hem of her night dress furled on the waters skin. Something like a laugh rolled from her mouth and she stopped, dipping her hands into the water and flicking them into the air. The drops arced like crystals, and he felt a bird flutter in his chest when she turned to face him.

He considered offering her more ice-cream, then rejected the idea. He would cook for her.

-oOo-

He dragged the barbeque out from beneath its plastic cover and a skein of webs. A small herald snake slipped around the corner and away from sight just as he realised it was there, a slither of shiny skin and an arrow head. The dogs didn't even notice. He wondered whether there was anything in the house to cook.

There was definitely charcoal. A resident scorpion braced and curled its tail at him as it emerged from the lip of the bag. He flicked it away with the wrapper he'd just peeled off a firelighter, and wondered whether there would be any more ambushes on this quest. He lit the fire, and thought about what it meant to leave Betty on the pool step while he went inside. Could she still swim?

She splashed water at the dogs while he retrieved sunscreen from behind the bar. He dried her arms and face and then applied the lotion. As he stepped back to consider her, he

thought of her thinning hair. By the time he'd got them each a hat from the hooks on the veranda, the fire was burning nicely and he really needed something to cook on it.

He sprinted through to the kitchen and flung open the old chest freezer. Dog food, dog food, dog food. Shit. Where was the human food? His fingers were burning and his heart thumping as he stretched further into the freezer. Wieners! They felt like a trophy in his numbing hand.

He stabbed a few pricks into the wrapping (he knew that much at least), and slapped the package into the microwave. Hazarded a guess at the defrost time, and pressed start before dashing out to the poolside.

She was now on the third step down, and only her head was above the water. Her nightdress and the grease of the sunscreen eddied around her. The dogs crouched with their front paws hanging over the edge, one on either side of her. Their tongues lolled as they panted, eyes half-lidded. She was staring out across the water from below the brim of her hat, as though lost in her own thoughts. Something about this sight energised him, and he found himself yearning for a Green. He took one from the bar fridge, as well as a Coke, and went out to his wife. Flies were leering around the dogs heads, and one lit upon Wolf's flue. The dog shook his head, and Betty splashed at him, cupping her hands and flipping water onto Wolf, who shuffled back and shook himself.

"Coke?" he asked.

She turned and shifted up a step, reaching for the drink. He could see through the fabric to the droop of her breasts, the dark patch of one nipple. Just months ago he wouldn't have flinched at the sight, but today…

"We're having a barbeque."

His own words and the happy response of her face chased away the ache, and he felt inspired to tell her more.

"Hotdogs!"

She placed the coke bottle on the poolside and clapped. Her fingers curved back as her palms slapped together, and it felt like they were slapping away all his memories of their lives together. Where was she, really?

He turned his eyes away but he could still hear the crackle of the fire, the panting of the dogs and the slap, slap, slap of her hands. She began to hiccough.

Then he heard the ping of the microwave.

Chapter Twenty Eight

So hot. I'm not sure why Mother and Father have left me with this old man, but I like him. He lets me stay in the pool, even when he's not around. No ducks here; he has dogs. If I splash the water, he doesn't say *No, Elizabeth*.

Mother says hotdogs are un-ci-vi-lised. I know Father doesn't always think that coz sometimes he buys me one after school. But we eat them at Joe's Diner. I don't think Mother has ever been to Joe's. I like Joes coz it's noisy and smells like all the things she doesn't let me eat. Mother likes things to be quiet and ci-vi-lised.

Uncle James must be ci-vi-lised. I know that coz I saw them snuggling, and Mother doesn't snuggle often. Not even with Father; I don't think.

The old man holds out another hotdog and I take it. Full of ketchup, just how I like it. I might get sick (Mother always says I'll get sick if I eat so much), but I don't care. He laughs when I stuff my mouth so full I have to chew with my mouth open. These hiccoughs don't help.

I like him a lot. Mother would never let me eat on the pool step. I watch crumbs float off, and so do the dogs. I reckon, if they weren't so old, they'd jump in after those crumbs. Maybe I'll jump in after those crumbs.

Or maybe I'll go find Shiloh. Shiloh will show me a film, perhaps the new Peter Pan. I love the old one, but Father says the new one will have sound. Father also says the new one won't be out for a while, but Shiloh can do anything.

I get out the pool. My night dress is heavy with water, and the old man gives me a towel.

He says, "Here you go, Betty."

Poor thing. He has me confused with someone else. My arms and feet do look different. My right hand and the right side of my face feel heavy and saggy. Even my right leg. I sat in the pool too long. He doesn't look at me straight, so with this crinkly skin I

remind him of someone else called Betty. I should say, I'm Elizabeth, but I don't want to be rude. Mother says that a lady is never rude. The rude rules are confusing.

I walk back inside, and the house is dark. My right leg drags its foot. It's a tired leg. I wonder why the old man doesn't have more lights on inside. Here's the start of the stairs and I'm careful as I go down, coz my tired side wants to slip off me. Drip, drip go my pajamas. I hope he doesn't mind. Mother would be upset at water on her carpet. I start to go to the room I was in, but I see another on my right, even though my right eye is trying to close. Snooping is rude.

It's a girl's room. I only know coz there's pink in it. Not everything is pink, but some is, and boys don't have that. Some stuff is strange. There's a picture on the wall that is a little torn on the corners, and it has some scary faces on it. Four of them. It's like someone is shining a torch from beneath them, and I don't like this picture. There's a word I can read on it, but it doesn't make sense.

Queen. One of the words I learned at school this year. But there's no crown, and no pretty face, or even pretty hair for a crown to go on. Just mad faces and mad hair. I'm frightened, but it doesn't chase away my hiccoughs. My heart is beating very fast and I wish I never came in here. It's like a trick. Pink to make me look. Then the wicked picture.

"Hello, Elizabeth."

I can't see Shiloh. Nor can I tell whether Shiloh is male or female, smooth-skinned or wrinkly. "Where are you?"

"Don't be scared. I don't always have a body."

"That's horrible," I hear myself whisper, as the room starts to go dark around me.

"Not horrible, just different."

"I don't like it. Show me where you are."

"Give me your hand."

I turn my left palm up, not sure of what Shiloh wants. My heart is pumping very quickly, and my head hurts. There's a shadow behind my eyes that I'm scared of. Do I know this shadow? Has it been creeping up on me?

"I'm here."

I feel the warm dry palm that belongs to Shiloh. The strong fingers that slip between mine. My breath is coming back to me, but the hiccoughs are there too.

"Why is it different?"

"Things have to change. You know that."

I do know that, but I don't like it and my body feels like it's trying to slide off me.

"I'm here with you. Try not to be scared."

"Do you have a headache tablet?"

"I have a film that'll make it easier. Sit on the bed."

"Stay with me!"

"Just sit. I'm here."

"I'm all wet."

"You're not."

And I'm not. I sit, and I still can't see Shiloh, but the hand that was holding mine curls around my shoulders, and the wall next to the horrible picture lights up.

-oOo-

My face is cold and my nose is running. The rest of me is warm. No, it's hot. Too many clothes. Father said, She's going to be too hot, but Mother kept putting on more layers. When he handed me over to Becky the au pair, he whispered in my ear, She does that because she loves you so much.

I don't know whether he's lying or confused.

My toboggan session with Becky is over. Or maybe Becky is bored of tobogganing with me. She stopped being cheerful as soon as we were out the door. She'll be lively again when Father or Mother opens the door. Her nose is running too; I see her wipe it with the back of her glove. My head hurts from the cold.

I hate Aspen. I like LA. And playdates with my friends. More than Aspen, I hate staying in Uncle James' apartment in Aspen. Mother and Father say it's important that we come when he invites us coz he's a Big Client. That makes me scared coz when I asked what

that means, Mother said that without him we couldn't live in our house in LA. I love our home. And the ducks and my bedroom and our pool and the deck where sometimes I sit and look out over the Valley, and it looks like a film set.

So I try and be a good girl when Uncle James is with us. Which is a lot. Once when Father and I were in Father's offices on Rodeo Drive, Father let me try on a necklace he made. It was heavy. Diamonds and emeralds, with a big emerald at the centre. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I looked like a princess. I asked him if I could keep it and he said No, it belongs to Uncle James. I made it for him. Which I don't understand because Uncle James doesn't have a wife. When I asked Father if he has a girlfriend, Father didn't say anything. Just shook his head and looked away.

"Where's your other mitten?" says Becky.

I'd hoped she wouldn't notice. I lost it somewhere on the last toboggan ride. It was loose and when it came off, I said nothing coz I was too hot anyway.

I shrug and look down. "My head hurts."

Becky does a big sigh. Like a sigh from a film. She makes a little groan. The tip of her nose is red, and she wipes it again. "Was it on the path here?"

"Maybe." I shrug again. I try not to look at her coz Mother says my face goes red when I lie. That's how she catches me out.

"Will you wait here, Elizabeth? Hold onto this rail 'til I get back. Okay? I'm going to run back and look for it."

"My head hurts."

Mother would tell me not to whine.

Becky pretends not to hear me. She's backing away and starting to move back down the stairs. "You stay right there. Don't move. I'll be faster without you."

"Shall I go inside? Get a tablet?" I say. The headache is making my mouth water.

"No! No, just wait for me. I can't take you back without a mitten."

I sigh. She runs down the stairs.

I scratch a nail on the railing, and try to pretend that the pain isn't getting worse.

I swallow.

I knock on the door.

No answer

I knock louder.

Nothing.

I peek down the stairs, and there's no sign of Becky, and now there are specks of light in front of my eyes. I try the door, and it opens, so I walk inside. The lights are on, and they make the pain worse. And I'm so hot, I need air.

I walk to the lounge so I can get to the balcony, and I hear voices. Mother is here. I start to turn to go back to the kitchen. Maybe there are tablets in there. But then I hear her words.

"…my life was over as soon as I had her. So don't you speak to me about sacrifice, John. I'm paying the ultimate price."

"That's not fair, Milly. You talk as though your life is over…"

"It may as well be." I hear her suck on a cigarette. A sound that crackles in my sore head. "My chances of being a success now that I have a child are less than zero." I hear her puff the smoke out.

"Why didn't you wait?" Becky's whisper is very cross. Her breath smells like toast, and her cheeks are as red as the tip of her nose. Which is wet again. I can't help blinking.

"Bye Becky," I say, and I go my room.

People are talking behind me, but they're not speaking to me, so I carry on to the room that I use here. I close the door and take off the one mitten, the jacket, the woollen hat with its pom-pom that's too heavy and bounces on my head. Mother's words are like a song that makes the pain in my head worse.

I lie down on the bed, and through the window I can see it's started to snow. If I watch one flake, it floats. Like it's trying not to fall too fast, coz when it stops everything will be over. It won't be itself any more.

The roof across from us is like that. A big sheet of white. Or is it actually a real sheet?

I sit up, and nausea flops up my throat.

It's a film screen. And there's a film showing.

I'm in the film! Father films me sometimes, and when we watch it, the film is all jerky, like this one is. I'm tobogganing. Was he filming me earlier? I'm on my own though. I'm going too fast. White is flashing past me, faster, faster. Spots in front of my eyes. I'm screaming, although of course there's no sound. Not even music. Wait. Yes, there is music. I know this tune. It's…it's the music from Peter Pan. From the scene where Tinker Bell is dashing around Wendy's room. When she attacks Wendy for kissing Peter…I must concentrate on the music, and I mustn't turn and go back to the words down the passage.

I hit something, and I fall. I feel it. Snow in my mouth, my ears. Cold, cold pain in my head. Careful, don't look back. Don't listen to her behind me.

I get up, and brush off my dress. A pink dress with pretty scoops on the hem. I shake the snow from the white shoes with the straps that go around my heels. The music isn't any slower. My head is spinning; I got up too quick. So I sit on the floor, where there's a cushion and music and a woman with beads around her head. No, it's a man coz he has a beard. He puts his arm around me. He smells like cheese. And something else, something sweet that catches at the back of my throat. I cough and cough, and my breasts are so tender that the coughing hurts them.

Just don't turn around.

So I stop the coughing and reach for the wall beside me. Up I climb and there's sunshine that cuts my eyes, and trees with olives on them. The sun is so hot, I'm sweating and licking on this ice-cream, hoping the cold will move from my tongue, across the whole of me and maybe soothe these tender breasts and numb the wound in my head.

And I'm not alone because he's watching me. Does he know? Can he see her behind me?

I won't turn, I won't. I won't listen to her either. If I don't look, she has no voice.

He takes my hand. My heart hammers so fast my breath can barely keep up, but he doesn't try and make me turn. Just holds me. Then he picks me up and carries me away from her. From them. My head is against his chest, so even like this I can't see her. Can't hear her.

My breath is hot against his shirt. He doesn't smell like cheese, and I hope that the baby won't either.

He says, It's okay, everything's okay, Elyssa.

Chapter Twenty Nine

His desire to be with Betty, this shadow of his wife, was a force that made no sense. What he couldn't understand was the comfort he found in her presence. Not only the physical Betty, but her nuances; her form, her gait, a shrug. He wondered whether it was in such physical hints that she'd identified him as Albert.

Don't leave me alone.

There wasn't much to clean up after the meal. The barbeque was too hot to clean, and it could wait for Chance's return. The rest was easily dealt with, and he set about it with a vigour that felt new to him. It didn't take a psychology degree to know why this was the case.

What are you doing?

He filled the basin with water, as hot as he could bear it, and whisked up the suds. The skin of his forearms became shocked pink gloves. In went the barbeque tongs, the scissors he'd used to cut packets open, the plates on which he'd carried the sausages and bread rolls. No drinking glasses because they'd drunk out of bottles. Not too civilised, but she was just a girl.

In a small stone tub next to the basin he found an assortment of sponges, a pad of scouring wire and an interesting looking brush. The sanitised scent of the dishwashing liquid powered up his lungs. The plates were treated with a sponge, after which he applied the brush with an energy that sizzled through his fingers at the tongs and scissors. Worked a charm.

Everything was rinsed in water just as scalding. Then he scrubbed the basin and cleaned the sponges and the brush itself. Rub, rub, scrub. The skin on his hands started to look like it might separate from the flesh.

Then the counters, followed by the table at the centre of the kitchen – God knew when that was last cleaned – and then the floor with the broom and the mop.

Frank surveyed the kitchen with his hands on his hips, and remembered watching Mrs Doubtfire. He hated that film. Ah, the pantry, with its lack of light, its powdery mustiness. In the cupboard beneath the sink he found an assortment of cleaning agents containing chemicals he thought would do the job. Their acridity made him sneeze.

Out came every item in the pantry, each contributing to a caking of greasy dirt beneath his fingernails. As he reached the halfway point of the last shelf, he discovered three light bulbs, one of which appeared to be the correct size and stem shape for the pantry fitting.

He lost track of time. Light on, shelves and goods cleaned, mustiness overcome by the corrosive odours of Margaret's cleaning agents, and matters seemed brighter. For a moment.

Outside the sun was softening and the dogs needed feeding. What would happen if he didn't give them food? Would they become more adept at catching blue-headed lizards? Would frogs sustain them? The clicking of their claws on the paving outside the kitchen window made him draw breath. The long nails of old dogs.

Dry pellets clanged in their food bowls. Their whines were a soft encouragement on the other side of the wall.

"C'mon, you two."

Imagine drooling in anticipation of such a meal.

He told them to sit, and made them wait as he placed their bowls on opposite sides of the courtyard. A long gloop of saliva swung from Ziggy's flues. Frank clapped his hands against his sides, and they leaped forward. Gulped and chomped as though their lives depended on it. Wolf burped – an inelegance that had been charming when he was a puppy, but was now vaguely repulsive. Wolf started to turn, and Ziggy growled.

Same story every day.

Don't leave me alone in this story.

Inside, he ran more hot water and dishwashing liquid into the saliva-slick bowls, then left them to soak. Time to resume the photograph hunt.

Irritated by the gloom that stretched from the lounge and into his mood, he reached for the light switch, but stopped. Something glowed from Betty's study. He'd left her computer on. Was there a password? He doubted himself; he wouldn't know her password.

Photographs sailed sedately across the screen. It seemed incredible that Betty would've set this up. Scenes from the lake, pictures of the garden, the dogs, Frank, Chi, Frank and Chi, Deidre… What the hell was Deidre Parrimore doing in there? Carolyn – that made more sense…

He tapped the space bar and exhaled. Betty, Carolyn and Chiara, smiling straight at him. Chi looked about eleven, her face unmarred by loss, anger and subterfuge. Carolyn the golden-haired wife of… God, who was she married to? Hank? No, he was British. Henry? Harry. Yes, it was Harry. How could he forget? It didn't matter though, because laughing with her eyes directly at him was Betty. Their hair was pinned back by sunglasses, and the lake was a blue strip behind them.

He'd forgotten she was beautiful. Not movie star pretty, but… She seemed so alive, vibrant. Was that the Cassie period? He tried to think, but memories were shaky and unreliable when his eyes were snagged on this image. This was the photo she'd chosen for her background. A picture without him in it. He certainly didn't remember taking it either.

A thump on the other side of the wall. Like something heavy falling to the ground. Chi's bedroom was on the other side of the study wall. Betty? What would she be doing in there? He hesitated, not wanting to leave the photograph. Such a leaden thud.

Perhaps she'd dropped something. Or fallen. He moved quickly out of the study, through the lounge and right down the passage. He wavered at the entrance to Chi's room. It was dark in there. What if it was a burglar?

He switched on the light and took a deep breath.

"Damn! Betty!"

She was lying on the floor, fists clutched at her chest, growling and crying.

"Betty!"

Crying became wailing. High and dog-like. He tried to roll her onto her back, tried to see what was wrong with her chest, but she tightened into a kernel and clamped her mouth shut, so that the whine came out of her nose in a softer, thinner scream. Then she went quiet as vomit oozed between her lips.

He rolled her onto her side, propped her there with pillows from Chi's bed, and ran to the phone.

-oOo-

Frank knew people who spoke of incidents as though they'd had some sort of outer-body experience, and the tone and delivery of those stories always jarred. Melodrama and hysterics that set his teeth on edge.

This felt like a lesson in empathy.

Painted lines on the road whipped before him, the slipstream of a life he couldn't keep up with. He looked at Henry Trevor's face in the glow from the dashboard, and thought about how vivid dreams can be. And how unrealistic life often is. Henry's lips were moving, probably with words of reassurance. Perhaps he was talking to his son.

In the back of the twin-cab, Henry's son was working on Betty. Working on seemed a ridiculous term for the beating he was giving her chest, with the heels of his hands gripped in tandem. A med student home for the holidays. Just the other day he'd been a kid in nappies.

"Frank, I need you to focus. Answer me, please. Did Betty show any signs of dizziness, chest pain…?"

"Chest pain. Yes, yes…she had her hands at her chest, like this…"

"Headache?"

How the hell would he know?

"Hiccoughs?" the son shouted from the back.

"Yes! Yes she had the hiccoughs at the pool. But she'd just had a Coke… Is that good? Does that help?"

Outside the street lights weren't on. Frank couldn't remember a time that they'd worked. He saw a billboard and the words *WELCOME TO STARSAT* flash briefly in the headlights.

"It does, Frank. Seems Betty's having a stroke," said Henry.

Left at yet another traffic circle, then left again. Then right. Each swing of the steering wheel snapping at Frank's neck. The car slid and rattled through the entrance of Kamuzu Central Hospital and the walls he knew to be blue, faded to grey in the car lights. *AREA 33 POLICE UNIT* stencilled onto the wall on the left side. Why was there a police unit at the hospital? The seatbelt bit into Frank's shoulder as Henry swung the car left, then right again, and he thought that Betty and Henry's son (what was his name? They'd known him since he

was born) would be thrown right off the back seat. Like pins in a bowling alley. Not that he wanted to look.

Trevor was out the car and running into the doorway where he'd parked them. A black mouth of a doorway, with the words *STRICTLY AMBULANCE ONLY* painted onto the board above it, lit by the headlights Henry had forgotten to switch off. This was the door through which Frank had carried Shadrack a lifetime ago. Shadrack never came out of there. The driver's door was open and the interior light on, but outside everything was dark. The son began shouting, but when Frank forced himself to look he realised that he was shouting at Betty.

"Come on! Come on!"

He must be very strong to keep that up. All the way from Chi's bedroom to this Godforsaken place, where, according to Margaret, people only came to die.

He could smell Betty's shit, and there was vomit on one cheek and on the seat. He turned away and faced the gloom of the hospital, and the dark mouth of the ER entrance. Maybe she was dead if the son was still performing CPR after all this time.

I'll breathe in and out, and maybe you won't leave me.

Then the son said, "Ah, good girl. She's breathing Frank. Good girl! Great!"

What version of Betty would be left after this?

Where are you?

Henry was back, and swearing.

"Power cut. No fuel for the generator."

"Fuck!" from the back. "What about tPA or antiplatelet meds?"

"Nothing. We can't just assume it's ischemic."

"We have to do something. Aspirin?"

"She's having seizures. Probably haemorrhagic. No aspirin, Ben."

Ben.

"Or a large ischemic. It's a bloody large stroke of some kind. None of that stuff's definitive, Dad. We have to do something."

Henry reversed in a sharp downward twist, both hands tight on the steering wheel. Frank's head thumped against the window as the car lifted one back wheel onto a kerb, stopped and then accelerated forward.

"Shit. Dad?"

"Is she breathing?"

"Yes. I've got her on her side. What are we doing now?"

The twin-cab was unsteady as Trevor twisted it back in the direction they'd come from. Tree shadows whipped ghost-like on either side.

"Frank. Take my phone."

Where the hell was his phone? The car was lit in hints from the dashboard lights.

"There! There man, near the ashtray. Frank, you need to…" Henry leaned forward and snatched the phone, the headlights swaying across the road as he did so. "Look under Contacts."

"I don't know how to use…"

"Give here." Ben's arm came through the gap between the seats.

To his left Frank could make out the vague shadow of the hospital chimney.

"Look under Karen, with a 'K'. She works for MSO."

"Got it. Dialling now."

Ben's arm came through again, and then Henry was talking on the phone and driving at the same time, and the lines were still flashing, while a dark world slid away from them outside. They curved around traffic circles, turned at intersections, chased by Henry's voice and the smell of Betty fading on the back seat.

Hold on.

"MSO is arranging a medevac. Through BUPA."

Acronyms and medics were assuming that his wife was worth saving. Worth the cost of a medical evacuation. That she wasn't going to die in spite of everything. All those years of paying BUPA fees and thinking that they'd never need it, and now…Was that what Betty wanted? Had they ever discussed that?

I don't care what you want. Don't go.

"Coming from?"

"Jo'burg."

"Fuck sakes! How long will that take?"

"Dunno. Hasn't taken off from Lanseria yet."

"Dad, if she needs tPA, she needs it faster than that."

"I don't need a bloody lecture, Ben. I'm the doctor here."

Who drove when they took Shadrack in? All that blood, meat and bones exposed, but Frank hadn't shied from the sight. He had to look at him, because Frank was the one who sent him up on the threshing machine. To this day no-one knew who'd switched the machine on. Blood all over the thresher. Blood sticky all over the car. The smell of it.

No blood here. Just shit and vomit.

Was anything going on in there?

Could she see Shiloh?

Did it hurt?

When Henry and Ben had arrived at the house after he'd phoned, she was slack on the bedroom floor, with only the faintest breath passing through her nostrils and onto his fingers. As though Shiloh was slipping in and out of her, a wraith tugging his wife from her body.

Should he have performed CPR? No, no, she'd been breathing. He'd put her on her side, that was the correct thing to do.

"Fuck." And then the sound of Ben's exertion as he worked on Betty. Again.

Why? Why did she need such a thing? Who were they saving here? Betty the little girl? Betty, the body with a brain that kept telling them she should be dead? How many times were they going to try and bring her back?

-oOo-

The factory clinic had all the light that Kamuzu Central Hospital didn't. Frank had his window down to escape the odour from the back seat. Gravel crunched at him as the car turned into an open bay in front of the clinic doors. The lights were on, the doors open; people were waiting, ready to save his wife. Sweetness and dust oozed from the factory only meters away. Ben was already carrying Betty inside. He tried to summon the strength to follow them, and failed. There was just too much for him to carry. He sat in the car, seatbelt on, wondering whether he'd ever be able to follow his wife now.

"Frank. C'mon, buddy." Henry was at the window.

"Is she dead?"

"No. We're getting her cleaned up."

"I can't see her like that."

"I understand."

"With Shadrack it was different. I could stay with him… I could deal with it…"

"You weren't married to Shadrack."

A nightjar called. He'd never liked that sound; like someone mourning.

Henry spoke again. "Shadrack's wife didn't handle it well. Remember? At least you're not screaming and shouting at us."

Another gap in his memory. "Was she here? At the clinic?"

"At the hospital."

The nightjar kept going.

"I was too caught up…"

"She was beating you with her fists. Screaming at you. You don't remember?"

It seemed his memory simply picked and chose at random what was most convenient to relay back to him.

“Don’t worry about that now. Come on in. We’ll keep her stable til the SOS plane gets here.”

SOS, MSO, BUPA. Catch her if you can.

Chapter Thirty

Fifteen hours.

He'd never been in a Lear before. Outside the window, the green and red of Lilongwe shrank away. No circling and languid banking. It was unfathomable to him that it had taken this long to get Betty moving in a straight line to a machine that could read her head and tell the doctors what to do next.

-oOo-

Power had returned to Kamuzu Central in the middle of the night, but there was a problem with the CT machine. It wouldn't power up. Henry swore and hit the closest wall with an open hand. No-one mentioned tPA or aspirin again. Instead Henry picked up his phone once more, and soon afterward Deidre Parrimore arrived at the clinic.

"Let's get you home," she said to Frank. "Get passports and clothes. Things you'll need in Jo'burg."

She drove him in the dark back to the house, talking at him with words he couldn't remember now. Packing a bag with clothes he placed on the bed. Making suggestions about other things they'd need. Good suggestions. Asking him if he was hungry, whether she could make him a sandwich before they went back to the clinic. The lines on her face etched by nosiness and gossip blurred and softened in the bedroom light. The perfume he'd always found so cloying soothed his fractured thoughts.

-oOo-

The plane was narrower than he'd expected. Betty lay ahead to his right on a stretcher, eyes closed.

Are you there?

A green blanket was pulled right up to her chin and black straps criss-crossed her chest. Another was tight across her pelvis. That must be a ventilator coming out her mouth. And the grey wire coming out from the blanket… was attached to a monitor. He could ask about all of it, but these people seemed to function in a world separate from his. Polite enough but pre-occupied. Speaking a language he couldn't interpret.

He hadn't realised that Henry and Ben wouldn't be on the flight. There was no-one on the plane who knew him.

Not even you. Please, please come back.

One of the men in blue shirts, the one with thick dark hair that reminded him of a Labrador, leaned across Betty and adjusted the tube in her mouth. His lanyard dangled and then came to rest on her chest before swinging back with him as he moved onto his haunches. He said something to the woman in overalls. She nodded, then looked at Frank. Her eyes were big for her face; he wondered whether it was because she was a woman or simply her eye contact that gave him the courage to speak.

"How's she?"

She pushed a strand of hair behind her ears with a gloved hand, and moved in a crouch across to Frank; placed a hand over his.

"Sir, your wife's in a critical condition. At the moment she's able to breathe because we've got her on a ventilator. Her blood pressure's also very erratic. We're trying to keep her stable until we get to Milpark."

Yes, Henry said they'd be going to Milpark. Frank nodded, wanting to show these people that he was calm.

"And what about medication for the stroke?" He was shouting over the whine of the aeroplane.

"Without a CT scan or an MRI, we're not able to tell what treatment to give."

That must be bad. So much time had passed. He looked at Betty again. Only her head showed, and even that was cluttered by medical paraphernalia. The third medic, another man in a blue shirt and black sleeveless jacket, was watching him. His eyes were bright against his dark face, but they only made Frank feel even more alone. Outside the window, the planet was hidden beneath a duvet of clouds. He was nowhere.

-oOo-

Lanseria airport, and Betty was being resuscitated again. Over and over she crashed; over and over they reined her back. An ambulance waited alongside the plane, blue lights strobing their fright. Clouds hung heavy, the sky glowering at their efforts.

"Dad! Dad!"

Frank moved to the doorway and held onto the hinge as his daughter reached the stairs.

"Chi. Come, darling."

"Sir, we need you all outside," said the overalled woman.

"This is my daughter. Betty's child."

"I understand, but there's not much room in here and we need space to help your wife. If you could please wait outside, next to the ambulance. We'll bring her out as soon as she's stable."

Chi was at the top of the stairs.

"Mom? Oh God, what's happening?" She was trying to look past Frank and the overall woman, who held up a gloved hand.

"Ma'am, we're just getting her stable. Please wait down at the ambulance with your father."

"Is she dying?"

"Not if we can help it."

"Come, Chi. Let's go down."

She seemed not to hear him at first, then turned her gaze to his face as though she might find something there that she couldn't see inside the plane. She nodded, and turned around.

On the tarmac, they embraced, and it seemed to Frank that there was the faintest scent of a man on her neck.

"How is she, Dad? I mean, what are you thinking? Has she come round since we spoke? Is she breathing on her own? Have they told you anything?"

He rubbed her arms. "She's not great. I don't know how she'll be if she survives this."

"If she survives?"

He tried to hug her but she pulled back. “What was going on? What happened before she had this…this…fit?”

“It’s a stroke. And I don’t know. She seemed fine. Well, you know, as fine as she’s been since Shiloh showed up. In fact she was happy. I thought she was in the spare room, but when I found her she was in your bedroom.”

“Mine?” Chi’s hand covered her mouth, and she closed her eyes.

Chiara, distraught as she was, sucked him back to the moment. As though from the instant he’d found Betty on the bedroom floor until now, he’d been watching from the other side of a window. Out here in the strange glare of the clouded sky, his daughter’s face was pinched. The sag of skin on each eyelid – had those been there before? Creases he didn’t remember netted patches of her face, and her fingernails were ragged. She lifted one to a corner of her mouth and chewed at it, her eyes flicking between him and the doorway of the plane. He thought perhaps he should smile, try to reassure her, but he had no words.

Don’t leave us.

They were bringing her out, the two men managing the stretcher while the overall woman lifted the monitor and cables. Two men from the ambulance moved forward to assist, and the only visible part of Betty was a fine spray of hair at the top end of the stretcher.

“Mom?” Chiara stepped forward as they moved Betty across to the ambulance.

From the monitor screen it seemed she was alive at least. The medics shifted as though Frank and Chiara weren’t there. Their lips churned out a professional dialogue. Frank remembered doing the same to factory visitors. People who didn’t belong there. The back of the ambulance was a large square box, and once Betty was fitted into place, the overalled woman gestured to Frank from its doorway.

“Sir, your wife is going to need our full attention. You’re welcome to join us in the back, but your daughter must ride in the front if she’s going to come with us.”

He turned to Chi. “What about your car?”

“I was dropped off. I’ll sit in the front.”

-oOo-

The distance of such a drive: a lifetime, a burst of seconds. Sirens wailed out his distress, but he didn't look up. He kept his eyes on the form of his wife beneath her blankets and wires. His brain moved into a lulled state, as though someone had pressed his pause button. Perhaps humans were little more than elaborate computers at the end of the day, with pause and stop buttons.

At Milpark hospital, Betty was wheeled into the ER, and all around him people were shouting in fast foreign words. Chi held onto the gurney, until the shouters told her to stand back. Away went Betty, as they stood aside and obeyed the instruction to wait.

Where? Where were they meant to wait? Fluorescent lighting flared down on them, exposing every pore on Chi's face. What he thought he'd smelled on her earlier had been replaced with the odour of fear. Or maybe it was the stench of this place. No-one said anything else to them, so they sat on two armless chairs that were set against the wall. If they'd been told to wait, this must be the place.

"She doesn't look like Mom anymore."

So much tiling, and what was with the weird patch of carpeting on the walls?

"She's fuzzy."

"What?"

"Did you see her? Mom's disappearing."

"She looks awful coz she's had a stroke, Chi. More than one probably."

"She's dying."

So much bright light. This wasn't the type of place to run short of electricity. Even in a power cut. And the machinery here would work, every time.

-oOo-

But Betty died.

The bright light glared down as though nothing had changed, and they were informed that the doctors couldn't resuscitate Betty. All that electricity, machinery and expertise came too late. If they'd been able to get her there earlier…

It seemed like the glare evaporated their tears, desiccated their senses. They were taken to the room where the experts had tried to save her; a room lined with machinery and the ghosts of frenzy. He touched Betty's arm, and it was still warm. He held his hand just a centimetre from her mouth, wondering whether some pale movement of air could tell him there'd been a mistake.

Chiara touched her too, then began to cry. "I'm sorry, Mom. So sorry."

Frank tried to tell himself this was it. The moment he saw Betty for the last time. The day the last part of her was taken away, leaving him with photographs and memories. He tried and tried to tell himself this, but the receiving function in his brain was closed.

He put his arm around Chiara and wondered why he had no tears of his own.

Chapter Thirty One

Tim fetched them from the hospital.

Frank sat on the back seat of the Mercedes, and the leather creaked in a tight give. In the light of yet another dashboard, he stared at the profile of Chiara's lover. Music played, low, like a growl.

Betty would never see this man; never hear his voice or think about how quiet he seemed. That he looked so different to Michael. Frank wondered what she would've made of the interaction between him and their daughter. The way they seemed to understand each other's body language. How he'd shaken Frank's hand, said the right things and patted Chiara's father on the back in commiseration, the way a son-in-law might do. How he smelled of Chiara's neck at Lanseria.

There's a bruise, just here beneath my ribs. Where my soul is, I think.

Not that Betty was capable of opinions about that sort of thing in the last few months. He shifted in his seat, wondering whether Chi was thinking about this man and her mother. A piece of paper crackled beneath him, and he pulled it out. It was a drawing. He smoothed the paper across his knees, and in the light of shifting street lamps he observed a scene of stick-people in a family pose. Four of them with smiles, hands with stick fingers in a daisy spread. A big one and a small one in triangle dresses, a big one and a small one in squared-off shorts. A dog. A house. Sun in one corner.

Outside it had started to rain, and he wiped at echoes of the raindrops that trickled down his cheeks.

-oOo-

He never slept, so he didn't get that feeling when he woke up of knowing something was wrong and then slowly rediscovering it. All night, he kept on knowing that Betty was dead. And it seemed Chiara suffered the same. She brought their coffee to the lounge and sat facing him, mugs still in her hands. Outside, the rain continued.

"I don't get why you want a funeral in Lilongwe, Dad."

"Because that's where she's from." He reached across the low table and took a mug from her.

"But who's there that she cares about? Who cares, or cared, about her? And why a funeral?"

"Her friends are there. We lived there for decades, Chi. Where do you think we should have it?"

"In LA. If we have to bury her, let's put her next to her parents."

"That's definitely not what she'd want. And she wanted to be cremated."

"She'd want to be with her parents. I'd want to be buried next to you."

He sighed and drank some of the coffee, which was too strong. He put it down. "She never wanted to be with them."

"That changed when they died. I mean, we all went over for their funeral. It meant something to her; that's where she's from."

"Not any more, Chi. She's more a part of Malawi than anywhere else. Who'd be there in LA anyway? She doesn't have friends there anymore."

"Well, she wouldn't want a funeral in Lilongwe."

"Of course she would."

"Bullshit!" Chiara's coffee mug hit the table and its contents splashed the surface. She stood, and strode to the window. Folded her arms across her chest.

"I don't understand why you're so upset about this."

"And I don't understand why you're so intent on keeping her there. Where she suffered so much."

Coffee rose back up his throat. "Chi…"

She turned her head. "You nearly destroyed her in that place. Now you want to put her bones in the ground there. Or cremate her, or scatter her ashes there, or whatever the bloody hell it is you're thinking of. How dare you? How bloody dare you?" Her voice tapered to a whisper and she turned back to the window, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"That was over a long time ago."

She turned to face him fully this time, her face flushed. "Don't you get it? What will it take to get you to see past your own arrogance? Your own fucking selfishness? Don't. Bury. My. Mother. In. Lilongwe."

Chi moved back toward him from the window. Her head extended toward him, and she paused a metre away; he could smell the soapiness of her. He wondered whether she planned to strike him. He wished she would.

He stood. "Chiara, I stopped that affair with Cassie. It was over a long time ago, and it was something between your mother and me."

"She was my mother. Don't you try and make out you had some sort of special relationship with her, something I could never understand. Mother. Do you know what that means?"

"It was about our marriage…"

"Those things are never just between two people. Your behaviour not only screwed with Mom, it also hurt me. Me, Dad! Did you ever think about that? Everyone knew you valued fucking a girl barely older than me, over us. Everyone. And Mom was wandering around like a dazed person, acting like it wasn't happening. Probably because that's what every other person in Lilongwe was doing, except Carolyn. That's right. All those fucking hypocrites in Lilongwe who you want at her funeral, just left her like that."

She paused, as though this was a point for him to interject. Try and redeem himself, so she could smash his words away with more of her own. But he was at a loss.

"And why did you give Cassie up? Was it because you came to your senses? That you remembered you loved us?" Her cheeks were red and wet. She licked her lips, her breathing laboured.

"Of course I…"

"You nothing! Her father strong-armed you. What a joke! You came back to us because you had nothing else. And you really thought Mom never knew. You're pathetic."

"She never…"

"No she didn't. She never said a word to you, did she?" Chi's voice lowered again.

The burn that started when the doctor told them Betty was dead, got hotter. He could feel tears pushing, and a trickle at his nose. He was pathetic.

"I'm sorry, Chi."

"I don't want your apology now. We needed it then."

He sat and absorbed the slice of her words, appreciating a vague sense of surprise at his own capacity for this sort of pain. She remained next to him, as though supervising his anguish.

Words came out of him. "And have you thought of apologising to Tim's wife and his children?"

Chi stepped forward and hit him across the cheek with an open hand. He almost thanked her. Instead he got up and walked out of her apartment.

-oOo-

Outside the moisture in the air soaked his lungs, even though the rain had paused. The sky hung metres above him, keeping shadows away. His shoes thunked on the wet tar and whisked across shallow puddles. Birds sang out from damp branches. Drops hung like dim jewels at the ends of leaves, promising a shower of their own with the next breath of wind. An unseen guard opened the electric gate at the complex entrance, and he marched on, hands in his pockets.

Chi's words smashed around in his head, crashing against the image of Betty growing stiff on the hospital bed; flailing against his own memories of them as a family. Of Cassie spread-eagled on her bed at Mama Kasamiya's, laughing at him. Of Betty pretending not to know. Of Chiara in her little pink gumboots, rushing toward him at the end of the day.

The rain started again, but on he tramped, along a path with young trees planted on either side, cars swishing past, tyres hissing. Big blobs of water coming off the leaves, little sharp drops falling between trees. Tree trunks dark with water. Dog shit softening in the grass on the side of the path. Other pedestrians pushing past, heads down, rain pattering at their umbrellas and raincoats. His head was soaked, but beneath the wetness of his shirt, his heart steamed. He thought he might be crying, but couldn't be sure with all the rain.

He began to jog. His shoes were all wrong of course, factory boots with heavy tips and barely any give. The path was hard, made of bricks, and it wound a sweet weave through

young yellowwood trees. If he could run faster there was a chance his lungs would chase out the scald in his chest. But he was a lumbering sort of runner, and his passage between other people clumsy. His arms slapped and jabbed at them, and his trousers (so good at protecting him in the factory) shrank up against his thighs, and flapped at his shins. Faster. Slap, slap. An umbrella scraped at his face; he misstepped and found himself flailing toward the brick surface.

No-one stopped. He lay against the bricks. Blood diluted in the rain and trickled off his palm. A Jack Russell hesitated at his face, one paw poised. Frank panted and returned the dog's gaze. Steam came off them both.

"Milo, come!"

A woman ran past; her eyes flicked at him and then away. She slapped her thigh and the dog shook itself and cantered off.

-oOo-

He knocked at Chi's front door with the hand that wasn't bleeding. With a bit of luck none of the other residents would see him. His clothes were dripping onto the tiles, and one knee glimpsed out through a tear in the fabric. Surely Chi knew he was back? The security people at the gate would have checked with her before allowing him back in.

A lock turned on the other side of the door, and it opened slowly. Her head appeared when it stopped, but she didn't make eye contact.

"I'm very wet."

Chiara walked away, leaving the door open. Was he supposed to go inside? His teeth chattered. He removed his shoes; they made squelching noises as they came away from his feet. He took the socks off too.

She returned with a towel, and her eyes were red. So was the end of her nose. She sniffed and raised the towel at him.

"Thanks." He rubbed at his head, and when he looked up again, she was gone.

He walked inside, leaving his socks and shoes outside the door. She was in the kitchen, leaning her butt against the counter, head down.

"Chi, I'm sorry. I should never…"

"I also said things I shouldn't. I'm sorry, Dad."

He pulled the towel across his chest and said, "Come here."

And to his relief, she did come, she even hugged him back. They stood and cried in the wet embrace. He was probably leaking blood onto her, and he wondered how much she'd mind. He'd lost Betty as interpreter, and wasn't sure he'd ever understand his daughter again.

"Dad?" Her voice was muffled against the towel.

He stood back and clutched his stinging fist in the towel. "Yes?"

"Why don't we have the service at the lake? In front of the cottage, on the beach. We could scatter her ashes over the water."

"I'd love that."

She sighed and sniffed again. "You're bleeding."

He nodded, and wondered whether this was progress between the two of them.

"You're a bloody disaster without her."

"I am, Chi. I really am."

"Me too."

The strangeness of humans: the way they could cry and laugh at the same time.

Chapter Thirty Two

Precisely why what Betty would want counts any more isn't something he voices, although it comes to mind often.

You left.

The minister from the Lilongwe Baptist church stands barefoot in the sand, jeans rolled up, with his back to the water. The lake flashes and shifts. Deidre Parrimore dabs at her face with a handkerchief, and there are sweat stains at her armpits. It must mean something more than just a need for gossip that she made the trip. That she took care of him that awful night. Carolyn is there too, and she looks so much older than the last time he saw her. Harry died, she told Frank this morning. Only a month ago. It was on Facebook.

Chi sobs, and he squeezes her hand; feels her squeeze back.

Margaret looks the same. She resigned when he got back from Johannesburg, and her expression never changed when he told her Betty was dead. He was holding Betty's ashes at the time, but didn't tell Margaret that.

Walter looks out over the water, as though that might be where the wives who escaped them have gone. Then he swallows and looks down. Places the fingers of one hand on his lips as the minister's words are swirled back towards the water.

Henry Trevor sits at his left, his expression still. According to the autopsy report the stroke was ischemic; perhaps the aspirin would've saved her. Henry said it didn't look like the stroke was anything to do with Betty's condition. Frank wonders briefly how they can tell such things.

-oOo-

The service is over. Frank will wait until the wind dies down to scatter her ashes. Chiara has arranged a lunch for the small crowd on the veranda of the cottage. A fan beats above the food, but the flies are persistent, so everything is covered with wire-framed nets Betty bought at the market.

"Why did you invite Shadrack's wife?" asks Henry, and a crumb trembles at the corner of his mouth.

Frank follows his gaze. Tries not to blink at the revelation. Feels his heart shrink at the realisation that the woman who hated him all these years was Shadrack's wife. "Margaret worked for us for many years."

"Gotta say, I thought she hated you after that night at the hospital. You were the guy who ordered him up onto the thresher that day…"

"She does. And yes, I sent him up there." He didn't switch the thresher on though. It had been off. Off. He would never…

How incredible that he didn't register Margaret that night with Shadrack. It's incredible to think that she carried on working for them. And there he'd been, carrying on just as before, with her under the same roof. Assuming she hated him because he cheated on Betty.

Henry shakes his head and pats Frank on the back. "People are a strange lot."

-oOo-

People are taking forever to leave. They seem to want to linger and drink and reminisce, so he retreats to his bed. Stares up at a ceiling that has darkened and become something different. Everything keeps changing.

"Dad, they've gone." Her voice comes from the dark patch of doorway.

"All of them?"

"Yup. Even Margaret and Carolyn."

"They hate me."

"Come. I've got Jack Daniels on the veranda."

He drags his legs across the bed and feels the cool of the cement floor caress his soles. They carry him down the passage, to the lounge, outside. All these places she won't walk through again.

He sits and takes the glass Chi offers him. Swallows the contents quickly, and leans forward to pour himself another. She doesn't tell him to slow down, which he's grateful for. He sits back and sips at the second one.

"You know, she was gone really, a while ago. Her mind I mean. It took me a while, but I came to appreciate having her presence, just the same."

Chi says nothing. Just nods over her own drink.

"And now, I miss them both. My wife, and her body. That sense that she was still there... even though, you know…I don't know how to say it."

"I get it."

"Her smell, the feel of her skin."

Chi is silent. Maybe he shouldn't be talking about that, given how Betty was at the end. The bruise remains tender, a reminder of her he can't escape. Even when his mind wanders, his body doesn't forget.

"Why the hell do I miss her body? I mean, that's what betrayed her in the end, wasn't it? Some sort of… I dunno…countdown. Tick tock, while we all watched."

"Stop it, Dad!"

He halts, tosses back the rest of the Jack Daniels, and stares out at the black and the stars that are the only light in this apparently moonless night. He hears Chi begin to cry and wishes he could comfort her.

"Did you know that Margaret was Shadrack's…?"

"Dad, I think it was my fault."

"You did know?"

"What?"

"You knew Margaret was Shadrack's wife all this time?"

"Of course I knew. Don't tell me…"

"I didn't know. I didn't fucking know. All this time."

He reaches for the bottle. Pours himself a good slug and does the same for her. He lifts his glass, she does the same, and they both drink. He gulps and puts his glass down.

"Say what you were going to say."

She takes another swig. "I triggered this whole thing. Mom's breakdown. Everything." She starts to cry again.

Jack has taken the edge off his ache, but he still doesn't know how to help Chi. Hasn't been able to since she became a teenager. He hiccoughs, then holds his breath. Hiccoughs are now sinister, despite Henry assuring him it was a symptom specific to strokes in women. Chiara is sniffing and wiping her eyes. Eyes that are middle-aged and don't seem to belong to his daughter.

"What?" he manages.

"Last year I called her. Told her I was seeing someone."

He pours more into his glass. God, he loves the colour of Jack. Then remembers that he's listening to Chi's confession. "Uh huh."

"A married man."

"Tim."

She stares at him, the hooded eyes look stricken. "I just…I couldn't…"

"Chi, honey. Come here." He pats the cushion next to his on the couch.

She downs the rest of her drink and moves across. Lays her head on his shoulder. It's a heavy head, and he arranges it to a better position, then ruffles her hair.

"You didn't drive your mother crazy by telling her you were doing what I did."

"How do you know?"

"Because I'm very smart."

She laughs, but he knows she's still crying.

"We blame ourselves; apparently it's part of the grieving process."

They're quiet, and the small waves that the wind has ruffled for millennia, keep rushing at the shore, out there in the dark.

“When I was younger, ‘specially when I was a teenager, and when you were with Cassie, I thought you weren’t my real father.”

These same stars would’ve shone out at Chi when she thought those things. Shivering out there in the heavens as though what happens down here is too terrible to watch. He doesn’t answer her.

She shifts, lifts her head off his shoulder and sits up. “Now of course, I know I’m just like you.”

She rests her head on him again and exhales.

THE END