PART ONE

1

Dying is not as easy as it looks in the movies.

In the movies, a car skids on ice. It slews across the road, teeters on the edge of the cliff.

It drops; it tumbles; the doors come off; it crumples and arcs, crumples and arcs – and finally stops against a tree, wheels up, like a smoking turtle. Other drivers squeal to a stop and leave their doors open as they rush to the precipice and stare in horror, while the car—

The car pauses for dramatic effect.

And then bursts into flames.

The people step back, they shield their faces, they turn away.

In the movies, they don't even have to say it.

In the movies, the driver is dead.

I don't remember much, but I do remember that the

Pina Colada song was on the radio. You know the one. Pina Colada and getting caught in the rain.

I hate that song; I always have.

I wonder whether I'll tell the police the truth about what happened. When I can. Will I have the guts to tell them I was trying to change channels when I hit the ice? Because of that song. Will they think it's funny? Or will they shake their heads and charge me with dangerous driving?

Either would be a relief, to be honest.

I was on my way to pick up Lexi from Cardiff. She'd been away somewhere; I can't remember where – maybe a school trip? – but I do remember how much I was looking forward to seeing her again. She often got the train home with her friends, but now the weather had turned and the trains weren't running. Ice on the line or something – you know how many excuses train companies have for their shoddy reliability. When I was Lexi's age you could set your watch by the trains; now you can hardly set your calendar with any confidence.

Where was I?

Oh, I was coming down the A470 with the old tips looming over me and the ground sloping sharp away into the valley below. It's all grass and trees now, of course, because of the old Coal Board planting, but tips is what a lot of them used to be, however much we all called them mountains. Mountains don't turn to black porridge and bury little children at their desks the way this very one did, all those years ago. I

remember *that*, you see, and I remember the little Williams boy with the wonky eye, who came to rugby practice one week and not the next, and never again. But other memories are jumpy or not there at all.

I do remember thinking, *Whoops, you didn't see THAT coming, Sam!* And then hitting the barrier and wondering about the lie I'd have to tell to Alice to explain away the dent in the Focus. Only had it six months, and she's always telling me I drive too fast. But before I could even *think* of a good lie, the car sort of jumped in the air and then all of a sudden I was the *wrong* side of the barrier, with not much between me and the River Taff but a two-hundred-foot drop.

That drop came in four parts.

The car hit the ground nose-first and the windscreen shattered into lace with a sound like squashing a giant beetle.

Then came the silence while I flew like a happy lark.

Then it hit again – all crashing metal, and the grass an inch from my nose. I tried to jerk my head away but I had no control, and I saw the damp tufts and the crystals of leftover ice, as big and sparkly as dinner plates.

Then came more lovely silence, as I watched the dull snow-sky pass by in slow motion and wondered who would pick Lexi up now. We've only got the one car. Maybe she could stay the night with Debbie – she's a nice girl.

This time, when the car hit, I bit my cheek and tasted the iron of blood down my throat. The door came off and I watched my right arm flail close to the opening as we took off again – me and the car we bought together at Evans Halshaw in Merthyr. It was an ex-demonstrator so we got two grand off, but it still smelled new, and that's the main thing, Alice said.

She's going to be so cross with me.

I don't remember coming down the fourth time, but I'm assuming we must have, or I wouldn't be here – I'd be the first Ford Focus driver in space.

With my luck, I probably wouldn't even remember that.

The traffic had slowed to a crawl and eighteen-year-old Patrick Fort could see the blue flashing lights up ahead.

'Accident,' said his mother.

Patrick didn't answer pointless statements. They both had eyes, didn't they?

He sighed and wished he were on his bicycle. No bother with jams then. But his mother had insisted on driving – even though Patrick didn't like riding in cars – because he was in his good clothes for the interview. He was wearing the only shirt with a collar he owned, the grey flannel trousers that made his thighs itch, and the shoes that weren't trainers.

'I hope nobody's hurt,' she said. 'Probably hit ice on the bend.'

Patrick said nothing again. His mother often spoke like this – making redundant noise for her own edification, as if to prove to herself that she wasn't deaf.

They edged towards an impatient-looking policeman in DayGlo who was flapping an arm, ushering cars past in the open lane.

Now they could see where a car had gone over the side. The dull silver crash barrier was stretched into a deep loop, as though it had tried to hold on to the car for as long as possible, but had finally had to let it go with a bent sigh. A knot of firemen stood and looked over the edge of the precipice; Patrick supposed their training qualified them for that, at least.

'Oh dear,' murmured Sarah Fort. 'Poor people.'

The car ahead of them had stopped and Patrick could see all its occupants craning to the left.

Rubberneckers. Desperate for a glimpse of death.

The policeman shouted something at them and flapped his arm furiously to get them to drive on.

Before his mother's car could move again, Patrick opened his door and stepped out on to the tarmac.

'Patrick!'

He ignored her. The air outside the car was bracing, and the slope above him suddenly seemed more *real* – a looming hump of solid matter, covered with a yellow-red carpet of dead winter grass. He walked over to join the firemen.

'*Patrick!*'

Patrick leaned against what was left of the barrier and peered into the valley. A car lay, wheels turned up in death, wedged against a small stand of trees close to the riverbank. A trail of debris marked its path from the road – a door, a magazine, a length of twisted trim. The radio was still on in the stricken car, and Patrick could hear a song floating tinnily up the side of the valley. 'In Dreams' by Roy Orbison – 1963. Patrick didn't care for music, but he never forgot a release date.

'What happened?' he said.

The nearest fireman turned to him with a roll-up clamped in his lips. 'Who are you?'

'Is anyone in there?' said Patrick.

'Maybe. Get back in your car.'

'Are they dead?'

'What do *you* think?'

'I can't tell from here,' shrugged Patrick. 'Can you?'

'Look, smart-arse, get going. We're working.'

Patrick frowned at his hand. 'You're smoking and staring at a car.'

'Just bugger off home, will you!'

'No need to swear.'

'Piss off.'

'Patrick!' His mother appeared and took his elbow and said sorry to the fireman, even though she couldn't have known why.

Patrick took a last look. Nothing was moving down

there. He wondered what things were like inside that car – still and twisted and bloody, and awash with Roy Orbison getting higher and higher like the torture of angels.

He shook his mother's hand off his arm, and she said sorry to *him* then. She was sorry about everything, always.

They got back in the car and his mother continued driving – but much more slowly.

2

Tracy Evans had imagined that the Cardiff neurological unit would give her plenty of time to catch up on her reading. All that quiet; all that stillness; all those comatose patients not vomiting into paper dishes, not peeing into cardboard bottles, not ringing those buzzers that made her feel like an effing air hostess – without the perks, or the prospect of marrying a pilot.

She'd been looking forward to the lack of hassle, and to *Rose in Bloom*, the third in the Rose Mackenzie series. In the first, Rose Mackenzie had graduated from the orphanage, shy and beautiful and still a virgin, despite several titillating attempts on her virtue. In the second, she'd had her money and her heart stolen by the cad Dander Cole – only to be rescued from imminent ruin by Raft Ankers, her tall, dark and monosyllabically handsome guardian. Raft's secret (and therefore, no doubt, tragic) past kept him from paying any but the most

formal attention to her, of course, but Tracy knew what Rose could not yet see – that embers glowed in the depths of his unfathomable eyes, waiting to burst into flames of passion.

The title alone of *Rose in Bloom* promised much in the way of conflagration, and twenty-four-year-old Tracy had filled the opening on Cardiff's neurological unit with that very vow in mind. She'd imagined rows of sleeping patients, serene among the machines, and herself moving silently between them – more a night-watchman than a nurse – or turning slow pages by the light of a single yellow lamp . . .

The reality, however, had turned out to be quite annoyingly different, in ways Tracy had barely imagined, let alone encountered. A few patients *were* deep in comas – ostensibly asleep, motionless – but others were in a range of vegetative states. Tracy undertook all the usual nursing tasks – changing drips and catheters, sponge baths, administering medication and nutrition, and noting alterations in respiration or motion. But here there was also cream to be massaged into skin to keep it supple, guards to be raised on the beds of those patients who thrashed and flailed, and bedsores to be prevented on those who did not. There were grunts and moans and blinks and incoherent shouts to be translated into sane requests for water or a switch of TV channel. There were nappies to be changed and arses to be wiped clean of soupy orange excrement. Physios wrestled noisily with stiffening

limbs and clawed hands. There were splints to be strapped around legs, and dead-weight bodies to be hoisted into wheelchairs, or on to tilt tables, where patients hung as if crucified – all in an attempt to keep them from contracting into crooked foetal balls from which there might be no return.

Basically it was bedlam. Combined – for Tracy, at least – with a prickling fear that the dead-eyed patients were *watching* her, and biding their time . . .

To cap it all, there was the ward initiation – a painful C-diff infection that had Tracy doubled over in the toilet half a dozen times a day, and left her literally and figuratively drained. The other nurses called it 'the diff-shits' and told her it wouldn't be so bad the next time. Tracy vowed to learn by her mistake and to start applying now for other jobs, before the next time could ever become *this* time.

In the meantime she learned that there were good coma patients and there were bad coma patients. A more experienced colleague, Jean, told her this in a way that let her know that such things were understood, and that it was OK to understand them, but not to talk openly about them.

Good coma patients were quiet. They didn't make noise; they didn't lash out when you tried to help them. They didn't get pneumonia and require a lot of extra attention, or pull out their feeding tubes and drips. Good coma patients had families who were polite and didn't clutter the place up with bits from

home, and who brought little gifts – bribes, really – for the nurses, in the hope that they would take good care of their loved ones in the long hours filled with their absence. There were always at least two boxes of chocolates open behind the nurses' station; Tracy liked the nuts, and would lift up the top layers before they were finished to get at the hard centres below, before anyone else had a chance.

It was also understood – by the nurses, at least – that good coma patients had been good people in their previous lives, too. They were here because of strokes brought on by overwork, car accidents that were not their fault, and falls from ladders while helping neighbours clear their guttering, or rescuing cats from trees. *Good* coma patients got their brows stroked and kind words in their ears, encouraging them to return to the world in one mental piece.

Bad coma patients cried all night long, or choked on even the thinnest porridge, or gripped their bed guards and rattled them like the bars of an old cage. They shouted out and flailed, and sometimes connected with a fist or a foot. They soiled themselves into freshly changed nappies – apparently just for the hell of it – and got constant infections that required extra nursing all night long. Bad patients were here because of drug overdoses and speeding and drunken brawls outside pubs. Their families were demanding and mistrustful. Bad patients got pursed lips and brisk handling, and their restraints tightened 'for their own good'.

Nothing of this distinction was written down or discussed with doctors or families, but all the nurses knew the difference. When Jean first showed Tracy around the ward, she walked from bed to bed, filling Tracy's head with biographies that were never to be rewritten or erased – or even verified as truthful.

'This poor lad was going to buy his girlfriend an engagement ring when he was hit by a taxi. Driver was on his phone, I'll bet,' said Jean. 'The girl comes in after work and just cries. Every day for seven months. Sweet little thing says she still wants to marry him. Breaks your heart.' She sighed and sounded sincere, so Tracy nodded in a way she hoped denoted that she, too, was a little bit heartbroken – even though she thought that if *her* (hypothetical) boyfriend were in a coma for more than a few weeks, she'd probably just cut her losses and move on, not stick around to watch him shit in his pants for the next fifty years.

Jean was on to the next bed. '*This* one,' she said with a brusque tug of the sheets over the chest of a middle-aged man, 'fell off that bridge at the end of Queen Street. Drunk, most likely. Or running from the police. Shouldn't have been on it in the first place; it's a rail bridge, you know, not pedestrian.'

Tracy did know. She herself had staggered under it many a Friday and Saturday night as she wove the mile from Evolution back to the house she shared with three other girls. People were always hanging over the parapet of the bridge with spray cans, or playing

chicken with the trains as they left Queen Street station.

'A right pain, this one,' whispered Jean over another man. 'Bawling and shouting. Sometimes in a foreign language, makes me think he has something to hide.'

Tracy nodded, enthralled.

'He has us all running about like headless chickens. Gets violent too.'

'Really?'

'Well,' shrugged Jean, 'he doesn't *mean* to, I suppose, but he can knock things about. He's very strong. He broke Angie's finger.' She nodded at a pretty, dark-haired nurse with white tape on her left hand, then looked back at Tracy seriously.

'So you take care.'

'I will.'

'And the *families*,' said Jean, with a look that said that Tracy would soon find out for herself. 'You mustn't let them bully you. *You*'re the professional, not them. Remember that.'

'I *will*,' said Tracy firmly, and looked around the unit. Two wards, twelve beds – ten of them containing people who were neither dead nor alive; who had bought tickets to the afterlife and then had somehow had their journeys interrupted, and who were even now debating whether or not to go on, or to turn around and make their way back home.

3

He had seen a lot of doctors, but it wasn't until he'd started school at the age of five that Patrick realized there was something wrong with him. He hated the disorder of his classmates and the physicality of the playground – where nobody else was interested in clearing the quad of gravel, then grading it according to size.

In the classroom there was no task too complex for him to tackle, and few he could not complete. While the other kids rushed out to play, Patrick would wriggle and shriek if the teacher tried to encourage him away from his alphabet or his sums. He was a barnacle for learning.

He deconstructed his lunchbox and discarded anything red, and was obsessed with parroting any sentence spoken to him, emphasizing each word in turn to taste the changes.

PUT the chalk down.
Put the CHALK down.
Put the chalk DOWN.
And still he'd be holding the chalk.

Nobody rejects difference as quickly and brutally as children. Soon Patrick was not invited to houses and parties, and was excluded from groups and games. But he didn't want to go to parties, hated groups, and didn't understand the games, so it didn't bother him. After all, he was fascinated by the rhythm of ants, but it didn't mean he wanted to *be* one.

Until he was seven years old . . .

Children weren't allowed in the bookmaker's, so while his father watched the horses and dogs on the big screen, Patrick sat under the counter nearest the door, hemmed in by bikes and an old black Labrador, which was either always wet or just smelled that way. Sometimes men would stand in front of Patrick without even knowing he was there. They leaned their elbows on the counter to read the pages of runners and riders that were pinned to the walls, and he looked at their knees and their crotches, and the muddy prints their boots left on the lino. He could hear the scratch of the cheap little biros as they scribbled their selections over his head, and their muttering when they lost, which seemed to be all the time.

Occasionally they noticed him and bent down and said, 'Hello, down there' and 'All right, boyo?' But

when that happened, Patrick always edged towards the dog for support, and said nothing back. Once a man held a Milky Way out to him and the Labrador snatched it and swallowed it in two gulps – wrapper and all.

'Don't say much, do he?' an old man once remarked to Patrick's father, and his father replied staunchly, 'He's thinking.'

His father always told the truth: Patrick *was* thinking – about the way air smelled like rubber when it hissed from bicycle tyre valves, about the odds that changed on the screens, making horses' names jump up and down the list like fleas, and about why dogs had pink gums but black lips.

Increasingly ignored, Patrick grew to enjoy his post by the door, where he could observe without being observed.

It was a hot summer day, and Patrick was tracing the Labrador's slumbering outline on to the lino in biro, when a shocked groan went up from the men in the bookies – followed by a terrible silence.

Patrick crawled from under the counter and crept forward past the shoes of the men, until he stood up just inches from the giant TV screen.

Pixellated by proximity, a purple jockey trudged up the emerald grass with a saddle on his arm that should have been on the back of a horse.

Patrick touched the grass and felt the green buzz warmly around his fingers.

'What's that kid doing in here?' somebody called out, and his father got up and held out his hand.

Patrick drew back. He hated to hold hands; it made his bones itch. But he was perplexed to see that his father had tears in his eyes. For some reason he didn't understand, it made Patrick take his hand without complaint. He even held it while they crossed the busy road, and then all the way to the lounge bar of the Rorke's Drift. There his father bought him a Coke in a bottle that looked as though it had been squeezed in the middle, and touched his own pint to it with a dull click.

'To Persian Punch,' he said huskily, and pinched his nose, which was like wiping it on his sleeve but not as common.

'To Persian Punch,' agreed Patrick, although it was only later that he would learn that Persian Punch was a horse.

Had been a horse.

He never forgot the feeling that it had given him. The curious sense that he was closer to his father at that moment than he'd ever come to anyone. That he could almost *share* what he was feeling. For the first time, Patrick had an inkling of what it was that the other children seemed to know instinctively – that they were part of something bigger, something mysterious.

Something he finally wanted, but still didn't know how to get.

* * *

Discovering that he was missing a critical link turned school into a daily misery for Patrick. Everybody else possessed the key to popularity and happiness, and his clumsy attempts to find his own key always ended with other children looking at him funny, or calling him names. Classmates hid his pencils just to watch him rage, and a group of boys wrapped his winter coat round a rock and threw it on to the roof of the bike shed. The frustration left him confused and angry, and obstinate at home, where he made his parents shout at each other behind closed doors. Patrick would press his cheek to the cool, painted wood and listen to his mother's voice cracking hysterically: '. . . can't go *on* like this! I wish we'd never *had* him!'

He liked it when she got like that, because then his father would take him on long walks across the Beacons – just the two of them – while she stayed home and drew the curtains so she could sleep. 'I need to recover,' she'd say wearily, and they'd return much later to have tea in a darkened house – silently, so as not to wake her – and his father would put the vodka away somewhere different each time.

Finally, when Patrick was eight years old, Mark Bennett – a monster of a farmboy – had shouted 'Twpsyn!' and punched him in the back as he swung on the monkey bars. Patrick dropped into the dirt and lay gasping at the sky until his breath came back to

him. By the time he'd got slowly to his feet, the bigger boy was already high on the swings, laughing. Patrick had stood to one side and waited for the swing to swoop down and past him – then smashed Mark Bennett square in the face with a rounders bat. The combined speed of the swing and the bat knocked him out cold and off the swing, in an impressive somersault that a generation of Brecon children would claim to have seen with their very own eyes.

The school had called Patrick's mother, who'd burst into tears and hung up, so they'd called his father, who had left work in the middle of the day to fetch him.

And had died because of it.

4

I'm asleep and I cannot tell you how hard I try to wake up.

I dream of Jesus hanging on a cross in his pyjamas, his hands twisting in agony while Mary in a blue uniform tugs on his drubbing feet. Other times it's a birdman in a black cape and a gas mask, come to plunge its long beak into the jelly of my eyes and drag me off by the sockets – and I scream until my throat hurts, but nobody comes.

Because it's a dream – as if that makes it any better.

Sometimes I'm asleep but I'm *aware* that I am not awake. Then I swim for the surface in a bottomless well. The water is thick and dirty and I can't always see the disc of light. Only the fear of what lurks beneath me in the sinuous darkness keeps me fighting, keeps me swimming.

And yet, whenever I get close to the top, I turn away from the greater horror overhead.

Up there, beyond the water, somebody screams in pain or in anger – a tortured soul howls obscenities and roars its agony. A hell above me. A holocaust in a foreign tongue. Tears are shed; women and children heartbroken and scared. 'He'll be all right. He'll be all right.' But the sobbing doesn't stop – just moves further away.

Some unseen fish bites the back of my hand and my arm goes cold, and there's a tugging at my insides like a leech sucking my belly inside out. My shoulders ache, my legs cramp, my neck hurts. Hands run over me like I'm a cow at market and – like a cow – hot shit slides out of me, unhindered by decency.

There are voices far above me, as if people are passing by the well with buckets and other things mechanical. I hear them coming and I hear them going: a slow Doppler effect. I don't recognize them but they seem to know what they're doing; they're very busy, very *efficient*, even though I can't make out the words.

The voices drift in and out, and *I* drift in and out, too – in and out of life and dreams for days, for weeks, for years? But when I'm *in* I listen all the time for somebody I know. When I hear them, *that*'s when I'm going to break the surface and shout out, *that*'s when I'm going to make them know I'm here.

I'm going to call out: *Hey! Hello! I'm down here!* And

they will look down the well and see me at the bottom, and wave in surprise and go and get help and pull me up in a big wooden bucket, like a kitten that's been lost for ever.

Hey! Hello! I'm awake! I can hear you! I'm awake!

The words are always on the tip of my stagnant tongue. All it will take from me is the air to form them with, the effort of pushing them out, and I'll be away.

But for some reason, I'm frightened to try it.

If I can't force myself to wake from my own dreams, what if I also can't shout out when I need to? Or if I *can* shout out, but nobody hears me? What if they pass right by the lip of the deep, dark well, and never look down, however hard I'm screaming?

That would no longer be a dream.

That would be a nightmare.

Tracy Evans noticed that coma patients were not visited with Get Well cards and grapes; coma patients were attended by those who loved them, or by those who felt a sense of duty. It was easy to tell the difference. Those who loved stayed for hours, touching, washing, talking, playing favourite music through iPod earphones, bringing in childhood toys and adult knick-knacks, holding scented flowers under breathless noses, singing 'Happy Birthday' with tears in their eyes and croaks in their throats.

Those who loved hoped for recovery.

Those who came out of duty hoped only for an end, one way or the other. They sat and read or brought their laptops to catch up on their emails – and asked endlessly for the password for the free Wifi. They bit their nails and tapped their feet and read any old magazine they could find, even the gardening ones. They stared out of the window, down across the roof of the car park and the city beyond it – as if even that were preferable to looking at the person in the bed who wouldn't make up their mind whether to live or whether to die.

Tracy Evans liked those visitors better. They never asked for vases or for the blinds to be opened, or thought they'd seen a twitch or a blink, or a finger tapping out SOS in Morse on the lemon-coloured blankets.

The ones who were there for love were a bit of a pain. She'd only been here a few weeks but already she'd had a girlfriend leave a boyfriend a life-sized stuffed leopard, a woman bring in an electric frying pan to cook bacon by her husband's bedside, and four karate club members performing some kind of routine, complete with loud yells, in the hope that the sound would kickstart a brain that no longer worked. She couldn't even tell them off for waking the other patients, because waking the patients on the coma ward was sort of the whole *point*.

It was all mildly diverting, but in no way did it

replace or facilitate Tracy's obsession with the progress of Rose Mackenzie's life.

The one bright spot was Mr Deal.

Mr Deal came every night after work to see his wife, whose notes told Tracy that she had been here for nearly a year, after suffering a brain haemorrhage following a fall downstairs. Mrs Deal was forty, which meant Mr Deal was old enough to seem far more exotic to Tracy than the young men she routinely met in Evolution on a Friday night. Those young men hunted in packs and vomited in gutters; she couldn't imagine Mr Deal doing either of those things.

There was something authoritarian and brooding about him – something of the Raft Ankers, if Tracy were honest – and every time his visits coincided with her shifts, she got a little thrill.

He never came at weekends, and seemed just uninterested enough in his wife during week-night visits to make Tracy think that a bit of mild flirtation might not be such a sinful thing – or a wasted one. She hadn't done it yet – not properly – but she knew she would quite soon, unless Mrs Deal died or got better. Actually, only if she got better. If Mrs Deal died, Tracy thought she would still be in with a chance. Men hated living alone and were no good at it; Tracy knew this because her father had tried leaving her mother once, and had been so thoroughly hopeless that he'd returned home just two weeks later with his tail tucked between his legs, right where his balls should have been.

Mr Deal wasn't a pilot or a doctor, but he was obviously rich and important. Tracy guessed the former because he had a set of keys on a Mercedes fob, which he often twirled on his finger while he looked at the car park with his back to his wife. She guessed he was important because when he spoke on his BlackBerry about work, he sounded as if he were giving orders, not taking them, and frowned and sighed as if he were running the United Nations.

Rich and important, and just a little bit dangerous.

Tracy Evans pulled a fresh sheet tight over Mrs Deal's slowly curling body, tucked it in hard, and hoped she wouldn't get better too soon.

5

It was only the first week of August, but Patrick had already packed his bags for college.

Bag, singular.

Sarah Fort stared down into the battered old suitcase, open on his bed in the room under the eaves that looked out across the smooth green hills of the Brecon Beacons.

She had told him to take everything he'd need for the twelve-week term, so he'd packed his laptop, his textbooks and his hoodie with the word HOODIE on it.

Nothing else.

With a sigh, she opened Patrick's drawers and started to fill the suitcase with sensible things. Sweaters, shorts, socks. His washbag held only toothbrush and paste, cheap shampoo, and a razor with innumerable blades, each one supposedly more

efficient than the last. Sarah smiled at the razor. Patrick got so angry about the lies advertisers told: the best ever, the longest lasting and eight out of ten cats outraged his logic. But he'd bought the razor anyway – prey to the power of advertising, just like any normal person.

Normal.

It was all she wanted for him – to be normal. Of course, she wanted him to have a job and a wife and a family, too – but she'd settle for normal. Normal would be a relief.

Down below, next to the ramshackle wooden shed, on the patch of weed-strewn gravel they called the driveway, Patrick was leaning over the engine of her little Fiesta. What could be more normal than a boy fixing a car on a sunny day? The scene gave Sarah hope. He'd got that from Matt – that obsession with mechanical things, even though Patrick had never learned to drive. The Fiesta was twenty years old now, and still ran like a dream, thanks to him.

She watched him tinker. From this distance she could see the boy *and* the man; the way he was changed but still changing. Big hands on the end of wiry arms, wide shoulders but narrow hips, and cropped hair that came to a childlike curl at his nape as he bent to read the oil level.

Sarah sighed. Patrick had been such a sweet baby; a boisterous toddler. But then – increasingly – a strange little boy. He'd started to stiffen when they tried to

hug him, to look away when they spoke. His teachers said he was the cleverest in the class at sums, but then looked down at their hands while they mumbled about everything else: his fixation on detail and routine, his isolation and his lack of eye contact.

After Matt had . . . died, Patrick had got worse. He shrieked if Sarah reached out to him, and barely spoke – except to ask obsessively, 'What happened to Daddy?'

The doctor said it was understandable.

When it went on for a year, the doctor turned his palms up more cautiously, and said it was an understandable obsession.

Sarah hated the word 'obsession'. She preferred to call it a 'phase'.

But it had gone on so long . . .

Patrick had started to bring home dead animals. Birds, squirrels, rabbits. He sat and stared at them for hours, rolling them gently back and forth with a stick, or spreading a dead wing to watch the feathers move into place. After a while he'd begun to slice them open, peering into cavities and unravelling intestines. Making his bed one day, Sarah found a peeled shrew under the pillow. After that, dead things weren't allowed in the house. She had caught him testing the padlock on the shed door instead, and warmed his backside for him.

No means no, Patrick!

The dead-animal phase had lasted years, and then

Patrick had become more focused on mechanical things. When he wasn't fine-tuning his bicycle gears, he was peering at the engine of her car, or those of neighbours, coaxing dead and dirty metal back to life with a spanner he wielded like a wand. Now his hands often reminded her of Matt's, with the whorls on his fingers mapped in oily isobars.

Sarah frowned. This sudden desire to go to college – to learn anatomy – seemed like an unwelcome return to that earlier obse— that earlier *phase*. No good could come of it.

She watched her son tighten the spark plugs, then put each of the old ones back inside little cardboard tubes for disposal and line them up neatly on the ground, making sure each one was parallel with the last. She knew that when the time came to throw them away, he would take them out of the tubes one last time and check each one again before dropping it into the bin.

What went on inside his head?

Sarah had been asking herself the same question for eighteen years and knew she probably would for another fifty, if she lived that long. What was it that made Patrick panic if his T-shirt was too tight? What hitch in his brain made him arrange his books by publication date, and eat his food in alphabetical order?

Sarah never asked him. They talked – but never about the things that mattered. It was all *Bring down*

your laundry and *Don't forget your coat*. Part of her yearned for more; another part shied away from anything deeper or more difficult. The truth was, she didn't want to know why he was the way he was, or whether there was anything she could have done about it.

Or *not* done . . .

She caught sight of her reflection in the window: tight-lipped, no make-up, mousey hair scraped into a utilitarian knot. The face of a woman who has no one to wake up with.

Through her own ghostly eyes she watched Patrick wheel Matthew's old bike across the gravel and disappear down the lane. She knew he'd be gone for hours, and felt the relief.

There were two dusty framed photos on Patrick's bedside table. The first was a picture of Matt on the Beacons, taken from a child's angle that only accentuated his stature.

He'd been such a handsome man, thought Sarah, and they'd shared such dreams. Not grand dreams, but humble ones – of a better couch, a holiday in Scotland, and of going together to watch their son on the rugby field or in the school play. They hadn't wanted much, but they'd been denied even that.

The other photo was of her and Patrick standing awkwardly together – not touching – next to the old blue Volkswagen she'd once loved but which she couldn't bear to look at after Matt's death. Patrick was

only seven or eight in the photo – a thin child with dark-blue eyes and brown hair that was always clipped too short, to save time and money. She'd framed it because it was one of the few pictures she had of him where he was actually looking into the camera. No doubt because Matt was behind it, she thought with an unexpected flicker of the old resentment. Patrick had always been more Matt's son than hers. Matt would explain things to Patrick in a low, soothing voice, and never cared if Patrick said nothing in return, or got up and left in the middle of it.

Both of which drove her crazy.

The least you could do is nod your head, Patrick!

If you're not going to sit at the table like a big boy, you can bloody well go hungry.

It wasn't often Sarah was able to hold Patrick's gaze, and now she picked up the photo and thumbed a path through the dust so she could study his eyes. Even though they were ten years out of date, they were still the same – solemn and wary. He didn't trust her; she knew that. Even as a small boy he would turn and look to Matt for confirmation of anything she'd said – each glance a needle in her heart.

On a whim, Sarah slid the photo under the hoodie, where Patrick wouldn't notice it until it was too late. It knocked against something wrapped inside the thick material of the sweatshirt.

Sarah took out a black hardcover notebook with a red cloth spine, and opened it – expecting that Patrick

had already begun making notes for his anatomy classes. He was the most conscientious of students.

Instead there was page after page of dense pencil lists in his firm block capitals.

. . . CHARGER, BELLADONNA, HOSTILITY . . .

She frowned at the long columns of random words.

. . . EXIT STRATEGY, SLEEPER, COMMON GOOD . . .

Sometimes there was a date, or an asterisk next to a word, or a symbol that meant nothing to her. *None* of it meant anything to her. She doubted it meant anything to anybody apart from Patrick. She flicked through dozens of almost identical pages, increasingly uneasy, yet not knowing why. Partly it was because she'd never seen the book before, which meant Patrick must have kept it hidden. That alone was disturbing. But mostly because its contents just seemed so *odd* – and she discouraged odd wherever possible. Odd had never done Patrick any favours, and never would.

As she was about to close the book, it fell open near the back where the pages were still clear, and suddenly she was looking at a black and white photograph of a little girl in a white dress.

Panic squeezed her throat, and gooseflesh rose down her forearms. What was *this*? Her mind – always primed to expect the worst – launched like a firework, spinning crazily through a ruined future where the police knocked on the door, where she had to find the money for solicitors, where people spat at them in

the street and broke their windows, whether Patrick was found guilty or not.

Then she realized that the photo was not so much black and white as sepia.

And that the child was dead.

She gasped and bent her head over it more intently, with the little bedside alarm clock ticking suddenly loudly in her ears.

This was beyond odd.

The little girl in the picture was aged about five. Her face was pinched and workhouse poor, but her flaxen hair had been brushed and a dark ribbon tied into it over one bony temple. She wore a long, carefully arranged dress full of lace frills and impractical flounces. It was a dress worn only for such photos, Sarah guessed – likely to have been provided by the photographer, and probably the only decent dress the little girl would ever have worn.

The child in the picture was propped on a chair; Sarah could just see the tips of her shiny black shoes dangling below the pristine hem. The girl's eyes were closed, but that might just have been the taking of the photograph, Sarah knew. Those Victorians had to keep utterly still during long exposures, and children often couldn't make it. They blinked, they twitched, they yawned . . . they blurred. So the eyes might have been caught mid-blink.

No, it was the hands that gave it away.

A cheap doll had been placed on the girl's lap and

her arms arranged around it, as if she were holding a favourite toy. But this child's hands were beyond holding. The wrists were curled inwards, and the fingers were slack – and the photographer had failed to notice that the pinkie on the girl's left hand was bent backwards under the doll, in a way that no living child would have suffered.

This girl was dead.

Somewhere Sarah had heard of such photos, but she had never seen one. Pictures taken of the dead for their families to remember them by, in a time when few could afford to spend precious pennies on such fripperies for the living.

She felt overwhelming relief, then gave a short, nervous laugh at the thought that she could be relieved by finding a picture of a dead child among her son's possessions.

Her brief illusion of normality popped like a soap bubble and she looked out across the Beacons, where sunlight illuminated the very top of Penyfan, throwing its swooping drop into ominous shadow. She remembered the day Patrick had been suspended from school – how she'd swayed on that crest, staring into the abyss, while fingers of mist caressed her calves and encouraged her to take a closer look.

She hadn't been back since. This was close enough.

She heard again the smooth, cultured voice of Professor Madoc on the phone a few days after Patrick's interview – talking in careful circles, tying her

up in condescending knots about empathic response and special requirements – and her registering none of it but the single word 'quota'. Patrick had got into college because of their disability quota. That was the bottom line. Not because he had smashed national academic records in A-level biology and zoology, but because of his Asperger's Syndrome.

Professor Madoc could patronize her till the cows came home, but she wasn't stupid; she'd had an education once; she'd had a life! And no amount of politically correct verbal acrobatics could hide the fact that, although they were letting him take anatomy, Professor Madoc thought there might be something badly amiss with Patrick.

At the time she'd felt killing tears scorch her eyes. Now – sitting on her son's bed, with his cryptic notebook in one hand and a photograph of a dead child in the other – she wasn't sure he was wrong.