

Prologue

March 2014

It was Matt Harvey, the new head of Biology, who first drew her attention to the problem. Although now of course she wondered how many other people knew. Matt had knocked on her door, unannounced, in the middle of the first lesson after lunch, and asked if he could have a word. Ailsa was midway through an email to a local biotech company, requesting work experience for sixth-formers hoping to study science at university.

‘Can it wait half an hour?’ she asked apologetically, as he poked his head around the door. ‘I really need to get this off.’ She gently massaged a small circle between her eyebrows, hoping to ward off the frown line that was threatening to settle there.

‘Sorry,’ Matt said. ‘It really can’t.’ He had such a panicked expression that Ailsa wondered whether he was about to resign. She glanced at his hand. He was holding something. To her relief, it wasn’t an envelope but a mobile phone. This reprieve was immediately tempered by irritation that he needed to bring his phone with him at all. It was difficult enough to persuade students to

sever the digital umbilical cord when they came into school, never mind if teachers failed to set an example.

Matt came in and shut the door abruptly so that the leaves of the cheese plant by her desk quivered. ‘Sorry.’ He opened his mouth and licked his lips a couple of times. Ailsa smiled in a way that she hoped was encouraging while retaining a professional distance. He looked away, unable to meet her eye.

‘I’m not sure how to most effectively sort this one out,’ he said, staring at his feet and drawing attention to the sort of casual footwear that sixth-formers were discouraged from wearing. *He must be in trouble*, thought Ailsa, trying to ignore the split infinitive. She ran through typical problems encountered by teachers in their first year at a new school: he had fallen foul of Mrs Arnold, her tricky deputy head pastoral (everyone did); he couldn’t master the new internal communication network (no one could); he was worried he was going to miss his GCSE targets (she would agree with him that league tables were blunt instruments, but funding depended on results and she would suggest he organize some extra classes on Saturday to avoid any disasters).

She was good at getting these messages across in a way that was sympathetic but firm. All the psychometric tests she had completed during the interview process for this first headship came to the same conclusions: Ailsa was a natural born leader. Where she went, her staff generally followed.

‘Sorry about the mess. I’m trying to do a million

things at once.’ She spoke with a cultivated informality appropriate for a workforce which, for the most part, was younger than her. ‘How can I help you?’ she asked.

‘Help me?’ He squinted at her quizzically as if she were being deliberately obtuse, and his thick dark eyebrows caterpillared into a single line. She squinted back, vaguely remembering from a management course that the best way to make people feel comfortable was to mimic their body language. Perhaps it was a less orthodox issue: a pupil with a crush maybe. When Ailsa interviewed for a new head of Biology, the only point against Matt Harvey made by Mrs Arnold was that he was too good-looking. Ailsa had said, only half joking, that if that meant more girls did Biology A level, it was a risk worth taking, especially now that there was extra funding for students who studied science.

Ailsa abandoned the email mid-sentence and invited Matt to sit on the small sofa in the corner of the room by the radiator. The heating was about to go off as part of a new money-saving scheme that had been disguised as an example of the school’s commitment to environmental issues, she explained.

‘But don’t tell anyone.’

‘It might be more convenient to stay near the computer,’ Matt suggested, walking purposefully towards her desk. ‘I need to use it.’

Ailsa stood up to make way for him. There was an awkward moment as they repositioned themselves. He removed his jacket and sat down on her chair in front of

the computer screen. She noticed shadows of sweat under his armpits. He undid his cuffs, carefully rolled up his sleeves and clicked each knuckle once, making Ailsa wince.

‘Sorry. Forgot how you hate that,’ he said, looking up at her with a smile so quick it had gone before it reached his eyes.

‘It’s like fingernails on a blackboard,’ she said, and then instantly regretted betraying her age to someone who had only ever known whiteboards. Matt pulled the chair towards the computer screen and it screeched across the floor. Despite being someone who liked to melt into the background, everything he did was very loud.

His fingers moved deftly across the keyboard. So quickly that she couldn’t see what he had typed into the Google bar. Ailsa watched the screen, intrigued to know what could be so important that he had to interrupt his lesson to show her. The afternoon was always the worst time to deal with a crisis. By then the optimism had been sucked out of the school day and she was filled with a wired energy fuelled by too much caffeine and too many unfinished to-do lists.

She impatiently smoothed down her skirt, trying to iron out the wrinkles and persuade it back towards her knees. You have to be careful what image you are projecting, she had told her seventeen-year-old daughter recently when she appeared in the sitting room wearing a minidress so short that when she bent over you could see her knickers. Ailsa understood the mys-

terious equation whereby teenagers responded to exhortations to be responsible with a similar urge towards independence, but was singularly unable to apply the science to her own children.

‘It’s a fancy-dress party. Dress code: Professor Green meets *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. I can’t exactly wear a burka,’ her daughter had laughed. ‘The trouble with you, Mum, is you’re obsessed with what people think of you.’

It was true, Ailsa thought. She often wondered how others might see her, especially her team of teachers, but also people whose opinion she didn’t need to worry about, like the locum doctor who had missed her mother’s heart problem or her New Age next-door neighbours.

‘Someone in my A-level set gave the game away. I wasn’t sure whether you already knew,’ said Matt. He paused and held his head in his hands, staring down at the desk. He was behaving more like a drama teacher than a biology one. ‘Christ, I feel like the messenger in *Julius Caesar*,’ said Matt, his sweaty palm hovering near the screen.

‘*Antony and Cleopatra*,’ Ailsa corrected him, instantly regretting her fastidiousness. Once an English teacher, always an English teacher. She wondered how he really saw her. A hard-working and confident superior whose innovative schemes for incentivizing students had been adopted as policy by the Department of Education. A stickler for detail with an annoying radar for split infinitives in internal emails. Or a forty-two-year-old woman with a tendency to wear too much lipstick who didn’t

notice when flecks peeled from her lips and stuck to her teeth. Ailsa made a quick sweep of her front teeth with her tongue. Maybe someone past youth, but still worthy of sexual fantasy. A MILF perhaps. When her eldest son, Luke, had finally explained what the term meant last week she couldn't work out whether it had given middle-aged women a new lease of life or added a new layer of pressure.

It struck her that this was a good example of cognitive dissonance, the ability to hold contradictory thoughts about the same subject. She had covered this in that morning's assembly, using the example of smoking as something that gave pleasure but everyone knew was bad for them.

'Fuck,' he said. 'You've got filters. Give me a moment. I'll get round them.'

Ailsa was taken aback by his language. He was the teacher who had recently sent out a student for swearing in class.

'I'm in,' said Matt. His tone wasn't triumphant. He paused briefly, clicking his knuckles again. 'It's short. Shouldn't take more than two minutes.' He clicked play. 'I'll play it slow so you can absorb it properly, frame by frame.'

'Because of the resolution?' asked Ailsa, fumbling for the correct terminology.

'No. Because it's a sequence,' he said, furrow-browed as though puzzled that she still didn't grasp what was going on.

‘Hadron Collider, string theory, meta data,’ said Ailsa breezily. ‘Technology is leaving me behind.’ She was looking for words of reassurance. None came. But then she was unworthy of his sympathy. Later, when she couldn’t remember how it felt not to be anxious, she realized that this was the last time she had felt truly light-hearted.

Ailsa focused on the screen. At first it was a little hazy; the person taking the video clearly wasn’t a professional. There were half-head shots. Limbs at comical angles. And overuse of the zoom feature. Or maybe it was a faux hand-held technique to give authenticity to what followed? There were two figures. Judging by the length of her long fair hair, the one at the front was a girl, although it was difficult to tell any more. The camera zoomed out unexpectedly and Ailsa caught a glimpse of a low-ceilinged space with a light blub swaying in slow hypnotic circles. There were no windows and apart from what looked like a pile of rocks on the floor behind the boy the room was apparently empty. As more frames played, Ailsa could see a narrative forming.

‘It’s a lot to take on board,’ Matt said apologetically.

‘Why are you showing me this?’ asked Ailsa, wondering if this was how twenty-something men hit on forty-something women. Except she knew how twenty-something men hit on forty-something women. Their eyes locked. He knew what she was thinking and just as quickly she knew that this time she was wrong.

‘Look at the uniform,’ said Matt, tapping the screen to get Ailsa’s attention as the girl fumbled with the boy’s

zip. She leaned over his shoulder and he enlarged one of the frames until it filled the screen. How could she not have noticed? The girl's sweater had the distinctive green and yellow stripe of the Highfield Academy uniform around the neck and cuffs. Another of Ailsa's innovations. To give pupils high visibility. *Not so clever now*, she thought. He pressed play again and the girl inexpertly released the boy's penis from a pair of underpants. It was too much. Ailsa stepped back from the screen.

'How did you get hold of this?' she asked, casting around for something to say.

'I caught Stuart Tovey watching it just now.' He gave Ailsa the phone that he had been holding when he came in the door. 'Obviously I've confiscated it. To look for clues.'

Why did he talk in such short sentences? wondered Ailsa. Was he nervous or had his brain been atrophied by Twitter?

'Did you ask him how he got hold of it?'

'He said someone had forwarded it to him.'

'What do we know about the boy?'

'He's left-handed,' said Matt. 'That's about it.'

'How can you tell?'

'Look,' he said as the boy gripped his penis in his left hand.

'It's not Stuart Tovey, is it?' asked Ailsa, reluctantly turning her attention back to the screen, feeling like a grubby voyeur. 'You'd expect it to be but he's much shorter than this boy.'

‘You don’t get to see his face. Unfortunately. I can’t work out if that was deliberate or down to poor technique.’

The girl was kissing the boy. He kissed her back. The passion was real or at least the acting was convincing. Just as Ailsa thought she was about to see the boy’s face, the camera teasingly panned down for a mid-body shot. The girl got on her knees in front of the boy. Ailsa knew instinctively what she was about to do.

‘What about her? Do you recognize her?’ asked Ailsa, recoiling from the screen.

‘Yes,’ said Matt.

She wondered how she was going to deal with this. Cyber-bullying, contraception, chlamydia, chemical highs – even the drugs were high tech. But she had them all covered. It was the unknown unknowns that always got you in the end. She felt so bad for the girl. How would she tell her parents?

‘Who filmed it? Do you think they did it themselves? Do you think the girl even knew?’ She turned towards him, searching for answers. ‘I think I’ve seen enough, Matt.’

‘You need to watch to the end, Ailsa,’ he insisted, using her name for the first time. ‘I’m really sorry.’ He got up from her chair. ‘I think maybe you should sit down.’

When it was finished he leaned over her and dragged the file to the bottom right-hand corner of the screen.

The email she had been writing popped back up on screen. Ailsa glanced at the last word she had written,

aspiration. It sounded like a medical procedure. She wished someone could perform it on her and wipe her memory of the images she had seen. But even if this were possible, she would be reminded of it in other people's faces. Because by now surely most of the school must know. People would tread on eggshells around her. It would be like when her mother died almost exactly a year ago. Already she knew this was different. Any sympathy this time would be tinged with judgement. How could you allow this to happen on your watch?

Matt explained to Ailsa that he was going to speak to the head of IT. 'We need to get the film taken down as quickly as possible,' he said gently.

He made the phone call without waiting for her response. Certain phrases from this conversation reverberated around her head. 'Inappropriate content . . . YouPorn . . . RedTube . . . Facebook . . . gone viral.'

She was relieved it was he who had approached her – his calm measured approach to helping nervous A-level students work out anything from revision timetables to genetic sequencing was exactly what she needed. The scale of the problem was beginning to dawn on Ailsa. Tsunami, earthquake, avalanche. The metaphors all involved natural disasters. But this was an unnatural disaster. It shouldn't have happened.

'No one will hold you responsible,' Matt said. His hand hovered by her shoulder but he didn't touch her.

'Of course they will,' Ailsa said. 'I am accountable.'

This was clear minutes later when the chairman of

the board of governors called to talk about the situation. In lieu of sympathy, he discussed strategy, for which Ailsa was grateful because she couldn't face any platitudes. He talked about crisis management and media blackouts. He pointed out that she was running a flagship academy and adverse publicity could be used to score political points. For legal reasons, he was overly concerned about whether 'the incident' had taken place on school property. He pointed out that a school scarf was visible in the background but agreed with himself that this wasn't conclusive evidence.

The only person who didn't seem to know anything was the girl. Ailsa had sent Mrs Arnold to call her out of class and positioned the venetian blinds so that she could see out of her office into the corridor outside but no one could see in. Romy was sitting on a narrow bench, leaning over so that her long hair covered her face like curtains. Ailsa could see her lips moving and at first wondered if she was rehearsing what to say but then realized that she was revising from a science textbook. Even though to her it was upside down, Ailsa could see she was looking at a cross section of a human heart. The girl had coloured each of the four chambers and blood vessels a different colour, transforming it into something beautiful. Right atrium, left atrium, inferior vena cava, superior vena cava. As she read each label, her finger drifted from one part of the diagram to the next, like a child learning to read for the first time.

It was such an innocent gesture. Ailsa felt her stomach heave and thought she might be sick. She swallowed a couple of times and took tiny sips from a glass of water. The girl wouldn't be revising anatomy if she knew. She would be nervously flicking through the pages of one of the magazines strategically placed on the table beside her. Or biting her nails. Or crying. Most likely crying.

It didn't surprise her that she was revising. In contrast to everything else that had happened, it was what she would have predicted. Ailsa skim-read the reports from staff for a second time to steady herself. Apart from a recent blip in a Biology exam, Romy was a straight-A student. She was taking four science A levels; she wanted to apply for medical school. 'Both parents are professionals,' the director of studies had noted, as though this gave her ambition credibility. Outside of class, there were no issues flagged. Her parents weren't divorced; there was no recent history of alcoholism, sexual abuse or drug addiction in the family. No involvement in gangs; no history of bullying or being bullied; no symptoms of depression. She was what Ailsa called a blank canvas.

The only hint that something might be wrong came from Matt, who said that over the past few months Romy had spoken back to him a couple of times in class and been sent out once. Ailsa put this to the back of her mind. There was nothing here that came close to offering an easy explanation.

Ailsa glanced out of the window again. She was dis-

composed to discover the girl was staring straight back at her, although of course she couldn't see through the venetian blind. Romy wasn't one of those girls coated in thick layers of foundation, lipstick and mascara. If Ailsa had been pressed to identify which girls might be vulnerable to this type of situation, Romy would have been close to the bottom of the list.

She was curious-looking. Pale-skinned and dark-eyed. Inherited from her father. Striking rather than beautiful. In her first term at the school a small group of children had mocked her for being albino. 'Why would I want to look like you?' Ailsa had heard her retort.

She looked nothing like her dark-haired older sibling, thought Ailsa. Ailsa's stomach clenched as she realized that perhaps Romy's older brother was already aware but didn't know how to deal with the situation. In which case she had failed him too. He sometimes hung out with Stuart, the boy who had the video on his phone. Perhaps he should see Mrs Arnold? Ailsa wrote this down in a new notebook specially dedicated to the scandal and underlined it several times.

Stuart swaggered along the corridor. Ailsa didn't know the name of every pupil in her school. She had decided early on that the effort of memorizing every student would be at the cost of something more strategically important. So she knew the names of the kids that came to her notice, either the clever ones or the naughty ones. Stuart fell into both categories.

He stopped beside Romy, which surprised Ailsa

because she couldn't imagine they were friends. Romy looked up. He had a striking profile. A long aquiline nose and big dark eyes. He had gone from boy to adult without the awkward transition through spotty adolescence. His body was ridiculously muscular; his school uniform barely contained his thick thighs and overworked shoulders. Steroid abuse was to boys what anorexia was to girls, thought Ailsa, remembering something she had read in the paper.

Stuart smiled at Romy. The smile turned into a lip curl and then suddenly he stuck his middle finger in his mouth and simulated the motions of oral sex. Romy looked taken aback. She frowned and shook her head. Stuart threw back his head, laughed and slouched off. When he passed her window, his lip turned into a half smile and he blew Ailsa a kiss as though he realized that she was watching.

Ailsa gripped the edge of her desk. Her hands were shaking. It was ten past three in the afternoon. She couldn't wait any longer for Romy's father to appear. It wasn't fair on the girl. Her anger towards Stuart transferred to him. Knowing what was at stake, how could he be late? She would have to be careful not to betray her feelings in front of the girl. One of the most important issues, Mrs Arnold had flagged, was to present a strategy that made Romy feel as though the adults around her were in control of the situation. They all had to present a united front.

She knew Romy would be feeling nervous about

being called from class. Since as far as she knew she wasn't in any trouble, she might be worried that something had happened to her family. Ailsa phoned her assistant to send Romy into the office.

'Everything is fine at home,' said Ailsa abruptly, as soon as the girl breezed through the door. She had spoken a little too quickly and Romy looked puzzled, as though unsettled at the possibility that something might be wrong. She left the door open. It was the best evidence yet that she had no idea what had happened.

Ailsa was overwhelmed with a desire to protect her. Perhaps Stuart was the only person in school who had seen the video clip? Perhaps she need never know? And then just as quickly she abandoned the idea because the file was like a forest fire. Matt had kept her updated through the afternoon on websites where it had appeared and what action had been taken to get it removed.

And besides, as Ailsa was fond of telling troubled students, everything that went wrong should be used as an experience to learn from. It was a way of encouraging children to believe in the possibility of renewal. People could evolve. Reputations could be rebuilt. Except in this case she wasn't sure she really believed her own rhetoric. She vaguely remembered the story of a girl in south London who threw herself off a building when a boy refused to delete sexual images of her from his phone. She felt a sudden venomous rage towards the boy in the video. He had obviously forced her to do this. She needed to confirm his identity as quickly as possible.

She would press the girl for details. After that she would have to speak to his parents. He would be expelled. The police would be called. He would be prosecuted. But none of this would make the girl feel any better. In fact it could make her feel worse.

Ailsa got up from her desk and slowly walked over to close the door. She wanted to delay the moment for as long as possible. She looked at the girl's face, knowing that in the next minute her world would tip on its axis.

'Is there something wrong?'

'How is your work going?'

'I was in a Biology exam.'

'Were you doing a practice paper?'

'Yes.'

'How was it?'

'Fine. I think. Now I'll never know, because I was only halfway through and it won't be a true result.'

'Medical school is very competitive.' Would this affect the girl's application? Ailsa wondered. A new worry rippled through her body. She had to accept that she had no control over the situation, Mrs Arnold had advised, barely able to disguise her excitement at this latest drama. Matt had said something similar, then he had contradicted himself by insisting that he would personally take charge of checking which websites were showing the film.

Even if they got to the bottom of how this had all started, there was no telling where it might end. She thought of the draft she had written for her next assem-

bly. She wanted to warn the pupils about how in the digital age one badly thought-out decision could end up defining you for the rest of your life. She swallowed a couple of times.

‘There’s something you need to see, Romy,’ said Ailsa.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked the girl.

Ailsa opened the file in the corner of her computer screen.

‘I’ll sit on the sofa while you watch. I’ve seen it already.’

‘Is it something to help with my university application?’ Romy asked as she pressed play.

Ailsa couldn’t bear to watch again. She couldn’t decide whether she was being cowardly or sensitive. She sat down on the yellow sofa. When Romy replayed this scene in her head, as surely she would, periodically, for the rest of her life, would it be worse for her to watch it alone or with someone else? Ailsa, usually so decisive, didn’t know the right answer. She pressed her fingers into her temples until she could feel the blood vessel pulsing beneath. And then it was too late. Romy’s face froze. Her usually pale complexion flushed until even the tips of her ears were red. Her lips turned down until she looked like the mask of the goddess of tragedy that hung above the door of the school theatre. It was as if her face was separating from her body. For a moment it was a perfect mask. Ailsa knew she was about to cry. Her life as she knew it had ended.

It was too late for anger, yet part of Ailsa wanted to shake Romy and demand why she had allowed this

to happen. The other part wanted to hold her in her arms like a small child and protect her. She knew from experience that this was the moment when she had to ask the question. Children would always tell the truth when there was nothing left to lose.

‘Who is the boy?’

There was a knock at the door. Her father came in before Romy could respond.

‘Sorry,’ Harry said without offering any explanation. Ailsa’s anxiety spiked again at his bad timing. ‘I got a call about giving a lecture in Cambridge.’ He went over to his daughter and put his arms around her. Ailsa didn’t say anything. The girl didn’t need to ask how her mother would react. She knew already.

‘Oh, Mum,’ said Romy, getting up from the chair and looking at Ailsa for the first time. Ailsa walked over to her daughter, arms outstretched, like she did when her daughter first learned to walk. For a moment all three of them stood in a silent embrace. Ailsa looked up at Harry.

‘How has this happened to us?’

I

Three months earlier

Ailsa woke up lying on her front, trying to piece together fragments of a dream that had already scattered. She allowed her hand to drift beneath the duvet until it reached the man in bed beside her. Good. He was still asleep. Keeping her eyes closed, she gently pressed a small circle of Harry's flesh with her fingertip and tried to guess which part of him she was touching, remembering a game they used to play when they first met.

Except it was instantly recognizable as the cleft above his left hip bone. Nineteen years together might have softened the angles but Ailsa was now more familiar with Harry's topography than her own. She could navigate his body like a blind person reading Braille. She wished for a moment that she could go back to the first time, to recapture that excitement of mutual discovery. Passion was commensurate with the amount of insecurity you could tolerate, Ailsa had recently read somewhere, probably in a magazine she had confiscated from a pupil at school. And after almost twenty years she and Harry should be very secure together.

His skin was hot to the touch. Its warmth made her

hesitate but if she curled herself around him to soak up his heat then he might wake up and misread the gesture as a desire for sex. The mechanics of early-morning arousal were as predictable as a metronome. The old post-coital euphoria had been replaced by the less glorious sensation of a job well done.

Outside it was snowing again. Ailsa could tell because the usual sounds of early morning were muffled as if someone had thrown a blanket over the house. It wasn't an illusion that snow created stillness and tranquillity, Romy had explained to her little brother, Ben, last night, during a family dinner characterized by a shortfall of both qualities. 'Snow is porous so it absorbs noise.' Nine-year-old Ben had stared at her in awe. 'Perfect conditions for a trainee spy who needs to pass on information, Grub,' she added. He nodded so vigorously that Harry outlined the results of a recent study showing that head-banging caused long-term brain damage.

'Granny once hit her head and came round speaking French,' said Ailsa's father wistfully. 'Do you remember, Ailsa?'

'Vaguely.'

The thought of her father strengthened her resolve. He was desperate to get back home to visit her mother's grave. It was six days since he had last been and he had started to fret that it might be covered with weeds; that the winter-flowering viburnum hastily hacked from a neighbour's shrub and left in a vase might have died; that the vase might have been stolen. Ailsa pointed out

that all were most likely covered in a thick layer of snow but Adam was unconvinced.

‘I need to see her,’ he said firmly. ‘Viburnum was one of her favourite flowers and I never bought her any when she was alive.’ This became his excuse for opening another bottle of wine. And with the alcohol came the tears. ‘I need to check that Georgia’s all right. That she’s not lonely.’

Romy had held his hand and tried to persuade him that Granny was fine. Ailsa’s younger sister, Rachel, insisted viburnum was almost impossible to find in flower shops. Harry promised to plant a shrub in Adam’s garden so that he had a ready supply throughout the season. Finally he was soothed.

If they left now, Ailsa would have time to drop him home and visit her mother’s grave to check everything was all right before Adam went. She wanted to be there alone, to remember her mother without having to negotiate anyone else’s grief. It was decided. If she didn’t go now, the car would get stuck or it would be too icy to drive him home. She stealthily edged away from Harry, slowly relinquishing the duvet so that he wouldn’t be woken up by a sudden blast of cold air.

She found last night’s clothes in a pile and pulled on a jumper and pair of jeans, cursing Harry for his stinginess about switching the heating off at night. There was a time when they would have done anything for each other. No longer. Even the temperature of the house was up for negotiation. Ailsa zipped up the jeans. Underwear could wait until later.

She headed downstairs, deliberately ignoring the domestic rubble that she passed along the way, although unable to resist the temptation to apportion blame: chocolate reindeer wrapper. Ben. Empty Coke can. Ben. That was easy. Overturned glass on the landing table. Undoubtedly Adam. Teddy bear wearing new collar intended for Lucifer the cat. Possibly Luke. *The Real Spy's Guide to Becoming a Spy*. Ben. Box set of *True Detective*. Rachel. A book about growing your own vegetables. Harry. Did boys who read books about survival in the wilderness really grow into men who dreamed of allotments? Dustpan and brush. And beside it pieces of broken glass carefully wrapped in old Christmas paper. Also Harry. Only Romy hadn't left a trace.

Much later Ailsa remembered this detail. Or lack of detail. Because only then did its metaphorical significance resonate. In the sixteen years since her uncomplicated birth, Romy had been the least demanding member of the family.

The most placid of babies, even as a newborn Romy had only cried when she was hungry or tired and was unfussed when passed around from one person to the next. There was no separation anxiety. Luke had been completely different. The first time he played hide and seek, he had sobbed big fat tears when he put his hands over his eyes because he couldn't see his mother. Ben had issues around feeding. Rejected the breast. Cried for milk in the night. And refused solids until he was almost one.

But Ailsa should have known from growing up beside

the sea that a mirror-calm surface was often an illusion. Her mother had always warned that the most treacherous currents were invisible to the naked eye, a phrase that had always reduced her and Rachel to hopeless giggles. Ailsa smiled at the memory, already anticipating the sharp stab of loss that followed. The rapturous pain of memory, Rachel called it.

She didn't bother with the kitchen, shutting the door on Lucifer and last night's mess to avoid being sidetracked. One of the reasons she was determined her father should leave before lunch was that it would encourage Rachel to go at the same time. Seven nights with them both was enough. They hadn't spent time together so intensively since they were children. That's what a parent's death did to you. It sent you hurtling back through time.

Ailsa grabbed the car key from the hook by the back door, pulled on Romy's boots and a huge khaki jacket with fake fur around the hood that belonged to Luke. She zipped it up until only the top of her face was visible and headed outside. She breathed in deeply until the cold burned her lungs and squinted at the snow-bleached landscape. It was completely still. Every stem and leaf was covered in a glassy fleece of frozen snow. She stared up at the vast anaemic sky and felt a familiar surge of joy at the way it swallowed her up. Some instinct drew her gaze to the second-floor window of the house next door. She glanced over and saw a curtain move.

It wasn't until she had crunched her way down the

driveway to the road that Ailsa realized just how much snow had fallen in the night. Using the sleeve of Luke's coat, she wiped a circle of snow from the windscreen, climbed inside the car and slammed the door. It was like being inside an igloo. The only sign of the world outside was through the small porthole in the windscreen.

The car was a mess. The leather seats were peeling, the grille had come off the ventilation system so that you couldn't direct the jet of air, and the internal lights no longer worked. But the engine started as soon as Ailsa turned the key and the heating was immediately responsive. She jumped as the radio came on at full volume. The children had left it on Kiss FM. A rap song assaulted her senses, something about a girl sucking a man's dick and her sister being stabbed with an ice pick. Gruesome. Ailsa quickly switched to Radio 4, but the news was all about more changes to the exam system so she switched back. Perhaps if standards in English were raised, lyrics would improve. Although he could have gone for toothpick rather than ice pick. Rappers lacked irony.

Ailsa put the car into first gear and pressed the accelerator. When it didn't move, she pushed a little harder and heard the tyres spin. She should go and get a spade. But outside it had begun to snow again. She pressed her hand to the windscreen and watched as the tiny snowflakes melted. It occurred to her that the heat from the engine might do the same and then she could try again.

Leaving the engine running, she pulled out her mobile phone and dialled her mother's number. She had kept

paying for her mother's phone just so she could listen to her message. No one else knew. Not even Rachel. 'It's Georgia here. Although obviously I'm not here at the moment because otherwise I would have answered this wretched phone, so please leave a message and I will get back to you.' For a couple of seconds her mother came back to life. Ailsa saw her in the kitchen of their family home, hair wet from swimming in the sea, excitedly describing how a seal had joined her in the water. Then just as quickly the memory dissolved.

Ailsa closed her eyes to trap the tears behind her lids, breathed in deeply and thought about their first Christmas without her. Her chest hurt. It was the hole left when Georgia had died. When she was sure she wouldn't cry she opened her eyes. On balance it had gone better than expected. They had survived. Ailsa jumped as the back door of the car suddenly opened.

'Thought you might want some company,' Rachel said, slamming the door behind her.

'Why didn't you get in the front?' asked Ailsa. It was typical of Rachel, who always complained that Ailsa treated her as a child, to behave like a child. Ailsa waited to see if she would put on her seatbelt without being told and then felt perversely irritated when Rachel clicked it into place.

'Because Dad will want to go in the front, won't he? Is he coming down?'

Ailsa ignored her questions and instead revved the car again.

‘Careful or you’ll flood it,’ warned Rachel. ‘You need to wait a minute and press the clutch up and down to get everything flowing.’

Ailsa glanced at Rachel in the mirror. She had a stripy scarf wrapped around her face and was wearing an oversized bobble hat that belonged to Luke. Her unruly brown curly hair poked out wherever it could. Apart from a few crow’s feet, as fine as lace, Rachel barely had a line on her face. And these just highlighted her startling grey-green eyes. Even her imperfections were beguiling: the tiny chip on her front tooth, the rabble of freckles on her slightly too wide nose and the gap across the outside edge of her right eyebrow, the legacy of stitches from a childhood accident. Her hands were deep in the pockets of the coat that Ailsa used for work. She winked at her older sister. Her eyes were their mother’s.

‘Are you wearing any of your own clothes?’ asked Ailsa.

‘I’m here. Isn’t that enough?’ asked Rachel. ‘And I’ve just fed Lucifer.’

‘I’m glad you’ve finally helped get a meal on the table,’ Ailsa teased.

‘You’re a much better cook than me, Ails. Always was.’

Rachel always turned criticism of her into a compliment to Ailsa.

‘Harry does all the cooking now.’

She put the car into gear again and tentatively pressed the accelerator. The wheels spun beneath her, digging

even deeper trenches, sending a new spray of snow over the windows. She pressed harder and the wheels wheezed disapproval.

‘You should have dug around the tyres,’ suggested Rachel.

‘That wouldn’t work. I’m going to sit here with the engine running for a bit longer so the heat from the chassis melts the snow,’ said Ailsa. She put Radio 4 on again. There was a severe weather warning for the south-east of England. Advice to stick to main roads. Essential journeys only. Freezing fog. Thundersnow. Not even the BBC spoke in proper sentences any more. *Stop noticing this shit*, Ailsa chided herself. It was so ageing.

‘We’ll be spending another week here if it goes on like this,’ said Rachel, echoing Ailsa’s worst fears. She felt guilty straight away. She loved her sister. And everyone said that grief was easier if you shared the different stages together. But they weren’t synchronized. While Rachel had been poleaxed by their mother’s death and had spent the funeral in a Valium haze, Ailsa had organized everything. By the time Ailsa gave in to the grief, Rachel had entered the angry phase.

‘Did I tell you the last time I went to see Dad, just before Christmas, I couldn’t find him when I went in the house?’ said Ailsa over the noise of the engine and the radio.

‘Who?’

‘Dad. The front door was open. I went upstairs. His

bed was broken. It was at a thirty-degree angle. His head was hanging over the edge like he'd been decapitated.' Rachel didn't say anything. 'He could have had a stroke because of all the blood pooling in his head.'

'But he didn't.'

'Didn't what?' asked Ailsa.

'Didn't have a stroke.'

'He'd laid the table for lunch. There was a place set for Mum with those biscuits that she used to love. That's all he'd been eating. He could have starved. Or got scurvy.'

'KitKats?'

'No, the Scottish ones she used to have as a child.'

'Tunnock's.'

'Exactly.'

'But he didn't.'

'Didn't what?'

'Didn't starve.'

'What's your point, Rach?'

Rachel unwound the scarf from her face and leaned forward until she was jammed in the gap between the two front seats so that she could see her sister more closely. 'The trouble with you, Ailsa, is that you think you can control everything. You don't have superpowers. You're not omniscient. You can't prevent disasters. Shit happens. It just does. And we all have to get on with it. You can't inoculate us all against disaster.'

'We need to work out a routine. So that one of us

checks on him every four or five days,' Ailsa responded. 'I can't keep doing this on my own.'

'You're falling for his old tricks. Dad has always made everything about himself. That's probably why Mum ended up having a heart attack.'

I could say the same thing about you, thought Ailsa. 'He's one of those larger-than-life figures –'

'Which is shorthand for a recovered alcoholic with an overinflated sense of self,' Rachel interrupted.

'He's drinking again, Rach. It's been a really difficult time and it's worse when you see his grief close up. He's much more vulnerable than he used to be.' Still nothing. Ailsa turned towards her. 'The question is, what are we going to do, because doing nothing isn't an option, is it?'

Rachel's wild eyebrows furrowed. Ailsa was gratified to know that finally she had got through. The great thing about having a difficult conversation in a car was that you had a captive audience. It was a tactic she had learned soon after having children. Ailsa affectionately patted her sister on the shoulder. They had been through so much together. They would get through this. Rachel remained silent.

'Do you think I should be dating a man who is young enough to be my son?' she suddenly asked. 'I mean what are the real differences between my body and the body of a twenty-seven-year-old? Do you think people can tell if your internal organs are old?'

Ailsa gripped the steering wheel as hard as she could so she wouldn't say anything she regretted.

'I read somewhere that a woman in her early forties and a man in his twenties represent perfect sexual compatibility,' said Rachel dreamily. 'I'm in great shape for someone who is almost forty, don't you think? He's been so lovely to me about Mum. And he's not married. I know you have a problem with that. I'm not totally insensitive. So what's the verdict?'

'You'll probably get hurt,' said Ailsa, revving the engine again.

'Why?' asked Rachel.

'You'll meet his friends and they'll talk about things that you know nothing about.'

'Like what?'

'Music, apps you've never heard of. I don't know – that's the point.'

'Age doesn't exist any more. It's all about shared interests and experiences.'

'He'll want to have children,' warned Ailsa.

'We've already talked about freezing my eggs,' said Rachel. Ailsa pressed the accelerator. 'And he wants to get to know my family better.' This was why Rachel always ended up getting her own way. She just kept going until eventually the opposition capitulated. That's why she would be so good with their father, if only Ailsa could get her on board.

'Better?'

'You've met him already.'

‘God, he’s not one of your builders, is he?’

Ailsa put the car into reverse and pressed the accelerator to persuade the wheels to get purchase on the slippery snow. For a moment the wheels spun, churning up the snow as high as the windows. She pushed the accelerator as far down as it would go. The car burst into life and shot into the car parked behind. The bronchial alarm of the people carrier belonging to Ailsa’s new next-door neighbours wheezed into action. Ailsa’s head thumped back against the headrest.

‘Shit,’ she said.

‘Shit indeed,’ said Rachel. ‘I’ve probably got whiplash. I might have the body of a thirty-year-old but I’ll develop the posture of an old lady.’

In spite of herself, Ailsa couldn’t help giggling. Rachel annoyed her more than anyone else she knew but she also made her laugh the most. Loveday came out of her front door straight away and Ailsa knew that it was she who had been looking out of the upstairs window. She berated herself for not making more effort with their new neighbours because it would have made everything easier now that she had crashed into the only car within a mile of the house.

She remembered how six weeks earlier, just after she had moved in, Loveday had come to the front door and Ailsa had ignored her and ducked down beneath the picture window in the sitting room. Loveday wanted to invite them over for a drink. Ailsa knew this because she had told Harry over the garden fence. As the doorbell

rang more and more insistently, Ailsa had imagined a future where their lives were seamlessly integrated like honeycomb. A hole would be cut in the fence between the two gardens and a gate erected so that the children could go in and out of each other's gardens as they pleased. The gate would never be shut. Crockery from one house would appear in the cupboard of the other. Books would be shared. Clothes would migrate. She instantly knew that this was not what she wanted. Eventually she would need new friends. But right now she didn't want the burden of absorbing anyone else's lives. They needed to rebuild their own. In the end Loveday had gone. But she had stayed long enough for Ailsa to know she was a woman who was used to getting her own way.

Loveday's arms were folded, probably against the cold, decided Ailsa as she opened the electric window to speak to her.

'I am so sorry,' said Ailsa. 'So sorry.' She wanted to get out of the car to assess the damage but Loveday's arms blocked her way.

'Are you all right?' asked Loveday. She smelled of patchouli oil and the musty aroma made Ailsa feel queasy.

'We're fine, aren't we, Rachel?'

Rachel nodded. Loveday leaned over and rested her forearms on the edge of the window so that Ailsa could see two sets of surprisingly long painted nails. She was wearing a big chunky necklace that banged against the car's paintwork. It was a silver eagle's skull, and the

beak nestled between her breasts. Loveday noticed her looking.

‘My talisman is an eagle,’ she said.

‘Sorry?’

‘We all have an animal spirit that protects us. Mine is the eagle,’ Loveday explained. She touched the necklace and lifted it towards Ailsa. ‘The wings represent the balance between male and female. It denotes protection and survival.’ Ailsa stumbled for a response. ‘My husband is a bear,’ said Loveday, filling in the silence.

‘Polar or grizzly?’ asked Rachel.

‘How interesting,’ said Ailsa, trying not to giggle.

‘He’s curious, secretive and fierce. All at the same time. It’s a great combination. Bears and eagles are very compatible.’

‘Unfortunately I don’t have a talisman,’ said Ailsa, stumbling over the unfamiliar concept in an effort to sound interested.

‘Maybe if you did, this wouldn’t have happened. Maybe that’s what’s been missing from our life,’ said Rachel from the back of the car. ‘Hi, I’m Ailsa’s sister,’ she explained to Loveday when it became apparent that Ailsa wasn’t going to introduce her. ‘Not the most auspicious way to meet, is it?’

‘Really, it doesn’t matter as long as both of you are fine,’ said Loveday. ‘It’s your car that’s taken the hit.’

‘We were trying to get my father home. He’s desperate to visit my mother’s grave. She died earlier this year. But he’ll just have to stay here until the snow clears. None of

us will be going anywhere. The older children were meant to be going to a party. New Year's Eve is going to be a bit of a damp squib.' Ailsa listened to herself babble, trying to work out if she was in shock or trying to compensate for her previous indifference.

'It's settled,' said Loveday firmly as Ailsa stopped. 'You must come to us. Our friends can't get here and I've cooked enough food for a whole ashram. The children can hang out together.'

'What a lovely idea,' said Rachel before Ailsa could answer.

'It will be nice for everyone to meet properly,' said Ailsa, trying to regain control of the situation.

'There is always opportunity to be had in adversity,' said Loveday with a smile. 'That's one of my mantras.'

Another face appeared at the car window. Loveday introduced her son, Jay. He was wearing a hastily pulled-on T-shirt and pair of jeans. His eyes were half closed as he wearily offered to help.

'Jay?' questioned Rachel. 'Like the bird? Because your mother's an eagle?'

He looked perplexed. 'After my grandfather,' he then said with a smile. 'Shall we try giving it a push?'

Ailsa closed the window.

'Lock up your daughters,' Rachel laughed as Romy came out of the house to see what was going on. Jay looked across at her and their eyes met. Sometimes that was all it took.

‘Actually, lock up your sister,’ said Rachel. ‘Did you see the definition in his arms? He’s hot.’

‘You’re too old to call people hot,’ says Ailsa. ‘You’re beginning to remind me of some old bottom pincher.’

Rachel leaned on Ailsa’s shoulder and they clung to each other, laughing like they used to when they were children. Ailsa waited for Romy to come over and tell her to stop being embarrassing, but when she looked up at her Romy was smiling too.