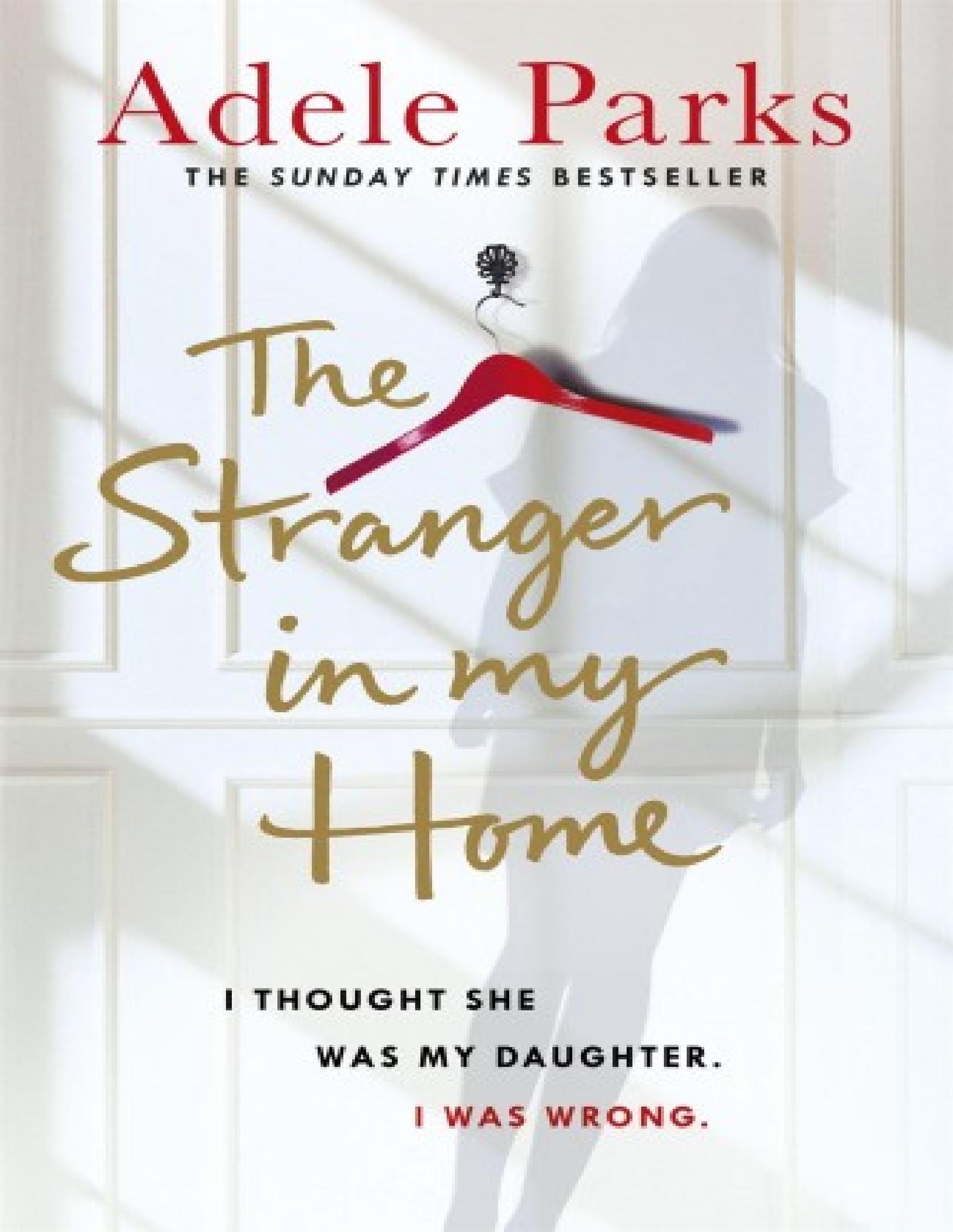


# Adele Parks

THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER



The  
Stranger  
in my  
Home

I THOUGHT SHE  
WAS MY DAUGHTER.  
I WAS WRONG.

Adele Parks

The  
Stranger  
in my  
Home



  
headline  
review

## **About the Book**

### **What would YOU do if your child wasn't yours?**

Alison is lucky and she knows it. She has the life she always craved, including a happy home with Jeff and their brilliant, vivacious teenage daughter, Katherine – the absolute centre of Alison's world.

Then a knock at the door ends life as they know it.

Fifteen years ago, someone else took Alison's baby from the hospital. And now Alison is facing the unthinkable. The daughter she brought home doesn't belong to her.

*When you have everything you dreamed of, there is everything to lose.*

## About Adele Parks



Author photo © Jim Parks

Adele Parks worked in advertising until she published the first of her sixteen novels in 2000. Since then, her *Sunday Times* bestsellers have been translated into twenty-six different languages. Adele spent her adult life in Italy, Botswana and London until 2005 when she moved to Guildford, where she now lives with her husband and son. Adele believes reading is a basic human right, so she works closely with The Reading Agency as an Ambassador for Reading Ahead, a programme designed to encourage adult literacy.

Want to find out more about Adele? Visit her website for the latest news on her upcoming events: [www.adeleparks.com](http://www.adeleparks.com), head to Facebook for exclusive extras: [facebook.com/OfficialAdeleParks](https://www.facebook.com/OfficialAdeleParks) and chat with Adele on Twitter [@adeleparks](https://twitter.com/adeleparks).

## **Acclaim for Adele Parks:**

‘Sweet, sharp and simply unforgettable’ Lisa Jewell

‘A must-read. Romantic yet truthful’ Jenny Colgan

‘A beautifully written, thoughtful exploration of love and loss ... This is Parks at the top of her consistently excellent game and is one of those rare books you won’t stop thinking about until long after you turn the final page’  
*Daily Mail*

‘A wonderful exploration of love’ Katie Fforde

‘We can’t think of many authors who create more flawed and loveable characters’ *Glamour*

‘Adele Parks is a deft observer of human nature’ Kathleen Tessaro

‘Will captivate you from the first page’ *Closer*

‘A riveting read full of truths and tender moments’ *Good Housekeeping*

‘She is a particularly acute observer of relationship ups and downs, and her stories are always as insightful as they are entertaining’ *Daily Mirror*

‘Writes with wit and a keen eye for detail’ *Guardian*

‘Full of emotional set-pieces and real insight into relationships between men and women’ *Heat*

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New Beginnings (ebook)  
Love Is Complicated (ebook)  
Love Is A Journey (paperback collection)

# Prologue

The doorbell rings.

I feel a flutter of excitement: is it what I've been waiting for? I rush to the door before the bell rings a second time and fling it open, but it's not what I'm expecting.

'Alison Mitchell?'

'Yes.'

It's something to do with the way he says my name, tentatively but somehow officially. 'Are you – look, I'm sorry. This is going to seem a bit peculiar.' He breaks off and looks to the ground, awkward. 'I just need to know, do you have a daughter who was born in St Mary's Hospital in Clapham between March 27th and 29th fifteen years ago?'

'Yes. Katherine; her birthday is the 27th.' I'm so used to being honest and straightforward that I splutter out this response before I consider whether this is the sort of info that should be routinely exchanged, on the doormat, with a total stranger. He swaps his expression of awkwardness for one of panic. 'Is Katherine in some sort of trouble?' I ask, fearful.

His mouth twists as though the words he has to spit out taste foul. 'Can I come in? This isn't something we can talk about on the doorstep.'

## *Fifteen Years Ago*

*The smell of hospital disinfectant and her own blood lingered in the air, but she hardly noticed. They swaddled the mewling, delicate baby and placed her in Alison's outstretched arms. As she took hold and folded the small bundle into her, she knew that this is what her arms had ached for for so long.*

*People came and went: the nurses popped by to help her into a clean nightie, check she was comfortable; Jeff floated in and out of the ward, dashing off to make euphoric phone calls to family and friends, returning to relay their messages of joy and their congratulations. Alison and the baby were still, steady. They locked eyes – held each other's gaze and hearts – until the baby's lids grew heavy and sleep took hold. Even when the baby slept Alison couldn't tear her eyes away. She was so perfect. Alison gently moved aside the blanket so she could gaze at her child's legs, her arms, kiss the crook of her elbow and her butter-soft toes. She slept on and Alison continued to stare, mesmerised. It was love. Pure, unadulterated, unconditional, unending.*

*She had had an especially easy birth. In her birth plan she'd specified that she'd try any and all drugs to ease the pain and that she'd have a Caesarean if the experts thought that was the route to go; she trusted them to make the decision: they had the experience. As it happened, none of that was necessary; the baby took only four hours to arrive from start to finish as though keen to make her way into the world. Jeff smuggled in a mini-bottle of Moët. They secretly drank it together from plastic cups pinched from the water fountain. Naturally, he had the lion's share; Alison managed just a couple of mouthfuls, as she fretted it would affect her milk. Under most circumstances, she'd have been discharged late that afternoon, but she was allowed to stay in hospital overnight. She'd been chatting to the nurses during labour – it really had been that comfortable – and told them she'd only just started her maternity leave the day before. She'd thought she*

might go back to work at some point and so she'd left it as late as possible before stopping, planning to maximise her time off with her baby, although from the moment she gave birth she guessed that had been unnecessary. She would never go back. Others might think that the mediocrity of her career and her paltry pay meant it wasn't worth her while. The truth was, it was the amount she worshipped Katherine that meant it couldn't be worth her while. She didn't want to miss a moment.

She'd had ambitious, unrealistic nesting plans. In the two weeks she'd allotted between stopping work and the due date, she'd planned to have new windows put in the house. The rattling ones were not good enough now they were to have an infant at home. She knew the timing of her plans was tight but she had thought she was in control. The baby showed her she wasn't by appearing eleven days early. The big relief was that their daughter was completely healthy, weighing in at an impressive seven pounds, two ounces; the nurses joked about how big she might have been if she'd gone full term! Still, Jeff had to rush home to chivy along the window fitters and he returned crestfallen; the house was freezing, and the glaziers couldn't possibly complete the job in a day. They said, at the hospital, as they weren't busy, Alison could have the bed for the night; stay in for observation. They were doing her a favour. A kindness. The nurses insisted the baby went to the nursery because Alison almost fell to sleep holding her. They said she needed her rest.

'Do you know, killer-whale and bottlenose-dolphin calves don't sleep for a whole month after they're born and, therefore, neither do their mothers?' Jeff informed the nurses.

'But the mother of your baby is not a killer whale,' they replied with mock-sternness. In fact, the midwife and the nurses were charmed by Jeff, by Alison, by the baby. An easy birth, a besotted mum, a supportive dad, a beautiful, healthy baby. So much bonhomie swilled around the ward you could smell it on the bouquets, hear it in the cries, the mewlings, the laughter, taste it in the cosy cups of tea.

They carried her away into the nursery, where there were a number of bassinets, a number of newborn babies.

Each one of these tiny, seemingly inconsequential acts sets destinies.

They brought the baby to her three times in the night. By the third time Alison barely opened her eyes; she was surprised at the depth of sluggishness her body had dived into, following the euphoria of the birth.

*She felt her daughter's head, then her cheek against her, then nuzzling, tugging. Hungry, animalistic rooting. She fastened so tightly to Alison's flesh and Alison wept with relief and delight. At last, at last.*

*Jeff returned to the hospital at eleven the next morning. He had the car seat and several sets of baby clothes because he wasn't sure which of the many squeezed into the little wardrobe Alison might prefer. She sensibly opted for a simple Babygro and a grey-and-white striped beanie hat; they could play with frills, bows and ribbons later.*

*'Darling, can you bear the idea of staying with my parents for a day or so? The house is so draughty, but the glaziers swear they'll be done by the end of the week.'*

*Alison nodded happily. She didn't care where she was, as long as she was with her baby. Her mother-in-law would be a help, she was sure of it. 'I feel sorry for you,' she said to Jeff as he kissed first the baby's head, then hers.*

*'Why's that?'*

*'Sleeping in that cold house, all alone last night, when we had each other to snuggle.'* She brought the baby a fraction closer, kissed her cheek. *'I couldn't bear to miss a moment. She's changed already. Don't you think?'* Jeff smiled and sort of shrugged. *'She seems a little longer, certainly smoother.'*

*He kissed Alison's head again. 'Maybe she's stretched out a bit. That's all the wonderful mothering you've been doing overnight. Now, are you going to feed her before we set off?'*

*'Yes, I think I'll try.'* Again the baby latched on to Alison's breast with a natural ease which so many mothers would envy. She fed and fed until she wore a peculiar expression, a little like a satiated, happy drunk. She only, finally, let her mother go when her lids fluttered and closed and her small black hole of a mouth slipped to the side, when her cheeks were flushed and shiny with milk. Her dark eyelashes fanned out like a peacock's tail.

# 1

‘Mum? Mum, is that you?’

‘Who else would it be? You should be asleep.’ But as I say this I push my daughter’s bedroom door and the hall light falls in a shaft across her room and lands on her bed. She’s lying down but her eyes are bright and wide; she’s beaming, holding an open book. This is how my fifteen year old rebels: she might occasionally read instead of turning the lights out. I know – I’m blessed.

‘It’s been a great day. Hasn’t it?’

‘It has,’ I agree.

Lingering, for even a moment, is all the encouragement she needs; she scoots over to one side of the bed, allowing me room to sit down. I don’t take much persuading, even though I know I ought to be insisting on lights out because there’s school tomorrow and, because Jeff and I seem to have less and less time to ourselves as Katherine gets older, I ought to go downstairs and make time for him. However, mum–daughter pre-sleep chats have always been irresistible to me. It seems only five minutes since we’d lie on this bed, her infant body, warm and uninhibited, curled tightly into me, and I’d read *Each Peach Pear Plum* to her. Now I can’t take such intimacy as an absolute given. Everything has to be continually renegotiated as she moves towards adulthood. I sit on the bed, then swing my legs up, lying flat and next to her now taut almost-woman body. I put my arm around her and she doesn’t object; to my delight, she squirms closer. I’ve been gifted another day of her childhood. I live in fear of the moment when she shrugs me off and feel like punching the air every time I get away with the joy of dousing her in affection.

‘What was your favourite bit of the match?’ she asks.

‘You winning,’ I reply automatically. Her beam, which already stretched across her entire face, widens a fraction more. That was the right answer. It’s always the right answer. Katherine, like all children, wants to know that

her parents have noticed she's fabulous. That doesn't stop at five, fifteen or forty-five: it's eternal. She *is* fabulous, though, and I'm more than happy to chuck out endless compliments and affirmations. She scored two goals today; what a great start to the season. If she carries on like this then her team will certainly qualify for the finals of Rathbones National Schools Championship. I never played a team sport at school, let alone scored a winning goal. I live in awe of my talented daughter who, people say, might one day play lacrosse for GB.

Katherine starts to tell me what's going on in her book. It's set in a horrifying post-apocalyptic world, the sort that seems to fascinate so many teens. Some feisty heroine is plotting to murder a political tyrant in order to safeguard her family, who are all being exploited or tortured; it sounds pretty gory and a lot like the plot of the last book she read. I try to follow and show due interest but I can feel tiredness set into my limbs. It's not yet ten o'clock but I could fall to sleep here next to her.

Jeff puts his head around the door. 'I thought I'd find you in here.' I know he's mildly chastising me because he's itching to pour himself a gin and tonic and see what's new on Netflix. However, he's putty in Katherine's hands, too, and is also always up for a chat with her.

'We're just talking about the game.'

'You were extraordinary,' he says simply.

'Thanks, Dad.'

'You always are,' I add. Katherine grins and blushes with that complicated teen mix of pleasure and embarrassment, whilst she tries to turn the subject from her achievements.

'What's your book, Dad?' Jeff looks at the book in his hand. He appears to be somewhat surprised it's there, but we're not. He's a novelist and, when he's not sitting in front of his computer writing, then he is vociferously reading. He always has reading matter with him, it's as though it's surgically attached.

'It's about evolution.'

'Oh.' Katherine doesn't actually roll her eyes but I can tell she's not especially fascinated. Jeff apparently can't, or at least chooses not to, acknowledge her disinterest.

'You know what I've just read?' he says.

'What?' we chorus, humouring him. Since he reads so much, he has naturally become the self-appointed conveyer of interesting facts. His

specialist subject is Mother Nature's mothers.

'Female octopuses lay between 50,000 and 200,000 eggs at a time.'

'So many?' Katherine comments. As an only child, she's fascinated by how many siblings other people have, but even she must be overwhelmed by the thought of such a vast number.

'The mum ensures their survival by separating the eggs into groups based upon factors like size and shape. She then dedicates the next two months of her life to protecting them from predators and getting them enough oxygen by pushing water currents towards the eggs. Think of that – she actually tries to turn tides for her offspring.'

'Quite some dedication,' I remark.

'Amazing, isn't it? The thing is, she's so busy keeping them all alive, she doesn't have time to feed herself so she often ends up dying shortly after they hatch.'

'Er, thanks for that, Dad. I remember a time when all the stories you told me ended with "And they all lived happily ever after".' Katherine giggles and then rolls on to her side, effectively giving us leave to go downstairs.

As soon as we're on the landing, Jeff whispers, 'I've been to the garage, Alison, love, and bought Snickers.' When we are with Katherine we avoid eating the sort of snack that's laden with refined sugar; her diet is appropriate for an athlete, lots of protein and veg. 'G&Ts poured,' he adds; our diets are appropriate for a couple in their forties who have been together for ever and kindly refer to each other's excess pounds as 'love handles', 'something to grab on to' or 'more to love'; that's if we refer to them at all. We settle in front of our rather too-big flatscreen TV. Jeff says I can pick the film; I choose a political thriller I know he'll enjoy, because he did buy the king-size Snickers.

The thriller manages to hold about sixty per cent of my attention. A further thirty per cent of my mind is running through what I need to do tomorrow: what will I put in Katherine's packed lunch? Is her uniform clean and ironed? I must not forget to give her the cheque for the school trip to the theatre. The final ten per cent is wrapped up in acknowledging how damned lucky I am and offering up a silent prayer of thanks to whoever is listening, whoever I ought to be grateful to. People say that nothing is perfect and while, obviously, that's true – world peace continues to evade us, the queue you didn't choose will, inevitably, clear faster, and even Kate Moss doesn't have a figure like Kate Moss any more – things are good for

us. I never thought it could be like this. I'm thankful. Very, very thankful. I love Jeff. I love my daughter. I'm extremely lucky. I'm safe. That's what I tell everyone, over and over again, before they can jinx my excellent fortune with an envious glance or an irritated comment. *All right for some.* I'm lucky. *Safe.*

That's what I tell myself.

## Thirty Years Ago

*Not a single teacher listened when she said she wanted to be a lawyer. Mr Potter, supposedly the careers-guidance teacher, actually smirked. He was such a sad case. Still lived with his mother, carried a string bag to the shops. It shouldn't matter to Alison what he thought of anything but it did because these adults, they controlled things, decided things. Potter was disgustingly discouraging, patronising; it made her want to slap his stupid face. He asked her if she really understood what being a lawyer involved. No, clearly, she didn't. She didn't know any lawyers, she'd only seen them on TV, but she did know that they wore great suits and kicked ass. People listened to lawyers. She would have liked to know what one did, exactly. How someone could become a lawyer. Someone like her. Potter had asked her if any of her family had gone to university. Wanker. He knew the answer to that. He just wanted to hear her admit it. Her dad was a mini-cab driver. God knows what her mother was. A skank was what most people had called her when she still lived around here. Long time ago. She was unlikely to be a lawyer, Alison knew that much. More likely to be on the wrong side of the law.*

*'Have you thought of nursing?'* Potter asked.

*'I don't like the sight of blood.'*

*'Did you take typing?'* He reached for the file that sat on the table between them and started to flick through it, half-heartedly hoping to remind himself what subjects she was taking. He didn't seem as though he'd ever find the relevant piece of paper, so she put him out of his misery.

*'No.'*

*'Shame. It's very useful.'*

*Fairly or unfairly, Alison considered typing an option for thick girls; the ones who had been thrown on the scrapheap at fourteen when the results of the summer exams decided if a kid could do chemistry, physics and biology or just general science; when it was decided whether you could do*

geography and history or you would do typing and cooking. She wasn't thick. She was poor. People often mixed the two things up. She had got decent results in those exams, even though her doing so was met with universal surprise from the teachers and the other kids alike. On the whole, it was accepted that the kids from the council houses would mess about in bottom sets until they left school at the age of sixteen. The kids from the three-bedroom semis had gawped when she first walked into the top-set classrooms; they were literally open-mouthed, like in a cartoon or something. One teacher had actually asked if she'd taken a wrong turning; could he direct her to another room? Fuckers.

'Here are some leaflets about the army. It's a career for girls, too, you know, nowadays.' Potter had raised his eyebrows in a way that was supposed to convey a sense of shared surprise and yet offer encouragement. There was something about his complacent grin and even his sweat, which he mopped with a handkerchief, that seemed to say, Gosh, aren't I the hero? What would you do without me? Like he was Rambo, Mad Max and Indiana Jones all rolled into one. She knew he'd dispensed the same leaflets to three quarters of the year group; the army produced them and recruited at schools like hers. No effort whatsoever was required from Potter. The only kids likely to get any differentiating guidance regarding their careers were the handful whose parents had gone to grammar schools and universities themselves but still held socialist views so had refused to send their offspring to private schools: the dentist's kids, the vet's kids. Although they were unlikely to come to Potter's dingy little office – no more than a cupboard, really – their parents would tell them everything they needed to know about UCCA. It must be nice, thought Alison. To have someone in your corner.

'You know, with the army, you could travel the world, meet interesting people—'

'And kill them. Yeah, I know. My friend has a mug that says that.'

Alison had left the office, shoulders practically dragging on the floor. She knew she should have walked tall, jutted out her chin, somehow shown Potter that she was vibrant and thoughtful, ambitious and full. So full of yearning. But he had sapped her energy. Potter did that. The school did that. This village did that. So far from anywhere.

Far from the glittering world she was sure must exist.

*She saw it sometimes. The glittering world. It beamed into their front room through TV programmes like Moonlighting, Dynasty and Dallas; it took the form of enormous white leather sofas, sequinned dresses and strange foodstuffs like lobster and BLT sandwiches. But then, they were all American shows. Maybe that's how far she'd have to go to find some glamour, some success. Unimaginable. How would she ever get to America? She'd once been to Benidorm, but that was it. Foreign travel seemed so, well, foreign. Truthfully, her life was closer to Brookside or EastEnders. Insignificant, claustrophobic, morose. There had to be more, even here in Britain. Down South somewhere? Maybe there? The adverts swore there was. In adverts, women had glossy hair and creamy skin – they all looked a bit like Princess Diana, but not as good; people spoke in smooth, posh voices; families ate Shredded Wheat; mothers cooked with Oxo cubes; children were excited to see their fathers arrive home from work after a long commute. Cosy kitchens, heated front rooms, lots of food.*

*Steve's house was a bit like that. Warm. There were some obvious differences, though. His dad was a builder, not a banker, and his mum worked at a factory doing laundry for local restaurants and hotels, so she was rarely home before her husband. Their house wasn't tidy like those on the adverts; more often than not there were piles of washing-up or ironing lying around waiting to be sorted out. (Steve's mum said that was her least favourite job, that it was a busman's holiday.) No one spoke with a smooth, posh voice, they were for ever shouting, teasing and laughing; often the jokes they made were pretty rude, especially Steve's dad's ones – his mother sometimes flicked a tea towel at him and said, 'Eh, Sewer Mind, that's enough' – but it was warm.*

*In both senses of the word.*

*When Alison visited she often felt a thaw in her soul. Time off from being her: abandoned, alone. Even the tea-towel-flicking was affectionate.*

*Saturdays were the absolute best because before she and Steve went to the pictures she was asked for tea and they had steak, fried onions, chips and beans. Every Saturday! Steak! Imagine! Steve's mum cooked it in a way that when she put it in front of you the juices still ran around; fat and blood on your plate, but somehow it looked delicious. You had to move your chips to one side pretty quickly or they'd go soggy, but mopping those juices up with bread and butter was heaven, or as near as Alison had ever got to it. They ate it around a table. All the family. Steve, his mum and dad, his two*

*sisters, an aunt, sometimes Steve's brother if he was home, and Alison. Just a little pine table. It was a squash but, still, it was nice. Alison and her dad rarely ate together but if they did it was off a plate on their knees in front of the TV.*

*At Steve's, Alison didn't even have to clear up afterwards; his mum would always tell them to hurry on their way. Steve was allowed the keys to his dad's Renault and handed money for popcorn, like he was still a kid. The popcorn in the cinema was extortionate! Alison didn't let him spend his mother's hard-earned cash that way, it was a waste. Instead they spent it in the Co-op on Mr Kipling French Fancies and Wispa bars, which they'd eat after the movie, in the car, parked up on a quiet B road. She always felt sexier on a full stomach. The food warmed her up enough to make her want to take her bra off.*

‘Muuuuuummm, have you seen my lacrosse socks, the ones for the home game?’ Although it is yelled from upstairs, even above the noise of the water running on to the breakfast pots, I hear the hint of frustration and panic. This morning when the alarm went off I hit snooze, and the second time it went I didn’t hear it and Jeff hit snooze, meaning we all overslept by twenty crucial minutes.

‘In the drawer!’ I call back. I resist adding, *Like they always are*. I’ve learnt that is a hopeless comment to make to men or teenagers.

‘Which drawer?’

‘Top-right-hand one.’

‘No, they’re not.’

‘Yes, they are.’

‘I can’t find them.’

So I dash up the stairs, suddy hands and all. I walk straight into Katherine’s bedroom. Usually I knock but the door is wide open and she is standing in the centre of the room, glaring, not so much at me as at life, which today she is finding a bit testing. She’s panicking because, officially, the school rule is that if you haven’t got the correct kit you can’t play in the game. In my day, you just had to grab something grotty from the lost-property box (actually, that was quite an effective reminder for most, because some of that stuff reeked) or, if you were banned from the game, you’d gratefully slink behind the bike sheds to gossip or even smoke a cigarette. Katherine would hate to miss the game, though – she’d feel she was letting down the school.

Yesterday’s triumph of scoring two goals is forgotten. It is literally *so yesterday*. Life, for teenagers, is a rollercoaster. Parents, like it or not, have to hang on for dear life.

As I walk into the room I notice two things; one, the top-right-hand drawer is open and I can see the socks from here. Two, Katherine’s hand is

hovering over her skirt pocket, where I can see the outline of her phone; I deduce that something on the phone has upset her. 'Everything OK?' She scowls at me and folds her arms.

'I said – I can't find my socks.'

'Yes, but is there anything else?' I wonder whether she's having some trouble at school. Bullying again? My thoughts jump to Dolly Bridge, the troublemaker in Katherine's year. Last term there were a number of occasions when I dearly wanted to rip off Dolly Bridge's head and use it as a football.

She scowls and refuses to answer. I reach for the socks.

'There.' My tone is not as patient as I'd like it to be. After all, the damn socks were where I said they were, but I'm not really angry with Katherine, it's just that Dolly Bridge isn't standing in front of me. If she was, I could cheerfully stuff the socks into her big, annoying mouth. I am somewhat irritated with Katherine, though, because she's allowed Dolly to rule her world. I wish Katherine understood the power of being the kid who can win the game for the team; she should tell Dolly where to get off, but she won't. It's not in her. When I was a kid I would not have taken any crap from Dolly Bridge (it's odd then that I do as an adult, albeit indirectly); indeed, her snide comments might not even have registered. When I went to school someone would have had to set my hair on fire for it to be a really bad day. However, I've sent my daughter to a totally different sort of place and, at Wittington High School for Girls, Dolly's behaviour should not have to be tolerated.

I thought things were better this term. And they may well be; Katherine's anxiety might just be about *socks*. That's the thing with teenagers: it's easy to know *when* they are upset, harder to know *why*. I'll get to the bottom of this tonight; now's not the time. I know, I sound overprotective, a little bit too involved. I can't help myself.

She pushes the socks into her kitbag, heads downstairs, grabs her enormous rucksack and packed lunch and then checks her reflection one last time. I see hesitancy and insecurity flash across my sweet daughter's, frankly, beautiful face. She straightens her shoulders, lifts her chin and then pulls on a beam. That's my girl. The world's a bitch, but whatcha gonna do?

Outside, the weather is blustery, the first falling leaves are being flung over the road; one catches in my windscreen wiper, the others gang together at the kerb, making it difficult to see where the pavement ends and the road

begins. Inside the car there's a fog. I consider how to draw out the sun. 'Fancy listening to Radio 1?' This is a big concession. I really don't understand a word that's said on Radio 1 and haven't for about ten years. I prefer to listen to Radio 4 and usually insist that we do so on school commutes, in the hope that Katherine will learn something worthwhile. I'm not sure when I decided this was a good idea. I mean, it's not as though Radio 4 can put a person in a good mood; all it does is make me feel depressed about the economy and calcify my belief that everything I'm feeding my family is poisoning them. Still, I stick with it because it helps me have something to talk about at dinner parties.

Katherine looks delighted at the reprieve and immediately retunes the radio and turns up the volume, starting to move her shoulders coolly in time with the track that's now playing. Something shifts in my brain. For a second I remember a time when I absolutely loved Radio 1. In my mid- and late-twenties, Sara Cox and Zoë Ball were my idols. Still are. I used to think every single tune they played spoke to me, every single lyric was written for me. I used to feel the conversation and music throb throughout my body. There was a time when listening to the radio made me feel sexy, alive, vital. The only throbbing that takes place nowadays is in my head.

The effort I've made is worthwhile: by the time I pull up at the school Katherine seems relaxed and vibrant.

Drop-off has to be efficient. There's a one-way ring system that allows three cars at a time to pull into a bay outside the main building so that parents can deposit their daughters. There's no tolerance of lingering farewells, as approximately four hundred cars have to filter through this spot before eight twenty in the morning. Still, Katherine risks leaning over the gear stick and gives me the briefest of kisses on the cheek, almost a whisper. Pretty brave and decent, because most kids stop giving any PDA towards parents at about eleven years old. She grabs her weighty bags and hops out of the car. I can't stop myself, I yell out. 'Don't worry about those who talk behind your back, they're behind you for a reason!' If she hears me, she doesn't acknowledge my Hallmark-card wisdom. Nor does she reply when I add, 'Love you!' I hear someone call her name and she starts to run to catch up, deftly wending her way towards a gaggle of svelte, babbling creatures. I quickly lose sight of the flicky-haired bunch, as a big BMW 5 Series is blocking the view.

In a moment of horror, I realise that it's also blocking the exit and that a number of parents in cars behind *my* big BMW 5 Series have started to hit their horns. I smile diffidently, hoping they are discerning enough to notice that I'm not the one causing the jam; I can't get past. At times like this, I wish we'd bought a Fiat 500.

After three girls with enormous backpacks and sports bags are spewed from the car in front I watch as the glossy, impeccably manicured mother unloads a cello, a violin and a hockey stick. She unpacks slowly and carefully, seemingly oblivious to the growing resentment of the parents who need to pull into the drop-off bay so their children can safely get out before the school bell rings. It's the blow-dry and the French manicure which allow her to be so sanguine. The mothers with visible roots, flat shoes and hastily selected Boden T-shirts and cardigans always hurry. We don't want to be seen. I need a good two hours getting ready before I'm just about passable, time I haven't got in the morning. I feel the palms of my hands turn clammy. I really should have a smaller car. Eventually, the manicured mum gets back into her vehicle and I watch as she rearranges the contents of her handbag, makes a phone call and then, after another Jurassic age, smoothly pulls away. I start after her with a violent jerk, stall and then hear the dreadful, distinctive crunch as the car behind me hits my bumper.

A quick glance in my mirror, and I see Jan Bonville, the Chair of the Parent Association, glare at me. I get out of the car, glad that Katherine is long gone and not around to witness my gaffe, although I'm sure she'll hear of it, because gossip spreads like wildfire in this school. In a chichi school in the Home Counties, no one carries a knife, so people feast on this sort of blether.

'I'm so sorry,' I say immediately. Apologies fall from me like leaves from a tree on a gusty autumnal day. I eternally feel as though I'm in the wrong, and I'm sorry for it. Jan is a petite woman, slim, short, neat. She has English-rose looks, skin that shuns make-up, a tidy dark bob and sharp, hard eyes. Her smile never reaches them. I quickly assess the damage. There is none, save for a small scratch on Jan's car, something I don't doubt will polish out.

'I'll have to take your insurance details,' she barks.

'Of course,' I agree. Then, in a tardy attempt to gather my wits, I stutter, 'Really? I mean, will this need to go through insurance? I'm happy to pay for any damage. We don't want to push up our premiums.'

‘I like everything to be above board.’ Her tone is horrified, as though I’ve just suggested some major-league fraud.

‘Obviously, yes. Me too. But.’ The mothers in the cars queuing behind Jan’s are going ballistic. There is a veritable symphony of horn blowing and beeping.

‘Give me your name and number,’ insists Jan.

‘Well, you know my name.’ We’ve served on the same committee for two years now. True, I’m only a lowly class rep and she is the lofty Chair, but she must know my name. All those cakes I’ve baked, all those raffle tickets I’ve sold; last summer I dressed up in a zebra onesie for the school fete and let children throw wet sponges at me. It must mean *something*. Jan stares at me; her expression is stuck between vacant disdain and severe irritation.

‘Alison Mitchell,’ I admit.

‘Spelt?’

‘The usual way,’ I sigh in disbelief. More glaring, more honking. I capitulate. ‘A. L. I. S. O ...’

As I drive away – red-faced, sweat dripping down my back, humiliation seeping from my every pore – I wonder a few things about myself. One, why didn’t I tell her that the fault is always with the person who bumps into the car in front? And, two, why did I use my lovely suede gloves which Jeff bought me just last weekend to rub away at the scratch? While this action did prove that there was no damage, it ruined the gloves because her car was so filthy. These questions go unanswered. Severe self-introspection is something I avoid.

I don’t think Jeff notices that I’m late home from the school drop-off. His office door is closed, which tells me, emphatically, that he doesn’t want to be disturbed. There have to be rules and a certain amount of discipline about such things if someone works from home. Jeff has written four novels so far. The last one was a huge hit. Enormous. Over a million copies sold in the UK alone, it has already been published in seventeen different languages, and counting, and someone in Hollywood has optioned the film rights. That was nearly two years ago. Jeff has written three thousand words of novel number five. He is playing with the idea of writing a high-brow literary novel, the novel he describes as the one he has always wanted to write. When he says this to his agent, Sue, she nods sympathetically, says he must write whatever he wants, but then reminds him of the healthy

advance that was paid to him on the understanding that he was writing another commercial novel. Sue also reminds him of the importance of timely deliveries; his signature advance can't last for ever. Two months ago he announced that he is, officially, suffering from writer's block, something I don't really believe in. I mean, don't nurses, teachers and lifeguards have off-days where they can't be bothered – but they have to bother, don't they? Because who has ever heard of nurse's block? I keep that view to myself; Jeff would only sigh and say that I simply don't understand the creative process.

I'll take him a coffee at eleven and tell him all about the school-gate farce then. I know he'll say I'm silly to worry so much about everything. And he'd be right; I annoy myself at times. I wish I could be more confident. Jeff would've told Jan Bonville to take a flying jump, only he wouldn't have said it so graciously; he'd have used the sort of language that causes sailors to blush. He's quite a surprise that way. On the whole, he ambles through life with an air of cordial vagueness, but he doesn't take any twaddle from anyone. He's firmly polite but, if he has to sacrifice one attribute, he lets the politeness go. I wish I could be so brave and true to myself. I wasn't always this slightly posh, slightly frail, slightly hopeless sort. This is entirely of my invention, which makes it worse. I was once quite outspoken and opinionated. When did I stop being real? Stop saying what I was thinking? I certainly can't remember a distinct moment which dramatically brought that part of my personality to a halt. It was a gradual thing. I was one thing, and then I eroded into another. I decided to self-censor. I do know that my transformation from bolshie council-estate Scouse teen rebel to the epitome of respectability, living in the Home Counties, was complete by the time I was thirty-six years old, about the time Katherine started school. By then, I really understood what I had to lose. Not only did I stop saying what I was thinking, I stopped thinking. It was just easier.

I know that I need to do something productive quickly to counter the Jan Bonville effect. She's flung me into this pit of self-doubt and insecurity. I check the gym timetable to see if there's an exercise class I can bob along to but I seem to have just missed the starts. I'm most tempted to Skype my best friend, Rachel, who five (long) months ago moved to Montreal. The problem is, although it's 9.45 a.m. in my world, it's only 4.45 a.m. in hers, which isn't a civilised time to call, even if we have known one another

since antenatal classes. I don't think she'd thank me. Rachel left in a flurry of promises that we'd have regular Skype sessions; we said that we'd be just as close as we were when she lived only half an hour away. It hasn't been the case. By the time she gets her kids off to school and is ready to call me I'm on my way out of the door to pick up Katherine. The weekends are no more convenient, we're both absorbed in family life; she has four children aged between fifteen and three and describes herself as a professional chauffeur. I understand: even with just one child, our weekends are quite full on. This weekend just gone, for instance, there was a drinks do with the class parents on Friday evening, Katherine had lacrosse training on Saturday and a game on Sunday. I promise myself I'll send Rachel a long email tonight, giving her all our news and asking for all of hers. I know she'll see the funny side to Jan Bonville's schoolground terrorism. I miss her healing humour. There's a best-friend-shaped gap in my life right now. Part of me wishes that Rachel's husband hadn't landed a great job in Canada, but I accept that it is what it is. Friends have to be pleased for one another when good things happen for them. Don't they? Because, you know, otherwise, we'd be enemies.

I settle on a significantly less fun mode of distraction: housework. I unstack and stack the dishwasher and put a load in the washing machine and another in the drier. I try not to feel guilty about the electricity. We do have solar panels. Jeff had them put in because he found my habit of wandering around the house unplugging everything and turning off lights the moment anyone left a room annoying; he says the panels will have paid for themselves by 2050. I wipe clean all the kitchen surfaces and whizz through the house, tidying. We're not a particularly untidy family but nor are we camera ready at all times. Jeff's office is shambolic, as is Katherine's bedroom, although shared space tends to remain reasonably organized, as I stay on top of things. Unlike many of Jeff's colleagues and the other school mums, we don't have a cleaner. I am a stay-at-home mum; it doesn't make sense to pay someone to do what I can easily manage. Besides, I can be careful to time my pottering about with a vacuum cleaner so that it doesn't have a detrimental effect on Jeff's concentration, not something I could easily explain to paid help without sounding very affected. I do any potentially noisy work in snatches, when he nips out for a coffee or to buy a paper, when he goes to the loo. That's more time than you might imagine.

What next? I have a 'To do' list as long as my arm. Every woman is familiar with the list: it's full of the sorts of thing that *should* be done at some point but quite simply aren't. The ironing is always on the list, never gets crossed off, even though I iron every Thursday morning. Then there's taking old clothes to Oxfam, cleaning the fridge, tidying up the airing cupboard.

The doorbell rings and I feel a tiny flutter of excitement. A delivery. Just the distraction I need.

I start to scan my mind to recall what I've sent for recently. I'm expecting fabric samples, because I'm thinking of re-covering the sofa, and Jeff is always ordering out-of-print editions of books from obscure second-hand bookshops. Unlike me, he doesn't have a 'To do' list, he has a 'To read' list and spends an enormous amount of time relentlessly tracking down incomprehensible, fascinating titles. He's very impressive. Most likely, it's something for him, but I'm holding out the hope that it's the samples so I rush to the door before the post lady rings the bell a second time. I fling it open but, instead of the weather-beaten, smiley postie, I'm faced with a lean, tall, really rather handsome man. I wonder what he's going to try to sell me. Fish? Charity? God? He's rather trendy, but I can't see a portfolio so I don't think he's an artist who has come to show me his work, which does happen from time to time around here. He smiles apologetically and endearingly. He is somewhat familiar. A school dad, perhaps. I rack my brains to place him.

'Mrs Mitchell?'

'Yes.'

'Alison Mitchell?'

Then I realise – it's something to do with how he says my name, tentatively but somehow officially – this must be Jan Bonville's husband, here to follow up on the insurance details. How did such a sour one as her land this charmer? There is no justice. He has gentle eyes, brown, deep; very different from Jan's sharp, flashing ones.

I'm irritated that she's sent him. I haven't even told Jeff about the incident yet. Somewhat defensively, I say, 'Oh, I see, this is about the bump at drop-off. I think it's quite unnecessary that you've turned up here. Jan and I have sorted everything out. I've accepted full responsibility.' I am somewhat put out that I'm being hounded, but I think I'm more put out that Jan's husband is handsome. She just doesn't deserve it.

‘Jan?’ Confused, the man tilts his head to the right and squints at me.

‘It’s not about the car?’

‘No. I don’t know anything about a car.’

‘Oh.’ I feel a bit of an idiot.

‘Are you – look, I’m sorry. This is going to seem a bit peculiar.’

He breaks off and looks to the ground, awkward. He’s wearing skinny jeans and washed-suede boots which look artfully distressed and a soft, dark-grey leather jacket; not the scruffy-biker or cowboy type, the really stylish type. He has a thick, grey scarf wrapped around his neck, although he doesn’t seem unduly concerned about the autumn breeze. His jacket is open, showing a white T-shirt; it hangs casually off his broad shoulders. I wonder whether he’s one of Jeff’s friends. I do know him from somewhere, I’m sure of it.

‘Look,’ he goes on, ‘I’m sorry about this intrusion. I just need to know, do you have a daughter who was born in St Mary’s Hospital in Clapham between March 27th and 29th fifteen years ago?’

‘Yes. Katherine; her birthday is the 27th.’ I’m so used to being honest and straightforward that I splutter out this response before I consider whether this is the sort of info that should be routinely exchanged, on the doormat, with a total stranger.

He swaps his expression of awkwardness for one of panic. ‘I should have sent a letter.’

It’s such an odd thing to say. Who sends letters nowadays? The tax man, blackmailers and Jeff’s great-aunt. He’s not any of those. The man doesn’t look threatening, but he does look distressed. There’s something about his earnest but hopeless expression that makes me ask, ‘Should I get my husband?’

‘Yes, yes. I think that’s a good idea. We have something very important to discuss.’

‘Is Katherine in some sort of trouble?’ I can’t imagine what sort it could be. Katherine is universally described as a good kid.

His mouth twists as though the words he has to spit out taste foul. ‘Can I come in? This is not something we can talk about on the doorstep.’

Jeff comes down the stairs at my request, curious, concerned. He doesn't rush. He always has a misleadingly languid way of moving, I am the one who has the monopoly on frenzied and anxious movement. His gaze sweeps over the handsome man standing in the doorway.

'Can I help?'

'I ought to introduce myself. I'm Tom Truby.' The stranger holds out his hand to Jeff, who automatically clasps and shakes it. I don't recognise his name. As far as I'm aware, there isn't a girl called Truby in Katherine's year and I think I know the name of every child. Not a school dad, then. 'There's something we need to discuss,' he says firmly again. 'It's extremely important.'

Jeff doesn't seem to consider the possibility that the man might be about to murder us brutally and steal all our possessions (something I've contemplated), because he invites him in. We all trail through to the kitchen, where Jeff offers to make coffee. Tom Truby says, 'No, thanks, just water,' and then suddenly changes his mind and asks for an espresso. A short drink, something you can swallow in one gulp, then leave in a hurry if necessary.

He glances around the house, eyes darting from one thing to the next, taking in the bespoke cream country-kitchen cabinets, the black marble worktops and the Woodlawn Blue walls. I notice his eyes fall on the expensive details: the pastel-blue Smeg Fridge, the Grohe Duo filtered boiling-water tap, the brass-coloured Scandinavian pendant lights and the overflowing bowl of fruit. His scrutiny makes me feel uncomfortable, but then scrutiny often does. It's true the tap was ridiculously expensive; most people can't even imagine what it cost, which I'm grateful for – if people could guess they'd think we were insane. Jeff regularly points out how handy it is to have boiling water at the touch of a button, but I could get that before, by popping on the kettle. We actually sourced the brass-coloured

Scandinavian pendant lights in Sweden, although I've since noticed that John Lewis do something similar; Jeff says they are not the same, and he's right – the John Lewis ones would have saved us eight hundred quid. The magnets on the fridge are those word ones that people use to write funny messages to one another; Jeff has arranged them to form a haiku poem about autumn.

A soft breeze drops the  
Scarlet leaf so like your lips.  
Mid September now.

The fruit bowl seems the least pretentious thing about us and, even then, rambutan mingle with apples and bananas. In an effort to break the palpable tension in the room I almost offer this stranger a banana, as I do all of Katherine's friends when they visit, but I stop myself just in time. His eyes linger longest on the photo wall. We have quite a display: a mixture of casual snaps and posed pictures taken on formal occasions. I follow his gaze; I never tire of staring at these photos. There's the one of the three of us holding surfboards in Cornwall – I really haven't ever got the knack; some of Katherine holding various academic certificates and lacrosse trophies – sometimes shy, sometimes proud; one of all the extended family at Jeff's parents' Golden Wedding anniversary party – that was such a lovely day; one of Katherine when she was just a month old; and another on her first day of school – adorable. The usual array, yet unique to every home. Mr Truby can't take his eyes off them.

'Why did you ask about Katherine's birthdate?' I ask, concern bubbling in my chest. He doesn't answer my question but instead tells us that he lost his wife to cancer recently. Obviously, we offer up our condolences but it's tricky to know what level of sympathy is appropriate; we don't know the wife, or the man, or understand why he's in our kitchen, leaning against our counter. He waves away our 'sorry's, anyway, as though he's tired of hearing the platitudes, as though he knows they can't help.

'It was ovarian cancer. By the end, she also had breast and lung cancer. Riddled with it. That's what they say, isn't it? That's the expression.' He stares at us with an angry intensity.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Truby,' I say again.

'Tom, please.'

It is a bit odd calling him 'Mr'. He's not one of Katherine's schoolteachers, but I also feel uncomfortable calling him Tom. He is so attractive that it's awkward. I rarely notice anyone's attractiveness nowadays – well, at least, not men's; I'm often commenting on attractive women I see in the street, at the school gate or the shops, and so on. Women make so much more effort. By the time they reach my age most men look alike: a little plump, a little grey and balding, a little ruddy. I can't remember when I last stumbled across a physically attractive man of my age. Young men are still lovely but, well, they are young and so very other that I stopped noticing them in that way long ago.

This Tom man is definitely the sort women want to swing from chandeliers with.

Beautiful people make me want to fold in on myself like an origami frog. But, besides Tom's distracting charisma, there is something else that is making me feel uncomfortable. I get the feeling he is bringing us a problem. I flick a glance at Jeff. He returns a sympathetic smile which somehow communicates that he knows I'm panicking and he's trying to reassure me. True, I often think there's going to be an issue, a difficulty, a calamity, and I spend a lot of time worrying unnecessarily, but this time I'm certain. I instinctively know Tom Truby is trouble.

'Is this a fundraising matter?' Jeff asks. He's regularly approached by people who want his financial support or for him to be patron of some charity or other. He helps where he can, freely giving signed copies of his books as prizes in raffles; occasionally, he donates an entire set of his first-edition hardbacks. Mr Truby shakes his head. Jeff looks puzzled but gestures for him to go on. As a storyteller, Jeff appreciates that some things have to be explained in their own time. Unrolled. He allows the stranger in our kitchen to tell his tale.

'A woman's risk of developing breast and/or ovarian cancer is greatly increased if she inherits a deleterious – that is to say, harmful – mutation in the BRCA1 gene or the BRCA2 gene. My wife inherited the gene from her mother, who also died young.' He barely takes a breath but continues, 'Men with these mutations also have an increased risk of breast cancer.' It's a throwaway thought. Not his concern. 'Both men and women who have harmful BRCA1 or 2 mutations may be at increased risk of other types of cancer.' He puts me in mind of an infant child who has learnt his lines for a

school play and is simply intent on delivering them by rote. Expression sacrificed to speed.

It's awful that this poor man is so grief-stricken he feels the need to explain this level of medical detail to strangers. I'm trying to show concern and mask my perplexity. Jeff's expression is now one I'm familiar with: he *is* interested, very much so. He probably thinks there's a story line in it for him. Sadly, fresh inspiration can come from tragedy.

'Genetic tests can check for these particular mutations in people with a family history of cancer that suggests the possible presence of a harmful mutation in one of these genes.' We stare at him, unsure how to react.

'What has this to do with us?' Jeff asks eventually.

The man seems stunned. Did he think he'd explained? He runs his hands through his hair and glares at us, eyes enormous and pleading for understanding, but what is it that he wants us to understand? He looks at us, heavily, and then adds, 'After my wife died my teenage daughter took herself off to have this genetic test, to see if she had the gene. She was terrified, you see. They all were. I have three children.' Poor man, left alone with three children. Poor children, left without a mother. 'She shouldn't have gone for the test. They normally recommend counselling and a much more measured approach when it's something so monumental, especially for children. Somehow she managed to persuade the staff it was in her best interest. I'm not sure she was one hundred per cent honest about parental consent.' He sighs. 'Olivia can be economical with the truth if she wants to be.'

'Oh, yes, that's teenagers,' I comment sympathetically. Actually, Katherine is reasonably honest and frank with us, but I want to be able to say something soothing, and telling the parent of a rebellious teen that your teenager is an angel is not that.

'And does your daughter have the gene?' Jeff asks, cutting to the most pertinent question. He is managing to concentrate on the story much better than I am, not allowing himself to be distracted by sentimental imaginings of this family being ripped apart by the early death of the mother.

'No.'

Jeff looks delighted. He lets out a deep sigh of relief. I take his cue and smile too, saying, 'Well, that's wonderful. Something to be grateful for.'

'She's not a genetic match at all.'

‘Marvellous,’ said Jeff. He is beaming now, his most charming smile, the one that makes his eyes twinkle. He makes the effort to charm men and women alike; there’s not a sexist bone in his body.

‘You misunderstand me. The test results for the cancer have confirmed that Olivia isn’t my child.’ Tom Truby’s eyes bore into me. Bleak now.

‘You mean your wife had an affair?’ Jeff asks the question. I don’t because, somehow, for some reason, I suddenly understand. It is as though I am being gradually lowered into an icy bath and I can feel the freeze in my toes, my legs, my hips.

My heart.

Slowly, he spells it out, ‘Olivia isn’t my genetic daughter, nor is she my wife’s.’

‘I’m sorry, but—’ Jeff and I are standing side by side. I feel him put his arm around my shoulders but I shake it off, step away from him. I don’t want him to try to comfort me. If he is trying to comfort me it is because he, too, has made the leap that I have. His gesture makes my assumption seem more credible. I can feel my heart beating so quickly the others must be able to hear it. I feel dizzy, disorientated.

‘What has this to do with us?’ asks Jeff again, his voice breathy. I can hear the effort he is making to remain measured.

‘I think you have my baby.’

I stumble forward and reach out to the kitchen counter. I have to steady myself. My knees are shaking, but I can’t collapse. Can I? Maybe I can. Maybe this is the one time in my life when I can just let go, because who would blame me? I feel vomit rise up and I clamp my mouth closed, swallow it back. Both men look at me with concern but, as I’ve cast off Jeff’s arm, neither moves towards me. I am grateful. I don’t want them near me. I feel I am being tested, and I need to stand on my own two feet. It is important that I do so.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I think your daughter is our daughter. Mine,’ he corrects himself, clearly still not used to referring to himself alone and excluding his dead wife. ‘I think there was a mix-up at the hospital.’

‘Nonsense!’ I snap. I don’t know where that particular word came from, it is a stupid word to pick; inadequate and incongruously posh as a response to such a diabolical, bloody statement. I should have said something more

visceral. An Anglo-Saxon cuss – I know plenty of them, but I’m out of practice. ‘No. No.’ Tom looks at me pityingly.

‘I’ve done quite a lot of research. There were only nine babies born during the relevant time. Five of them were boys. I’ve tracked down the other two girls, but they don’t seem likely options for a swap.’

‘Why?’ I am grateful that Jeff has the capability to ask this. Moments like this are why people form couples. I can’t ... I just can’t ... This is too ...

Much.

‘Because your baby is the only other Caucasian girl.’ He sighs but pushes on. He cares about us, but not as much as he cares about his own agenda. ‘You’ll need to do a DNA test. If she’s ours – mine – then you’ll need to get her tested for the cancer, too. Well, at least, you might want to. I’d recommend it. If not straight away, then as soon as she’s old enough to cope with it. If a harmful mutation is found, several options are available to help a person manage their cancer risk.’

This Tom Truby looks brittle. He’s been broken and patched back together again but not mended. Not quite. Not ever. Wary concern sits stubbornly in his eyes, the skin beneath them is the colour of a bruise, his mouth stays narrow and disappointed even when he tries to smile. I feel compassion for him and hate him at the same time. How can that be? It is devastatingly confusing. I stare at Jeff, waiting for him to say it isn’t so. To say there must be a mistake, that it can’t be this way. It’s ridiculous! Katherine is *our* baby! She’s my pride and joy, my everything. I hate it that those phrases have popped into my mind. They are hackneyed. They don’t cover it. They don’t get anywhere near the point of her. Of *us*. I’ve sometimes noticed that parents who are victims of the most horrendous crimes or dreadful luck who release a statement on TV always fall back on clichés; now I understand why. There are no words for this horror. Pain, shock, reduces us all to dumb animals. *Jeff, Jeff!* I silently plead with him. *Make it not so. Make it not this. Do something. Say something!*

But he doesn’t say anything.

He looks crushed. Stamped on. I feel a huge surge of pity for him and myself but almost instantaneously it morphs into fury, a fury so vicious and primal I want to hit him. I want him to do something – *anything* – to stop me believing what Tom Truby is saying. He should throw this man and his ridiculous suggestion out of our house. He is polluting it. Attacking us. Why did Jeff invite him in in the first place? What a stupid, imbecilic thing

to have done. I push Truby, sort of jab him in the chest. It is a pathetic move. Not a shove, nothing substantial, something terrified and mean. Both he and Jeff stare at me with incredulity. But I jab him again and again. To no effect. He is strong and solid. Immovable.

‘Get out of my house. Get out!’ I cry.

‘We need to talk this—’

‘Out!’

I cut him off and start to push him towards the door. Thankfully, he cooperates, no doubt sympathetic to my shock and hysteria, which makes me almost admire him even while I despise him. He walks towards the front door, head hanging. ‘Here’s my address.’ He puts a piece of paper on the hall console, pre-prepared. There is something too sensible and determined about his gesture and it frightens me. ‘I’ll go. Leave you to get used to the idea.’

*Get used?* Is he insane? ‘Out, out!’ I yell. I push him in the back as he crosses the threshold then immediately slam the door behind him. I lean against it, body tense. Rigid. Jeff staggers away and sits on the bottom stair. I glare at him. He sinks his head into his hands, refusing to meet my gaze. I look at the address, expecting it to be a London one – after all, that’s where Katherine was born – but it’s not, it’s a town less than twenty minutes’ drive from ours. This in itself isn’t unusual – we live in a commuter belt; ninety per cent of the parents of children in Katherine’s class are ex-Londoners – but still I feel trapped and hemmed in. Pursued. A London address would have given me something – space, anonymity.

‘Can it be true?’ I ask.

‘Possibly, I suppose.’ He shrugs. I realise it is defeat rather than indifference but still I loathe him for the betrayal.

‘It’s not! It’s not!’ I shout, then shove my way past him and clump up the stairs.

## Thirty Years Ago

*The assembly hall had always seemed enormous to Alison, but today it felt stuffy and cramped. There were almost two hundred kids hunched over desks; panicking, sweating into their polyester uniforms. Their despair drew the walls closer together, squashed the ceiling towards the floor. Anxiety stained the air; hormones and Oxy 10 effectively eroded hope and self-esteem. This was what it was all about, when the axe fell. It would be decided: losers, winners. The invigilator, Mr Scott, who taught RE, was repeating the instructions: there was to be no talking, if extra paper was needed they were to put up their hand.*

*Alison thought it was an appalling piece of timetabling that the first exam was maths. Miss Wilson had tried to be upbeat about it – ‘Better to get it over with,’ she had insisted – but no one had been convinced by what she or any other teacher said. As far as Alison could make out, the teachers seemed to hate the kids at Manse Newton comprehensive. If anyone wanted to be a teacher, actively chose the profession, they would not end up here. At best, the sort of teacher here had entered into the profession because there was nothing else for them to do; at worst, to feed a merciless desire to torture. Teachers didn’t take their pupils’ relationships seriously, let alone their ambitions, or even their thoughts. All they ever said was that you had to ‘work hard’ and that the exams ‘were important’, then they contradicted themselves by saying stuff like ‘You’re young, you have your whole life in front of you, nothing is make or break.’ Make your bloody mind up.*

*Alison sighed. It was confusing. Adults were confusing. And hopeless. They understood absolutely nothing. Not what it was like to be here. Or what it was like to want not to be here.*

*‘You can now turn over your papers.’*

*Once, when she was eight, Alison’s gran had taken her to a pantomime in London. It was the year her mother had left; her gran had been trying to fill a gap. It couldn’t work; no matter how much Domestos and furniture polish*

*Gran used to clean the house, it still smelt of hopelessness, despair, abandonment. The panto was Dick Whittington and His Cat. Alison had been disappointed; she'd have preferred it if they'd gone to see Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty, something with a princess in a flowing dress. The best bit had been the orchestra. She'd watched them before the show began – shuffling, disordered, squeaky – then they had transformed on cue. Made magic. That was how it was when they were told to turn their papers over. A crescendo of shuffling, then a lull. Alison thought it must be quite something to be able to play an instrument. Or to be especially excellent at anything, really.*

Two and a half hours

Answer ALL questions in Section A. In Section B, full marks may be obtained for answers to FIVE questions.

All necessary working MUST be shown.

You are reminded of the necessity for good English and orderly presentation in your answers. In calculations you are advised to show all the steps in your

working, giving your answer at each stage.

Section A

Answer ALL questions in this section.

1.

- (i) Calculate the probability that, when a die is thrown, the number obtained will not be divisible by 3.
- (ii) A coin is tossed and a die is thrown. Calculate the probability of obtaining a tail on the coin and a 5 on the die.

(4 marks)

*Fair enough. She picked up her pen.*

*The maths paper wasn't that hard. It wasn't easy, but Alison had done quite a few past papers so she had a sensible idea as to what to expect. She flew through section A, answering all twelve questions with reasonable confidence.*

Section B

Answer FIVE questions in this section.

*What was it with the capitals? Why did the examiners feel the need to shout at them all the time? It was OK; they didn't have to. They had her attention.*

*She carefully read through the first question in section B; it was all about angles and calculating distance. Pythagoras's theorem. It was a gift! She'd seen this exact question on a 1982 paper; all they'd done was change the numbers. Lazy devils. She'd got the idea of looking at past papers after the January mocks, when she had realised they were doing the paper the previous year had taken as their final exam. Before then, she'd imagined that all the papers were written following a process in which the teachers conferred and came up with individual questions; she didn't know much about the examination system. The people she knew didn't talk about that sort of stuff. They talked about electricity bills, whether they could afford to go to the pub or whether they'd have to make do with just getting in a few cans.*

*She wondered what Steve's paper had been like. He'd taken his exams two years ago. The thought of her older boyfriend always filled her with a strange sense of pride and excitement. She wondered all sorts of things about Steve, practically all the time. What might he have had for his breakfast? What did he think of Tears for Fears or Kool and the Gang? Would she ever be able to persuade him to read The Cider House Rules? Did he really like cherry cola or was he just saying that to be different? He'd got a C in maths, which was all right, all he needed to get him into the sixth form in town to do a BTEC in mechanics. She'd asked her maths teacher if they still had that year's paper, but they didn't; she'd been told she might get it from the library in town. She'd taken the bus, not with that much hope, but it was something to do, a day out. There wasn't a lot to do in Manse Newton. A postbox, a telephone box, a pub and a newsagent; it was hardly Disneyland.*

*The librarian in town had been surprisingly helpful. She'd seemed to think the request for past maths papers was totally reasonable. She went away and photocopied them in a little office; Alison could hear the clink and whirl of the machine. It took ages. When the librarian came back with a whole heap of printed sheets she asked for seven pound twenty. A breathtaking amount of money, but they were copied now; she had to take them. She had counted out the money on to the counter, her hands shaking a bit. She'd had to walk the four miles home because she didn't have enough now for the bus fare, but it was worth it because the librarian also showed her these clever books called York Notes. They were basically books about her set texts in English which had analyses of everything: themes,*

characters, plot and language. Who knew? There were sample answers, essay plans, handy quotes and study tips. Alison had said that it seemed a lot like cheating but the librarian had just laughed and said it was all about being prepared.

'Prepared'. The word had seemed strange to Alison. Obviously, she knew what it meant, but preparedness seemed elusive, luxurious, ultimately unobtainable. How could she have prepared for her mother leaving, taking Alison's three younger brothers with her but leaving Alison behind? It had been a monumental shock. Her gran had said it was because there were only two bedrooms where her mother was going and, while all the brothers could pile in together, Alison couldn't very well share with them, could she? Gran was trying to be kind, but Alison knew she could have slept with her mother, if her mother had wanted her enough. When she'd said as much, Gran had looked embarrassed, put out that the child had seen through the flimsy, careless excuse, the flimsy, careless actions. Stuttering, she had replied, 'But what about your daddy? What about me? We'd have missed you.' Alison didn't think it was right. She didn't believe her dad would have missed her, not that much. He never seemed to notice she was there. Besides, shouldn't her mother have missed her more; more than a father or a gran could? More than anyone? More than she could bear? Wasn't that normal?

Alison had been propelled into a perpetual feeling of chaos and disarray. She had felt uncertain of the things most eight year olds take for granted: the supply of clean socks and knickers, the reliability of the tooth fairy and even Santa Claus. From that moment on it seemed to Alison that all she could hope for was just to get by. All she could hope for was finding a swimming costume that just about fitted in the pile of second-hand clothes someone had given her dad, there being eggs in the fridge, beans in the cupboard and, if not that, then maybe a pound note propped behind the clock on the mantelpiece, so that she wouldn't have to wait until nine or ten o'clock, when her dad finished his shift, before she could eat. As she got older, she got better at getting by. She did the shopping so that she never again had to resort to using washing-up liquid on her hair, she wound sticky tape around the strap of her school bag the minute she saw the plastic begin to fail, she washed through her school shirt every night.

'By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail,' the librarian had said. She was old, at least forty, strict and sensible looking, with flat, brown,

lace-up shoes, a plaid skirt and short, greying hair. Alison liked her. Strict and sensible women didn't run off and leave half their family in the lurch. 'Benjamin Franklin said that.' Alison wasn't sure who Benjamin Franklin was exactly and, while his advice seemed sound, she decided she needed to know more about the man before she accepted it as gospel. Before she left the library she took out a slim Ladybird book about him. The biography was no doubt too young an edition for her, but that was all they had. On discovering that this working-class man was not only one of the Founding Fathers of the United States but also a leading author, printer, political theorist, politician, scientist, inventor, civic activist, statesman and diplomat, she decided to put her trust in him.

Alison had gone home, drawn up a timetable, read, made long notes, distilled them into shorter notes and stuck word prompts above the kitchen sink and in the loo. She had completed all the past papers several times. Alison had studied, practically around the clock, for the next six months. She was prepared for this exam and all her others.

She'd even gone as far as to order the prospectus for three or four universities. It had been the librarian who suggested she do so: 'Just to be informed.' Alison hadn't even heard the word before. 'Prospectus'. Doing so felt daring. Presumptuous. Then they glided through the letterbox and landed on the thin carpet in the hallway. Their glossiness was exotic and out of place. She had had no idea that such possibilities existed. The brochures (because that's what a prospectus turned out to be) were far more glamorous and promising than the Argos or Littlewoods catalogue or even the holiday brochures she'd glanced at at friends' houses. The paper was thick. She felt she had to wash her hands before turning the pages. The photographs were of young people beaming, swathed in scarves and opportunity. They were like her, except not like her at all. The courses listed were overwhelming. Ostensibly, she was doing research into studying law, because she knew that paid well and that lawyers (like funeral directors) were always in demand, but she could easily imagine herself turning to theatre and film studies, management and economics, French, history of art. There was so much choice. Could she? Could she perhaps have that chance?

Now, she worked her way through five of the questions in section B. The numbers fell into place, coming together like that time when she went on holiday to Great Yarmouth with her dad and they'd played the slot

*machines on the front every night for a week. Once – just once – three sevens had come up. They'd won over thirty pounds in ten-pence pieces! Magical.*

*She even had time to check her answers. Someone had opened the window in the hall and fresh air floated in, a summer breeze and the buzz of an insect. One or two kids jerked their heads up, furious and distracted by the bee, but Alison felt something marvellous tremble in the air. A hint, a suggestion, opportunity. Maybe, maybe. She was waiting for something to happen, something to change for the good, and the clean air seemed to suggest it might. The future was on its way, and it had to be better. It had to be.*

*That was it, she had finished, and while she never counted her chickens before they'd hatched, been reared and arrived on her table as Sunday lunch, she thought she'd done well. Very well. She didn't dare move her head left or right. She was the sort of girl teachers accused of cheating, although she never would. She didn't want to or need to. She kept her wide, serious eyes to the front, tucked her hair behind her ears, barely moving her head to glance at the clock. There were four minutes to go. It was then she noticed that Pauline Cooper, who was sitting right in front of her, had a dark patch of blood seeping through her grey school skirt. Poor cow. It had happened to most of the girls at some point or other. So mortifying. There was nothing you could do except take your jumper off and tie the sleeves around your waist, pretend it was a fashion statement rather than a cloak. Alison wondered whether Pauline would have a jumper with her; it was such a warm day. Imagine being on during your exams – what a bloody nuisance. Alison thought that, if blokes were the ones to have periods, the human race would probably have been eradicated by now. Knowing Alison's luck, she'd come on in the next day or so, bound to. She made a mental note to go and buy extra sanitary stuff; she'd wear two at once in an exam, rather than risk the mess Pauline now had to deal with. Great – the best she could hope for was to sit on a four-inch-thick wad of cotton wool that wouldn't stay in place: how was that fair? She wished she could afford those ones with adhesive wings; maybe she'd buy them, just for the exams.*

*Then, suddenly, it came to Alison, as fluidly as the answers to the algebra equations had. It had been two months since her last period. Easter. Her stomach sloshed inside of her. Heat prickled under her arms and yet a shiver ran down her back. A dry lump of sand appeared in her throat. Her*

*legs began to quake; she could hear them banging quietly but relentlessly against the underneath of the desk. She was too clever to tell herself it was nothing, that the stress of revision had caused her periods to stop, that she hadn't been eating well, or anything else comforting. She knew it. Somehow, she knew it for certain.*

*Of course she wasn't going to get good results and go on to A levels. She wasn't going to go to university. She wouldn't be a lawyer. Stuff like that didn't happen to girls like her.*

*Shit happened to her.*

Can he *make* us have a DNA test? That is the question swirling around and around my head. *Go away, go away!* I'm not sure if I mean the question or, more likely, the man himself. The problem, which he's literally brought to our door, is too awful and enormous for me to process. It's madness. I lie on the bed, pulling at my hair, actually yanking it, as though I'm trying to wrench it out of my head. I'd had no idea people really did this, but it turns out we do, in fear, in frustration. It hurts and the pain is a temporary distraction.

Jeff puts his head around the door frame. He looks pale, almost transparent. He tentatively edges into the bedroom, carrying a cup of tea, which he quietly places on the bedside table. I eye it resentfully. What good can tea possibly do? I loathe the fact that we British are seen as so conventional and simple that a cup of tea can fix everything. I expect him to sit on the edge of the bed, but he doesn't, he hovers helplessly. I am not used to seeing him unsure and can hardly bear it. His hurt makes this nightmare authentic. I am ashamed of my reaction; sulking in bed like a teenager is unlikely to solve anything, but the pain and confusion are too vivid and extreme for me to deal with my shame.

Let alone the bomb that has just been dropped upon us.

It takes everything I have for me not to say, *Sod tea*.

'Thanks.' I look away from him, won't meet his eyes. If I were to see acceptance of the situation there, then I'd never forgive him. I feel betrayed by him, although I can't explain why. If Katherine isn't ours, he's let me down somehow, because when I thought she was ours I was so proud and grateful that he'd given me such a gift. I'm not being fair. He looks devastated, too. Eventually, he sits on the edge of the bed, but he still doesn't touch me. I'm glad of that. Some women like to be comforted in times of stress and difficulty; I curl in on myself.

We sit in silence for a while letting the tea go cold. I still can't think of the words. After a while, I say, 'We should ignore him. Pretend he doesn't exist, pretend he never came here.'

'I don't think we can.' Jeff lets out a heavy sound that reverberates around the room, staining the Egyptian cotton sheets, making the super-king bed uncomfortable, casting dark shadows across the Louis XV dressing table; exposing the interior decor as meaningless, pathetic. I'd always thought, or at least hoped, that we were safe here in our lovely big house, so tastefully and thoughtfully put together, but I was wrong.

'You mean, legally?' Can this man – this *stranger* – force us to have *our* child's DNA tested? Is that legal?

'I don't know where we stand, *legally*. I imagine we'll have to get a lawyer,' says Jeff, delivering another one of his horrifying groans. I've never been more regretful that I didn't go to law college. 'What I mean is that, *morally*, we can't ignore him.'

'"*Morally*"?' I splutter with rage and indignation. 'You can't think that, if Katherine is his, genetically speaking, we'll hand her over.'

'No, of course not.' Jeff looks impatient. Neither of us has it in us to be nice to each other, we are too shocked, our lives detonated. 'I just think, *morally*, we have a responsibility to get her tested.'

'Why? Why would we have the test done?'

'Because of the cancer thing, Alison.' His words are slow, careful.

Oh God, oh God. Their meaning seeps under my skin. She might not be ours, but there could be worse news even than that. My stomach heaves. 'Without that, I might feel like you do.' Jeff moves his hand a fraction so that his fingertips are resting on mine. The gesture isn't very him, it is too tentative, but in it I find some understanding. 'I might hide away. Run away. We could pack up and go where Tom Truby would never find us, but *if* she has a genetic cancer gene—' His words catch in his throat, almost hiccup out. Pain is so primitive and awe-inspiring. He continues. 'But *if* she has the gene, he might be a help, after what he's been through with his wife. He'll know things we don't.'

'Aggghh.' The sound I make is enormous, animal. I bury my head in the pillow to try to stop it coming out but it throws itself around the room anyway. Katherine might have a cancer gene. Unbearable. 'What shall we do? What shall we do?'

I feel for Jeff. I know that my hysteria is not helping the situation at all, but I can't behave better. It's beyond me. I simply can't do what is expected of me. I need him to have answers.

'We'll do the DNA test first. A step at a time.'

'No, no, no,' I groan into my pillow.

'What can I do to help?' Jeff strokes my head, the way I stroke Katherine's when she's ill.

'Say it isn't true,' I plead.

He won't do as I ask but instead states, 'We have to know. We have no choice but to face this.' I suppose part of me is relieved he sounds confident about what we should do; another part of me thinks what he is proposing is impossible. How can he ask so much of me?

'Then?'

'Then, I don't know. Then we'll decide what to do next.' He leans forward and kisses my head.

Slowly, I nod. What choice do I have? 'If it turns out as he says it will, you know—' I won't say the words. 'Then we could tell her she's adopted. We could still run away with her.' I grab Jeff's hand and squeeze it tightly. 'We can't let Tom Truby meet her, you understand that, don't you? Because if he meets her he'll want her. Naturally, he will, she's so wonderful,' I finish breathlessly.

Jeff looks confused. 'What about Olivia?' I stare at him, unable to understand his comment. Does he mean Tom Truby won't want Katherine because he has Olivia? Or is he suggesting we might want to meet Olivia? I daren't ask him to clarify. Even the tremor of the thought of meeting Olivia seems like a betrayal of Katherine. I can't begin to deal with that right now. It's too painful, too complex.

'I don't care about Olivia. *Katherine* is my daughter, it's as simple as that. You don't need to confuse things.'

I can imagine how it will be for Jeff. He is solidly middle class; he attended a selective grammar school where boys were drilled into having a sense of community, a stiff upper lip and a desire to act responsibly. Jeff will always do the decent thing. He overpays at honesty bars, he buys books at full price from independent booksellers, he clears the snow from the elderly neighbours' path before he does ours. I've always loved this about him. 'Sod you, and sod doing the right thing!' I snap. Jeff looks at me with a complex expression somewhere between disappointment and disbelief.

I'm sick with shame and need. I let a silence settle around us. After a few moments I ask, 'Can we do it without her knowing? The DNA test. There's no point in alarming her.'

'I don't know.' He must catch something in the look on my face that makes him think better of such brutal honesty. 'Yes, yes, I'm sure we can. Then that will probably be the end of it,' he declares firmly.

I feel something in me shift, a speck of relief supplied by Jeff. A step at a time, yes. Tom Truby might be mistaken. His birth daughter might be with another family. The hospital records could be wrong. There could have been another Caucasian girl born around those dates. Katherine is ours. She is. She *is*. I will not – cannot – accept anything else.

Yet.

And, God knows, this thought is an unwelcome one. There was something about Tom Truby that was familiar from the very first moment I saw him. Katherine has dark auburn hair, but then so does Jeff. Both men and my daughter have brown eyes. Katherine's are almond-shaped. They seem to rest in her face with a sort of nonchalance which I've always found irresistibly beguiling, especially when they sparkle with happiness or excitement. She has the most spectacular eyelashes; I've joked that, when she slept as a baby, they brushed her cheekbones. Jeff's eyes are much smaller; he doesn't have noteworthy eyelashes. When I pushed and jabbed Tom in the hallway, shoved him out of the door, he'd closed his eyes, as though batting away my agony, shielding himself from it; I suppose he has enough of his own. I noticed his eyelashes and then, when he opened his eyes to plead silently with me ...

I saw Katherine.

## Thirty Years Ago

*Straight after the maths exam, instead of using the lunchtime to revise her French verbs in the school library, Alison ran all the way home. She grabbed her money box off the windowsill with shaking fingers. It was a ceramic pig with flowers on its back; she'd had it for ever, her gran had bought it for her. She prised out the rubber stopper and shook the contents on to the bed, carefully counting out the coins, feeling somehow ashamed and grubby that she was dragging the cute little gift, a symbol of her childhood, into this horror. She needed a Clearblue home pregnancy test; there were adverts for it in all the teen magazines she picked up in the common room. Thank goodness – otherwise, she wouldn't have known what to do. The idea of going to a doctor was horrifying.*

*She caught the bus into town, knowing she'd miss her French exam, but how could she even think of turning up to it now? Besides, while going to the local chemist would have been quicker, she couldn't risk it; the woman who worked in there knew her dad. She went to Boots but still had to ask for the test over the counter. A middle-aged man served her; there wasn't anyone else. He looked concerned, pushed his glasses up his nose and put the test in a plastic bag. It cost a fortune! She could have bought a new skirt from the Saturday market for that. The results took thirty minutes. A three-step process using a dipstick and a small tray.*

*Of course, there was always the hope she'd done the test wrong. She hadn't used the first pee of the day.*

*Of course, there was no hope at all.*

*She turned up to the majority of the remainder of her exams but she might as well have not bothered. She couldn't concentrate. All she could think about was that her dad was going to kill her. Probably throw her out. How sad and disappointed Steve's mum would look. Steve's older brother had been 'trapped'; it was the stuff of family legend. Apparently, the girl was 'no better than she ought to be'. That marriage hadn't lasted more than*

*eighteen months after the baby was born. That girl had taken the baby away somewhere. Hull, they thought. None of the family ever saw or heard from her. The whole thing made Steve's mother cry. Alison didn't want to make her cry. She was alone.*

## 6

Sometimes in life we do things we're not very proud of. Even nice people do. People pretend to like their boss more than they in fact do because they want a promotion. People send texts full of elaborate lies about traffic, illness or workload to avoid a commitment, rather than just saying, 'I fancy a night in watching TV.' People have affairs and break the hearts of their spouses after twenty years of marriage. Sometimes, we're not very good at all.

Jeff and I did not tell Katherine the real reason we rubbed a cotton-bud stick on the inside of her cheek, twenty times. We told her that Jeff had been invited to go on that programme on TV, *Who Do You Think You Are?*, where ancestral DNA searches are quite common, and Jeff is occasionally asked to be on such TV shows; he was once on *Pointless* and he turned down *University Challenge* because of a clash in his diary. Like all lies, it was a mistake. Even the lie 'No, your bum does not look big in those jeans' is a mistake, because you might save your friend's feelings for a fleeting second in the sweaty changing room on a damp Saturday afternoon but there will come a point when a bunch of builders snigger at her as she walks down the street and she'll know you lied. Illogically, she won't be furious with the builders. It will be your fault. Lying is wrong but, at the time, this lie seemed, if not right, then at least not as wrong as everything else. Easier, I suppose.

Jeff and I also rubbed swabs on the inside of our cheeks. Contrary to popular belief, it is not saliva that is tested; the swabbing collects cheek cells. The process is simple and streamlined. Designed to bring fast assurance or, perhaps, Jeff says, like ripping off a plaster, best done quickly, with one determined stroke. I think it's more like lobbing dynamite or pressing the big red button.

It took us just a matter of minutes to find a reputable DNA-testing centre on the internet. The company we chose used a product that had apparently

been voted best 'Peace of Mind' paternity test last year.

Jeff commented, 'Can you imagine the award ceremony for that prize?'  
'Hardly the Oscars,' I murmured.

I have to admit, it was a well-thought-through website, designed to lull you into a sense of security, with lovely melodic piano music on the videos, which were narrated by accessible types in white coats. The site advertised the services of an accredited testing laboratory boasting lots of certificates. There were pictures of gurgling, chubby babies and beautiful parents snuggling into their (or someone else's) offspring. The text was littered with reassuring words like 'confidence', 'alpha', 'certainty', 'reassurance'.

Yet the site was utterly at odds with how I felt about everything, and it made me furious.

Fury had been simmering, ever present, since Tom Truby burst into our life. I have no sense of what is happening to us. I'd been relegated back into being a stupid person with a messy life. It isn't fair. I've worked so hard to be the opposite. From the moment I knew I was pregnant with Jeff's baby all I ever wanted was to be a devoted, perfect mum. I have been entirely absorbed by it, I've abandoned myself to it. I've given up so much, and happily.

I won't give her up.

Despite the company's best efforts and their assurances that the emphasis is on the emotional well-being of the clients, everything about the process seemed grubby and sad. The paternity-test kit could be sent direct to our home or to an address of our choice, in discreet packaging. The confidential results would be available the next working day. The results are one hundred per cent accurate. There could be no arguing with them.

We so ferociously wanted to believe that Katherine was our child biologically; we hoped the whole thing would go away. We believed we could test her, get the result and forget the entire, terrible incident. Just go back to being as we were. I see now that we were burying our heads in the sand. The eyes. The eyelashes. Her long, lean body, so unlike my short, wide one. Katherine got really excited about the idea of going on TV, and so we had to tell her that wasn't going to happen.

Oh, and that she wasn't our daughter.

Some parents hate the school parents' night; they approach it with trepidation. They feel terrified and patronised; spun back to their own lamentable childhoods, full of disappointment and frustration. Everything they have achieved as adults dissolves, everything they've failed to achieve is magnified when they face a teacher who is going to tell them that their child lacks focus, is disruptive in class and is unlikely to realise their full potential because they are currently distracted by their latest crush.

Not us.

Katherine is amazing. She has always been the sort of girl the teachers describe as 'a pleasure to teach'. She's a bright all-rounder, besides playing lacrosse at county level; she gets decent grades across the board – and when I say 'decent', I mean in the top ten per cent. Yet she's not nauseating. Not everything comes easily to her, there are subjects she really has to work at, but the fact is she does. She works extremely hard, with very little prompting from us. Her teachers declare that she can be relied upon to 'have a go'; they universally agree she's enthusiastic, sensible, respected, popular. They don't seem to have noticed the Dolly Bridge situation or, if they have, they don't think it's all that important.

And the thing is, Katherine *is* lovely. She's not vain or sneering, she's genuinely kind and modest. She has good manners which come from empathy and respect rather than smarm or cynicism. She's human, so I've occasionally seen her struggle with jealousy, but that's the point: she *struggles* with it. She doesn't give in to it, she acknowledges it and then puts it away, even goes so far as to congratulate the girl who scored the winning goal for the opposing team and grudgingly admire the girl who gained a higher mark in the school test. Look, I'm not saying she's perfect but she's as damn close as anyone I've ever known. I'm certain that, if the world were populated with Katherines, it would be a wonderful place.

She takes it badly.

‘You are fucking kidding, right?’ I’ve never heard her swear before. ‘You have got to be absolutely fucking kidding,’ she says again.

I let it go. She has just been told her parents are not her parents. Sometimes there just aren’t reasonable words.

‘No, darling, I’m sorry, we’re not. Why would we kid about such a thing?’ murmurs Jeff.

‘How do you know?’

‘A man came round. Your biological father. He told us.’

I hadn’t wanted to tell Katherine this, but even Jeff, who makes up stories for a living, couldn’t think of a convincing enough tale to explain away the situation. My idea of telling her she’s adopted is not realistic, I see that now. How would we have suddenly discovered that she needs a DNA test in order to see whether she may develop a genetic cancer? And, while that might avoid the whole ‘other family’ issue for the moment, somewhere along the line she would certainly want to know more about her origins. One lie would inevitably lead to another. We agreed it would be an impossible way to live.

‘Just some nutter. Why are you listening to him?’ Her voice is high-pitched and squeaky, her usual crisp, plummy tones lost to panic.

‘That’s what we hoped, but we’ve had a DNA test done. Firstly, one that – sadly – proved that you’re not ours, biologically, and then another which categorically proved you’re his, biologically.’ I notice that Jeff is very careful to repeat the word ‘biologically’; that sentence would be unbearable otherwise. Tom Truby sensitively offered up his and Olivia’s DNA so that we could be absolutely sure. There’s no room for doubt.

‘Why did you tell me? You bloody, bloody idiots! Why did I have to know?’ Terror and insecurity sluice across her face, her eyes look bleak and betrayed. She seems to be taking to this swearing thing. I get it. I don’t mind that she thinks we’re idiots. I think we are, too. For days now I’ve been going over and over this. How could I have let it happen? How did I not know? And now, now that it has happened, how should we handle it? How can I protect her? We seem so inadequate. ‘Couldn’t you have just shut the hell up? Why did you tell me?’ she pleads, turning to me.

‘Because there’s something else.’ I want to stay silent. To never, ever have to say these words, but I can’t leave it all up to Jeff. It isn’t fair. ‘There might be – just might be – a complication.’

‘A complication? What could be more fucking complicated than this?’

‘There might be an illness.’ I hold her with my eyes.

‘A genetic illness?’

‘Yes.’ She is open-mouthed, literally gasping air as though she can’t breathe. Jeff reaches out to put his hand on her arm but she roughly shakes him off and he retracts, scorched. You see, she’s so like me. How can she not be mine?

‘What sort of illness? What is it?’ she demands.

Slowly, because no parent should ever have to utter these words. It’s just not fair. ‘A mutated gene that might lead to cancer.’

Again Jeff moves towards her, again she pushes him away, but I see something flicker in her face that suggests she doesn’t want us to be so easily set aside. I stand up and put my arms around her, encircling her in a big bear-hug. She forcefully squirms and struggles, like she used to when she was about two and didn’t want to go into her pushchair. Then, she’d make her body rigid and uncooperative. Now, I clasp her tightly and feel her fight beneath my arms. ‘No, no. No!’ she says over and over again, as I have in the past week. We don’t want this change, we don’t want this disruption to our lovely lives. After some moments she accepts that I’m not going to let go of her and she collapses into my embrace. Sobbing.

There wasn’t a good way to tell her.

There isn’t anything good about any of it.

She cries for ages. Huge, dramatic sobs eventually give way to small gasps and then, finally, fat, silent tears. Teenagers are intense at the best of times. Katherine has been known to cry if the neighbour’s cat brings a dead mouse into the house, but her reaction doesn’t strike me as over the top or hammed up. She is untethered. At first, she doesn’t ask any questions. She curls up on the sofa, her head on my lap, presumably thinking it through as best she can. I stroke her hair, her back, her shoulders. I repeat again and again, *It’s OK, it’s going to be OK*, but not aloud, just in my head, because I can’t promise her anything and I don’t want to tell her lies. I don’t know if it is going to be OK, I am simply praying, as mothers do.

Snotty and red-eyed, she is eventually persuaded to eat. Jeff has warmed a carton of soup, he’s sliced big chunks of bread and gone to the effort of putting oil and balsamic vinegar in little bowls, setting out napkins and placemats. I wonder what he’s thinking but somehow Katherine gets it: he’s trying to cheer her up, trying to act as normal as possible. It is the little things that keep us going, and he is trying to do that. At the table she asks

us the questions that had to come, question after question, because each answer we give just means more to explain. What sort of cancer? What does the test for BRCA1 or BRCA2 mutation entail? If she has the mutated gene, what are the chances of her getting ovarian or breast cancer? Are there any preventative measures? What will we do next?

We answer her as best we can, while trying not to scare her. I've done a lot of research into the BRCA1 and 2 genes in the past week; I don't have much good news. Since her biological mother had the harmful gene mutation, Katherine has a fifty per cent chance of inheriting it. With it, she has a fifty-five to sixty-five per cent chance of developing breast cancer and a thirty-nine per cent chance of developing ovarian cancer. Mutations in BRCA1 and BRCA2 have been associated with increased risks of Fallopian-tube cancer, peritoneal cancer and pancreatic cancer. Breast cancers associated with these mutations tend to develop at younger ages than sporadic breast cancers. I see Katherine wearing a hospital gown and having chemotherapy. I see her hair, currently artlessly swept up and casually pinned, falling out in clumps on her pillow, her eyebrows disappearing. I see her body wasting away. Her own cells attacking her. A vile civil war inside my beautiful girl's beautiful body. No.

I focus on telling her the easy bit, the fact that the tests which check for all possible mutations in both genes is relatively simple and will only require a blood sample. The sample is sent to a laboratory for analysis. It usually takes about a month to get the results.

'Not that we should rush into you taking this test,' I caution. 'Counselling is recommended before any genetic test for an inherited cancer syndrome is undertaken.'

'We'd better get that counsellor on speed dial,' she mutters.

The elephant in the room.

There is a pause, a space while we all remind ourselves that, as well as the risk of the mutated gene, we have another immediate, immense problem. Not the cancer – the Trubys.

I ignore its great, grey leathery hide. 'We need to give a lot of thought as to how you'll feel about taking the test. The impact of the results...' I say softly. Katherine keeps her eyes on her soup. 'Your dad and I are here for you.' As I utter the words, I hate myself; they are so inadequate, so over-used. She won't look at me but I don't doubt she's thinking the same. I

press on. 'But a health-care professional who is experienced in cancer genetics is the best person to guide us all, I think.'

Truthfully, I don't know where to start. Katherine pulls her huge eyes away from the soup and stares at me. Can she see my thoughts? Does she know I'm torn? I like the idea of there being a counsellor, someone to hold her hand, to guide us. Yet at the same time I am horribly uncomfortable about involving the authorities. We've never had the need for social workers, counsellors, lawyers; now I imagine we'll need one of each. Besides, the sites I've read say that there are no preventative measures anyway, all that is on offer is enhanced screening, which might lead to earlier detection. The better screening would begin only when Katherine turns twenty-five. Prophylactic surgery, which is doctor-speak for risk-reducing surgery, is not something I can even contemplate right now, let alone mention. I know I have a lot more research to do on chemoprevention, the use of drugs or vitamins to try to reduce the risk of cancer. It's all very complex.

Were we right to land all this on her?

Jeff said we didn't really have any choice. Tom Truby has telephoned three times since he visited. I'm not even sure how he got our number; we are ex-directory. When I mentioned this to Jeff he shrugged and said it was easy enough to look up that sort of thing online. It doesn't look as though he is going away. This isn't a secret we can keep. 'Only alligators get to care for their young by holding them in their mouths, Alison. Katherine isn't an alligator,' said Jeff.

'No, she's my little girl.'

'She isn't a little girl any more.'

I know. She is in the middle of her GCSE courses and she is as tall as I am but, as I look at her blotchy face, red and raw with tears, she seems very young. Just a breath away from the seven year old who fell out of her friend's treehouse and broke her arm. I remember that incident as though it happened yesterday. Her shock, her pain. I remember her turning her great, wet eyes to me. 'Help me, Mummy. Fix me,' she'd said, her arm hanging limp and unnatural at her side. I bundled her into my car, not even waiting for an ambulance. I don't know to this day if that was the right choice, but I simply had to do something. I sped through the streets. She was seen by a doctor within forty-five minutes of falling. I'd been able to help.

Not like this, after all, then.

‘It’s all so huge,’ says Katherine.

‘I know, it’s very confusing,’ I admit. I grimace at my woeful understatement. Even the most reliable scientific sites are peppered with words such as ‘might’, ‘could’, ‘possible’ and ‘probable’. Nothing is certain. We are standing on a thin sheet of ice and it’s cracking beneath us.

‘I know one thing for sure.’ She juts out her chin, a gesture I’m achingly familiar with. One that signifies defiance and determination but also masks vulnerability.

‘What’s that?’

‘I don’t want to meet them.’

‘Right.’ I daren’t breathe, daren’t move. I remain purposely expressionless, like the subject of a Victorian photograph.

‘You’re my mum and dad. I don’t need anyone else.’

I can’t pretend this doesn’t please me. The relief is enormous. Selfish, maybe, but colossal, without a doubt.

‘The Three Musketeers,’ Jeff murmurs. It is a name we gave ourselves years ago. Dauntless, brave, self-contained.

‘Exactly,’ declares Katherine. ‘They can’t make me see them, can they?’

‘No one will make you do anything you don’t want to do.’ I rush to reassure her.

That night, in bed, Jeff and I lie in the dark, facing the ceiling. Not touching. This disaster lies between us, taking up real space. Katherine is, hopefully, asleep; she is exhausted from the crying and all the discussion. Her room is next to ours; I keep an ear out for signs of restlessness or nightmares, as I have for fifteen years. I think back through the things that have kept me awake in the past. When we first brought her home from hospital, like most new mums I agonised over every decision. Should she sleep in our room or her own room and was it safe to bring her into our bed for her night-time feeds? My mother wasn’t one to offer direction, so I turned to manuals; they were full of conflicting, confusing advice. Some preached the importance of keeping your child close; others insisted on the importance of nurturing independence from the outset. I was torn. Some said to swaddle your baby for security; others suggested this was barbaric and would certainly lead to heat rash. There were paragraphs in those books which made me feel physically ill, the ones that mentioned cot death and accidental smothering; I often held a mirror to Katherine’s mouth so I could see her breath on it. I moved her into her own room when she was three

months old but I remember often falling to sleep on the floor in her nursery because, once I had made the decision to nurture her independence, I discovered *I wasn't quite ready for it*. I asked my mother if it had been the same for her with the boys; I couldn't bring myself to ask whether it had been the same with me because I'd only be burnt by the answer. She simply laughed. Not a cosy, comforting, conspiratorial laugh but a mocking one that said, *You're so soft, you are*.

Don't get me wrong, I love being a parent – nothing has ever given me greater pleasure – but right from the start I've also been plagued by worry. No one warns you just how much there is to be concerned about. Did I wean her too early? Did I choose the right pram? Have I done anything right? And it didn't ever get easier. I thought it would, but my experience was simply that the moment I stopped worrying about one developmental stage another would leap up and hit me in the face.

I've lost sleep over imminent tests, friendship groups, party arrangements, fixture picks and, many a time, simply because I was waiting for her to fall asleep so that the tooth fairy could visit. I've lost night after night staring at the ceiling, sick with fear as I imagined the million ways I might lose her. What if she wandered on to a street without looking both ways and into a speeding car? Stop. Or she could be snatched by a paedophile, a murderer, locked somewhere unspeakable. You read about it. My God, how do they print it? Stop. When she was younger and children would, from time to time, go missing, I would howl. How did the parents bear it? Did they pray they'd find the little body of their child rather than have a lifetime imagining a dank basement with a stained mattress, the chains? Or did they learn to live in an infernal eternal cocktail of hope and despair? Stop.

Later I worried about more banal things: a failed exam, a missed trophy, a devastatingly good-looking boy tearing out her heart. As she gets older, no doubt my thoughts will turn to other threats: an unattended drink leading to a gang of middle-aged men in a hotel, or a friend request online that ends with her body in a skip in a lonely street. I don't want to think about these things, but I do. I've been so careful. I chopped her food into tiny pieces so she wouldn't choke, I've had her inoculated against everything going, I taught her to stop, look and listen, bought helmets and knee pads, served wholegrain and never processed food, warned her about stranger danger, and I always drive her if she needs to be anywhere.

I want to scream. I thought I was being so vigilant and attentive. I've tried so hard to protect her from every conceivable risk or threat. But I was blind.

I lie on my back. Jeff is on his side now, facing me. His eyes are closed but I know, because I'm so familiar with his breathing patterns, that he's not asleep. 'I have wasted so much time being anxious about the little things and the various possible horrors, and now this. *This.*' He reaches out and puts his hand on my shoulder. This. I could never have imagined. 'I have to get used to the fact that she's not mine. Not by blood.'

'No, not in fact,' he says with a sigh.

'Yes, *in fact*, just not by blood.'

I should be ironing, or cooking, or cleaning the fridge, but I'm not, I'm staring at the TV. It's not even switched on. Jeff is not at home; he's gone into London to use the British Library. He spends a lot of his time either there or at the local university library. He has a visiting professorship at the uni and so likes to show his face now and again. I can't believe, in this day and age, that there is anything Jeff needs to research that he can't find on the internet. When I put this to him, he says he likes to write in a library, surrounded by great works produced by stupendous minds. He says it's inspiring. It's hard to think that a comment such as that is anything other than an affectation, but writers can be very affected – at least Jeff does not insist on wearing a hat at all times, dyeing his hair purple or quoting Shakespeare's sonnets – so I let it slide. Besides, it is a relief to hear he is writing again. A relief that he's not going to renege on his publishing contract. That's a complication we can do without right now.

And it's a relief that he's out of the house.

In truth, right now we're finding one another's company a bit hard going. We're not rowing exactly, but we're snapping at one another. Almost constantly. I did not know that it was possible to argue over the way a person stacks the dishwasher – or the fact that they fold their dressing gown. I've watched Jeff do this for years, but it has only just started to bother me. I mean, really, who folds a dressing gown? Most people simply throw it down somewhere, on the floor, or a chair, or perhaps hang it on the back of a door. What am I talking about? Most people don't even wear dressing gowns: it's so old, so settled, so annoying!

Deep breath. We're under a lot of stress.

We have yet to have Katherine tested for the defective gene, but she is in counselling. She didn't want to go to a counsellor but we thought – well, Jeff, in particular, thought – that she needed to talk to a professional.

‘All the websites recommend counselling before you take the test and I know that, if there’s one thing you like better than academic achievement, it’s an authoritative website giving direction,’ said Jeff.

‘Very funny.’

In the end I agreed to it, but as I drove Katherine to her first session I suggested that we didn’t need to go into too much detail.

‘By which you mean?’

‘Well, our situation is complex. We don’t want to get sidetracked.’ I risked glancing at her, trying to work out if she understood what I was saying.

‘What about “honesty is the best policy”? You’re always telling me that.’

Sometimes it’s a bit inconvenient that my daughter takes me at my word and can quote that word back to me.

‘I’m not asking you to lie, I’m suggesting you omit.’

‘So honesty is only important if it’s people – specifically, *me* – being honest with *you*. Any other sort of honesty is negotiable.’

I tried to ignore her tetchiness. ‘I mean, it’s probably easier all round if we just say you are adopted and that you’ve just found out, rather than mention the—’ I hesitated, still unsure how to refer to our predicament: ‘the mix-up.’

‘OK. If you like.’

Jeff thinks that the counsellor ought to know the full story; he said that we are adding to Katherine’s sense of confusion by not talking everything through properly. Maybe. However, I’m terrified the story will be leaked to the school, to the papers. This is just the sort of thing the tabloids like to jump on: a hospital cock-up. I can imagine the headlines: CHANGELINGS: THE PRINCESS AND THE PAUPER – not that Katherine is a princess, and nor is Olivia a pauper, but when has the truth ever got in the way of a juicy headline? I’m simply not ready for that.

‘Who would leak it?’ Jeff asked.

‘The counsellor.’

‘She can’t. Everything that’s said in the sessions is confidential. Isn’t there an oath or something? The Hippocratic oath?’

‘That’s doctors. I looked it up. Confidentiality is not absolute in counselling sessions. There are exceptions.’

‘What sort of exceptions?’

‘Public interest. Counsellors may need to make a referral to the police or social services when there is a serious risk of imminent harm to their clients or to others.’

‘That’s not the case with us.’

‘When a client is seriously mentally ill or in cases of child or elder abuse.’

‘Well, that isn’t us either. Is it? You’re talking rot.’

I don’t know. Could anyone think it was abuse that I’d brought the wrong baby home from hospital? It was certainly careless.

‘I’m just not ready for it, Jeff, can’t you understand that?’

‘This isn’t about you, though, is it?’

‘It’s about her deciding when she’s ready to take the test for the mutated gene.’

‘Yes, but what about equipping Katherine for the moment she meets the Trubys?’

‘Katherine doesn’t want anything to do with them. She’s said as much.’

Jeff sighed dramatically – he looked caught between exasperation and pity – then left the room. Recently, we’ve all spent a lot of time in separate rooms. I finally see a use for our big house beyond advertising Jeff’s success.

I have not felt a need to return Tom Truby’s telephone calls. We have enough to deal with. He’s becoming a pest. I fear it’s only a matter of time until Katherine picks up the phone and it’s him; although, in fairness, on all but one occasion he has confined his calls to times when Katherine is at school. Noticing his thoughtfulness is somehow upsetting. At least, unsettling. I don’t want him to be thoughtful, although obviously I don’t want him to be unreasonable. I don’t know what I want.

The doorbell rings, jolting me out of my stupor. When I open the door my first thought is that he looks dreadful. Possibly a fraction thinner than when I saw him last, and certainly more anxious.

‘Hello, Tom.’

‘You told her,’ he says, not bothering with any social niceties.

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘She comes to our house, stands outside, watches us.’

I feel myself sway. I think of my gran saying, ‘Well, he could have knocked me over with a feather’ and for the first time I understand the quaint, now painfully accurate, turn of phrase.

‘That’s impossible. She’s said she doesn’t want anything to do with you. She’s sworn she only wants one family. Us.’ I’m so dismayed, shaken, I don’t even consider how rude this must sound. I just have to keep him at bay. *Them* at bay. The siblings, too. That’s all I have to do.

But he shakes his head and shrugs, sorry for me. His shrug is something Katherine does. Just the right shoulder. I thought gestures were learnt, not inherent, but this proves otherwise. I’m hardly surprised to be wrong. I’m always wrong. The shrug jolts something in my heart. Suddenly, I am awash with a huge sense of intimacy. It’s peculiar, because I feel I know Tom better than I do. I realise that this comes from the fact that he’s Katherine’s biological father. They are undeniably alike. Even though he is trouble, he is somehow my trouble. ‘You had better come in.’

I make him coffee. This time he accepts an Americano. As I hand the cup to him, he wraps his fingers around it, although it’s not cold in here. I notice he has elegant fingers; he probably plays an instrument, the piano or the violin. Maybe even the cello, like Katherine. I can’t bring myself to ask. Her playing the cello has always been such a source of pride to me. We’d thought she got her musical talent from Jeff’s mum. I invite him to go through to the living room and have a seat there but we don’t make the move; instead, we end up sitting on the stools at the breakfast bar. Tom can’t tear his eyes away from the photos on the wall.

Eventually, reluctantly, I offer: ‘Take a proper look.’

He leaps out of his seat and dashes to the wall. His eyes drink her in. I can’t stop him. I tell myself that his enjoyment of the photos can’t diminish them for me; he can’t take away my memories. He can’t take away my daughter. Can he? ‘She looks a lot like my other two.’ I can hear excitement in his voice, but I don’t know how to reply. He suddenly catches himself and blushes, ‘Well, you know, I mean my oldest and youngest.’ I wonder whether he has a photo of Olivia with him but I don’t ask. I *am* curious. Certainly, I am. Late at night I find my mind drifts to the motherless girl and I wonder how she’s managing with all of this. Who is she talking to? I hope there’s someone. But I haven’t got a right to both of them. I have to choose. So I don’t indulge my curiosity by asking to see a photo of her. I need to keep my distance.

I have dozens of photo albums stuffed with every single stage of Katherine’s life. I keep them on shelves in the living room, always close by. They are ordered by the colour of the album cover, not chronology, which is

fun, because whenever I reach for one I'm treated to an unexpected slice of time travel. She might be three years old, pink and plump at EuroDisney, breathless and beaming at a fairy-tale princess, or she might be eleven, smart in her school uniform, serious and eager, or eight, wide-eyed, face sticky as she devours ice cream. I could offer to show him. There are so many, if he sat through them he wouldn't think he'd missed out on a single moment. I can't bring myself to mention them.

I'm not ready for that yet. Sharing her.

I'm not ready for Katherine to have the gene test and, to my shame, I'm not ready to see a photo of Olivia, let alone meet her. I'm not ready for anything to change. I'm not sure when I ever will be.

After a while he comes back to his seat and I have to ask. 'How many times has she been to your house?'

'I'm not certain. I've only seen her once, but Olivia says she's seen her a few times.'

'When?'

'Well, I saw her one time when I came home from work early.'

'But Katherine goes to school in Chatterford.' Chatterford is south of our house by twenty-five minutes; the Trubys live in Warringdon, north of us by twenty minutes. 'I drop her off and pick her up.' My voice trails away as I understand. Katherine has been playing truant. I feel panic that Tom Truby has drawn the same conclusion. What must he think of that? That I lack control or, worse still, knowledge, about my daughter. My mind flies to court cases, to him telling a jury that I'm not vigilant, not careful. That I'm an unfit mother. And I am! How have I failed to notice she's playing truant? Why hasn't anyone from the school called? They have quite strict rules about absenteeism. Katherine must be writing notes to excuse herself, possibly from my email account. As I drop her off at school, I can only assume that, from there, she takes a train and then maybe a bus to the Trubys'.

I know exactly where they live. I looked them up on Google Maps. I zoomed in on the satellite photo, trying to distinguish their red clay roof from all the others in their dense street. The thought of Katherine catching public transport into new, uncharted areas alarms me. How did she get their address? I had put it away in a drawer in my dressing table, hidden in amongst all the lipstick stubs and ancient eye shadows I've lost interest in. Did she stumble across it or root it out? Why don't I know? Maybe she

checked my history on my computer and put two and two together. She's sharp enough. But does she do that sort of thing? Snooping? Truancy? Lying? I sense that Tom has worked all this out in a flash. He seems knowing – worldlier. More prepared. I hate the feeling he knows more about Katherine than I do. I want him to think of us as – well, perfect. Perfectly happy. Perfectly content. Perfectly impregnable.

Mostly that.

Not that I can say Tom is exactly battering down the door of our sanctuary; it's more that he's seeping in. Seeping underneath, and over; past the hinges.

'Well, Olivia must be playing truant, too,' I say sharply.

'Yes, she must. I'll have to talk to her.' He isn't defensive, the air around him is more defeated and I feel unexpectedly sorry for him. It must be difficult bringing up three kids on his own. Teenagers aren't easy at the best of times and this is by no means what anyone would describe as the best of times. His vulnerability somehow allows me to admit to mine.

'I thought Katherine was handling everything quite well. I wanted to believe that. I shouldn't have been fooled. It just never crossed my mind that she *did* want to see you. Why didn't she just say so? I'd have taken her to you. We could have done it properly.'

'I guess she didn't want to hurt you,' he says softly.

I am in pain, actual physical pain. He rests his hand on my arm for a brief moment and squeezes it. It helps; it's a comfort. The minute I feel as much, terror shoots through my body. I don't want his comfort. Do I? I feel lonely, threatened and insecure, and it's all his fault. I don't want it but maybe I need it. Jeff certainly isn't offering any. I stand up and open the kitchen window. I need air, cool air. I take deep gulps. There's a pain in my forehead and in my neck, a tight throb, it's been there since Tom first visited three weeks ago and no amount of paracetamol can shift it.

'And Olivia? How is she managing?'

'Pretty well, I think. On the whole.'

'Yet she's also skipping school.'

'Well, yes, but—' He doesn't finish the sentence.

'What?' I prompt.

'Well, she only has the swap to worry about. At least she's free of the mutated gene.'

‘And the fact she’s lost her mother,’ I add with a deep sigh. Tom shrugs. His gesture is almost callous, but I understand: there’s only so much he can bear, only so much he can deal with. They are all grieving. Besides, Olivia hasn’t been hanging around our house. I’d know if she had because we’re home most of the day. She doesn’t seem to want or need us. We both fall silent. This situation is too horrific for relative strangers to negotiate.

He coughs. ‘Have you done the test?’

‘We’re not rushing into it,’ I snap. ‘She’s in counselling. We will do it, at some point. When the time is right.’ He nods. Doesn’t push but stares at me with her eyes, wounded, and I feel bad for snapping. He must be worried, too. He knows more about this destructive gene than most. ‘I’ll let you know when she does.’

That should be it. He’s done what he said he came to do. He’s told us Katherine’s playing truant; he must know I will respond to it appropriately. He can go now. Get out of our life.

Except that Katherine secretly visits them.

‘Have you spoken to her?’ I ask carefully.

‘Not yet.’

So he’s going to. The pain in my head and my neck sharpens; it hits me in my gut, too. I feel the strength of him. The determination. He’s planning on having Katherine in his life. He’s not going to go away. I feel breathless and sick. Caught. ‘I thought we ought to manage the situation between us.’ His suggestion is reasonable yet I recoil from it. I’m backed into a corner, I see that. If I don’t agree to work with him then he’ll still see Katherine, they’ll find a way; that much is obvious.

‘I thought perhaps we could do something together, all of us. Some quality time,’ he offers.

Inwardly, I scowl. I’m being managed – not manipulated exactly, but certainly controlled, and I resent it. I hate the expression ‘quality time’, as I hate the expression ‘me time’ and ‘family time’. I don’t understand why people divide it all up. All my time is intrinsically linked to Katherine and Jeff. It’s about them, it’s about me and it’s certainly quality. Whether I’m with them or apart from them, they are my priorities and that, in my opinion, is how it should be. I don’t have to carve out time to make them feel valued, they simply *are*. They are valued when I’m shopping, cooking, cleaning or lying on a beach mat in the south of France. They are my

reason. Katherine, particularly, because she is my greatest achievement, my triumph, my legacy.

Or at least I thought she was.

‘That might be a bit much,’ I grumble.

‘Well, then, just the girls and the parents. I can leave the siblings at home, although they are, quite naturally, keen to meet her.’

‘Maybe.’

Instead of settling, he pushes. ‘Although I think we are all guilty of underestimating our children from time to time ... are you quite sure Katherine won’t be able to cope with meeting Callum and Amy, too? I’d like to have the whole family involved from the get-go if I can. You can imagine: they’ve been through so much. They’re very excited about this.’

I doubt his kids are excited about this and I’m certain I don’t underestimate Katherine, I’m just trying to protect her, but all the same I see the situation for what it is. I look at this lean, determined man and feel a wave of defeat wash over me. He’s dogged. I bet he wore this expression when he was fighting for test results, painkillers and even when he was letting his wife go. Dignified. Untiring. Indomitable. He’s sick of the word ‘no’. He’s not going to accept it. Even though I hate his expression, I fear I will be spending ‘quality time’ with him and his children. I don’t have a choice. I shrug, with both shoulders. The way I do, not the way Katherine does, and even that seems poignant. He must take my gesture as agreement because he suggests the following Wednesday evening and starts to walk towards the door. The most I can hope for is a stay of execution.

‘Katherine has lacrosse training on Wednesday.’

‘Then Thursday.’

‘She has a music lesson on Thursday. The cello, from four forty-five until five forty-five and then debating society from seven thirty until nine fifteen.’

‘Friday?’

‘She does a stint in the Oxfam shop after school. She volunteers there an hour a week. It’s for her Duke of Edinburgh Award.’ He bites his bottom lip and holds my gaze. Reluctantly, I say, ‘I suppose she could miss it, just this once.’

‘That would be wonderful.’ Then, I don’t know why, maybe in an attempt to flatter me or simply because it’s true, he comments. ‘She’s a very impressive girl, by the sound of it.’

I can't resist. 'Yes, she is. She's always very busy.' Her timetable is finely tuned, delicately balanced. We want the world for her. She has no time for this confusion, for another family. I don't say that. Instead I say something equally treacherous: 'She has always been too wonderful to be mine.'

'What do you mean?' His forehead furrows. It's a good look on him. His concern is sincere and disquieting.

I'm not up to much. Never was. I didn't deserve her. I should have known. I swallow the words, not allowing them to reach him because they are more honest than sensible. He will discover my faults soon enough; it's dangerous to draw attention to them now, before I have to. 'She's just so wonderful, you see? It's quite overwhelming. She has this goodness, almost a golden presence, so unlike other teenagers.' The absolute stature and vigour and charisma and proficiency of her. It's unimaginable. I smile, but I can feel the tears scratching inside my throat.

'Olivia is awesome, too, you know.' He sounds irritated, as though I've rejected his daughter. Have I? Or have I rejected mine? I nod, because it would be rude not to.

I thought I'd been given a second chance, a reward even, when Katherine was born. But it was too much to hope for.

I had to be punished.

'Friday, then, after school? We could meet at mine, it might be less awkward than somewhere public. You know, in case anyone—'

'Freaks out?'

'I was going to say "feels uncomfortable".'

We're all going to feel uncomfortable. I nod, giving in. I can see he's trying to be thoughtful.

He grins. 'Then we can go for a pizza. There's a decent little Italian restaurant, family run, just a five-minute walk from ours.' He pauses. 'Do you think that's an appropriate time for us to talk to them both about skipping school?'

I bristle. Does he think he has a say in Katherine's discipline now? Is that it? 'No, I don't. I think we both ought to handle that separately.'

'Oh, OK. Whatever you say. You're probably right.' He nods. 'The restaurant is quite a simple place but I think you'll like it. It is very family orientated. I wonder, can I ask you a favour?'

'Yes.'

‘This is the first bit of good news my family have had since Annabel’s diagnosis. I really want it to be a happy occasion.’

I stare at him, uncomprehending. How can he think this is good news? ‘Good news?’ I say.

‘Well, isn’t it? Finding an extended family.’ He beams. It’s straightforward, hopeful. I fight a surge of guilt and self-disgust. I haven’t thought of it that way. I *can’t* think of it that way. For the first time I consider that, for Tom, this is not about switching or trading children or even affections, or anything base at all. It seems that he sees this as an opportunity for his family to extend; perhaps he’s hoping we can fill the void. His optimism makes me want to do something to help him. Not hand over my daughter, but something. ‘The favour?’

‘I think it’s in everyone’s interests not to talk too much about the bad gene.’ He hesitates. ‘About Annabel’s cancer, because, after all, that—’ He breaks off and blushes.

‘Because Annabel’s fate might be Katherine’s.’ He nods and sighs sadly. ‘That’s not something I want to dwell on,’ I assure him.

‘Good.’ He looks relieved. ‘It’s probably best we don’t talk about Annabel at all. The children are still finding it very difficult.’

‘Of course, understandably.’

‘So we’ll avoid the subject.’

‘Yes, if that’s what you want.’

Annabel. She was called Annabel. I play with the name, letting it inch through my mind. I think of pretty bluebells with bouncing heads trembling in a fresh spring breeze; I think of tinkling bells, perhaps on a horse-drawn sleigh. ‘Such a lovely name,’ I mumble.

Tom nods, delight spreading across his face, loosening his shoulders and chest, somehow making him look even taller, broader. The memory of her, soothing or delighting. The thought of her being. ‘Yes, although I rarely called her that. She mostly only used Annabel at work. I called her Bel or Bella, whatever suited her in the moment. And her mother and schoolfriends called her Anna or even Annie.’ He grins at the goofiness of needing to tell me this. I understand. One name wasn’t enough for her, couldn’t contain her or get to the essence of her. She was so big. So special. Katherine’s mother.

I loathe her.

Shockingly, for a horrible moment I almost think I'm glad she's dead. I know that terrible, dark thought is something I'll never be able to confide in anyone. Not even Jeff. I've loathed the thought of Annabel since Tom first came into my life. I'm jealous of her. I'm jealous of a dead woman. How sick am I? The thing is, the way I see it, she's dead, yet she's brought nothing but trouble and pain to my door. By dying, she's left me with this cruel tangle: a daughter who isn't, strictly speaking, mine, a daughter with a gene that might ruin her life. And another girl, who is motherless, who I have given birth to.

I loathe her. Annabel, Bella, Bel, Anna and Annie, God help me, because she's stolen from me. She took the baby I bore and, worse, I think she has the power to steal from me again.

## Thirty Years Ago

*After her mother left her behind, Alison would have happily never set eyes on her again. Or maybe not happily, but she was reconciled to this being the case. She trained herself not to miss the mother she'd had, or the one she wanted. But then her father said she had to move out, said he couldn't be expected to look after her any longer, not considering everything. Sixteen, he said, was almost an adult.*

*Almost. Though not at all.*

*Alison thought of her gran; maybe if she hadn't had a stroke she'd have been a support, given her some idea what to do, how to hold it all together. But Gran had no idea about anything now, it was all she could do to support her neck; there could be no help from that direction. Alison was alone. The social workers discovered that her mother had settled just fifteen miles away from where Alison had always lived. That surprised her; she'd assumed her mother must have run far away. In many ways, it was worse that she hadn't. Alison told herself she ought to be grateful that her mother was prepared to take her in. But she wasn't. It was better than nothing, but it wasn't quite something.*

*Her mother had always had a relentless anger about her and it had long since crystallised into bitterness and cynicism. She didn't seem to like anything much in the world, not her neighbours, her dinner, the weather and certainly not her daughter. Her boys – noisy, brash, spoilt – were the only things that were ever able to bring a smile to her lips. She thought life was no better than you could expect. She expected pond scum. This latest debacle – well, she could have predicted it, at least that's what she said. Her daughter was a disgrace, a disappointment, a shame.*

*'I hope you have enough sense to know that this boyfriend of yours won't want anything to do with you.'*

*'I don't know that,' Alison muttered. She thought he might, if she explained it properly, understand that it was a genuine mistake, not a trap.*

*And maybe not even a disaster. It didn't have to be that, did it?*

*'Of course he won't. Nor his mother. You silly little slut.'* Her own mother stared, cold, cruel. Alison felt isolated, defeated. Perhaps she was right. How could she expect any support from Steve and his mum? She was an idiot. *'Don't you dare say a word to him. Don't go showing yourself up even more.'*

*'But doesn't he have a right to know?'*

*'Just keep your mouth shut, OK?'* She barked out her instruction, a snarling dog. *'You won't be seeing him again. Understand? Not if you want to live under my roof.'*

*'But he might help.'* Alison sounded feeble, unsure.

*'Help how? He's done enough.'* Her mother's look of disdain and disgust sliced through any lingering confidence Alison had in Steve. It was true he hadn't been around much over the summer. He hadn't been that sympathetic when she said she was feeling sick – and then he had had no idea why! They hadn't had sex for ages. Alison didn't feel like it any more; he said she was a spoilsport. *'How far gone are you anyways?'*

*'Four and a half months.'*

*'Well, you can't keep it.'*

*'Can't I?'*

*'Of course not. Who is going to let you look after a baby? What makes you think you could look after a baby?'*

*Nothing. She could barely look after herself. Her head hurt. She couldn't think clearly. Her mother had done nothing but yell at her since she arrived.*

*'You'll have to give it away.'*

*Her mother's opinions were so forcefully put that Alison forgot she wasn't really entitled to have any.*

*Alison found it difficult to be around her for more than quarter of an hour without losing the will to live. Her mother should never be allowed in the room with whoever was in charge of the big red button that set off all the nuclear weapons. Planet Earth would be done for.*

*Alison always dreamed that things would change. They never did. She lived in hope that the day would come when her mother put her arms around her and made her feel better.*

*It never did.*

On the way over I remind Jeff and Katherine that we really don't need to stay long, indeed, we don't actually have to eat with them; no one responds. I suggest we should have a signal: 'If any one of us plays with their right earlobe it means that we need to leave pronto. Agreed?' All I get is a self-conscious, confused shrug from Katherine. Jeff just takes hold of my hand and squeezes it the way he does when I'm getting a bit worked up on our way to a lacrosse game. Usually, at that point, he says, 'It's just a game. *Katherine's game.*' Today, I notice the lack of calming refrain.

I wonder how red and watery my eyes are, exactly. The sleeves on my jumper bulge at the cuff as I've started to stuff used tissues up there. I feel the dampness rubbing against my wrist; real, like heartbreak, and I feel so overwhelmingly sad. The sadness sits, a stone in my heart. I find it impossible to behave in a normal manner. Everything that is said is loaded; everything that is left unsaid is a regret. Katherine is being understandably but unusually monosyllabic of late. She eats her meals with one elbow on the table and her face propped in her hand, listlessly shovelling food on to her fork. I can't bring myself to remind her of her manners. When she sits with us to watch TV I catch her gazing out of the window. She's absent. Sometimes I worry she's already gone. I don't give up. I keep trying to engage her. The other day I caught her in a rare chatty mood so I took advantage of it and asked how she was getting on with her counsellor.

'OK. She wears a name tag pinned to her drooping chest, which I hate.'

'You hate her drooping chest?' My attempt at a joke goes ignored.

'No, I hate the tag. Badges, name tags, lanyards, et cetera, are just ridiculous. I think people should make enough of an impression that you remember their name when they introduce themselves. It's a bit sad to expect to be forgotten.'

She was trying to avoid my question so I forced a laugh and replied, 'Wait until you're my age, then you'll be glad of a prompt. I'm forever

forgetting people's names, and it's mortifying. Better to wear a tag and save the offence.'

'Well, there's a blessing; maybe that's not something I'm going to have to worry about.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I might not make it as far as my senior moments.'

She was sort of joking. But sort of not.

Jeff tries to take hold of Katherine's hand as we walk up the path to the house, but she shakes him off. She throws him a look: *What can you be thinking?* She's right, she can't arrive holding Daddy's hand like some little posh girl, which they've no doubt decided she is anyway. If Jeff ever knew about these sorts of social sensitivities, he's forgotten. He looks hurt. Just for a nanosecond a shadow falls across his face and all the sunlight and mischievousness vanishes. He catches my eye and throws out a thin, unconvincing grin, so then the honesty dies, too. He's been doing that a lot recently, the forced jovial face. I wish he wouldn't. His insistence that everything is *fine* and that we will all 'get through this' is hopeless. It just makes him harder to reach. How can we talk about anything candidly if he's pretending to be Pollyanna on happy pills? There's no room for me to say that I doubt everything is going to be fine.

I told Jeff about Tom's visit and Katherine's truancy whilst lying in bed. Our bed has become the scene of all our battles at the moment. We speak in hissed whispers. We used to swap sweet nothings, now it's all bitter somethings. His response was to insist that we didn't make a big thing about it; he maintained it would be a mistake to mention it at all. 'What good will it do? At best, she'll feel embarrassed and ashamed, which is stress she could do without. At worst, she'll be angry and resentful. We don't want to drive her away.'

'No, of course not, but—'

'A bit of acting up, considering everything that's happened, is normal. You have to accept, Alison, that Katherine can't be textbook ideal all the time.' I glowered at him but he didn't notice. His argument seemed infantile. A crowd-pleaser rather than the reaction of a responsible parent. 'Her actions are a cry for help. It's only natural she's curious about the Trubys. Aren't you even a little bit curious about Olivia?'

'No. Absolutely not.'

'Alison?'

‘I’m not.’ Truthfully, I am, but I can’t allow her in. There’s no room.

‘You have to drop it, Alison. I know you think she’s betrayed us by secretly visiting the Trubys.’

‘No, I don’t.’ But I do. A bit. I feel wounded.

‘Don’t make her feel like she has to choose between us and them. Wanting to know more about the Trubys doesn’t mean she wants less to do with us.’

Doesn’t it?

‘Alison, I know it wasn’t your intention but you’ve made it impossible for her to tell us she changed her mind about visiting them – the way you’re trying to pretend none of this is happening, the way you’re insisting on acting as though Olivia doesn’t exist.’

‘Me? This is all my fault, is it?’

‘Katherine knew you wouldn’t understand her need. That’s why she had to resort to sneaking out of school.’

‘Do you think we should inform the school? It’s not what I want, but I’ll do it if it keeps her safe.’

‘By “safe”, I think you mean “controlled”.’ Jeff has never minced his words with me. It’s a trait I’ve always admired; I can trust him to be honest and frank. At that moment, I mentally flicked him the finger but managed not to do so for real, a huge demonstration of self-control. ‘I know you believe in “Do the crime, pay the time” and that all misdemeanours, intentional or otherwise, are and should be punished, but I don’t think heaping any more trouble on Katherine right now is at all helpful.’

‘I don’t want her punished; I want her safe. It’s not safe traipsing halfway across the county on public transport.’

‘Look, this is difficult, but we’re going to be fine. We ought to have facilitated a getting-to-know-you session with the Trubys straight away. Then she wouldn’t have taken things into her own hands.’

‘I don’t want her to get to know them.’

‘It’s not about what *you* want, Alison. I’m sorry, but it’s not. Let’s just all try to stay calm and pleasant, shall we? I don’t think we should mention the truancy. I think we should tell Katherine that meeting up is what we want too.’

‘No, Jeff.’

‘Tom agrees – well, he suggested it, actually, and it’s the adult thing to do.’

‘When did you talk to Tom?’

‘He called the other day. You were out. It’s not a crime for me to talk to him, Alison.’

I wanted to yell at him to stop being so ridiculously reasonable about everything, but I was pretty sure he’d have told me it was a better response than hysterically crying all the time. He turned his back to me and we both did a poor impression of pretending to fall asleep.

I’m worn down with trauma and can’t think straight. Jeff seemed so confident that I did as he and Tom suggested so, instead of tackling the issue of Katherine’s secret visits head on, I’ve pretended we think it’s a good idea for her to meet the Trubys. If Katherine is surprised at my U-turn, she hasn’t said so.

The Trubys’ house is modest. I see Katherine swiftly glance around and I will her not to say anything. She wouldn’t be intentionally rude, but it’s safe to say she is an especially privileged kid and she exists in a rarefied bubble; nearly everyone she knows lives in enormous houses that have two, sometimes three, brand-new cars parked on their sweeping driveways; some of them have swimming pools. I really don’t like her passing comment on people who are poorer than we are, because I know. I know how it is to come from not much. To be part of not much.

The Trubys’ house is semi-detached. The front garden is minute, the size of a car; indeed, some people in the street have parked their cars in their gardens. There’s a porch, it needs repainting; the flat, grubby roof is covered with sheets of asphalt; weeds are robustly colonising the cracks in the path. It’s quite a busy street, I imagine they can hear the noise of traffic whizzing by at all hours. It’s nothing like our quiet, calm road. Our neighbours repaint their woodwork every other year, keeping Farrow & Ball in business. Hedges are clipped, grass is cut, cars are washed with Trooping the Colour precision, pride and regularity. Everything is neat and restrained. The Trubys’ house – their entire neighbourhood – is more feral.

Then I remember that none of this is a surprise to Katherine: she has been here before. I must not cry. I must not. I have to keep my chin up. As I have always tried to do. But, really, life as we know it is over. And while, rationally, I understand that life goes on, that there may be a way around or through this, I can’t imagine it. Not right now.

‘The Three Musketeers, right?’ says Jeff. ‘All for one and—’ He waits for us to complete the sentence.

‘One for all,’ I mumble obediently. Katherine just stares ahead, apparently fascinated by the letterbox. She looks taut with expectation and stress. I can feel her heartbeat, her pulse, her sweat, her breath.

Tom opens the door. He beams, but it’s a nervous, keen-to-impress smile. I recognise it. Katherine returns it. Tom shakes hands with Jeff, who effusively and repeatedly says it’s great to be here. I glare at him. I’m planning on being a bit cool with Tom, but my lifetime of trying to please and being polite combined with his obvious desperation that this visit be a success forces me to return his smile. Encouraged, he surprises me by pulling me into a hug. I accept it – how can I not? Jeff looks taken aback, too, but then he slaps Tom on the shoulder and manages a sort of manly semi-hug which means the three of us are awkwardly connected. It’s a bit much. Eventually, Tom breaks away and turns to Katherine. She shoots out her hand, making it clear she’s not on for a cuddle. He shakes it enthusiastically and, for a fleeting moment, they look into each other’s eyes. He must be instantly and deeply familiar to her: she’s looked at those eyes every time she’s looked into a mirror. She pulls back her hand and pushes it into her jeans pocket.

‘Olivia is in the sitting room,’ says Tom. My heart is in my mouth.

We all tramp through and find her watching TV. She is surrounded by crisp packets and empty Coke cans. Instantly, I see myself in her and, while this should in theory make me bond with her, it doesn’t. For as long as I can remember, I haven’t thought I was all that. She is slouching rather than sitting and her feet are on the coffee table. Her hair is dyed a peroxide blond but her roots betray the fact that, naturally, she has the same colour auburn hair Katherine has; I can’t think why she’d want to change it. Or how she is allowed to. Doesn’t the school care? Doesn’t Tom? About that, or the piercings? Her nose and her belly-button are bejewelled. She’s wearing high-waisted jeans and a crop top. Both items are fashionable but unflattering, as she is a bit plumper than most girls like to be. She probably has a slow metabolism, which will be my fault. I have always marvelled that Katherine can put away anything she likes and is still a stick; that has never been my experience. It’s not a mystery now. I want to apologise to Olivia. For her metabolism, for her ordinariness. I stay quiet because I realise that if I say anything she might think I am apologising for something so much bigger, like leaving her in the hospital by mistake. Should I apologise for that, too? But how? I scramble around for something to say.

Nothing. A blank. Small talk would be insulting. A big speech, impossible. I look for Jeff in her. There might be something about the shape of her chin, but no, not really, she's all mine.

'Olivia, we're so excited to meet you.' Jeff reaches forward, proffering his hand for her to shake. She leaves it hanging there. He retracts it and puts it on the small of my back, moving me an infinitesimal amount closer to her. 'Aren't we?'

He's talking to me. 'Absolutely,' I say obediently.

Olivia turns to me; her wide, serious eyes comb me up and down; her expression remains unimpressed, unconvinced. She knows I'm not absolutely excited to meet her. She knows I'm terrified, unsure. I wonder what she's feeling. She answers my question when she turns away. She's nobody's fool.

The curtains are partially drawn but a slanting stream of early-evening autumnal light determinedly flows through, catching the dust before it hits the laminate floor. The room seems to be on pause, waiting. The air is depressed; I'm bleakly reminded that this is a house still in mourning. Tom doesn't apologise for the disarray, the way I would. He just stares at Olivia, his concern clear. Determined, she keeps her eyes trained on the TV. She has a phone in her hand, too; I don't doubt it is spitting banal messages and acronyms from people with poor spelling. Wtf? Lol! Yolo. Tom picks up the remote and the screeching soap opera is cut off mid-flow. Olivia turns to him, glares. No one knows what to say until Tom says, 'Oh, I'll call the other two down. Callum and Amy. You'll love them.'

Olivia lets out a deep sigh.

The restaurant isn't what I imagined. But I don't know why I'm focusing on the restaurant. Panic, I imagine. It's easier to dissect the inadequacies of the venue than think about anything bigger. Everything bigger. When Tom said it was a family-run Italian I'd imagined an intimate setting, white linen tablecloths, fan-shaped napkins and a decent selection of antipasti. I thought we'd be cossetted, comforted; that we'd at least have the food to talk about. Instead, the building is cavernous, the tables are bare Formica and the acoustics are poor so our already stilted conversation is further slowed as people have to keep asking for things to be repeated. Jeff constantly states, 'I must be going deaf,' and then laughs riotously as though he's made an uproariously funny joke.

It's an awkward moment when we have to decide who sits where. No one wants to make the call and therefore we all hold back, hovering like birds, both polite and nervous. The thing is, there are good manners and then there is the fat worm that the early bird catches; I'm aware of both. The table is long and skinny. Not helpful in terms of communicating. As there are seven of us, someone is going to be made to be the odd one out, left facing no one. Tom tries to take charge of the seating arrangements; he pops Amy on the end and suggests she is flanked by Callum and Olivia. No doubt this is simply how they are used to sitting, in a tight little cluster, but I throw him a flustered glance: where does that leave Katherine? Callum seems to understand; he suggests that Katherine sit in his seat, but Olivia shakes her head vehemently, indicating that she doesn't want to have to face Katherine just yet. I'm slightly offended on my daughter's behalf, because I know she'll do her best to carry off the dinner with aplomb – but I also feel a real flicker of sympathy for Olivia. When I was fifteen I'd have gone to pieces faced with this mess. Jeff leaps in and takes Callum's seat and Katherine settles next to him. Callum goes around the table and sits next to Olivia. That leaves the two end seats for Tom and me. There is a moment of

hesitation, then I quickly grab the one next to Katherine. I need to be by her side, and I don't even care that by taking this seat I've effectively drawn lines: we are positioned as opponents – the Trubys versus the Mitchells.

I begin to understand what Tom meant when he described the restaurant as family-friendly; there's an abundance of sticky high chairs and strollers awkwardly blocking the walkways and numerous kids charging around, screaming loudly, either with rapture or in a temper. The waiters stand about, pens and notebooks at the ready, faces fixed into fake expressions of forbearance. I never used to mind frenzied kids dashing about – I mean, that's what kids are supposed to do. But today I feel a wave of nausea. I want to warn their mothers: *Hold them close, keep them by your side, don't take the wrong one home.* I can't focus on the menu, which isn't particularly long or involved, but it seems overwhelming. I'll have a Margherita pizza. Just for speed. The sooner we order, the sooner we'll be fed and the sooner we'll be out of here. Why are we here, anyway? What made me agree?

How could I have refused?

I try to raise my eyes to look at Olivia. I need to say something to her. I feel Jeff's gaze bore into me. He's expecting me to start a conversation, as usual. I'd hoped that, since the situation is anything other than usual, I'd be off the hook, but no. With effort, I ask, 'So, do you have a sport, Olivia?' Katherine stares at me open-mouthed, clearly despairing. I know she hates it when I ask her friends about their hobbies or school, but what else are we adults to talk to children about? We can't really say, 'Illegally smoking, then, are you?' or 'Do you do drugs?'

'No, not really.' She doesn't look up from the menu she's holding. Her nails are painted with a blue, glittering varnish which could be quite pretty, but it's chipped.

'Are you doing the Duke of Edinburgh Award?'

'No.'

'Doesn't your school offer it?'

'Yeah, they do. I'm just not doing it.'

'Olivia is a wonderful artist,' chips in Tom.

'Are you really?' asks Jeff with enthusiasm.

She looks up at him. 'I like art.' She smiles and I have to admit, it's a winning smile. I envy Jeff for catching it.

'Is it your favourite subject?' he asks.

‘That and English,’ replies Olivia. Jeff beams back at her. He looks triumphant, as though he’s won something, as though it’s a competition.

‘Dad’s a writer,’ says Katherine. She’s beaming, too.

‘Yeah, I know. I googled you all,’ replies Olivia. Her words are reluctant, as though she didn’t want to admit to showing an interest, and yet she didn’t *have* to tell us so maybe she wants us to know she cares. ‘You play lacrosse a lot, right?’ She glances at Katherine, who nods enthusiastically in reply. ‘Yeah, I got that. I didn’t think people really did that outside Enid Blyton books.’

‘Oh, they do,’ I say defensively.

She doesn’t look my way but continues to stare at Katherine. ‘Yeah. There were, like, loads of competition times and league tables and pictures of you collecting trophies.’ She makes it sound boring. It’s not boring.

‘Katherine plays for the Regional Academy U17 team. Even though she’s only fifteen, she’s been put on the English Lacrosse Elite Performance Pathway. The 2020 Olympics is not a pipe dream.’ I mention this only to keep the conversation going, but I must be yelling, the acoustics are so dreadful, and the moment I open my mouth it seems that a volume dial has been turned down: the rest of the diners in the restaurant fall silent and my brag brays out aggressively. I think I hear Jeff groan. Katherine turns pink at her neck, which she always does when she’s embarrassed.

‘I read that,’ drawls Olivia. ‘On her Wikipedia site.’ She sniggers. Maybe I have been presumptuous, putting a Wiki site together, but by failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail. Finally, Olivia turns to me. ‘Couldn’t find a thing on *you*, though. What do *you* do?’ Now, she meets my eye and I see challenge. Disdain.

‘I keep house.’ Where did that pathetically antiquated term come from? Never in my life have I felt so inadequate, so desperate. I help Jeff finesse concepts, I handle all his admin. I also liaise with his accountant and the PAs of his agent, editor and publicist regarding any tax, VAT, availability or contractual issues. I fold my arms across my chest and fail to tell her this, or the fact that I’m pretty good at art myself. It was the subject I did best at. I got an A grade. Probably because it was the only one I completed before – well, when I could still concentrate. She sighs, and I know I’ve disappointed her. I look to Katherine for moral support. She can’t meet my eye; she’s turning an ever more vibrant shade of pink. I’ve disappointed her, too.

Callum, who is clearly a diplomatic boy, helps me out; he asks if everyone has decided what they are going to eat. He recommends the linguini del mare, and Katherine immediately says she'll try it (even though she doesn't like mussels). The conversation slowly starts to pick up. Taking Callum's cue, people discuss whether to order a shared plate or two of bruschetta and, if so, who wants garlic and who wants mozzarella? Perhaps we should take one of each? Both Jeff and Tom mention they'd like a glass of red and ask Callum if he wants to join them; if so, they'll order a bottle. Tom is keen to underline the fact that Callum drinking a glass of wine with food is legal and responsible. I feel heavy, understanding that he, too, is concerned about being judged as a parent. Something he's done easily and comfortably for a number of years is now under scrutiny. Callum says he's going out later so doesn't want a drink, which I think wise because, even if it is legal to drink alcohol with a meal at such a young age, I don't think it should be encouraged. Oh, blast, I feel a wave of shame as I realise I am judging. I really don't want to. Or, more accurately, I don't want to *be* judged, so I feel I must do my level best not to get involved with Tom's parenting. The men settle on a small carafe, just a glass and a half each. Olivia tells Amy that 'melanzane' is the Italian word for 'aubergine' and that, no, she probably won't like it. I don't think it's good to discourage a child from trying new things, but I bite my tongue, or rather my tongue appears swollen and fat, incapable of movement.

Throughout the meal it becomes apparent that it's not just talking about the menu I'm finding difficult: I don't know how to talk about the weather, or, when the conversation moves on, I can't find a view about anything in the pop charts, I have no opinions on new apps and I couldn't care less about the different regions where different-shaped pastas come from – I'm amazed anyone does. While remaining mute, I follow the conversation closely – I'm searching for a subtext, undercurrents. What isn't being said? The thing about Olivia liking English, for example, is that something? Might she take after Jeff? Will Jeff be hoping for that? Is she? Tom and Amy both declare that they love olives, and Katherine does, too; neither Jeff nor I are keen – are taste buds inherited? But then Olivia says she likes them, as well, and Callum declares his disgust. I realise that it doesn't matter, not in any real sense, who likes what, yet every subject makes me feel at once insecure and territorial. I'm standing on shifting sands. I notice that Katherine is extremely animated and excitable, almost hyper, although

no one, other than me, is likely to notice as much. You'd have to know her inside out to spot the telltale signs: she's gabbling, her eyes are wide, bright – almost manic – as they dash around the room, unable to settle. She's clearly enraptured. I'm somewhat relieved to note that she doesn't seem to engage with Tom much – although she is extremely polite when answering any of his questions: she meets his eye and responds with complete and thoughtful answers, as she's been brought up to – but, mostly, her attention is focused on Olivia, Amy and Callum. Particularly Callum.

Katherine laughs loudly at all his jokes, even the ones that really only deserve to raise a small grin; she's hung off his every word and agreed with everything he's said – even his views on warming up for a lacrosse game were met with extreme enthusiasm, although his limited knowledge of the sport meant that his tips were very obvious and underwhelming. He's extremely handsome and two years her senior; a flash of panic strikes like lightning. What if she is attracted to him? You read of it. Don't you? I've certainly read about it – admittedly, in those very gossipy weeklies I indulge in when I visit the hairdresser – siblings who don't know they are siblings find each other, after years apart, and have an intense attraction for one another: obviously, they would. They are at once strange and familiar, exotic and comforting. The thought makes my stomach churn, it's a layer of complication I simply can't begin to process. Katherine's an intelligent girl – she must know she can't think that way. I shoot her a harried glance, but at that moment she turns to Amy and I see her lavish just as much attention on the little girl. Ah, I see. Siblings. That's what she's falling in love with. My innards tremble, not with panic, which was my reaction to the fear that she'd find Callum attractive, but with sadness. Wretchedness. She's never once said she'd like a sibling. Now I wonder whether she has secretly longed for a brother or sister. If so, why has she never mentioned it, even in passing? What else isn't she telling me? Tom was right: there is a striking physical resemblance between Katherine and his children, particularly Amy. The same skin tone, hair colour, eye shape. Both girls are wearing ponytails that erupt like fountains from the top of their heads. Amy is sweet and cheerful. A little bolder than I remember Katherine ever being, but she seems good company, all the same.

Neither Jeff nor Tom is the sort of man who could fall into stereotype and discuss the latest footy game, but it turns out they are both considering purchasing a new car and so they chat about mileage and diesel pollutants

for a while. Jeff establishes that Tom does something in design, but the conversation doesn't lead anywhere. Tom is clearly not a man obsessed with his work; I suppose he has enough on his plate. Their conversation isn't what anyone would call ground-breaking or intimate but I envy them. Why can't I think of anything to say? Something that would simply pass a few moments, allow the time to slide. I've trained myself to become a whizz at oiling the wheels of social chit-chat. Ordinarily.

Jeff refills his and Tom's glass and signals for a second carafe. Tom says he doesn't want anything else to drink but Jeff pushes ahead: 'Just a glass for me, then.' The young, pretty waitress patiently hovers while he slowly examines the wine list for a decent wine that's sold by the glass; he never settles for the house wine. She's balancing a large tray that is piled with dirty plates, pizza crusts and balled-up paper napkins; she was on her way to the kitchen, having cleared another table. Jeff should have let her deliver the tray first.

'That's quite a skill!' I say warmly. The waitress looks vacant, uncomprehending. I try to elucidate. 'Balancing that enormous tray when it's stacked so heavily.'

'Oh, I'm used to it.' She gives me a small smile. Jeff looks up from the wine list to listen to my chatter; I didn't mean to interrupt him, I was just trying politely to fill the time he was taking picking a new wine. I jab my finger at the menu and continue to talk to the waitress.

'Well, it looks tricky.'

'It's not.'

'No, you make it look easy.' I realise I've just contradicted myself. I'm nervous.

'I was a waitress once upon a time, you know.' She nods at me, disinterested. Jeff finally makes his choice and she disappears back to the kitchen. Somehow, my attempt to make conversation has had the opposite effect; we sit in silence. When the waitress returns she picks up on the atmosphere. She hurries to put down Jeff's glass of wine, stretching across the table. It's overfull and most of it spills down my cream jacket. The table erupts. Tom looks stricken, Jeff frustrated, Katherine and Callum are mortified and Amy screams; I'm not sure whether it's with excitement or shock. I steal a glance at Olivia. She's making a big show of trying not to laugh. There are lots of layers in her response.

The waitress is horrified. She instinctively starts to wipe at the blood-red stain but the cloth she has in her hand is the one she wipes down the tables with; the one that mops up smears of tomato sauce and garlic butter. 'Oh, well, it really doesn't matter,' I say as I try subtly to stop her ham-fisted attempts to fix things. 'I was always dropping things when I was a waitress! Practically every shift. Really, it's nothing. No, you can't pay for dry cleaning, this thing pops in the wash. A bit of Vanish will do the trick.' I know full well it is dry-clean only and that there's a fifty-fifty chance the stain won't ever come out, but saying so won't help.

The waitress runs off to get Jeff a refill. I order a glass of white, not to drink but to throw on the stain. I know that can sometimes fix things. 'Silly of me to wear cream to a restaurant,' I say. 'I should have kept it for the theatre.' I think Katherine actually groans. I wasn't trying to sound elitist, far from it, but I don't go anywhere else other than eateries and the theatre; I'm a woman of a certain age, my clubbing days are long behind me. I didn't intend to cause a fuss or a stir; the opposite.

'Why did you tell her you were once a waitress?' asks Olivia.

'To put her at her ease.'

'It didn't work, did it?' she points out with grim satisfaction. 'I think you made her uncomfortable.'

'How?'

'Well, she identified your overfamiliarity as embarrassment, embarrassment at your respective social positions.'

'Olivia.' I can hear the warning in Tom's voice; Olivia, it appears, cannot. She has in fact made a very perceptive point. I'd be impressed by her intelligence if it weren't shrouded in belligerence and an attempt to offend me.

'After all, you're not a waitress now, are you? You're a customer in this restaurant, sitting there in your expensive clothes, so your familiarity must make things worse, not better. I mean, it's a bit patronising, isn't it?'

Katherine grins, her face alight with recognition. 'You are so right. Mum means well, but she overcompensates. When we are on holiday she won't let us use more than one bath towel the entire week and she cleans up before room service arrives; she says it's disrespectful expecting someone else to work around your dirty knickers.' Amy and Olivia laugh at this, Amy with delight that the word 'knickers' has been said aloud at the dinner table. Olivia's reasons are no doubt darker. Encouraged by her appreciative

audience, Katherine carries on. 'What's the point of being able to afford five-star hotels if you're not going to enjoy them? If you're going to feel guilty that the guy who attends the pool looks tired?' I place my hand over Katherine's. She's not embarrassing me here, she's embarrassing herself. When she's excited, she's thoughtless. She sounds arrogant and inconsiderate. I can see that Tom is fighting an expression of surprise and maybe even disapproval.

'Too funny,' says Olivia.

It's all Katherine needs; she's so desperate for Olivia's approval and attention. 'When we had a cleaner she used to scrub all the loos before she arrived. I mean, what's that about? In the end, Dad let the cleaner go. Bizarrely, Mum seemed happy about adding to the country's unemployment.'

'OK, Katherine,' says Jeff.

Flushed, she ignores him. 'Dad says it's like she's ashamed of what she's become.'

'OK, now, Katherine, let's change the subject. The Trubys aren't interested in this,' Jeff insists. The Trubys are, in fact, rapt.

'Oh, Dad, we can say anything to the Trubys. They're practically family. They *are* family!' Jeff starts to cough. It's dramatic and prolonged. Tom and Callum scramble to pour him a glass of water and the waitress returns to the table with the fresh glasses of wine. It's a shame because, in the commotion, I think everyone misses how Katherine finishes her diatribe. 'It's stupid for her to be ashamed because she's actually very cool. A good mum. A good person. Just someone who only ever gets her hair cut by the salon director nowadays.' Katherine beams at me, pleased with her punchline. I squeeze her fingers, but no one hears the teenager's compliment, slipped in amidst her banter. The impression they are left with is that she is snide and I am a social climber, a slightly shame-faced one, but one all the same. I pour the white wine on the stain. It does nothing.

I give up, fall back into myself and decide to leave it to Jeff to keep things ticking over. To his credit, he picks up the mantle. He mentions that we've just booked a skiing trip in Andorra. 'Are you skiers?' he asks.

'I'm a boarder, as is Olivia. Callum and Amy ski,' replies Tom.

'Oh, wonderful. Will you get away this season?'

'No, not this year. None of us feels up to it.'

The penny drops and Jeff looks stricken. I remember why I usually lead when it comes to small talk. 'No, no, of course not. I'm so sorry,' he says, feeling the full weight and sorrow of the dead mother at the table. I feel awful. Sorry for Jeff for putting his foot in it and distraught for these children, who lost their mother not long ago. I must make an effort, get myself together. Normally, I'd've asked if Tom's wife skied or boarded. I'm a great believer in the importance of talking about people who've died. I think it's the only way to keep them alive – and those who were closest, who miss them the most, do want to keep their memory alive – but Tom specifically said he wanted the evening to remain light; he more or less forbade me to talk about Annabel.

Anyway, I can guess: she could probably do black runs with her eyes closed.

Jeff, scrambling around for something to say to break the awkwardness, blurts, 'Alison doesn't ski, or board either. She's no sense of balance.' Tom raises an eyebrow and Jeff seems to think he has no alternative but to plunge on. 'Utterly hopeless. When we go to the Alps she spends the week in the spa or drinking hot chocolate.' I feel heat rise up from under my armpits; it creeps to my chest then my neck and settles on my face. I know I must look like a tomato, one of those you see trodden into the street after market day, squashed and scrappy.

'Never got the hang?' asks Tom politely. His enquiry is no doubt supposed to be kind, but the fact that I'm hopeless at something he believes

simply requires a knack (rather than endless lessons and bruises) causes me to turn a deeper puce.

‘Neither sport has ever really appealed. I don’t much like the cold,’ I confess.

‘But you’re not cold if you wear the right gear,’ says Olivia. ‘And I’m certain *you* must have that.’ All eyes are on me now. I’ve heard this argument a dozen times before. I’ve stopped countless dinner parties in their affable tracks with my confession that I don’t like to ski. People who do enjoy hurling themselves down a mountain, whether on a board or with two sticks, never understand another person’s reluctance; it’s always seen as an inadequacy, a lack of sophistication or sense of adventure. No one ever questions the sanity of the skier (who invariably ends up with a fracture or a torn ligament), but everyone wants to have the hot-chocolate drinker certified – it makes no sense.

Wait until they discover I don’t speak a foreign language. Or play an instrument.

Amy announces, ‘You won’t like watching Callum play ice hockey, then. It’s always freezing!’

‘Oh, so you play ice hockey, Callum?’ I can’t think why I hadn’t asked about his hobbies earlier; evidently, he’s the sort of kid to have some.

‘Yes, I do.’

‘At county level,’ adds Olivia. ‘You should have googled him.’

‘It never crossed my mind. I mean, that’s the sort of thing your generation do. Isn’t it? People from our generation just wait for these things to come out in conversation.’ I don’t mean to be cutting, I don’t intend to sound like a prude, but I know I do. I just can’t seem to hit the right note. I turn back to Callum, exasperated with myself. ‘I imagine that must require a lot of commitment. Do you train ferociously?’

‘Almost every evening.’ He glances at his iPhone to check the time. ‘Actually, that’s where I’m heading now.’ He starts to make movements that suggest he has to dash. Oh, no; he’s been instrumental in helping this evening limp on and, while it hasn’t been a roaring success, his presence has saved it from being an out-and-out disaster. I want to grab at his hoodie sleeve and beg him to stay. I think he sees the desperation in my face because he casually throws out an invite, ‘Actually, I think you would enjoy watching an ice-hockey match, even though it is chilly. It’s very exciting, and you’re clearly a family that likes a bit of competition. I think you,

especially, Alison.’ He promptly looks embarrassed. ‘I didn’t mean ... I just. It’s a very fast game. Exhilarating.’ I wave away his explanation. I realise he didn’t mean anything inflammatory by his comment; we’re all walking on eggshells. I try to put him at his ease.

‘I’ve never seen an ice-hockey game. I’m sure I would enjoy it.’

‘Why don’t you all come along to my game tomorrow evening? You can wrap up.’ Jeff, Katherine, Tom and Amy look delighted. Olivia looks furious. I can’t see my own face but pray I’ve pulled it into a polite enough expression to hide my horror at the thought.

‘Oh, we’d love to, except Jeff and I already have plans to go to friends for dinner and, as much as I’d like to wriggle out of that, I simply can’t. We’re quite strict about our noncancellation policy. It’s just a silly thing of ours. Once you accept an invite, you honour it, no matter if a more exciting offer comes along. There’s been many a time when this policy has caused Katherine to roll her eyes, I promise you.’

‘I bet,’ interjects Olivia.

‘Manners are all,’ I insist. No one looks convinced that manners *are* all, but I push on. ‘Maybe another time.’

‘Or perhaps Katherine can come on her own?’ suggests Tom.

‘Oh, yes!’ cries Amy.

‘No, no. That’s impossible,’ I counter.

‘Sounds like a good idea,’ comments Jeff, choosing to focus on Amy’s excitement rather than my lack of it. ‘Will that work with your lacrosse schedule, Katherine? Do you have an away game tomorrow, or have to get up early on Sunday to train?’

‘No, no, it’s fine,’ she replies, smiling, not even checking her timetable, which I’ve handily stored in her phone for exactly this reason. There might very well be a clash. I reach for my phone and quickly ascertain there isn’t. Damn.

‘Well, if that’s OK with you?’ Tom is looking at me, but what can I say? *Take care of her. Bring her back to me. Go away. Just – just vanish!* All these things run through my mind, thoughts like insects uselessly beating against a dirty window. Out of the question that I say any of it. I nod stiffly. ‘That’s settled, then,’ he says. ‘Should I ask for the bill?’

‘Settled,’ repeats Jeff. He’s beaming, and I have to concentrate very hard on not stabbing him in the hand with my fork. I catch Olivia’s eye and take no comfort in the fact that she looks as unhappy with the decision as I am.

As we stand up and begin to put on our coats, I stroke Katherine's back. The gesture is subconscious. I want her to watch herself.

The Truby children slope out of the restaurant and set off towards their house. Callum and Amy turn to wave at us. Olivia doesn't. She doesn't seem to hear me when I call my goodbyes or, at least, that's what Jeff says. I think she heard. Tom hangs back for a moment and takes the opportunity to ask Katherine how she's getting on with her counselling sessions. I have to admit, it's very thoughtful of him.

'It's going OK. My counsellor is called Betty Lopez.'

'Pretty name,' comments Tom affably.

'Yeah, I think I'd remember even if she didn't have a tag pinned to her saggy boobs.' Katherine winks at me, qualms forgotten. I feel flushed with relief that we still have in-jokes, private references, not just secrets. 'Unfortunately, she's not as pretty as her name.' Katherine makes this pronouncement unapologetically. Teenagers are so judgemental about how everyone looks. I'd work on that if I didn't have to deal with a possible life-threatening disease and a brand-new birth family. 'She wears her hair as short as a man's, which can be an awesome look, but I get the impression Betty is not so much going for elfin beauty as for total practicality. I really think it's possible she once tied her long hair into a ponytail and then just hacked that off with a pair of kitchen scissors because she couldn't waste another moment washing and drying it.' Clearly, Katherine has no more intention of telling Tom anything about her sessions than she has of telling me.

'Perhaps she donated her hair to a worthy cause?' suggests Tom.

'What, like kids with cancer who need wigs?'

'Yes, maybe, considering her line of work.'

'She doesn't smile properly. It's professional but not convincing or comforting. You know what I mean?'

'Does that bother you? Are you sure she's the right counsellor for you?' asks Tom with concern.

'I don't mind. I mean, she spends a lot of her time counselling people about their imminent deaths; she'd be weird if she was grinning from ear to ear.'

'Good point.' He breezes over her gallows humour. I wish I could do that. Is it a skill that comes with practice?

'You've given me a pretty clear picture of her.'

Katherine shrugs, as though she's trying to throw off a weighty blanket. 'I have a lot of time to think about all of this stuff when I'm in there with her, trying not to think about what they want me to think about.'

Tom draws Katherine into an enormous, uninhibited hug. She hesitates for a moment and then I see her body relax into his. I stand aside, self-conscious and ashamed. I flick a look at Jeff. We haven't managed to elicit a fraction of that info from her, despite regular enquiries. Tom pulls away and then makes a quick departure. He has to run to catch up with his children.

As we wait for Katherine outside the loo, Jeff says, 'Olivia is quite the Botticelli model, isn't she?' He looks delighted. 'So very much like you.'

I glare at him. 'Don't say that. We don't know what she's like. She seems rather—' I break off, as my gran used to say that it's best to be quiet if you haven't got anything good to say.

'I meant, physically, at least,' he adds. I stare at a faded print of Venice that's hanging on the wall, housed in a cheap Ikea frame. I wish Katherine would hurry up. I just want to go home. Close the door on this. 'Ours is such an interesting situation.'

'Interesting?'

He looks momentarily startled, almost guilty. I wonder if he meant to make that comment aloud.

'It's unusual, you have to admit that, and this could all be a lot worse.'

'It might be yet.' I look to my feet so he won't see the tears spring to my eyes. 'If she has the mutated gene, I will ... I will—'

I don't know. I want to say I will stop breathing, because that would be fitting, that would be fair, but it's a stupid thing to say. Dramatic. Unreal. Inaccurate. A comment like that would cause Jeff to sigh impatiently. I bite my lip.

‘I think I have a headache coming on.’ I am standing in a skirt, tights, heels and bra, flicking through the various tops in my wardrobe, looking for something suitable to wear. A couple of things cross my mind. One: Jeff hasn’t so much as glanced at me. There was a time when he couldn’t keep his eyes off me when I was getting ready for a night out. Eyes, hands, lips. He’d often make us late and cause me to panic that my hair was going to be ruined by his impromptu amorous advances. That hasn’t happened in as long as I can remember. I suppress a sigh and console myself with the fact that my hair will at least stay in place. Two: I realise I couldn’t care less about what I wear tonight; my clothes bore me. They are irrelevant. Not one piece stands out. They all seem equally hopeless and identical; even if they are blue, black or white, they are all basically the same. From a hanger I yank a thin white top that has a silver sequin trim around the neckline and think it will do, although I’ll need a jacket; we’re going to the Fords’, and they don’t turn the heating on until November, swearing that with so many bodies the dining room will ‘soon heat up’. It never does. ‘Did you hear me?’ I demand of Jeff. ‘I think I’m getting a headache.’

‘No, you’re not.’

He’s right, which, irrationally, makes me like him a little less. It’s not true that all women want to be known and understood all the time. ‘Do you think she’s going to be OK?’

‘She’s going to be fine.’ He’s rolling up his shirtsleeves, carefully, but in a fashion that is designed to give the impression of indifference. It’s part of his authorial look. We both know that much of tonight’s focus and conversation will be on and about him. It’s not a special occasion, not his birthday or a book launch or anything, but Jeff’s job is interesting; people want to talk about it.

‘I wish I could have persuaded her to have taken her ski jacket.’

‘Alison, she’s watching the match, not playing in it. She has about three layers on as it is, including a completely sound *ordinary* jacket.’ He waves his arms around a bit to show he’s at a loss for the word to describe her jacket. It’s a thin, fashionable one. Of course he has the words to describe it, he’s a writer, he is just trying to pretend that this level of concern and fuss is beneath him, unnecessary. It’s extraordinary how much we say to one another with the words we don’t use.

‘Ice rinks can get extremely cold,’ I comment.

‘Yes, I know. The clue’s in the name.’

I stand at the full-length mirror in the corner of our bedroom and slick moisturiser on my neck and face; we’re quiet for a moment. ‘Did you give her any cash?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much?’

‘Ten pounds.’

‘Do you think that’s enough?’

Jeff lets out a small but significant huffing sound. ‘That is a redundant question. Obviously, I do, or I’d have given her more. What do you expect she’s going to buy at an ice-hockey game? She may need money for a coffee, at most. Ten pounds is more than generous. I’ll be expecting change.’

I don’t like Katherine drinking coffee but I know this isn’t the moment to say so. There’s nothing she and her friends find more hilarious than ordering at Starbucks and telling the barista that they are called Jennifer Lawrence or Dakota Fanning. I imagine it is quite amusing hearing them call it out when the cappuccino is ready and watching all the other customers look around in anticipation. ‘What if she wants to buy a souvenir?’ I rather hope she doesn’t.

‘A souvenir?’

‘A scarf or a team T-shirt.’

Jeff screws up his face in mock-astonishment. ‘If she needs anything else, Tom is there. I’m sure he’d lend her the money.’

‘She might want money to get a cab home.’

‘Tom is bringing her home.’

‘But if something goes wrong. If they don’t get on and she wants to leave in a hurry.’ As I articulate this I can’t decide if this scenario is something I want badly or something I should pray doesn’t happen.

‘I think that’s unlikely.’

‘But—’

‘She can text us.’ It seems to me that Jeff often knows how things will play out, or thinks he does, which is as good as. He’s always confident that he can predict what people will do. That must be useful in his profession; he observes, sees patterns and identifies types. Perhaps we humans aren’t infinitely fascinating, after all. At least not to Jeff. I never assume I can predict outcomes. There is an old adage, ‘Plan for the worst, hope for the best.’ I do half of that.

Jeff and I have always had a different response to life’s inevitable emotional highs and lows: he craves them; I shun them. I firmly believe it has everything to do with our respective backgrounds. I have endured enough drama to last me an eternity; I long for normality, tranquillity. If I were to draw a metaphor, I’d say that throughout my childhood, isolated, I sailed stormy, black oceans while he played Pooh Sticks by a babbling brook. He comes from a middle-class home where his parents loved one another a sensible amount right up until his mother’s death two years ago; they did not feel the need either to doubt it or shout about it. He and his sister were encouraged and motivated, although not suffocated. Fortnightly phone calls between family members centre around how well the roses or the captain of the golf club are faring. As a result, Jeff operates on terra firma. He finds the world interesting rather than terrifying, and life’s challenges stimulating rather than discouraging. It’s what I love about him and what is most foreign about him. It’s what I wanted for Katherine, although that’s impossible now.

When Katherine has fall-outs at school he simply says, ‘It’s inevitable – ignore the bitches.’ Admittedly, his response makes her laugh and my insistence on visiting the school to discuss the situation with the headmistress makes her furious, but I have to do something; he can let things be. I understand that a level of detachment must be necessary with his work. When his mother died, he was, naturally, upset, they were very fond of each other – she was a wonderful mother, and mother-in-law – but he didn’t grieve in the expected way. He often referred to her, warmly, even tenderly, he was happy to share memories and anecdotes about her, but he didn’t cry or skip a meal. I never once caught him staring off into the mid-distance, simply missing her. If it hadn’t been for the fact that she appeared,

thinly veiled, in his next novel as a magnificent, indomitable matriarch, I might have thought he'd rather undervalued her.

His ability to remain somewhat removed from this catastrophe and to observe it, rather than magnify it, is probably helpful; it's possibly what is keeping us all sane right now, yet I feel a spike of resentment. I long for a more agitated response to our plight. At least that way I might not feel so alone.

'She didn't eat much of her tea.' He doesn't respond, so I'm forced to be explicit. 'Do you think she's becoming a little bit anorexic?'

'That's crazy. Usually, she has a great appetite. She was just excited about tonight. Besides, I don't think one can be a "little bit" anorexic.'

'She's under a lot of pressure.'

'Yes, but—'

'She's very thin.'

'She's always been thin. They all are.'

I pause in applying my lipstick and glare at him. It didn't need to be said. Why does he insist on pointing out that she's one of them? I notice that my lipstick is bleeding into the lines around my mouth. I have an old woman's mouth. On top of everything.

'Yes, she has always been thin, but her counsellor did say that we had to look out for strange behaviour. I'm just trying to be vigilant.'

'I don't think a girl skipping a meal because of excitement is strange behaviour.'

'How do you know it's excitement? It might be anxiety.'

'She wanted to go, Alison. She jumped at it.'

'Don't underestimate what she's going through,' I say crossly, because I know she did want to go and I can't bear to hear it.

'I'm not. I'm fully aware that she's facing immense challenges at the moment.'

'Yet you think it's OK for her to gad about with strangers?' I'm becoming shrill and unreasonable. Frustratingly, being aware of this doesn't have the effect of forcing me to calm down; instead, I plunge deeper into a vortex of panic. 'Unaccompanied? You think that's OK, do you? Do you? You don't think that will add to her sense of uncertainty and chaos?'

'No, I don't. They're not strangers, are they?'

'Yes, they are,' I insist. I stamp my foot. Literally. Jeff and I stare at my leg in amazement. Neither of us knows what to say about such a childish

outburst. I feel impotent. Humiliated.

‘Well, they oughtn’t be,’ he murmurs. I disagree but can’t answer because I know if I say another word I’ll cry. I need to keep her greedily to myself. I can’t admit exactly why; it’s a vile thought that her time might be limited, there might not be enough of her to go around. It’s sickening. I sicken myself. Jeff walks towards me, takes hold of my hand and gently leads me to sit on the bed. He puts his hands on each side of my head and turns my face towards his.

‘We ought to count our blessings, Alison. They are charming people.’

‘Yes,’ I reluctantly admit, because, undeniably, they are. And they might steal her. Even if she is well and healthy, I am still at risk of losing her.

‘No screaming fits, no dirty tricks, no stories sold to the tabloids. I think we’ve been extremely lucky with the Trubys. Extremely lucky.’ I’m at a loss as to how to respond. Nothing about this situation is lucky. ‘She’ll be OK,’ he whispers.

‘Not necessarily. What if—’ I can’t bring myself to say it. He stays focused on me, I know he does; even though I pull my eyes away from his I can feel the heat of his gaze on my scalp, there among my dark roots and stray grey hairs. All human fallibility and vagueness. Vanity. It’s suddenly important to me that I don’t cry in front of him. Normally, I’m unafraid of showing my feelings to him, they are forever bubbling just below the surface: joy, pain, euphoria, disappointment. He thinks it’s fascinating and even attractive that I cry at movies and the news, but I feel this so deeply I cannot allow my feelings breath. Given any sort of life, they’ll engulf me.

Carefully, he explains, ‘That’s why I want her to get to know the Trubys. So that she has more family to support her if she does have the mutated gene.’

‘It’s *our* job to support her.’ I don’t want to have to listen to what he’s saying.

‘You can never have too many people to love and support you, can you, Alison? You know that.’

Yes, this is what I’ve always believed, and yet I can’t bring myself to agree with him. She doesn’t need their love; she has mine. She has me. Aren’t I enough? I’ve always tried to be everything. Jeff waits for me to nod, obedient to his calm, well-thought-through, rational train of thought. When I don’t acquiesce, he stands up. ‘We’ll just have to see how this plays out.’

The inappropriateness of his words causes my throat to burn. I think I'm going to choke. Choke on his words. 'Really. And that's your answer, is it?'

'Well, what else can we do?' I don't know, and I hate myself for not knowing. I'm supposed to guide Katherine. I'm her mother. 'Look, at least she's happy tonight,' he goes on. 'Since we dropped this bombshell on her, she hasn't been herself, not really. The swearing, the truancy. Both completely understandable, but not very *her*.' I don't want to concede the point, but I can't deny it. The brutal, black facts beat down on me like blows.

*She's not ours. She might get cancer.*

I don't want to deny her any happiness. I've only ever wanted her happiness.

'I think she just sees it as gaining a load of siblings,' he adds.

'But it's not that simple, is it? Not that simple at all.'

'Maybe not, but maybe we have to think of it in those terms for now.'

'Until when? Until she wants to have her nose and tummy button pierced like Olivia?'

'Do her piercings bother you that much?'

No, not really, but I daren't say what really bothers me: *Until she wants to move in with them*. Saying it might make it happen. I move my head in a way that is neither a nod nor a shake. Jeff realises I'm not going to make any further comment; he simply adds, 'I'm done. I'll wait for you downstairs.'

## Twenty-Two Years Ago

*The brittle, clawing fingers of her hometown dug deep into her flesh and held her fast for three more slow, never-to-be-recovered years. One by one, she bent the fingers back, loosened the clasp of inertia, paucity, responsibility, and reached for possibility, opportunity, hope. She wriggled free and, finally, aged nineteen, she ran to London. Unfortunately, the streets were not paved with gold; they were packed with people who had plummy accents, lithe limbs and silky hair. Aliens. It seemed that everyone – other than her – dashed about, certain of their place in the world, clear about where they were going, and not ashamed of where they had come from. Terrified, she considered getting back on the coach, but instead she made a burrow, if not a home, in a tiny, dirty flatshare. Eyes to the floor, she worked hard; many long, poorly paid hours met her rent. She worked as a waitress through the day and as a cleaner in an advertising agency at night.*

*Then the world started to shift. Imperceptibly, Sloaney types went to ground; skinny models and gritty rock stars started to rule. Alison was entirely lacking in the sort of daring that allowed hedonism or even pouting but at least her accent was no longer a drawback; she was able to amalgamate somewhat. It wasn't until she was twenty-four that opportunity finally slithered through the door, arriving in the unlikely form of a bolshie creative director stumbling back into the office after an extremely long lunch which had rolled into supper. She'd just finished cleaning the loos. It was disgusting, the state people left them in. They didn't bother even to flush half the time. What sort of person thought it was OK that another person would clean away their turds? The creative director was loud and flamboyant. She'd seen him before; sometimes he worked late, sometimes a few of them would just hang around the office, drinking beer, acting as though they didn't have homes to go to, although she knew they did. Nice ones, probably. Tonight he yelled to her that he was planning to pick up some important sketches before he went on to a nightclub with a client. She*

made him coffee, pointed out that there was some white powder just below his nose and handed him a bin with admirable speed when he turned green, thus saving the important sketches from being soaked in regurgitated pizza. After she'd wiped his shoes clean of vomit and called him a cab home, he offered her a job as his personal assistant. She wasn't sure he'd remember in the morning but, in a rare display of nerve, the next day she did not go to the café where she served lattes to grumpy commuters but instead turned up at the Soho offices and slid behind the desk outside his door. To her surprise, no one asked her to leave.

She thought of the adverts she'd watched on telly as a child; the ones about Oxo cubes and families; this gave her the courage to raise her head a fraction and she started to glance up and about. She was efficient and helpful. She smiled a lot and never complained about the long hours, so people liked her, or at least – if she couldn't hope for quite that – they needed her. Before, limited by having two jobs, her romantic opportunities had been confined to the driver of the late-night number 22 bus or the chap who owned the corner shop at the end of the particularly dingy street she lived in. They were both in their sixties. Now she considered the guys who sat at desks near her own; she was curious about their sharp suits and slick, shallow smiles. She managed the occasional romantic encounter. Scrub that – she managed the occasional sexual encounter – romance didn't feature; offering to clear the desk so that she didn't accidentally staple her backside to a status report was about as romantic as it got. Unfortunately, she found that the devastatingly attractive guys made her feel plump and pointless. She believed the point of her was that she was fairly bright and fairly kind, but very hot men aren't generally interested in either trait. She decided, as they inexpertly drilled into her, never to regret these experiences, but she knew she could hardly value them. They were tiring and inane. She could only hope they would turn out to be more fun in retrospect than they were proving to be at the time. It might give her something to think about when she was a middle-aged housewife chopping vegetables.

Baby carrots or courgettes.

She was so very glad when Jeff came along.

It was a bright Saturday in September. Camden Market was alive, buzzing like a beehive. The smell of aromatherapy oils and incense butted up against the smell of strong coffee, and coleslaw on jacket potatoes. Some people were eating Thai food, Chinese, Indian. It was astonishing to Alison.

*She enjoyed dawdling around the stalls selling second-hand donkey jackets and customised Doc Martens. She was often drawn to the mystics offering to read Tarot cards, revealing futures for a few quid, but she never dared do it. What if it was as bad as her past? She couldn't bear the thought. Best not to know. Alison liked the market because it was accepting of all; people with buzz cuts, tattoos, piercings or Fred Perry shirts were shoulder to shoulder, it was the embodiment of Cool Britannia. Anarchic, experimental and inspiring. Most Saturdays, she and her flatmate trawled around the stalls, marvelling at the curios and trinkets, coveting the clothes and the furniture. That particular Saturday Alison was foraging through the tie-dye and crystals, looking for funky, fun, inexpensive accessories. She couldn't decide between two hats. She kept putting one on, then taking it off and trying the other, staring at herself in the mirror, pulling funny expressions which she hoped passed for alluring. He came out of nowhere and said, 'You must buy the blue one. The other is a horror.'*

*She should have been offended, but the moment he said it she knew he was right. The air was giddy. She could taste it on her tongue, feel it in her veins.*

*'Alison, this is Jeff, from my office. Jeff, this is Alison, my flatmate,' her friend had muttered dutifully. There was something in her tone which suggested she'd already seen that Alison and Jeff wanted to become much better acquainted.*

*'Where are you going to wear that?'*

*Alison blushed, mumbled, 'Nowhere special.'*

*'Oh, yes, you are. I'll take you for a drink. I know the best pub on the river.'*

*Alison appraised him. He was five foot ten, or eleven, average height. Yet he seemed so big, exuberant; she sensed that he had enough confidence, optimism and assurance to buoy up them both. Their mutual friend understood she'd just become the third wheel, she made discreet excuses and left them to it. Melted away like snow in sunshine. So it was decided. Alison went with him immediately, somehow sensing that this might be it, the moment when her luck really changed, her life changed. For ever.*

*He was unlike the other young men she knew. So many others were inflated with misplaced arrogance or crippled with crises of confidence, but he managed to get the balance right. He introduced her to his wide circle of friends and together they all had such fun. He knew all the best places in*

*London: comedy clubs to laugh in, Indian restaurants to eat in, old-school cinemas, the latest nightclubs, secret places to swim. He seemed to have access to so much life, and he was willing to share it with her.*

*He bought her flowers.*

*And books.*

*Jeff wasn't stupidly good-looking, not the sort that would cause her to be silenced by nerves. That's not to say he was unattractive – far from it. He was attractive, but, largely, the attraction came from the fact that he was a ridiculously clever man. She took delight in declaring him – to anyone who would listen – the most intelligent man she had ever met. There was a chance she set too much store by the fact that he could quote Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Larkin and Dylan Thomas, but then is it possible to give too much credit to a man who wants to quote poetry? Importantly, Alison felt that Jeff seemed to value her as someone who was fairly bright and fairly kind.*

*He said she was his best friend. She never said, but he was her everything.*

*Jeff was a miracle.*

Caitlin and George Ford are attentive hosts and, other than shunning the invention of central heating until November, they try to make us very comfortable and welcome. I feel guilty that their efforts are wasted on me. When we arrive we're offered an aperitif. Jeff quickly accepts a gin and tonic and asks Caitlin to make it a stiff double; I guess that means I'm driving, so I request an orange juice. Caitlin has invited two other couples. We all have girls attending Wittington High in various year groups. We're in an exclusive, quite-pleased-with-ourselves club; our girls are the sort to go to a certain type of school, we are the sort who can afford it. The smugness chokes me and I want to yell at the mothers that securing a place in a school highly rated in the league tables guarantees *nothing*. It takes everything I have not to.

The problem with living in a confessional society where oversharing is the norm and eating an orange-flavoured KitKat is counted as news that demands a photo, a tweet and several posts on Facebook and Instagram is that if you decide to keep your problems to yourself then people naturally assume you have none, that you must have an absolutely perfect life, the result being, when you are feeling at your most wretched, people assume everything is simply tickety-boo. Does anyone ever consider the possibility you're just keeping a dignified silence any more?

Jeff is a wonderful guest; he throws himself into an amusing story involving Andrew Marr. There's a curious energy about Jeff of late. He's animated, almost frantic. His mood is a direct contrast to my stale defeatism. I know it's because he's writing again. He hasn't mentioned anything specific, but his general air of exuberance, despite our horrific situation, can only be a result of that. I have not asked because, truly, I'm in no mood to indulge him. I'll be regaled with anecdotes about lunches with his editor, his thoughts on plot and character and his trials while

researching. I have enough on my plate dealing with my unimaginable real life.

I am a hopeless guest and simply can't get into the swing of the conversations. Tonight, I find the small talk irritating, the theoretical debate pointless, and the jokey fun seems puerile. Caitlin has clearly gone to some lengths to produce tasty hors d'oeuvres and I recognise the main course of smoked haddock and sweet-potato gratin from the frozen range at COOK – normally a favourite – but I find I have no appetite. When Katherine was a baby she used to love sweet potato. I hadn't really cooked with it much before she was weaning, until Annabel Karmel's *Complete Baby and Toddler Meal Planner* suggested I should.

I bought the book because it promised that it would offer me guidance in giving Katherine the best nutritional start in life. As a new mum, I martyred myself to giving her 'the best start in life'. Among other things, those words are responsible for my enduring breastfeeding throughout two bouts of mastitis (I viewed her insistent, tugging, agonising gulps as a privilege), buying a particular soft-play baby gym (which cost twice as much as any of the others did) and a hideously expensive DVD programme about a green, fuzzy, unidentifiable animal that was supposed to help her learn a foreign language (it didn't, but she did enjoy playing with the accompanying toy). I slavishly followed recipes for organic chicken casserole, butternut-squash purée and cottage pie, before blending the meals to mush and freezing them in ice-cube-sized portions to be defrosted and served at a moment's notice. I can picture it still, her tiny, sweet, rosebud mouth opening wide to accept the dainty pink plastic spoon laden with goodness.

I wonder what she's eating now. A McDonald's burger, probably. The thought causes me to push my gratin to one side; my insides are a tight knot. Jeff isn't eating much either, although he's drinking enough to sink a ship.

The ice-hockey game was due to begin at 7.30 p.m., although they met at the rink at six. She wouldn't let me drive her there. Jeff dropped her off. The rink is only ten minutes from here, coincidentally enough. It's strange that she's so close, and yet not. I imagine her in a boisterous, excitable crowd, watching the fast-paced game. I'm here amidst placid company and measured conversation, and she feels so distant. I just want to hold her tight. Tom mentioned that there is some sort of light show before the start of the game; he said there was a raffle, a great atmosphere, they even sing the

national anthem. ‘She’ll love it,’ he assured me. There it was again, a man assuring me how my daughter would feel or act. Such enviable certainty. Katherine was ready by five, despite three outfit changes. Not knowing anything about the sport, I googled it, discovering that each game consists of three twenty-minute periods and that there is a fifteen-minute break between each. It should all be over by half past nine. I glance at my watch. It’s just after eight. Assuming everything is running to schedule, then the second part is just about to begin.

‘Your bathroom is that way, isn’t it?’ I ask Caitlin. I feel uncomfortable asking, even though I never say ‘toilet’ nowadays, I know that’s common, but I still feel a bit self-conscious calling it a ‘loo’; I mean, I’m not related to the Queen.

‘First door on the right, after the sitting room,’ she reminds me.

I leave the dining room and walk to the front door, open it, then close it quietly behind me. The car is freezing. I whack up the heating and slowly pull out of the drive; I don’t want them to notice I’ve gone. I’m not sure what I’m planning. Maybe I could get to the rink, check on Katherine and then get back to the dinner party before anyone is aware that I’ve absconded. Maybe I won’t come back. I don’t care. I’m not thinking about that. I’m thinking that I shouldn’t be giving up Katherine so easily. I feel I’m handing her over without a fight and, while I don’t know who exactly I should be fighting, I do know she’s mine. She’s my baby, my baby who might have a mutated gene that will lead to cancer, and I can’t bear a moment away from her.

It’s difficult to find a car-parking space at the rink. I’ve never seen the place this busy. This often happens to me: I find I am surprised by a rush of life that is occurring somewhere beyond my notice. Presumably, every Saturday there’s a game, the rink is this packed, heaving, throbbing, while I am at a sedate dinner party or perhaps at home curled up reading a book while Jeff writes one – or not. Katherine sometimes has a friend over for a sleepover on a Saturday night – not every week, because often we have to be up early on Sunday morning for lacrosse – but if there’s no game or training then she sits in her room with a friend, the two of them giggling, whispering and painting their nails. I order Thai takeaway for us all. Those Saturday evenings are some of the best nights of my life. Content, contained, calm. I never care that there’s life gushing elsewhere when we have those stay-in Saturdays; all the life I need is within my four walls.

I circle the car park twice. I feel desperation mounting in my belly. I'm reminded of when Katherine first started school, I always arrived for pick-up at least ten minutes earlier than necessary. I don't know how it happened. Her primary school was a five-minute drive or a ten-minute walk from our home, yet if I was in the car I'd always build in time, just in case. Maybe the traffic lights would be against me, or there could be a jam. I didn't want her rushing out and scanning the mothers at the gate to find me lacking. I knew she'd be completely safe if ever I were to be late. The teachers held on tightly to the children until they were handed over to their parents. But why risk it? Why put her through that moment of tension and uncertainty? Why let her down? It was the same even if I collected her on foot. Pick-up was twenty past three, yet I was never able to leave the house later than three; I just couldn't bring myself to sit there in the kitchen a moment longer. Outside the school gate, I would practically bounce on the balls of my feet in excitement at the prospect of seeing her. A day apart felt too long when she was so tiny. I'd want to hear her chatter or blow her nose, see her face light up when I pulled a Mini Babybel cheese from my pocket. I simply had to be near her to feel all was well in the world. Isn't every mother like that? Quite simply, everything just seems better when we are together.

I feel that same mix of excitement and tension bubbling up inside me now. I decide to park in a space that is clearly marked NO PARKING, ACCESS 24 HOURS; I'm prepared to take the hit on the fine or even deal with being towed. I have no choice. I *have* to be near her to breathe easily.

Despite the fact that the car park is full, the reception area is deserted. A spotty, tired-looking young man sells me a ticket without meeting my eye.

'It's started, you know,' he says, partially apologetic, partially censorious.

'Yes, I realise.'

'Same price.'

'That's fine.'

He pauses, and looks concerned. 'Standing room only,' he says. I'm beginning to doubt he wants to make the sale. I just want him to hurry.

'I don't mind.' Standing will be fine. I'll be able to move around, maybe stay out of sight, maybe go and say hi. I'm not sure yet.

'That will be eight pounds,' he sighs. I scabble around my evening bag and am relieved to find a folded ten-pound note tucked in the pocket. He

hands over the ticket and I rush towards the ice rink. I used to bring Katherine here for skating lessons when she was maybe nine or ten years old. She had a lot of hobbies when she was tiny, a lot of lessons, which I always call opportunities. As I dash down the stairs I run through them in my head: ice skating, horse riding, ballet, tennis, fencing, swimming, drama, sailing, tap and, of course, lacrosse. I can see her now at each different stage, wearing each different uniform or kit, her face always the same: earnest and ever so slightly self-critical. It's different now: we've had to consolidate and concentrate on her lacrosse. Focus is all.

The moment I enter the arena I remember that I'm wearing a flimsy, sparkly top and a thin evening jacket, not at all appropriate for an ice rink. My teeth start to chatter and I'm shivering violently as I crane my neck and scan the crowds in an effort to find her. Despite the sizeable audience, it takes me just a few minutes until my eyes rest on her. She's sitting in a section about twenty metres away. She's with Amy, but there's no sign of Tom or Olivia; their seats are empty. Her expression is not earnest or self-critical; it is one of giddy happiness. Her cheeks are flushed with the cold air and her eyes are glittering, bright with excitement. I feel relieved and yet, at the same time, rejected. Just a shard of that emotion. Like the moment she first refused to take my hand in public or when I bought her a top as a surprise and I wasn't greeted with delighted thanks but instead the question, 'Who are you thinking of? Is it for you?' Children are unintentionally barbaric; if we do our jobs well, they must, inevitably, leave us behind. Jeff is always telling me I have to loosen my grip, I have to be ready to let her go. I know this, but I can't accept it. It's counterintuitive; all I want is to hold her tight.

I watch as she swiftly moves her head, as her eyes flick across the ice, trailing Callum, no doubt. The players menacingly dart forward, halt, pass, tackle, with a lethal blend of skill and fearlessness. The gum shields and the padding transform the young men into ominous bionic gorillas. Katherine chats to Amy, who is holding an enormous tub of popcorn. Amy leans into her, one hand casually resting on her arm. She offers the carton and Katherine smiles and grabs an enormous handful which she pushes into her mouth; comfortable rather than polite. I bet onlookers are enchanted. Two sisters having such fun. What's not to love? In terms of my spying episode, surely this is the very best result I could wish for.

Yet.

I feel surplus. I sigh deeply and consider my next move. Should I say hello or simply sneak away? I can't decide. I'm physically and emotionally frozen. Then Katherine jumps up out of her seat. For a moment I think she's spotted me and I now find I don't want her to, but as I follow her outstretched arm I see she's pointing to the players. Callum has the puck and in a flash he hits it into the net; the net minder looks dazed then frustrated as the judge puts on the red light, indicating that the goal is allowed. Katherine and Amy cheer and I punch the air, too. It's automatic; everyone around me is roaring and jubilant. As people are jumping up and down, I momentarily lose sight of my daughter, and when the crowd settles I see Amy pull apart from her, after what was clearly a celebratory embrace. Not a jubilant high-five. Not a gutsy air punch, a warm hug. I know I have to leave before she spots me.

As I turn, I feel the weight of a coat land on my shoulders. Instinctively, I pull it around me before I even consider where it's come from. 'Did you think we'd steal her?' It takes a fraction of a second for me to understand. Tom has given me his coat, a thoughtful, intimate gesture I can't process.

'Don't joke,' I mutter.

'No. Sorry.' He looks embarrassed. The question has landed too close to the mark. We stare at one another, not knowing what to say next. I'm flooded with guilt. He gave me his coat. The simple kindness is overwhelming. I shouldn't be here. I should have trusted them. Tom, Katherine – all of them. I can imagine what Katherine would say if she learnt I was here. Hashtag trust issues. But then, how could I not come? I stare at Tom and think there's something about his expression that understands all of this without me having to say it. I doubt he's going to rebuke me. I'm grateful to him for being so gracious but I'm also aware that his charm, insight and thoughtfulness will be a problem to me, as will Amy's easy affection and Callum's daring and prowess. If Katherine's birth family had been messier, she might not be so interested in them.

'I saw Callum score,' I say.

'It was brilliant, wasn't it?'

'Yes. It really was.'

'I almost missed it; I was making a phone call. There's better reception here than in the stands.'

'Katherine jumped up and down. Amy hugged her.' He looks delighted, but I wonder whether I should have held back the information instead of

blurting it out. On one level, I understand it belongs to him, too, but his knowing that the girls are building trust seems like a win for him, a loss for me. I keep telling myself we are on the same side. I don't believe me. 'Where's Olivia?'

'I couldn't persuade her to come. That's who I was calling, actually. Not that she picked up.' We are facing each other but everyone else is focused on the game; we keep getting bumped and jostled. It's awkward. Touching him, however accidentally, is awkward.

'Well, this isn't easy for anyone.'

'No, true, but her absence is nothing to do with Katherine. Well, it's likely to be *something* to do with Katherine but, primarily, it's because she has a boyfriend. Her first. Or, at least, her first serious one.'

'Oh.' I don't know what to say.

'I think she had a hot date lined up tonight.' He raises his eyebrows in irony at the words 'hot date', as though the suggestion is a little ludicrous. 'Not that she's actually said as much. She opted to explain her refusal to come along by saying it was because Katherine was coming. Little minx. I wasn't fooled for a moment. I know her too well.'

'Gosh, how awful.' The moment I make this comment I regret it. Tom bristles.

'Teenagers do sometimes tell fibs.' He pulls his face into an expression that is supposed to be a grin; however, I know this is not that. It's a smidge patronising, pitying; he obviously thinks he's breaking bad news. I *do* realise teenagers sometimes tell lies. Even Katherine wasn't honest about wanting to meet the Trubys, or about her truancy, but I can't imagine her lying about seeing a boy.

'It's not a big deal.'

'No. I see.' In fact, though, I don't; it all sounds a bit underhand and complicated. Using our terrible situation for her own ends sounds pretty awful to me, but I don't want to say so. I direct the conversation along a less incendiary path. 'Is he nice?'

'Who?'

'The boyfriend.'

'I wouldn't know. She hasn't introduced us.'

'Oh.' I'm taken aback. Tom seems so thoughtful and together – I pull his jacket closer around me – how can he condone his daughter sneaking about on a Saturday night with a boy he hasn't even vetted?

‘Not formally. Well, not at all, actually,’ he adds. His face creases with concern, he looks defeated and I realise he’s asking himself the same question. Suddenly exhausted, too, I decide to help him out.

‘Well, even if you do meet him you are unlikely to approve.’

‘How so?’ He looks defensive but willing to fight his corner, like an urban fox caught rummaging through bins.

I smile, trying to convey that I’m not getting on his case. ‘Well, which boy *is* good enough for your baby girl?’ I want to demonstrate good-natured empathy, the sort I might give to any parent at the school gate. Nothing too deep or meaningful. I don’t want to get involved. I don’t.

‘Absolutely.’ His relief is tangible. ‘I can’t stand the thought of him touching her. Wanting her. It all just seems so wrong. So fast. But there’s no denying it, she’s coming to that age when, you know, sex matters. For them, it’s everything. It’s vital. It’s there!’ I stare at him, nonplussed. Intellectually, I do know that this time existed, even for me – especially for me – but I can’t quite recall it, not precisely, and I can’t believe he’s mentioned it. Not at all.

‘Quite,’ I mutter. It’s odd to hear him talk of Olivia in this way. I don’t carry Katherine and sex in the same train of thought. Never, ever. She’s been to parties and danced with boys but anything more is unimaginable. She’s only fifteen.

‘I mean, Olivia is fifteen. It’s a tricky age, isn’t it? Not quite legal, but the hormones are raving.’

‘Not at all legal!’ I gasp, somewhat allowing my good-natured empathy to disintegrate. For me, laws are black and white. Tom shrugs. I suspect he’s been living with a lot of grey for a while.

‘I’ve seen him, from a distance. I don’t doubt she’ll tell me about him when she’s ready. I trust her.’

I get the feeling he’s trying to convince himself as much as me. She struck me as streetwise and, although that isn’t always a straightforward compliment – and not something that is ever said of Katherine – I do think being streetwise is useful.

‘I can’t imagine Olivia doing anything stupid.’

‘Really?’ He looks tragically hopeful. I feel guilty because I let the platitude slip out without giving it much thought, simply to comfort him in the moment, but now I see he really wants my opinion. ‘I am a bit concerned. I mean, this whole situation, it’s pretty hellish, isn’t it?’

I stagger with relief. My knees actually quiver. I want to grab hold of him, hang on to him, weep and say, *Yes, yes, it is*. His openness floors me; Jeff's rigid insistence that everything is fine seems even more ridiculous and alienating. Something shifts, just a fraction. We're on the same side.

'What does he look like? The secret boyfriend.' I doubt he's going to say 'smart, respectable, reliable', and I feel frustrated, disappointed. That's what I'd want for Katherine; I find I want it for Olivia, too. Perhaps even more so. I have a feeling she needs it.

'Skinny. Unprepossessing. He needs a haircut, a shave and perhaps even a shower.' Tom does his/Katherine's shrug but I'm not fooled; I feel his discontent. 'I'm afraid I don't get it.'

'I suppose that's the point of him, at least as far as Olivia is concerned.'

'I suppose.'

We both glance about. The place is packed with young, excitable, noisy, tattooed types. It seems everyone has a tattoo nowadays, not just sailors and troublemakers. Everywhere I look teenagers are eating fast food as though they are ravenous, barely bothering to swallow before they kiss each other with equal hunger. Their trousers are falling down, their hoods pulled up. They don't fasten their enormous trainers but instead stuff their laces into their shoes. They seem outlandish to me. I can neither recognise nor remember that lusty wanting of everything – of food, of each other, of life. For me, it's all once removed now. I want things for Katherine. Not the hoodies, tattoos or public displays of affection but other things. A big life. A successful life. And now, a long life. That more than anything. I guess Tom must be thinking something along the same lines when he says, 'Youth – we may as well leave it to the young.'

'Well, we haven't any choice; it's theirs. It was ours but trying to recapture it is nothing other than tragic.'

'Yes, pathetic.' There's a glint in his eye and I respond knowing that I need to lighten the mood.

'I'm thinking of the mothers who dress like their daughters,' I offer with a smile.

'The fathers who sleep with their PAs.'

'Botox.'

'Comb-overs.'

'Collagen.' We are both suppressing giggles now.

‘If I’m being frank, I was never especially good at being young,’ confesses Tom.

‘You weren’t?’ I’m surprised. I can’t imagine him ever being anything other than comfortable in his own skin, happy with every stage of his life. Except this latest one. Since he lost his wife.

‘I don’t tend to value what others do, and peer pressure is such a vast part of being young.’ It’s a worthy explanation. I’m glad he didn’t tell me that he failed at being young because he stayed at home and studied every minute of the day, or that he had no friends, or too many spots. Yet something about the explanation chills me. He’s a little too self-reliant and sure of himself. I wonder if that’s going to be a problem for me. Yes, I think it might be. I try to push the thought away. Cling to that recent bonhomie. I must not get into the habit of thinking of him as the enemy. ‘Still, I would have it all again if I could,’ he says with a big grin.

‘Not me.’

‘No? I always assume that everyone longs to be young again.’

I’d never want it back again. I couldn’t endure it a second time. ‘It would have to be very different,’ I murmur. Impossibly different. He looks interested but doesn’t push. For a nanosecond I almost want him to. But that’s crazy. I’m so confused around Tom. We’ve barely known each other a month and yet I feel a deep and profound intimacy with him, probably because of his physical similarity to Katherine. He looks about, obviously deciding to change the subject.

‘Where’s Jeff?’

I want to say he’s parking the car. I want to pretend that we are united in this scouting expedition, but I can’t, not to Tom. Strangely, I think he’s the only person who understands how hard this is, so I sigh and confess. ‘He’s still at the dinner party. They think I’m in the loo.’

‘How long have you been away?’

I glance at my phone. ‘Thirty minutes.’

‘I guess by now they’ve discovered you’re not fixing your make-up.’ He grins, a rueful, complicit gesture. It’s a really stupid thought but I can’t help it: I wonder, does my make-up need fixing? Is that what he’s saying? The more ludicrous thought is the one that follows: I should have checked it; there was always a chance I’d bump into him.

On cue, my phone starts to ring. I see it’s Jeff and pick up. ‘For fuck’s sake, Alison. Where are you?’ he says.

‘I’m at the ice rink.’

‘What?’

‘The ice rink.’ Tom turns away and pretends not to be listening, but he can’t fail to catch Jeff’s angry tones bouncing from the phone.

‘Bloody hell, Alison, have you lost your mind?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you with Katherine?’

‘She doesn’t know I’m here. I just needed to check on her.’

‘No. No, you didn’t. Go home now. I’ve already told the Fords that you were ill and you had to leave in a hurry. I very much doubt they believed it.’

‘Are you at home?’

‘No.’

‘Are you still there? With them?’

‘Well, yes. Where else could I be?’

Where, indeed? Here? I bite that back, but can’t help sniping, ‘I won’t be able to pick you up if you’ve said I’m ill. You’ll have to get a cab home.’

‘Don’t blame me. I had to come up with something. It was excruciating. I thought you were the one who wanted to keep this thing under wraps. How are we going to do that if you start acting so oddly? How could you just up and leave a dinner party without a word of explanation?’

‘I don’t know.’ I don’t know anything. I wish he wouldn’t shout at me. ‘Are you going to leave now?’

‘No, not now, don’t be ridiculous. It will look even worse if I leave early, too.’ I’m not sure it would. Surely there’s nothing more natural than a man rushing home to see his sick wife. ‘I’ll stay until coffee.’

‘OK.’ The chill of the rink is setting into my bones, despite Tom’s coat around my shoulders. I put my phone in my bag and rub my hands up and down the length of my arms. ‘I had better go,’ I say to Tom. He doesn’t make any reference to the call or to even the fact that I haven’t hung up yet and Jeff’s disgruntled tones can still be heard coming from my bag.

‘You could stay if you like.’

I glance towards Katherine and Amy. I want to stay, eat popcorn, see if Callum’s team holds its advantage. I don’t want to be in on my own all night, but I shake my head. ‘Can I ask a favour of you?’

‘Of course.’

‘Could you not mention to Katherine that I was here?’ He nods and I am grateful. I don’t want to feel gratitude towards him, but I do. In a strange

way, that I haven't been able to acknowledge, I have from the moment he told me he is Katherine's father. How could I not? He brought her into existence.

'Do you want me to walk you back to your car?'

'No, you had better get back to the kids. Don't be—'

'Too late. No, I won't.'

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.' I shrug out of his coat and hand it back to him. He puts it back on.

'Oh, nice. You've warmed it up for me.'

When I get back to the car I check my phone. Jeff has hung up; I wonder how long it took him to notice I wasn't listening. I wonder if he noticed at all.

‘It suits you.’

‘No, Mum, it doesn’t. I look—’ Katherine waves her arms around in despair. ‘Flat.’ She looks lithe, elegant and refined but I know better than to say so. ‘How have you managed to find the only thing in the entire shop that’s not fashionable?’ she moans. True, I did suggest she try on this particular dress. It’s lovely. It comes just below the knee and it’s made of good-quality cotton. Katherine glowers at me, her face like a work of art: cool, distant, frustrated. I long for the infant I could have swept into my arms, tickled until raucous giggles made her foam at the mouth, until she gripped on to me and smothered me with small, fierce kisses. This child is certainly no longer an infant, although she’s not as almost-woman as she imagines. She poses, as they all do at her age, like a fawn, slightly knock-kneed, hands on hips, just. Her hair falls in a loose, silky rope over one shoulder, her cheeks are flushed. But her mouth is set, weary, almost resentful. My intention was to impress her, to have a bit of a bonding session, but it’s not happening. She’s here with me but I sense that I’m boring her or, worse, that she isn’t really even aware of me. Her mind is elsewhere.

We’re taking advantage of the fact that Katherine doesn’t have any training today, so we’ve come shopping. I suggested it. She’s always growing and, while she really doesn’t mind wearing last year’s skirts and dresses (the truth of the matter is that she actively likes doing so, as they ride up her thighs), I’m less keen. I suggested we could get our nails done, too, and then have lunch. Jeff muttered something about it being dishonest to try to buy one’s way into someone’s affections, but I ignored him. I’m not buying anyone. I’m simply treating my daughter and, if that happens to be the day after she’s been to an ice-hockey match with her birth family, then so what?

I didn't invite Jeff. We've hardly spoken since last night. He's nursing a hangover; I'm nursing a grudge. The Fords must have served coffee at an ungodly hour because he didn't return until after 1 a.m. I was still awake when I heard the taxi pull up outside our house but I stayed in bed, faking sleep. He slept in the spare room, as he sometimes does if I have an early start or he has a late night. I was annoyed with him for not getting home in time to greet Katherine. I thought he'd want to hear the low-down. He has a rather wonderful and enviably easy way of chatting with her that tends to elicit more information than I can ever gather. Without him, I know I often sound too probing and demanding. I heard Tom's car pull on to our drive at nine forty-five, but he didn't come in. I was relieved and yet strangely disappointed. I pinned myself into a chair and watched her say her goodbyes through the blinds, rather than dashing to the door. When she walked in I exercised extreme restraint. I glanced up from the book I was pretending to read, beamed and asked, 'Nice night?'

'Yeah, great.' She looked cautious. Different to how she'd looked at the rink. I guessed she didn't want to hurt my feelings and so was suppressing the jubilation I'd witnessed earlier. 'Callum's team won. Four-two. He scored.'

'How marvellous!' I probably sounded shrill, a bit too enthusiastic. I coughed and tried to pull it in but she didn't give me the chance.

'I'm really tired. I'm going straight up.' She yawned, conveniently on cue. I was not convinced. For all her many talents, acting isn't one of them.

'Wouldn't you like a hot chocolate?'

'We had one at the rink.'

We.

Her foot was already on the first stair tread. That's when I suggested the shopping expedition. I laid out the delights like tempting sweeties: Superdry, Jack Wills, Hollister.

So here we are. Normally, she loves visiting this store; it's full of devastatingly good-looking male assistants who are prepared to flirt with even the mothers for a sale. The decor confuses us mothers but delights the gangs of teens that endlessly trail in and around. It's a strange mix of LA surf culture yet it's almost completely pitch black. I'm forever setting off the alarm as I take a garment to the door to establish whether it's purple or navy.

‘Try something else on, then,’ I suggest. I know I’m not going to get my own way with the blue cotton dress. Even if she does agree to it, it will languish in her wardrobe, getting perhaps just one outing, when she visits Jeff’s family. Patient smile fixed purposefully in place, I return to my post by the one (occupied) chair that’s been made available for waiting mothers and friends, and she turns back into the changing room. As I wait for her to re-emerge I glance around at all the other mother-and-daughter pairs who are shopping. The mums are cautious, tactful or bossy, the daughters giddy, sulky or frustrated; a veritable cornucopia of emotions skitters around the curtained changing rooms. Mostly, there’s love. Mothers shop with their daughters because they love them. Daughters shop with their mothers for the same reason. We don’t all remember as much all the time, but it’s true. I think of Olivia. Who is she shopping with now? Suddenly, Katherine is in front of me again. She’s wearing spray-on-tight jeans and a crop top. An Olivia outfit. Have I conjured her up by thinking of her? ‘Oh, don’t you think—’ I stop myself because she shoots me a look which communicates that nothing other than confirmation that she looks sensational will be acceptable. I nod and head to the till, in the hope that the unopposed purchase will loosen things up between us.

At lunch I suggest the sharing plate; I always think they help fuel conversation. I point out the beetroot-cured salmon gravadlax and the Moroccan-spiced hummus with flatbread. She says she wants the bowl of miso rice that comes with pak choi, broccoli, red peppers and sugar-snap peas. I say I’ll have the same but pad out mine with grilled chicken breast. ‘Can’t I tempt you with one, too, or maybe some prawns?’ I ask.

She shakes her head. We busy ourselves with ordering and only when we have our meals in front of us do I say, ‘So, you haven’t said much about last night.’

‘It’s a really interesting game. I went in not knowing anything about ice hockey, but it’s a blast.’

‘Yes, no doubt.’

‘You’d have liked it, Mum.’ She glances at me, questioningly, and for a fraction of a second I wonder whether she knows I was there, but then her face cracks into a warm, open beam (just the second of the day; the first was when I paid for the spray-on trousers) and I know Tom has kept his promise.

‘I’m sure I would have.’ Dabbing my mouth with a paper napkin, I say it almost off-hand, almost as though I hardly care. ‘How were the Trubys?’

‘Great.’ She shovels a huge forkful of rice into her mouth and chews intensely, which means she can’t say anything more, as her mouth is full; so polite. I wait a moment before I try again.

‘Was it comfortable?’

‘Yeah, great.’ It seems she’s torn. She doesn’t want to talk about the fab night she had with them because she’s afraid of hurting me. It crosses my mind that neither does she want to lie and tell me she’s had a terrible time because it will be betraying them. I feel sorry for her. She shouldn’t be in this position. I have to help her through this.

‘They seem a lovely family.’

‘Yes.’

‘As I’d expect. I mean, they are related to you – how could they be anything other than wonderful?’ She grins; she’s used to me throwing compliments at her. She swallows them quickly, barely tasting them. I don’t make a secret of the fact that I adore her, am amazed by her.

‘Callum introduced me to all the members of his team.’

I freeze. ‘Did he? How exactly?’

‘“How?”’

‘How did he introduce you?’

‘Erm, as Katherine Mitchell. That’s my name, after all.’ She’s irritated again. I remind myself that these mercurial moods are not entirely new and are not exclusive to Katherine. Most teenagers alternately love and loathe their parents at least ten times an hour.

‘Did he say ...?’ I trail off. She blushes. I know every one of her blushes; I know when she’s mortified, elated, angry, delighted. This one is a mix between impatient and self-conscious. Still, she gives me what I want.

‘He never mentioned that I’m his sister.’

‘Well, that was sensible of him, because you’re not, and in this age of social media a comment like that could spread like wildfire and be terribly misinterpreted. Very confusing.’

‘But I am.’

‘Well, technically.’ She gives me a cold look that asks *Which other way is there?* Of course there’s another way. Callum was not brought up in the same house; they have not shared Christmases and birthdays; they have not squabbled at home on wet afternoons or on crowded beaches on bank

holidays. If Callum is her brother, then Tom is her dad. What does that make Jeff? What does that make me?

‘He said I was his cousin.’

‘What?’

‘He had to. Everyone said we looked alike. Amy, too. I thought it was a good answer.’

‘I suppose.’ It wasn’t a disastrous answer. I have been thinking that I’d go along the same lines myself, if I had to. If anyone called me on it. I feel a slight rush of gratitude, enough to give me the generosity to add, ‘He certainly seems a very bright boy. Very together.’

‘Yeah, he’s cool. Amy is so sweet, too.’

‘She seems it.’

‘You’ll never guess who was there?’

‘Who?’

‘Dolly Bridge and her gang. It was hilarious. She was totally acting like we were best friends because she wanted to hook up with the players and saw I was an in. Callum totally saw through her.’

‘Did he?’

‘Yup. He was all, like, “Yeah, maybe we could all grab a pizza one day. Talk to Katherine, she’s got my deets.”’

‘Have you?’

‘What?’

‘Got his deets? His details?’

‘It was a joke, Mum. No one says “deets”. He was winding up Dolly.’

‘Oh.’

She looks gleeful. Being in a position of power over Dolly Bridge is something she’s long dreamed of. It suits her complexion. I’m pleased for her. She hasn’t answered my question. Has she now got a means of getting in touch with them all independently? I suppose she has, and I suppose she will. Facebook, Instagram, snap-chatting and what have you. Countless untraceable ways.

I start to cut up my chicken into extraordinarily small pieces, smaller than you’d feed a weaning baby, and pile them on to the back of my fork; I can’t lift the food to my mouth, though. Eating seems an impossibility.

‘Amy wants me to go round again because she wants to show me the clothes she’s customised. She’s got this Swarovski crystal-styler thing and

seems obsessed with adding bling to pretty much everything she owns. She's really creative.'

'Right.' I suppose I must, on some level, have known there would be another time, and another after that, and one after that again, but I hadn't altogether accepted it. I'm not able to think beyond the moment, and I suppose I'd held fast to the vain hope that Katherine's interest would be satiated after one visit. Whilst they were all thinking it was the beginning of a relationship, I was praying it was the end of her curiosity.

'Tom mentioned something about us all going for a country walk next weekend. I said yes.' I disguise my shock. I suggest a country walk almost every weekend, Katherine agrees only about once every two months. I consider this completely normal for a teenager. Her weekends are busy, anyway; of course she isn't always going to want to spend her precious few free hours with us, her parents.

Although she's happy enough to spend time with the Trubys, it seems.

I try to be rational. I oughtn't to read too much into the fact that she's readily agreed to this walk just because the Trubys suggested it; she's been brought up to be very polite. I take a deep breath and think about Tom's discretion and understanding last night. I tell myself her mixing with them is not the end of the world, but I don't quite believe it. I want to tell her that I understand. They seem nice enough people. But they are not *her* people. They're not.

'And Olivia?'

Katherine drops her eyes to her food. I think talking about Olivia is a good idea. She's the crux of it, after all, and she's also the fly in the ointment. She did not go along to the rink and play happy families. Once Katherine admits as much, we can start to have an honest conversation about the difficulties of this complex situation we find ourselves in. We can admit that it's going to be a bumpy ride, perhaps we can decide whether the ride is worth getting on at all. We can't all live in La La Land, pretending life is seamless and straightforward.

'Oh, yes, she seems nice, too.' Katherine is still staring intently at her miso rice.

'But last night.'

'Well, she was quiet, really, didn't say much.' Katherine looks up from her food, puts a forkful in her mouth and starts chewing. She's not blushing.

She looks calm, resolute. Determined. It takes me a moment to understand what is going on. Katherine is lying to me.

‘But you think Olivia seems happy enough with everything? Not too traumatised?’ I ask this to give Katherine a chance to correct herself. To tell the truth.

‘Oh, yes. Fine.’

For clarity. ‘So she was there last night?’

‘Mmmm.’ Nodding.

‘The entire time?’

‘Yes, why wouldn’t she be?’ I feel hairs stand up from my body, as though they want to desert me.

‘And you got on?’

‘Well enough.’ She is now hastily piling food into her mouth, manners forgotten. ‘We need to get a move on if we want to get our nails done.’ She spits out these words and a grain or two of her rice lands on my plate. I place my knife and fork side by side, my appetite well and truly lost. I raise my arm and signal for the waiter to bring us the bill.

On Monday, Tom calls to confirm that we'll all go for a country walk at the weekend. He suggests Saturday but then calls back to say he can't manage that, there is a problem, can we do Sunday? I want to ask him what the problem is, but I fight the instinct to offer to help, telling myself I shouldn't get too involved. Simultaneously, I ask myself how I think that might be possible.

'Do you have a route in mind?' I ask.

'I'll think of something. Do you think it's a bit late in the year for a picnic?'

I do, but the alternative is a pub lunch. I'm not sure I want to sit around a table with the Trubys again, not just yet – or ever – but Katherine clearly wants them in her life. Whether or not I want it or think it's the right thing has to be set aside for now. If I try to block their relationship she'll turn sneaky, that much is clear. I know Jeff thinks I'm struggling with this situation because I'm losing control and that I'm an obsessive control freak, but that's not the case. Well, I am an obsessive control freak, but all I've done for Katherine – all the choices, the guidance, the advice, the vigilance – it's never been about trying to control her. Jeff is wrong about that. It's always been about being in her corner, supporting her and showing her as much. I want her to grow up with an unequivocal feeling of unconditional love. That above anything, no matter what. I guess I just never anticipated being tested to this extent and in this way.

'Picnics are always fun,' I say, with more enthusiasm than I feel.

'Plus, we won't have that awful moment where we all struggle with the seating plan,' laughs Tom. As if reading my mind. 'Shall I text you or Katherine the arrangements?'

I'm thrown. One moment I'm languishing in a sense of shared understanding, the next I feel wrong-footed. But why? Tom hasn't done or said anything wrong. I'd guessed he must have Katherine's telephone

number now, and he's simply asked who he should contact; he's trying to keep me involved, not the opposite. But his question feels like a leap and I'm only ready for baby steps. Am I being unreasonable? 'Me,' I say firmly.

'Will do.' He sounds totally sanguine about my response, he doesn't seem to catch the fear or caution. I *am* being daft.

In an impulsive effort to try to appear as reasonable as he is – to *be* as reasonable as he is – I say, 'Perhaps you could give me Olivia's mobile number.'

Tom hesitates. I hear the discomfort down the telephone line. 'Why would you want that?' he asks.

I can hardly say, *Because you have my daughter's number*. 'Well, to send the occasional text. That's how teens like to communicate, isn't it? It's an easy way to break the ice.'

'Right.' He laughs nervously. I get the sense he's buying time.

'What is it?'

'I'm sorry, Alison, this is really awkward, but Olivia has expressly asked me not to give you her number.'

I'm pierced by embarrassment and hurt.

'Oh. OK. I see. Well, forget I asked.'

'I'm really sorry. I think it would be a good idea, but I have to respect her wishes. You understand, don't you?'

'Of course.' Yes, I understand. How stupid of me to imagine that Olivia might be interested in any sort of a relationship with me.

'I'll ask her again, if you like.' He sounds doubtful.

'No, no, don't do that.' I rush to put him out of his misery. The poor man is mortified. Almost as mortified as I am.

I can't decide whether to pray for a bright autumnal morning or torrential rain on Sunday. I don't think Tom is the sort to cancel if the weather is inclement, he'll just come up with an alternative activity, so I might as well hope it's dry. In the end, it's a flat day, the sort where the sky is totally devoid of colour and the air is damp. Still, Tom texts me some ordnance-survey coordinates and we meet at a small National Trust car park. Tom, Olivia and Amy clamber out of their car. It's impossible to ignore Olivia's reluctance; she looks as though she's wading through quicksand. She slowly pulls on a hoodie, allowing me time enough to read the slogan on her T-

shirt: BASIC BITCH. I'm not sure if it's a description or an accusation. She unnerves me. Judges me. Blames me?

'Where's Callum?' asks Katherine.

'Oh, he's seeing his girlfriend today,' replies Tom breezily. If Katherine is disappointed, she doesn't show it; in fact, it's Olivia who flashes her father a disturbed look. I suppose she'd rather be seeing her boyfriend than be out with us; I can imagine the row that's gone on to get her here. Tom doesn't notice her glare, perhaps he's become oblivious to them. 'But we have brought a surprise that I think will just about compensate.'

Laughing, Tom opens the boot of the hatchback and a chocolate Labrador leaps out. He starts bounding around the car park, ignoring Tom and Amy's calls and attempts to put him on a lead. Katherine joins in excitedly, chasing the dog, her ponytail swishing back and forth. For a moment she's a little girl again, and my heart heaves. I'm not sure if it's with delight or sadness. I sometimes think I need to get to know myself better.

'He's rather nice. I didn't realise you had a dog,' I comment.

'This is Mozart,' laughs Amy. She's giddy, exhilarated. 'He's new.'

'He doesn't look like a puppy.' Although he doesn't look fully grown either. His paws are still large and he bounds about.

'No, he's eighteen months old. He belonged to a friend of mine who has got a new job overseas. They'll be living in an apartment. No good for a dog this size. I said we'd take him in,' explains Tom. The dog slobbers around Olivia's legs. She doesn't pat him, she studiously ignores him; a little like she ignores me.

'Eighteen months, eh? How old is that in dog years?' asks Jeff.

'Fifteen and a half,' replies Tom affably.

'That's very precise.'

'I looked it up on some website.'

'It's like Dad is obsessed with filling his house with teenagers,' mumbles Olivia. I actually think this is quite witty but she glares at me, so my smile freezes into a cold smirk.

'Don't you like dogs?' I ask.

'Not really. We already have two cats.' I hadn't realised, I can't remember having seen them when we visited, but then we rushed in and out of the house as quickly as possible. It strikes me that Olivia, with her protective older brother and her fun younger sister, her big, friendly, brown dog and her two lazy cats, has the exact life I used to covet when I was a

child. Something in my chest soars. It feels peaceful; I'm glad for her. My biological daughter has all that I longed for: I feel relieved. Then I remember her mother is dead and I want to be sick. I can't give her what she most needs. I'm an awful person; this whole situation is just highlighting the fact. I also fight a fleeting flash of horror that perhaps Katherine will see that the brother, the sister, the cats and the dog make up the ideal family. Maybe she'll feel cheated that she isn't living that life; after all, it should have been hers. All she's inherited is the possibility of a mutated gene. It doesn't seem fair. Nothing about this is fair.

Olivia continues: 'I think he'll be a bit of a nuisance. Dad will be tied. All the feeding and walking.'

It's clear Olivia doesn't see the dog as her responsibility. She has a point. I should say so but instead I find myself saying, 'I've never come across a child who doesn't want a dog. Katherine is always nagging me for one.' Olivia shakes her head and turns away from me. I feel I've just missed something. An opportunity, perhaps. Just a small one to – I don't know – sympathise? Relate? Luckily, Tom moves things on.

'I know, like Amy. She told me she thinks a walk without a dog seems stupid, purposeless.'

I'm not sure if he means that Amy said this, or Katherine. Katherine has used that exact argument to me but she couldn't have said it to Tom, could she? She wouldn't be so rude. And if she has said as much, that isn't the reason he got the dog, is it? I mean, that would almost be like a bribe? That can't be. Tom just stepped in to help a friend. Nothing to do with Katherine, surely. Mozart is clearly keen to get going and is barking loud enough to wake the dead so I shake the daft thought away.

We set off along a bridleway and soon we're cutting through a forest. Hefty splats of rainwater from last night's downpour slip from the drooping vegetation and fall on us. Mozart charges ahead, causing the long, wet grass to shudder and fold behind him. From time to time, he runs back, slobbering, muddy. I watch Olivia try to avoid his enthusiastic pawing, whereas Katherine seems not to care about his paw prints on her new jeans or his fat tail whipping her calves. She just laughs. It's good to see her enjoying the walk, taking an interest in the leaves turning from green to golden. It reminds me of when she was very young and would walk between Jeff and me, sometimes insisting we swing her, other times happy

just to be pointing out the gruesome deformed toadstools or the pretty country flowers. Jeff must be thinking the same thing.

‘Nice to have a bit of company. Recently, more often than not, Alison and I are left alone to stumble through the countryside, along the paths, sometimes clogged with mud, other times gleaming in thrilling bursts of sunshine. Katherine never seems that keen to join us nowadays.’ His tone is jovial enough, but I shrink inside a fraction. Why must he always be the writer? ‘Gleaming in thrilling bursts of sunshine’ – who talks like that? Jeff grins conspiratorially, expecting Tom to do the usual thing of bemoaning teenagers. He doesn’t. He looks delighted. Delighted that he can get Katherine to do something we can’t?

‘Really?’

I glare at Jeff, and when I find myself trailing him, along a winding, single-file path, I hiss-whisper that he shouldn’t have shared so much.

‘Why not?’ he whispers back, but not as quietly as I’d like. I’m pretty sure Tom, who is only five metres away, can hear him.

‘Because I don’t want Tom thinking Katherine is ever unhappy with us.’

‘He won’t think that. That’s silly. Not unhappy, just normal.’

No doubt Jeff is right: Tom is unlikely to think the worse of us because our teenager isn’t gagging to accompany us on Sunday walks. He just looked pleased because he wants Katherine to be happy and included.

Throughout the six-mile tramp, Katherine is up front, setting the pace, with Amy, mostly. They charge through puddles, happy. Olivia does not follow suit. She trails behind, sullen, dark, her earphones in; clinging to her own soundtrack of her life, blocking everything else out: the birdsong, the whip of the grass against boots and calves, the dog’s panting. Us. The message is loud and clear: Olivia is not happier when we are around. Jeff initially gallops ahead with Katherine and Amy but then drops back and tries to engage Olivia; she rolls her eyes but does pull out the white threads from her ears. Tom and I seem to plod along in the middle, often finding ourselves side by side.

At first, him matching my stride causes me to feel irrationally concerned. I feel self-conscious and somewhat panicky. He throws countless questions my way, insisting he is keen to get to know me. I’m not used to being in the spotlight so my answers start slowly, carefully, but the more we chat, the less cagey I feel; he’s very charming and easy to talk to. I can’t help but be flattered that he seems to think I’m the interesting one to chat with. Usually

when we meet new people, I am the least appealing member of the family. Clearly, Jeff is fascinating, with all his stories about being an author, the people he's met, the places he's been, and Katherine is simply refreshing, a teenager who is willing to converse.

Tom surprises me by asking the classic question, usually the preserve of women: 'How did you meet Jeff?'

'Oh, the usual, he was a friend of a friend. I was shopping with the mutual friend and we bumped into him.'

'They say supermarkets are a hotbed for hook-ups. Maybe I should try it.' Obviously, he's joking, but I find it strange to think that one day he might be out there again, looking for a new partner. I wonder how that will impact on Olivia, how it will impact on all of them, including Katherine.

'It wasn't a supermarket, I was shopping for a hat, actually.'

'For a wedding or something?'

'No, funky-fashion-hat shopping.' I smile shyly, feeling a little awkward about using the word 'funky'. Tom looks taken aback. I guess, looking at me now, dressed head to toe in clothes that have been picked because they are comfortable rather than fashionable or even pretty, it seems unlikely that I ever shopped for accessories such as hats, just for the fun of it.

I don't want to go into detail. It's ours, mine and Jeff's. Besides, Tom would probably be bored; surely he only asked out of courtesy rather than genuine curiosity. I wonder whether I should ask him how he met Annabel, or would it be too painful? Or too private? I remember him asking me not to talk about her at our pizza dinner. I hope he will talk to me about her when he's ready. Instead, I keep the mood carefree by commenting, 'Funny to think there was once a time when I used to spend every Saturday looking for a new outfit, often just to wear out that night.'

'Did you really?'

'Yes. Are you surprised?'

'I am.'

'Because you can't imagine me caring about how I look?'

Tom throws out a good-natured grimace, reproaching my self-deprecation. 'Because I imagined you as the sort of girl who had endless hobbies and better things to do with your Saturday afternoon than mooch around the shops.'

'Around market stalls, actually. I didn't have enough money for shops.' He looks a little startled. I giggle; I find I like surprising him. Even

shocking him. ‘You thought I was like Katherine?’

‘I did.’

‘No. The middle-class enthusiasm to fill every spare hour of the day doing something useful came to me fairly late on. I wasn’t born to it.’

‘I see.’

I’m not sure why I said so much. Such a confession has to be worse than Jeff admitting that Katherine is reluctant to do country walks with us. I thought I wanted to seal myself off from this man, but I find I can’t. Part of me accepts that he has to know me. Illogically, I think he might already. It’s hazy. Being around him is like diving into a cold pool with a hangover. Disorientating, but not unpleasant. ‘Anyway, looking good *is* useful.’ My defence causes him to grin.

‘You sound like Olivia.’

I don’t know what to say to that; the comment seems potent, full. I try to joke it off. ‘Don’t let her hear you say that, she’d be horrified. I can’t imagine she wants to see herself in me at all.’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’ he says kindly.

‘Look at me.’ I hold my arms wide and stand still for a moment, so he can see me in all my full glory.

‘You look lovely.’

I don’t. I’m wearing a purple-and-green waterproof jacket, black trousers that are the epitome of nondescript, and wellington boots. I brush away his compliment; it can’t be sincere. Sincere compliments aren’t often bestowed on women in their forties who carry a bit of extra weight. Still, it’s nice of him to pretend. We fall quiet for a moment or two. I notice the terrifically English sound of a blackbird warbling. ‘I think it all started to go wrong, in terms of sartorial elegance,’ I say, ‘when I had Katherine. Shopping interfered with her routine and, besides, I didn’t like leaving the stroller outside the changing room while I tried on clothes. I began to do most of my shopping online, or from those slim A5 catalogues that seem to pour through the door, although I swear I’ve never signed up for any one of them. You know the ones – all the young, beautiful models look slightly fazed to find they’re wearing sensible jumpers and functional brogues.’ Tom laughs. Literally throws his head back and laughs out loud at my comment, even though it wasn’t that funny, just an observation. His laughter settles like a great big, golden commendation. I like making him laugh even more than I like surprising him. ‘I barely remember the days

when brands such as French Connection or Diesel or Ted Baker were my staples.'

'There's nothing to stop you wearing those sorts of brands now.'

'It's too late now. I'm too far removed from that woman. I don't know what's fashionable this season because I don't know what was fashionable last.'

We all have only a finite time in which we can call ourselves young. I wasted a lot of mine. I mentally shake myself. No one forced me to wear beige, to *be* beige, to start to consider wellington boots as the must-have footwear in my wardrobe – I wanted to be this sort of mum. The practical, dowdy, reliable sort. I did not want to be the flouncy, flirty, flighty sort. I pull myself together. 'I'm being silly. Why am I talking to you about clothes? It doesn't matter. It's peripheral.'

'Where are you from, Alison? I can't quite place the accent.'

No, he wouldn't, I've worked hard to get rid of it. To try to sound a little more like Jeff's friends, a little less like me.

'A town about fifteen miles from Liverpool.'

'And what made you move down here, London and then the Home Counties?'

'Oh, you know, the usual. Work attracted me to London and then, when Katherine was a toddler – well, it's very pleasant out in Surrey. There are great schools, low crime rates, an above average percentage of children go to the Russell Group universities.'

'Same reasons we moved. Don't you think it's odd that we ended up living relatively close to one another? It makes me think we're sort of fated. I mean, either of us could have moved anywhere.'

'Yes,' I admit, although I secretly wish that one of us had decided the Hebrides was where it was at.

'It's such a lovely part of the world, isn't it?' he enthuses.

'Yes.'

'But?'

How did he hear the 'but'? Jeff never hears it. I sigh, 'It's just I sometimes feel uncomfortable with how ... comfortable it all is. Does that make any sense at all?'

'Yes.' He turns to me and quickly squeezes my shoulder, a token of solidarity and understanding. It's distracting; I almost stumble into a patch of nettles. I cough and carry on.

‘Where I come from we don’t do smug.’

‘No?’

‘No. Nothing to be smug about. We’re witty, gritty, real. I’m a deserter. I saw it was easier down here. I listened to Thatcher when I was a little girl and it sunk in. I got on my bike. I didn’t like her but I had a feeling she knew which side my bread was buttered on. So I came south.’

I did it all for Katherine. Even though Katherine hadn’t even been born; I hadn’t even met Jeff when I made the decision. I did it for my future babies, plural, as I had expected there would be more than one, I suppose. And I’m pleased. I made a good call. I mean, look at her. My daughter, she’s magnificent. She’s tall and glossy, talented, polite, she speaks the Queen’s English with utter precision, she never has to think twice whether it’s a basin or a sink, whether it’s ‘pardon’, ‘excuse me’ or ‘sorry’. She knows those things. I shouldn’t care that I can never go back. I don’t care.

‘And it’s all worked out beautifully,’ he says, giving me the endorsement and the approval I crave and yet don’t feel entitled to. ‘Here you are, happy wife and mother.’

‘Partner.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Partner and mother. Jeff and I are not married.’

‘You’re not?’ Tom momentarily stops dead in his tracks. I’m surprised. I have come to expect that reaction from some of the more conservative mums at the school gate but I’d somehow thought Tom might be cooler about our situation; indeed, I think part of the reason I told him we aren’t married is so he wouldn’t think of me simply as a predictable, uptight Home Counties mum and wife.

I backtrack a little. ‘Not as such, no.’

“‘As such’?” I realise my comment is ridiculous. A person is either married or they’re not.

‘But you wear a wedding ring.’

‘It was my grandmother’s. It doesn’t fit on any other finger.’ This isn’t strictly true. I suppose I do wear it on my wedding finger to avoid too many nosey questions. I sometimes answer to the name Alison Mitchell for the same reason. ‘We never got round to it. Never saw the need.’

He never asked me.

This is possibly my own fault. ‘When we met I did make quite a big deal about how I could never see myself being married. I was a free spirit. I said

I didn't want to be shackled to a patriarchal institution that had been invented so that men could further subjugate women.'

'Nicely encouraging,' laughs Tom.

'Wasn't I? We both wanted kids, though. There's no question that we are a family. A unit. Besides, it's not that unusual in this day and age.' Or at least that's what I'm always telling myself.

Tom suddenly starts to do a poor impression of Beyoncé. He wiggles his bottom and begins singing something about if Jeff liked it, he should have put a ring on it – I don't know whether to be cross or amused but before I can make up my mind Amy calls for Tom; she and Katherine are having trouble reading the map. He dashes off to aid them and I feel oddly deserted. I glance behind me and find Jeff staring at me, his forehead creased in concern.

The moment we get home from the walk Katherine seems keen to disappear to her room. I try to engage her in conversation but as I was on the walk with her she doesn't think there's anything for us to talk about. I ask, 'Did you have a good time?'

'Awesome,' she replies. But it's a flip 'awesome', rather than a heartfelt one; she is more interested in something on her Instagram stream.

'Did you like the picnic?' I pursue, a bit anxiously. I really want her to tell me how she felt about being with Tom, Amy and Olivia but I don't seem to be able to burrow my way into that conversation.

'Yeah, the chicken drumsticks were nice. What was that on them?'

'They were honey-and-soy roasted. It's Martha Stewart's recipe.'

'Oh, yeah, well, tell Martha I liked them.'

'No, I don't know her, she's—' I don't get the sentence finished because Katherine has drifted out of the kitchen and up the stairs, her long legs sauntering, her long hair swishing. She has the distinct air of someone who has somewhere far more desirable to be. I give up and turn to putting away the waterproofs and cleaning mud off the boots. I can hear Jeff talking to someone on the phone about our day. I guess it must be his father, or maybe his sister; I still won't let him talk about our situation widely. I'm not sure how I'm going to keep it contained, or even why I need to, but I have a desperate feeling that I must. Only Jeff's immediate family and my friend Rachel know; I've sworn them all to secrecy. I'm not sure I would have even told Rachel if she'd still been here in the UK, but the distance between us somehow makes me feel safer, and I had to talk to someone. I know I'll have to tell my family sooner or later; later looks attractive. After the initial hurdle – Rachel's shock and incredulity – I've called her four or five times to discuss the matter, and it has helped. The first three times I just sat in front of the Skype screen and cried while she said over and over again, 'Oh, Alison, I'm so sorry. I wish I was there with you. I'm so sorry. It might not

be as bad as you fear. She might not have the gene.’ Rachel, a true friend, didn’t care how often I sobbed back, ‘But she might!’

Listening to Jeff’s calm, objective tone riles me. How can he be so unruffled? I don’t doubt that his family are trying to be sympathetic but everything they say seems insensitive or dismissive. They think the situation is simple: Katherine is our daughter, full stop. But I’m beginning to see that’s not true. She is our daughter, semicolon, because – and it kills me to admit this – she’s Tom’s daughter, too, in an undeniable way. I have to share her. From here on in, that is how it will be. Then there’s Olivia. I think how much time Jeff spent talking with her today. I am going to quiz him about what was said, although I shan’t be surprised if he’s reluctant to share with me the ins and outs of their conversation, Olivia has probably asked him not to. I wonder whether she’s given him her mobile number; it was clear they had plenty to say to each other, that they got on. I twice heard Jeff laugh out loud while they were chatting. What might Olivia have said that was so amusing? I wish I knew. I’m glad Jeff is talking to her; it compensates somewhat for the fact that I can’t find a way to yet.

But I do accept that she’s ours, too, now. In an indubitable but imprecise way.

I suppose, given the fact I find it all so complicated and confusing, it’s a big ask expecting Rachel to grasp the niceties of this dilemma over Skype, but she’s all I have, so once again I dial up. I don’t even check the time, and when I get through I see that she is in an apron and has a tea towel thrown over her shoulder. It looks a bit theatrical.

‘I’m just making lunch,’ she says, somewhat unnecessarily. ‘We have three couples and their kids coming round.’

‘Wow, quite a houseful.’ I should feel delighted that she’s made so many new friends so quickly, and I *am* glad, but I also feel a tiny bit jealous and despondent. We used to throw big, inclusive, warm, welcoming Sunday lunches when Katherine was very young. For many years now Sundays have been devoted to her homework and lacrosse games. Weekends are much more structured and purposeful. I mourn for the fluidity of mothering a pre-schooler and, for a fleeting second, I question my choices. Competing is important, but is it as important as a family lunch? I’ve always thought it was, but what if that is just something else I have been wrong about? I suppose I also envy Rachel her big family. Even though she’s my age, having a three year old makes her seem incredibly youthful by comparison.

I also envy her security, her certainty. It's highly unlikely she's ever going to find out that any one of her four children was swapped at birth. I've covered off that quirky statistic.

Annoyingly, today's conversation is out of sync; her voice trails behind her lip movement by a second or two, which hampers communication. She starts to tell me what she's cooking but I can't stop myself from cutting across her and telling her all about the 'family' walk. Well, almost all. I do tell her about the arrival of the dog, which delighted Katherine, I confess that the only child I managed to speak to was Amy. 'Katherine is closing down on me and I don't know where to begin with Olivia, since she's made it clear she wants nothing to do with me.'

'It must be difficult.'

I don't tell her how much time I spent walking with Tom. I don't mention his gentle way of eliciting so much from me or the fact that, curiously, I wanted to impress him. I don't tell her that at times I judged my own tone to be a tad flirtatious. I don't know why that was the case. Maybe because I was talking about when I was a much younger woman. It was probably just that. Talking to Tom makes me feel as though I am listening to Radio 1 and that the tunes playing are for me. I don't know what to make of that. I certainly daren't say it aloud, not even to Rachel.

'It's so weird watching Amy. I'm not saying she's exactly like Katherine, but there are similarities. Their hair colour – although they have that in common with Olivia, or at least they would if she didn't dye hers – but it's more about Amy's build and her gait. I keep wanting to scoop her up into a big hug, smother her with kisses, you know? It's so disconcerting.'

'I wish you'd tell one of our other friends about your situation. Maybe one of the girls at Pilates.'

'Why would I do that?'

'I think it would be good to have someone close by to talk to.'

'Well, you're at the end of a phone line and you're my best friend.'

Rachel looks concerned, not convinced. 'I wish I could give you a hug.' Paranoid, I think she's trying to give me the slip, palm me off on someone else. 'You seem so—'

'What?'

'Lonely.'

'Well, whose fault is that?' I try to laugh, but my tone is angry, hurt.

‘I think it would be good to have someone to take your mind off the whole thing now and again. Someone you could share a bottle of wine with, or go to the pictures with, like we did.’

‘I can’t imagine the latest blockbuster would distract me.’

‘No, you can’t, can you?’

The problem with Skype is that there’s always the temptation to look at your own two-inch-square image – to check your hair doesn’t look awful – rather than look at the person you are talking to. I know it’s not the biggest sin in the book, but when Rachel suddenly gasps, ‘Gosh, I really need to get my roots done! Are they honestly that grey?’, I can’t forgive her. I press disconnect.

I go to Katherine’s room to check she is doing her homework, or at least listening to music, rather than texting some dangerous middle-aged man who wants to lure her away and chop her up into tiny pieces but operates under the avatar of LouiseLacrossegirl15. She’s absorbed in designing a poster to advertise the school production of *Macbeth*. I suggest that she could splatter red food colouring over it and my suggestion is met with appreciation and enthusiasm. I’m relieved: it could just as easily have been dismissed as infantile or obvious; I no longer feel I’m on firm ground with her. I hang about in her doorway, waiting for her to invite me in or start a conversation. Horrifyingly, I find I don’t know what to say, and the not knowing pains me. I don’t know whether the problem is my grief and guilt or her resentment and fear. The truth is, I’m beginning to wonder if, on some level, she thinks she hates me. Sometimes her soft, almond-shaped eyes calcify with resentment or confusion, or terror. We don’t have conversations as such, just a symphony of irritated or jaded exhalations. She seems to be for ever biting her lip, as though forcibly trying to hold in what she wants to say. She ought to just spit it out. I know it, anyway. *How could I have let this happen?*

Conversation used to flow easily and readily between us. I remember when we’d talk about something she’d learnt at school, or something someone had said at school, about clothes, a TV show. Simple stuff. Uncomplicated stuff. Things have changed since she became a truant so that she could spy secretly on the Trubys, and she doesn’t even know that I know so. Since I dipped out of a dinner party to spy secretly on her, which she is unaware of. Since she told me that Olivia attended the ice-hockey match, which I know to be untrue. It’s a mess. A web. We never had secrets

from each other before. Besides, now I'd find it hard to be interested in who said what at school, or to hold a conversation about what she watches on TV; all I want to know is what she thinks of Tom, Olivia, Callum and Amy. Whether she thinks she'll ever be ready to take the mutated-gene test? Does she still think of us as her parents? These questions are hard. Impossible. But I'm her mum, I can't give up. I take a deep breath and give it a go.

'We were lucky with the weather today. I'm glad the rain held off.'

'Yup.' She doesn't look up but holds her head at a slight angle, a sign she's concentrating. Maybe on the poster design, maybe on avoiding talking to me. I gather up the plates and plastic water bottles that are scattered around her room like pigeons in Trafalgar Square. I pick up her dirty clothes and put them in the laundry basket; I manage to resist commenting that, really, she should put her own clothes in the wash at her age. She tolerates the tidying for a few moments and then says, 'I can't really focus on this with you pottering about. Do you mind?' She nods towards the door. Her tone is pleasant enough, but unequivocal.

'Sorry, no. No, of course not. I'll get out of your hair.'

'Goodnight, then. Sleep well.' It's only seven o'clock so I guess what she's saying is that I don't need to bother her again tonight.

'Don't forget to pack your school bag.'

'I won't.'

I close the door carefully behind me.

I'm losing her. She's slipping away from me, like sand through a timer; a constant flow, one way. The wrong way. Is this normal? Is this a teenage thing or a swapped-baby thing? I don't know.

Later, when Jeff and I are each devouring a glass of wine, I tell him what I did to Rachel. He sighs wearily; it's annoying and exaggerated. 'That was unreasonable.'

'I don't think so.'

'You can't expect Rachel to want to talk about it as much as we talk about it.'

'Why not? I've spent hours listening to her debate when she should let her children attend nursery, which orthodontist might be best for her daughter, whether her sons can manage both football and rugby as extracurricular activities or whether it would be better to give attention to just one.'

'There's no point in getting worked up.'

‘I am not getting worked up.’

‘I think you’re expecting too much from people.’

He’s wrong about Rachel; I’m not unreasonable in expecting her to listen to me. It’s what mothers do; we talk about our offspring, way more than we’d ever talk about ourselves. It’s a fact that we discuss them to the point of being boring; we’re kind to each other and rarely point this out but instead indulge in the discussions, the debates and dilemmas about one another’s children and wait for our turn. Jeff still talks about himself more than he does Katherine. Jeff still has ambitions, deadlines, tight spots, research and remuneration issues none of which has anything whatsoever to do with Katherine. He has a career *and* a relationship with his daughter. My career *is* my relationship with my daughter. It’s an important difference. I simultaneously envy and resent the fact that he can be distracted.

‘I think I need to tell my family about what’s going on.’ I fling the suggestion out without thought. I guess I’m desperate.

Jeff looks at me from over his glasses. His stare is at once bemused and censorious.

‘Why would you want to do that?’

‘My mother has a right to know.’

‘No, she hasn’t.’ I see Jeff’s gaze soften. ‘You’ll only be hurt, Alison.’

‘Not necessarily.’

He picks up the newspaper and opens it wide to form a barrier between us. There’s silence for several minutes. When he does speak, he tries to move the conversation on; he wants us both to forget my crazy suggestion. ‘I think Katherine is doing tremendously well. She’s handling all this with great maturity.’ I suppose he’s trying to reassure me, even congratulate me on our magnificent and well-adjusted child; I am not cheered. I finger the condensation on my wine glass before I take a sip. I pretend to savour it, rather than answer. ‘We ought to be proud,’ he adds. I stare at him, mystified. I wonder how he manages to be confident in taking credit for Katherine’s excellence now. I wish I did. I feel removed from it. Before, I was in awe; now, I’m just outside. ‘I’m worried about Olivia, though,’ he adds.

‘She sounded happy enough today. I heard you laughing.’ I sound a bit petulant. I suppose I am feeling a bit petulant. With Katherine, Jeff has always firmly held the role of fun parent, whereas I’m the fussy, anxious one, and it’s already crystal clear that he has an easier relationship with

Olivia, too. I haven't got round to telling him about Olivia's request to Tom to withhold her number from me, effectively barring any attempt at communication. It's humiliating, shaming. A defeat before I'm off the blocks.

'She's got a sense of humour, that's for certain. You know?' Jeff looks to me for understanding, or at least acknowledgement. I can't comment. 'She's cheeky, witty. Like you.'

'Like me?'

'Well. Like you were.' I scowl at him. 'The thing is, I'm not sure she is dealing with all of this as well as she would have us believe. I mean, how can she be? She lost her mother just five months ago and now she's gained a sister, who she must see as a potential usurper.'

'Did she talk about Katherine?'

'No, it wasn't that.'

'Did she talk about Annabel?'

'Only in passing, and it was heartbreaking – she slipped up, used the present tense. Do you remember my father did the same just after my mother died?'

I feel for her. A deep pang. Jeff's right; that is heartbreaking. 'Poor thing. It is going to take a while to accept on any level something as awful as the death of her mother.' I think of my own mother choosing to leave when I was about Amy's age. It wasn't the same but, still, the consequences were far-reaching. Like a stone being thrown into the centre of a calm lake, the ripples, I fear, are spreading even now. I feel sorrow and pity for all three children. What right-thinking woman wouldn't?

'We could do more.' Jeff pauses. '*You* could do more.'

'Me?'

'You know what I was thinking? Maybe the girls should have a joint sleepover party. Invite their respective friends. We could host it.'

'Are you insane?' I bang my wine glass down on the small table next to me with an intense clatter. It's amazing it doesn't smash; I don't even care.

'Alison.' He's mildly reproving.

'How would we explain that to everyone?' I wish this hadn't been my first thought, because Jeff has just asked me to be kinder to a girl who has lost her mum and I know I should be. I just don't know how to be. I'm ashamed that I'm struggling so much with it. 'They don't have any friends in common. They don't even like each other.' He doesn't bother to deny

this, so I know he must have noticed as much. ‘Why would you push them to have a sleepover?’

‘I don’t know. I thought it was a good idea.’

‘Well, it isn’t.’ It’s my turn to pick up the newspaper and pretend to start reading it, although even stories about the latest war-torn lands and various political and Hollywood scandals can’t keep me gripped. I know Jeff is staring at me, waiting to say something more.

I wish I had obliged when he says, ‘You rather like Tom, don’t you?’ It’s the way he doesn’t look at me but instead picks at the label on the wine bottle that warns me. I feel accused, and annoyed to be so. Jeff has been the one insisting we invite the Trubys into our lives, that we involve them. He was the one who said, ‘Let’s see what happens.’ Do I? Do I rather like Tom? The thought embarrasses me. It doesn’t seem as innocent as it should be. It’s not straightforward; there is a shadow of something. Jeff carries on, leaving the beat of the suggestion in the air for us both to contemplate and yet avoid. ‘It was just an idea about the sleepover party. I just thought it might be a nice thing to do for Olivia. Don’t dismiss it out of hand. I know you want to pretend she doesn’t exist.’

‘That’s not true. I just have to stay focused on Katherine.’

‘Situation normal for you, then.’ I glare at him but don’t trust myself to speak. I’m stung. The problem for me is that I don’t know where Olivia fits. Tears brim into my eyes again. I will them not to fall, but Jeff must notice them anyway. ‘You have a big heart, Alison. Isn’t there room for Olivia?’

‘Jeff, Katherine might have the mutated gene. Katherine might get cancer.’ I have no satisfaction playing that particular trump card. I see something close to disgust climb across his face. He mutters that he has some work to do. I doubt he’s at his creative best in the evenings, with a glass of wine in his hand, but even so I’m glad that he wanders into his study, closes the door behind him. I feel hot and angry. Alone. No one understands the colossal scale of disruption this revelation has caused.

Except Tom. Perhaps.

I think of how he talked to me today, focused on me with his almost hypnotic patience. I can practically feel his ardent sincerity as though he were actually present and by my side. He understands my position, more than anyone else. More than my in-laws, more than Rachel – more than Jeff.

I can't fight it: something inherent, involuntary, makes me believe I should tell my mother what's going on. I know Jeff is right. It makes no sense that I feel any sort of duty towards her, as she has never been the archetypal mother or shown any maternal obligation towards me, yet I find myself on the train to Liverpool.

'How come you didn't notice?' Her eyes flick over me in disgust. I feel like an idiot, as though I've done something terrible to her. This is an extra layer of complexity. I've felt weighed down by the brutal fear that I'm at fault here since the moment Tom walked into our lives. I've done something terrible to Katherine, Olivia – Jeff? It's been a black hole of unfocused guilt. I resent the fact that my mother soaks it all up as though she is the victim. 'How could such a thing happen? How could you *let* it happen?'

I try not to take it personally, but it's unfair that she always thinks *I'm* the disaster. *I'm* to blame. But she always has and always will. It's an unalterable fact of my life. Her conclusion takes grip, becomes my reality. I know I have made mistakes.

One mistake, really.

But the baby swap wasn't my fault. I hate myself for justifying it to her but do so anyway.

'Well, you know what it's like in hospital after you've given birth. It's confusing. It was all so new to me.' Her eyes bore into me. Condemning.

'Not that new.'

'I only saw her for a few hours – straight after the birth, before they took her to the nursery.' My mother continues to stare at me: hard, unflinching, disappointed. 'Then I slept. When I woke up they handed me the baby. I didn't think they'd have got her mixed up. Who *would* think that?'

'I'd have known. I'm sure I would.'

I don't make a jibe that I bet she wishes she had swapped me, because she wouldn't deny it and I'd be the instigator of my own pain. I want to point out that my child was swapped by accident when she was less than a few hours old; my mother left me on purpose when I was eight years old. Insult to injury, she took my three younger brothers with her. Surely her crime is bigger, more vicious and more profound. I search her face for guilt, regret or repentance, as I often have; it's never there. Instead, I see icy indifference. I'm sitting on my hands so that I don't lurch towards her and wring her neck. Jeff was right: I was a fool to come and hope to find any comfort. Why haven't I defeated that instinct yet? Will I ever? She makes me feel like a total failure. By contrast, she's keen on the children she bore who have a Y chromosome.

Davey is her favourite. She repeatedly mentions that he's an entrepreneur and has made a stack of money attending the University of Life. By scrimping and saving, my mother helped him buy a scruffy two-bedroom flat over twenty years ago. Davey charged his two best friends rent that more than covered the mortgage; he's bought and sold repeatedly ever since. He has a gift for reading the market, buying during the crashes, selling at the peaks; he now owns seventeen properties. Undeniably, he's done well for himself. He bought my mother her council house and, on her sixtieth birthday, he paid for her to go on a world cruise; every now and then she gets out the photo album to remind me. Good luck to him. I'm not jealous, I'm just saying, he didn't invent anything, he isn't working on a cure for Alzheimer's – he doesn't even decorate the properties he buys; he gets Eastern Europeans to do it for him. I know: I sound bitter.

My mother is also quick to point out that my middle brother, Neil, has given her five grandchildren. True enough. She'll omit to mention that these children were born to three different women and he doesn't live with any of them. Details, details. Then there's my youngest brother, Mark. In his late teens and early twenties he did a lot of drugs. She might vaguely allude to his 'difficult time at university', but only in the context of how he was the only one of us to get to university; he was under a lot of pressure, so needed a valve.

She will tell anyone who listens that I was an accident. She had flu and vomited up her contraceptive pill.

She does love Katherine, though. She's proud of her. A little intimidated, even. Katherine, Mum will grudgingly admit, is my greatest – actually, only

– achievement. And now I’ve mucked that up.

‘She’s not ours?’ She looks shocked, wounded.

‘Well, of course she is. Nothing’s changed.’

‘Everything has changed.’ The most annoying thing about my mother is that she articulates the things I’d hate ever to say but, yes, she’s right, everything *has* changed.

‘She *is* ours,’ I insist.

‘Not really.’ She pours herself a mug of tea and then, grudgingly, one for me, too. She slides it across the kitchen table. She never invites me into the front room. She says it’s for guests, for best. I don’t qualify on either count.

‘How can you say that?’

‘I’m not suggesting you swap them back. I see you have to keep her. I’m just saying she’s not ours. I always thought she was too good to be true.’

‘Too good for me, you mean.’ She doesn’t answer but simply stares at me. Confirming.

‘Well, I’m sorry for you,’ says Frank. Frank is my stepfather, and a good man. Arguably, too good for my mother. He tries to smooth things over between us as much as he can, but I don’t think he knows the half. Hasn’t a clue what he’s up against. For example, I doubt he knows she left me when I was a child. I bet she’s given him a sterilized version of her past. And mine. She must have. She’d be too ashamed of me to tell him the truth. And, I’d like to think, too ashamed of herself as well. She met Frank ten years ago in the laundrette. Her washing machine was on the blink. They married eighteen months after that. She said that she ‘held no truck with those living in sin or fornicating’. I joked with Jeff that, while my mother had said some harsh things to me in her time, this was perhaps the most scarring. The image of her and Frank ‘fornicating’, as she put it, burnt on to my mind. I’d have had a lobotomy if I could have. I realised that their marriage, like that of Davey and Mark, and all of Neil’s, was an opportunity for her to tell me how depraved and disappointing I am for not marrying Jeff. Why couldn’t I persuade him? she asked. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

My only saving grace was Katherine. But now ...

‘How’s she taking it?’ My mother dunks a biscuit into her tea. She seems to be concentrating on not losing the mushy part more than she’s concentrating on me. Frank takes the packet of biscuits and puts half a dozen on a plate, then offers them to me. I don’t want to eat her food but I take one because of his thoughtfulness.

‘Quite well.’

‘She’s a sensible girl. What’s the other family like?’

‘Nice. Sadly, the mother is dead.’

‘Well, that’s a good thing.’

I sigh. ‘I don’t think we can say that.’ My mother glares at me. It’s the strangest thing, but I realise she is trying to be loyal. A dead mum is less of a threat to me than a live one. Delight at a stranger’s demise is as close to support as I am likely to get. ‘The husband seems pleasant. Reasonable.’ I look at my shoes. She stares at me intently. Despite giving me up for eight years, it always seems as though she knows me better than I know myself. She recognises the worst bits of me. The shameful half-formed thoughts and the regrets. I think of Jeff’s words – ‘You rather like Tom, don’t you?’ – and I think of Tom’s attentiveness, which is appealing, and his vulnerability, which is more so. I know it is best that I don’t look at her when I mention Tom’s name. I don’t want her to speculate on that relationship. It’s too complex, too delicate for her brutal judgement, for her dark mind. I rush on. ‘And there are two other children besides Olivia – Olivia being our birth child.’

‘Katherine has siblings.’ Mum looks happy. My biggest fault is that I’ve failed to supply more grandchildren. That I’ve burdened my child with being a lonely only. God, if only that was all I’d burdened her with.

‘Yes, an older boy, Callum – he’s very sporty, plays ice hockey – and a younger daughter, Amy. She’s terribly sweet.’

‘Well, siblings are nice.’ Then, ‘I doubt you’ll be able to hold on to her.’

‘What makes you say that?’ How can you be so cruel?

‘Well, what have you got to offer her that equals siblings?’

I drain my tea, say I have to go.

‘Well, it’s been nice seeing you. I no longer expect much beyond those bloody awful Christmas letters you send out. Hardly even personalised.’ She snorts; a dismissive, sarcastic laugh. Many people are rude about Christmas missives. More often than not, they are cynically dismissed as middle-class bragging tools. I don’t see them that way, I accept that it’s hard to stay in touch with a lot of people so these letters are simply efficient, although admittedly with my mother, the letters are more of an avoidance technique. I rather like hearing that Ron and Karen went on a safari to Botswana, that Henry and Sue’s daughter has got a place at RADA. It’s

simply an old-fashioned version of Facebook. Lives set out with purpose, showing order and meaning and progress.

My mother starts to shake theatrically, as though she's convulsed with laughter, but I know her well enough to realise she's never really moved by joy.

'Can you imagine their Christmas letter this year?' she asks, through gasps.

'Well, I don't imagine they are the sort to send one,' I reply stiffly.

'But if they did. "We're sad to tell you the missus is dead and Olivia isn't ours. On the brighter side, Callum is doing very nicely with his ice-hockey team." Yours won't be much better.'

I glare at her. 'We won't be sending one.' I don't tell her about the mutated gene. What's the point?

Frank offers to give me a lift to the station.

It's only when I stand on the platform, anticipating the train that will take me the long, juddering distance into London, where I'll have to change and get another one home, do I realise that she never asked a thing about Olivia. Ignored her existence. I feel a flush of shame creep over my scalp and a shiver down my spine. I'm disgusted with myself because maybe we resemble one another in this. Am I pretending Olivia is nothing to do with me? I don't want to have *anything* in common with my mother – a woman who can abandon a child. Was I too easily put off when Olivia refused to give me her mobile number? I'm the adult here. I should try another way to reach her. I pull out my phone and quickly send her a Facebook friend request.

The valiant autumnal sun, fragile but defiant, shines and sends some warmth through my tights, whispering breath on to my legs as I imagine an infatuated lover might. It's an odd thought for me to have. Somehow all the more scandalous and incredible to have here, in the vicinity of my mother's bleak sphere. I blame lack of sleep. A local train pulls up at the platform, I hear the names of the village stations I recognise from my childhood blare out over the tannoy, but I am waiting for the fast train, the one that will get me out of here, take me in the opposite direction. My friends talk about the halcyon days of childhoods past; the freedom of being able to ride a bike anywhere, never having to worry about Twitter trolling and the fact that kids still believed in the magic of Christmas. I don't look back through a soft focus, my childhood was sad, oppressed and limited, yet for a moment I feel an illogical longing, something like homesickness, but then the sun dips, lost behind a cloud, and I feel relieved to be leaving. It's never been here, my home. I'm sick for what's never been. That's all.

The train arrives and as the passengers disembark I scan the crowds for faces I might recognise, but there are none, even though the type is familiar. Older women waddle off the train, carrying shopping bags. They look like

the older women from my childhood, although they can't be; they have to be the daughters of those I knew. Regardless, they wear the same look: harried and fretful. Many of the women are with their friends and sisters. I overhear snatches of conversations about errant husbands, unruly children and worrying health problems. They sympathise with one another, click their tongues then laugh and reassure. Generation after generation, the concerns are the same. Although not the same as mine. There are only two other parents in the world who have my particular problem; no other woman. I call Jeff but go straight through to voicemail. I leave him a message telling him which train I'm boarding and promising to text once I make the connection in London. It's a perfunctory call. He said this visit would only upset me further; I'm not prepared to give him the satisfaction of being right. Then I call Tom.

'Hello, it's Alison.'

'I know.'

'Oh.'

'You're in my phone.'

Of course I'm in his phone. He's in mine. It doesn't mean anything. A pause. A breath. 'I've just told my mother about – well, the swap.'

'How did she take it?'

'Like she takes everything. She blamed me.'

'That's harsh.'

'She *is* harsh.'

'I'm sorry.' It is the sort of 'sorry' that not only relieves but relaxes, like fresh air entering a stuffy room. My train pulls up and I realise I should hang up; I've told him what I wanted to tell him. He's done what I hoped – sympathised with me, made me feel a tiny bit better – but then he says, 'What about your dad?'

'My dad?'

'How did he take it?'

I board the train and find a window seat without hanging up. His voice is calming. I put my handbag on the seat next to me, selfishly discouraging anyone to sit there. 'I haven't told him. We are not in regular contact.' That's skimming the truth. I sigh, and then admit, 'He hasn't even met Katherine. My parents divorced when I was eight.'

'He left you?' I rather like the outrage I hear in Tom's voice.

'Actually, *she* left me. I stayed with him until I was sixteen.'

‘Then?’

I hesitate. ‘It just made sense for me to move back in with my mother. He had a need to start again. He moved to South Africa.’

‘Wow.’

‘Yes. He remarried and had two more children. Girls.’ I turn to look out the window; the train slowly pulls away and I breathe a sigh of relief. I got away. Again. Each time, I fear I won’t. Illogically, I feel I’ll be pulled back into it all. Crazy, when you think the evidence is that they can never wait to be rid of me. Who do I imagine might try to keep me here?

‘South Africa is a long way away.’ It’s a gentle understatement that elicits more from me.

‘I visited once, in my twenties. Everyone was very polite to me, though not exactly welcoming, a shade below that, but certainly convivial. Dad had changed.’

‘How?’

‘He was, I don’t know, just different. He hugged his daughters a lot, he called barbecues *braais*, commented that the air conditioning took some getting used to and, when anyone was late, he indulgently said that they were “running on African time”.’ Tom makes a sound that is somehow sympathetic towards me and dismissive of my father. It is mollifying and encouraging. ‘However, it soon became apparent that my stepmother had not mentioned her husband’s first family to her numerous coiffured, barbecuing – sorry, *braai*-ing, friends. She asked me whether I’d call him Terry rather than Dad.’

‘Ouch.’

‘Yes. He just looked at his sandals when she made this request, didn’t say a word. I noticed that he still wore socks under his sandals, even if everything else had changed.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Again, the ‘sorry’ eases things. ‘Thanks.’ We fall silent, but there’s no suggestion that the conversation is over, that I should hang up.

After a while he says, carefully, ‘Do you think that’s why you’re so ferocious about Katherine?’

‘Am I ferocious about Katherine?’

I hear him make a sound down the phone, a sort of laugh. ‘You are about protecting her, looking after her. Was it because your parents didn’t really look after you?’

I don't know how to answer. I feel as I always do now when I speak to Tom – flattered. His intense scrutiny is pleasing. Jeff makes me feel a bit foolish and insinuates I'm simply – boringly – overprotective, even though he, more than anyone, must know why I can't stop myself. Tom seems to understand, maybe even admires me for it. I love Katherine with such intensity because, how could I not? But, on some level, my style of mothering is a rejoinder. It's entirely possible that I am self-sacrificing, orderly, supportive and polite because my mother was selfish, chaotic, irresponsible and cruel. 'Maybe. Almost certainly,' I admit. 'I'd do anything for her.'

'Naturally.'

'Literally, anything.' I sound more intense than is wise; I guess I'm feeling particularly emotional because I've just visited my mother. 'Do you understand?'

'Yes, I do.' I hear it in his voice. He does. 'I would, too,' he adds.

I blink – once, twice – to try to help me through the depth of the moment. I can hear his breathing, and it's almost as if he's invited me to elaborate. 'It's true to say my childhood was a bit seat-of-the-pants. Experimental.'

'How so?'

'In a book or a film a story about an absent mother would, no doubt, have a scene where the deserted girl might endearingly clamber up on to a stool, reach to retrieve an old cookery book.' I sigh. 'She'd turn the dusty pages and trace her finger over the recipes written down by her grandmother. She'd learn to cook, faltering at first, but eventually she'd produce delicious, hearty dishes. Maybe even make a career out of it. In real life, I practically starved.'

'That's why it's all organic this, that and the other now.'

'Well, yes, I guess so.'

'I don't suppose you went to private school?'

'God, no. We never had much money. The concept is strange now, as I always have enough money to buy anything I could reasonably want. I can buy a cup of coffee for over three pounds and even resist silently calculating how much less it would have cost simply to spoon a heap of instant in a mug and drink it black.' I don't know why I'm telling him all this. I've spent the last thirty years of my life trying not to let a hint of my ghastly past leak into my shiny present. I suppose the truth of it is that it

never goes away. 'It took me a long time to get here. To a place where I take financial security as a given.'

'Now, you don't even have to work.'

He's only stating the obvious, but I feel a bit stung. Reduced. 'I do all the housework,' I say. He obviously hears my defensiveness.

'Oh, I'm not criticising. I think it's wonderful if mothers can and want to stay home to bring up their kids. Who needs the aggro of having to explain the importance of attending sports days to their bosses?'

I imagine he's had quite a bit of aggro being Mum and Dad to three children, so it's extremely generous of him to say as much. 'It *has* been wonderful. I'm not good at blowing my own trumpet, but I do believe I've been the best mother I could be to Katherine. Or at least I believe that most of the time,' I add candidly.

'No doubt about it.' It means a lot to hear his enthusiastic endorsement, especially on the back of a visit to my mother's. I was what others called 'a natural'. Katherine's toddler tyranny didn't faze me. Urges, impulses, fads, appetites and energy were all just challenges which I joyfully rose to. Some women resent it. 'Some of my friends talked about losing themselves. I was grateful to be swallowed whole.'

'Happy to lose what had gone before?' His question frightens me. It's so perceptive. I daren't answer directly. He seems to know me better than I know myself. I almost tell him. I almost tell him everything. I stop myself just in time.

'I was happy to rush around with rice cakes and baby wipes. I was the one who knew where we kept the nail scissors, what exactly had to be packed in her ballet kit. I liked being indispensable.' Cleaning up messes made me feel useful and purposeful. Whole. Katherine gave me meaning. Women rarely admit that now. It's so old-fashioned to say you are happy to live to look after your child, achieve through your child, but I am. My friends used to say, 'How have I been reduced to this?' But I felt elevated. Being Katherine's mother elevated me. I liked it all: shopping, washing, chopping, puréeing, wiping, reading, bending, playing, singing, dancing, pushing, rocking. All the things that add up to being a parent held me enthralled. Still do, but it's more complex now. I don't know how I'll ever come to terms with the fact that I've only ever been a good mother to Katherine. Is that enough?

Can I forgive myself?

Tom tuts sadly. 'I'm sorry about your mother and father. You seem very alone.' I'm left breathless at that comment. I have Katherine, I have Jeff, I have friends. Not bosom buddies, perhaps, but a dinner-party circuit, people I wave to when I go to my Pilates class. Although, I have to admit, the distance between Rachel and I is now not only physical. She didn't believe me when I said that the Skype connection had been lost, but then neither did she care enough to call me on it. We're currently confining ourselves to WhatsApp messages. Tom's right. I do sometimes feel very alone. Did it take another lonely person to see that?

'I don't feel alone now,' I confess.

'You're not.' The warmth of his words sneaks through my ear into my head and my heart. They settle, sending a glow through my body. I feel his sympathy and understanding and it's almost a little too heavy to bear. I want to say something as important back to him, but I have to be careful. Are we friends now? Are we more? The boundaries are blurred and I feel I'm smudging them further.

'What about you?'

'Me?'

'You never mention your parents.'

'They live in Spain. They bought a holiday home in Alicante in the early nineties and retired there about four years ago.'

'You must miss them.'

'They have a good life there. Lots of friends.' He hasn't answered the question.

'You must miss Annabel terribly.' It's a woefully inadequate comment, but it's a start. Since the first time he came to our house, Tom has not allowed himself to speak about Annabel. I understand that he doesn't want to be morbid around the children but I think he needs to talk to someone.

'Yes. Every morning I wake up and for a fraction of a moment I forget she's gone. I reach out for her but my arm falls flat against the cool sheet. My grief assaults me anew. Every morning.'

I gasp. What to say in the face of such loss?

A man with a trolley selling tea, sandwiches, crisps and Twix bars shuffles by. I shake my head at him. I have no appetite. I feel the motion of the train through my body. I feel Tom's pain, too. The worst thing is, there are so many hurdles to get over. He never talks about Callum and Amy taking the test to detect the mutated gene. I suppose he must be blanking it.

I think about what that gene will mean for Katherine all the time. I guess he's reached a saturation point in terms of what he can deal with. Tentatively, I moot the idea, 'Tom, have you given any thought to when Callum and Amy might take the BRCA1 and 2 test?'

'They both did, shortly after Olivia took herself off to have it behind my back.'

'Oh.' I'm stunned. I don't know what to say.

'They're clear. Didn't I ever tell you that? I can't believe I never told you that. I suppose I forgot to mention it the first time we met. I'm so sorry. You must have been worrying all this time.'

Yes! However, I don't want to pile any more grief or guilt on to Tom, so I say, 'Well, you had a lot of information to convey.'

'Indeed.'

'And this is good news. Great news!'

'For Callum and Amy, undoubtedly, but I'm so sorry, Alison, their results don't have any bearing on Katherine's. This doesn't mean the gene has skipped a generation or anything like that. Each child has a fifty per cent chance of inheriting it.'

Each child's odds is separate and unrelated to their siblings', and yet – yet. The cold grasp of panic tightens around my neck. Could they all three be lucky? Is that likely?

I need to change the subject now.

'Jeff thinks we should throw the girls a joint sleepover party.' I don't know why I am saying this. It's certainly not what I want. I wonder whether I'm testing Tom.

'That's a bloody awful idea. They barely make eye contact – we can't fling them together. They're not ready for that.' He passes with flying colours.

'I agree.' Hesitantly, I ask, 'Has Olivia talked to you much about the situation? About how she feels?'

'No. She's being very closed. You know teenagers.'

'That I do.'

'I'll ask her again, if you like, about you having her mobile number – or maybe we should arrange for you to meet up with her without all the others, even without Katherine.'

'Possibly.' I'm not sure. I don't know which way to turn. Would that be disloyal to Katherine? Would Olivia even be interested? I think of Tom's

loneliness and I want to offer him something. ‘We’re thinking of going to the fireworks at Elizabeth Park on Thursday. The council always puts on a good display. Would you like to join us?’ I throw out the invite before I change my mind, before I even consider that Katherine hasn’t actually committed to the family outing. I’ve suggested the idea, and she’s murmured, ‘Maybe.’ I know she’s also been invited to a friend’s private fireworks party, a party where they will be toasting marshmallows and serving hot chocolate.

‘That would be wonderful, but doesn’t Katherine have a music lesson and then debating society on Thursdays?’

I’m impressed he remembers. And also a little daunted. Is he teasing me? Throwing back in my face the obstacles I recently presented to him? ‘She can miss the debating society this once. Meet at the south gate, at, say, six fifteen?’

‘Great.’ I can almost feel his smile through the mobile. He has so many milestones in front of him to get through: Halloween, Bonfire Night, Christmas, birthdays, anniversaries. Days that used to be joyful celebrations will simply have to be endured. If I can do anything to ease that burden for him and his family, then I want to.

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ I say, and I’m surprised to find that’s the truth.

‘Me, too.’ He pauses and then lets out a big breath, the sort that always heralds an announcement. ‘Look, Alison, I want you to know I’m your friend. I’ve come to—’ He falters, then goes for it. ‘I’ve come to care about you, a great deal. If you ever need a chat, you’re welcome to come over. It doesn’t have to be a scheduled visit. You can just drop in.’

I feel sweat on the back of my knees. ‘Thank you, Tom.’

‘And as for your family and your background and such. I think you should be kinder on yourself. None of us can undo or even disentangle our pasts. They are knotted. And why should we wish to? Our pasts are the ingredients of who we turn out to be. From what I know of you, you’ve turned out fine. Everyone has a tendency to want to smooth over the awkward or discomfiting parts and present a respectable, shiny version to the outside world, but it’s not necessary. Not for me. I mean, we are practically family.’

For the first time, that idea didn’t make me want to recoil.

Having made the arrangement, I still wasn't sure whether Katherine would agree to attend the firework display. I'm pretty sure if it had been with just me and her dad she would have declined, insisting that she was too old for toffee apples and sparklers. She's done Bonfire Night often enough with us, and her excited squeals have, over the years, given way to a quiet dissatisfaction with what the evening ultimately delivers; familiarity can do that. However, she's lured in by the promise of the wider chaos siblings represent. I get it: a big family offers buoyancy and fluidity; seven people can gather and then pair off, then regroup; that sort of number defuses any intensity. Our tight unit of three offers loyalty and stability, but that's very close to predictability: one step from 'tedious' for a teenager.

We decide to walk to the event, there's no point in taking the car; it's impossible to secure a parking spot within a mile of the activities, unless you park the day before. It's chilly and drizzling, but I've done this in drilling rain before; bad weather is traditional. As we walk towards the park Katherine thrills me by linking her arm in mine. We point out the fireworks that occasionally flash in the sky. Sparkle then disappear.

'When I was a little girl I thought fireworks were spells, wonderful little blasts of magic exploding into the air,' I say.

She squeezes my arm. 'Oh, Mum, you are really sweet. I know that. You tell me every year.' She's in a good mood. It's funny, but the fact I'm noticing as much highlights the fact that she really hasn't been, not very often, in the past few weeks. Who could be, given what she's dealing with? As we walk, Katherine chatters about the auditions for a music contest at school she's thinking of entering and how she has been conned out of a mark in a physics test because the teacher said she couldn't read her handwriting. I find it tricky to concentrate on what she's saying and leave it to Jeff to interject the appropriate comments in the appropriate place. I am battling with strange and confusing feelings. As usual, there is the dread

that I carry about almost constantly, yet there's something else, too. If I didn't know better, I'd say I have a small but definite sense of excitement, of anticipation. But that can't be right, not under the circumstances. I can hardly be eager to see the firework display; like Katherine, I've come to know what to expect from the council's fireworks. I keep thinking about Tom. About him dropping his coat around my shoulders at the ice rink, about his keen interest in my stories on our walk, about his gentle pledge to be my friend when I called him from the station. It's unsettling.

We reach the south gate at ten past six, but we are still quite a distance away when I spot Tom. He's taller than average and better-looking than most; he stands out. After the greetings – a mix of polite cheek-kissing, hand-shaking and shy nods (me, Jeff, Katherine) – I look about for the children. They're nowhere to be seen. I watch Katherine do the same, then her shoulders droop in disappointment as Tom explains they have all made other plans and won't be joining us.

'What other plans?' she demands, no doubt irritated because, after all, she did turn down the invitation to go to her friend's house.

'Well, Amy was worried about leaving Mozart in on his own, so Callum offered to stay in with her, and Olivia is meeting her friends – here, actually – but she'd already made the arrangement before we suggested meeting up.' And, unsurprisingly, she wouldn't cancel for us. 'We might bump into her.' He scans the crowd but looks doubtful. There must be a thousand people here; it's unlikely anyone will find anyone unless they've made specific arrangements. I watch Katherine swallow her irritation and deal with the let-down; I'm proud of her and sorry for her, but I realise that I'm not disappointed. I'm a little bit relieved. Olivia has ignored my Facebook friend request. She clearly doesn't do polite or flexible, she isn't prepared to engage or converse.

I glance at Tom. The drizzle has settled on his face and is sparkling, like his eyes. He's undoubtedly, classically, handsome. Katherine is also iridescent, lean and chiselled. She looks right standing by his side. I feel disloyal for noticing as much and so grab hold of Jeff's hand as we walk.

We follow the masses heading towards the glow from the enormous bonfire and find ourselves quite a good spot to watch the towers of flames shoot up into the dark night. The fire is throwing off a fierce heat that keeps the crowd at bay even more effectively than the recently constructed boundary. I watch dads lift their children on to their shoulders and

remember the countless occasions Jeff did the same. Now, if he tried, Katherine's legs would trail to his knees! I see that, as usual, there are grandparents here, looking amazed at the neon antennae and flashing wands that are being touted and gasping in shock at the ridiculous price tags attached. Naturally, there are gangs of teenagers. I automatically sweep my eyes over them to see if I recognise any of the kids. I don't, yet they are all familiar. Many of the girls are dressed inappropriately, considering the occasion and the month; they are wearing low-cut tops and lightweight jackets rather than sensible rollnecks and duffel coats. I briefly wonder whether anyone even makes duffel coats any more. The boys stand around, self-consciously sharing a can or two. The cockiest among them swear in loud voices; they have an air about them that suggests they know this is the sort of night that is punctuated with small quarrels and mishaps. Our little group is quite silent by comparison. It's impossible to pretend this situation isn't awkward. We all throw our attention on Katherine. Jeff asks if she wants a jacket potato.

'No, I'm good, thanks, Dad,' she murmurs, flashing a quick smile.

'Maybe a hot dog?' says Tom. She shakes her head. 'A toffee apple?'

'No, thank you. I find them tricky to eat.'

He understands her. 'It's that first bite that's the problem. You have to really go for it.'

'Yes.' She grins again. 'And my hair gets stuck to the toffee.'

'I don't have that problem.' He laughs. She laughs along with him.

'Some candyfloss, then?' offers Jeff.

Katherine looks at me with hammed-up exasperation. 'Dad, you know Mum thinks candyfloss is the worst. White-sugar alert!' She starts to wave her hands above her head in mock-alarm.

'If you want some, you can,' I say, although I probably don't sound too convincing.

'It's OK. I'm really not hungry.'

'A hot chocolate maybe?' offers Tom.

'Tea?' says Jeff.

Katherine suddenly starts walking quickly towards a cart selling neon deely boppers and both men stumble after her, racing to retrieve their wallet first. I wonder whether she'll end up with two pairs. I don't see any other families falling over themselves to buy the overpriced tat or treats for their kids; most families seem to be exerting energy on avoiding doing so.

Throughout my life, I've often felt out of step. Never more so than now. Where's the manual for this? Where's the guidance?

On discovering that the firework display won't start for at least another half-hour, Jeff and Katherine start to hotfoot it towards the funfair, to kill some time. Tom and I follow reluctantly.

'Not a fan of funfairs?' I ask.

He shakes his head. 'Honestly? I can't stand Bonfire Night. For a start, I think it's barbarous to celebrate torturing a man, and I think the event has become yet more diabolical now that we're also expected to thrash about in bumper cars and make ourselves sick on waltzers.'

I stare at him, amazed. This is exactly what I think of firework festivities *and* funfairs, but I have long since given up saying so, because Jeff and Katherine call me a killjoy. Somewhat surprisingly, Jeff is a bit of a beast when it comes to arcade games. We often leave with a cuddly toy because of his expertise on the shooting range, and when Katherine was young a wholly good trip to the seaside was routinely ruined by him dragging us into the trashy, thrashing arcade so he could show off his prowess. Those sorts of activities were far too close to my own past. I wanted to give Katherine an altogether different childhood, one with sandcastles and crabbing. 'I'm not a fan of fireworks. I like a sparkler, but that's about it.' Tom grins and the skin at the sides of his eyes crinkles pleasingly.

'I totally agree,' I say with a beam. 'You should have said. We could have gone to your house, bought a modest box from the newsagent, let them off in the garden and then watched Amy write her name in the air with sparklers.'

Tom looks regretful. 'Would you have gone for that? Oh, I wish I'd known. That would have been lovely. I could have cooked – I make a decent chilli.' He looks at the unappetising jacket potato he's bought, slavered with slimy coleslaw made from cheap salad cream; it's sitting in a polystyrene box and he has to eat it with a plastic fork. It's a challenge. I also realise that he must feel bad about leaving Amy at home, even if Callum is with her. It strikes me that he's sacrificed quite a lot to be with Katherine tonight. With us. He should have just said that Mozart was a complication. I'm certain Katherine would have been delighted to hang out at their house, and I wouldn't have objected. I might have quite enjoyed it too, I suppose. Their house certainly needs an injection of life and warmth. Even though we've only visited once, and briefly, I felt it was a place that

lacked. A grieving house. I suppose Jeff would have gone along with any plan.

‘Shall we do it?’

‘What?’

‘Go to yours now.’

Tom shakes his head quickly. ‘No. We won’t be able to get fireworks now.’

‘I bet we could at one of the late-night supermarkets.’

‘I haven’t prepared anything to eat.’

‘That doesn’t matter. You have a potato. Katherine says she’s not hungry.’

‘But Jeff and Katherine are really enjoying the funfair.’

I don’t say anything else. He’s clearly a man who likes to stick to a plan once he’s made it.

While Katherine and Jeff enjoy the haunted house and the various spinning wheels, Tom and I continue to chat. I tell him a little more about Katherine’s aspirations, both sporting and academic. He can’t help but be impressed, although I’m careful to hold back a little. I tell him she’s interested in doing politics and international studies. She dreams of working for the UN. ‘Olivia?’

‘She’s undecided. Maybe she’ll go to art college.’

‘Fine artist? Graphic designer? Photographer?’

‘She’s very young, there’s plenty of time.’ I don’t state the obvious, which is that she’s exactly the same age as Katherine. ‘Did you have it all planned out at such an early age, too?’

‘No,’ I admit, ‘the opposite. I was pretty chaotic.’ I’m uncomfortable that he has perhaps deliberately drawn a comparison between Olivia and me. I move around a bit so my wellington boots don’t sink into the mud.

‘Where did you go to uni?’ It’s a standard question, one that always makes me feel a little too warm. I wonder whether I have the energy to fudge, the way I do with so many of the school-gate mothers or Jeff’s publishing colleagues, but then I realise I simply don’t feel the need.

‘I didn’t go to university. I left school at sixteen.’ I don’t imagine he’ll stare, aghast (although I have received this response in the past), nor do I pause for him to deliver one of the obvious platitudes – ‘Well, it’s not for everyone’ or ‘How enterprising!’ – instead, I quickly ask, ‘You?’

‘Bristol.’ It fits. Jeff went to Durham. Both places are frighteningly impressive.

I don’t want to ask, but I can’t stop myself; it’s like picking a scab. ‘Annabel?’

‘Bella? Cambridge.’ Of course. I think of Katherine’s grade As and A stars, which have always been such a great source of pride to me, and a little bewildering. I see now. It’s Annabel’s win.

‘What did you study?’ I ask this to help him over the difficult fact that I’m obviously the thickie out of the four of us.

‘History. Don’t ask what I came out with, though.’ Since he doesn’t pause but immediately tells me – ‘I graduated with a wholly underwhelming Desmond Tutu’ – I gather he isn’t in the slightest bit concerned by this. He has an effervescence about him, a confidence in his past that can’t be clouded by something as mundane as an average degree. That must be lovely. My past clouds everything. ‘I found my degree very interesting, just not as interesting as the pub or the rugby field.’ He smiles. His warm breath swirls in the cold night air, like a dragon’s. ‘I left qualified to do absolutely nothing at all. Most people suggested that I studied for a PGCE next because teaching is not only useful but respectable and everyone knows the holidays are long, but I’ve always thought that the vast majority of children are annoying – my own excepted.’ He pauses and looks a bit concerned as to how I might take this comment. Nothing can be throw-away between us. I nod, encouraging him to go on and not to dwell on exactly how many children he can claim as his own right now. ‘The marking is endless and the pay insulting, so instead I wangled my way into a job in design and brand management.’

I don’t ask how he made that fantastical jump. I can imagine. He’ll have looked the part. It’s always easier if you look the part. He might have known someone. A family friend who could put in a word. I know how these things work now. ‘It wasn’t as glamorous as it sounds,’ he declares. I cast my mind back to his living room, furnished with an Eames lounge chair and a Bang & Olufsen stereo. Admittedly, the former was draped with discarded hoodies and lost under piles of old newspapers and schoolbooks, but both were signs that he was once deeply concerned about material possessions and what they said about him.

‘I suspect your job was very glamorous,’ I comment.

‘It really wasn’t,’ he insists. ‘At least, not when I was working as a lowly account manager. It didn’t prove to be useful or respectable. The holidays were non-existent, the children could be naughty or nasty – but they were called creative directors. Still, no one ever gave me nits.’

I laugh, as I know I am expected to. I realise that he’s served up this abridged, witty version of his early career before. Illogically, unreasonably, I feel a bit put out. I want him to give me more. I’ve confided so much in him. Surely he knows he can trust me enough to be able to reciprocate. I wonder if he’s given me this sanitised and edited account of his career because he thinks it’s beyond my comprehension: the long, boozy lunches, the tight, stressy deadlines – what could I know of it? By way of showing that I understand some of his world, I say, ‘That’s so interesting. We were more or less in the same trade.’ I can’t resist; I need him to know. It’s not that I believe there’s not more to me than being a mum, because what’s more than that to me? But there is other.

‘You were a designer?’ He’s polite enough to hide any outright incredulity.

‘No, I worked in advertising. Way back when. In the days when it was split above the line, below the line. I was above the line.’

He smiles, nodding at the archaic terminology. ‘When there were contact sheets and laminates.’

‘Faxes, not texts.’

‘Instant coffee, not lattes.’ I don’t know why we’re making a cosy club out of our out-datedness once again; I suppose there’s some comfort in it. We’ve grown up. We’ve lived through it all.

He doesn’t ask me how I managed to kick-start my career and I don’t volunteer the information. When you work in an industry like advertising you swiftly learn that there are lots of unwritten rules; rules about what to wear, eat and drive, how to speak, smile, shag. I rapidly came to understand that it was of vital importance to be bright and ballsy, to be resilient, resourceful and have an ever-present rictus grin. Beam at all times. Broad, dazzling smiles. It was a hideously misogynistic environment. In the company I worked in there were no male personal assistants and only two women on a board of eighteen. I watched the women in more senior positions than mine and noticed that they tried harder, achieved more and yet were paid less than any of their male colleagues. I noticed that if a couple of colleagues slept together, then he was seen as a hero, she was a

slut. And people wonder why women might prefer to stay at home and bring up their babies.

However, it seems Tom doesn't have any enthusiasm for quizzing me about my career days. I'm almost regretful; I have a few stories that would raise spirits, raise eyebrows. It might do us both good to think of something other than our complex family problems. I've noticed that Tom is eternally intense. He always seems wary, a little watchful. It's totally understandable, considering what he's been through and is going through, but I do like to see him laugh. I wish he did it more.

'Do you enjoy your job?' I ask.

'Yes, I do. Not that I'm exactly shining at work at the moment. It's a good day if I remember the client's name, which is, after all, considered the basic in any industry but is certainly essential for a branding agency.' He grimaces charmingly, and I gently laugh.

The rain falls like a mist between us.

Jeff and Katherine are heading back towards us. They are carrying a pink soft toy, it could be a cat or a rabbit; it's of that quality. Jeff looks jubilant. Katherine is keen for us all to visit the hall of mirrors. 'Even you won't be scared, Mum,' she laughs. I agree, and we pay over six quid between us for two minutes laughing at our fat legs; I can do that for free every night before I go to bed. Then, somewhat disastrously, we have a go at knocking the coconuts off their perches. I say 'disastrously', because Tom succeeds and Jeff doesn't. Tom can't hide his excitement at his skill. He hands the coconut to Katherine as though it were a gold medal. I maintain that the cat/rabbit cuddly toy is a bigger prize, but I can tell that Jeff thinks otherwise.

'Oh, you should keep it for Amy,' she says, flashing a look at her dad, who is struggling not to look sulky.

'She's not that keen on coconut,' Tom assures her. 'Anyway, I won it for you.'

I keep a constant eye out for Olivia but, as I suspected, it's hopeless, the crowds are too enormous; besides, it's wet and dark. We amble back towards the cordoned-off area as the firework display is about to start, and the amble becomes more of a stride as we get closer and people start to jostle for the best views. I can't understand this: we all have to look up; there's enough sky for everyone; it's not like we're trying to get to see a school play. Then I see the sense in the elbows-out tactic. Endearingly,

there's a small brass band playing old-fashioned but rousing tunes; unsurprisingly, they are pretty amateurish, but most of the onlookers applaud good-naturedly nonetheless.

Then there's an expectant lull as the blaring fairground music silences, tired tots stop grumbling and giddy teens become keen and attentive.

*Swoosh!* Young children fidget and flutter and then come to their senses, some people clap, others confine themselves to quiet 'oh's and 'ah's, as the sky is fleetingly brightened by bouquets that bloom then vanish and rockets that whizz and bang. I glance at Katherine. She's animated, raw and young. Her eyes, hair and nose are gleaming, with excitement, youth and the cold. I adore her, and I pray she's going to have many, many more Bonfire Nights ahead of her. That she'll bring her own children here, get cross with them over the sugar content of the treats and spend her night making sure they are close by her side, safe; that she'll have time to see them turn into teens, alternately bored and animated in the blink of an eye. I want it so much that it hurts. The fireworks blur as tears well. I will them not to fall so no one will see me rub them away. I don't want to spoil the evening. I feel the heat of Tom's body as he leans a fraction closer into me. It could be because the crowd is thickening and we're short on space, or it could be because he's spotted the tears hovering on my lashes and he's offering me discreet support. We watch the fireworks at one another's side, and it's comforting.

The fireworks bang and zoom all about. The pitch-black sky is dizzy with red, pink, white, purple and blue cascades. The colours explode, then smoke trails dreamily as they float into nothingness. The encouragement from the crowd becomes more robust as people get caught up in the magic and lose their inhibitions; everyone appreciatively calls out: *Ooooh! Ahhhh! Ohhhh!* Tom occasionally bends towards Katherine and makes some comment or other; she laughs, smiles, nods in response. Next, Jeff comes up with his own witticism or remark. It's like watching two seagulls struggle over a chip on the seafront.

'Ever since the millennium, firework displays have been expertly choreographed, don't you think?' says Tom. 'Not like in my day.'

'True,' interjects Jeff. 'Katherine has never experienced the let-down of the last firework being a pop rather than a bang, have you, darling?' Katherine shakes her head obligingly.

'I love the flinty smell of fireworks,' enthuses Tom. 'Do you, Katherine?' She nods.

‘Did you go to the Thames, last New Year’s Eve? They have multi-sensory firework displays now, you know. Remember, Katherine?’ She moves her head. I’m not sure if she’s nodding or shaking it.

‘What are they, exactly?’ asks Tom.

Jeff explains. ‘They made the fireworks smell of apple, cherry, strawberry and peach. They also filled thousands of bubbles with Seville orange-flavoured smoke and pumped out thousands of grams of edible banana confetti.’

‘Oh,’ mumbles Tom, not showing whether he’s impressed or not.

‘Yes.’

‘Did you go?’

‘No,’ admits Jeff, which rather takes the shine off his story. He tries to recover. ‘Maybe this year. What do you think, Katherine?’

‘I might have plans for New Year’s Eve.’

I get the feeling she’s quite ready to go home by the time the display comes to a finish.

We fall in with the vast majority, who are now gladly shuffling towards the gate. Some children are asleep in buggies, the older ones are yawning and trailing behind, watchful parents reach for their little, sticky hands. Jeff suggests we stop off at Costa for a hot chocolate but about a thousand other people have had the same idea and Tom says he needs to get home to the kids. He pulls me into a brief but tight hug and Katherine opens out her arms to him.

Tom peels away, and is swallowed by the crowd almost instantly. We start to walk home in silence. A group of teenage boys across the road catches my attention because they're heading in the opposite direction to most of the teeming crowds. I suppose they are going to the funfair that we've just left. They are the decent sort, boys that are wearing hoodies but not carrying cans of beer, the sort that will step on to the road to allow a mother with a buggy the right of way. One of them says something particularly funny and the rest throw their heads back with raucous laughter. That's when I spot him. Callum. A snail's trail of cars divides us and I lose sight of him for a moment, but I'm sure it was Callum. My mind makes fast jumps as I try to understand what's happened. I can imagine his friends texting him all night, telling him they are off out to meet girls and have some fun at the fair. He must have become frustrated about having to stay in with Amy. No doubt he shoulders a lot of responsibility. I understand he's been through a great deal, I can imagine he wants to blow off steam, but really! She's eight years old. How could he have been so irresponsible as to leave her alone? Without thinking about it too much, because if I did I might talk myself out of it, I cut through the line of cars and start to chase after him. I call to Jeff and Katherine to carry on: 'I'll catch you up.'

'Where are you going now?' Jeff sounds irritated.

'I thought I saw Jan Bonville from school. I need to talk to her about something. I'll be five minutes. Don't wait.'

I push through the crowds, forced repeatedly to hop up and down, on and off the kerb, but pretty soon I've caught up with the group of teenage boys. I reach out and tap Callum on the arm. He turns around, a wide grin plastered on to his face. It falters for a moment.

'What are you doing out?' I demand. I know that, technically, this boy is none of my business, not my responsibility in the least, but the thought of

poor Amy abandoned makes me breathless with anger. As a kid who was often left in alone from the age of eight, I know it's a terrible thing.

'Erm, I'm going to the funfair,' he replies, seemingly unperturbed, unrepentant. 'Have you had a nice night?'

I'm taken aback by his composure. 'Lovely, thank you,' I reply automatically. He glances behind him. His friends have not slowed down to wait for him; boys don't, I've noticed. If this were a gang of girls, they'd all be huddled around me, giggling and waiting for an introduction.

'Fireworks were good.' I'm not sure if he's making an assertion or asking me a question.

'Did you see them?'

'Yeah.' Again he throws out a look of desperation towards his mates. They are fifty yards away now. It's clear he wants to catch them up. I scowl. That's not my concern.

'Where's Amy?'

He points further up the road, in the direction I've just come from. 'Up there somewhere.'

'On her own?' I gasp.

He looks perplexed. 'Of course not. We're with a whole gang of people.'

Now I'm the one who is confused. 'Olivia?'

'Yes. She's there, with all her friends, and Mum—' He stumbles over his words, goes red. My heart contracts for him. 'Mum's friends. Everyone.'

'Oh, I see. I thought—' But I can hardly say what I thought.

How could I have imagined Callum would be so irresponsible? I now realise what's happened. Annabel's friends have scooped up the children. Probably, there's a whole host of women who are desperate to help the family of their late friend. Capable, kind men and women who are keen to get the Trubys through these holidays and high days. I imagine a lot of people will have had the instinct that made me invite Tom and the children here in the first place, and those people no doubt have a lot more right and ability to offer sympathy and care. What was I thinking? I've put Tom in a difficult position. It's clear what's happened. The children evidently refused to spend the evening with us and Tom was too polite to say so. As he'd already committed to the arrangement, he saw it through. He must have been torn. Naturally, Annabel was the sort to have numerous friends: uni friends, NCT friends, school-gate friends. I bet she cut calm and confident swathes through life, I bet she charmed and inspired everywhere she went. I

guess they'll have children Callum, Olivia and Amy have known since birth. I hadn't considered the wider support circle.

I can't explain it, but I feel a bit wrong-footed. Silly of me. I should be delighted the Trubys have this support. I am. I *really* am.

It's just that, well ...

I thought I was beginning to get to know Tom.

This gaggle of strangers, however kind and compassionate, don't fit with the picture I was drawing of him. Admittedly, we haven't spent long with the Trubys but, whenever we have, Tom always seems so dreadfully alone. Lonely. Yes, he's delightful and inquisitive, but I'm pretty certain his focus on me is simply a deflection device; it's as though he can't bear talking about himself, not in any detail.

I guess I thought he needed me.

Callum glances back over his shoulder again; he doesn't want to lose sight of his pals. He's keen to get away from me.

'I don't want to be rude, but I'd better get going. Just been let off the leash.'

'Yes, yes, of course. Nice seeing you. Have fun. Stay warm.'

I turn round and head back up the road, searching out Jeff and Katherine, but I also keep an eye out for Olivia and Amy and their friends, too. As much as I'm surprised by the existence of a cheerful bunch of pals, I do understand it's a really good thing for the children. I would like to see them wrapped in a compassionate and loyal group. I'd like to hold that image in my head, rather than the one of their stark, grieving house.

When I catch up with my family I don't mention seeing Callum; it's too complicated; Katherine has enough to think about without having to concern herself with the fact that the Truby children have slighted us.

When Katherine is safely tucked up in bed, Jeff hands me a glass of red and we both sit down on the sofa, not next to each other exactly; we'd have to reach out to touch. Still, I sense that he's trying to be as pleasant as he possibly can with me. He put away all the coats, hats and gloves when we arrived home rather than dumping them on the chair in the hallway as he does normally, he set the table while I made a quick bowl of pasta pesto and then he offered to pop out to buy me a bar of chocolate, although I declined. Significantly, he didn't rush off to his office and squirrel himself away but instead sat down with the clear intention of making conversation. I know he is trying. I just wish I could appreciate it fully. Instead, I find it a bit

depressing: I think that he shouldn't have to try; being nice to one another used to be effortless. I notice the cat/rabbit toy propped up against the clock on the mantelpiece. It's a cheap, peculiar-looking thing, as fairground toys often are; I'm pretty sure it wouldn't pass any safety standards. Its eyes are sewn too close together, which makes it look a little nervous, tense. I'm in a bad way, I must be, if I'm humanising a toy.

'Did you have a good time tonight?' he asks.

An accurate answer would be 'sort of'. That type of response would definitely lead to a more in-depth and truthful conversation. 'Yes, great, thank you,' I say. Then, as an afterthought, 'You?'

'Oh, yes, very pleasant. Pretty good show,' he mumbles, nodding. He seems defeated. There's no vigorous insistence that we 'just have to see how things play out.' I suppose he's still feeling a bit scratchy because he couldn't knock a bloody coconut off its shy and Tom could.

I know Jeff is staring at me, waiting to say something more. I consider telling him about spotting Callum and the fact that he, Olivia and Amy all chose to be out with family friends rather than us but then I notice he is wearing a tense expression, similar to that of the cat/rabbit, so I decide against it. I'm pretty sure a trouble shared would be a trouble doubled in this case. There's a long pause. Neither of us even bothers to pick up a section of the newspaper or a novel to fake a distraction. Eventually, Jeff says, 'Tom has a very relaxed way with Katherine, don't you think?' I can hear the discomfort in his voice. Jeff is rarely uncomfortable; usually, he is so relaxed in his skin I live in perpetual fear that it might slip off him like a seducer's kimono. His obvious unease is disconcerting.

'No more relaxed with her than you are with Olivia.' He doesn't look convinced. 'I suppose it's because he's used to having more than one child. He knows how to keep things equal. We're at a disadvantage.'

'I certainly am,' says Jeff. His irritation has a whiff of animosity.

'Why you more so than me? You are doing far better with Olivia than I am.'

'But that's irrelevant.'

'Why is it irrelevant?'

'Because it's not Olivia you want to be mother to, is it?' I stare at him and his meaning slowly sinks under my skin. 'Oh, come on, don't pretend you haven't noticed.' He swallows back his wine and then hastily refills his glass. 'There are two dads, two girls, one mum. You can't lose.'

‘Don’t say that. I can.’

‘No, not really.’ He looks crushed, and I feel someone squeezing my heart. He hasn’t been my focus for days now, weeks, but in that moment I remember his fragility, his humanity. It’s not that I don’t think about Jeff, it’s just that out of all the people I think about – Katherine, Olivia, Tom – I consider Jeff the most self-sufficient. He doesn’t need me the way they do. However, he’s my life partner. He is Katherine’s dad.

‘We’re in this together,’ I assure him. He gives me a look that says, *No, not really*. The hurt and humiliation colour the air. It’s unendurable; after a moment, he picks up the remote control and starts to channel-hop desultorily from one show to the next. The gesture is crippling in its futility.

‘Everything all right with Jan Bonville?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is she still going on about the damned car scratch?’

‘No, she’s let that drop.’

‘Good thing, too. Daft bitch,’ he says, attaining a casual, dismissive tone. ‘She needs more to worry about.’

No doubt. And we so obviously need less.

‘Tom.’

‘Hello, Alison.’ I can hear the warmth and pleasure in his voice. I feel flattered and, at the same time, guilty as I think of Jeff’s trounced demeanour last night. Admittedly, he seemed jauntier again this morning. He always rallies. He said something about having to get to the university library and dashed out of the door, a slice of toast in his hand. He likes eating on the run. It makes him feel vital. When we first met I’d often find a used mug in his beaten-up car because he’d have made a cup of tea and then had a thought about somewhere he needed to be or go. He’d rush out of the door with the mug and slurp the hot, sweet liquid at traffic lights.

‘I’m sorry to call you during work hours.’

‘Don’t worry, you’re not interrupting anything important.’

‘You must be working on *something*,’ I insist laughingly. Tom’s approach to his work is the opposite of Jeff’s. Tom has been through enough to understand that he works to live: to pay the bills, to keep a roof over the kids’ heads, et cetera. Jeff lives to work: he thinks the only thing that really matters is what he produces. I once heard him say that he thinks of himself as a writer before he thinks of himself as a man. I’m sorry, no matter how much he reminds me of a badly put-together toy, that comment is pompous, ridiculous. It’s impossible not to note that Tom’s life experiences are beyond Jeff’s and that his attitude to work is more pragmatic.

‘You’re really interested? OK. Well, I’m looking at several almost identical yellows on a RAL K7 colour chart to try to make a decision which one says “sunshine”. It’s for the lettering on a margarine tub.’

I can’t stop myself giggling. Assured that I’m probably not interrupting anything vital, I say, ‘I just wanted to talk about last night.’

‘OK. There’s something I want to talk to you about, too. Can you meet for a coffee?’

I had planned to ask him about Olivia, Callum and Amy's non-appearance over the phone, but a coffee does sound tempting. I've been to my Pilates class this morning and I have nothing else to do with myself other than plump cushions in an already immaculate house. 'Yes, all right. Fine.'

Tom suggests a small, independent bistro in town he knows. I haven't visited it but I have often walked past and it always looks inviting. I'm not sure why I haven't ever been inside. Habit, I suppose. I tend to visit the tea shops in department stores or one of the many coffee chains. Those sort of establishments offer anonymity. No one is likely to want to strike up a conversation.

Although I'm very prompt, Tom is waiting for me. He has a seat at a table right at the back, and I'm oddly relieved. Not that there is anything wrong with meeting him for coffee, but I don't need to advertise the fact by sitting in the window. What if someone I know walked past – a school mum, or Jeff?

Tom jumps to his feet and I notice his long, loose limbs. They seem as though they should belong to a younger man. He leans towards me but instead of pulling me into his habitual hug he catches me off guard by going for a kiss on either cheek. Not the maw-maw kiss of air or the vague hovering of his chin near my ear, actual warm kisses. One, two. His lips on my cheeks. Soft. His hand is on my elbow, too. He squeezes it. It's nothing. Just good manners. A social greeting appropriate for two adults meeting in a public place. But my cheeks and elbow tingle. 'I didn't know what to order for you,' he says.

'I'll have an ordinary coffee.' I correct myself because, although he's bound to understand my order, I sound gauche. 'An Americano.'

We order; Tom asks where I parked.

'I didn't drive, I walked. It's only ten minutes. The traffic is heavy; it might very well have taken me the same length of time in the car.'

'I guess people are already starting their Christmas shopping.' He shakes his head, as though to dislodge the thought. 'Bella used to love Christmas. She would have been writing Christmas cards by now.'

'Really? I'm surprised, I guess I had her down as a bit more laissez-faire, a bit more relaxed.'

'It wasn't a neurotic planning thing, it was excitement.'

The waitress brings our coffee mugs to the table; the hot liquid slops over the rim as she puts them in front of us. I don't grab a paper napkin to mop it up because this is the first time Tom has voluntarily opened up to me about Annabel. I don't want to interrupt his flow. He is on a roll. His small talk has been swallowed by his memories. I wonder whether this was why he was so quick to suggest we meet up; he must have reached a point where he needs someone to talk to. 'I know lots of women turn into she-devils at Christmas.' He glances at me apologetically, correctly guessing I have been guilty of being such a woman. Then he adds, 'I mean, it's understandable, women still seem to take the brunt of the extra work. Wrongly.'

I smile to show I'm not offended. My brief but boisterous blow-up on Christmas Eve is practically a family tradition. I always want to be at the nativity service at church or serving mince pies to friends in the warmth of our sitting room; the reality is I'm usually dashing about with the vacuum cleaner, worrying whether the turkey will defrost before the big day, panicked that Jeff's family are going to arrive before their allotted time. Katherine and Jeff are quite understanding when I lose it for twenty minutes. Jeff pours me champagne. Katherine asks if she can use the wrapping paper as she has something special to wrap. Wink, wink. I know she means something special for me. Sweet girl.

'Bella never got stressed at Christmas.'

'Never?' I splutter hot Americano. Really? *Never?* What was she, Superwoman?

Tom looks completely sincere. 'No. She loved Christmas. Especially the parties. We threw one every year. The Saturday before Christmas, whatever date that happened to fall. She'd bake mince pies and serve little savoury snacks.' Bake? No nipping to M&S and heating up pre-prepared vol-au-vents? 'She served cookies and brownies in the shape of Santa and Rudolf and had endless bowls of red and green sweets lying about everywhere; nothing showy, just fun. She spent ages sorting out Smarties, Fruit Pastilles and Skittles. The kids loved eating up the left-over other colours she rejected.'

'How lovely.' I tell myself that no one in their right mind worries about E numbers or additives at Christmas. I need to let go a bit.

'Yes, I'm not being braggy, but we threw good parties. Lots of alcohol is the key. For the guests *and* the hosts. It would be stacked in the kitchen sink and in the bath, ice skittering in the water; one year there was actual snow

on the ground at the right time so Bella chilled the beers and Prosecco by half-burying the bottles in it in the garden. It was magical.'

'I imagine she was the sort of woman to have a lot of friends,' I say, trying to bring the conversation around to the reason I wanted to meet up.

'Oh yes. I never knew who she'd invite. It got bigger every year. Throughout December she'd fling out invitations like confetti. Friends, neighbours, new acquaintances, stalwarts and newbies side by side. People talked about our parties well into January.' He's smiling at the memory. It's a wide, peaceful grin, then it collapses and he breaks eye contact. Looks at his coffee. 'This year, no one will know what to do with themselves the Saturday before Christmas. It will be like the whole street is in mourning.'

I reach out and take hold of his hand. I can't think what to say so I simply squeeze his fingers. He nods, understanding.

'It's good she had so many friends. I mean, that must be a great help and comfort now.' I take a deep breath. He looks up at me, confused. 'I know that Callum didn't stay in with Amy and Mozart last night. I saw him at the bonfire.'

'You saw him.' Tom looks aghast, so shocked I feel sorry for him.

'Don't worry, I totally understand. I've joined the dots.'

'You have?' He looks grave.

'I see that Annabel has friends who want to take care of the children, who want to help. It's a good thing. I'm glad you are not as alone as I feared.' I realise I'm still holding his hand and abruptly let go, lean back in my chair. 'The children didn't want to come out with us, did they?'

Tom turns red. 'Oh, I wouldn't say—' I meet his eye and he falls silent.

'It's OK. It's understandable.' I had half-hoped he'd insist I'd got it wrong, that certainly the children liked spending time with us, but he doesn't. 'I guess they've grown up with Annabel's friends. Their children must be your children's friends.'

'Yes,' he admits.

'We're still strangers by comparison. It was really good of you still to join us. I can't imagine that was an easy choice.'

'I like spending time with Katherine.'

'I know.' I guess Katherine must remind him of Annabel, in ways I don't know about and never will. Maybe she has her physical features, although, as she looks so much like Tom, I imagine it's more likely to be expressions, but, inevitably, there will be something.

‘And you have that rule about standing by the first invite you accept.’ I smile. ‘Besides, if I’m honest, I couldn’t quite face the whole crew en masse,’ he explains.

‘Understandable.’

‘They mean well, but—’

‘They remind you of what you’ve lost.’

‘Precisely.’ I want to take hold of his hand again, but I fight the impulse. It would perhaps be too much. Tom excuses himself, says he has to go to the loo. When he comes back he looks a little more together.

‘Shall we stay for lunch?’

‘Don’t you have to get back to the office?’

‘I’ll stay late this evening.’

I don’t often go out for lunch, even though Jeff regularly refers to me as a ‘lady who lunches’. If he’s working from home, rather than the library, I fix us soup, salad or a sandwich. Before Rachel emigrated we’d sometimes drop into one another’s home and enjoy a slice of quiche or a bowl of pasta. Having lunch in a lovely bistro with Tom seems too appealing to resist.

Once we’ve agreed that we are staying, we seem to accept that we want to indulge. We order starters and mains. Tom even persuades me to have a Bloody Mary. ‘You’re not driving.’

‘Well, you are.’

‘No, I walked here from the office and, by the time I leave the office this evening, I’ll have metabolised a Bloody Mary. What time do you have to pick up Katherine?’

‘She’s training, so not until six.’

‘There you go, then.’

‘And what time do you have to pick up Amy?’

‘Callum collects her from after-school club.’ He orders doubles. It seems very daring to be drinking at lunchtime, and fun.

The food is delicious, locally sourced and down-to-earth. I order cauliflower soup, which I never make at home because Jeff retches at just the thought of cauliflower; it’s also the cheapest starter on the menu. For my main I order fishcakes; there’s a special deal on them.

‘Do you always order the cheapest thing on the menu?’ asks Tom.

I’m taken aback he’s noticed and so simply stutter a truthful response. ‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Habit, I suppose.’

‘But you know you can afford anything on the menu, have been able to for a long time. None of it is expensive and, anyway, I’m picking up the tab today.’

‘You are not,’ I say firmly.

He smiles blithely, making it clear that’s a point we’ll deal with when it’s time to leave. ‘It’s a self-esteem issue, Alison. Similar to not spending much on the clothes you wear. You should think about it.’

I don’t know what to say. His perception knocks me off balance; I’m at once mortified at having been called up on it and pleased because he cares enough to work me out. I decide to pick a pudding without looking at what they cost. That’s if Tom wants a pudding. I won’t eat one if he doesn’t. I don’t want to look greedy, especially if he does end up picking up the bill.

Keen to change the subject, I say, ‘So you said there was something you wanted to talk to me about.’

‘Yes. There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you.’ He puts down his knife and fork, looks unsure but then decides to go for it. ‘I think the mix-up might have been Bel’s fault. I’m pretty certain.’

This is so mammoth I hardly dare breathe. Quietly, as though trying not to scare off a timid animal, I ask, ‘Why do you say that?’

Tom’s face is a complex assembly of emotion. He looks weary. Ashamed and disloyal. Unhappy at being so. ‘I’ve been thinking about it, and it was something she once said. Just once.’ His face tightens. He looks away, unable to meet my eyes. He lowers his voice and speaks to the wall. I lean towards him, to catch every word. ‘We had been expecting twins.’ I gasp. Katherine was a twin? It seems so incredible, so wonderful. There might have been double her magnificence. ‘We lost one twin during pregnancy, at five months.’ Not magnificent then, tragic.

‘How did Annabel take that?’

‘Stoically.’ Of course. Of course she did. Annabel was perfect, you see. Not neurotic or irrational, not indulgent – like me. She was perfect: she was Katherine’s mother. He is looking at the table now, carelessly playing with his food, no intention of eating it. I can’t swallow either. ‘Just once she told me something, sort of as a joke. You see, Olivia doesn’t look like our other two, and this one time Bel made a comment that we’d brought the wrong baby home from the hospital.’

‘Not much of a joke.’

‘Well, no, as things turn out. No. But people say that sort of thing all the time, don’t they? My mother used to wonder where I got my creative side from. Dad made jokes that I was the decorator’s son. No one thought he was being serious.’

‘I suppose,’ I admit churlishly. I just can’t laugh about this.

‘Bel giggled and said it was possible. That she had held two babies in the hospital. I remember her telling the story. She looked playful at first but then her eyes dimmed for a second. It struck me as odd so I asked her about it that night when we were in bed together. What did she mean she’d held two babies?’ He glances at me to check I am with him. Certainly, I am with him. I’m hanging off his every word. ‘Have I ever told you that Olivia’s –’ he hesitates – ‘Katherine’s birth was long and hard?’ We don’t know how to refer to the babies at this stage in their lives, when they had Katherine but called her Olivia, and Jeff and I had Olivia but thought of her as Katherine. I nod him on, not wanting him to get side-tracked by this matter of names but instead to tell me when exactly he thought the switch might have happened. ‘The hospital wanted to perform a Caesarean, since we’d already lost the twin, but Annabel wouldn’t hear of it. She tore, they had to use forceps in the end; it was a nightmare. I hated every moment. I was actually quite angry with her.’ I can’t hide my surprise. Weren’t they a faultless couple? Isn’t Tom sanguine and adoring? How could he be confessing to being angry with his wife during labour? Then he explains, ‘You know how anger surfaces when you are in fact terrified or when you care too much.’ I think of how much yelling and snapping Jeff and I are doing of late. Oh yes. I know that. ‘I didn’t think she had to suffer so. I thought she was punishing herself. Irrationally.’

‘Punishing herself for what?’

‘For losing the twin.’

My stomach slips, defying gravity, as an enormous wave of pity floods through my body. Poor Annabel. Poor, terrified, dead Annabel. Suddenly, and rightly, I pity her. I have not allowed any room for that. I’ve been so resentful that her mutated gene is threatening Katherine and so furious that we are left managing the children’s emotions that I haven’t allowed myself to think about her properly. Something inside me opens up a fraction and, for the first time since I heard her name, I feel deep grief for the loss of Annabel. For the lack of Annabel. She didn’t have an easy ride in her short life.

The waitress comes to our table. She eyes our barely touched meals wearily. 'Everything all right?' she asks.

'Delicious,' I assure her firmly, but then confuse her by putting my knife and fork together and telling her she can take my plate away. Tom continues.

'She lost a lot of blood, needed a transfusion. As I said, it was traumatic. Even when Katherine was finally delivered she didn't become any more rational. I know all mothers of newborns are somewhat overprotective but she was unreasonable. She refused to stay in bed, was constantly agitated and insisted on hobbling around while she was still attached to the drip. She went into the nursery whenever she heard a baby cry. She always thought it was our baby.'

He pauses and pinches the bridge of his nose, then uses his thumb to massage his forehead. I breathe slowly and deeply, resisting hurrying him on, even though all I want is for him to finish his story. I need every detail. It matters to me, so very much. I need to know when I became Katherine's mother. I know it was not at eleven fifteen on the morning of 27th March, as we've always thought, but sometime within the next twenty-four hours. In real terms, it doesn't matter, it's just a question of hours. Yet nothing else matters as much, right now.

'She was so tired, she wasn't sure what she was doing.' He is trying to explain and excuse. I am touched by his loyalty. 'She told me that in the middle of the night she'd wandered into the nursery. It was dark and quiet. The duty nurse had nipped to the loo. Annabel just had this urge to pick up another baby while she had ours in her arms. You know, just to see. A sort of fantasy. If everything had worked out with the twin, could she have managed two? That was all she was thinking. She never meant to cause any harm. She'd had an emergency Caesarean, she was pumped with drugs. Dazed. You know?' His eyes are pleading for understanding. 'She told me that the nurse came in and scolded her. Said she was endangering both babies since she wasn't particularly steady on her feet. The nurse snatched the babies off her one at a time and put them back in their bassinets.'

'That's when it happened?'

'Possibly.' His expression, normally so benign, is clamped and rigid. 'Probably. Yes. The night Bel told me about the incident, she said she was joking, as I say, but somehow she wasn't. I never thought anything of it until – well, until after she died. After the tests.'

I imagine the moment. I can see it vividly. The skinny, frail woman attached to a drip celebrating the birth of one baby, still grieving for the other. I see the nurse, efficient, well-meaning but a touch too officious and, after all, not quite as efficient as she believed herself to be. How could it have happened? Why weren't the babies tagged better? Yet if they had been, I wouldn't have had Katherine. But I would have had Olivia. I have not allowed myself to think about how differently things could have turned out.

This birth story is such a stark contrast to my own easy one. I'm floored with pity for the woman and the baby. What a terrible, heart-rending struggle. I think of the baby I brought home, unaware she had already lost her twin and had endured such a tricky start.

For the first time, I really acknowledge that I gave birth to *Olivia*. Obviously, until a couple of months ago, I thought the story with the mini-bottle of champers and the chatty nurses belonged to Katherine, but it belongs to Olivia. Birthing Olivia was easy. It is something she has; we have. That, and the pregnancy. My bump so tight I thought the skin would tear. The baby – *Olivia* – throwing out her elbows, her knees and heels, purposefully, as if she were trying to reach me. Propping myself up to watch TV, never being able to find a comfy position to sleep in, Jeff having to help me out of my chair. Sometimes I'd ask him to tie my shoelaces; he'd grumble that I was being lazy but he'd tie them anyway. 'At least you're not an African elephant – count your blessings. They carry their babies for twenty-two months before giving birth.' I remember stocking up on white Babygros, vests, socks (the size of my thumb!) and mittens. White, because that would work no matter if it was a boy or a girl. I always believed it was a girl, hoped it would be. I felt that would be easier. I bought the diminutive garments for Olivia, I understand that now. They became Katherine's.

We are where we are. It is what it is. Katherine is my baby.

'Didn't Annabel notice that the babies had been returned to the wrong bassinets?'

I don't want to sound accusatory but I think I must because Tom snaps a little. 'I said: she was on lots of heavy painkillers, she hadn't slept. Those early days are a fog.'

'But she must have noticed.' I know my frustration is leaking out.

'Didn't you, when they brought you the wrong baby for her next feed?'

I am silenced. I have asked myself this question over and over. How did I fail to notice? What sort of mother was I that I didn't know? When I held that hot, firm, snuffling baby in my arms on the second day, I loved the baby they gave me even more than I had the night before, but that wasn't because I preferred one baby to the other. I didn't love Katherine more than Olivia or Olivia more than Katherine. It wasn't a choice. How would that be the case? I didn't even know there were two. It is simply that I've loved my child more every single day of her life. As, no doubt, Annabel loved Olivia.

I loved her when she curled into me, smudging our existences together, and when she flailed with fury as her teeth broke through her gums. I loved her even when my back and my shoulders ached with holding her. I loved her though I never finished a meal or had a full night's sleep for months. I did. I was, and am, imprisoned by that love. You think you love them so much you'll burst, that there isn't any space left at all to produce or give more love, but then the next day, you do have more capacity.

This pattern continues until they are teenagers.

Joking. Obviously.

My love for Katherine is greater in this moment than it has ever been. Until tomorrow, when I shall love her more still.

There was never any question that anyone other than I would take Katherine to her counselling sessions, at least not in my mind. I'm the one who takes her to all her lacrosse games and training, to her music lessons, to her French-conversation tutor, to sleepovers at her friends'. I'm the one who picks her up from all of those activities, too. It's my job. Jeff offered to drive her to counselling once but I shot him down.

'Why does it matter who takes me?' asked Katherine. 'I go into the sessions alone.'

'I like being there in the waiting room to support you, Katherine. I want you to know that I'm just the other side of the door.' I also hope that the journeys might provide an opportunity to talk. They don't. After every session I ask her how things went. She replies with an unconvincing, not especially revealing, 'Fine.'

'Well, I hope you don't wear that expression the whole time you are there *supporting* her,' mumbled Jeff when Katherine was out of earshot. He lay a particular emphasis on the word 'supporting', implying that he seriously doubted I was at all.

'What expression?'

'The one where you pull your face into a tight, sad look. That's no sort of help – you're more likely to make her want to run away.'

I checked in the mirror, but I couldn't catch the particular expression he was talking about; there are a number of horrified and dismayed expressions to choose from. I made a mental note to smile more.

Anyway, today we are both accompanying her; Katherine has had nine weekly sessions now and this week we've been asked to attend a family conference and review. Jeff has advised me that, above all, it's important to appear balanced and reasonable. He drives. It's raining hard, the wipers swish left to right, squeaking and groaning. The traffic grinds practically to

a standstill, two lines of steel and tyres – one going north, one going south – snaking as far as I can see.

‘We’re going to be late,’ I mutter. I twist a damp tissue in my hands. If anyone hears me, they don’t bother to respond. The stop-start nature of the journey is frustrating; each jerk and halt frays my nerves further. I think about all the toxic fumes that are being belched out into the atmosphere; I wonder what the impact on our health really is. The creeping cars give me plenty of opportunity for voyeurism. It’s funny that drivers forget they are surrounded by windows. They grab their phones and make calls, reply to emails and texts, even though they shouldn’t. They greedily stuff sandwiches into their mouths, chew gum, pick their teeth, fingernails and noses. I see one middle-aged woman suck her thumb. We’re all in the same boat but act as though we are quite independent from each other. Likely as not, we are listening to the same songs and news stories on the radio, we are all desperate to unfurl, to stretch, we are all worried that we are going to be late. I wonder whether I’ve ever been sitting in a traffic jam next to Tom, Olivia and the others. Possibly even passed Annabel when she was alive. How many times have we unknowingly crossed one another in the street, in a car park, in a supermarket? We live in the same county. It’s possible we did so, when we existed in ignorant bliss. I wouldn’t have noticed them. They would have just been another family, going about their business as we went about ours.

I become aware of the scream of sirens coming from behind us. I wonder how the ambulance will get past. Slowly, like prehistoric animals, rather than machines capable of moving at 120 miles per hour, cars start to nudge towards the kerb. The truth is, someone else’s disaster is simply an inconvenience to the many who dwell in hermetically closed indifference.

‘By the way, you ought to know, I’ve told Betty about the swap,’ pipes up Katherine. I swing around in my seat to look at her, but she’s steadfastly staring out of the window, refusing to meet my eye. Jeff gently puts his hand on my knee and so I turn back to the front and concentrate on looking at the tail lights on other cars. They are blurred. It could be the rain on the windscreen, it could be my tears. I don’t know.

‘Fair enough,’ says Jeff calmly. ‘Thanks for bringing us up to date.’ He manages not to sound sarcastic. A thought occurs to me: he might not be being sarcastic.

We travel in a loaded silence. I can't bear it. We are in the system now. My acute fear of social workers, lawyers and people with forms who work for the local authorities crystallises. Jeff has been insistent that we must already somehow be in the system, since Tom made his original inquiries at the hospital where the girls were born, but Tom has assured me that he was discreet, evasive, that nothing official has been documented.

'It is bullshit coming to a counsellor anyway, but coming and then not talking about the issues is more so,' Katherine says defiantly. I don't doubt she's exploiting the fact that I'm in shock over her revelation and therefore haven't got the energy to remonstrate about her language. My restraint is rewarded by her altering her tone to a slightly more conciliatory one. 'To be fair, I wasn't actually planning on spilling the beans. I didn't for the first few sessions. I played along. But then, you know ...' She shrugs. The gesture says, 'Duh.'

'Know what?' asks Jeff gently.

'I answered all her questions on whether I understand that there is a choice in finding out about the harmful mutation in the BRCA1 gene or the BRCA2 gene. I just hate that particular combination of letters and numbers. They hide behind the technical names, make it sound like a food colouring rather than something hideous. Question after question. Do I want to know if I have it? How will I feel if I do have it? Do I think I'm ready to have that sort of information? I promise you, she never shuts up. You should know that.' Despite her show of bravado, I can hear in her voice that she's fighting tears. 'It's basically the same question, though, isn't it? How will I feel if I'm told I'm going to die sooner than anyone else and in a more painful way?' I gasp. Jeff looks pale and sweaty. Katherine doesn't notice, she's on a roll. Weeks of frustration are being vented; fear and desperation crash around the car's leather-and-walnut interior. 'I mean, what the hell? How does she *think* I'll feel? It's so morbid. I told her.'

'What did you tell her?' Jeff asks carefully.

'I told her that, the way I look at it, before I take the test I don't know anything for certain so, in effect, I *don't* have the gene, I'm *not* going to die. Once I take the test I limit the possibilities. There are just two outcomes. I might not have it. Whoop, whoop, great. Panic over. As you were. Or, I do have the gene. Then what? What?' I look at her through the car mirror. She's glaring at me now. Furious. I hold her gaze, although it's painful to do so. I can't help her. That's got to be the worst thing a parent ever has to deal

with: our ineffectuality, our limits. ‘Because we all know the craziest thing about all of this. If I do have the gene, they can’t do anything about it. Can they? What’s that supposed to mean? I’m just waiting to die, then, right? A horrible, slow death.’

Abruptly, I have some insight. She said the sessions were fine. I’ve asked her every week. I get the same answer. ‘Fine.’ I wanted to believe her.

‘She’s always asking, “How are things going at school?” “Do you have friends you can talk to?” “How do you feel?”’ Katherine is repeating the questions in an annoying, squeaky voice. I’m pretty sure Betty Lopez does not speak in this particular tone, but I get the point. “Do you feel isolated? Misunderstood?” “I realise it must be very difficult articulating your feelings about this situation.” And it was *that*. The smug understatement. The certainty that she’d seen it all before and – however tragic this situation with the mutated gene is for me – she has the power to help me through it because there is procedure and precedent. “Isolated”? “Misunderstood”? She realises it must be “very difficult”. I can hear the exasperation and incredulity in Katherine’s voice ringing out loud and clear like a church bell. ‘I’m standing on a volcano! She, like most adults, realises *nothing*. Knows *nothing*. And I wanted to point that out to her.’ Katherine’s breathing is fast, frenzied. ‘So I dropped the bombshell about the swap. It was just to get her to shut the fuck up. I’m sorry, Mum, I know you wanted to keep it a secret.’

‘Pull over, Jeff!’

‘I can’t, there isn’t a parking spot.’

‘We’re only going five miles per hour anyway. Just stop!’ I grab at the door and start to open it, so he does as I ask.

I jump out of the car, even though it’s dangerous to do so. I don’t care. I’m sick of following the rules. I fling open the back door and climb in next to Katherine. ‘You have nothing to be sorry about, do you hear me? Nothing.’ I hold her face in my hands. Stare into her eyes, drink her up. She falls into my arms and sobs. I hold her very tight as her tears run down my neck. The heat from her face burns into my skin. I hold her and stroke her hair. I kiss her head. I stand with her on the volcano.

But I don’t have any answers.

The waiting room is devoid of colour. It's like everything had to pass through a bleaching process before they let it in here. I suspect the look they were going for was tasteful, or at least inoffensive; they've achieved bland. Cream-coloured walls, cream chairs and cream tiles on the floor. Even the paintings are cream. I'm sure I'm almost invisible, as the colour drains from my cheeks the minute we walk through the door. I'm nervously tapping my foot and chewing my lip, an embodiment of anxiety. I remember Jeff's warning and force my mouth to turn upwards. I suspect I achieve a grimace rather than a grin. I notice he's wearing a tie. The last time he wore one was at his mother's funeral. His effort terrifies me.

The receptionist nods politely when we blurt out our excuses about the traffic and ushers us through to the consultation room as quickly as she can. Betty Lopez is not as understanding. She flicks a quick and unnecessary glance at the clock on the wall and then back again, at our red, blotchy faces.

'Do have a seat,' she instructs. Without making the smallest attempt at small talk or to establish any sort of rapport, she begins. 'So.' Betty holds open her arms expansively, invitingly, like a preacher. 'How are things?' I would have thought that Katherine's red eyes and slouch told her all she needed to know.

'Fine,' Katherine and I mutter.

At the same time as Jeff says, 'We're rather hoping you can tell us.'

Betty looks a bit exasperated by his comment but she manages to force out a polite smile.

'That's not exactly how counselling works. But I can tell you that Katherine and I have made great progress now she's put me in the picture on *all* the particulars surrounding this precise case.' She pauses and, like a fifties schoolteacher in a film, looks over her glasses at Jeff and me. I realise she's trying to reprimand us for misleading her and, in the past, I

might have been chastised. Now, I don't give a damn. We're doing the best we can. 'Naturally, the counselling has taken quite a different turn since I've come to fully understand the complexities. We've placed less emphasis on preparing for the mutated-gene test and more emphasis on dealing with Katherine's feelings about her new family.'

I can't stop myself making a strange sound, something between a huff and a protest. I fold my arms across my chest. Betty Lopez looks at me, not without sympathy, then turns to Katherine. She has a pencil and a notebook in her hand. So does Jeff. He always takes the notes at parents' night and such; I'm usually too giddy on praise to concentrate. Obviously, it's a very different vibe now. He says he wants to make notes about the answers to any questions he may have.

'So you are seeing the Trubys regularly now?'

'Quite regularly,' mumbles Katherine. She looks exhausted. Crying as hard as she did in the car must have leached all her energy.

'With or without your parents?' Betty points to Jeff and me. I don't really like the way she does that, as though Katherine might not know who she's referring to when she says 'parents', as though there might be some uncertainty. It sort of drives a wedge between us. She doesn't need to do that.

'Both.'

'Are they structured, timetabled visits?'

Katherine looks uncomfortable and fakes boredom, the default setting for teenagers who are embarrassed, hurt or confused. I jump in and answer for her. 'It's more that one meet-up sort of leads to the next, then another occurs. Now, there have been quite a few.'

'Let Katherine answer if you can, Alison.'

Katherine dutifully picks up the mantle. 'Tom arranges them mostly, and Mum no longer puts up any real resistance.'

'Were you resistant to Katherine bonding with her birth family?' Betty pops her pencil smartly in her mouth, indicating that she isn't going to interrupt me, she wants me to talk now.

'Well, a bit, at first. Hesitant, rather than resistant.'

'Cautious,' adds Jeff supportively. As we both want to come across as reasonable and balanced, revealing my initial reaction – wanting to run away with everything we could carry, emigrate overseas so that they'd never find us – might not achieve that.

‘As long as I’ve done my homework and there’s no lacrosse, she lets him drop by or I pop out. She likes to come along, though, when she can.’

‘Is that out of a sense of concern? Do you want to keep tabs on them?’ Again Betty fixes her beady eyes on me. I think I preferred it when she only wanted to talk to Katherine, after all.

‘No. I enjoy his company.’ I feel Jeff’s glance slide across the floor between us and then up to challenge me. I turn to him, confused. I thought I was supposed to appear reasonable.

‘And what do you do together?’

‘Often we take Mozart for a walk, or have a meal,’ Katherine says. She loves spending time with Mozart. I do regret not buying her a dog myself; it’s the only thing I’ve ever denied her, really. She has about a million photos of him in her phone; pictures of him slinking out of his basket, nuzzling her knees, running in the park, licking her hand. Besides pizza, we have eaten burgers, tacos and noodles together. I’m keeping track. Tom suggests something different every time. He’s fun. I know I am not fun. I’m polite and proper. Katherine says I always make far too much of an effort when he eats at ours; I put out napkins, decant the ketchup and, apparently, that’s overdoing it. We had a fight about the candelabra. I did remove it in the end. I know she liked the fact that the times we went to theirs, Tom just rooted around the fridge and sort of threw a meal together. Casually. Confidently. ‘We’ve played cards – you know, we just hang out,’ explains Katherine. ‘There has been talk of visiting a theme park as a big group but we haven’t set a date yet, and Mum suggested we all pop into London and have a walk along the South Bank, perhaps visit Tate Modern or the Globe, but Tom said it wasn’t Olivia’s thing. I imagine she vetoed the suggestion with one effective sneer.’

‘And how is your relationship with Olivia, Katherine?’ I’m beginning to understand why all Katherine ever says to me on the journey home is ‘fine’. This grilling is exhausting.

‘OK.’

‘Does Olivia join in the family excursions?’

‘Not really.’

Betty turns her focus on Jeff and me. ‘We probably ought to get you both some counselling, too. Do you two have a relationship with your birth daughter?’

‘We invite her to everything,’ I mutter defensively.

‘But she doesn’t join in,’ admits Jeff.

‘None of the kids do as much stuff with us as I had hoped,’ says Katherine carefully.

‘Go on.’

Katherine lets out a deep breath. ‘The meet-ups haven’t been exactly as I imagined.’ I force myself to keep my eyes to the front. Maybe she always talks this much in Betty’s sessions, or maybe her howling in the car has lowered her defences and she hasn’t the energy to hold up the barriers: either way, this is news to me. ‘The truth is, after the initial flurry of excitement – if that’s the right word; certainly, interest – I haven’t seen as much as I imagined I might have of my siblings. Most of the time, it’s now me and three parents.’ She doesn’t need to say it: the thought bubble above her head reads, ‘As if the undivided attention of two wasn’t enough!’ ‘Not that Dad always comes along. Turns out he really *is* allergic to dogs; I’d always thought that was just something Mum made up as an excuse for us not getting one. If Tom brings along Mozart, Dad tends to stay at home.’ Again, I feel Jeff’s eyes burn into me.

‘Well, Dad is at the library a lot. He’s writing,’ I add.

Betty ignores my interruption and continues to direct her questions to Katherine. ‘And your siblings?’

‘I’ve seen Amy five times in total, Callum and Olivia three each.’ She’s keeping count?

‘Why don’t the other children come along more regularly?’

‘Tom is always offering up excuses for them, and they all make total sense, but I had kind of been looking forward to seeing them a lot.’

‘Well, I suppose we ought to be grateful that Tom’s carving time out especially for you,’ I say. ‘He’s a single parent with three children. It’s quite an ask.’

‘Not that I did ask for any of this,’ mumbles Katherine.

‘Well, no.’

Not sidetracked by my teen’s clever comebacks, Betty asks, ‘What sort of excuses do they make?’

‘Well, Callum has a girlfriend and she seems to keep him pretty occupied, plus, he has to train hard for his ice-hockey club, which I totally get. Olivia doesn’t have a sport, but we all know she has a boyfriend, not that she’s introduced him officially. Tom and I laugh about that. I think he thinks it’s a bit immature of her to try to keep her boyfriend a secret, but

he's not pushing it, he's allowing her to do things in her own time. He respects his kids that way.' She doesn't have to add that I would not be so cool. Neither of us can imagine me allowing her to hang out with some boy I hadn't vetted.

'Would you like to be closer to Olivia?' Katherine tilts her head to one side: possibly a yes; maybe a no. A teen gesture that's refusing to commit. When they are together I've noticed that Katherine and Olivia steal sneaky glances at one another. Something a bit like hostility. Certainly, curiosity. Studying each other as you might study an insect under a microscope. I guess they are trying to work one another out. They don't talk to each other, because what is there to say? Olivia has lived Katherine's life and Katherine's lived hers. Pardon the parlance, but it's totally fucked up. Who has cheated whom?

'Amy spends a lot of time in London with her grandfather. Not Tom's dad. Sadly, his parents live in Spain.'

'Sadly, because you'd like to get to know them?' asks Betty.

'Maybe. More that I really feel for him. He's very alone. It's quite tragic.' I'm deeply impressed with my daughter's compassion. Even with all she has on her plate, she manages to see things from others' points of view. 'We saw a bit more of Amy to start with, and that was nice but this last couple of weeks she hasn't been around.' It's a shame, but totally understandable. Little children like spending time with their old relatives. I was very close to my grandmother and, naturally, Tom needs help with childcare now and again.

'Do these grandparents know about the swap?' My resentment that Betty Lopez is clambering all over our business shifts a little. It's a good question, not one I've thought to ask myself. Katherine turns pink. The shade and spot of the blush (very high up on her cheekbones) and the way she purses her lips ever so slightly shows she's defensive and hurt.

'The last time I saw Amy was when she came to our house, a couple of weeks ago. I'd sorted out some of my old toys for her to play with. While we were playing Connect 4 I quizzed her about whether they know about me. I guess I could have asked Tom, but it just sort of cropped up when I was with Amy. I mean, I'd been wondering if the London grandpa might, at some point, want to meet me.' She's talking to the floor.

'Do you want to tell me more about that?'

‘I pretended to concentrate really hard on the game, although I knew I could have already won if I wanted – there were three yellow discs in a diagonal line just waiting for me to pop in the fourth. I was letting her win, even though Mum says that does no one any favours in the long run.’

‘What did Amy say?’

Katherine pauses. ‘She looked nervous, as though she knew I’d be upset. She said, and I quote, “Daddy told us not to talk about you.”’

‘Did you ask why?’

‘Yes, she said it was to do with the fact I might get ill. Apparently, Tom thinks it’s unfair to introduce me to everyone if I’m going to just die.’

‘No, Katherine. I can’t believe Tom said that,’ I leap in.

‘Maybe not in so many words. Amy talked about me “getting really sick. Like Mummy did.”’ Katherine is trying to appear unperturbed, brave. I can tell by the way she’s holding her head – neck a little elongated, like a doomed queen going to the execution block – that she’s scared, disappointed. ‘Look, I get it. I understand. That’s why Tom is keeping everyone at arm’s length from me. He doesn’t want his family going through another loss. I’m not simply a surprise sister, I’m a ticking bomb.’

Jeff coughs. He writes something down in his notebook.

‘Oh, Katherine.’ I reach for her hand but she shakes me off.

‘I think it’s time I took the test.’ I hear her words but can’t take them in. ‘I need to know. We all do.’

There’s some paperwork to complete. I am shaking like a leaf and only just manage to sign on the dotted line.

‘This is a big step. I’m certain Tom wouldn’t want you to rush into having the test,’ I mumble to Katherine.

‘I know, but it’s not his decision, it’s mine. I need some clarity.’

Betty Lopez takes Jeff and me to one side. She explains that someone will call to make an appointment in the next day or so.

‘So soon?’

‘Well, that’s what you’re paying for,’ she beams, not understanding that I’d pay a king’s ransom for Katherine never to have to have this test, for there to be no need of it. I’d sell everything we own. I’d sell my soul.

‘It’s a straightforward blood test. However, I strongly recommend that we continue with our sessions while we wait for the results, and perhaps for a great deal longer. I think we made some marvellous progress here today.’ If by ‘marvellous progress’ she means I’ve listened to my daughter’s

heartbreak, then yes, I can agree. ‘There are clearly issues surrounding her desire for a relationship with her siblings that need more attention.’

Jeff nods but doesn’t say anything. He hasn’t said much throughout. I wish he would, although it’s unreasonable of me to hope he has the words when I haven’t. I suppose it’s that I always think he’s hardier than I am, more finished and competent.

‘I also think it might be worthwhile if you both made appointments with my colleague. You also need someone to talk to.’

‘We have each other,’ I say, but Jeff takes the card. ‘Why do we need to meet with a colleague, rather than you?’ I demand.

‘There would be a conflict of interests if I became your counsellor while counselling Katherine.’

‘But we’re on the same side.’

She throws out another polite, professional smile and the receptionist asks if we’d like to pay now.

As Jeff hands over his debit card, I turn to Katherine. ‘Would you like to go to that American diner in town? The one that does the curly fries. We could get a knickerbocker glory.’

She looks at me pityingly. I know. It’s not like ice cream can still solve everything, but what else can I offer?

‘It’s OK, Mum, we should get back. I have some homework to do,’ she says, and heads for the door.

When we get home Jeff offers to make supper but, as Katherine dumps her bag and jacket on the kitchen counter, she says she's too hungry to wait. She starts to put together a chicken sandwich and gently but firmly pushes me aside when I attempt to help. I know I shouldn't try to do everything for her, that it is annoying, but I can't help myself. 'She's not an invalid,' says Jeff, which I think is pretty tactless of him, because it only highlights the fact that maybe she will be and, besides, while he's trying to pretend to be jovial, I can hear the bite in his voice. I'm frustrating him. He's frustrating me. Touché. Katherine grabs an apple and a packet of crisps, too, then runs upstairs to eat alone in her room. Undoubtedly, she thinks she's done enough talking for the day.

As I open the fridge and pull out a chilled bottle of Chardonnay, Jeff comments, 'Well, that was intense.' I pour myself a big glass; Jeff looks aggrieved and only then do I think to go back to the cupboard and get out a second glass to pour him one, too. I'm not normally a selfish person – my overwhelming desire to follow etiquette is usually enough for me to think to offer – but nothing is normal at the moment. Over these past few months I've barely had room to think about Jeff. He must understand this, as he accepts the belated glass with an appreciative nod.

'Do you think she's ready to take the test? It seems that the counselling has been all about the swap. Is she prepared?'

'We have to trust her. If she says she's ready, then she's ready,' insists Jeff. I stare at him but don't know how to say that *I'm* not ready. 'Do you want anything to eat?'

'I'm not hungry,' I reply curtly.

'You should eat.' I walk through to the sitting room, my glass of wine in one hand, the bottle in the other. I can hear Jeff start to open cupboards, checking the contents of the fridge; he's clearly intent on preparing supper. The telephone rings. I leap up, thinking it's probably Tom; no one else ever

uses the landline. He sometimes rings after Katherine's counselling sessions, although there's usually nothing to report. I thought I'd mind but I've found I don't. I like to hear his voice, his concern. Maybe he feels the same about my voice because often a quick enquiry turns into a lengthy chat. Before I know it, I'm walking around the house with the handset tucked between my shoulder and ear. I put away the ironing and unstack the dishwasher while we discuss where we might eat next time we meet up, and I pair socks while we talk about whether he'll pick Katherine up or whether I should drop her off. It's a bit peculiar: he is the last person on earth I thought I'd ever consider a friend; when he first dropped this chaos on our doorstep I saw him as the enemy. I needed someone to be angry at. Now, my anger, my fear, is more focused on the situation rather than on an individual. Our conversations have revealed a man struggling with his own sadness.

Tonight Jeff is faster than I am. He dashes to snatch up the phone. I strain to listen to his voice floating from the hall. It's just someone trying to sell insurance. We are fully insured: the house, house contents, the car, bikes, jewellery, golf clubs, glasses – still, you can't insure against this. Health insurance doesn't actually protect.

I sit in stricken silence until an hour later when Jeff calls me to come and eat. He sets down a plate of fish stew and rice. It's doused in fresh herbs and he's decorated the plate with slivers of transparently thin lime and lemon slices; he's made quite an effort. I force myself to pick up a fork.

'What will we do if she has the mutated gene?' I ask.

Jeff advises, 'Don't project. Don't leap ahead, Alison.'

I concentrate on the food. One mouthful, then the next. A spin on the metaphorical 'one foot in front of another'. 'One day at a time.' I've found this approach to be the very opposite to what it is supposed to be. Rather than reassuring, it's daunting. I feel reduced and without control. In an effort not to be overwhelmed by despair, I comment, 'The fish is good.'

'Thank you. Not too bland?'

It is, but why would I say such a thing? 'It's lovely.' He looks pleased and lifts another hefty forkful to his mouth, as though I've given him permission to relish his meal to the full. With equal vim, he takes a big slurp of wine and then tears at the wholemeal loaf and starts to mop up the fish stock. I begin to wonder whether he heard his daughter sob in the back

of the car, whether he actually attended the counselling session with me today, heard her demand the gene test.

‘I don’t believe Tom is holding Katherine at arm’s length from his children because he’s concerned about any future heartbreak that might occur if, you know—’ I can’t bring myself to say the words. ‘I think Amy must have misunderstood him.’

‘Well, it is true that he hasn’t offered to introduce Katherine to her biological grandparents,’ says Jeff.

‘No, but then nor have we offered as much to Olivia. He probably just wants to take things slowly for Katherine’s sake too. It makes no sense to rush into this test.’

‘Well, it doesn’t make *much* sense. It’s certainly a teenager’s way of looking at things.’

‘If the worst came to the worst, I think Tom would want his children to support her. That was what you used to say, too. That was your argument for letting them into our lives in the first place.’

Jeff shakes his head regretfully. ‘I don’t know for certain. Who knows what lengths anyone might go to in order to protect their children? Maybe he does think they’ve been through enough. Whatever his motivation, no doubt he thinks he’s doing the right thing.’ Jeff sounds as though he very much doubts that Tom *is* doing the right thing. He pauses and then adds, ‘I mean, it would be an explanation. He’s always making excuses as to why they can’t make the meet-ups. Turning up here on his own like a lost puppy.’

I can’t ignore the dig. Sometimes Jeff isn’t as sympathetic to Tom as I think he ought to be; he says it doesn’t matter anyway because I am sympathetic enough for the two of us. It’s not a sentiment that’s delivered as a compliment. He says Tom isn’t our concern; if we are to have a relationship with a Truby, it ought to be Olivia. But it’s not as cut and dried as that. Like Katherine, he wishes that more opportunities presented themselves for a relationship to blossom. The Trubys came into our lives uninvited but now we’ve been left in the difficult and embarrassing position that at least two thirds of our family want them more than three quarters of their family want us. It’s a question of mathematics. Their reluctance has placed Katherine in a similar position to the rejected partner who desperately drunk-texts an ex.

‘The excuses he makes are nothing to do with whether Katherine might get ill,’ I reiterate firmly. ‘The truth is, the children aren’t interested in us. They don’t want to be involved with us.’

‘How do you know?’

‘He told me.’

‘When?’

‘Just after Bonfire Night. The kids were all at the display, they just didn’t want to be there with us.’

Jeff looks wounded. ‘You never said.’

‘No.’ I haven’t mentioned the lunch Tom and I shared to Jeff. I meant to, but that night he locked himself in his office, writing, writing. I suppose he deserves to know that Tom thinks Annabel swapped the babies, how it occurred, but he’s never asked. So I didn’t get round to telling him. I did at least tell him that Callum and Amy have taken the test and are not carriers. He nodded, looked relieved. We’re not doing much talking recently. I don’t know a way of explaining all that now, so I stay on track. ‘The endless excuses Tom invents to explain the children’s whereabouts are to protect Katherine’s feelings, not to push her into taking the test.’

‘Even Amy?’

‘Even Amy what?’

‘Even Amy is uninterested in having a relationship with Katherine? I find that hard to believe.’

‘I don’t know about Amy specifically. She probably just goes along with what her older siblings say. I tell you, he’s just trying to protect Katherine’s feelings.’

Irritation corrodes Jeff’s face. ‘Well, his lies haven’t helped, have they?’

‘Not lies. Excuses.’

‘Since when have you accepted the distinction?’

I don’t reply, because I’m not sure of the answer. Around the time we told Katherine we needed to take a swab of her cheek cells because we were going to appear on a TV show, I suppose.

Jeff continues, ‘Our darling girl. I imagine she’s hoping that the best-case scenario is that not only will she get a clean bill of health but unfettered access to her new brother and sisters.’

I put down my knife and fork. My heart slows. My poor baby. Has she thought of the worst-case scenario?

‘I wish we’d had more children,’ I mumble. Jeff doesn’t comment. It’s not a new lament. It hasn’t been aired for about nine years, but it used to be a regular chant. No matter how many times either of us wished it, it didn’t happen. One of those medical mysteries. I conceived within five months of trying for Katherine but was never so lucky again. Jeff continues to eat his supper but I think I detect a slight lessening in his enthusiasm for it. I feel for him. We’ve both cooked a number of meals recently that have gone uneaten or been consumed with a distinct lack of appreciation.

‘She’d choose us, right?’ I ask. He doesn’t reply. Perhaps he’s thinking about all the rowing and snarling that has gone on recently. We have done our best to behave reasonably in front of Katherine but sometimes our exasperation – our terror – bubbles over. We spit out words that blister and scald. We seem to take it in turns to wind each other up. It’s the stress. It’s hard to remember, to believe, that before all this we were yin and yang to each other. Perhaps he’s thinking that she seems much happier, more relaxed, when she’s with Tom. And she does; Tom never asks more from her than whether she’ll walk Mozart. We’re her parents, so we are the ones who have to nag her about tidying her room, putting her clothes in the wash basket, packing her school bag, attending training, giving a lacrosse game all her focus, eating sensibly, dressing suitably, the dangers of drugs and alcohol. The list of tedious rules is endless. *I bore me.*

‘There’s no question of anyone choosing anything,’ he declares.

‘But if it went to court?’ I ask fearfully.

‘Why are you doing this to yourself? It’s not going to court. No one has suggested such a thing.’

‘But if it did?’

Jeff puts down his utensils too now and sighs. ‘Well, if it did, we’d have a far better chance. Mother and father. As pitiful as it is, no court is going to think a teenage girl should be moved into a home where the father is widowed. Besides, I don’t want to be crass about it, but we have a far better standard of living. She doesn’t want for anything.’

‘Except siblings.’ I don’t know why I insist on playing devil’s advocate and explicitly articulating the worst-case scenarios; I suppose so Jeff can reassure me that they will never happen. Only he doesn’t reassure me. His words, as sensible and reasonable as they are, don’t seem to tackle the essence of the problem.

She might just prefer them.

And then my world would end.

‘The siblings aren’t necessarily an advantage; they might very well be a problem. Especially since, according to you, none of them is keen to have a relationship with her anyway. No one can expect just to slot a fifteen-year-old girl into a family and not imagine there’d be some issues. Besides, the siblings are grieving. They have enough problems of their own.’

‘We’re not married.’ I throw down the gauntlet.

Jeff is dismissive. ‘Tom Truby doesn’t know that.’ Then he sees something in my face. ‘You didn’t tell him.’ He is suddenly irritated. ‘Bloody hell, Alison! Tell me it’s not so.’

‘If it went to court, if there were lawyers, they’d have found out anyway,’ I mumble defensively.

‘Except that if Tom had thought they had a hopeless case, it would have been less likely that he’d ever think of going to court. Now he knows we’re not married, we’re at a disadvantage. He might want to pursue it.’

I’m surprised Jeff is so dismayed. I can’t explain to Jeff that the conversation only came up because I was trying to impress Tom. How mortifying! How foolish! ‘You’ve always maintained that not being married is no disadvantage at all. You’ve always said that it’s romantic that we choose each other every day.’

‘Well, yes, that’s my view, but it might not be the view of some starchy family-law judge. Who knows?’

‘You said this would never go to court!’ He’s come full circle: he’s now arguing that the very thing he suggested was preposterous is possible. It seems I’m not the only one losing my ability to be logical.

‘And you say it might,’ he says coolly. ‘I suppose it comes down to what Tom wants.’

‘Why do you say that?’

Petulance mixes with fury: a toxic cocktail. ‘Tom has a way about him. He always seems to get what he wants. You wanted nothing to do with him; now he’s your best friend. Katherine wanted nothing to do with him; now she wants to spend every spare minute with him.’

‘His wife died – how can you say he always gets what he wants?’

‘I know, and that’s terrifically sad, but at least his kids definitely do not have the defective gene.’

‘*She* might!’

Jeff stares at me, uncomprehending, then stung. It takes me a moment to understand what I've said. He meant Callum, Olivia and Amy. Of course he did. They are Tom's children. I want to swallow back the words, but I can't. I can't think of any defence beyond: 'I trust Tom.'

Jeff's ferocity dissipates. He has the look of a deflated balloon well after the party is over. 'We can't take the risk. We should get married.'

We've known one another twenty-two years, been a couple for eighteen of those. I have imagined his proposal countless times. When I was much younger I thought he might propose after one of our lusty love-making sessions. We'd be naked and wrapped in one another's arms; he'd murmur the suggestion into my ear. Or maybe he'd propose during one of our many indulgent weekend breaks or exotic holidays. I thought it might be romantic as defined by big-budget Hollywood romcoms: nothing less than endless tickertape celebrations and soft-focus moments. When he didn't propose at the top of the Eiffel Tower I told myself the crowds would have been distracting. The absence of the down-on-one-knee gesture in Venice was a relief; I mean, it's so hectic there, with pigeon poop everywhere. When we visited Barbados, just after I found out I was pregnant, I did briefly imagine that our peaceful dawdles along the sandy beaches might present an opportunity. They didn't. Over the years, my romantic aspirations have dwindled. I've told myself that he isn't the type to succumb to all that mediaimposed nonsense. Writers resist cliché and convention. It didn't have to be somewhere exotic. It just had to be heartfelt and meaningful. I would be just as happy if he asked me while I was doing the washing-up. Sincerity was all that counted. I imagined the proposal in many ways.

I didn't imagine it would come like this.

'Tom won't use it against us. He's not like that. He doesn't want to hurt us.'

'You've changed your tune.'

He storms out of the kitchen, letting the door bang behind him. It isn't until after I've poured myself another glass of wine, cleared the pots, stacked the dishwasher and wiped all the surfaces that I realise I didn't answer him. I didn't accept his proposal.

I love Fridays when there are away games timetabled for the afternoon across the school, because parents can collect their daughters from school to take them there at two o'clock. Some parents can't manage this and their daughters travel to the games by minibus. Katherine has mentioned that she'd love to go on the minibus because the team sings songs and fools about. I understand the attraction but, even so, I usually pick her up. I'm not certain that all the minibuses have safety belts and, besides, we get to spend a bit more time together. The truth is, at the moment I'm reluctant to let her out of my sight. If I could, I'd go to school with her. I almost feel as though I want to swallow her whole; literally consume her. Jeff keeps saying I have to loosen my grip. He says the way I'm behaving is depressing. 'It's as though you're admitting she might not be around for the duration, that you're trying to make the most of her,' he scowls. Well, yes.

I swap the odd word with one or two of the mums who have been able to pick up their daughters early. We talk about the upcoming Christmas fair and the carol concert. There's some confusion as to what we have to donate for the former and when we can buy tickets for the latter. I'm able to help because I have a digital copy of last week's newsletter on my phone; I always download it for just this sort of emergency. As we chat, we all keep one eye on the tide of girls flowing from the main door, waiting to spot our own. There's the usual noise of feverish final gossip and chat: it's as though they haven't had time to talk to each other all day, which I know isn't true; sometimes it seems like that's all they do at school. I see Katherine walking with her friend Maddie Goodwin; they start to scan the pick-up point and sideroads for Maddie's mum, who never gets out of the car to greet her daughter. This isn't neglect: Maddie forbade her to do so in Year 8. In truth, I might be the only Year 11 mother who regularly appears at the gate. Mrs Goodwin drives a great big silver Range Rover, so you'd think she'd be

easy enough to locate, but then practically every mum seems to have the need for an off-road vehicle in this busy urban town, so it's not.

I notice Tom leaning against the fixtures board, where a lot of parents mill about. He stands out: not only is he tall but he's male, and not many dads do the pick-up from this school. He doesn't look particularly comfortable and I notice he hasn't shaved. It's shallow of me, but I wish he had. The parents at Wittington High tend to be a clean-cut bunch. I've been extremely nervous about him meeting us here. I'd have much preferred it if he could have met us at the match; there are so many people on the sidelines we might not have been as conspicuous. To be absolutely frank, I'm not even sure I want him at the game at all. It's bound to lead to lots of questions. However, he has said on two or three occasions how much he'd love to see Katherine play lacrosse, the last of which was in front of her. She seemed reasonably responsive; she said, 'I think you'll be bored,' which, as Tom pointed out, from a teenager is virtually a gold-edged invitation. I didn't know how to dismiss the suggestion without appearing rude.

We make eye contact and he nods at me, throws out a small wave. It's a discreet gesture; that's very thoughtful of him. I ruin it by waving back anxiously, which catches his, Katherine's and everyone else's attention. I'm panicky.

'Who is that?' asks Zoë Rutter, standing on tiptoes to get a better look above the swarm of heads and boater hats. Even when he's unkempt, Tom's good looks are the sort to cause a stir.

'That's my uncle – I mean, Katherine's uncle,' I mumble as I start to head his way.

'Lovely,' she says, with outright appreciation. She nods, smiles and turns away, accepting my word. The thing about being known for the sort of scrupulous honesty that makes me no fun at a pub quiz is that it means I'm never going to fall under suspicion when I do tell a lie.

'Hey!' He kisses me on both cheeks in greeting. I glance about to see if anyone is taking undue interest. He picks up on my nervy behaviour. 'Are you OK with this?' I nod. It's too late to change anything. Katherine wanders up to us. He has teenagers, so he knows better than to make any attempt at greeting her beyond a smile and a nod in front of her friends.

He doesn't ask about her day but says, 'Your mum told me you took the test.' While I'm sure anyone eavesdropping will assume he means Grade 7

cello or some module or other of one of her GCSEs, Katherine understands immediately. For us, there's only one test now.

'Yeah, I did.'

'You are a brave girl.' He smiles and his eyes crinkle up. He must have been devastatingly handsome when he was young. Irresistible. It's pretty clear that a number of the mums, nannies and au pairs think he's really quite something as he is now; they are tripping over their tongues. Small girls are earnestly trying to tell their mothers about their part in the nativity play or how they answered a geography question, but they are being ignored. Katherine notices. She glares at Tom's admirers, rolls her eyes, folds her arms across her chest, no doubt despairing that they find this man attractive. In her opinion he's too old to be noticed; the mums are too old to be noticing. She probably thinks it's all a bit pathetic.

'She was amazing,' I confirm. All I can think of is her quietly determined face smiling at the doctor in the clinic, assuring him, and anyone who'd listen, that she wasn't in the slightest bit afraid.

'Are you OK with me taking it?' she asks Tom thoughtfully.

'Absolutely.' He actually looks rather stressed, maybe a bit tired – none of us is looking forward to the result – but he rallies. 'You must know that I support any decision you make. You're a really sensible girl, Katherine. Even though we've only known each other for—' He looks to the sky, obviously doing the maths.

'Eleven weeks,' I offer.

He grins. 'Eleven weeks – I knew from the onset that you were level-headed, wise.' Katherine has received this particular compliment a million times over. We're always telling her as much, and so are her teachers; her friends' parents often agree to their child attending an excursion only if Katherine is going along. I'd have thought she'd be bored of being called sensible, but she beams at him. He beams back at her. Mirror images.

I notice that the minibus is already pulling away. 'So, shall we get going? We don't want to be late.'

Tom slaps his hands together. 'Can't wait.'

'Do you know where you are going? Elseward Grammar.'

'In Chitterfield, just up the A307? I have to turn left just after the little playpark; if I get as far as the new Waitrose I've gone too far, right?'

'Yes.' I'm impressed he has made the effort to look it up. Whenever Jeff has to attend a school function or a game, or on the rare occasion he has to

pick Katherine up from a friend's, he dashes out the house, yelling at me to text him the postcode. He entirely depends on satnav to find anywhere. There's something quite appealing about a man checking a map and then simply driving to his destination with confidence. That said, Katherine loves it when Jeff changes the programming on the satnav and we're given directions by the voice of Homer Simpson.

'I know it. It's not that far from Amy's school.'

'OK. We'll see you there.' I stoop to pick up Katherine's rucksack. She always has so many heavy bags; it's all the textbooks they have to carry. I worry she's going to damage her back. In a flash, Tom swoops up both the rucksack and her kitbag and effortlessly throws both over his shoulder.

'Aren't we all travelling together? There doesn't seem any sense in taking two cars. It would be nice to chat on the way. I'll drive.' I glance at Katherine. She shrugs. We've been in Tom's car before on a number of occasions. It's a terrible mess. It's full of loose CDs and empty cases and the two things never seem to tally. There are sweet papers and empty Red Bull cans on the floor. It's nothing like my immaculate car, which smells of pine air fresheners and is valeted inside and out once a month.

'Erm, fine. That's very good of you.' I really wish I could learn to say the word 'no'.

As we walk to the car Katherine tells us that they expect to win this game. Elseward Grammar are well below Wittington High in the league 'They're pretty lame and, besides, we're really on form at the moment.' I know it's probably because she's simply excited about Tom coming to spectate but she sounds a bit too confident.

'Pride comes before a fall,' I warn. She glares at me and I kick myself. Why couldn't I have kept that thought in my head?

Tom tries to come to the rescue by changing the subject. 'How are we going to introduce me on the sidelines?'

'As Tom Truby,' I say. Both Katherine and Tom throw me a despairing look. It's obvious I'm trying to avoid the issue. I acquiesce. 'Well, we should stick to the story that you are Katherine's uncle,' I mutter.

'Fine.' Tom smiles, willing to accommodate me. 'Am I your brother or Jeff's?'

I think of my own brothers, hard-faced and cold; respectively, grasping, irresponsible and spoilt. 'You could never be my brother,' I assert firmly.

Tom's smile broadens. 'I'll be Jeff's, then. Is that all right by you, Katherine?'

'Actually, I think it's unnecessary. I don't feel like Mum does. I don't have a great desire to keep our peculiar situation under wraps.' I stare at Katherine, surprised. This is news to me. 'I reckon if I told the girls about it I'd be such hot news. It would be all over Instagram and the whole world would be snapchatting about me in a heartbeat.'

'My biggest fear.'

'But Mum, what's the worst that can happen? So what if our situation was leaked to the press? That would be a result.'

'You'd be interviewed in the paper, everyone would be clamouring to be your bestie,' chips in Tom.

'I might even get to go on breakfast TV or *The Wright Stuff*. You would be good on breakfast TV, Tom.'

'Yeah, I could sit on the sofa effortlessly, almost inadvertently, flirting with the female presenter.'

I stare at him, shocked.

'I've actually considered anonymously calling a tabloid to spill our story,' says Katherine.

'What?' I'm aghast. I stand stone still and stare at the pair of them. 'Seriously?'

'No, not seriously, Mum.' Katherine links her arm through mine and laughs. 'We're teasing you. Hashtag chill.'

Tom is walking on the other side of me; he casually flings his arm around my shoulder. 'We wouldn't do that to you. We know it would crush you. You're so intensely private. Katherine wouldn't ever want to do anything that would upset you. I mean, even if you two have your ups and downs, she loves you to bits.' Katherine squeezes my arm, affirming what she won't say herself nowadays.

I'm touched that he's noticed, that he cares enough to let me know he sees it's the case. I wonder what we look like to other people, walking down the street huddled together, all of us smiling now. A unit. A family? I'm thinking about that as Tom unlocks the car; he opens the door for me as Katherine checks her Instagram feed and scrambles into the back. 'You *are* adorable and, with your funny, worrying ways, so very easy to wind up. We all love you.' He's laughing as he says it and so I don't know. I can't quite be sure. An affable comment. Or? Something more?

I have to move an out-of-date newspaper and a tatty old copy of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* before I can sit down. I hand them to Katherine to put on the seat next to her. She doesn't appear to have heard his comment. It's not surprising; like all teenagers, she assumes that most of what adults say is a bit dull. 'Oh, I'm studying *Brighton Rock* for my GCSE,' she comments.

'Do you like it?' Tom asks.

'Well, yeah. A book with gang murders, suicide pacts and a sociopath who thinks killing someone or marrying them are about equal – what's not to love?' She stares out of the window. I happen to know she recently wrote a very good essay likening the book to a morality play, a clash between two characters equally obsessed with good and evil, but I get it: showing that much enthusiasm for literature is hardly cool. 'It's made me want to go to Brighton, though. I haven't been for ages. We used to go when I was younger, didn't we, Mum?'

'Yes, we did.'

'We always had a brilliant time. It was forever hot and totally heaving. I remember being thrilled by how much plastic and sugar was available.' I remember the strings of cheap, beaded necklaces, the snow globes, the lettered rock and the bubblegum machines that lined the pavements; stuff which I pronounced tat and Jeff called fun. 'I think there's an old photo of me somewhere, wearing a naff kiss-me-quick hat. Isn't there, Mum?'

Yes, there is. She's grinning, too young to be shy or to think to pretend she's only enjoying wearing it with a sophisticated sense of irony. She's simply wearing a hat that demands her parents hug and kiss her. I'm in the photo, too. I don't even look disapproving; my expression is the one every mother wears when she's irresistibly charmed.

'I'd like to see that, some day,' says Tom.

'I think I remember eating Nutella-filled crêpes,' she muses. 'We haven't been to Brighton for ages.' I cross my fingers and hope she doesn't mention why. It's quite possible I was the one who insisted we stopped visiting and instead went to West Wittering if we wanted to be by the seaside, by the sea. West Wittering is not a destination point for riotous hen nights where the bride opts to wear an inflatable penis on her head. I'm just saying.

She does change the subject but, as it happens, I'm no more comfortable with her next topic. 'Will you be picking up Amy at three fifteen?' she asks Tom.

Tom coughs. 'Well, I wasn't planning on it.'

'You could bring her here to catch the second half. I bet she'll enjoy the match tea. Elseward always serve delicious brownies.'

'She's got a ballet class today.'

Disappointment radiates off Katherine. 'So you'll have to take her to that? How will we get home?'

'Oh, don't worry. We can get a lift back to the school off Maddie's mum,' I chip in. 'I'm certain she won't mind.'

'That won't be necessary,' Tom says. 'I do a lift share with one of the mothers for ballet class so I don't have to get back for three fifteen. I don't need to be home until five.' Tom looks strained. Katherine doesn't bother to ask about Olivia or Callum; she knows they get themselves to and from school. We're sitting at a red light and he takes the opportunity to turn to try to look directly at her. Clearly unimpressed, she stares out of the window, apparently fascinated by the Christmas decorations hanging from the street lamps.

'I think it's rather lovely that when Tom isn't playing chauffeur to any of his three he opts to spend time with you,' I say in a sing-song voice that falls on deaf ears. We finish the journey in a difficult silence. Exactly like a family.

The minute we arrive at Elseward Grammar Katherine dashes off towards the changing rooms. I find Tom and I a spot to stand on the sidelines. I pick a place where we are some distance from the other Wittington High supporters because, if I can minimise tricky questions, I will. Tom looks downcast. ‘What did I say wrong?’ he asks.

‘It’s because you haven’t brought Amy along.’

‘She’s at ballet,’ he groans.

‘I know, but—’

‘What?’

I don’t see any point in lying. ‘Well, Katherine thinks you are keeping the kids at arm’s length because you are concerned about her health.’ He looks confused. ‘You know, if the worst comes to the worst.’ I stutter out the words; they actually hurt me physically, but better that than me becoming used to saying it. ‘She thinks you’re trying to avoid putting them through any more trauma.’ Tom doesn’t look sad, as I expected; he looks angry. I guess he has enough to be fuming about: the cards he’s been dealt have not been fair.

‘What put that idea in her head?’ he demands.

I don’t want to get Amy into trouble, so I shrug. ‘Oh, you know, teens. They come up with the strangest thoughts.’

He joins the dots. ‘So that’s why she decided to take the test all of a sudden.’ I nod. He runs his hands through his hair, grasps it. Practically yanks it. ‘She must be terrified. Totally fucking terrified.’ I glance about, mentally urging him to keep his voice down.

‘Well, yes. I mean, less than three months ago, everything was pretty straightforward. The most she had to worry about was how to bat back a few choice jibes from Dolly Bridges. Now I think she spends all her time thinking, *What if? What if?* Imagining the worst.’ I shrug. I’m not telling him anything he doesn’t know.

The teams file on to the field and the game gets off to a fast start. Katherine plays competently but not with her usual flair. She's normally so adroit at catching, carrying and passing the little, yellow, solid rubber ball. It used to be one of my greatest pleasures, watching her run around the field. Now I find the experience profoundly perplexing; she's so swift and strong and vital; tanned, toned, streamlined. How can her body betray her, if not now then sometime in the future? It's wrong.

It doesn't seem to matter to Tom that she's not on top form, as he appears to be unable to concentrate on the game; instead, he paces up and down the sidelines. I know he might not be entirely familiar with all the rules, but when he looks up just in time to see the opposition score he lets out an almighty celebratory whoop. The Wittington High mothers scowl at him. No matter how attractive he is, that sort of behaviour is unforgivable; polite applause is the most that can be tolerated in terms of acknowledging the opposition's good play. He seems to be distracted by the occasional excited screeches and laughter of the small children in the nearby playground. He keeps glancing in that direction. The park is all the way across the school grounds, but I can just about make out some kids playing on the swings and dashing around the strange, bouncy animals on fat coils. Their mothers stand by. No doubt some are attentive; others are deep in conversation with their friends. I'm too far away to see but I know how the tableau looks. It's a very ordinary afternoon: there's a blank, colourless sky, the damp pavements are pocked with puddles from an earlier shower. Yet it's not ordinary for us. Nothing is any more.

'Did she ever play there?' he asks.

'Katherine? No, not at that playpark, it's too far from our house.' What can he be thinking? Actually, I wasn't all that keen on public playparks. They made me nervous; Katherine could so easily have been knocked over by some other, bigger kid, maybe have fallen under a spinning top, or she could have been snatched. Playparks have to be Paedophile Central, surely. We had a garden that was big enough to accommodate a trampoline, a swing and a playhouse, so Katherine invariably had friends around to ours.

'Amy likes to play there sometimes.'

'Of course. It must be convenient.'

'Well, at least she used to. Before.' Everything is divided into before or after for him. 'We don't go there now. I miss it.'

‘They grow up so quickly,’ I comment. He nods sadly. I’ve seen pictures of Tom before Annabel died; there are a couple of family photos dotted about his house. In those photos he looks like a man who has just heard a joke or is just about to tell one. Now, even when he’s laughing, he’s a sad man. I wish I could change that.

He shakes his head and mumbles, ‘I had so many plans, and now everything is impossible.’ I wish I could just forget the mothers on the sidelines and wrap my arms around this man who is grieving for his wife. But I can’t. I’m not that woman. I’m not that brave.

The moment the whistle goes at half-time, Tom strides on to the pitch, heading towards Katherine’s team, all of whom are eating orange segments, huddled around the coach.

‘Tom, Tom, where are you going?’ I call. He ignores me. Helplessly, I watch as Katherine becomes aware of his approach. She seems to understand that he’s agitated and promptly walks towards him, heading him off before he reaches the team. It’s not unheard of for a Wittington High supporter to intervene during half-time – confident mothers and blasé fathers often throw tactical advice about, much to the chagrin of the coach; it’s the one thing I’ve never done to vex Katherine – I mean, what do I know? I wonder what Tom can be going to say. He knows nothing about the game at all.

I watch as he folds her into an enormous hug. There, on the pitch, in front of everyone. She bears his PDA for about three seconds, which is pretty generous of her, and then she pulls apart and asks, ‘What?’

‘What?’ He laughs.

She glances about. She’s standing with her knees knocked, shoulders drooped, omitting waves of mortification. ‘Was there something you needed?’

I hear him reply, ‘Just a little talk.’

Concerned that, if I can hear him, then others can, too, I call out and ask if he’d like some tea. ‘They serve it in the dining room. Lovely and warming.’ Katherine’s coach is calling for her to rejoin the group for the pep talk; Tom is oblivious.

‘So how *are* you doing?’ he asks.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Yes, you said that before, but *really*? It’s a total mind melt, isn’t it?’

‘It’s OK.’

‘It isn’t. I mean, you must be scared. Waiting for the results and everything.’ I can see Katherine blinking furiously. I know she won’t want to want to cry in the middle of the game, but she might, because of his understanding. ‘You must have thought you knew exactly where you were in life, *who* you were. Now, nothing is certain. I understand.’ I appreciate that he’s concerned, but I’m not sure he’s helping: this isn’t the time or the place. He lowers his voice, so I don’t catch what else he’s saying, but he keeps her until the coach pulls her away, demanding that she talk tactics with the whole team before the second half commences.

When he returns to me, he looks much brighter. However, the standard of the game does not improve. Katherine plays badly. She misses a decent chance, even though Maddie sets her up to score, and she muddles two passes. We lose 4–1 and the Wittington High supporters cast glances my way that range from faux sympathetic to maddened. They forget that it’s a team game and that, while it seems Katherine can and does sometimes win it on her own, she can’t lose it on her own.

I’m the only one who talks much on the drive back to the school. I talk Tom through the history of lacrosse and mention the different rules between here and the US, between the men’s game and the women’s; he doesn’t seem especially engaged. He keeps looking in the rear-view mirror, trying to catch Katherine’s eye. No chance. He asks her what she’s up to over the weekend.

‘Nothing. Maddie asked if I wanted to go for a sleepover tonight, but I said no.’

Tired, we wave goodbye to Tom and then clamber into our own car and set off towards home. It’s getting dark and the air feels damp. I don’t know whether to bring up Tom’s emotional dash on to the pitch. If I don’t mention it, I’m minimising it. Teens seem to want perpetually to minimise everything: their waistlines, the attention their parents pay them, the effort they put into their homework; only eyelashes ought to be maximised. But I can’t leave it alone.

‘What did Tom have to say that was so urgent?’ My voice has failed me. It sounds shrill and probing; I wanted to be light.

‘He said I’m doing brilliantly.’

‘Well, you are.’

‘He said I was strong and brave.’

‘That’s true, too.’

She shrugs, 'I don't feel very brave.' I'm sure Tom must have been reassuring. I know that, when he talks to me, sprinkles compliments or encouragement, it feels like a duvet being thrown over me. Settling. Although, today, he was clearly out of sorts. 'He went on about me dealing with so much. The swap, the mutated gene, a new family, yada yada yada ... and he threw in a new one.'

'Waiting for the test results?'

'Grieving for a new mum who is already dead.'

'What?'

'Watch the road,' she demands as the car in front of us brakes suddenly and a big lorry next to us grinds and lurches. I recover my composure, or at least I give the impression of doing so. She continues: 'I know, right. I hadn't actually thought of that one, the lost opportunity of meeting Annabel. I haven't got it in me to imagine dealing with problems that haven't occurred, I have too many real issues. I didn't say so, though, because it seemed offensive. I guess the lack of Annabel must be the worst thing for Tom.'

Bad enough to make him behave inappropriately at a lacrosse game and to say tactless things to a young girl. I regret not steaming over to interrupt their conversation.

'He also kept saying that everything is going to be OK.' Katherine stares at the windscreen wipers. Swish. Clear, blur, swish. The lights change colour and someone in the car behind toots aggressively. 'I want to believe him, but I'm also a bit annoyed that he's giving me the cliché. I mean, he can't know that.'

I understand the temptation to soothe and to insist that the tests will give us the result we want, but I've resisted going down that path. It's not simply because I'm forever gloom and doom, I just don't want to lie to my child; it's dishonest, promising her something I can't deliver. Even Jeff – normally quite an assured, positive and poised man – has seemed a little reticent to do so. Of late, he hasn't been himself. He's sort of hovering on the outside, as though he's watching everything unfold but doesn't know how to dive in and save her. When she pushes us, the most we say is, 'Let's wait and see.'

'He said Annabel would have loved to have met me.'

'I'm sure she would.'

'He said she would have been proud of me.'

‘Undoubtedly.’ It hurts, the thought of Katherine craving Annabel’s approval, but I smile at her, refusing to let her see anything more that might distress her.

‘You know what? He said, in all of this mess, if he could change just one thing, it would be that. He’d have had me meet her. I couldn’t stop thinking about that during the second half. Obviously, I realise that wishing doesn’t change a thing anyway, but I feel he’s wasted his wish, you know?’ She throws me a questioning look, disturbed and feverish. ‘Categorically, if I could change anything about this situation, then I’d have it so that Annabel didn’t have the gene in the first place. You see, if she didn’t have the mutated gene, then she wouldn’t have died and this whole business of the swap would most likely have stayed buried for ever.’ I nod but don’t trust myself to speak. Grit itches in my throat and eyes. ‘Wouldn’t that just have been for the best? Callum, Olivia and Amy would have had their two parents; I’d have had mine. We all knew where we were then. Plus, if she hadn’t had the gene, then there would be no chance of me having it. No chance of me dying. Tom should have wished for that.’

I agree with her. She’s totally, one hundred per cent right. ‘I’m sorry, darling, I should have come and stopped him talking to you.’

She sighs. ‘Yeah, you should have. Coach was miffed.’

‘He means well.’

‘I suppose.’

I want to do something to make everything better. I want to wave a magic wand and grant wishes. I can’t. ‘Why did you say no to the offer of a sleepover at Maddie’s?’

Katherine looks exhausted, fed up. ‘I thought you wouldn’t want me to go.’

‘Honestly, I don’t mind.’

She looks up, excited, her face transformed in a moment. ‘Really?’

‘Really. We can pop home, pick up your overnight things, then I can take you straight there, if you like.’

‘Brilliant. I’ll text her.’ Gleefully, Katherine starts to tap her phone. A giddy teenager, happy at the prospect of a night watching chick flicks and trawling Facebook to find profile pictures of teachers they can laugh at. It’s something I can give her. It’s not much, but it’s all I can do.

I know it was the right thing to do – allow Katherine to go to Maddie’s for a sleepover; she needs a valve to release all this pressure – but Jeff hasn’t got home from his lunch yet, so I find myself home alone. Listless, restless, useless. I think of the things I could do to fill the late afternoon: I could write Christmas cards, I could make a start on wrapping some of the gifts I’ve bought. There are quite a few; I tend to pick up little stocking fillers for Katherine from about August onwards. I could flick through some recipe books and start to plan the menus for the festivities. As usual, Jeff’s father and his sister and her family are going to be staying with us for three days; unusually, I’m not that excited by the prospect. Katherine’s result is due on the 18th of December. What sort of Christmas will we have?

Tom’s emotional frailty today has left me bone weary. I can’t hide from the spread of this catastrophe. I keep hoping someone is going to be strong enough to prop me up, but that hope is fading. Jeff is distant, but I know he’s suffering; he’s drinking more than normal. Tom is open, but I feel he is a great big void that I can’t fill. I ache. Maybe I’m coming down with something. Or maybe it’s just stress. I make myself a strong cup of tea and add a heaped teaspoon of sugar. I rarely have sugar in my tea, but I need the comfort. I take the tea through to the sitting room. It all looks a bit untidy, if I’m honest. I suppose I should run the vacuum cleaner around, at least plump up the cushions and clear away the glasses and plates from last night’s TV snacks. I sigh, weary. I can’t be bothered. All I want to do is curl up under the rug and perhaps watch some mindless TV.

I flick through a few channels. I can’t bring myself to watch the evening news, it’s too depressing, but there’s nothing other than dull, ancient repeats, programmes in which dithering couples can’t decide which house to buy, or awful tabloid shows that humiliate rather than entertain. TV is not the distraction it used to be. I once marvelled at how complicated and messy other people’s lives were. I’m abashed to admit it but I used to get a

sort of hit out of the fact that mine was so sorted; as if I'd proven something, achieved or recovered something. Now I feel increasing empathy for the skinny, shouty women who, desperate and confused, demand answers on *The Jeremy Kyle Show*.

I check the clock on the mantelpiece and wonder what's keeping Jeff. I'm not one hundred per cent sure where he is today, or even who he is with. Somewhere or other. Someone or other. Is it possible that, last night while we were both doing a good impression of watching TV, he told me his plans? If so, it was in one ear, out the other. Jeff and I are in a bad place. I can't deny it, not even to myself. We've barely spoken since the evening of the day we visited the counsellor with Katherine. The evening he proposed. Nine long days ago.

I don't know what to say to him. I don't know how to answer. My silence is only causing more unease and tension between us, but how can I think about his proposal now? Especially a proposal that was so begrudgingly issued. The matter is too big and thorny to tackle.

Suddenly, I want to do something nice for him. A gesture that will show him I'm still here. That I know he's here, too, in this awful predicament. I can't start cooking, because I have no idea when he'll be back. I glance around the unkempt room again. I could make it look more welcoming. It's a start. I force myself to get from under the rug and begin to whizz about.

It doesn't take long for me to get things shipshape in the sitting room. All that was really required was a top tidy. Next, I head for Jeff's study. He hates me poking about in there when he's at home, but the room is in dire need of an airing. It no longer smells of old books and leather, it smells of stale sweat and dust. I could give it a good clear-out to surprise him.

I carefully place weights on the piles of paper scattered across his desk, floor and shelves before I ease open the window and let the chilly early-evening air drift in to the fusty room. The debris of his labour is peppered everywhere. I turn and wonder where to start; it doesn't do to tidy vigorously because for the several months following I have to live with complaints that he can't find whatever it is he's looking for, and I'm trying to do a good thing here, not upset the apple cart further. Besides, he does not accept that it is chaos. To him, mess is an essential part of the creative process. He says neat piles are offensive. I argue that knowing where bills are filed is a basic necessity of being a grown up. Mess is simply mess.

Aren't we the living embodiments of that now? Still, at least this is the sort of chaos I can ease.

I gather up the coffee cups and wine glasses, then empty the waste-paper basket. I remove any objects that can definitely be counted as peculiar in a work environment, such as a random coat hanger, one of Katherine's hoodies and a tennis racquet. The room looks better, but far from sorted. Bearing in mind Jeff's distaste for neat piles and my need to know that the utilities have been paid, I start to carefully pick up pieces of paper from his desk and read them to see if I need to act upon anything. If not, then I replace the paper exactly where I found it. It's a laborious and not especially satisfying process, but this is what needs to be done.

Many writers hang on to traditions more staunchly than the average citizen. Writers often like actual books, physical newspapers and a proper desk diary. Often, they have a National Trust diary, the type that comes free with membership, as this sort advertises frugality, and most writers like to wear their poverty as a badge of honour; or the desk diary might be something arty, one that shows Mapplethorpe's photos, or similar. Jeff has a luxurious, frighteningly expensive Smythson of Bond Street journal. He writes in it with his Montblanc fountain pen.

Curiosity overwhelms me. In a second, I flip the pages and discover that he has had lunch with his agent, Sue, today. I'm a little taken aback. Lunches with agents are a rare enough occurrence that Jeff generally discusses them in advance. At length. He chats about the date and, more importantly, the venue. He tells me his agenda. I feel a flash of guilt that this occasion, which must be important to him, has gone unnoticed by me. I pick my way through a bit more physical paperwork – a final demand for his NI contributions, some receipts for ink cartridges – and, as I stack up the back issues of the *Bookseller*, I begin to wonder what they might have been meeting to discuss.

General strategy, perhaps? To celebrate a landmark sales figure? Luckily, Jeff's last novel is still selling at a reasonable rate. I know there isn't an imminent launch – if only! Could it be a pitch? A treatment? It's too much to hope that he might actually be delivering a book. It's certainly been a very long lunch. It's past five now. My heart gives a little skip. If he's working on a treatment, then that is exciting news. I feel a small thrill at the thought of discussing it with him tonight.

Then I see it.

An A4 manila file on his desk. It is the title that catches my eye: 'The Swap: working title.'

It is a good title. Arresting, not gender specific. But while I'm thinking this, I'm also fighting the dread and fury that are bubbling up inside me. Because I know. I just know.

He's altered the gender of the changelings. The story is about two boys but, even so, the plot is absolutely identifiable. The boys are called Karl and Oliver. Oliver is one of three children and his mother has recently died, leaving the 'bright, worthy but somewhat artily pretentious father with the role of lone parent'. Karl is an only child. 'His father is a renowned and respected architect, his mother a highly controlling housewife.' Those genders haven't been swapped, then. Not to protect the innocent. Or the guilty.

My eyes flash across the paper. I can only skim-read, as words fall in and out of focus, blurring, sharpening, morphing again. I force myself to concentrate and yet I don't want to know what's written there. It's a little like it was whenever I received a Visa bill in my twenties, only a hundred times worse: 'From the view point of a middle-class couple ... parents to one fifteen-year-old son ... devastated to discover ... adored child isn't theirs ... Stranger appears ... doorstep ... medical evidence ... unequivocal ... swapped at birth.' I'm so shocked I'm gasping for breath. I think I'm going to choke. No. No. It's impossible. Vile. Beyond cruel. A tightness in my chest makes me think I am in danger of suffocating. My legs shake, my knees knock together, I collapse into the desk chair. I read the same paragraph three or four times to be certain, but there's no room for doubt. There really isn't.

I read the entire document as best I can, my hands shaking as I turn the pages. 'A profound and terrifying ordeal.' What the hell? That doesn't cover it. 'Devastating effect on family life ... revealing deep-seated issues and rifts'. What can he mean? But I know what he means. He means this: him writing a manuscript about our life together and me having no idea.

It is quite a well-plumped-out synopsis; plus, the first chapter of the novel is complete. Jeff is serious about this project. I imagine he and his agent are bent over it right now, reading it through, perhaps marking up possible edits or making small changes. I don't suppose there's much leeway in terms of character development: that's all been worked out for

him. 'A highly controlling housewife.' The four words cut me like a blade. So reductive, so insulting.

At all right?

I rush to the final paragraph of the synopsis, desperate to know how he ends the book. There is a genetic illness. Not the BRCA1 or BRCA2 gene; ovarian cancer wouldn't fly, as the changelings are now boys. The illness is Wilson's disease. I read on and discover that the child is categorically diagnosed with it. Jeff suggests that the book end with a cliffhanger, not specifying whether the child dies or not.

I can actually taste vomit.

Then I notice another section: character motivation. 'The mother, seemingly unlikable at first, is only truly understood when it is revealed why she clings so passionately to Karl. When she was sixteen she fell pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl who she gave up for adoption. This is something she deeply regrets and despairs of but has never come to terms with. Having already given up one child, she is devastated to find the child she's reared is not her own.'

Now, the vomit is on his desk.

I do not clear up my vomit. I leave it there to fester. Not through malice, especially; through indifference. I do not care if the leather top of Jeff's eighteenth-century desk will now always smell like the doorway of a pub at kick-out time on a Friday. It's all I can do to drag myself back into the sitting room, crawl under the rug and wait for him to return.

He arrives home just before seven. I can tell he's had a bit to drink, although he's not drunk, he's just full of bonhomie. It's a fairly rare commodity in our house recently so it's noteworthy. He claps his hands together and a big confident whack of a sound reverberates through the sitting room, telling me that the meeting went well. I expect it was a fine wine, a decent year, a celebratory bottle, not the sort to leave a hangover. He puts on the lights and then almost jumps out of his skin when he notices me curled up into a defensive, defeated ball on the sofa.

'What are you doing sitting in the dark?'

'Isn't that where you like to keep me?' My comment is a little too left-field for him to catch my meaning immediately.

'I'm parched. Going to make a cuppa. Do you want one? Or maybe something stronger for you? I've had enough.'

'I've had enough, too.' But I don't mean drink. I follow him through to the kitchen and watch as he goes about his usual business – selecting his favourite mug from the cupboard (the one that says 'World's Best Dad'; the irony is not lost on me), flicking through the tea caddies until he finds the loose lapsang souchong, locating a strainer, opening the fridge while he considers whether he wants milk and then deciding against it.

'When were you going to tell me?'

'Tell you what?' He opens a drawer and pulls out a teaspoon. Such ordinary, familiar actions, yet there's a stranger, a monster, in my kitchen.

'That you are using our life as the inspiration for your next book.' He freezes, his back to me. He doesn't turn to face me straight away. I know

he's gathering his thoughts, forming his defence. It's repellent. 'Were you even going to tell me, or just let me catch on when it hit the bestseller list? Or maybe when you did a first-person promotional piece for the *Daily Mail*?'

'What are you talking about?'

'Don't try to deny it. I've seen the file on your desk.' Now he does turn to me, and I wish he hadn't, because he's still the same man. He hasn't physically changed, as surely he ought. He is not grotesque, scarred, deformed like Dorian Gray's portrait, and yet he has sold his soul. He looks like the man I fell in love with at the hat stall, so many years ago, the only man I've ever trusted with my story of the agony of giving birth to Peter, the hundredfold agony of giving him up. The man I imagined I'd spend the rest of my life with. But he is totally different.

'Look, you really have got this all wrong.' He moves towards me and tries to place his hands on my shoulders, but I shake him off, back away, out of reach.

'Did you or did you not meet your agent for lunch today?'

'Well, yes. I did.'

'And was that to pitch the idea for your next novel?'

'Yes!' He looks pleased with himself, animated. I splutter indignantly. 'Really, it's so wonderful to be writing again. I can't explain just how wonderful, and Sue is very excited about the concept. It's a great story.'

'No, it's a terrible story! What are you thinking?'

'What?'

I cut him off. 'Changing the gender of the characters doesn't stop it being *our* story. Our terrible, tragic story. It all makes sense now! All that stuff you've been saying about us just waiting to see what will happen, letting it play out! I thought you were being calm and clear-headed, but you weren't: you were being experimental and we were the experiment!' I'm shouting, but I don't care. He deserves it. He deserves to be yelled at. 'You took notes when we went to see the counsellor. You've been watching us a bit like a scientist watches rats in a lab: you wanted to know what we'd do next, how we'd react with one another.' He looks down to his feet, doesn't deny it. I wish he would. I wish it weren't so. 'Was that the reason you suggested the joint sleepover party for Olivia and Katherine? No doubt you thought that might make a glorious crescendo to the book, but you couldn't even make

that much up! You needed to put us through it, for the sake of authenticity, no doubt.'

Now he looks up at me, but I don't see any hint of shame or regret, as I expected. He looks defiant, cold. 'How could you think that of me?'

'How could I think anything else?'

'Look, admittedly, I played with the idea. A few months ago. When Tom first came round here. I was in shock. We all were. I wrote up the synopsis as a way of processing the events. You know I do that. I'm a writer, that's how I make sense of the world, but I haven't presented it to my agent as an idea for a novel. Certainly not. You have to believe me.'

I don't, actually. 'OK, so what did you present today?'

'Something different.'

'What?'

'Oh, you're not interested.' He sighs, frustrated.

'I've never been more interested in my life.' He stares at me, fury emitting from his every pore. I can only assume he's furious with himself for being so careless with his filing. For letting me discover his awful plan. He can't pitch me an alternative idea because there isn't one. He's too taken aback at being rumbled to manage to come up with something that might convince me there's another pitch. I glare at him. Hurt. Disgusted. Betrayed.

He crumbles in front of me. Sagging, he falls back into a kitchen chair. 'Alison, you have no idea how hard it is.'

'What is?' Does he mean the swap? Of course I have an idea how hard it is.

'Writing.'

'Oh God.' I fling my head back and growl in disbelief.

'It is,' he insists. 'You like the lifestyle well enough – private school for Katherine, the big house, the cars.' Actually, I don't much care about the house or the cars, but he's right that I do like it that we can give Katherine the best of everything. 'But you undermine the actual process. You laugh at it. You think it's easy. A hobby I got lucky with. It's not that. It's hard. If you do it well and with honesty, then it's extremely hard. Every day for months now – for over a year – I've woken fearful, wondering whether I'm going anywhere with my ideas or whether I'll just hit another dead end, another brick wall. It's tough to be continually individual, original, inspirational.'

I don't like the fact that he's come up with three words in a row that end in 'al'; it seems contrived and practised. It might be that he's a natural orator but, most likely, he's rehearsed this speech in front of the bathroom mirror or, worse still, on some writer groupie. Someone who will have listened sympathetically: a wannabe writer, a publicist who is paid to look compassionate, maybe his agent. They'll have nodded seriously, indulging him like a child whining about his homework.

'I'm terrified, Alison. It's so ephemeral. What if my last novel was it? What if that's as good as I can be? What if I never sell that many books again?'

We've had this discussion. Often. I've repeatedly told him that sales don't necessarily reflect brilliance. He knows he lives in a modern world where competitions and promotions, prizes and reviews, mean more than anything, more than maybe they should. I can't be bothered to say it all again: *I* am not going to indulge him; there are real children wrapped up in this chaos.

'Then this came along. Tom knocked at our door and what he told us blew my mind.'

'He blew my world apart.'

'That's what I mean.' But he doesn't mean the same thing. 'I had to write it down. I couldn't not.'

'You called me highly controlling.'

'Is that what's bothering you?'

'You give the child the illness.'

'It's just a plot idea.'

'No! It's ill-wishing.'

'What I type into my computer will not affect the outcome of Katherine's tests.'

My heart is pounding so wildly I think it will explode, tear right out of my body. It would be fitting: my useless, hopeless heart that's never been able to keep anyone who mattered truly safe.

I so rarely say his name. It might be fifteen years since I've done so. I've had to bury it. There are some memories that just can't be revisited. Some things that cannot be spoken of. The effort it takes leaves me breathless. 'You used *Peter*.'

I don't know how he answers that one because I don't wait around to find out. I pick up my handbag, car keys and coat and I walk out of the house.

## Twenty-Two Years Ago

*Christmas came with prodigious expectations; every direction she turned was evidence of other people's glee and the incessant promise of their future happiness, tenderness and closeness. It was hard to stomach. Obviously, Christmas was for children. It was a time when kids stuffed their faces with selection-box chocolate bars, mums took them to meet Santa in department stores and tear-jerking nativity plays were performed up and down the country. If that weren't torture enough, December was also Peter's birthday month. He'd been born on the 14th, at 9 p.m.*

*When they'd returned to her mother's he had looked out of place, her beautiful boy amidst the scrimping, the shouting, the bitterness and blame.*

*They came to collect him on the 23rd. There was no question that she'd get to spend a Christmas with him.*

*'No point in making a meal of it, Alison. What's done is done. You said this was what you wanted. Now get out of bed and come and help me with your brothers. We've got to get the tree up. The bloke on the market gave it to me, said there was no point in charging on Christmas Eve, any stock he had left would just be pulped. I knew it was worth waiting.'* Her mother had left the room, a whiff of cigarette smoke and callousness trailing behind her.

*Alison had developed a crazy ritual since moving to London; she always visited Hamleys on Regent Street to imagine what she might have bought her son for his special day and for Christmas. She'd walk slowly around the shop, inching her way through the excitable crowds of boys and girls, mentally selecting the very best gifts. It was a peculiar custom; bittersweet. Hot, sticky kids with flushed faces, warm hands and bright eyes wide with anticipation ran past her, sometimes accidentally bumped into her. She felt ghostly yet she was glad of their touch. He'd be eight this year. She supposed that, by now, he'd have lost any baby chubbiness he might have had. She put her hand on her hip and tried to guess what height he might have reached. What he'd look like standing by her side. Was he boisterous,*

*cheeky, sporty? She hoped he was a kind child. She thought that was likely. Most of all, she hoped he was happy. Please, God, at least that.*

*She didn't know anything much about him. It was better that way. Everyone said so. They talked of a clean break, but that was rubbish, because broken hearts were always filthy messy. She did know he lived in America, her Peter. Imagine that! He'd already travelled further than she ever had. They said that the father had been offered a marvellous job over there, an offer they couldn't refuse, but she privately wondered whether they'd simply wanted to put some distance between her and the boy. An entire ocean. An insurmountable distance.*

*This year, on her way to the toy shop, she happened to bump into her new friend Jeff outside Liberty; he was doing his Christmas shopping, he explained. Her pulse quickened, literally, as the heroines of nineteenth-century novels insisted theirs did when a handsome stranger walked into their lives. Some things never changed.*

*'That's all I'm doing, too,' she said, slightly defensively.*

*'Maybe we should join forces?' He offered this with that confident, positive air he had, fully expecting she'd accept. Normally, she would have said yes.*

*'I prefer shopping on my own.'* She glanced along Regent Street, which was packed with vehicles, lights and harried shoppers. She was finding it difficult to get her breath; it must be the crowds.

*'No, that can't be true.'* He smiled, sure he knew better. *'Everyone likes company when they are Christmas shopping.'*

*'Not me.'*

*He was surprised by her resistance. 'But a second opinion is always helpful. Honestly, I could do with your advice on picking gifts for my mum and sister. I mean, I never have a clue which smelly thing they might like. They're all the same to me.'* She didn't look convinced. He grinned charmingly. *'And, bearing in mind that you very nearly bought the orange hat not the blue one on the day we met, obviously you could do with my help, too.'*

*He had remembered the hats. Even the colour of the one she'd rejected. The thought was like a candle on a birthday cake: warm, bright, hopeful. He was a hard man to ignore. 'I have to visit Hamleys to buy a gift.'*

*'Who for?'*

*'My nephew.'*

*'How old is he?'*

*'Eight.'* The candle was snuffed out; the fictitious nephew punched her, glared at her, punishing her for denying her son.

Jeff clapped his hands together, a gesture that said, Bring it on. *'Sounds like fun.'*

*'You'll hate it. It'll be hell, overrun with crazily excited kids and exhausted, put-upon staff.'*

*'I don't scare easily.'*

Desperately, she added, *'Hamleys has five million people through their doors a year and most of them come this Saturday, just before Christmas.'*

Determined, he insisted: *'I don't mind.'* She couldn't shake him, but she had to go to the shop. It was her only motherly duty. She sighed and gave into the inevitable with an ungracious shrug.

So they trailed around the enormous toyshop, picking their way through children hyperventilating over various stuffed toys, dolls and plastic weapons. Jeff entered into the spirit of things; he picked up one item after another: Lego sets, Meccano kits, Action Men. As Alison never actually bought a gift for her lost baby, and the ritual was simply imagining a world where she could give him things, she was forced to make continual excuses why Jeff's ideas were unsuitable: *'I think he has one of those already'; 'Oh, that's not very him'; 'I was looking for something more original.'*

Eventually, fighting exasperation, Jeff asked, *'What's this nephew of yours called, then? You've never said.'*

*'Peter,'* she whispered.

*'You know, I think that's the first honest thing you've said to me all day. Come on.'* He took her hand and led her down the escalator and outside into the freezing London street. *'Let's find a quiet bar.'*

And it was there, in a tatty Wetherspoons, that she told him everything. Her grief, regret and guilt spewed on to the tiny table between them, staining it just as surely as the rings of red wine left by glasses had stained it before. She told him, because he asked, that she loved Peter with a violence, almost, that he was always with her, even though he hadn't ever been. Not really.

*'I gave him up because I loved him. It might seem like the opposite, but I thought I was doing what was right for my baby.'* He put his hand on hers and squeezed. *'I couldn't cope. I didn't know how to. I know other girls manage and will go on managing, but I couldn't.'*

*'No, of course not,' he said tenderly. 'You were a kid yourself.'*

*'The social worker said there was a chance I could still do my exams, maybe one day go to university. She said Peter would be placed with parents who would adore him, who had longed for him.'*

*'I'm sure he was.'*

*'She kept saying it over and over: "His new family will love him very much." I kept saying that I loved him very much, but she gave me this weird look. I understood: my love was not enough. My love was inadequate. She said it was the best thing for everyone. Best all round.'* He didn't comment on that.

*Jeff's reaction was perfect. In many ways, he healed Alison that day. He saw in her things that were so deeply buried, so long neglected, that even she had forgotten they existed. Good things which had, to all intents and purposes, disappeared. He dug them out. Reinstated them. He celebrated her resilience and didn't call her a hard bitch; he insisted her unease and gaucheness were manifestations of artlessness. He saw her refusal to look back as a healthy survival instinct or possibly as natural, youthful ambition. He unshackled her from her sad past. He said he understood her choice – which had been no sort of choice at all – and that anyone in their right mind would understand why she'd made the decision she had.*

*She told him that her family had never forgiven her. 'Not that my mother was up for any parenting awards herself – she didn't like me much even before I got pregnant.'*

*'I think maybe your mother has baby-addiction syndrome,' he concluded on hearing that she had abandoned Alison when she was eight years old and taken the smaller, cuter kids with her.*

*Alison shrugged, but she knew she couldn't shrug it off, not really, not completely. She confessed, 'I needed her so much then.'* Jeff was livid with her useless mother for blighting Alison's plans to return to school. *'She refused to give me a roof unless I could pay rent, insisting I got a job and gave up any fancy ideas about getting above my station. She wanted to punish me.'*

*'She's the one who needs punishing.'*

*'Do you think so?' Alison dared to meet his eyes. The room was swaying, in soft focus. Any harshness and spite was banished by his warmth.*

*He met her gaze. 'I'm sure she has her reasons for choosing to live a deadening, limited life but she has no right to thrust that on you.'*

*Everything they had despised or been disgusted with in Alison, he saw as understandable, even brave.*

*Finally, she told him she loved kids but she didn't feel entitled even to smile at one in the street any more.*

*'You'll be a great mother when the time is right, Alison. Don't worry about that for a minute.'*

*It was liberating. Under his jaunty encouragement the horrors submerged. The emphasis shifted and the guilt, the shame and her all-pervasive sense of unworthiness fell away.*

I bang on the door of the house, a little too loudly, a little too desperately. Blue flakes of paint fall around my fist. Mozart starts to bark excitedly. I can see the shadow of Tom through the frosted glass, and it's a huge relief. He could have been out collecting any one of his three kids from a friend's house or a match or something, but he's not. He's here, where I need him to be. I notice that he looks hunched, a little lost, defeated, and even though I'm crazed with my own pain I feel a great swell of pity for him. A widower. A single parent. This solidifies into a real affection because, when he opens the door and sees me standing on his step, he straightens and smiles.

'You said I could call around any time.' I lift my hands from my sides, a slightly apologetic gesture.

'And I meant it.'

He opens the door wide and I follow him into the little sitting room. Today, it's empty and the TV is switched off. The air is fat, as though the central heating has squeezed out all the oxygen, and it feels hard to breathe. Tom disappears into the kitchen and returns with two glasses and a bottle of wine. I'm glad he didn't suggest coffee.

'White OK?' I nod. He pours and then hands me a glass. Sometimes when wine is warm and it's the fourth glass of the night, it is functional, not very special. This is the first glass of the evening; as a matter of fact, it is my first glass of the week. It's crisp, chilled, voluptuous. Needed.

I take a sip, and a moment. Tom doesn't rush me for an explanation as to why I've arrived at his door. I make myself inhale, exhale, as though I were at a Pilates class. I slowly try to make sense of what's just happened. I can't. 'Where are the kids?' I ask instead.

Tom counts them off on the fingers of one hand. 'Callum is at his girlfriend's. Situation normal: it's like they're conjoined twins.'

'Joined at the lips,' I suggest.

‘That’s as far as I’m willing to speculate.’

‘Young love.’

‘Yes. Amy is at a makeover, sleepover.’ He grimaces. We both, no doubt, are imagining Amy’s beautiful little face clattered up with glittery eyeshadow and too-bright lipstick. ‘I told her all about Katherine’s game before she went. And Olivia—’ He pauses for a moment. ‘She’s at the library.’

‘On a Friday? I’m impressed.’

He lets out a big sigh. ‘I’m doubtful.’

‘You don’t think she is at the library?’

‘No. Which library stays open this late on a Friday?’

‘So, if she’s not there, then where might she be? Out with the boyfriend?’

‘Probably.’

‘He still hasn’t been introduced?’

‘No.’ I don’t ask the next question. Shouldn’t he have been introduced by now? I don’t ask because I know the answer and so does Tom. I wish Olivia *was* at the library, or playing hockey, or rehearsing a play, or doing *something* productive. However, if I’m being brutally honest with myself, I find all I really care about is the fact that I found the house empty; empty, that is, except for Tom. I want to be alone with him. I suppose this is what I’d hoped for when I fled from Jeff. I just need to be able to talk to someone, frankly, uninterrupted. Unhindered.

That said, there’s nothing hindering or interrupting me now and yet I can’t find the words. I am perched on the edge of the sofa but I feel I can’t keep as ramrod straight as I usually try to. I flop back, careful only not to spill my wine. I close my eyes for a second, trying to keep the world at bay. If only I could. When I open them, just a moment later, Tom is sitting next to me, also flopped, also with his eyes closed.

I have studied Tom’s handsome face before. It’s impossible not to want to look at him. But my gaze has always been cut short, been fleeting. I worry that if I start examining him I might assume an intimacy I have no right to. I might slurp up his very essence, like I do with Katherine. Obviously, that’s not appropriate. I struggle to keep Tom and Katherine distinct and apart. But it’s a battle I lose. The fact is, they are interwoven. I trust him because I trust her. I think he’s kind because I know she is. I think of him because I think of her. Now his eyes are closed I can look without him knowing. Take in as much as I like. As much as I need. I can smell his aftershave. I see one

or two hairs poking out the top of his T-shirt. I notice the loaf of muscle in his thigh.

What a day. I rushed here, outraged, shattered, wanting to tell him about Jeff's novel, but the stale air and the small room, which is north-facing and doesn't catch even the light from the street lamp let alone sunshine in the summer, makes me more than aware of how isolated he must feel. 'Who do you talk about it all with?' I ask.

'All?'

'Losing Annabel, the baby swap, the fact that your elder daughter might not be in the library but out with a boy you have yet to vet, what you're going to cook for tea. *All.*'

He smiles, a gentle smile, which creeps into the corners of his eyes. 'Well, largely, I'm too busy to talk about it much. Most of the time I just get on with it. It's surprising how consuming it can be – searching out PE kit or lost textbooks, packing school lunches, attending parents' evenings ...'

'And, on top of that, you have your job.' I shake my head. 'I can't imagine how you cope.'

'They say that, traditionally, men are excellent at compartmentalising.'

'Are you?'

He smiles again. It's rueful, not in the slightest bit self-pitying. 'No, not especially. I find my concerns bleed into one another.'

Earlier, when Jeff admitted to his feelings of stress and vulnerability, he simply sounded self-absorbed, defeatist and entitled by turn. Tom is dealing with so much more, and he's unsupported. I am quite taken aback by his frank confession, his openness. Instinctively, unthinkingly, I put my hand on his wrist. Comfort. Sympathy. That's all. I feel the warmth of him seep into my fingertips. He doesn't move to shrug me off, which is a relief but also awkward, because I don't know when to let go of him. I wait a beat. Then move my hand away. He glances at me and my breath catches in my throat. Katherine's eyes. Beautiful. He takes a large gulp of the delicious wine; it is definitely the sort that ought to be sipped, but I gulp, too.

'Tell me something,' he says softly.

'About what?'

'About anything.'

I should tell him about Jeff's bloody awful idea for his next novel – after all, that's why I'm here – but I can't, not yet. Something holds me back. Once I vocalise Jeff's treachery I won't be able to unsay the words. I am in

the habit of being on his team; it's been my position for so long it seems disloyal to expose him to Tom; besides, won't I just be worrying Tom? Obviously, I have to talk Jeff out of this crazy idea, otherwise all the Trubys will be caught up in the media frenzy that is bound to arise. I don't want to stress Tom unnecessarily. Tom gently nudges me with his elbow, a prompt.

He notices our empty glasses and refills them. The crisp wine shudders into the glass. He hands me mine, which I think is kind. Most people would simply leave it on the coffee table, within reach. He sits up straight, alert, and stares at me. I can almost feel his breath on my neck. Almost. I'm self-conscious. This situation has an echo of something. Something I used to do. It sounds like the conversation one might have on a date. An early, innocent date, full of anticipation, trepidation and promise. It shouldn't feel like that.

'What's going on with you?'

It's too general a question for me to dare proffer an answer. He must know things aren't great, or why would I have rushed around to his house? I sigh and admit: 'Jeff and I had a row.'

I expect him to ask what the row was about and I need him to so I can edge into the conversation; instead, he shakes his head as though mystified and says, 'I just can't get my head around the fact that you and Jeff aren't married.' He looks genuinely puzzled. He stares at me with frank admiration, and I can't resist interpreting his mystification as a compliment: he thinks Jeff is mad not to have made our relationship official. It's an old-fashioned view, but I find I like it. I don't know what to say and am relieved to discover he isn't really expecting me to make any further comment. We sit in silence, sipping the wine. He's still wearing a puzzled expression.

It is pitch-black outside. I fight the urge to stand up and draw the curtains, block out passers-by and potential onlookers. It's an old habit. When I was a child I didn't want people looking in on our inadequate furnishings, our lack. I always think that people who dare to leave their blinds up, their curtains open, are incredibly lucky: they have nothing to hide, it's as though they are inviting the whole world to party with them. This room is subtly illuminated by one table lamp next to Tom. It has the effect of throwing light around him like a halo. There's so much falling through my mind. Katherine's test result, Jeff's pitch, Tom's big brown eyes, Annabel's lost twin baby. Peter.

'What was the twin called?'

'Joseph.'

‘Oh, a boy.’

‘You thought it would be a girl?’

I shrug. I’m not sure. I think of my own lost boy. Not lost so much but given away. And it hurts. A physical, intense pain, as though I have been stabbed. I’m familiar with this agony: it happens every time I think of Peter. Even though, over the years, I’ve trained myself to accept the sting of missing him, I never get used to it; not really. A fat tear rolls down my cheek and slides under my chin. Soon another one follows, and another. I don’t try and wipe them away.

‘Oh, Alison, come here.’ Tom puts his strong, warm arms around me and folds me into a hug. My silent tears continue to fall, darkening his T-shirt. ‘Hey, don’t cry.’ Then when he realises that’s a suggestion I can’t follow, he recants: ‘It’s OK, let it all out.’ He’s not saying anything particularly original but I am so, so grateful for his gentle murmurings and the warmth of his broad shoulders. Finding Jeff’s book outline has created a hairline fracture in the dam holding back my emotion and now it’s splitting apart.

I mumble, ‘Jeff has betrayed me.’

‘He’s having an affair?’ Tom sounds shocked, enraged.

I break from his embrace and manage to smile through my tears. ‘No, not that.’ Even though I’m furious with Jeff right now and feel utterly betrayed, I can’t imagine *that* particular betrayal. It’s simply not something he’d do. I look around for some tissues. I always keep a box on our coffee table at home, hidden under a chic little cover, ready for emergencies. Tom guesses what I’m searching for and leaps up; he comes back with a roll of toilet paper. I take it appreciatively.

‘Jeff’s not the affair type. He sowed his wild oats when he was young.’

‘Did he really?’

‘Yes, he did. I know that for a fact.’

‘But I got the impression you were quite young when you met at the hat stall.’

‘We were, but we didn’t get together then. We were friends for a few years before we became a couple.’

The bottle of wine is empty. That was fast. He goes to the kitchen and returns with another. I contemplate saying I’ve had enough and suggesting a coffee but I don’t really have the emotional energy to get the words out. It’s easier just to accept the wine.

‘Tell me all about it. Let me help you.’ Tom looks at me expectantly, intensely. I owe him an explanation of some kind. After all, I have turned up at his house unannounced and now am behaving like an emotional wreck; I suppose I am here looking for comfort. He can only really give me that if I explain what the matter is. He settles back down on the sofa; there’s hardly a centimetre between our thighs. I’m ridiculously aware of him. His heat, the wine on his breath, his socks (the right one has a hole in it; his big toe is peeking through). There’s something happening. It doesn’t feel like comfort any more. It feels heavier. I take another swig of wine. This bottle isn’t chilled or as good as the first one, it tastes a bit metallic, but I don’t care. I swallow it down anyway.

‘I found something on Jeff’s desk. I wasn’t snooping, I was tidying up.’ I rush to reassure myself as much as Tom. I don’t want him thinking I’m that sneaky, neurotic sort.

‘Of course not,’ he murmurs, gently reassuring, as though he’d never in a million years have judged me as such.

‘It was a book idea.’

‘Right.’

The betrayal of Jeff wanting to expose us burns and throbs inside me. I decide to explain just part of that to Tom. I can perhaps get some comfort and sympathy, even guidance, without further burdening him. ‘Jeff knows something about me that is terrifically private. He is the only person I’ve ever trusted enough to confide this particular thing to and he’s thinking of using it as the basis of his next book.’

‘What’s the secret?’ I hadn’t expected him to ask that. I’d expected him to generally rail against Jeff’s disloyalty, to decisively state that my privacy must be respected, to be incredibly huffy on my behalf. I stare at him, surprised. He meets my gaze. ‘You can tell me.’

‘I had a baby when I was sixteen and gave him up for adoption.’ The words fall out of my mouth in a breathless tumble. They take on a life of their own, determined and rebellious. The confession is so raw that my first instinct is to grab the words and stuff them back in my mouth or, if I can’t do that, then to deny them. Will Tom be disgusted with me? Angry, even? He’s told me about his little boy who was cruelly taken from him; now I’ve told him I gave one up. He’s bound to judge. Will he think I’m selfish and irresponsible?

Tom takes hold of my hand and brings it to his lips. He kisses my fingers. It's a long, hot kiss, his lips pushing hard on my flesh; it's not an erotic kiss but it is full of love. It's the sort of kiss I might have smacked down on Katherine when she was a child if she had fallen over and I wanted to make it all better. I don't know how to respond.

'I forgive you.' It's such a strange thing for him to say. I look at him quizzically. 'Now forgive yourself.'

I pull my hand away from his and tightly wrap both arms around my legs, which I've drawn up under me, shoes slipped off, feet now on the sofa. Katherine sometimes sits in this way if she's lost a lacrosse game, a tight ball of disappointment. I feel strangely cheated. I thought he might ask more. That he'd want to know the circumstances of the pregnancy and the relinquishment; I thought he'd at least ask the baby's name. Peter. I want to tell him about Peter. After all, I have just said that this is my deepest secret, and that, other than Jeff, I've never confided this in anyone. Shouldn't that have some importance? My parents and brothers know, they had to, but only twice in my life have I actively chosen to share this part of my past. Tom has always been so interested in everything I have to say – he wanted to know about my clothes, my career, my parents – so why has he closed down when it comes to this?

I sip my wine and Tom busies himself hunting out his iPhone then connecting it to the speakers; we both suddenly seem aware of the need for background music. *Now forgive yourself*. The words were too glib, given too easily. *I forgive you*. How can he forgive me before he knows more about the situation, about my predicament, my regret, my pain? What does he have to forgive anyway? My crime wasn't against him. And does his slick offer of forgiveness really mean the opposite? Is he shocked by me? Disappointed in me? Or is it that he simply doesn't think this is a big deal?

He's wrong. It's a huge deal.

I think back to when I told Jeff about my son, Peter. I was twenty-four years old. We'd known each other just three months, the same length of time Tom and I have known one another, when I come to think of it. Jeff had already proven himself to be a marvellous friend. I remember meeting him in Regent Street; the cold December air had made his cheeks pink. Hamleys was hell, an orgy of plastic and excess, yet hard to hate because it was stuffed to the roof with excitable kids. Then Wetherspoons: it smelt of cigarettes and beer-stained carpet. Jeff healed me. He made me feel

dignified and unshackled. He was reassuring and uplifting. The horrors submerged. Guilt faded a fraction. Shame slipped away.

I'm so deeply immersed in thinking about Jeff that I'm a little startled when Tom refills my glass and passes it to me again.

The background music he has selected is loungey, sexy. I'm not sure of the artist but I'm pretty certain it's the twenty-first-century equivalent to Marvin Gaye. I look at him, bewildered; it's definitely not the right sort of music to accompany the outpouring of my deepest secrets. He screws up his face, playfully apologetic. 'It's Callum's playlist.'

'I see.'

'Do you want me to turn it off?' I do, really, but it seems petty to say so. I shrug. I have become close to Tom in the past few months; we've been on an intense ride together. He's always seemed so interested in me, so thoughtful and gracious; he's always appeared to understand me so well. I'm trying to reconcile that Tom to this one, who has clumsily dismissed my confession about Peter and my concern that Jeff might exploit my experiences.

Then it occurs to me that Tom is not dismissing me – he wouldn't. He's trying to be tactful. He's trying to minimise the drama of the confession, no doubt because of some sort of embarrassment. I mean, what is he supposed to say? At least he hasn't reacted with anger, disgust or judgement. I should be grateful for that. He's making light of it because he's trying to stop me beating myself up. It must be that. It can't be disinterest. Maybe he's just processing this latest reveal; it is a lot to take in. This theory seems the most logical when he suddenly asks, 'Boy or girl?'

He hadn't even caught the gender. 'A boy,' I confirm. 'Peter.' Tom bobs his head stiffly and then knocks back his glass of wine, draining it. 'Actually, it's his birthday soon.' I'm about to say that he'll be thirty. I wonder whether he's a father himself by now. I might be a grandmother; it's hard to imagine. Impossible to know. He's unlikely even to be called Peter any more.

'It all makes a lot of sense. Your ferocious overprotectiveness towards Katherine isn't just to do with the fact that you were neglected as a child, it's because you're trying to make up for what you did to Peter.' I nod sadly. Jeff was right about one thing: there would certainly be a convincing explanation for the controlling nature of the mother in *The Swap*. Somewhat pathetically, it seems I'm fairly easy to understand.

‘So you, too, think I’m ferociously overprotective, then?’ I ask, trying to sound light but feeling battered. ‘I’d always thought you rather admired my hands-on approach.’

It seems I have messed everything up here, like I always do. I know I irritate my adored daughter with my timetables, structure, ambitions and goals. The truth is, she couldn’t wait to embrace a new, less cloying family. I’ve drifted so far apart from Jeff that he thinks sacrificing my most intimate secret is fair game if it saves his career. I don’t have a career of my own because I’m a mother. But that’s a relationship. Not a career. Men are lucky: they take it for granted that they have a relationship *and* a career, the two things are quite distinct and apart. It allows them to channel their energy and ambition in one direction; their love in another. And what about Olivia? Doesn’t she deserve at least a slice of my protection? If I’m ‘ferocious’, I presumably have strength to spare, but I’ve buried my head in the sand and tried not to get too involved. Yet I am involved; we’re inextricably linked.

Tom turns to me and grimaces. ‘Sorry, awful choice of words. You know I don’t think your instinct to protect is too much. I understand. I’d do anything for my kids, too.’ He reaches out and moves a strand of hair from in front of my eyes, tucks it behind my ear. ‘You must know by now, Alison, that I think you are pretty damn perfect.’

And I still don’t see it coming, no doubt because I’m so caught up in my own thoughts about Katherine, Jeff and Olivia. Tom leans in and kisses me, not on the hand this time and not like a parent kisses a child to soothe them. This is an adult kiss. Square on the mouth. His lips are soft yet firm, warm and in the right place. They know when to stay still and when to move. His lips brush my ear next. Then they’re back on my mouth. I’m too stunned to process this, to react. I feel his unshaven cheek. His warm breath. It’s a technically excellent kiss. Half-formed thoughts whirl around my head and refuse to fasten. He’s Katherine’s biological father. I’m Katherine’s devoted mum. He’s attractive. I’m interested. Flattered. He’s lonely. I’m scared. It really is a lovely kiss.

Except that it’s not Jeff’s kiss.

It comes to me. Instinctively, like the act of breathing out after holding air in my lungs for a fraction longer than is comfortable. The thoughts sharpen. Clarify. I process, I react.

I pull away, gently, so as not to hurt his feelings, but to make sure he knows I'm not interested I carefully yet firmly put my hands on his chest and push to make some space between us.

'No, Tom.'

'Why not?' He looks genuinely confused.

'Well, Jeff, for a start.'

'You're not his wife.'

I find this a bit offensive; I hate it when people make this distinction and judge our relationship in this way. 'I am. As good as,' I say defensively. I think about the proposal Jeff threw out in frustration and fear last week. It's ironic it occurred as I was insisting that I trusted Tom. I do. On the whole. A little less now. We were in a difficult situation before; now he's plunged us into something considerably more awkward and bewildering.

'He doesn't make you happy. I've seen it these past few months.'

'I'm unhappy because of the situation we all find ourselves in. We've raised each other's babies. Katherine might have the mutated gene. That overpowers my every thought.' How might he imagine I could be happy with that hanging over us?

'You barely talk to one another. It's me you turn to.'

My head is woozy, I've drunk far too much, far too quickly. I've barely eaten all day. I recognise the truth in his words. There *is* a connection between us. I *do* find Tom attractive and sympathetic. He's worked very hard at ingratiating himself with me. I *haven't* been talking to Jeff. However, even through the alcohol-induced fog, I wonder whether that's Jeff's fault or mine. Or a bit of both.

'I've been thinking, Alison. We could be a family.'

'What?'

'All of us together. I bet you've always wanted more children.' He smiles at me, delighted to have alighted on this solution. Is he serious? As if anything can be as easy as that. 'Katherine adores her siblings. She's always disappointed if they're not around.' With the notable exception of Olivia – but I don't get time to interject because Tom continues: 'I'm Katherine's father. You are her mother.' This doesn't make sense, it's not logical, and yet on some level I do know what he means. I've just had the same thought myself. 'Alison, I am in love with you.' I stare at him, open-mouthed. I can't comprehend what's happening. This kind, handsome man is declaring his love for me. That's madness. He looks so much like Katherine, it's

peculiar. I could almost fall in love with him just because I adore her. I almost have. *Yet.*

Jeff is Katherine's dad. Jeff is the one who has brought her up. He's the one who has dotted her chickenpox spots with soothing lotion; I remember he spent hours playing cat's cradle and simply holding her hands so she wouldn't scratch the sores and scar. He's the one who taught her to swim; she hated inflatable wings and refused to wear them so she'd simply wrap her arms around his neck and kick while he swam. I always thought they looked like a couple of turtles. He's the one who learnt that the only way to get her to eat peas was by pretending to be King Poseidon using a trident. He sat on the nippy British beach with her, building sandcastles, even though we were wearing waterproofs; he even queued for ice cream. He always had a handkerchief to wipe her face. I know because I was there with him. We've always been side by side. All along. We're a team.

Tom's thoughts, clearly, could not be further from my own. He lunges forward and kisses me again. This time, there's nothing gentle, tentative or lovely about the kiss. It's passionate; determined to the point of aggressive. As I try to manoeuvre away from him, he pushes his entire body on mine and I am on my back. Before I know it, he is lying on top of me. I struggle, but he doesn't stop. His hands run up and down my body: my thighs, my waist, my breasts. I try to push him off me but he just grabs my arms and pins them above my head, laughing. He's so big, it seems he can hold both my hands down with one of his while his other continues to explore my body roughly. His hand is up my jumper; he makes a fast and clumsy lunge for one of my breasts, somehow finding his way inside the lace of my bra.

It's then that Olivia walks into the room.

I gently push open the front door. I'm not sure what it will be like to face Jeff. I'm still absolutely furious with him regarding his pitch, but now I have kissed Tom – or at least been kissed by Tom. Do two wrongs make a right? I sigh, wearily. No, absolutely not. When have they ever? I wish we could just scrub tonight; I wish none of it had ever happened. Is it progress, I wonder, that I only want to turn back the clock twenty-four hours, not three months?

I took a taxi home. As much as I wanted to be out of there, I knew I couldn't drive myself, as I've had far too much to drink. I left my car at Tom's. I'll have to collect it tomorrow; the thought already distresses me. Can I manage to sneak around there, early on, and retrieve it without having to speak to him? I just can't face him right now. I can't imagine when I'll be able to face him again. Tom did not want me to leave at all. Even when Olivia stomped out of the house, shouting, 'You are a moron! You both make me sick!' he didn't run after her, he just kept saying to me, 'We can't let her spoil the moment.'

'What moment?' I demanded. 'Where is she going?' I pushed him off me and straightened my clothes as I ran out of the front door and along the path; the frosty night air bit my bare arms. Olivia was already out of sight. 'Where will she go?' I asked.

'To her friend's, I suppose.' Tom shrugged. He didn't look in the slightest bit fazed. I know he encourages greater independence in Olivia than I manage with Katherine. I understand that, as a family, they have been through so much more than most families ever have to stand and I assume that's why they are more self-governing. Generally, I've admired Tom for fostering confidence and autonomy in his children but, under these circumstances, I can't help stressing about Olivia's whereabouts.

'Which friend?'

'She has a number of them.'

I scowled at him. ‘Aren’t you concerned?’

‘She’ll settle down, probably come back in half an hour. I’ll text her if it makes you feel better.’ He did text but I wasn’t surprised when the phone failed to shudder with a responding message.

‘I’m getting a cab.’

‘There’s no need for that.’

‘There’s every need.’

‘We were on the brink of something there, Alison. You know this has been on the cards. Just give in to it.’

I insisted on standing near the door to wait for the cab and while I was doing so Tom got a text from Olivia saying she was going to stay at her friend Rosie’s. He resisted saying ‘I told you so’, but his expression conveyed his belief that, once again, my reaction had been panicky and that he knew his family well enough to make the call on their safety. Again he tried to convince me that this meant I really didn’t have to hurry away.

‘Alison, please. Don’t rush off. We need to talk about us. About our family.’ I had no clue as to how to respond to that; I stared at him, mouth gawping. He stepped towards me, his face just centimetres away from mine. I was glad to hear the toot of the taxi horn.

Back home, I walk straight into the kitchen for a glass of water. I need to start thinking clearly. This is a mess. A big, fat, unholy mess. And now I think I’ve played my part in it being so. The house feels other; still and empty. Katherine is at Maddie’s and I can’t bring myself to hunt out Jeff. He might be sulking in his office, or skulking in the sitting room; it’s even possible that he’s asleep in our bed. Imagining his contentment and lack of concern causes another shard of anger to spike me. Shouldn’t he know we are on the edge of a disaster here? Why hasn’t he sat up and waited for me? On the other hand, thank goodness he *hasn’t* sat up and waited for me. I’m sure he’d be able to see the betraying kiss on my lips.

Then I see it on the breakfast bar, left out quite prominently so that I cannot miss it: a small pile of A4 paper. Tentatively, I move closer. I’m not sure what I’m about to discover, or what more I am up to discovering.

On top of the pile there’s a printout of an email. It’s from Sue, his agent. I automatically check the date and time it was sent: only three hours ago.

Wonderful concept, Jeff! I’ve already sent ‘Ding Dong, Five Months Gone’ – working title (I think we could find something more emotive) on to your publishers.

This is such a raw, affecting story. I haven’t come across anything similar. I don’t doubt we’ll hear from them soon. As you know they have been champing at the

bit for this!

Well done! Put your feet up this weekend. You deserve it. – Sue.

*Ding Dong, Five Months Gone?* Is he insane? What happened to *The Swap*? I sigh, wondering why I even care what it's called. I don't want the atrocity ever to come into existence. I suppose, after years of being involved in Jeff's work, helping him come up with concepts, listening to him as he discussed ideas and read chapters to me for continuous review as he's writing, I'm simply on automatic pilot. And what does this mean, anyway? Why has Jeff left me this email? Is he gloating? Justifying himself?

Underneath the printout of the email is the synopsis and then the first few chapters. I don't want to read it again. The words are still scalded on to my mind but, like picking at a scab or scratching an insect bite, I find it impossible to resist. I climb up on to a kitchen stool and begin.

At first, I don't understand at all.

There is a bright, worthy but somewhat artily pretentious father with the role of lone parent to a seventeen-year-old boy, Oliver, but there is no sign of Karl or his renowned and respected architect father – or his highly controlling housewife mother, come to that. The synopsis specifies that the novel will be written from the different viewpoints of the single dad and his teenage son ... *girlfriend appears on the doorstep ... medical evidence ... unequivocal ... five months pregnant ... young boy has to take on the responsibility of parenthood.*

What?

I read it over. Once again, I can feel my legs shaking, knees knocking together, but not with the horror I felt earlier today but with something like relief. I read to the bottom. This is not the plot I read earlier this evening, it's not about our lives. I begin to think I'm going mad.

I come to sense that Jeff is in the kitchen. I know he's standing in the doorway watching me read the document. He gets milk out of the fridge, pours two mugs of it and spoons in cocoa before popping both mugs into the microwave.

'Why didn't you tell me you hadn't presented *The Swap*?'

'I did. You didn't listen.' His voice is calm, even. He places one mug down in front of me. 'Careful, it's hot.'

It's funny, isn't it? If anyone were to ask me how I would define love or, less ephemerally, if anyone were to ask me how I know Jeff loves me, I

doubt I'd say because he makes me cocoa and warns me not to scald my mouth, but in this moment I think perhaps that's how I do know. I jumped to an awful conclusion. I think it was understandable but, admittedly, I didn't let him explain himself. I didn't trust him. Yet he's willing to forgive me my rashness, to chalk it up to little more than a spat. Which, for sure, it was. The relief. The relief.

Except. I think of Tom's lips on mine. His hands on my body. Why did he do that? Did he really think he had a chance with me? Had I given him reason to believe that? Maybe. It was a kiss that came out of turmoil and anger and trauma, but nonetheless a kiss. The familiar fizziness starts again in my nose; I realise tears are threatening. I put my head in my hands.

'Oh, thank God. I just couldn't have coped with that.'

'The publicity around me publishing a book based on our lives?'

'No, the betrayal of you publishing a book based on our lives.'

He nods. 'I'd never do that. I thought you'd know that much about me, at least. Why didn't you trust me more, Alison?'

'I saw the pitch, Jeff. *The Swap*. It was in your mind at one point.'

'Yes.' He looks at his feet, awkward. He's wearing Ugg slippers, which always makes me smile; a man really can get away with a lot if he's a writer. 'It was,' he confesses, 'but only for the briefest of time.'

'But you do use your own life as inspiration. I know very well that I've appeared in your books in various guises.' He looks a bit hangdog, caught out. Versions of me are in all four of Jeff's novels. I'm easy to recognise. I'm often cloaked in a ubiquitous fog of fretfulness or apprehension, which, more often than not, the hero finds infuriating, because he fondly remembers the amusing, sexy woman he fell in love with. I'm rarely usefully employed. I self-assign to a bit part as I'm often irritatingly non-committal about expressing views on whatever catastrophe is unfolding in the plot of the novel. I'm always a little thinner in his books because, if you could invent a perfect world, why wouldn't you make your wife drop a dress size?

'I should have thrown it away, but you know I never bin any ideas.' This is true: he superstitiously thinks that dismissing ideas is somehow rejecting creativity. I suppose, since he's been incredibly stressed about his flow and whether he might have writer's block, rejecting any idea would seem a sacrilege to him. 'But you do see that I didn't present *The Swap* to Sue.'

'Yes.'

‘You believe me when I say I’d never expose you, or Katherine, or Olivia – any of us – in such a way.’

‘Yes.’ I believe him because he’s the man who sometimes follows me into the utility room and helps me pair socks. Because he’s the man who mows the grass even though he thinks I’m insane for not hiring a gardener. Because he’s the man who still joins me in the ritual of picking out a gift for the baby I gave up thirty years ago. Because he’s the man who will stand by me, no matter what the results are of Katherine’s tests. He holds his arms wide and I fling myself into them.

We are peaceful and content for a few minutes, clinging to one another. Then Jeff asks, ‘Where did you go?’

‘What?’ I understand his question, but I’m buying time. I’m pretty sure this newly negotiated peace will be destroyed if he hears I ran to Tom; besides, I’m not ready to tell him what happened tonight. I know I must; there have been far too many secrets in this house of late. That has to stop. I’m going to tell him about that first secret lunch I had with Tom and about the private conversations we’ve had that I should have shared. I’m going to tell him how Tom has misinterpreted my friendship, how he kissed me, first gently and then quite brutally.

But not yet.

I distract him. ‘So this concept – a single dad is bringing up his son and the son gets his girlfriend pregnant?’

‘That’s it in a nutshell. I thought maybe a one-night-stand rather than a long-term girlfriend. There would be the humour of “Who are you?” “I’m the mother of your baby.”’ Growing in confidence, he dares to make a stab at the characters’ voices.

‘Poignant humour.’

‘Indeed. She would move in; the boy and the father both support her through the pregnancy. They’re inept at first, but become increasingly proficient and responsible.’

‘And they get it together at the end of the novel?’

‘Maybe. Or maybe she goes to university and the boy and his father will take responsibility full time. That would still be a happy ending.’

‘It would indeed.’

It’s fascinating, this part of the process, when everything is up for grabs and Jeff can play God with his characters, controlling the outcome, serving up just desserts. It must sometimes be tricky for him living in the real

world, where he is as mortal and helpless as everyone else. Where there is no guarantee of justice, no immunity from mistakes or regret.

‘I want this to start out as a really funny book. Irreverent, zeitgeisty.’ He’s trying to look modest but I can tell he’s pleased with himself. And so he should be: he’s right, it’s not easy coming up with a new concept, something no one else has investigated, and I think this is it. I can imagine he’ll do a good job of it. He’ll write an amusing, relevant and emotional book.

It’s been a while since I have shown him how much I care about what he’s up to. In truth, it’s been a while since I actually did care, so now I’m keen to show him I’m interested. ‘How did you come up with the idea?’

Jeff’s face turns a distinctive red. ‘Ah, now. There is something I wanted to talk to you about.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve been mulling it over for a week or so now, but I’ve just never been sure of when would be the right moment to bring it up.’

I nod in sympathy. The concept of ‘the right moment’ has vanished from our home. *Whoosh!* Gone. Since Tom sauntered into our lives and destroyed everything we thought we knew, when have we had a moment that wasn’t stained with fear, regret or reprisals?

‘Alison, there is no easy way to say this.’

‘Just spit it out.’ I want to sound encouraging, but I think I come across as a bit aggressive, as Jeff – only just recovering from our row – flashes me an uncertain look.

‘The idea for the novel occurred to me when I saw Olivia reading a pregnancy book.’

‘Olivia? Hang on, Jeff. Are you saying Olivia is pregnant?’ Jeff looks shamefaced.

‘Well, that’s the thing, I don’t know. Initially, the idea never crossed my mind. I thought it was maybe a biology project or something. I mean, she’s only fifteen. But in the last few days I started to wonder—’

‘What? Hold up.’ I put my hands in the air as though that might actually stop something. Time, perhaps? The onslaught of more problems? ‘When was this exactly? Where?’

‘I was in the university library. I’ve been going there quite a bit. Partially for info, partially for inspiration. I like watching young adults interact with each other. Alison, I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be young. I thought I

knew, but I don't. They all burn, all the time, and they are excited, uncertain, elated, depressed by turn.' This conversation has echoes of the one I had with Tom at the ice rink. I'd like to investigate it further and, obviously, Jeff feels inspired, but I need to bring him back to the point.

'Olivia?' I say firmly.

'Oh, yes, well. When we went for that Sunday walk – way back, do you remember?'

'Yes.'

'Well, we spent a bit of time chatting.' I remember that, too. I'd always wanted to ask him what they were talking about, but I didn't dare intrude on their relationship. 'She mentioned that her school library wasn't particularly well stocked. She has quite the enquiring mind, you know.' I didn't know, but I have a feeling I should have. 'Anyway, I suggested that she use the uni library, even though she's not a student. With my position there, I got it waved through.' He's trying to downplay his largesse but I know he's thrilled with himself. 'I sometimes see her studying there.'

So she *has* been visiting the library, after all. I don't have a moment to feel pleased and proud of this. 'Go on.'

'I don't usually try to go over and chat, I don't want to cramp her style – she's often with other students.'

'Older students? Do you think her boyfriend is older than her?' My heart sinks to the floor. I hear it thud.

'I don't know.'

'We *should* know.'

'Maybe. Anyway, normally I just give her a discreet nod, but one time she was on her own so I decided I would go and say hi. That's when I noticed she was reading a pregnancy book.'

'What was it called? Did you see?'

'*What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Do you remember it? We had a copy, didn't we?'

We did. It's a bible for every mum-to-be. It's not a book you'd read for a biology project. I wonder if it can be true. Olivia pregnant? Tom didn't believe that she was going to the library; it seems he was wrong about that – but he did know about an unsuitable boyfriend; that much, I'm afraid, he *was* right about. 'Did you ask her about it?'

'No.' He looks contrite. Depressed. 'I didn't think about it, not at the time. I'm sorry, Alison. She scrambled to put the book away the minute she

saw me. I distinctly got the impression that she didn't want to talk about it with me. As I say, I assumed it was for a school project. Then, I suppose, because it gave me the idea for my novel, I just got caught up in that—' He breaks off and shrugs, but it's not a shrug of indifference: it is regret.

'Oh, Jeff.'

'I know, I know. I'm sorry. I should have said something. I should have thought.'

'Oh, my poor girl. She's fifteen.'

'It does happen, Alison. You, more than anyone, should know that.'

I do. Yes, I do. I also know how hard a thing it is to deal with, and she's dealing with this alone.

'But she's just a baby herself,' I murmur.

Suddenly, it hits me. I'm almost knocked off the kitchen stool as a huge wave of palpable, physical love practically floors me. I think of Olivia's shocked and confused face tonight and all I want to do is soothe her, reassure her. I think of her secretive, sulky comments and I feel a need to cheer her. I remember her moments of wit and honesty and I want to encourage her, agree with her. I'm full of compassion, bursting with it. I want to reach out and touch her, but I've never been able to. She's run away from me and, let's face it, I've never tried to chase after her. I will help her now. I will. She is not Katherine, she's nothing like her, but she is a child and she is alone. I brought her into the world, I have to help her negotiate a path through it.

'You should have talked to her, no matter if she was reluctant, no matter if you were embarrassed. She needs someone in her corner.' I feel this acutely. I wonder how far along she is, I wonder what her plans are. I imagine she's too shocked and terrified to have any plans yet. I know it took me weeks to face up to my pregnancy. Just long enough to blow all my chances of getting decent grades in the exams I'd worked so hard for.

Olivia must not be left to deal with this alone.

'Have you got Olivia's mobile number?' I ask.

'Yes, I have.'

'Give it to me.' I send a text. I keep it simple. I tell her where and when to meet me tomorrow. I don't tell her what I want to talk about. I don't ask her if she will come. I don't want to give her the opportunity to turn me down.

## *Eighteen Years Ago*

*She fell in love with him the day she met him in Camden but considered it impossible. He was so full and complete; she was so lacking. What could he possibly see in her? She wasn't going to make a show of herself by throwing herself at him. Instead, she'd settle for friendship and be grateful for that much. So much. Someone who knew the very worst there was to know, the darkest, deepest, most painful and shameful secret and yet still valued her. It seemed almost too incredible. A miracle. She sometimes thought it was more than she deserved. She certainly didn't dare push it.*

*For four years – four long years of yearning – she stood by while he had flings with lithe, foreign girls who spoke English with faltering, provocative accents or posh, leggy girls who rode horses and had weekend parties in the country. They settled into a pattern: he'd have his fun then turn up at her scruffy flatshare and suggest they go for a pint, over which he'd complain that they didn't get him, these other women, not really, not any of them. 'Not like you, Alison,' he'd say.*

*Their friends shook their heads, wondering what was taking them so long. They were clearly just right for each other. He buoyed her up; she stopped him floating away. Alison felt for him, as much as she did for herself. She wished she had thinner legs and silkier hair because then maybe he'd notice her in the way she longed for him to. The way he eventually did. She had not suddenly transformed, Pygmalion-style, a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, so she reasoned that the time arrived because he simply, inevitably, grew up. He finally came to value the importance of being understood, thoroughly and completely. She thought it was odd that it took him so long because that's what she'd fallen in love with in the first place – his ability to understand her, to accept her.*

*Not that Jeff would ever agree with Alison's account of the way their relationship had progressed when, in years to come, she would repeat it in a jokey voice to dinner-party guests and friends. He would for ever insist that*

*he had been in love with her from the get-go but had waited four years because he wanted her to be ready. He wanted her to be sure of him. He claimed that the other girls had been time-fillers; he was always trying to tell her that she was his one, but she'd never listened.*

*Alison would laugh and shake her head, finding it hard to believe.*

*But that was his staunch and secure memory of their love and she'd never persuade him otherwise.*

Even though it's now past two in the morning, I find it difficult to fall to sleep. Jeff and I have just made love. It's been a very long time since we've connected like this. At all. I've missed him. His warmth, his confidence. I let both sink into me. I'm glad he's back. I'm glad I am. His arm is hot and heavy, thrown over my stomach. I can hear his breathing: it's slow but he's not quite asleep yet.

'Why are humans so complex? How come we manage to blight everything?' I ask the dark room.

'It's not *all* blighted,' insists Jeff kindly. It's nice to get a response and it's reassuring that he doesn't accept we are in the eye of a storm. For once, I don't bother to remind him what might be. He knows the situation as well as I do. Or, at least, most of it.

Making the effort, he props himself up on one elbow, head resting in his hand. He can barely keep his eyes open. It reminds me of the nights long ago when we first got together. Our eyes stung so much with tiredness, but we couldn't stand the idea of losing a moment of each other to sleep. 'I'm so glad you are piling in and helping Olivia.'

'Of course.'

He raises his eyebrows and I have the self-awareness to feel a bit sheepish. There's no 'of course' about it. Until last night Jeff hasn't been able to take my affection for Olivia as read. Nor have I.

'I've been so surprised by how you've held her at arm's length.' He trails a finger along my hip. 'It's been very hard to watch. I mean, you've shown more interest in just about every kid you've ever come across than you have in her, be that Katherine's friends, your friends' kids, my nephews. I was hurt for her and—' He pauses. 'I was hurt for me. I took it personally. It was like you were rejecting me. The baby we made wasn't of any interest to you.'

‘It wasn’t that at all. I didn’t dare love Olivia. I hardly dared so much as look at her.’ I don’t bother to point out that Olivia didn’t seem in the least bit interested in having a relationship with me either, that she wouldn’t give me her mobile number or answer my friend request, that she told her dad she didn’t want anything to do with me. I’m the adult; I shouldn’t have accepted her rejection so willingly, I should have continued to offer her opportunities to be in our lives, but I thought I had to guard Katherine. I thought there wasn’t enough room for two of them. That I couldn’t have any entitlement to both. I try to explain: ‘I’ve been so terrified they’d take Katherine away.’

‘Who? The Trubys?’

‘Yes, or worse still, cancer. I’ve been gripped by the fear that if I let Katherine drop out of focus, even for a moment, then I might be punished for it.’

Jeff’s fingers are resting on my arm now. It tickles, but in a pleasant way. ‘You do know that’s nonsense. You do know that none of this is your fault.’

I sigh. ‘I once read that in days gone by the Chinese had a superstition never to praise a newborn baby because it would draw the attention of evil spirits and demons. These spirits and demons would jealously want to take that baby from you if it was highly valued. They’d want that treasure for themselves.’ I check to see if Jeff is following me or whether he’s drifted off. He looks alert, interested. ‘So, instead, the Chinese referred to their babies in unfavourable terms. You know, “Oh, my baby is too fat”; “My baby is slow and boss-eyed.”’ Jeff smiles, giving me confidence enough to splutter out my fear. ‘It sounds crazy but sometimes I think that by adoring Katherine as much as I have, I’ve been asking for trouble. I think all parents of sick or lost children must wonder the same.’

‘That’s not at all rational. You’re worrying about not giving her enough attention and yet blaming yourself for giving her too much.’

‘Since when have I been known to be especially rational?’

‘True.’ He beams in a way that ensures I don’t take offence.

‘The thing is, I love her so much it’s not possible to be rational. I don’t think many parents are. She’s my world. You understand that?’

‘Yes, certainly I do. She’s my world, too.’

‘And now our world has been blown apart.’

‘No,’ he says firmly. ‘But it has expanded. We have to find room for Olivia. I’m glad you’ve made a step in that direction. We’re allowed to love

her. There's no question for me who is whose parent – the parents are the ones who do the bringing-up – but there's room for us all to love them both. I've been thinking about this, Alison, a lot, and the way I see it is that we need to have a proper relationship with Olivia or move away and let her go completely.'

'How can you talk about moving away? She might be pregnant. She needs us.'

Jeff looks relieved, happy. 'I want to love her. Honestly, I don't know how I'm going to be able to stop myself. I think she's great. She's just like you.'

'Chaotic with contraception, you mean?'

'No, I mean independent, feisty, passionate. Maybe a bit reckless.' I've hardly noticed any of these qualities in Olivia – how could I have? I've only met her a handful of times – and I struggle to recall them in myself, but I understand that Jeff is trying to pay me a compliment.

'We'll find room for her in our life. I do love her, Jeff. I don't really understand how, I hardly know her, but there's something instinctive.'

Jeff collapses on to his back. For the first time in months I see some contentment in his face. We haven't solved anything but we have, at least, redrawn the teams. We're on the same side. There is only one side. 'And we have to find room for Tom, too,' he adds, taking a deep breath.

I freeze. 'Oh, Jeff.'

'What?'

'You don't know the half.'

'Then tell me,' he mumbles.

I know I have to. He needs to know what Tom said to me, that he suggested we could run away and make a family together, that he tried to exploit the fact that Jeff and I are not legally married, ignoring the fact that we *feel* married. He needs to know about the kiss. The thought makes me squirm. The first kiss, it was careful, tentative; maybe, it took me a beat too long to move away. The second kiss was horrible. Not at all careful but insistent, unpleasant. I don't want to recall it. What was he thinking? Was that passion? I don't know where to start. I have a tendency to blame myself for, oh, just about everything, and obviously this is no different. Tom suggested we could make a family, that I should leave Jeff. He wouldn't have said that unless he thought there was some chance of it being received favourably. We have been talking, moving ever closer, for weeks now. I

thought that was all about our relationship with the girls, but was I kidding myself? Was I fooling him? I turn to Jeff because I need to look him in the eye when I say what I have to say, but his eyes have closed. His breathing has slowed. He's fallen fast asleep, a long day and sex finally staking their claim on his consciousness.

'I love you, Jeff,' I say, gently kissing his lips. He makes a semiconscious sound in response and rolls over. Maybe it's best that I haven't had chance to say anything more. I'm so tired myself I can barely think. I can't imagine I'm going to explain things very well, because I don't understand them myself. It's tempting to forget the entire awfulness. I mean, maybe I am making too much of this? What if the last night meant nothing to Tom – after all, he had had a fair bit to drink. He is a widower. Sometimes, the loneliness must overwhelm him. He can't have meant any of what he said, not really. I imagine he's going to wake up tomorrow mortified, full of regret and remorse about his clumsy pounce, which, at best, was misplaced passion, at worst – well, assault. Maybe the best thing is to say nothing more. Least said, soonest mended.

We have enough on our plates.

The café is shabby chic but clean. It has wooden floors and waist-height panelling painted in a shade I recognise as Mole's Breath. A peculiar name, if you think about it. Not as attractive as the colour itself. The place has a friendly and industrious atmosphere, not something I was necessarily expecting when I first clocked the impossibly beautiful staff through the window. The waitress is slight, Mediterranean-looking; she fills the lulls between serving customers by wrapping cutlery in paper-napkin sleeping bags. The barista is lanky in a trendy, androgynous-model way rather than a geeky way. He has an Afro the width of his shoulders and bushy sideburns that suggest an acceptable level of vanity and confidence; acceptable, and appropriate because he is gorgeous. I like people to be confident. I don't want people to take until they are forty-plus to know that being twenty is fantastic. However, as I've always found terrifically trendy young men intimidating, I suddenly blank on what I might order. A flat white seems inadequate. Here, they probably serve iced frappuccinos in five flavours with whipped organic goat's cream on top. I need something. I'm too old to consume two thirds of a bottle of wine, have only six hours sleep and expect to be bright and breezy. I rarely drink more than a glass nowadays and this morning I'm reminded why. I ask for some sparkling water: 'To start with. I'm waiting for someone.' As soon as I say it, I regret it. Have I jinxed it? Will she come? After last night. After what she saw – or at least what she thought she saw.

Each little wooden table has a vase hosting a modest sprig of evergreen rather than a bunch of flowers. There is an abundance of those old-fashioned but now spot-on-trend glass domes covering mouth-watering scones and tempting chocolate cakes. There are oversized jars housing oversized cookies and macaroons. It will be overpriced, too, but that doesn't matter. There are fairy lights trailed about on every surface and hanging from the ceiling.

I wonder if she'll turn up.

I congratulate myself on suggesting this place to meet. I only know of it because Katherine's mentioned it a few times; it's somewhere she and her schoolfriends sometimes like to come on the rare occasion they have Saturday shopping expeditions. I think Olivia will approve. I hope she will, but I can't be certain because I don't know her tastes and style. Yet, for me, the best thing of all, in amongst this overwhelming cuteness, is the choice of music: sweet tunes from the fifties and early sixties about love in a bygone era. An altogether different sort of love to the sort any girl expects nowadays. Yet, while possibly obsolete, it is still tremendously aspirational. At least *I* think so. The lyrics bring to mind Jeff's gentle and genuine lovemaking last night. The songs include words like 'forever' and 'true' in their lyrics, instead of 'bitch' and 'ho'. I like it.

I got Jeff to drop me off at Tom's before eight o'clock this morning. I figured he'd be sleeping off his hangover and I'd be able to retrieve my car without bumping into him. I've arrived here early. An hour early. I would have asked Olivia to meet me here at ten, or even nine, because since Jeff said she might be pregnant I've wanted nothing other than to hold her in my arms and tell her everything is going to be OK, I'm going to make sure of it. But then I considered that she might be suffering from morning sickness. I thought I had a better chance of her turning up if I suggested eleven, so she could have a lie-in, so that it wouldn't be quite so much of a chore to meet me. In the same vein of thinking, I've resisted texting Katherine, so far. When she was younger and went on a sleepover, I usually texted around 8 a.m.; I simply couldn't wait any longer. Since she's now been on several school trips and completed her Bronze Duke of Edinburgh Award I am more used to her being uncontactable for a day or so. I know she prefers it if I don't text to ask what she's having for breakfast. It takes everything I have to give her some space.

I suppose I also need some space. Space between being Katherine's mum and being Olivia's – what? Not mum, certainly. Not mum, *exactly*. She's made it obvious enough that she doesn't want that, but she wants something. She needs something. If I can, I'll give her whatever it is she needs; I will. I spot her pushing open the door and let out a sigh of relief. She's come: it's something, it's a start. She scans the room, finds me, scowls as I throw out a little wave, walks towards me with her head down. Now she is here I almost wish she wasn't. I think of the last time I saw her.

Her father's face pushed into mine, his hands all over my body. It's horrible, for both of us. I have to get past that. It's not important in comparison to why I asked her for a meeting.

'Hello, Olivia. You look very pretty.' She looks irritated with me.

'Don't.'

I am not sure if she is refuting my statement, as in 'No, I don't look pretty', or telling me not to compliment her, not to bother trying to ingratiate myself, as in 'Don't go there'. I wish I hadn't said something as banal but, really, she does look very pretty. Her skin is luminous, her eyes are sparkling. Oh goodness, she's glowing. I'm not sure why I decided to open this way. I'd never say something similar to any of Katherine's friends. I know well enough that such an overt compliment is likely to make a teen squirm. Compliments about an item of clothing or a hairstyle are acceptable, but a general compliment about a teen's look is cringeworthy and met with despair. I guess being nervous has made me forget as much.

She pulls out the wooden chair opposite me, it drags along the floor. Reluctance is oozing from her. I'd prepared myself for a prickly conversation, it's already worse than that by ten times over.

'Can I get you anything?'

'No.'

'The cakes look wonderful.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'A cappuccino, then?' I don't ever offer Katherine coffee, indeed I try to discourage her if she chooses it; I always think she's a bit young for those artificial stimulants. I realise I think of Olivia as so much older; ridiculous, since they are the exact same age. I feel swamped with guilt. If artificial stimulants aren't good for Katherine, then they aren't good for Olivia either, *especially* not Olivia, considering her condition – what am I thinking! 'Or an orange juice. Look, they squeeze the oranges here,' I offer.

'No. Thanks.' The 'thanks' was an afterthought. I wonder if she has just remembered her mother saying, 'Manners!' and prodding her, if not with an actual finger then at least with a look, because I think Annabel must have drilled the importance of manners into her children. I feel a flicker in my chest for this motherless child who is still trying to do the right thing by her mum, even though it's all going wrong. Even though the adults around her seem to be doing the wrong thing.

The waitress arrives at our table. I order a pot of Earl Grey and a slice of lemon-drizzle cake. I'm not especially hungry but, if I order cake, Olivia might be tempted to follow suit.

'A glass of tap water, please.' I understand her choice. She's saying, *I don't want anything from you. I won't accept anything from you.* She flashes her eyes at me. She's wearing a lot of eyeliner.

'Oh, have something to eat, or at least a hot chocolate.' She shakes her head. The waitress takes the menus away and leaves us to our awkwardness.

We both stare at the table for what feels like an eternity. 'I'm sure it will be worth the wait,' I blurt, although, in reality, we haven't been waiting longer than about five seconds and, besides, Olivia is waiting only for tap water. I wish I didn't have an overwhelming need to fill in every conversational hiatus. It's pathetic. Olivia clearly thinks so, too. She glares at me, loathing my insistent chirpy capability or, worse still, not believing in it at all.

I have no alternative but to launch in. 'So, it's been difficult.' She tilts her head, forcing me to elaborate. 'All of it. Everything, since we met.'

'That's an understatement.' Her tone is one of contemptuous incredulity.

'Yes, I suppose it is.' I glance about, looking for inspiration. It isn't hiding behind the salt and pepper pots; it isn't chalked up on the trendy blackboard displaying the menu. Jeff would probably know what to say; he's the wordsmith. 'I often find that the right words elude me.' She looks at me quizzically. 'Escape me.'

Her expression instantly turns to one of total disdain. 'I know what "elude" means.'

'Of course, I wasn't implying—'

'Yes, you were. You think I'm thick.' Her eyes slide across the table and then up at me. Cold with rejection.

'I don't.'

'I might not go to a posh private school but I'm not thick. I'm on for a bunch of As and A stars.' She drops my gaze and mutters to the table, 'Or at least I was, after last summer's exams. Who knows now? This hasn't exactly been the most normal of years.'

So many thoughts skitter through my head at once, like a million flies buzzing around a jam scone; I don't know where to start. It kills me that she's given up already. I want to tell her she doesn't have to relinquish the

A and A-star grades. I won't let history repeat itself. I also wonder whether she feels cheated out of the financial advantages that were her birthright. The thought has never occurred to me until now. I'm ashamed to admit as much. I haven't once paused to see this from her point of view.

'I didn't go to a posh private school either,' I offer. Olivia looks at me from under her fringe. 'And, by the way, I certainly don't think you are thick.'

'Then why did you feel the need to explain what "elude" means.'

'I wasn't explaining its meaning. I thought I was coming over a bit—' I search for the right word. 'A bit standoffish by using the word, so I changed it. It wasn't a fault in you that I was trying to compensate for, it was a fault in me.' She glares at me, reading me, checking for sincerity, seeing if she is being palmed off with an excuse. I don't dare move a muscle in my face: I hope she'll find whatever she is looking for there.

She must do, because she nods and says, 'I'll have a slice of carrot cake.' I flag down the waitress and order it, and an orange juice. I hold fire until our order is delivered. I resist chatting to the waitress. I need to stay focused.

'So where do we start?'

'How about the fact I saw you with my dad's tongue down your throat? That was disgusting.' I make myself meet her eyes, but I don't see disgust. She looks at me with a defiant, vulnerable glare. She now seems younger than fifteen.

'I'm very sorry about that.'

She waves her hand, feigning indifference. 'Whatever.'

'We didn't actually have— I don't want you thinking—'

'Save it for Jeff.' She cuts me dead with a cold look.

'Will you tell Katherine?'

'Katherine, Katherine, Katherine. It's all you ever think about.' It is. Almost all. I wouldn't blame her for telling Katherine or Callum; she must be tempted to cause trouble for me. Olivia chews her nails, letting me sweat. 'No, I'm not going to tell bloody Katherine. It may have escaped your notice, but we're not exactly bestie buddies, gasping to share confidences.'

'It hasn't escaped my notice. I know you don't want to meet up with her.'

'What? It's her that— Oh, forget it.' Olivia glares at me. I can feel her eyes boring holes into my face. Eventually, she asks, 'Why did you do it?'

Did you think we could make some sort of big, happy family?’

So she has assumed that I instigated the kissing, or at least willingly went along with it: naturally, she has – she’s unlikely to blame her own father or think badly of him. I decide it’s easier to shoulder the responsibility rather than ruin him for her. He’s the only parent she has. ‘Pathetically, I did. Briefly. Yes.’

‘Really? I thought you were going to tell me it was dad who made the pass. That would be just like him.’ She says this with confidence, and now I wish I had come clean: I think she could have handled it.

‘Well—’

‘Aren’t you old enough to know better?’ And I see it. I see what Jeff has been going on about. She’s so me. Under it all. For a moment, I think I know her well. Perhaps infinitely. She’s guarded. Realistic. Disappointed. To be fair, she has enough to be fed up about. Suddenly, she looks weary, bored. I wonder if she’s thinking about her own problems. ‘Look, what you get up to with Dad is your business. It’s nothing to do with me. Why would I care?’ A million reasons. ‘It’s your funeral.’ I think it’s an odd turn of phrase, considering everything. ‘But I feel bad for Jeff.’

I do, too. ‘Nothing happened.’

‘Ha!’ The spluttered sound is distrustful, incredulous. ‘Oh, come on. You fell for his charm ages ago.’ I decide I’m on the highway to nowhere. It doesn’t matter what has or has not happened between me and Tom, what I may or may not have to explain to Jeff. All that matters is that she’s pregnant. Olivia. A baby. So I move the conversation on: ‘Jeff told me that you go to the uni library.’

‘Yeah, he sorted it for me. It was nice of him.’

‘I’m certain he was happy to do it.’ I nibble at my cake but I can’t put off the moment any longer. ‘Jeff said he once noticed you reading a particular book.’

‘What – you’re spying on my reading material now? Checking out if I’m reading the *Kama Sutra* or *Fifty Shades of Grey*?’

‘No, no, certainly not. Well, yes, sort of. He wasn’t checking up on you. He was probably thinking it would be a conversation starter.’ I could imagine him glancing at the cover of the book. Hoping to start up a conversation about *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men*. ‘You were reading *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*.’

‘So?’

She looks entirely unfazed by my observation. Brass, as my gran would have said. I suppose I was expecting something else: contrition, embarrassment, defiance; she looks indifferent. ‘I wondered if there was anything you wanted to talk about.’ I stare at her meaningfully; she looks blank. ‘Olivia, you can’t pretend it isn’t happening. You really can’t.’

‘What’s happening?’

‘Have you seen a doctor?’

‘What?’

‘Look, Olivia, I know you think I’m pretty appalling but I’m going to say this and I want you to know I mean it. You do not have to do this alone. I’ll help you. I’ll stand by you, whatever you decide to do. I know it must seem scary and insurmountable and—’

‘You think I’m pregnant?’ She practically shrieks this. I glance about. The people at four tables have stopped their conversations in their tracks and are staring at us. I glare back until they look away.

‘There’s no point trying to hide it any longer, Olivia. You can’t cover it up for ever.’ I glance at her stomach and her eyes follow mine. It’s softly rounded, but then it was when I met her: has she got any bigger? I wonder how far along she might be. She puts her hand over it protectively.

‘You cheeky bitch.’ There’s no need for language like that, but I remind myself she’ll be hormonal. ‘What makes you think you’ve got the right to —’

I interrupt, wanting to head off her anger; she’s probably frightened. ‘I don’t want you doing this on your own. I want you to know you have someone in your corner.’ She gapes at me. I wasn’t expecting a hug, so I press on. ‘I’ll talk to your dad for you.’

‘I don’t need *you* to talk to *my* dad.’ She sounds really angry. Not scared, as I had been when I had to tell my dad I was pregnant. She’s furious. I guess that’s progress.

‘I just thought it might be tricky for you. Since he lost your mum, he’s been distracted – perhaps he’s made the odd wrong call – but he adores you, Olivia.’

‘What do you know about him? Or me? Or any of us? Really, what do you know?’ She pauses; the moment exudes sarcasm as she stares at my blank face and her questions sluice about our history. The truth is, I don’t know an awful lot. I don’t know if Tom has feelings for me, or if he simply drank too much and blurted out a load of nonsense. I had no clue that Olivia

uses the uni library or that she was heading for this sort of trouble. I know Callum plays ice hockey and that his girlfriend is called Issy but I don't even know if he has a middle name. I know that Amy likes to dance but I'm unsure if she has a favourite cuddly toy. Olivia continues: 'Nothing. That's what. You've done everything in your power to keep at a distance. And now this! You are an idiot, Alison. An idiot. If you weren't so sad, you'd be hilarious. To be clear, if you were the last person on the planet, I'd cut out my tongue rather than talk to you about anything.' She stands up, pushing her chair back violently.

I'm shaking, taken aback by her anger and by the truth of what she's saying. Have I existed in a state of perpetual shock for these past months? Why don't I know more? Why did I shy away from them all, rather than really try to understand this family which I need to blend with? I look at her, and she looks a lot like a lost chance.

'You know what?' Her lip is curled, her tone is cold. 'You should go away.'

'What do you mean?'

'You shouldn't have been in our lives in the first place. Dad was stupid to track you down. You have the money. You're not tied by anything as ordinary as work. You could just move. Get right out of our lives. Pretend none of this happened.'

'Wouldn't you—?' I want to say, *Wouldn't you miss us?* But I have no right and, besides, I can't bear to hear her answer, which would undoubtedly be blunt, honest. Yet suddenly I'm clear and sure. *I would miss her.* I see that now. Now, when it's too late. The brutal sensation of understanding this at last leaves me mentally gasping. I'm floored by something like anxiety or adoration. Here she is, in front of me, quite magnificent. My other daughter. My once was daughter. I try to swallow, but my throat is dry. However, my palms are wet with sweat; they weep regret.

'Do you know, in all of this, it's Jeff I feel bad for.'

'You don't have to.'

She throws out another contemptuous look. I don't mind: I can absorb it. 'He seems to care.' Almost sulkily, she adds, 'I think he sees you in me. No doubt that's why.'

Her comment is complex. She's acknowledging that we have some similarities, although she doesn't seem delighted by the fact. She's right,

Jeff has said as much, he does see me in her, but I also know that he cares for her in her own right. She ought to know that. ‘I think he just likes you because you are you.’

For a second her fury is abated. She looks at me carefully, warily. ‘You think?’ She’s hopeful and childlike. This girl who has already started to have sex, this girl whose body has started to make a baby, is simply a child. She’s so mercurial, just like Katherine.

‘I know.’ She gives me a small, acknowledging nod. ‘And, Olivia—’

‘What?’

‘I’m not going anywhere. I want to be near you. I know I’m not your mum, I know you’re not looking for a new mum, but I could be your friend. I want to be. If you’d let me. I like you, Olivia.’ I love her, but I can’t tell her that; she’d run a mile, laugh sardonically, perhaps crumble under the pressure.

She widens her eyes. ‘You think? You don’t even like yourself, Alison – how can you possibly like the daughter who is the spit of you?’ Then she flounces out of the café.

I scramble in my purse and find a twenty-pound note. I leave it on the table; I don't wait for the change. Even so, by the time I get to the café door there's no sign of Olivia; she's quick, I'll give her that. My phone rings and I see it's Jeff. I'm surprised: I wouldn't have expected him to risk interrupting. It's almost as though he has a sixth sense that I need him.

'It went badly,' I say the moment I pick up the phone, not bothering with the formalities of 'Hello, how are you?'

'Oh, I'm sorry about that. Well, it's bound to take time.' He sounds a bit harried, as though he's not really concentrating on what I have to say. 'I was actually calling to see if you'd picked up Katherine from Maddie's.'

'No, you said you were going to do it.' A flash of annoyance skitters up my spine as I check my watch. She was supposed to be collected almost an hour ago. Maddie's mum will be wondering where we are. This is the reason I do all the pick-ups and drop-offs: Jeff is notoriously forgetful and unreliable with this sort of 'detail', as he calls it. Especially when he's writing, he gets easily distracted.

'Yes, I know I did. And I went for her, but she wasn't there.'

'What do you mean?'

'Maddie's mum said she left at eight this morning.'

'What?'

'She told them we'd arranged to meet her.'

'Meet her? Where?' Anxiety immediately takes residence in my stomach. It swoops around, sloshing like a bucket of water carried by a child.

'At the Costa Coffee on Bridge Lane.'

'But why would we meet her there?' Bridge Lane is close to the A road out of town. I've never been in that Costa and, as far as I know, neither has Katherine. 'Is she sure?'

'That's what she said.'

‘Why did they agree to that? That isn’t what we planned with them.’ I’m annoyed with Katherine and I’m irritated with Maddie’s mum. Also surprised: most parents have a high awareness of the importance of sticking to plans concerning teenagers. Most have been, or expect to be, duped by teens looking for a bit of independence, thrills and spills. Generally, we’re on the same team in terms of trying to outfox and safeguard our kids.

‘She said Katherine showed her a text from me saying to meet there because we were heading off for a family day out and wanted to get ahead of the traffic.’

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘No, because I didn’t send a text.’

‘I know that.’ My mind is going at a hundred miles an hour; I’m considering possible reasons for Katherine taking off on her own. ‘Have you called her?’

‘Straight to voicemail. And I’ve texted. Three times. Nothing back. You?’ Jeff is talking in splintered sentences. They stutter out like gunfire: abrupt, deadly. I check my phone, but there are no messages at all.

‘Have you been there? To the Costa?’

‘I’m here now. There’s no sign of her. The staff here don’t remember seeing a fifteen-year-old girl of any description.’

‘And you’ve tried that Find my iPhone tracking thingy?’ We all have this app on our phones. I can’t tell you how many times it’s saved the day when one or other of us has believed we’ve lost our phone.

‘Yes. No joy. It just says her phone is offline.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Switched off or out of power.’

‘Oh, Jeff.’ She never lets her phone run out of ‘juice’, as she calls it. She took her charger with her to Maddie’s last night, I know she did, because I saw her pack it. She must have deliberately switched off her phone. Why? Why does she want to go off-grid? The anxiety begins to solidify, becoming a throbbing apprehension, cementing in the pit of my spine, pulling me to the ground. I stagger a bit, prop myself up against a nearby shop window, my legs and hands shaking, my brain whirling then fogging. I breathe in, deeply. Whatever Katherine is up to, she needs me to be clear-sighted, even though she might not want me to be. I have to out-think her, and she’s smart. Clearly, she’s put some thought into absconding this morning. Why? It makes no sense. If she’s meeting someone – girlfriends to do some

shopping with, or a boyfriend to do God knows what with – then she must know she’s given herself only a few hours’ head start; she must know we’ll track her down as soon as possible. This isn’t like the times when she bunked off from school; then, she had the whole day to herself, undetected. This plan doesn’t make any sense.

‘You know what, I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about. I bet she’s meeting some friends and planning on doing some secret Christmas shopping.’ I barely believe this, even as I say it, but I badly want it to be true.

‘At eight o’clock in the morning? Before the shops have even opened?’ Jeff articulates all the things that are in my head which I hoped he’d dismiss. I hear panic and fear in his voice. I wish I didn’t, because if Jeff is scared, then there really might be something to be scared about. I exist in a more or less perpetual state of apprehension and concern, but Jeff is invariably level-headed, considered. Throughout these past months he’s maintained that everything is going to be fine, that we’ll get through it. Although I’ve thought his constantly upbeat attitude was a bit frustrating at times, deep down I appreciated it, because an infinitesimal part of me hoped and believed he might just be right. He’s that sort of man; a man that might just be right. Now, he’s scared. That’s serious. I feel waves of panic threaten to overwhelm me, but I know Jeff needs me to be calm now, not distraught.

I check my watch again, even though I know what it says. My daughter’s whereabouts have been unknown for nearly four hours. I tell myself that’s not the same as her being missing.

‘Or perhaps a boy,’ I offer, trying to hide my distress. One with dreadlocks, or a skinhead, complicated tattoos all the way up both arms, acne on his chin, a condom in his pocket. Right now I’m desperate for it to be this level of deceit. Praying for it. ‘She probably hoped to carve out a few independent hours and then arrive back at ours at eleven, giving us some story about Maddie’s mum dropping her off, hoping we’d be none the wiser.’

‘Then why didn’t she come home?’

‘A boy might make her lose track of time.’

‘Alison.’ Jeff sounds frustrated with me for not articulating the dreadfulness that must be on both our minds. It’s a first that he’s chastising me for not looking at the worst-case scenario. How can I pretend there isn’t a life-defining test result looming? How can I pretend she isn’t confused about her parentage? Has she run away? Who would blame her? Part of me

would like to run away from this chaos, too, but I wouldn't because I'd never, ever leave her. I'm a parent, though; she's a child. She doesn't have the same responsibility towards me. Oh God, Katherine, where are you, you silly, gorgeous child?

'I'll call Tom and see if he's seen her.'

'You think she might have gone to Tom's?'

'Well, Olivia turned to you, didn't she? The whole business with the library card. Her father thought she was out with a boyfriend.' It's not the moment for me to dwell on the fact that Olivia was exceeding Tom's expectations, nor is it the moment to ask myself why neither of them had turned to me. 'You start calling her friends.'

'Where are their numbers? On your PC?'

'Yes, but there's also a hard copy of the year list pinned to the kitchen noticeboard. Use that.' For once, my zealous organisation seems to be useful.

'OK. Alison, do you think we should call her counsellor?'

'Yes. If you don't get any news via her friends within the next hour or so, we'll call Betty. And the hospitals.' I force myself to keep my voice very calm and clear.

'OK. I'll meet you at home. Be as quick as you can.' I hear the need in his voice.

I run to my car, my breath never making it to and from my lungs but instead taking harbour in my throat. I'm suffocating. I call Katherine's number. As I feared yet expected, it goes straight through to voicemail. I leave her a message. 'Darling, I don't know where you are but I know you are not at Maddie's. You are not going to be in trouble. I'm not angry, but you must call me. You *must*.' I am angry, but I'm not as angry as I am scared. The moment I'm in the car I call Tom's number. It rings for an infuriating six, seven, eight times before he finally picks up.

'Hi, sorry, just making pancakes. Couldn't find my phone in among the debris of the batter and eggshells and—'

'Have you seen Katherine?' I cut sharply across his languid explanation. He can't fail to hear the panic in my voice. Oddly, I don't feel a need to protect and support him the way I did with Jeff. I'm not sure if this impatience has something to do with his actions last night or simply because I don't have the resources to support them both right now. I know only one thing. I have to find Katherine.

‘Katherine? No. Should I have? Is she on her way over?’ The excited warmth of his voice, which normally pleases, disappoints. It’s like he’s punched me.

‘Oh my God. Has she called you today?’

‘No.’

‘Or texted?’

‘I haven’t heard from her. What’s wrong, Alison?’ Tom’s tone has changed to one of concern.

‘She was at a friend’s for a sleepover last night. Jeff went to pick her up this morning and she had already left.’

‘So she’s walking home.’ He sounds instantaneously relieved, a little bit incredulous that I’m so riled. This is because he doesn’t know her as well as we do.

‘No. She’d never do that. Never has. Maddie lives eight miles away. Besides, she specifically told Maddie’s mum that she was meeting us at a Costa.’

‘Why would she say that?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Have you called her?’

‘Yes, obviously. It went straight to voicemail. I’m going home now to help Jeff call her friends, her counsellor and the hospital.’

‘Oh, Alison, don’t get too stressed. I’m sure she’ll be home before you are.’

I think of Tom’s reaction when Olivia stormed out of his house yesterday. He was chilled, certain it was nothing more than a teenage strop, positive she’d resurface as soon as she calmed down, and he’d been right. But this is a different case. This isn’t a teenager, shocked and emotional, reacting to finding her father in a clinch, this is a pre-planned thing. What is she thinking?

‘I hope you are right,’ I mutter. I want to get him off the phone. Even though I have a hands-free gadget in my car, it’s hard to concentrate on driving, I’m so anxious. ‘You promise you’ll call me if you do hear from her? The very moment?’ I demand.

‘Definitely, and you’ll do the same for me.’

‘Yes, Tom, I will.’

There’s a moment. ‘Look, Alison, about last night.’

‘Not now, Tom. This really isn’t the time.’

Jeff and I spend an hour and a quarter on the phone calling most of the homes of the seventy girls in Katherine's school year. We know some of the parents very well; invariably, they do not take our claim that Katherine is missing at all seriously. They say, 'While I've got you on the line ...' and they try to talk to me about fixtures, dinner dates and even my views on the newly proposed PE uniform. It takes every iota of strength I possess to remain civil, but I'm not effusive and once I establish Katherine is not at their house, that they haven't heard from her, I cut them off sharply. On to the next one. I have never spoken to some of the parents before and those calls are excruciating, peculiar. A couple of the numbers are engaged or the families are out. No one can help. No one has any news.

I look online and read that the first few hours are often vital in offering up clues in a missing-person case. I keep checking the wall clock, my watch and the clock on my iPhone; they all say the same. Time is passing.

'I can't just sit here.' Jeff jumps up and starts to walk into the hall.

'Where are you going?'

'I'll walk the streets. I'll do a check of the places she likes to visit.'

'Where?'

'The school playing fields, the leisure centre, the ice rink. Her favourite shops.'

'I'll come with you.' I stand up, too, and reach for my coat.

'Shouldn't one of us stay, in case she comes home?'

I don't know the answer. She has a key, she could let herself in, but that's not the point. Someone ought to be here to greet her. 'Maybe,' I admit reluctantly.

I watch Jeff drive away and I'm devastated. I've never felt so alone in my life. I, too, want to be doing something to bring her home. I want to be out there looking for her. It's not enough just to sit and wait, wait and see what happens. I feel I've been doing that for too long.

It is the longest three hours of my life. I am on a knife edge, racking my brain for ideas of where she might be. Jeff calls regularly to give me updates but they're disheartening, he can't do more than tell me where he's been. He is scouring the streets, going from door to door between her friends' homes – most of whom we called this morning – asking again if they've seen her, heard from her, how she'd seemed to them the last time they saw her. He tells me that, this time, people's concern is tangible. No one tries to talk about fixtures or tartan PE skirts. Some of her schoolfriends burst into tears, as teenage girls are wont to do; they are still allowed to show their confusion and dread. Meanwhile, I call Jeff's family, our friends and the headmistress of the school. I text Rachel. I know she can't help, but I feel a need to reach out to everyone. Jeff's sister says she'll find someone to look after her kids and come and sit with me. She can be here by six. I tell her not to bother. We both agree that Katherine will probably be home by then.

When Jeff calls me at 4 p.m. I say, 'We have to call the police, Jeff. It's getting dark. Where can she be?' I imagine him nodding slowly. Sadly.

'I'll come home now. We'll do it together.'

The moment I hang up the landline starts to sing. I snatch up the receiver. Hopeful.

'Any news?' It's Tom. I have never been more disappointed to hear a voice in my life.

'No. Nothing.'

'Where have you looked?'

'We've called just about all her year group, we've visited her close friends, we've phoned the school, and Jeff's been out looking all afternoon.'

'Have you tried the local A&E?'

'Yes. Nothing. I hoped you'd be her.'

'Sorry.'

'I take it you haven't heard anything,' I ask, without much hope. I know it would have been the first thing he'd mention. He knows I'm out of my mind with worry.

'No. I talked to the kids about Katherine. They know to let me know the moment they hear anything, if they hear anything.' I think of them, Amy in particular, wide-eyed with worry.

'I have to go, Tom. Jeff and I have decided to call the police.'

'Really?' He sounds surprised.

‘What else can we do?’ I demand crossly, resenting the fact that his tone implies I’m over-reacting, perhaps being a bit hysterical.

‘Sure. You must do anything you can to put your mind at rest. Although my bet is that she’ll be home by teatime.’ Earlier, he said he expected she’d get home before I did. I know he wants to help and comfort, but they are empty, inaccurate words. ‘Will you tell the police everything?’ he asks.

About the baby swap? The mutated gene? ‘Yes, I will. We can’t pretend it’s not relevant. She might have – she might have—’ I don’t want to say it.

‘Run away because of all the stress,’ he finishes for me.

‘Exactly.’ My chest hurts. I’ve been carefully guarding the secret. I wanted to protect Katherine and all the Truby children from the inevitable media interest, but Katherine is missing and all that matters is getting her home. I’ll tell the world about my changeling if it helps bring her back to me.

Tom sighs. ‘I think you should tell them everything else as well.’

‘Everything else?’

‘About her issues with food, and that time when she mentioned cutting.’

‘What? Cutting? What are you saying? She’s never mentioned cutting.’ I have no idea what Tom is talking about. My blood slows. Part of my brain is already telling the rest of my brain to stay calm, that it’s OK, that whatever this is we can deal with it. The rest of my brain doesn’t believe; it is yelling back, *Fuck! Fuck. Fuck. What now? What more?!*

‘She has to me, Alison.’ He sounds embarrassed. For me. ‘And, well, I’m just wondering—’ He breaks off, clearly not wanting to offend me or upset me further. Eventually, reluctantly, he murmurs, ‘You see, maybe you’re right, she might have run away, but not necessarily from you. From us. I mean, there are other things.’

‘Like what?’

‘She’s under such pressure at school. The expectations you have—’ He quickly corrects himself: ‘*She* has in terms of the grades she wants to achieve. Things are more serious once they are studying for their GCSEs. Then there’s this Dolly Bridge character.’

‘I thought that had all blown over.’

‘No, no. Not at all.’ He sounds apologetic. No doubt apologising for knowing more about my daughter than I do. Olivia’s words ring in my ears: *What do you know? Nothing. You are an idiot, Alison. An idiot.* ‘Things

have got really nasty. I'm surprised she hasn't mentioned it to you. She told me going to school was unbearable.'

'"Unbearable"?' I stutter out the word.

'I'm sorry, Alison. I should have said something.'

'It's not your fault.' It's not his responsibility. It's mine.

'You had better mention that to the police. Look, if you need me, I'll come right over.'

'Oh, no, I'm sure you all have plans of your own,' I mutter politely. I don't want to be a nuisance. I exhale and accept that I might need to be a bit of a bother. I might need Tom. 'Thanks, Tom. I'll bear that in mind. I'll be in touch.'

The minute Jeff gets home we make the call. I do it, not even waiting for him to take off his coat and boots. The policewoman on the end of the phone at our local station is calm and thoughtful. I've never had a need to visit a police station in my life. My only contact with the law has been when I've stopped a policeman in London to ask directions to some tourist attraction or other. I have an enormous respect for the profession but I also have an enormous fear of the world, so I'm not even surprised when the policewoman doesn't give me categorical assurances that everything is going to be fine. I suppose I wouldn't have believed her anyway.

She compiles a report, asking almost the same things I asked Jeff. When did she go missing? Have we called all her friends? They also want to know if this is out of character.

'Yes, very.'

'Inexplicable to you?'

Sighing, I say, 'No, not really.' Then I tell her everything I can. All about the swap, the threat of the mutated gene, Dolly Bridges. Jeff's eyes go wide when I report that she has mentioned cutting. The policewoman says they'll send someone around straight away.

'Will it be you?'

'No.' This somehow upsets me; I feel a little bit more lost. I'd liked this woman's voice. I'd thought she was going to be by my side. Now someone else will be by my side and, although that person is likely to be just as efficient, serious and committed, it makes me think no one is by my side. Not really.

I hang up and the silence sits about us like a storm cloud, dense and heavy. Menacing. Foreboding.

Jeff rubs his eyes with the heel of his palm. His action is aggressive; it's as though he wants to gouge them out, like a patriarch in a Greek tragedy who has failed to see what's in front of him. 'I didn't know she was still being bullied. I thought that had died out over the summer holidays. I thought things had been OK recently. How could you keep this from me?'

'I didn't know either.' He looks confused. 'Until Tom mentioned it today.'

'She told him?'

'Yes.'

'And that thing he said about her talking about harming herself?' I shrug in despair. I do not know what to say to him. He looks like he wants to punch a wall; he shakes his head.

'She's been crying out for help.'

'It appears so.' But not to us.

'How could we have thought she was handling it all so well? Why did we accept that?' he asks.

'Because she's always exceeded our expectations. I think we just assumed she was doing that again.'

'We weren't careful enough.' Jeff seems to have lost all his colour in the last few hours. I know that can't be true, but he looks so much older than he did this morning. His salt-and-pepper hair is now simply greying hair, his skin is almost transparent. There are deep lines of panic engraved into his forehead. He's shrunk inches since the start of the day. I imagine I look equally rough but I don't have the will to put myself in front of a mirror. How I look is unimportant. Only one thing is important.

We hear car tyres roll across the gravel of our drive and both dash to the door, but it's not some parent returning a sheepish Katherine, it's a police car and another unmarked car behind. I already know there will be someone from some body or other: a social worker, a bureau of missing persons. I hold open the door. It seems an army marches in. Jeff offers tea.

There's a policewoman, about ten years younger than I am, who seems to be in charge. She tells me her name: Inspector Miriam Davis. Like me, she carries a few extra pounds, but her weight makes her look robust, reliable, rather than undisciplined. Her eyes flick over me, around the hall, over Jeff. She appears swift and shrewd. I forget I wanted the other police officer, the one I had spoken to on the phone; now I cling to Inspector Davis as if she were a life raft. This woman must find Katherine for me. This woman must

save me. I look at her ring finger and see she's married. I want to ask her if she has children. It's important to me but, even if she does, they're likely to be tiny. Toddlers. Infants. She'll think that's hard. She won't be able to imagine what it's like to have a teen. An independent being who you love so ferociously, but somehow it's difficult. You can't show that love so easily any more because you can no longer tickle your child so much she swears she's going to throw up, you can no longer smother her with kisses: her face, her neck, her chubby belly. She no longer has a chubby belly.

Inspector Davis jumps into action by asking questions that are a mix of common sense and ugly surprise; the questions suggest there is a procedure. I am in a system. This has happened to people before me. This will happen to people after me. But it doesn't feel like that right now. I feel hopelessly picked out. Separated. I have to repeat many of the same facts. The inspector wants to be clear, make her own checks. Once again, I explain about the unimaginable strain Katherine has been under. Miriam Davis is good: she doesn't show any shock or judgement as I try to unfurl our complicated life.

'So you can see why a teenager might run away, can't you?' I ask.

'Yes. That is a possible scenario. At this stage, we need to keep an open mind.' I search her face and try to understand what other options she could be considering. Clearly, it's not an abduction: Katherine showed a fake text to Maddie's mother; she planned this. What alternative is there to running away? Then I understand: the issue is what next? If she has run away, is she alone or is there some other child involved? How confused and stressed is she? If she's talked to Tom about self-harm, how far might that go? Is she the sort to do anything really serious to herself? Is there a 'sort'? How can you tell?

In the past, I've picked out the kids who are going to use their ambition and focus to achieve academically, the kids who will use their drive and physical advantages to excel on the pitch, the kids who will channel their confidence and love of the limelight to appear on stage. How do you pick out the kid who might hurt herself? Might want to end things prematurely? What are the attributes then? I feel dizzy. Faint.

'We were thinking she might simply be lost. She might have planned to meet someone in the hours between leaving her friend's house and coming home,' Jeff suggests hopefully. 'A boyfriend.'

Inspector Davis turns to him. 'Is there one?'

‘Not that we’re aware of. But—’ He looks confused. What do we know?

‘Why won’t she answer her phone?’ I ask.

‘Lots of reasons. She might be out of charge. She might have lost it,’ offers Jeff. I’m not sure who he is trying to convince, me or himself.

I am aware that there’s a great deal of activity going on around us while the inspector interviews us. Other people are looking at and for things. They asked us if this was OK, and of course we said yes; anything that’s necessary. I try to concentrate very hard on what Inspector Davis is saying, because it’s vital, but her words wash over me, through me. I think of the times I have sat in front of experts and absorbed important information about Katherine. Doctors have explained the MMR vaccination, chiropractors and physiotherapists have talked to me about her spine, balance and sports injuries, teachers have given me facts on her exam results or told me about impending school trips. I’ve always listened as though my life depended on it, gleaning every little morsel of info I could. Although nothing has ever been more vital than this conversation, I find that, somehow, my body is failing me. My head feels mushy and can’t hold facts. My tongue seems furry and swollen; I can’t articulate the questions I want to ask. There’s a droning sound, like a loud vacuum cleaner, rushing through my ears; how can I concentrate on what Inspector Davis has to say?

I think of cases that were high profile and police operations to find the child were extensive. They are nearly always cases concerning missing young girls. It seemed to me that their faces were to be found splashed across every newspaper and TV report in the country. Will that be us? I hope it is, because I want everyone to stop and look for Katherine. I couldn’t care less about the scandal, the raised eyebrows at the school gate. Yet I doubt this will happen, because she planned to leave us.

‘How many people go missing each year?’ Miriam Davis eyes me warily. I know the number is on the tip of her tongue; she’s trying to evaluate what I can bear to hear, what she should tell me. ‘How many?’ I ask again firmly.

‘Last year, over 300,000 people were reported missing.’ I visualise the number. All those noughts on the end. So big. I then try to imagine a crowd that size. I can’t.

‘And how many of them were children?’

She sighs but can see I’m a dog with a bone. She might as well tell me because, otherwise, I’ll resort to the internet; there’s information enough out

there to terrify the entire human race. ‘Approximately two thirds of them were under eighteen.’

‘You’d have to spend every minute of your working day to find that many.’

‘Well, yes. We would.’

‘But you don’t.’ I can hear the panic in my voice. They are not going to do that. They will not spend every minute of every working day looking for Katherine. They should be looking for her now. Don’t they know how precious she is? I’m almost floored, knowing that 300,000 families have the same thought each year.

‘No, we don’t. The first thing we do is establish the level of risk to the person who is missing. As people rarely go missing without a reason, being missing is often treated as an indicator of a problem in someone’s life rather than an event in itself.’

I think this is so ridiculously obvious I want to slap her. I can almost imagine the red mark on her cheek. It’s insane. Assaulting a police officer is insane. Why would I ever think of doing such a thing? I clasp my hands together on my lap so the wildness doesn’t become a reality. But hasn’t she been listening? I don’t understand why there are people searching our house. She’s not here, is she? Why might they need her toothbrush? No, it’s not in the bathroom: she was on a sleepover last night. They pick up the formal school portrait that was taken at the end of last year. ‘This her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Can we keep this?’

‘She’s changed her hair since then. She has a fringe.’

‘This will do for now.’ I promise to look out something more recent later; now, they need me to answer questions. Someone has just asked me whether they can have a look at my phone. They take screen grabs of the WhatsApp messages and texts Katherine has sent me. It’s painful to see them on the screen. Happy little plans and exciting news, drenched with smiley-faced emoji: ‘I scored two goals! Let’s go out for [picture of a slice of cake]’; ‘Can you bring my maths book to the gate, forgot to hand it in today! [blushing face]’. They asked me if Katherine uses any social media. Well, of course she does; she lives in this century. They ask to look at her laptop, explaining that there might be some clues as to where she likes to go or, if she had been planning to meet someone, who that might be. They ask me if I know her Facebook, Instagram and Twitter passwords. I don’t, but

we start to make a stab at them. Jeff suggests her birthdate or the name of her deceased pet rabbit.

‘Try 12OctJH.’ Josh Hutcherson’s birthday. It seems an age since she’s mentioned him. Crushes are a thing of the past, so what’s taken over? I feel hopeless that, once, I knew the birthdate of her crush, I knew everything. Now I know nothing. These past few months have been swollen with silence and secrets.

Shame and exasperation flood through me. If I wasn’t sitting down I might have been knocked off my feet with the force of it. Why do they keep asking me questions? I don’t have the answers. I don’t know where Katherine is. I want them to go and start looking for her. I want to start looking for her. I stare out of the window and imagine chasing up and down the streets, knocking on every door, stopping every passer-by and asking if they’ve seen her. That’s what we should be doing. Not sitting here talking and watching cups of tea go cold and glassy.

Jeff is asking questions now. I know because I can see his mouth moving and I catch some of Inspector Davis’s responses. ‘Review known hazards ... look at other factors related to the person’s ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, sexuality.’ I feel I’m being read a handbook. Katherine hasn’t upped and offered to join a terror group, she’s my baby. My lost, scared, confused baby. ‘Everyone missing is divided into low, medium and high risk. The speed and scale of the initial police response is thus decided.’

‘What is Katherine?’ asks Jeff.

‘I’d say low to medium at this stage.’ I’m not sure what that tells me. The inspector closes her notebook and stands up.

‘And you’ve deduced this because?’

‘Low because she has been missing only since this morning. Medium because she’s young, vulnerable, clearly troubled. You said it was out of character. We have already deployed two police officers to make inquiries, they are talking to her friend—’ She checks her notes. ‘Maddie, to see if she knows anything more. We’ll be following up with all her friends. The year list you provided is very useful.’

‘We’ve already called everyone,’ I bark.

She nods sympathetically, humouring me like you would a child. ‘The officers will be visiting her school. Although it’s a Saturday, there are games she might have gone along to watch, she might be in the sports hall or the locker room. I understand she’s very sporty. We’ll be looking at the

local leisure park, other schools where she's recently competed. Can you give me a list of any relatives she might visit? Including the details of her biological family.' I nod but I can't imagine Katherine getting on a train to visit Jeff's family, let alone mine. I must look the picture of despair, because Inspector Davis smiles briefly. 'Look, bearing in mind there is evidence that she pre-planned this disappearance, if I was a betting sort, I'd say she'll be home before bedtime.'

I notice that the deadlines keep getting pushed back. 'Are you?' I ask.

'Am I what?'

'Do you gamble?'

The inspector looks taken aback. 'Well, no, not really.'

I scowl at her. People should be careful what they say.

Jeff cuts in. 'What would propel her to a high-risk case?' I wonder as he asks this if he, like me, is undecided as to whether he wants the case to be high risk or not. As such, it would demand more manpower, more publicity, more noise, which would surely lead to finding her faster. It would also mean we were in much murkier waters.

'Time. Teenagers in general – specifically, twelve to seventeen year olds – constitute the largest group of missing people. Most children return home very quickly, within twenty-four hours, and nearly all of them come back within three days.'

I am envious of the way Inspector Davis answers Jeff's questions. She looks him in the eye and is straight. She keeps her tone steady and serious. When she answers my questions she betrays a little more concern. She thinks I can't handle this. She's right. Three days. Seventy-two hours. It's too long. It's unbearably long. How would she manage alone for that length of time? It's freezing cold and wet outside. A miserable December wind is throwing leaves and litter along the street. Why would she want to be out in that? Where would she go?

'Then what? If—' Jeff stumbles. 'Does it always take seventy-two hours before it's a high-risk case?'

'No. Sometimes new leads come to light, in which case we'd escalate sooner.'

'And then?'

'High-risk cases require the immediate deployment of more police officers, the appointment of an investigating officer, a press strategy, family

support, and notifications would be sent to the Missing Persons Bureau and, in this case, Children's Services, as Katherine is under eighteen.'

My head almost cracks with the thought of so many institutions, so many professionals poking around in our lives. I know that these bodies would be working to find my baby girl and bring her back to me but I can't help but think of Peter being pulled from my arms. I let out a small gasp. There's not enough oxygen in the air. Miriam Davis looks at me with sympathy. 'We're not there yet. I really don't want you to panic. Try to stay calm.' I've always thought this was a useless expression – as if there is a choice in the matter. I glance over to an officer who has now hacked into Katherine's social-media accounts; the password is Josh1992. The fog in my mind partially clears. I'm left with something horrible.

'A paedophile?' The words unintentionally erupt out of my mouth, like spittle. 'You are not looking for a boyfriend – it might be a groomer.'

'We do have to consider all possibilities.'

No one has seen her for fourteen hours. No one has received so much as a text. Missing. Everyone continues to talk as though she'll walk through the door any minute. I wonder if I'm the only one who fears it might not be the case. Do the others – Jeff, his family, the police, our neighbours – all believe in happy-ever-afters? I never have. I was taught at eight years old that the world is cruel and unpredictable, that people go or are taken, when my mother chose to leave with my three brothers. The lesson was reinforced when, at sixteen, I was made to give up Peter. My years with Jeff and Katherine had lulled me into a false sense of security. I was a bloody fool to have let my guard down. To have expected it might all be OK.

Tom calls. 'No word?' Even he, with his significantly more casual attitude to parenting, seems perturbed. I can hear a breathless nervousness in his voice.

'No. None.'

'What are the police saying?'

'There's an alert. Her picture has been circulated within the police force. They are making inquiries.'

'But what do they think has happened to her?'

'They are keeping their minds open to a number of possibilities. She might have planned to meet someone and got lost or hurt. She might have planned to run away but got lost or hurt. Or—' There're so many worse possibilities. I sigh deeply. 'They are also considering the chance that whoever she met up with has taken her.' I have built a wall. It's huge and made of brick. It's ridiculously high and dense. The height of a skyscraper, the width of several cars. Behind it are thoughts of *what might be*. What she might be suffering at this exact moment. Dirty mattresses, a basement, chains, her fear. Shards of these thoughts and images still successfully breach the wall, somehow slither over, but when they ambush me I layer on another pile of bricks, I slather on more cement. I. Block. It. Out. I won't let

that horror seep into my consciousness. I can still try to keep her safe in my mind. ‘Where are you?’ I can hear fast traffic roaring by in the background and I simply ask to detonate the trail of thought that is leading me to such a bleak place.

‘I went to that café you mentioned.’

‘Which café?’

‘The Costa on Bridge Lane. And I’ve also been to the ice rink where Katherine watched Callum play ice hockey. This afternoon, I did that walk we did one Sunday – do you remember?’

‘Yes.’ Tears are in my throat and eyes. I rest my forehead on the hall wall; it feels solid and steady. It might help me stay upright for another minute or so, and every minute counts. I’m glad he’s out there looking for her. I’m glad she has more than Jeff and me.

‘And I’ve stopped by at the Italian restaurant. And Elizabeth Park, where we watched the fireworks, and the rec, where we take Mozart. I thought, perhaps, because they were all happy places, she might have gone to one of them. I’m basically just tramping around anywhere we’ve been together.’

Like Jeff. ‘Thank you.’

‘They were happy places, weren’t they, Alison?’ he insists. He sounds panicked, distressed. I realise he’s near tears, too. I’d pity him, but I have no room. His fear can’t squeeze into my consciousness because my own fear is abundant, all-encompassing.

‘Yes, yes, of course. Look, I need to get off the line, in case she’s trying to get through. I’ll call you the moment there is news.’

‘I understand.’ Then, just as I’m about to hang up, he asks, ‘Alison, are you under any suspicion?’

‘Me?’

‘Well, you and Jeff.’

‘God, Tom.’

‘Sorry, forgive me, but the parents often are. In cases like this. I’m not suggesting. Sorry, I didn’t want to give you something new to worry about.’

‘You couldn’t if you tried. Goodbye, Tom.’

I haven’t eaten dinner, even though Miriam suggested I should, even though someone – a neighbour, I think – heated up a lasagne and set it down in front of me. I’m told that the police are searching CCTV cameras; so far, no one has spotted her. They’ve checked her bank records: no withdrawals or purchases. What is she eating and drinking? We’re being

told it is early days, but they also told us the first few hours are vital and that she'd probably be home by bedtime. It's hard to believe anything that's said.

Jeff comes home at quarter to eleven. I can smell the cold night air clinging to him. He doesn't have to say a word: I can see his search was fruitless. When I slipped out of the warm sheets this morning – crumpled with our lovemaking – he was so peaceful and content. That man has disappeared. He is home under duress; the police called him and suggested he needed to get some rest. He said he'd stay up all night, that he couldn't rest. They told him I needed his support so he was eventually persuaded to come home. I am glad to see him but, really, I agree with him, I would have felt better knowing he was still out there looking for her. I don't want to think we've given up on her for something as prosaic as sleep. Jeff paces the room, desperate to walk the streets again, but we can't think of where else to look. He suggests going back to all the places he's already tried, but something stops him from insisting. Maybe he does think I need him here; maybe he can't stand the idea of not discovering her, all over again. Fear is leaking in, a drop at a time. Drip, drip. We change into our pyjamas and clean our teeth. We do so because it's automatic and familiar, but doing so seems like a betrayal. I know Katherine has her overnight bag with her, but where is she making her bed? I can't stand the idea of night, and sleep, and another day. I want to stop time. I want her home now, but time keeps insisting that now is later and later, further and further away from when I last saw her.

Tick, tock. That was then. Completely other. Now, we are here in this unholy horror.

I look into her bedroom. It's crazy but as I push open the door I half believe she's going to be curled up in bed, under her pale-blue duvet, waiting for me to talk about her day, kiss her forehead and say goodnight. There's the usual teenage debris – discarded clothes, magazines, books – scattered about; nothing more. The emptiness of the room almost floors me. I can smell her shower gels and perfumes lingering in the air. Ghostly.

Jeff and I lie on our bed side by side, staring at the ceiling, not touching. I suppose I feel I'm not entitled to any comfort his body might give me. His hand clasping mine seems like an indulgence; something Katherine doesn't have right now and, as such, something I ought to deny myself. 'Don't forget that the police are continuing their search,' mumbles Jeff. I nod,

imagining them looking in doorways and on park benches, in sheds and under bridges.

‘How did we let this happen, Jeff?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I thought I was being so careful.’

But I know how it happened. It’s all my fault. I have too much. I’m being punished. I can’t hold on to it all. I can’t hold on to anything.

After a while I curl on my side, facing away from Jeff, in the foetal position. I breathe in the smell of my own sweat and fear. The smell of human frailty.

The early blue morning light pushes its way into the kitchen. Cold and no comfort. The room is almost unrecognisable. The bespoke cream country-kitchen cabinets and black marble tops look austere, harsh, rather than reassuringly expensive; besides, there are countless tea and coffee cups pocking every surface, half full of abandoned slick, grey drinks that couldn't cheer or console. The pendant lights cast gloomy shadows and the fruit in the bowl looks past its best. I move the word magnets around the fridge, decimating Jeff's haiku. And write *Where are you?* Jeff's laptop is droning quietly; I'm trying to look for a more recent photo of Katherine for the police to release. The task is difficult, awful. I reject some photos because they don't look exactly like her: she looks too young, or too grown up, too thin or as though she's carrying baby fat. I want the photo to be accurate; it will help the most if she's obviously, unequivocally recognisable. Other photos I reject because, while I love them, I know she does not; I remember her grimacing and commenting that her smile looks 'weird' in one and her eyes are 'wrong' in another. This photo is going everywhere: on the news, in the local paper, it will be pinned to local community noticeboards and tied to lamp posts, along with the flyers advertising rug sales. I don't want to upset her. I've developed a new fantasy. Instead of imagining the moment she tells me she has a clutch of GCSE A and A-star grades, she belligerently berates me for using the wrong photo in her search and now it's ubiquitous. And I laugh at her outrage and I don't care. Because she's home.

I am still nursing a cup of coffee that Jeff made at 4 a.m., when we admitted to ourselves and each other that we were awake and never going to find sleep. The police officers and the Family Liaison Officer will be back at nine o'clock, ten at the latest. But right now we're alone. Never more so. The house is other. Without Katherine, it is not home, it's nowhere in particular.

Jeff showers and dresses. After being asked twice, I haul myself up off the kitchen stool, my body a lead weight. I don't shower, I pull on the clothes I was wearing yesterday. I haven't the energy or imagination to think what else to wear.

When there is a knock at the door I almost push Jeff over in an effort to get to it first. I am light-headed with relief. I'm not angry with her now, the fury and worry have been swallowed hours ago. All I feel is hope. Glorious hope and relief. My arms ache with the desire to hold her.

It's not Katherine.

It's not Jeff's sister or his dad, although I know they are now on their way – we weren't able to fob them off any longer – it's not Inspector Davis and her team. It's a woman in her late thirties, she's about six months pregnant and I've no idea who she is or why she's standing on our doorstep at seven in the morning. She has a broad mouth which I don't doubt is usually cracked open into a wide, joyful grin, but today it is set, determined. Resentment that she's not Katherine causes me to sound more curt than necessary. I fold my arms across my chest.

'Alison?'

'Yes. Who are you? Do you have any information about my daughter?'

'I'm Annabel Truby. Can I come in?'

The world tips. Again. I feel it lurch and slide. 'Annabel Truby?'

'Yes.'

A woman. Pale. Freckled. Alive.

Stuttering, I protest, 'I don't understand – are you a relative of Tom's? You have the same name as his wife.'

'I *am* his wife. Or, rather, his ex-wife.' I know at once she is. That this isn't a hoax or a peculiar joke. I now recognise her from the odd photo I've seen of her at Tom's. Her hair is shorter, and obviously the pregnancy has changed her shape, but she is Annabel. Annie, Anna, Bel, Bella. I am crumpled. Dazed. She looks awkward, glances back down the drive towards her car, which she's parked on the road. I see Olivia sitting in the car. Deathly white. Almost opaque. I don't reply, can't think of anything to say, but open the front door wider. Annabel steps inside, signalling for Olivia to come, too. She scrambles out of the car, almost missing her footing. I cannot stop staring at Annabel. She's back from the dead.

Jeff offers to make tea, tells her we have fruit teas and decaf. He can't stop staring at her either. She smiles swiftly, glad of his thoughtfulness, but

asks for a glass of water.

‘Olivia?’ She shakes her head. Her gaze is fixed on her Adidas trainers. Too embarrassed to meet our eyes. Too angry? Too disappointed? I don’t know. Gently, he tries to persuade her; ‘We have mango smoothie.’ She glances at him and her mouth moves a little. That thing teenagers do, a reluctant half-smile, something that hints at a thawing. ‘Your favourite.’

I had noticed that Jeff has recently taken to buying mango smoothies. I thought perhaps he was on some sort of health kick, an unsuccessful one at that, because as often as not the smoothie went undrunk and I threw it out, congealed and well past its ‘best by’ date. He’s been buying the drink especially for Olivia, in the hope that one day she’d visit. It’s touching. If there wasn’t so much to think about, I’d feel impressed and also a little cowed by his thoughtfulness and knowledge. He pours her a glass and fetches water for Annabel.

‘So Annabel, you are—’

‘Pregnant,’ she interrupts. ‘Yes. I am. Not Olivia.’ I can hear a fierceness in her tone. Olivia has clearly told her that we thought she was pregnant; she’s affronted and defensive, as any mother would be if her fifteen-year-old daughter had been wrongly confronted with such a charge. I hardly think that’s the issue. It seems a million years ago since I was concerned that Olivia might be pregnant and talked to her so spectacularly unsuccessfully in the café. I open my arms in a helpless gesture.

‘I was going to say *alive*.’ Annabel looks confused. ‘Although, I’m happy for you, Olivia. You’re too young to be a mother.’ The comment is throwaway because Annabel *is alive*. ‘We thought you were dead.’

‘What?’ Annabel glances from me, to Jeff and back again. I can’t think of any way to temper the blow.

‘Tom told us you had died of cancer.’ She blanches. Olivia stumbles. Jeff quickly pulls out a kitchen stool and Olivia climbs on to it, obedient, like the child she is. ‘You can’t be serious,’ she mumbles. Jeff nods sadly.

‘But that’s sick.’

Annabel opts for the cosier armchair; she sinks into it. There is something about her that’s confident and graceful, even though she’s heavily pregnant. I always knew that would be the case. Even in this dire situation she seems controlled.

I, on the other hand, am rendered speechless and useless with shock and fear. Tom lied to us. A monumental, huge, ugly lie. Why?

Jeff picks up the mantle. He keeps his hand on Olivia's shoulder but directs his conversation at Annabel. 'Tom told us that you died from ovarian cancer. He said you also had breast cancer and lung cancer. That you were riddled with it. Those were his words.' He turns to me for confirmation. I nod. My chest is aching. I don't know how I'm going to take in my next breath. Assaulted by shock after shock, I don't understand what's real.

'He seemed broken,' I stutter. 'Grief-stricken. He told me about tending you through two years of illness. We've talked about him bringing the kids up alone.' I think of Tom's grief, how he often seemed sad and lonely.

'He said the cancer was caused by a hereditary mutated gene. He told us Katherine might have the gene.' Jeff sounds angrier. I realise that my head is as thick and useless as wet cotton wool. He seems to be leaping faster than I can. He looks distraught: he's joined dots that are only just coming into focus for me.

'I did have cancer. That's true,' says Annabel carefully. 'Tom did help me through that awful time. He was a rock. It was breast cancer, not ovarian, obviously.' Her eyes flick down to her enormous, blooming body. 'But it was not a hereditary cancer.'

'I'm sorry, I don't understand,' I splutter. 'You had breast cancer?'

'Yes. Five years ago. It's not, as far as anyone knows, hereditary.'

'You don't have a mutated gene?'

'No.'

'Did your mother die of breast cancer?'

'No. She's alive and kicking.' Then, as though she's talking to a child, Annabel says gently, 'Katherine will not get cancer. Well, she might, the way anyone might, but she hasn't inherited it from me. I didn't inherit it from my mother.'

'Oh my God.' Hearing this news is unlike anything I've ever experienced before. Relief pours through my body. *Katherine is not going to inherit a mutated gene. Katherine is no more likely to be blighted with cancer than the next girl.* The relief, the delight, is chased by cold, bleak terror. *Where is she?* 'But Tom said Katherine might die. That she needed counselling. A test.'

'I see. Was that by any chance his excuse for tracking you down?'

'Well, yes.' I think of the stress Katherine has been put through, we have all been put through. Is this woman saying that this was unnecessary?

Something begins to stir through my body: outrage. Pure rage.

‘I’m sorry,’ says Annabel.

‘Katherine is biologically yours. Olivia is biologically ours.’ I state this plainly, because I no longer know what to believe, who to trust. Annabel nods. ‘And you knew that.’ She nods again.

‘We discovered as much during, and as a consequence of, my treatment. The family all wanted to donate blood in case of an emergency during one of the procedures.’ She sighs. ‘Not necessary, really. I think they all simply wanted to feel useful. Olivia’s blood group didn’t seem to match, so we had genetic tests done. I regret that.’ Something flickers across her eyes. Grief? Guilt? ‘Once we discovered the mix-up, it became apparent that Tom and I had very different views with regard to how we should react.’ Annabel stares at me unapologetically as she reaches for Olivia’s hand and squeezes it. ‘I didn’t want to track down you or Katherine. Olivia is my daughter. I love her. She’s more than enough: she and Callum and Amy were all I wanted. I know you understand.’

I’m impressed by her clarity, her confidence, her bravery in saying what she believes. For her, it’s clear cut, as it was for me. Parenting is not about the biology. Parenting is about the care.

‘Yes, yes, Katherine is—’ I can’t finish.

‘Your everything.’ I nod gratefully. I’m not even sorry for Olivia, although she is in the room and can hear my confession. She doesn’t need me. She has Annabel. It’s a relief; not that I’m off the hook, more that she’s OK. I can stop worrying about her. She has her mum. ‘However, Tom disagreed. He had a very different take on the situation. He had this big thing about genetics. His blood and all that. Laughable, really, when you think what small effort their contribution to baby-making is, compared to ours.’ Annabel glances at Jeff, almost a wink, almost a joke. In another world, we’d all laugh. She’s talking to me mostly, though. She’s a girls’ girl. She wants to be my ally. My friend. She’s here to help.

But her help has come too late.

‘When did you find out? About the swap?’

‘Four years ago. At first I persuaded Tom to ignore the results but as soon as I was well, or at least in remission, we started arguing about what we should do next. He was adamant that he wanted to track down and have a relationship with his other blood daughter. I disagreed. I just wanted to let sleeping dogs lie. We rowed about it, a lot. Soon we were rowing about

everything. My going back to work, the kids' attitude to school, money.' She sighs. I stare at her mouth, concentrating on every word that comes from it. Trying to understand this new version of events I'm being presented with. Annabel ploughs on, determined.

'It was almost as though Tom couldn't deal with me getting well. Does that sound insane? He had been so wonderful throughout my illness, eyes glittering with concern, offering himself up to serve my every requirement – really quite amazing – but everything changed when I got well. This is going to sound strange, but it was as though he resented my recovery.' Annabel glances regretfully at Olivia. She is still staring at her trainers. Her stance is one that shows discomfort is scratching her very soul, but she doesn't contradict her mother.

'He'd become addicted to me needing him for everything. I had for so long, you see. I'd needed him for lifts to the hospital, a shoulder to cry on when I felt vulnerable, to remember my medication, to hold my hair when I vomited after chemo and then to cut it off when it started to fall out. On some level, he liked my neediness. He lost interest in everything else during my illness. Stopped seeing his friends, or playing sport. He said he wanted to spend every moment with me. At first I was grateful, flattered, then it became too much. He became a bit of a moody bastard, if I'm frank. I felt guilty. He even gave up his job, which meant we had to manage on the insurance money, but it wasn't enough. I had to get back to work pretty sharpish. He didn't like that, but he couldn't find a new position so there was no choice.' She pauses, rubs her hand absent-mindedly across her belly. 'I think he was having a breakdown, but we didn't realise it. He was living under so much stress, we all were. What's normal behaviour under circumstances like those we had endured?' Jeff refills her water glass. Her story grabs my heart and squeezes.

'You see, without my illness to focus on, he turned his attention instead to the baby swap. He became obsessed with it. Looking back, I see we should have got him some help.'

'Hindsight is a wonderful thing,' mumbles Jeff.

'Yes. We moved out of London. I agreed to it because he talked about a new start for us all, and it made financial sense. We could buy the same-size house but bank a bit of money, too. It was helpful. One less pressure. We picked Warrington because Tom said he had a job here. The job never materialised.'

I interrupt, 'But he does work in Warrington, at the branding agency.'

Annabel shakes her head. 'He's unemployed. Has been for four years, on and off. He gets casual jobs easily enough when he sees a need, he manages to get by. He's been a van driver and worked in several pubs. He's very charming at interviews but he can't or won't keep any job.' Who is this man? 'It took me months to realise that he'd tracked you down. That he'd instigated the entire move from London to be nearer to you guys. Well, to be nearer Katherine.'

Jeff leaps in. 'When was this? When did you move to Warrington?'

Annabel looks apologetic. She knows she's causing distress. 'Just over three years ago. I'm sorry.'

The thought of Tom stalking us for three years causes me to quake. Jeff puts his arm around my shoulders. I'm glad. Without it, I get the sense I might float away, up, up and away. This is insane.

'For a long time he maintained it was just a coincidence. Then he swore that he wasn't going to get in touch with you. He said it was enough to know that his daughter was nearby, but that so obviously wasn't what he thought. I kept telling him I wouldn't stand for it if he tried to make contact. I suppose it kept him in check for a while. We spilt up almost two years ago. It was hard, horrible, but we just couldn't see eye to eye on anything.' She pauses, sips her water, allows us time to digest. 'I have a new partner now and although this wasn't planned –' she glances at her bump – 'it is a blessing. Five years ago I thought I was going to die, now I'm bringing life on to the planet. How wonderful is that?'

'But that's not how Tom saw it.' Frantically, I'm doing the maths. Annabel appears to be about six months pregnant. She probably told Tom about her pregnancy three months ago. That's why he finally knocked on our door.

'No, no, not at all.' She shakes her head with genuine remorse. 'He's never accepted our divorce. Naturally, he misses the kids. They all live with me.'

'They do?'

'That explains all the occasions you didn't turn up to the meals and things we invited you to,' Jeff says to Olivia.

'You invited me to stuff?' She looks up from the floor, interested.

'Often,' I assure her. 'Your father told me you didn't want anything to do with us, that we had to cool it.'

Olivia's gaze bounces from me, to Jeff, to her mother and back again to me. 'He told me you weren't interested in getting to know me.'

'Fuck,' says Jeff. 'The man's insane. Cruel.'

'He had to keep the kids apart because, obviously, soon enough they'd mention Annabel. Do you remember that one time when Olivia did talk about her mum in the present tense? We thought it was grief. And fireworks night, when I saw Callum.' I turn to Annabel. 'Did you all go to Elizabeth Park to watch the fireworks?' She nods. I begin to comprehend the enormity and complexity of this deception. Tom's been determined and thorough. Ruthless and cunning. 'You know Amy told Katherine that Tom was keeping your children distant because he didn't want them becoming attached to someone they might lose.'

'Oh, that poor girl,' says Annabel.

'That's why she rushed into taking the test.'

So many layers, so many lies. 'I'm sorry. I had no idea he had got in contact with you. He got the kids to swear they wouldn't tell me. He managed to convince them all that it would upset me. The doctor has told me to watch my blood pressure, it's a bit above average; not surprising when you think I'm thirty-seven, but the kids have been concerned. So they went along with his plan.'

'Well, he is my dad,' says Olivia defensively. 'You know, whatever.' She looks terrified, mortified.

'Understandable,' reassures Jeff. 'This isn't your fault.'

'But that doesn't explain why none of the children mentioned you were still alive,' I point out.

'Did Tom ever talk about my death in front of them?'

I think back. 'No, not exactly. He talked about you being gone.'

'He's very clever.'

'What brought you here?'

'Olivia saw that Katherine had gone missing because of a post on Instagram.'

'A post from Katherine?' I'm fleetingly hopeful.

'No, I'm sorry. If it had been, I'd've mentioned that first.'

'Of course.'

'Just some moronic generic teen thing. You know: "OMG, like, Katherine Mitchell is MISSING. I once saw her play a game of lacrosse, sad face, sad face".' Annabel hands me a tissue. I blow my nose and blot

tears; she then clasps my hand, seemingly unconcerned about the snot and my emotion. My mind is like a Newton's Cradle desk toy, the one that was popular in the nineties: one ball hits another and has a consequence; one thought connects with another. He took her. He has her. This dangerous, unhinged man has my daughter and she thinks he can be trusted.

'He has my baby girl.'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Oh my God.' Jeff picks up the phone and I hear him ask for Inspector Davis. I stare at him, but it's as though we're swamped in a fog. He's not quite real or steady, nothing is. How can it be?

I can't believe it. Any of it. 'He telephoned me. He said he was searching for her.' Something clicks in my head. The fog parting. 'Oh God, he mentioned the Costa Coffee on Bridge Lane. I hadn't told him about that.'

'The bastard,' says Jeff.

'I don't think he'll hurt her.' It's Olivia who offers me this lifeline.

'He's insane,' I assert, momentarily forgetting that I should probably try to be tactful in front of Olivia. Her admirable realism shines through again.

'Yes, I think he might be. He certainly needs help, but I think he loves her. In his own way.'

Will that be enough to keep her safe? I didn't feel safe with him last night. I stand up and stretch out my arms. For a moment, I wonder if Olivia will resist, even now. But I think she sees that my need to hold someone is so great and cruel that she acquiesces. She falls into my embrace. I cling to her, tightly, tightly, and cry silently into her warm neck, a neck I once briefly snuggled many years before.

We are now a high-risk case. Jeff and I hardly talk to one another. We have no words to describe our distress.

They search Tom's house. We want to go with them but the police won't allow it. It's a potential crime scene. I imagine their white gloves, those overalls and the mask. I imagine them moving stealthily, seriously. I imagine the area being cordoned off. Neighbours, nosy and concerned. We wait in our home, with Annabel, Callum and Olivia. We all agreed it's too stressful a place for Amy to be; she's at home with Rory, Annabel's partner.

We are hopeful, anticipating what they might find. We are horrified, terrified as to what they might find.

She's not there. Nor is he. Just Mozart: alone, hungry.

'He'd crapped on the floor. Cruel,' comments the young male police officer.

'Yes, it appears that this man *is* cruel,' mutters Jeff. He looks like he loathes the young policeman's bluntness, his clumsiness. But it's Tom he loathes. What does it mean that he left the dog alone? That he's coming back soon? That he's totally heartless?

'What's going to happen to Mozart?' I ask.

'We'll take him to the pound for the time being. Once things sort out here, this dog will be easy enough to rehome. Very popular, chocolate labs are.'

I want to know what he means exactly – 'Once things sort out here' – but I don't ask. I doubt he could give me a straight answer; no one knows. 'We'll have him,' I offer.

'Are you sure?' The officer looks doubtful. This possibly isn't the best time to adopt a dog. I imagine there are procedures and paperwork. It infuriates me.

'He's Katherine's dog,' I insist. 'She'll want him here when she gets home.' My tone is such that no one dares disagree with me. They bring him

to me, with his basket, lead, food and water bowl. I think that's touching, thoughtful, that they brought along his things. He bounds about the house, paws slipping on the wooden floors; I get the feeling he, like the rest of us, is looking for Katherine. I pull the dog close to me, nuzzle my face into his fur and whisper to him, 'Did she go willingly, Mozart, or did he steal her away?' The dog just pants; hot, doggy breath.

Inspector Davis seems almost elated by Annabel's news. I see her professional antennae twitch. 'It's a very tangible lead,' she declares cheerfully. 'You have to look on the bright side. This is a good thing.'

Yes, it's a good thing. Annabel is not dead, Katherine can't have inherited a mutated gene that will kill her prematurely; we now know that, in all probability, she's with Tom; she has not been abducted in the street, she has not been lured away by a paedophile ring.

But then, Tom is a pathological liar. He's desperate, unhinged.

She's not here by my side, is she?

The people on our street are getting used to police cars rolling up our drive, men and women in uniform tramping in and out of our house. We are shown some clothes they've found in Tom's house. A young woman's clothes. 'Do you recognise them? Do they belong to Katherine?'

'No.' I'm categorical. We'd never let her buy a pair of Christian Louboutin shoes. Olivia reaches out to the too high, too strappy, red-soled shoes and tries to stroke them, almost lovingly, despite the fact they are in a plastic evidence bag.

'These are every girl's shoe-goal. They're to die for.' She puts her hand over her mouth and gasps at the expression she's used.

'Are they yours, Olivia?' I know the answer but grasp at straws anyway. She shakes her head.

'Size 37,' observes Inspector Davis. 'What size is Katherine?'

'Thirty-seven,' I admit. 'Do you think he bought them for her? Do you think that, between them, they've decided not to tell me?' What other secrets might there be?

'I'm surprised she left those behind,' comments Olivia. 'They'd have been the first thing I'd've packed.'

'They might belong to a woman friend of his,' points out Jeff. 'After all, we don't know anything about him for sure. He might have a girlfriend. Several.' My scalp itches. I haven't told Jeff about Tom's pass on Friday night. I haven't told the police. I don't know how to. It isn't relevant, it's

just confusing. I can't bring myself to hurt Jeff further: isn't he dealing with enough?

Inspector Davis does not speculate. 'And what about these?' She picks up another plastic bag. Inside this one there is a pair of shorts. She holds it up. They are so tiny they look like something a young child should wear.

'I couldn't fit my thigh in the waistband,' says Olivia. It's not strictly true, but we all understand her point.

'You don't recognise any of them?' The inspector points at the other items lying in evidence bags on our kitchen table.

I shake my head. Olivia intercepts. 'Hang on, that top is familiar.' It does look like something Olivia might wear: plunging neckline, very tight-fitting. Olivia starts to tap her phone. 'There!' She shows us a picture of Katherine, explaining, 'It's a screen grab of a snap chat she sent me.'

Any hope that the clothes belong to Olivia or a girlfriend of Tom's vanish. Katherine is wearing the plunging, clinging top. I stare longingly at the photo. For a moment she's here in the room with us. Wide smile. Sparkling eyes. 'What did she say in the snap chat?' I ask.

'She said her and Dad had been shopping; she said she wished I'd been there.'

'When was this?'

'Last Saturday.'

'You didn't know?' Inspector Davis directs her question at me and Jeff.

'We know when she spends time with him, but I had no idea they'd ever been shopping together,' snaps Jeff. He turns to me. 'Did you know? You spent much more time with him than I did.'

'They were supposed to be taking Mozart to the vet last week for his annual check-up. That's what he said.' My tone is altogether more regretful. How have I let this happen?

'I thought she was being a bitch, showing me what my dad had bought her, because, you know, by then, things were terrible between me and him.' Olivia looks stricken. 'What if she really meant it? What if she did want to be my friend?'

'She does,' I insist. I hate the way Olivia is using the past tense.

The inspector assures us that, since they are now pursuing a particular suspect, much more can be done to locate Katherine. For a start, there are 69,000 cash machines in the UK and they can all be monitored, live, so the moment Tom takes out any cash the police will be alerted. They have every

right to search his house, his laptop, his bank and telephone records, as well as all his social-media accounts. They are looking for hard evidence as to where he might be, as well as beginning to build a psychological profile: 'So we can have some idea what we are working with,' says Inspector Davis.

'Good luck with that,' mumbles Jeff.

Tom's a clever man and, however irrational or hysterical Annabel considers him to be, however afraid she is of that side of his personality, I am more afraid of his determination, his organisation. I always have been. It seems that he's approached this flit with extreme rigour and careful planning. It wasn't, as I initially assumed, necessarily an impetuous whim. There's evidence that he pre-planned it. He cleared out his savings account on Friday evening, which means he has over two thousand pounds in cash. He has not used his phone or a cash machine since Saturday morning at eight o'clock. The last person he called was Katherine. He called her twice between 7.35 a.m. and 8 a.m. The first call lasted twelve minutes; the second only one. The last call he received was from me, on Saturday, at eleven forty. He must have been expecting my call. Probably kept his phone just long enough to receive it. I assume the subsequent calls he's made to me were on a new phone – a pay-as-you-go one that he can get rid of if necessary. As he rang our home and we have a rewired vintage phone, there was no number recognition.

We're informed that there are eight thousand cameras positioned up and down the country's motorways and that the police have activated automated number-plate recognition; if he travels on a motorway, they'll pick up a trail in a jiffy. However, his car is soon found parked just a mile from his home. It's possible – probable – that he has another vehicle: the police are checking local garages for recent sales, and hire companies, too; it's going to be a long process. Besides, maybe he and Katherine are travelling on public transport; I imagine them zigzagging across the country in coaches, but in which direction I can't decide, or even imagine. The police are circulating their photos at bus and train stations. Olivia provides the picture of Tom, I don't have one. It strikes me as bizarrely telling. I thought I knew this man, I thought we had a relationship, admittedly a hazy, ill-defined relationship but something empirically important, but I don't even have a snap of him on my phone. He's a stranger. I stare at the photograph Olivia supplied, trying to understand. Looking for some sort of clue. I can't find

one. Apparently, Olivia took the photo last summer. He looks tanned, handsome, winning, charming. He doesn't look like a man that would steal my child. Yet he is.

The police have released a statement to the press but, as it is Sunday, there's no mention of the case in the national papers, and the local papers don't run at the weekend. The local radio station has picked up the story, however, so the phone has not stopped ringing. Obviously, our friends are very concerned: they want to help but don't know how; obviously, some people are frighteningly morbid: they just want to tell people they spoke to us. Gifts have started to arrive: food in sealed plastic containers, flowers, boxes of chocolates. Things are left on our porch. I have to step over them. It's peculiarly festive. I think, Katherine would love this. Then I catch myself.

'If there's anything I can help with, do say,' offers Annabel.

Inspector Davis nods. 'Well, of course we need to know the moment he gets in touch with any of you.' The police know every detail of the calls I had with him yesterday. It's still almost impossible to believe that, while he was pretending to look for her, he was, in all probability, concealing her. Like some sort of macabre game of hide-and-seek. The police have attached a machine to our home phone which might help us track him if he does call again, and a press conference has been arranged for tomorrow morning. Everything is being hurried along, escalated, because of all the information Annabel has given the police.

'Although she might be home by then,' says Jeff forlornly.

No one comments.

'He won't stay under the radar for ever,' says Inspector Davis confidently. I want to believe her, but this man has had us all fooled for so long it's hard not to be afraid of him. Annabel is afraid of him: poised, competent Annabel, who was married to him for fifteen years and had three children with him, who was nursed through cancer by him, is afraid. I can see it in the lines around her mouth, the way her eyes nervously flick to the door whenever anyone comes in and out of the room. *She's* afraid, so I know I should be, too.

And I am.

After Annabel had given us the first sluice of news, while we were all waiting for the police to arrive she released another catastrophic wave of revelations. We moved through to our once cosy living room, hoping it would offer some ease; it didn't, really. Leaning towards me, her swollen body oozing empathy, she explained that a temporary court order had recently been placed on Tom, excluding him from any contact with his children.

'When?'

'Last Thursday. It was a very hard decision to make. To be honest, the issue was taken out of my hands when he started to turn up at school and be, well – disruptive.'

'Disruptive? How?' Jeff asked.

'When we first divorced he was entitled to see the children every other weekend and every Wednesday evening.' I know this to be standard practice from friends who have gone through divorces. 'For a time, that arrangement worked well enough. It wasn't ideal. As often as not, a desperately needed schoolbook was left at the wrong house. I was always receiving a phone call asking me to drive over with a bit of missing sports kit, a favourite pair of jeans or a ballet shoe. No matter how often you ask kids to take responsibility for their own things, it never seems to work out that way. Then, over the months, the children became less interested in going to Tom's. They found it disruptive, inconvenient. He was often depressed. The kids said he was moany, needy. Besides, Callum and Olivia, in particular, have their own interests now. They don't want to spend the weekend mooching around with their slightly forlorn, slightly spiteful father. They wanted to see their friends, pursue their hobbies. Believe me, I tried very hard to keep their relationship with Tom going.'

Her strength radiated out as she gave this account of a tricky situation that so many families have to manage. I believed her and sympathised with

her, yet I wished it had all been different. I can't help but think that, if he'd still had her kids, he might not have needed my daughter.

'What about Amy? Didn't she want to spend time with her father? She's still young enough to find a parent's attention worthwhile,' Jeff commented.

'She did, until the pregnancy began to show. These past few months she's wanted to be around me and Rory more. She's helped put the nursery together. Painted pictures of cats on the wall. I don't know if she's feeling a bit insecure that her position as the youngest child is being taken or if she's very excited. She seems to fluctuate between the two. Either way, she stopped wanting to go to Tom's. She wanted to stay with us.'

'He must have been hurt,' I muttered.

'Yes. And angry. He couldn't accept that the decision was the children's. He said I'd poisoned them against him. He took to turning up at our house, late at night, shouting, waking the children, waking the neighbours. He once took a swing at Rory.'

'Was he drunk?' I asked.

'No. Just furious.' That scared me more. 'He started to go to the children's schools and insist that he needed to take them out of class.'

'And the schools allowed that to happen?'

'The first time, he told a teacher that Amy's grandmother had died. Amy was beside herself but then he told her he'd just made it up because he wanted to take her to the park, and that was better than going to boring old school, wasn't it?' Jeff and I swapped a glance that said: *The man is unhinged, what does that mean for us? For Katherine?* 'I had to tell the school not to let the children leave with their father. This just accelerated the tension. He felt undermined, powerless. Still, I felt better, but the truth is the schools can do so much to protect Amy, but Olivia and Callum are older.'

Olivia jumped in. 'He banged on the window of my biology class once, held up a picnic bag and waved to me to join him. It was, like, eleven fifteen on a school morning. He had no idea how odd and embarrassing that was!' I'm reminded of him rushing on to the lacrosse pitch on Friday. Emotional, unaware. 'He literally stalked Callum. Discovered where his girlfriend lived and then knocked on the door to introduce himself to her parents. Callum is seventeen – why would Dad think it was OK to do that?'

'How did they react? The parents of his girlfriend?' Jeff asked Annabel. 'Didn't they think he was a bit odd?' She cast him a look which asked, *Did*

*you?*

‘If they did, they passed it off politely enough. You see, he’s charming and convincing.’ Oh, I know that much. ‘He told them he’d found a necklace at his house and thought it must belong to Issy. He made out that he was being attentive, helpful; he wanted to ingratiate himself. He wanted to infiltrate.’

‘You make it sound like a battle.’

‘It sometimes felt like one. Callum started to get used to the fact that he’d arrive at his girlfriend’s house to pick her up for a date and find his father ensconced there, having a cup of tea.’

‘Erratic, irrational – certainly. But dangerous? Was a court order really necessary?’ Jeff asks. He wanted to believe that the situation wasn’t urgent and grim.

Annabel looked embarrassed. Her calm splintered. I knew she was deciding how much more we could take. Carefully, she explained. ‘I mentioned there were a lot of rows. There were fights outside their schools, at the ice rink, at their friends’ houses. He was always kicking off. We really didn’t have a choice.’

So the court order was issued on Thursday. He would have certainly known about it on Friday when he came to Katherine’s lacrosse match, when he whispered in her ear, when he asked what her plans were for the weekend, when he told me he loved me.

It’s Sunday. Katherine should have been playing lacrosse against Guildford High School for Girls today. She’d been looking forward to the game. They usually offer up quite stiff competition. A challenge. I vaguely wonder whether the game will go ahead or whether her team mates will be too distressed to play. Will they forfeit? Katherine would hate that. Sunday. Some families will be eating roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; others will be sitting in front of the TV or fighting with their kids about finishing homework. Sunday. A long time since Friday, when I stole a swift hug before she jumped out of the car and dashed up the path towards Maddie’s house. I’d give anything to be fighting over the homework with her.

It’s raining; relentless, grey drizzle. I wonder whether she’s dry. At least that. I flick through the coats in the downstairs cupboard, fingering the thick, fleecy jackets, the bulky coats with hoods, the foldaway waterproofs, wishing they weren’t in my cupboard, wishing my daughter had taken one with her. Despite the nasty weather and the fact that there is a countdown of

shopping days until Christmas, teams of volunteers – other parents from the school, parents of Katherine’s friends, mostly – have stepped forward to say that they’ll join the search party or distribute flyers in the shopping precinct.

MISSING. HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

DO YOU RECOGNISE THIS MAN?

I don’t like them sharing a flyer. His face close to hers. So similar.

At the time that used to be known as ‘after lunch’, as if anyone was interested in eating, Jeff declares he’s going to join the search party. He simply can’t stay put. I think of the many occasions when Katherine was little and we went to Legoland or the Aquarium at the weekend. The first thing I always did was to point out a really obvious meeting point. ‘If you get lost, come here,’ I would instruct. ‘If you can’t find this, then just stay in one place. I’ll look everywhere. I’ll find you if you stay in one place.’ I guess Jeff remembers this, too.

Callum and Olivia say that they want to distribute flyers. I imagine them in the precinct; it’s white, spacious and bright with a storm of silver lights everywhere. The windows of every shop are decorated with tinsel and baubles, treats and temptations. I look at the tree in the corner of the room. I haven’t turned on the lights today. How can Christmas still be happening? The precinct will be full of stressed mothers carrying too many bulky carrier bags, yelling at their kids for trailing behind them or running in front of them. Some kids will be hoisted on to their father’s shoulders, kicking their little wellied feet, both father and child sighing with impatience. Those lucky, lucky creatures. They don’t know. Will everyone be too busy with their own affairs to give us a thought? Will they even pause to look at her face on the sheet of A5 paper? At this time of year, people act as though buying the items on their list is the single most important thing in the western world. It’s laughable.

Even so, I say I want to go, too. Anything is better than staying here watching the clock creep round, fielding calls from people who, whatever their intention, irritate me both because they are not Katherine and because they block up the line. In unison, everyone choruses that it is best I wait indoors, wait for her to come home. She might call.

I wonder whether they think they are protecting me.

Annabel offers to stay with me. It’s good of her, because I’m no sort of company. For a long time, we sit in silence. The poor apology for daylight begins to fade and, as it does, hope seeps away, too.

Inspector Davis said that people are not as random, freespirited or impetuous as they like to think they are. She said they always leave clues as to their intentions, that patterns in behaviour create a trail: 'Humans cling to routine for survival. No one is immune.' In my mind I obsessively replay every moment of the last three months, looking for clues as to where Tom might have gone. Where he might have taken her. We have her passport and so I'm still hopeful he's in the UK. But the UK is a big place: not when you are holidaying in Bude – then, it seems that we know every third person on the beach – but when you are looking for a child, it's enormous. She's a needle in a haystack. I start to appreciate that Tom gave me very little information about himself and now I know that anything he did divulge is likely to have been untrue. He never spoke about anywhere he wanted to visit or a favourite place of his. He's never spoken about his childhood, or much about his past at all. I know his parents live in Alicante. That's all. The police are trying to track them down.

Annabel does not move to put the lights on, so we sit in the room, letting the dusk envelop us. I'm grateful to her for her tact. I like her, Annabel. Realising as much surprises me. The reality of her is so much more sympathetic and appealing than the dead Annabel I have imagined. I find I'm not jealous of her. She gave birth to Katherine and she's clearly a caring, thoughtful woman, but throughout this vigil it's been clear which of us is Katherine's mother. She would not swap places with me. No one would. I'm not resentful that she brought more bad news to my door. She came with decent intentions. She doesn't want to interfere, she wants to help. This mess is not her fault. Despite the fact that my world has been chewed up, spat out and urinated upon, I trust her. My gut reaction to her is the opposite of the one I had about Tom.

In the darkness I find the courage to mumble, 'I didn't want anything to do with him, not at first. I felt exactly as you did about the situation. Leave well alone. Jeff was the one who was interested, because of the illness, you know. He thought Tom might be a support if Katherine was sick.'

'Understandable.'

'Do you think? I still wonder, maybe if we had just upped sticks and run off? Told her nothing. We could have kept her safe that way.'

'You didn't know. You were being lied to. Besides, there are some things you just can't outrun.'

That's true enough.

‘Then Tom came around and told us about Katherine playing truant so she could go to visit him and the children. I was so shocked, but I understood how desperate she was to have a relationship with them. I had to go along with it after that.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure of what?’

‘That she ditched school to visit them. Did you talk to her about it?’

‘No.’ Annabel raises her eyebrows, asking me to think again. ‘Oh, I see, you think it’s another thing I might have been duped about.’

She nods ruefully. ‘You can’t trust a word he says.’

That’s a more difficult thought. Maybe Katherine never had a desire to meet Tom and the children. Perhaps we inadvertently pushed her into the relationship. What must she have thought of us? ‘Why did I trust him? Why didn’t I make more checks?’ But I know why: I was so desperate to keep it a secret that I trusted the one person who didn’t deserve to be trusted.

Annabel looks self-conscious. ‘Olivia told me.’

‘Told you what?’

‘About Friday evening.’ Then she’s straight to the point. ‘Are you having an affair with him?’

‘God, no!’

‘I’m not judging. It’s none of my business, really,’ she says hurriedly. ‘I just wondered whether the police might think it’s relevant.’

‘I am not having an affair with him,’ I say firmly, but I can’t help myself; I know my cheeks are scarlet. I wonder whether she can tell in this dark room.

I think maybe she can when she gently asks, ‘Were you ever?’

‘No!’ The denial hangs around in the air like a bad smell. I know I have to offer more. I owe her the truth. The full truth. Besides, what if she’s right? Do the police need to know what happened on Friday? *Is it relevant?* I sigh. ‘On Friday I went round to his house. Jeff and I had had a tiff. I was upset. He became amorous.’

Annabel lets out a little squeak, almost a giggle. ‘I’m sorry, Alison, I know this is incredibly serious, nothing more so, but “a tiff”, “amorous”? You sound like you live in a different century.’

Surprisingly, I’m not offended. The comment is too accurate and fair for me to resent. I collapse back on the chair, tuck my legs up under me and admit, ‘You’re right. You know, sometimes I think that’s what’s wrong with

me. I've a tendency to be this ridiculously passive victim. I sit about worrying and fretting instead of taking control. My default setting is to be almost preposterously polite. I'm always trying not to get in the way, trying not to put anyone out or cause any trouble. Trying, I suppose, to sneak under the radar. Look where that's got me!

'So what happened on Friday night?' she asks patiently.

'He pounced on me. Quite aggressively, actually; it wasn't pleasant. I didn't want him to kiss me. I didn't enjoy it.' It's not until I say this that I realise how true it is. I've felt guilty and implicated, but it wasn't my fault. 'I have been drawn to him. He is attractive. I was conned. But I didn't want to have an affair with him and I did not ask for him to kiss me. I didn't ask for any of this.'

'Did he hurt you?'

'No. Olivia interrupted us before things could get out of hand.'

'That's a relief.' I wonder what Annabel thinks this man is capable of.

'By the way, what was she doing at his house, anyway? I thought there was an injunction.'

'I know. She shouldn't have gone there.'

'I'm glad she did.'

'Yes, as it turned out, but I was furious with her when she told me she'd gone to his. She just said she felt really sorry for him. She went round on the spur of the moment because she felt awful that he was spending his Friday night alone.'

'That was kind.'

'Well, she is quite soft, underneath her bravado, and besides, he'd been texting her all evening, even though, strictly speaking, he's not supposed to.'

'Texting to say what?'

'Saying he was lonely. Can you imagine her surprise when she found the two of you?'

'I'm sorry.'

I'm deeply ashamed to have added to Olivia's distress, but Annabel plainly says, 'Well, it's not your fault, is it?' I see her calm, honest face turned towards me, radiating assurance. 'Is that all that happened?'

'He said some wild nonsense.'

'Like what?'

'That we could be a family, all of us together.'

‘How did he think that was going to work?’

‘He said he was in love with me.’

She doesn’t bat an eyelid. ‘Do you believe him?’

‘I don’t believe anything he said any more.’ We both sigh at the truth of that. ‘Do you think I need to tell the police?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know. Inspector Davis already knows you spent more time with Tom than Jeff did. I’m not sure how relevant it is other than to say he might be in a vengeful, desperate state of mind, but they know that, because of the court order I put on him.’ She shrugs regretfully. It’s my call, and she can’t make it for me. There’s something companionable in the dense, dark early-evening air. Shared regret and understanding, shared sympathy and support. ‘I suppose if he really thinks he’s in love with you, that might become useful.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, he might want to please you, still.’

‘He’s stolen my daughter!’ I can’t keep the anger out of my voice.

‘I know.’ Annabel doesn’t say anything else. It’s clear she is leaving the matter with me. We sit in silence now. No doubt she, like me, is scrambling around her brain for clues as to where he might have taken my daughter; Annabel has already drawn up a list of holiday homes they’ve rented in the past and given that to the police; each one is being checked. We have to find her soon. It’s still raining, and I can’t bear the idea of her spending another night out there. Out somewhere. It’s only when I hear the crunch of the tyres of Jeff’s car that we jump into action. We quickly put on the main overhead lights and try to dispel the gloom by collecting the half-empty teacups. ‘Will you ask Olivia?’

‘Ask her what?’

‘Tom said she was playing truant as well as Katherine; that’s how he found out about Katherine visiting. Will you ask her if it’s true?’

‘I will, but I think I know the answer. I’m pretty sure, with all the problems we’ve been having for months with Tom, that the school would have contacted me immediately if Olivia was absent. When was this?’

‘Late September, early October.’

‘Hmm. I’ve had her half-term report: her attendance was a hundred per cent. I bet you’ll find the same for Katherine.’ I barely remember her half-term report; we had so much on our minds when it arrived. We were simply pleased her grades hadn’t slipped too much.

‘Why would she search out a new family? She has you and Jeff. You are clearly devoted to her.’

‘We are, but—’

‘But?’

‘Did that make her happy? Was I cloying? Irritating? Pushy?’ My voice breaks as tears rush to overwhelm me. Annabel stands in front of me; awkwardly, because of her blooming belly, she pulls me into a tight hug.

‘Of course she was happy, of *course* she was. And she will be again. When they bring her home. She’ll be home soon.’

However, I *don’t* know. It’s easy for her to say. Her three children are safe and close by. Her fourth is still cocooned, far away from harm. I’m not sure of anything any more, because no one knows.

Did he take her?

Or did she run from us?

It's unbelievable to me that another night has passed without me knowing where my daughter is. Needless to say, I didn't sleep much. Nor did Jeff. Inspector Davis is right about patterns: humans do cling to them for survival. The pattern we have established is to lie on our backs staring at the ceiling, obsessively, relentlessly, replaying the decisions we made that led us to this place. We keep pressing rewind then play, rewind then play. To see when it all went wrong, to discover at which exact moment we could have changed it all. If I hadn't let her go to Maddie's on Friday, if we hadn't let her have a phone, if we hadn't allowed Tom into our lives.

More journalists than I expected turn up to the press conference, considering it's a filthy Monday morning and the event was hastily arranged. I suppose the lurid details are irresistible. A baby mix-up, a long-lost birth father, a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl.

It takes place in the town hall. I've never given any thought to where these things are staged. I watch as the elderly ladies who volunteer at the town hall fuss about setting out a long table. They put on a white tablecloth, jugs of iced water and glasses. One of them asks whether we'd like flowers. 'It's not a bloody wedding,' snaps Inspector Davis. Everything is taking so long. People are moving in slow motion. I swear they are. They need to hurry. I feel it keenly. Time is relentlessly marching on. Jeff takes tight hold of my hand. He's squeezing so much it hurts. Annabel asks, 'Do you want me to come up there with you? Sit next to you?' I shake my head but ask her to stay close by. She nods and squeezes my shoulder. People keep squeezing me, as though I'm playdough, as though I'm malleable. But I don't think I am. I am brittle.

The camera flashes are distracting but most overwhelming is the whirl of the digital lenses zooming in and out of focus, moving closer to us, trying to capture every one of our sighs and tears. I'm aware that everyone is expecting something from me. Inspector Davis wants me to make a

statement, but I've said I don't think I can. 'Well, somehow appeal to Tom Truby, throw a look or a word that will draw him out, make him do something that will reveal his whereabouts,' she persisted. Jeff wants me to hold it together. The press want me to fall apart. I want this not to be happening.

Inspector Davis gives a statement first. She throws details to the pack; I can hear their breath, held in their lungs. It's sensational. I can't follow her words exactly. I catch some of them but others float away from me, wayward. 'Grave concern ... missing for over forty-eight hours ... unable to confirm any sightings of Katherine ... Tom Truby ... person of particular interest ... asking the public to stay vigilant.'

Jeff reads a statement. It's full of all the usual clichés, which are ferociously true. 'We just want to see our daughter home safely ... She's a wonderful girl ... our world ... If anyone knows anything. Has seen anything ...' He looks directly at the camera. 'Please bring her home, Tom.'

The press start to yell out questions. Their voices are abrupt, unsympathetic; the questions are worse than that. They want to know if the police are looking for anyone else besides Tom Truby; Inspector Davis states: 'That's where the focus is.' They ask if Katherine might have gone with Tom of her own accord, or was she forced? Inspector Davis says that both scenarios are being considered. One reporter asks: 'Is the relationship simply one of lost biological father and daughter being reunited, or is it something more than that? Something other?' Inspector Davis wins my eternal gratitude when she ignores the question. She simply reiterates the importance of finding Katherine and bringing her home.

After the conference we are put in a police car and driven home. Inspector Davis says she'll call round later this afternoon to update us. We have her telephone number if we need to get in touch.

Annabel, Callum and Olivia come back to our house, without being asked; there's an implicit agreement that we all need to be near one another. There's another batch of gifts on the step. Left by people who don't want to disturb us. Two bunches of flowers, the sort you buy at a garage, which never quite cheer enough; a casserole; and a couple of packages. Someone has also lit a candle. I don't like it; it's something you'd put at a shrine. Shrines are for the dead. Yet I can't bring myself to snuff it out. Olivia and Callum scoop up the gifts and dump them in the kitchen. The house seems full. There's a policeman who was deployed to answer the phone while we

were at the press conference. As he leaves, he hands me a message that says Rachel is flying to the UK; she's boarding a plane now. She needn't do that. It's kind of her, but what's the point? How can she help? How can anyone help? Just Tom. Tom, who has caused all this pain, is the only one who can stop it. But he has not telephoned. Two mums from school are here as well; they put the neglected flowers in water and, on a more or less continuous basis, they kindly make tea and sandwiches. They seem unfazed by the fact that most of it goes undrunk and uneaten.

Jeff looks at the tea he's proffered in disgust; I know he wants a whisky, but it is only eleven in the morning. Annabel seems to understand. I watch her make a coffee and then add a nip.

'I'd love one, too, but I can't,' she says, looking dolefully at her bump. 'Alison?' I shake my head. I don't want alcohol. I've barely slept since Friday, when I drank more than enough. My head is fuzzy, my mouth is furry, but I do understand Jeff wanting a drink. He should take whatever comfort he can, wherever he can. He's welcome to it. He perches on the edge of an armchair, unable or unwilling to get comfortable. He drops his head into his hands. Mozart whines and licks Jeff's fingers. I should get him an antihistamine; he'll be sneezing soon. I stand in the doorway of the sitting room, forgetting to take off my coat until I feel Olivia gently tug my sleeve. She unbuttons the coat and slips it off my shoulders, then takes it away and hangs it up in the hall. I feel like the child. Jeff turns to me and asks, 'Do you think she might have chosen him? That she went willingly?'

'I don't know. I almost hope so. That would mean she is safe. If he has abducted her, then how? How is he subduing her?' Thoughts of gaffer tape, ropes, temazepam, even Rohypnol, come to my mind. I don't know how I am breathing in and out.

'But which do you think it is?'

'I'm lost, Jeff. I'm all out of ideas and thoughts.' Jeff looks at me for a moment, as though I've betrayed him. It's odd: I never realised how much he depended on my views until I let him down and didn't have one to offer. He looks away, worn out.

The room is hot and stuffy. Suffocating. No one knows what to say. Suddenly, Jeff stands up again, looks like he's going to charge for the door. 'I can't just sit here.' Callum places a hand on his shoulder.

'At least drink your coffee. Then we can all go and give out flyers.'

I know that, when they say ‘all’, they don’t mean me. I’ve been assigned to the passive role of waiting, being here, just in case; I know they’re trying to protect me. I’ve had a lifetime of predicting calamity and seeing a disaster at every turn, it’s reasonable to assume that I’m too frail to deal with this. Oddly, the opposite is true. I am astounded to find that I no longer feel cowed. How can I be terrified of what *might* happen? It *has* happened.

Peter drifts to the front of my mind. Over the years I’ve realised that I am always thinking of him, on some level; I ration how often these thoughts can be conscious. Now, even amidst all this horror and grief for Katherine, I think of the first child I let slip through my grasp. I didn’t fight hard enough for him. I’ve lived with that regret all my life. This time, I want to do something about my situation. I want to change something. I envy Jeff, the children, the volunteers, even the police, because they can pound the streets; it must be a relief being in the cold, moving, doing something, rather than sitting in this stifling room. I think I’d be eased if I could do that, I’d somehow feel closer to her. I feel constrained, hampered, but instead of quietly reconciling myself to a feeling of frustration I’m stunned to discover that I feel a slow burning anger gathering momentum in my head and heart. I want to upturn the coffee table, yank down the curtains, smash crockery and throw glasses. I look around the room to see if anyone has read my thoughts. Annabel is staring at me. She gives me the oddest of looks and I think perhaps she might have.

Jeff and the children quickly get on their way. Annabel is not going to hand out flyers, but she says she needs to go back to her house to pick up some clean clothes for her and the kids. I’m terrified by my own pent-up energy so I choose to open the post and packages rather than sit and do nothing. The post offers up little more than bills and catalogues. I put them in the bin. It’s just the easiest thing to do. The first package is a box of chocolates. There’s a note with it: ‘Thinking of you at this difficult time.’ It’s signed by a family we’ve known since I did NCT pre-natal classes. It’s undoubtedly kind of them. I realise how hard it must be to reach out, to think of something to say; I let the chocolates drop into the bin, too. I’d choke on them. The second package contains a bundle of magazines, a sachet of hot chocolate and a small packet of bath salts: ‘Sending you a care package. Our thoughts are with you.’ It’s from the women I do Pilates with. Bin. How can I read about diets and recipes, celebrities and film reviews? I

almost don't open the third parcel – what's the point? It can't offer me any comfort. It might as well go straight in the bin. But I do.

It's a copy of *Brighton Rock*.

I know at once. It is not the tatty, battered copy I found on his car seat. This copy is brand new. But I know. It's his. I rush to the front door and fling it open, run up the drive to the gate and look left and right. I can't see anyone. He's long gone. Dashing back to the house, I ask the two mums if they saw anyone delivering the various gifts.

'No, sorry. We were at the back of the house, in the kitchen. Can I make you a cup of tea? You look pale.'

I hurry back to the table and check the envelope. Unmarked. Hand-delivered. No note. I leaf through the book, hoping against hope there's a discreet note tucked between the pages. There isn't. I feel frustration and fury bubble with hope and adrenalin. It's something. He's made contact. That's something.

Then I notice it. A page turned at the corner. A word in the text has been picked out. An old-fashioned code, like something the Secret Seven might do. Underlined in pencil, carefully, not too obviously. You would have to be looking for it. Really looking. Hands shaking, throat dry, I read the sentence.

On page six: 'He had come out of the same streets ...'

I flick through until I find another turned corner. Page fourteen: 'I'm all alone.'

*Come alone.*

I swiftly start to leaf through the book, desperately looking for another turned corner. More underlined words. When I find them, I wish I hadn't. Page 102: "It's the last chance for me," Spicer said.'

I sit stone still for a moment and try to decide what to do next. I rummage in my handbag and retrieve the inspector's card. She's left us her direct number. I hold the card between my finger and thumb, playing with the corner, wearing it to a crease. I pick up my phone. Or should I call Jeff first?

But I don't call.

He has not explicitly said, *Tell no one*. He has not given me instructions to dump my phone or even details of where to meet, but I understand all that. It's implicit in 'come alone'. More explicit is 'last chance'. I can't take

any risks. I've often said I'd do anything for Katherine. Anything at all. Now, I have to prove it.

I know the way to Brighton, but now I also know about the automated number-plate-recognition system. I don't know if the police will have my car tracked once they realise I'm missing, but I can't risk it. I put on the satnav and programme a route that excludes motorways. It took a lot of nerve but I thought it best to leave my phone at home, on the coffee table in plain sight, next to the note saying that I'm taking Mozart for a long walk to clear my head a bit. At least this way Jeff will simply think I've forgotten it. I'm hoping he won't worry quite so much. Mozart is sitting in the well of the front passenger seat. He's a good traveller and I'm glad of the company.

It's raining again, quite persistently today. I wonder when it will ever stop. I almost imagine it won't. I put on the radio and hear that it's the wettest December on record, so far. The skies are grieving for Katherine. The enormous lorries transporting goods from Argos or food from Waitrose scrape and totter in front of me. I can't overtake because the roads are too windy, but that's not a bad thing. I have to stay within the speed limit as I don't want to be noticed by a speed camera. The satnav predicts the journey will take two and a half hours, because avoiding the main roads means I have to go quite some distance out of my way. Oddly, I'm not tired. I realise that adrenalin is pumping through my body, sustaining me.

During the journey I make a conscious effort not to allow myself to become worked up or frenzied. Undoubtedly, I can see the risks and flaws in this plan – if indeed my impulsive dart can be called a plan at all. I'm pretty confident that Tom wants me to head to Brighton, although that does not guarantee that is where I'll find him or Katherine; it is just as possible that he's luring me in the wrong direction. However, setting aside a lifetime of indecision and self-doubt, I stay steadily committed to my plan. I believe that they are in Brighton. I haven't much real evidence to go on but I believe it. I realise that, even when I do arrive, I'm not sure exactly where in Brighton I might find Tom. It's a big town. And then there is the question

of whether I should have told the police. I don't know, and it's too late to change course. Tom said 'come alone'. That could be a trap or my best chance.

The only concern that continues to nag me is whether I ought to have shared my plans with Jeff. Once he realises I've been gone too long to simply be walking Mozart, he'll go spare with fright as to where I might be. I see a telephone box and impulsively pull over. It's been years since I've used one, but they haven't changed. The doors are still impossibly heavy, inside it still smells awful, the only difference is it's more expensive to make a call now. I return to the car and scrabble around for change.

Jeff picks up after two rings. 'It's me.'

'Hello, darling, how are you doing?' He sounds weary, but I appreciate he's trying to be upbeat for me.

'OK.'

'Bearing up?'

'Jeff, are you still out?'

'Yes, I'm coming home soon, though.' I imagine him cold, wet, worn out. Still, I doubt he is planning on coming home soon.

'Look, I haven't got a lot of time. I'm ringing from a phone box. When you do get back home, I won't be there.'

'Where are you?'

'There's a note saying I'm taking the dog for a walk. If the police are with you, pretend to believe it.'

His tone shifts. Concern is overlaid with panic. 'Alison, what's going on?'

'I can't tell you, Jeff.' I lean my head against the dirty glass. There's a silence. I suppose he's imagining the possibilities. What am I up to? What mad risk might I be taking? What betrayal might I be planning? 'I want you to trust me,' I whisper. He still doesn't say anything. The level of background noise changes. I get the impression that he's walking away from a crowd. Is he protecting me, finding some privacy? Or is he about to blow off? 'You do trust me, don't you, Jeff?' I battle to keep my voice steady, I want him to believe that I'm in control. 'I must do something, and you have to trust me. I'm only calling you so you didn't find me gone and think he has me, too.'

'Are you safe?'

'At the moment.'

‘Has he made contact?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know where she is?’

‘No, but I know where he wants me to go.’

‘Alison,’ he whispers urgently, ‘You know all this rain we’ve been having? Well, it reminded me of that story I read once about a mother thrush.’

‘What?’

‘I told you about it. Do you remember?’ he asks urgently. ‘The little bird used her own body to dam an overflowing drainpipe in order to stop her nest being swept away by rainwater.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘It was a story of such brilliant ingenuity and self-sacrifice. Out of all the stories I told you about the animal mums, that’s always been your favourite.’

‘Yes, it has.’

‘Because the father thrush fed the mother and the young while she protected the nest,’ he reminds me. My heart squeezes as I understand what he’s trying to say. ‘Let me come with you, Alison.’

‘No. I can’t. It has to be this way. He said I was to go alone.’

‘It will be a trap. He’s dangerous.’

‘I know, but you have to trust me with this, Jeff. You have to.’

He takes a deep breath; another pause pulses through our history. I think he’s going to argue with me. Fuss, insist I call the police. At the very least demand to know where I am going.

‘OK, Alison.’ The relief. His unconditional loyalty nearly floors me. I imagine his concern and his frustration, but he is trusting me. The fact is, he has always believed in me, far more than I have myself.

‘I’ve got to go,’ I whisper. The tears are biting in my throat and eyes but I won’t give in to them.

When people think about nature’s most protective mothers they often talk about mamma bears willing to claw apart anyone or anything that might threaten their cubs. People are less aware that orang-utan mothers maintain physical contact with their babies for the entire first four months of their life. They literally never let go. Then there are the penguins who shield their chicks from the Arctic winds. I suppose I’ve always known that by

presenting all these examples of animal mothers' behaviour Jeff was telling me that he understood. That I'm an animal. That we all are.

'Go get our baby back, Alison.'

I hang up.

As I put the car into gear my back is a little straighter, my heart a little stronger. I am not a thrush, or a bear, an orang-utan or even a tiger.

Tom Truby, watch out, because I am an entire fucking menagerie and I'm coming after you.

I arrive in Brighton just before three. I park my car in an NCP and then head straight for the pier. I've decided that is the most likely place for him to expect me because, even though we once discussed our mutual dislike of noisy funfairs, the pier is the central point of Brighton.

The elements assault me. The air is freezing; it pierces and the vicious wind slaps. Stinging needles of rain jab me. I fasten my coat right up to the top button, pull my hat low on my forehead and wrap my scarf snugly around so that the only part of my flesh that is exposed is the couple of inches from my nose to my eyes. But then I am concerned there's a chance Tom might not spot me, even though I have Mozart with me. I ditch my scarf in a bin; a moment later a homeless man fishes it out, I wish I'd thought to hand it to him in the first place.

I can smell the salt of the sea and hear hungry gulls screech. It's a lonely, sad sound. Brighton is wearing an entirely different guise from when we used to visit with Katherine in the summertime. The shopkeepers have brought their wares indoors, as there are no tourists to be tempted into buying a rubber ring or flip flops; the front, the beach and the sea are practically deserted. I imagine Christmas shoppers will have stayed within the warmth of the shopping mall, though a hardy few might be battling with umbrellas as they dash around the tangle of the Laines. Despite the attractions, most people have the sense to stay away from the pier in weather like this; no one is dipping behind the life-size wooden fat ladies, the ones where you stick your head through the hole where her face ought to be. I wonder whether the lack of crowds will be a deterrent for Tom. Might he stay away? Have I got this all wrong?

I buy a cup of tea, served in a polystyrene cup, and a small bag of deep-fried doughnuts I intend to give Mozart. I realise it's a terrible thing to feed a dog but he looks like he needs a treat. There are benches under the central canopy, the ones where pensioners can find a bit of shade in the summer; I

don't sit there because I'll be easier to miss. I find a bench towards the end of the pier, out in the open, exposed, and then I sit down.

And wait.

It grows pitch black, and the wind is still blowing in from the sea; the rain has now settled into a steady drizzle. All credit to Brighton, there are coloured lights running up and down the pier trying to break the gloom; the fairground attractions have, optimistically, been kept open, but their tinny jingles are lost to the unforgiving weather. Small clusters of people respond to the lights and occasionally someone hands over a token to hook a duck or sit on the waltzers. The rain has made the wooden floor of the pier glassy. I see a child dash and slip over, dirtying his clothes. He is helped to his feet by his parents, patted down, rushed to shelter. The smell of chips lingers in the air and, eventually, I buy a tray. I gobble them down, not allowing myself to enjoy them. I've already had a second cup of tea. My legs and bottom are numb; every fifteen minutes or so, I stand up, stamp my feet and stretch a bit. I'm wearing my walking coat but, even so, the cold and damp are beginning to infiltrate my bones. Mozart has crept underneath the bench and is trying to benefit from any protection my body can give. I feel sorry for him and wonder if it was cruel of me to bring him. I consider taking him back to the car but I don't want to leave my post. I have to stay still. Tom has to find me.

I wonder, has he been in Brighton since Saturday? Did he come back to Surrey just to drop off the book? Or have they been nearby all the time? I don't know. The thought that he is always one step in front kicks its way into my head. I shove it out; it's unhelpful. I have to focus on what I'm in control of. I have to take charge now. For example, I can assume he's trailing me. I don't shiver at the thought; that's what I need.

There are so few people on the pier I have to do very little by way of being vigilant for his arrival; the challenge is making the minutes fall away. I play games such as counting how many cars pass in the distance before I spot a bus. Twenty-three, twenty-four. Ah, a bus, start again. One, two.

Just after six o'clock, I spot him. He is wearing a deer stalker hat I haven't seen before and he's turned up the collar of his coat, to protect himself from the elements, perhaps; to avoid detection most certainly. He stands, hunched and apart. I wave to him. It's an out-of-place, joyful gesture, but I am so delighted, so relieved. I was right, I was right! And if Tom is here, then Katherine must be close by. Safe and well, please God. I

frantically search her out, but I can't find her. He catches my eye but doesn't come over straight away. Instead, he makes me wait. He lingers near the carousel; I watch as he casts suspicious glances left and right, towards the helter-skelter and the girl selling chips. I understand: he thinks I've brought the police. I stand up slowly, one hand holding Mozart's lead, the other wide from my side; an open gesture. Deliberately, gradually, I walk towards him. Like a wildlife photographer, scared of startling away the beast.

'It's OK, Tom. There's no one here but me.' I practically have to yell this above the noise of the wind and the waves crashing on to the pebbled beach. 'Where's Katherine?'

He doesn't answer me but asks, 'Why are you friends with Annabel?'

He doesn't seem in the least bit fazed or embarrassed to have told me that Annabel was dead when she clearly isn't. Like him, I don't answer the question but pursue my own. 'Is she OK? Is she with you?'

'I saw the press conference. That wasn't very nice of you, releasing my photo, telling the world I'm a person of "particular interest" in the case.' He looks cold, angry. 'I'm not a person of "particular interest". I'm her dad.' I stop a metre away from him. I scan about over his shoulder but I still can't see her. I force my eyes to meet his. It's difficult, like facing the devil. He looks dreadful. His eyes are manic; he's unshaven, grubby. I don't take any pleasure from this. If he's this dishevelled, what state is Katherine in? His clothes are crumpled; he smells as though he's been sleeping in them. He's twitchy, buzzing like an electric fence. There is no sign of the calmness I once admired. His façade has crumbled. I'm left facing a raw, frightening instability.

'Let me talk to her. Please.' I can't keep the need out of my voice.

'Maybe.'

So he has her! She's alive! I sway slightly, allowing myself a moment of pure joy. The first for days. Because there was always that fear. The vilest thing possible. While I have been trying to keep the bleakest thoughts behind the wall, I have been for ever conscious of the wickedest possible outcome. But she is alive! He somehow senses my liberation and release and seems to want to crush it.

'You can talk to her if you don't disappoint me,' he says.

I'm not sure what he means or how I might disappoint him. Not knowing bothers me because I might do it inadvertently; he might storm off into the

blackness, get away from me again. So I mustn't let the relief make me giddy. I concentrate, focus. Being alert is all. I'm beginning to think I should have involved the police. They could have told me what to say, how to act. Or they could have pounced on him now, arrested him and brought this to an end. He is leaning on the pier railings, looking out to the tempestuous sea. I imagine pushing him over, hearing him cry out and splash into the water, but I know he's too big for me to attack, the railings are too high. It's a fantasy.

As has happened on previous occasions, it's as though he's following my thoughts. 'It's a good thing you came alone, Alison, because I'm the only person who knows where she is and, if something should happen to me, how would you find her, then?'

'Shall we go to her now?'

'I don't know.' He turns to me and I see he is genuinely uncertain. There's no sign of his previous determination and organisation. I get the sense that he's making this up as he goes along. He has no idea. He's rudderless. That's dangerous.

'Is she waiting for me? Is she far?'

'Shut up, Alison.' His words slam into me. 'Stop asking questions, you're annoying me.' He pulls his hat off his head in a temper and then, impotent, holds it in his hand, seemingly unclear as to whether he wants to stomp on it or put it on again. He throws it out to sea. The wind lifts it for a moment; it's weightless, before it's dropped into the eddying water. He looks disappointed, thwarted. It wasn't a satisfying gesture. There was no smash, or crash, or bang. He hits his hand down on to the railing. His upper lip stiffens as he refuses to wince. I stay absolutely still.

I'm reminded of what I'm dealing with. A psychopath who tells a child she might have an illness that may well kill her, who pretends his ex is dead, who steals children. Because now I'm pretty certain Katherine was taken from us. If she'd gone willingly, he'd be gloating about it. I think about how I should best handle him. I think of Annabel commenting that if he does believe he is in love with me it might be useful, he might want to please me. Still. Perhaps she's right. If anyone knows him, she must. I have to lull him. Flatter him. Win him over.

I have to find Katherine.

'I'm glad you sent me the novel.'

He turns to me again, his face open, pleased. I find his smile as unwholesome as his snarl. 'I knew you'd understand. Our book.'

*Our book?* The concept is preposterous. I hold my face steady, not revealing that I think this. 'Did you deliver it yourself? If so, you must have driven here today, too? We could have shared a car.' It's a silly joke but he responds, softening an infinitesimal amount. I want to take him back just a few days, to when I still believed his attention was harmless and flattering, to when he found my neediness – what? – a way in. I can't forget, not for a moment. 'It was very clever of you, leaving the book. Discreet.'

'I knew they'd have a trace on your phones by now.' He suddenly looks alarmed.

'I didn't bring my phone,' I reassure him. 'I'm not wired, or being tracked.' I unzip my coat and hold it wide open. I'm not sure how wires work exactly, but then I doubt he knows either. It's a gesture of good faith. He swiftly moves forward and grabs my shoulder bag. He turns it upside down and all my belongings spill on to the pier. Something small falls through the wooden slat, washed out to sea, never to be seen again. I have no idea what. Probably nothing more than a loose earring or a lipstick. A reminder, as if I needed it, that things get lost so easily. My purse, diary, make-up, Tampax, car keys – all scatter. Tom looks satisfied. He clumsily puts his hands into my coat pockets, searching for a phone. He pats my jeans pockets, too. I can't bear the feel of his hands on my bottom but I stay absolutely motionless and smile. He runs his hands down the centre of my chest, across my stomach, around my waist, like they do in airports if you've set off the alarm at security. Then he places his hands flat on my breasts and looks me in the eye while doing so. Challenging – evaluating? I force myself not to flinch.

I bet he can feel my heart beat.

'OK.' He steps back, almost sneering. Sure of himself. Sure he has me where he wants me. In his control. I came here willingly, would do the same again in an instant. I'm an insect to him. Nothing more than an ant crawling in his hand. He could close his fist and crush me whenever he chooses. I do not stoop to pick up my belongings. I hope he'll forget about them, too. 'Why did you run out on me on Friday?' he demands.

'That was a mistake,' I admit.

He nods, somewhat appeased. 'It was, Alison.' A muscle in his cheek quivers; he looks confused. 'I mean, what was so awful? What was wrong,

exactly? All I said was that we could be a family.'

'You have a family.' The observation slips out, inadvisably.

He flips again. No longer the man who is confident he has what I want and therefore is in control, now he's the man who's been hurt and rejected. Vengeful. 'Don't be fucking clever, Alison. I said I saw you at the press conference with Annabel. I can imagine how friendly you two are now. I bet she's told you everything, has she? Or, at least, her own warped view of everything.'

I reach out and put my hand on his soggy jacket sleeve. 'I don't believe a word she's told me. Well, obviously, I know she's alive, but I know and understand why you told me she was dead.'

'You do?'

'Yes, you were trying to protect me.'

He looks pleased with this idea, delighted. 'I was – that's right. Have you met her boyfriend?' He manages to make the word 'boyfriend' into a jeer.

'No.'

'Rory.' He spits out the name. 'Just a little man. He's her GP.' The information is delivered as an insult. 'Or was. Disgusting. He ought to be struck off. He stole my kids. Did she tell you that? Did she?' he snarls.

I don't know how to answer. It's ridiculous. Instead, I pretend he hasn't asked. 'The stuff she said about you rowing with her and embarrassing the kids, I don't believe that for a minute.'

'Bitch.' He shoves me hard at both shoulders. I stumble backwards and Mozart barks. A couple in their twenties walking past, laughing that their umbrella is turning inside out, glance our way and then hurry on by. Tom yanks Mozart's lead out of my hands and pulls sharply. 'Shut up! Shut up, you stupid fucking dog!' I reach out and pat Mozart's head. He responds and settles. I misplayed that, pushed it too far. I realise that Tom is not in love with me, even if he wants to believe he is. He's still in love with Annabel; he couldn't be this angry otherwise. I hope I can convince him I'm a good enough substitute. I put my arm through his and pretend the shove never happened, even though my shoulder feels sore. I have to tread carefully, patiently, like you do when you are corralling a drunken friend into a taxi or persuading teenagers to do something they consider uncool.

He looks at my arm, linked with his own, surprised. Then, he sulkily mutters, 'You've really let me down, Alison. You've spoilt things.'

'I can fix that,' I insist.

‘I want to talk to you, but I don’t think I can trust you any more.’

‘Yes, you can.’

‘You know, I could just run away from you now, get back in my car, and we’ll vanish. You’ll never see her again.’ His words are so brutally true I’m trembling.

Cautiously, I say, ‘Come on, now. Why don’t we go and get Katherine and we can all go and find somewhere warm to eat dinner?’ It’s such an ordinary suggestion it’s laughable, but the truth is I don’t know what else to do. I *am* ordinary. I am a middle-aged mother who goes to Pilate classes and rep theatre. I’m not a trained psychologist, or a martial-arts expert. I’m not in the SAS or even in a political party. No one ordinary really expects ever to have to deal with anything like this, do they? No matter how much they might fear or imagine it. Yet it happens. Horror happens to ordinary people and, when it does, we do our best. We fight back with what little we have; we try to stay calm; we draw on our limited experiences and offer warmth and dinner.

I’ll offer anything and everything I have.

‘You must be hungry.’ He looks at me, confused. ‘I’ve hardly eaten these past few days; I bet you’re the same, aren’t you? Too much to worry—’ I stop myself. ‘Too much to think about.’

‘I’ve eaten.’

‘And Katherine?’ He looks shifty.

‘We can’t eat in a restaurant, Alison, don’t be idiotic. We’re all fugitives.’

I want to punch the air. He’s put us on the same side. It’s warped and incredible but it is good news. ‘Yes, that’s right, of course.’ I squeeze his arm. ‘Come on, then, let’s go and see Katherine, get warm and dry, hey?’

He doesn’t move. ‘Have you brought your passports?’ I haven’t, it never crossed my mind, but I realise saying so will be incendiary. I teeter on a knife edge, not knowing how to answer.

‘Yes.’ I hold my breath, hoping he won’t demand to see them, hoping he won’t realise that, if I did have them, they’d be in my bag or my pockets, which he’s already searched.

‘Where are they?’

‘I brought a suitcase. It’s in my car. I couldn’t carry it.’

It’s the right answer. He beams. ‘Good, because we need to get abroad. We can’t start up as a family here now that you’ve told the police I kidnapped her.’

‘I’m sorry. I panicked.’

He throws out a glare conveying that he thinks I’m a bit dense, he couldn’t have expected any better from me. ‘You are such a worrier, Alison, that’s your problem.’

‘I didn’t see the bigger picture. I didn’t see what you were trying to do for us.’

He nods. ‘If only you hadn’t run off on Friday.’ His voice sounds genuinely regretful. I understand regret, although he’s regretting different things than I am, no doubt.

‘I know, I know, I’m sorry. But I’m here now.’

He looks slyly content. ‘Yes, you did always say you’d do absolutely anything for her. I admire that. I’ve depended on that.’

I try to smile. ‘Let’s go and see Katherine now.’

‘We should go to your car. Get your case.’

‘Can’t we go and see Katherine first?’

He looks like he’s considering it. He straightens, glances about him. I’m aware of his full height but I’m no longer admiring of it, I’m alarmed by it. ‘Pick up your stuff.’ He points to the sodden contents of my bag, which are lying on the pier.

I bend down to retrieve my belongings. I throw them all into my bag, not daring to leave anything behind. I can’t risk attempting a Hansel and Gretel trail, as I had briefly considered. We walk back along the pier, arms linked; to anyone passing by we must look exactly like any other couple out on a wet evening walking their dog. Once we reach the sea front, Tom turns to me. ‘You have to ditch Mozart.’

‘Ditch him?’

‘We can’t take him abroad and, besides, the holiday let I have here doesn’t allow animals.’ This is so bizarre, and a further indication how unhinged Tom is. He has a holiday let, apparently, where he’s illegally holding my daughter, but he’s worrying about breaking the rules on pets staying there. ‘He’ll draw too much attention, he’s always barking,’ snaps Tom. ‘It’s up to you. We can either go back to the car, pick up your suitcase and passports and leave him in the car, or, if you want to go and see Katherine first, you have to tie him up here and leave him.’

‘I brought him because I always thought he was your gift to Katherine. She loves him.’

He shrugs. 'Your choice. You said you'd do anything for her, Alison. This isn't too much, is it?'

I don't want to leave Mozart. 'You said you would, too.'

'Oh, and I will. I'm ready to prove it.' I hear the menace. His words choke the breath out of me. I tie Mozart's lead to a lamp post and walk away, grateful when his whines and barks are drowned out by the sound of the sea thrashing over the railings.

He uses his scarf to blindfold me. I don't object at all. 'Like that, do you?' he leers. 'Is this something I'm going to find out about you, Alison? We've so much to learn about one another.' Seemingly without a trace of irony, he adds, 'It's going to be fun.'

We don't drive for long, in Tom's newly acquired, battered Ford Fiesta. I manage to count to sixty twenty-five times, so I assume we are about twenty-five minutes from the pier, but I can't be sure because I'm keeping time by counting along to the pulse of the windscreen wipers and Tom keeps turning them on and off, agitated. I try to keep track of when we turn left and right but, as though he expects this, he seems to make two or three turns that go back on themselves; unfortunately, I quickly become disorientated and confused. I concentrate on the road surface, noticing when we pull off tarmac, when the tyres crunch through gravel and then when the car sinks into a mud track or, possibly, a grassy field. I wonder how far he'll get on the soft terrain; the surge of rainfall these past few days might mean the ground is boggy. I can't bear the idea of us getting stuck, not because I'm out in the middle of nowhere with this madman but because I'm so close to Katherine. It would be torture to be this close but not be able to reach her because of a waterlogged field. I just have to get to her. That is all that matters. My need to see her, hold her, stops me being afraid. After just a few more minutes he slows the car to a stop. My hands are not tied but I don't remove the blindfold. I'm not going to do so until he tells me to. I'm not going to put a foot out of line.

Tom comes around to my side of the car and opens the door; the cold air and drizzle blow into the car. Roughly, he grasps my upper arm and starts to march me across the field. Without sight, I have to depend on sound to give me any clue as to my whereabouts. I can't hear any traffic. I strain my ears but all I hear is rain: rain falling on tree leaves, rain falling on soft ground. Was that a fox barking? Could that possibly be the sea, waves rushing on to

the shore? Or is it just the wind rustling through the trees? I keep moving until I stumble when my foot catches on a flagstone. He lets go of my arm.

‘Steps,’ he warns. ‘Stand still.’ I hear him jangle keys. A door creaks open.

‘Can I take off the blindfold?’

‘No, I’ll carry you.’ And he picks me up with ease. One arm around my back and shoulders, the other tucked under my knees. Jolt, jolt, jolt. He leaps up three steps and then lifts me across the threshold as though I am a new bride. I try to disassociate myself from my body, which has so much contact with his. I don’t want to put my arm around his neck, but I do because, if I didn’t, he’d be sure to notice. It crosses my mind that, since he lifted me so effortlessly and I am significantly heavier than Katherine, if he wanted to move her from one place to another, I suppose he’d be able to manage it easily enough.

‘You can take off the blindfold now.’ I pull off his scarf as he turns on a bright overhead light. I blink at the glare, whipping my head around the room. We’re in an ordinary cottage kitchen. Quite small and dated, probably last modernised circa 1980, the ideal time to strip the charm and replace it with a look that’s now universally agreed to be ugly. It’s a compact rectangular room only a couple of metres wide and maybe three long. A wooden table with four sturdy faux-leather chairs around it takes up most of the space. To the left there are stairs going up to the bedrooms; in the right-hand corner there are two doors at a right angle to one another. I take all of this in because I know I need to know the lie of the land. ‘Katherine! Katherine!’ I yell.

‘Not so much noise,’ he barks. He points towards one of the doors in the corner. I immediately understand it leads to the basement. I don’t pause, I don’t hesitate, I run to the door and turn the enormous key, pull open the door and clatter down the stone stairs. It’s dimly lit and smells damp, like most basements. The air is stale. It’s been there for centuries.

It is as bad as I imagined. Worse. She’s lying on a skinny, old-fashioned camp bed that’s pushed up against a wall. There’s a duvet thrown over her but her right arm is sticking out. I see immediately by the way she is positioned and by her horrible stillness that she’s not conscious. For one more agonising moment I am battered by disgusting, all-consuming fear and panic. Please, God, let her be alive! Please, God. *Please*. I run to her and scoop her up in my arms. She’s cool, chilly but not cold. I check for a

pulse, and it's there. Faint, but real. She smells of vomit, sweat; even wee. I don't care. I pull her limp body into mine, trying to transfer my warmth and health to her. Her matted hair falls around her face, across my arm.

I scan around and see a plastic water bottle, half full, a tray with a bowl of cold rice pudding, a yogurt carton.

'What have you done to her?' I scream at him.

He looks embarrassed but not sorry. He should be whipping himself. Bashing his head against a wall until his brain explodes. How could he do this to anyone, let alone a girl he calls his daughter, a child he professes to love. I kiss her face over and over again, as though she's Sleeping Beauty and love's true kiss can work miracles.

'Mum? Mamma?' she mumbles.

'Yes, my angel, it's me, Mum. It's OK. I'm here now, everything is going to be OK.'

'I've been so ill,' she groans. 'Throwing up all the time.'

'I know, baby.' I reach for the water bottle and carefully place it next to her lips. 'Drink this, darling.' She sips obediently. Her eyelashes flutter.

'What did you give her?' I demand.

'Rohypnol.'

'The date-rape drug?'

'That's an awful thing to call it.'

'It's an awful *thing*, Tom!'

'It's just a sedative. I didn't touch her. Look, *I* didn't do this. *You* did this. If you'd just come with me on Friday,' he yells. I glare at him. 'We just went shopping on Saturday. We walked around the Laines. I didn't want to drug her, but she kept going on and on about *you*. Asking when she could go home to *you*. But I knew I had to have more time to persuade you to join us.'

'Why is she down here?' I demand.

'There was a nosy neighbour, some busybody; she popped round on Sunday morning with two kids. You know the sort, always wanting to offload their offspring. Asked if I had kids, someone for her brood to play with. Katherine was on the sofa in the sitting room at that point, but the nosy old cow almost pushed her way through into there. I couldn't risk it. That's when I moved her down here.'

'Pick her up, now!' Surprisingly, Tom does as I ask. He lifts Katherine over his right shoulder and carries her up the steep stone steps. I hold her

hand as we walk.

‘I feel sick again,’ mumbles Katherine; her speech slurred.

‘That’s the effect of the drugs, not a real illness,’ he assures me brightly.

‘Thought you were here. Then not.’ She starts to cry.

‘She was hallucinating a bit.’ Tom shrugs. I take the key out of the basement door and slip it into my pocket. ‘Unfortunately, there’s a gamut of symptoms, and she’s had most of them. But I’ve told her she has a bug. Now you’re here, she’ll believe that. She’s unlikely to remember anything at all about the basement.’

We are in the kitchen, Tom turns to me, pathetically awaiting instructions, and I wonder how it has come to this: my daughter stained with urine and vomit, flung across a madman’s shoulder.

A father crazed with loss and so unhinged he thinks he has the right to drug and kidnap a child.

‘Put her in the sitting room. I’ll make us a cup of tea and then we can decide what to do next.’

‘Right. You’re the boss,’ he says sunnily, playing the hen-pecked husband to a T. It’s surreal. How can this be happening? My hands shake as I turn on the tap. The water crashes against the tin kettle and I try to think. Swiftly, I move to the basement door and pull it wide open. I have to pray he doesn’t notice.

I only just manage to get back around the other side of the table when he returns to the kitchen, leaving Katherine alone in the sitting room. I can hear that he’s put the TV on for her. ‘Can I do anything?’ he asks helpfully.

‘Have you any biscuits?’

‘We do.’ Proudly, he opens a cupboard and reaches for a packet of Hobnobs. The packet is half finished. It is obvious that Katherine won’t have been in a fit state to eat biscuits, as he’s been drugging her for two days. Fury erupts like lava through my veins; he’s been munching on biscuits while she’s been lying alone in the basement. I add this sick behaviour to his list of crimes. Maybe to some it might seem insignificant compared to everything else; to me, it is a glaring affirmation that he is a monster, a shameless, lost, depraved soul.

I open and close cupboards, looking for what I need. Sometimes he anticipates what I’m searching for and reaches to pull a jug from a shelf before I get there; he opens the fridge, gets out the milk, sniffs it. I put three mugs, the tea pot, sugar, milk and biscuits on a tray. I delve into the cutlery

drawer, because I can't risk him seeing my face. 'Teaspoons – ah, there they are! Please can you carry through the tray?' I ask him.

'No problem. But first give me back the key to the basement.' He smirks, reading my mind. Knowing, I'm sure, that I was planning on shoving him in the back as he passed the door. Hoping that, with his hands full, he might topple, lose his footing and fall down the stone stairs. At the very least I could buy a moment to slam the door behind him and lock him in there.

He holds out his hand. I retrieve the key from my jeans pocket and pass it over. Leisurely, deliberately, he walks to the back door and locks that, too. He puts both keys in his pocket. 'The front is locked, and all the windows are, too, so don't get any more silly thoughts, Alison.'

'I just didn't want you locking anyone down there any more,' I say.

'Didn't you?' He picks up the tray and heads off to the sitting room. 'Coming?'

I have my arms around Katherine. The soft, silky skin, the weight of her, the fact I can caress her hair and kiss her head – all are miracles. It is enough, for now. He can't hurt her any more, because I am here and I will fling my body between them if I have to. I make all the food and drink, not that she is yet up to eating much, but I carry the warmed tomato soup in from the kitchen, keep it on my lap and then feed her. I watch his every move. He watches mine. I have no idea what he is thinking. Any trust I built up on the pier was obviously dissipated when he saw me filch the basement key, yet as we three sit watching the TV in a tortuous silence he behaves as though we are a happy family simply on holiday together, avoiding the poor weather.

'I'd suggest Scrabble, but I don't think Katherine will be up to it.' He smiles at her sympathetically. 'Feeling better?' Then, in a conspiratorial pantomime whisper, he says to me, 'One of the side effects is difficulty in concentrating or speaking. Won't last too much longer, but Scrabble's not the ideal game for her at the moment. It would hardly be fair.'

Katherine flinches. 'It's OK, darling,' I murmur. It clearly isn't. She's barely said a word since I arrived, an hour and a half ago. Despite his assurances that being drugged means she won't remember anything very clearly since shopping with him on Saturday, I'm pretty certain she does know he kidnapped her, drugged her, locked her in the basement. Tom keeps dropping hints that we are all having a little jaunt, but his story has a complicating overlying layer that he and I are absconding, planning on setting up home together. When he alludes to this scenario he glances theatrically at Katherine, as though saying, 'When are we going to tell her?' Clearly, she has not bought into his invention, as tears continually slip down her face and she cowers from him, clings to me. I can only imagine her terror. I don't know how much the drugs have affected her reasoning and logic, how much of this she is following. We haven't been left alone for one

second, so I can't talk to her. All I can do is hold her tight, rock her back and forth and hope she is piecing it together. I have whispered to her to stay as quiet as possible. I think it's safest.

'How much did you give her?' I ask.

'Oh, not so much. A little on Saturday night, just enough to send her to sleep. Then again on Sunday afternoon, and just before I set off back to Surrey this morning. I didn't want her waking up alone and being scared.'

'Thoughtful,' I mutter sarcastically. He beams at me.

'Don't look so worried, Alison. There are no long-term effects. It just sends you to sleep. All the bad press comes from the despicable things that are done to a person when she or he is asleep.'

'Where did you get it?'

'On the dark web. Have you heard of that?' I shake my head. All I know of the dark web is gleaned from *Sherlock*. That's always been enough for me. This isn't my reality. My reality is school and lacrosse league tables, book clubs and charity coffee mornings. 'I sometimes get myself a little pick-me-up from there, too.'

'Antidepressants?'

'Not quite.' He grins. I wonder what the hell he has in his system. How long he's been taking whatever he is taking and if these illegal drugs have anything to do with the fact he's so delusional. I appraise the room. Disappointingly, the locked window is mock-Tudor, a lattice of metal stopping me smashing it and climbing out. The only door out of the room leads back into the kitchen. There's no way out of this room. I haven't seen a landline telephone. I suppose there might be one upstairs, but the chances are he'll have unplugged any phones, hidden them. It feels hopeless. How long might he keep us here?

I can feel Katherine shaking. Momentarily, I feel as though I am under water, disconnected and sinking, then one of her tears splashes on to my arm and I'm jolted back up to the surface. I think of the mother thrush sitting on the drainpipe, making sure the wave of water didn't wash her babies away. I think of the father thrush, too.

'I'm going for a pee. Bathroom is upstairs, but I'm going to do it in the sink in the kitchen.' So we can't do a dash for the back door.

The minute he is out of the room I take Katherine's face between my two hands and urgently hiss-whisper, 'I left the car in an NCP with your dad's

number taped to the windscreen. His number is also written on the inside of Mozart's collar. They'll find us.'

'That will only bring them to Brighton. How will they find us here?' she whispers back hurriedly. Her face is streaked with tears and snot. She looks desperate, not reassured. 'I think he stole my phone. Do you have yours?' I shake my head sadly. She looks like she is about to howl.

'We just have to sit tight.' Back to this. I would act – I would – if I could see a way. 'We are getting out of here, do you understand, Katherine? Everything is going to work out.'

'How do you know?' she whimpers.

'Because I promise you, and I've promised your dad, and I never break a promise.'

She stares at me with her enormous eyes that I love more than my own, and I see her think about this. I am a worrier, a fussy, a bit of a brute when it comes to the completion of homework, thank-you letters and the consumption of vegetables. I am for ever regretting my past and worrying about her future. I have my faults. But I deliver. I am her mum and I don't break promises.

If I promise I'll get us somewhere on time, I do. If I say I'll be at the school gate, on the sidelines, in the audience, on the bleachers, that's where she'll find me. Tickets for the 2013 One Direction tour – yes, indeed. Lemon-drizzle cake for the school fair – no problem, even if I have to stay up until midnight. Maybe she'll be remembering the other promises I kept, ones she wished I *would* break, like when I promised she could have her ears pierced at the age of fifteen but not a day before. Perhaps she's remembering that, when she was going for the mutated-gene test, I would not promise it was going to be all right, even though she begged me to. That was outside of my control. This isn't.

'Oh, and by the way, you haven't got a mutated gene.' I kiss her forehead, pull away, beam at her.

'What?'

'He made the whole thing up,' I whisper, eyes on the door, terrified he's going to walk in any moment.

'Oh my God.' I expect her to smile, kiss me, laugh with relief, but instead she repeats the words: 'Oh my God. Oh my God.' She makes a strange sort of spluttering sound. I notice that her breathing begins to race.

It's shallow; I can hear the air rattle and scrape in her chest, not finding a clear way in and out.

'Katherine? Katherine, it's OK, darling. Take a deep breath. This is good news.' But she can't take a deep breath; she's hyperventilating. I think she's having some sort of asthma attack, but she's never suffered from asthma before. Could it be a heart attack? The Rohypnol he gave her! She's sweating, and her lips are turning pale. I leap off the sofa and rush into the kitchen. Tom is walking towards me, pulling up his fly. He hastily grabs two glasses of orange juice he's poured.

'I've got you a drink.'

I need to get to a phone to ring an ambulance. I need to get to the tap for some water. Not the orange juice. No, I don't trust that. I am an enormous ball of rage and adrenalin. I can't take any more. *I made my daughter a promise.* Not one more thing. *I am here to save her.* I can't help. *I am not going to fail.* I am keeping that promise.

I expand. My strength and determination multiply. The fury, panic, horror and desperation swell, too. All these things are hurtling around my body, pumping through my veins and gushing into my muscles and my organs. Especially my heart. I can hear elephants charge, orang-utans chatter, bears and wolves growl and howl. They are all behind me.

It's instinct. Not an accident. Although not deliberate.

My arms are flailing, then they go rigid of their own accord. I punch Tom in the solar plexus. He drops the glasses and they smash to the floor, orange juice everywhere. He doubles up, in considerable pain. Now it's him gasping for breath. It's lightening. Not a decision exactly. Not a choice. I punch and kick, and punch him again. I've never struck a human being in my life, so I don't know what I'm doing and some of the blows no doubt hurt me as much as they do him, but he's surprised and the lucky hit to the solar plexus has given me an advantage. He backs away from me, winded, wheezing. I bring my knee up in his groin and he crumples. He shifts back behind the basement door. The steps are steep, made perilous with spilt juice; it is dark.

Inevitably, he slips. I watch him fall. Bang, roll, bang, shuffle. Stop.

I slam the door closed, grab a chair to prop under the handle. 'Him, not me!' I yell to Katherine, because she must have heard the fall and be terrified. No time to say more. I run to the back door. It's locked, as I knew it would be. I pick up a second chair and smash it against the frosted glass

at the top. One, two, three. The window shatters; shards fly in all directions. I close my eyes and put my arms across my face. The glass scatters across the kitchen, and then the smithereens settle. Opening my eyes to spots of blood on my arms, dripping on to the floor, I push my head and shoulders through the broken glass. I scream and scream, as loudly as I possibly can. I demand someone call an ambulance. I yell, over and over again, 'Heeeelp! Heeeelp us! Please! Help us!'

It's a bright spring evening, not warm exactly but dry and clear. This year, more than ever, I'm appreciating the promise of the season of birth, fresh starts and new beginnings. Annabel and I have spent the last three hours transforming the local community hall into something attractively festive. We step back and proudly survey our efforts. We've gone for the 'more is more' philosophy. The room is doused in helium balloons, fluttering streamers, personalised bunting and the sort of glittery nonsense that everyone, other than me, seems to be wild about – tiaras, blowouts, horns and pompoms. I congratulate myself on the fact that, throughout this party-planning process, I've never once used the words 'tat', 'tack' or 'tasteless'; it really would be a shame to blot my copybook now.

'I had my doubts about how lime green and shocking pink were going to work together,' I admit. 'But it looks incredibly effective. Jolly.'

'Both their favourite colours combined – there was no other way to go,' says Annabel with a broad grin. She's a woman who smiles a lot; it's reassuring. She rubs her back. She's enormous now, absolutely huge. I'm fearful that her skin is going to split. Callum keeps making jokes about the exploding belly in *Alien*. Annabel just laughs and says that her stomach muscles are shot because this is her fourth pregnancy and that he was the beginning of the end for her, he ought to be more sympathetic. She's nine days overdue. Olivia is extremely keen for her to hang on a little longer.

'I don't want to share my birthday – at least, not with anyone else. It's my and Katherine's special day, and this new baby brother is not going to nab it.' She makes it sound like a joke but I think we all know she's more than half serious. Annabel is crossing her legs, fingers and toes, hoping her baby son doesn't crash the party. We've tried hard to make this day wonderful for the girls. We were all so proud and excited when they approached us and suggested a joint birthday party.

'We know most of each other's friends now,' said Katherine.

‘It’s going to get loads of Instagram coverage,’ pointed out Olivia.

The planning process has been a spectacular exercise in negotiating, compromise and diplomacy. Not that Olivia and Katherine disagreed, the girls spoke as one throughout; the sides were split along the generational divide. We gave in on the colour theme, inclusion of a piñata and the cake flavour; we stood by our decision on the budget. Well, more or less. And as for the issue of chaperoning, we agreed that we’d be there, ‘just in case’, but that we’d stay in the small annexe kitchen, out of sight.

‘I think it looks pretty fabulous,’ smiles Annabel. She sits down heavily in a chair. She looks slightly sweaty and tired. ‘I must be mad to think about hosting fifty sixteen year olds when I’m forty-one weeks pregnant.’

‘Absolutely! Do you want a glass of water? Lime cordial? Mango smoothie?’

‘I *want* a glass of wine but, go on, then, I’ll settle for lime cordial.’

Secretly, I’m still pleasantly surprised to find out that Olivia’s favourite colour is pink, albeit shocking pink – as she’s always at pains to clarify. I’d have thought she’d have left the colour behind, dismissed it as girly, infantile. Indeed, I’d have thought she’d have dismissed having a favourite colour at all as silly. However, her mother was right (of course she was): Olivia is much softer than she likes to pretend. I suppose when I first met her she had every right to milk the role of weary, disenfranchised teen; she was exactly that. She was absorbing a lot of her father’s grief and pain, keeping his secrets in a brave but misguided attempt to protect him, and she was wary and resentful of the new family that was being foisted upon her. Quite a lot for a kid to have on her plate, I think we can all agree. Now, I’ve had the total joy and benefit of seeing her at the very heart of a warm, functioning family. Now, I’ve had the privilege of getting to know her a little bit when she doesn’t have all that terrible stress and strain – she’s a wonder!

She has a terrific sense of humour, very dry but never cruel. She laughs a lot, like her mother. It’s a wonderful, hearty laugh, infectious. Despite her trying to convince everyone otherwise, she has a great many talents and skills that make her interesting and prepared. Her art is amazing, as Tom always claimed, and as a matter of fact she’s pretty brilliant at English and history, too. She can ice skate, actually do that twizzling thing where you bend backwards, kick up your leg behind you and hold the edge of the blade; she just doesn’t much *enjoy* doing it. She, like me, is not a fan of the

cold. ‘The ice rink is more Callum’s place,’ she once commented affably. She’s an excellent player of cards, she bakes lovely cupcakes, she can map-read and, quite impressively, she can fit thirty-two Maltesers into her mouth at one time, something that gave us all a great deal of hilarity one evening when Katherine and Jeff challenged her. Katherine only got to about seven before she thought she might be sick; Jeff had a decent crack at it: he got to nineteen. Mozart was keen to get in on the act but we only fed him one or two. We were all so happy to get him home, even Jeff, who is becoming less allergic to his fur now and can often be found reading his newspaper, Mozart contentedly lying at his feet.

‘Come on, Alison. Your turn,’ Olivia encouraged.

‘Oh no, I couldn’t.’

‘It’s fine. Just don’t let one land on your gag reflex, or else it’s all over.’

‘Desk-gate once more,’ laughed Jeff, an in-joke that flew over the girls’ heads. I managed eight but was never a serious contender for the title of champion.

‘You know Ed Sheeran holds the record, for fitting in fifty-one,’ said Olivia, laughing.

‘I did not know that,’ I replied.

‘He must have an enormous mouth,’ commented Jeff, opening and closing his own as wide as he possibly could, trying to imagine.

‘Have you ever wiggled an After Eight from your forehead to your mouth?’ Katherine asked Olivia.

‘No.’ She looked gleeful at the very thought.

‘It’s hilarious. Look, I’ll show you on YouTube.’

‘Better yet, I’ll nip to Tesco Express and see if I can pick up a box and we can do it for real.’ I said this, and I didn’t say that we’d all had enough sugar for one night, nor did I screech out that Olivia might choke, forcing thirty-one Maltesers into her mouth at once (and she really might!). Nor did I mention that it was getting late, because it was a Saturday and you only live once.

You really do. Don’t we know it?

The thing about coming close to true and absolute danger or grief is that life is never the same again. It can’t be, but we have to go on anyway. That’s what we do – humans, animals, the waves of the sea – we keep going. Our persistence is the only consistent thing about us. I’ve thought about this a lot in the past three months and the thing I’ve come to believe

is that after you are slammed up against horror and disaster, it's done. Just that. You can't change it. So there are only two routes left available.

You can decide to cower away, go home, lock your door and perpetually fear every shadow. You can incessantly look to the darkness, waiting for the next threat to emerge, remain convinced that life is strewn with hardships and disappointments and nothing more.

Or.

You can throw open your door, your heart. You can remind yourself, every day if necessary, that you got through. That everything passes. You can take comfort and strength from the fact that when it came to the wire you were not just a survivor but a warrior.

I am a warrior. Katherine is a warrior. Olivia, Jeff, Annabel are all, in their different ways, warriors. The world is populated with ordinary people who have shown their strength and braveness by refusing to fear shadows.

None of the medics could offer me a definitive reason as to why Katherine had a panic attack at the precise moment she did. The moment I told her she did not have the mutated gene. I thought I was delivering good news in order to sustain her. We've since half-heartedly joked, 'Can you imagine what her reaction would have been if she *had* inherited the gene? Considering she had a panic attack, when she heard she hadn't!' But it's a low-level joke, the sort that can only raise a reluctant grin. I suppose it was a shock too far, at that precise point in time. It may have been a reaction to the drugs she'd been fed. I don't know. But I do know that her panic attack possibly saved our lives.

The neighbour who Tom had described as a busybody heard my screams and came running. She did not walk on by. I describe her as a godsend. Later, she told Inspector Davis that her first impressions of the man in the holiday let had been that he was curt and unfriendly, suspicious. She'd been keeping her eye on the place, as it belongs to a friend of hers. I guess he simply ran out of reserves of his famous charm; I suppose everyone has their limits and it appears that he couldn't muster one more boyish grin or make his eyes twinkle while he was drugging a child. The neighbour was efficient and quick-thinking. She called an ambulance and then fetched the spare front-door key her friend had entrusted to her.

'For precisely this sort of emergency,' she explained. 'Well, not *precisely* this sort. I mean, who would have thought?'

She helped me pull Katherine to her feet and between us we managed to half carry, half drag my terrified daughter next door. There, we waited for the ambulance and police, Katherine breathing into a paper bag, both of us too shocked to cry.

The tears did come. When we saw them move his body out of the basement, into the ambulance. Katherine had to go to hospital, but the medics, assessing that she was calming down and not at immediate risk, transported him first. Katherine sobbed when she saw him unmoving, bloody, battered. I think she was still frightened of him. Scared that he'd suddenly sit up and make a grab for her. My tears were ones of pity, grief, regret. I didn't and don't regret my own actions. I regret that any of it had to happen.

Olivia quite often comes round to ours now and we have fun nights like the one with the Maltesers and After Eight challenges; we do more edifying things, too, if I can get everyone on board. Just before Christmas I managed to persuade Jeff and the girls to come to the National Portrait Gallery with me, my favourite London gallery, which Olivia loves too, what with her interest in art. Katherine visits Annabel and Rory's regularly as well, where she gets to enjoy her siblings for hours at a time, then she comes home again, secretly relieved that she doesn't have to share her bedroom or submit to playing hairdressers a moment longer with Amy: 'I know she's only young, but she tugs!'

'My tip is always to offer to put her hair in a French plait,' Olivia advises. 'Never be the customer, always be the stylist.'

My relationship with Annabel is muddled but wonderful, complex and yet simple. We created and carried one another's babies and so we are forever linked and indebted to one another. Yet most of our gratitude stems from the fact that we've made the most enormous leap: we've learnt to trust each other enough to let our birth babies go. We know they are cherished and that they are where they belong. That sounds so complicated and peculiar but it is how it is. Sometimes, life is just how it is. Not textbook prose. More existential poetry, with half-lines and irregular punctuation. I love Olivia but she's Annabel's child. Katherine is my daughter. It helped me feel better about Peter too. I understand now he's somewhere being loved. I have to believe that.

We could have hosted the birthday celebration at our house, we have room, but I thought it was a better idea that we found somewhere that

belonged equally to both the girls. I didn't want it to be a case of Katherine feeling responsible for hosting, or Olivia feeling uncomfortable because her sweet-sixteen celebration was at someone else's home. I try very hard to look at everything from both girls' points of view when I can. Besides, Annabel pointed out that I'd have much more fun if we hired this community hall. 'You won't be thinking about cake being trampled into the carpet or a drunk teenager throwing up into the vase of silk roses that has pride of place on your landing.'

'There will be no drinking,' I said firmly, then, less sure of myself, I asked, 'Will there?' Annabel hugged me – she really is a hugger. I'm getting used to it, I'm getting to like it.

'Well, maybe we could ask the parents of the kids who are already sixteen if they mind whether we serve Prosecco with the birthday cake. That way they'll have already eaten loads and they won't feel compelled to sneak in any hard liquor they can't handle. Do you think that's OK?'

I don't really, but I can see it's reasonable. And I want to be reasonable. I'm working on loosening my grip. Letting go. Not letting go of Katherine, just letting go of the anxiety I attached to her. Warriors don't think their kids are going to choke on chocolate or that they will become alcoholics if they have a glass of Prosecco on their sixteenth birthday. Besides, I realise that being part of a blended family demands extra-special care, compromise and cooperation. But it's worth it. The Trubys and Rory have brought a great deal of joy to our home. The Three Musketeers have recruited. 'We should have a cool name like that,' said Amy. 'I know, me, Olivia, Callum, Mummy and Rory can be known as the Famous Five!' I've come to learn that all her cultural references are derived from Enid Blyton or *Blue Peter*.

'What about Dad?' Callum had asked.

'And the new baby, when he comes?' Olivia wanted to know.

'OK, we'll have to be the Secret Seven, then,' said Amy.

'No more secrets, please!' chipped in Katherine.

'We could be the Magnificent Seven,' offered Rory. This was typically magnanimous of him. He's a positive, easy-going man and totally in love with Annabel. He must be, to take on this mess.

'I think the Magnificent Seven is pushing it,' said Annabel, with her trademark down-to-earth, tell-it-as-it-is style. 'Sometimes I think we're more like the seven dwarfs. Obviously, Rory is Doc. This baby is Bashful, because he's too shy even to come out. Bagsie I'm Happy.'

‘Happy is the only one that is any good. How come you get to be Happy?’ demanded Olivia.

‘Because I am the mother,’ replied Annabel serenely. I fully understood what she meant by that.

The moment was cut short when Amy said, ‘And Dad is Sleepy, isn’t he? Or maybe Sneezzy, because he’s poorly.’

‘He’s not that sort of poorly,’ Callum replied.

‘Well, what sort is he?’ This is the type of thing that crops up in our family. We’re breezing along one minute, giggling and talking nonsense, then we are dealing with this kind of dreadful question the next. Jeff says it’s called real life.

‘He has taken some very bad tablets and they’ve made him sick,’ explained Rory.

‘Too right,’ muttered Katherine. I discreetly slipped my hand into hers and squeezed, offering her moral support, asking for her patience and understanding, yet again.

To Katherine, Tom is a monster. A man who lied to her then lured her away from her family, who drugged her and locked her up in a damp basement. Her counsellor really has a lot to work with now. In fact, I think Betty Lopez is in counselling herself, in order to deal with Katherine’s case.

To Amy, Olivia and Callum, Tom is their dad. A man who, when they were younger, kissed their bumps better when they tripped up, blew on their hot food, taught them how to ride their bikes. A man who used to help them glue paper-tissue flowers on to Get Well Soon cards they were making for their mum, who cooked a particularly delicious shepherd’s pie, who dressed up as Santa at Christmas when he was putting gifts in their stockings, just in case any of them woke up and happened to spot him.

A man who – vulnerable, stressed and grief-stricken – made some appalling choices, who reacted badly to illegal drugs and became unrecognisable.

We now know that Tom started taking drugs not long after Annabel was diagnosed with cancer. That’s tragic, isn’t it? I think so. Sadly, a lethal cocktail of pride and shame prevented him from turning to his doctor and talking about the pressure he was under, so he was never prescribed the correct medicine or given the option of counselling. Instead, he chose to self-prescribe various uppers. He became dependent on – addicted to – drugs that increased his feelings of stress and ultimately led to debilitating

bouts of paranoia. He's been diagnosed with schizophrenia, depression and clinical anxiety.

'Still, no family is complete without a nutter,' commented Jeff.

We've got through the last few months by using a lot of gallows humour. This comment demonstrates the level to which Jeff has been high-minded and forgiving, considering he wanted to kill Tom when he first arrived at the A&E department in Brighton that wet December night. I know Jeff will never be able to forget the sight of his daughter quaking with fear, stained and stinking from her ordeal; his wife bloody and weeping, demanding to know if any of his old friends from Durham were lawyers.

I thought I might have to go on trial for what I'd done to Tom. At that point he was lying unconscious in a hospital bed and no one would tell me how bad his condition was; I thought he was going to die. I'd be responsible for taking a man's life. However, he didn't die and, eventually, the investigation team declared that my assault on Tom was reasonable self-defence. Most of his injuries – the concussion, the broken ribs – were sustained when he fell down the stairs, which he did when he slipped on the orange juice. The orange juice which, when tested, was revealed to have potentially lethal levels of Rohypnol in it. When Jeff first heard this, he roared, literally roared. I think if Tom had been standing in front of him he would have torn him limb from limb.

'We'd never have drunk anything he served us,' I reassured Jeff.

'That's not the point. His intentions were evil.'

'We don't know what his intentions were, or what his actions might have been. He didn't know either. Jeff, he wasn't in his right mind.'

'He wanted to take you from me, both of you. How can you be so calm?'

'I'm calm, Jeff, because I've seen where anger and fear lead. He started taking those horrible mind-warping drugs when he thought his wife was dying, he stole our daughter when he was so paranoid and deluded that he thought he was owed a child because his three had slipped through his fingers.'

The outcome of Tom's trial was a hospital order. I feel that was justice. He's getting the help he needs. The hope is, one day, he will become again the father his children deserve.

The party room starts to fill up. Jeff arrives with Olivia and Katherine, who insisted on getting ready together, Rory isn't far behind, with Amy. Callum is coming later: he's promised to bring two or three of his friends

along, which will give the party the appeal girls without older male siblings struggle to achieve. The girls' friends start to arrive. Teenagers in all their gore, in all their glory. Some, buoyant and giggly, offer up effusive praise for the decorations and hand over cards and gifts with excited squeals. Others arrive determined to be unimpressed; they are the type who won't dance, or eat or have any fun, but they'll go to bed tonight with a sense of satisfaction that they were, in their own eyes at least, unfalteringly cool. Some boys arrive – hunched and awkward or cocky and rowdy, they are all the same to me; they operate in packs, laughing too loudly at the same jokes, wearing the same trainers and the same self-conscious grins. It quickly becomes apparent that they are not all the same to Katherine. One boy walks over to her, kisses her cheek, hands over a carefully wrapped gift; black tissue paper, a lime-green bow. She beams widely, like ... like it's her birthday and it has only just become real now he's arrived.

I decide it's time I made myself scarce. I retreat to the kitchen, where I find Annabel placing cupcakes on a tiered stand. 'All alone? Where are Jeff and Rory?'

'They are circling the perimeter of the hall. Apparently, Jeff is convinced that all the mischief happens outside in older boys' cars. Is he speaking from experience?'

'Yes. Mine.'

'Interesting! You dark horse.' Her eyes light up; she wants to know more.

'Long story. I'll tell you another time. So what's their plan for stopping this deviant behaviour?' I ask with a laugh because, right now, teenage mischief is fun and natural, not scary or objectionable.

'It's vague. I think they are going to stride about a bit and cough loudly if they spot anything untoward. And we have Amy in the hall, she's a tell-tale, so if anyone so much as sniffs a wine gum or holds the hand of a member of the opposite sex she'll be straight in here to let us know.'

'I feel quite redundant.'

'We might as well grab a seat and eat a couple of these sensational cupcakes.'

'Yes, why don't we?'

We sit on uncomfortable plastic chairs in the grubby little Formica annexe kitchen, cramming the cupcakes into our mouths with unseemly greed. It's glorious. 'I'm pregnant – what's your excuse?' laughs Annabel.

The music from the party pounds through the thin walls at a volume that is slightly louder than I like it to be if I'm actually in the room with the stereo. The lyrics don't bear thinking about, so I don't think about them.

Annabel is bright, kind, sensitive and assured, but out of all her many attributes the thing I perhaps like the most about her is that she doesn't have an awful compunction to witter inanely in order to fill every conversational gap. I'm no longer that person either. We can be comfortable and quiet together. We are so for a while.

Then she asks, 'What time of the day was Olivia born?'

'Eleven fifteen in the morning.'

'Oh.' She nods, accepting this new piece of information about her daughter with tranquillity.

'And Katherine?' I ask.

'Three fifteen in the afternoon,' she replies. This is the first time Annabel has asked me anything about Olivia's birth. Nor have I asked her about Katherine's. These things can't be rushed. It's the right day to share.

Her hand darts to her stomach. 'He's playing football again.'

'Can I?'

'Be my guest.' I place my hand on her stomach and clearly feel a hand or foot punch out. I giggle, I can't help myself: it's such a wonderful, quirky experience, feeling new life, just there, waiting to burst out into this world and simply begin! I leave her stomach be and sit back in my chair, letting out a deep, contented sigh.

'Did Tom ever tell you that Katherine was a twin?' She looks me in the eye.

'Yes, he did.' So that much was true, at least. I've never been certain, since everything else he told us was a lie, and I never wanted to ask Annabel; it was up to her to volunteer the information as and when.

'Did he tell you that I think it was probably me who was responsible for the switch?'

'Yes.'

She lets out a long breath, 'I'm sorry, Alison, for all the confusion and chaos I brought into your life.'

'I'm certainly not,' I say firmly. 'Why would either of us change a thing?' I believe this absolutely. She gave me a magnificent daughter. I gave her one in return. Unorthodox, but true. We all have more to love

because of the mix-up. At that moment Amy bursts through into the kitchen.

‘Olivia is *kissing* someone!’ she yells excitably. I notice she has chocolate smeared all around her face. I don’t comment but grab a napkin and wipe my own, just in case.

‘I think we have more to worry about than that,’ Annabel says with a playful grin. For a second I think she has turned on a tap, perhaps to wet a cloth to clean Amy’s face, because I hear water gushing.

‘Err, Mummy, you’ve wet yourself.’ Amy’s eyes and mouth are wide with surprise, and her cheeks flush, embarrassed for her mother.

‘Not exactly.’

‘Then what?’

‘I’ll explain later. Right now I need you to go and find Rory.’

‘Do you have your hospital bag with you?’

‘Yes, all sorted. We’ve been travelling around with it for a month. Can you hold the fort here?’

‘Jeff and I will manage admirably. I honestly think your night is going to be more work than mine.’

‘You are kidding, right? I only have to worry about one baby, you’ll have fifty teens.’ We hug. I instigate it.

‘We’ll have Amy, as planned, and the other two as well, if they want to come back to ours. It will be rather fun keeping vigil together. Don’t worry about a thing.’

Amy stumbles back into the room, breathless and eager. Rory has clearly filled in the gaps for her. ‘You’re going to have the baby,’ she squeals with a new level of exhilaration.

‘Yes, darling, it seems that way.’

Jeff and Rory tumble through the door. Their excitement is tempered in comparison to Amy’s; indeed, Jeff’s shortness of breath might have more to do with the fact he doesn’t do enough exercise, and Rory’s elation can probably more accurately be described as sheer panic.

‘You are going to have the baby on Olivia’s birthday – she is going to be sooooo annoyed!’ yells Amy. She seems deliriously thrilled; I’m not sure if the thought of the imminent arrival of the baby or annoying Olivia is delighting her most.

‘It might take a while.’ Annabel glances at the clock. ‘I have never managed to do this in under nine hours, and she only has three left of her

birthday.'

'There speaks a determined woman,' says Jeff.

'Perhaps you should go out the back door,' I suggest with a smile.

'You think Olivia might object to her mum dashing through her party dripping amniotic fluid?'

I giggle. 'It might be classed as embarrassing or upstaging.' Annabel nods and waddles to the back door with all the calmness of a woman who has given birth three times before. We all follow. We kiss Annabel and Rory, wish them the best of luck and make them repeatedly promise that they'll call us the moment there is news.

'Don't forget, I'm naming him!' yells Amy; she seems incapable of speaking at a normal volume, hostage to giddiness. I scoop up this wriggling girl and hug her so her mum can actually get into the car unhindered. She does so and rolls down the window to blow kisses, while counting the minutes between her twinges. 'Don't forget to bring home the right baby this time,' Amy adds as an afterthought. 'Although, really, it didn't turn out too badly even when she did get them muddled, did it?' she asks me, turning her happy, almond-shaped eyes my way. She snuggles her head into the crook of my neck and I feel infinitely grateful.

'No, darling. It really didn't,' I agree.

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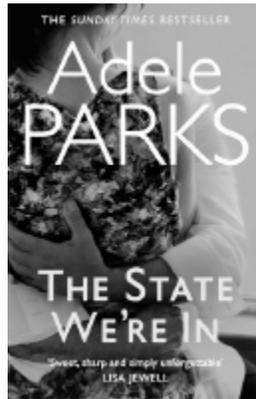
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Have you read Adele's other enthralling novels?

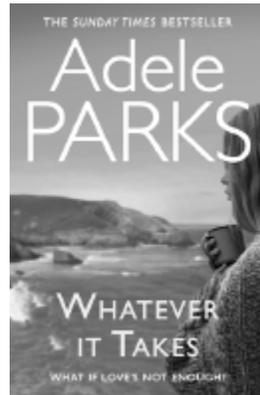
## THE STATE WE'RE IN



*Heroes can break your heart ...*

What are the odds that the stranger sitting next to you on a plane is destined to change your life? She's a life-long optimist, looking for her soulmate in every man she meets; he's a resolute cynic – cruel experience has taught him never to put his faith in anyone. But in the time it takes to fly from London to Chicago, each finds something in the other that they didn't even realise they needed ...

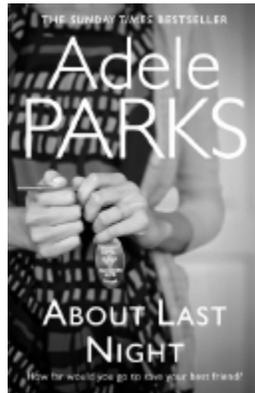
# WHATEVER IT TAKES



*What if love's not enough?*

How far would you go for the people you love? For Londoner Eloise Hamilton, there can be no greater sacrifice than uprooting to Dartmouth, leaving *her* perfect world so that her husband Mark can live *his*. But when a life-changing family secret emerges, Eloise suddenly finds herself struggling to hold everything together for the people she loves. Someone is bound to be overlooked, and the damage might be irreparable ...

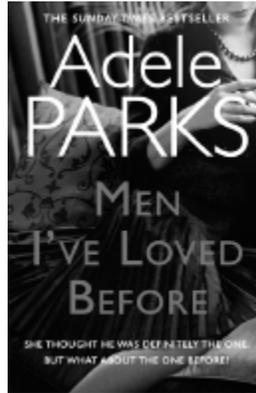
# ABOUT LAST NIGHT



*How far would you go to save your best friend?*

There is nothing best friends Steph and Pip wouldn't do for one another. That is, until Steph begs Pip to lie to the police as she's desperately trying to conceal not one but two scandalous secrets to protect her family. Her perfect life will be torn apart unless Pip agrees to this lie. But lying will jeopardise everything Pip's recently achieved after years of struggle. It's a big ask. So what would you do?

# MEN I'VE LOVED BEFORE



*She thought he was definitely the one. But what about the one before?*

Nat doesn't want babies; she accepts this is unusual but not unnatural. She has her reasons; deeply private and personal which she doesn't feel able to share. Luckily her husband Neil has always been in complete agreement, but when he begins to show signs of changing his mind, Nat is faced with a terrible dilemma. Is the man she has married really the man she's meant to be with?

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