



Boob Job

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Chapter One

Jane counted out the Paracetamol tablets, one by one and placed them in little piles on her bedside table, one, two, three, four ... twelve,- four piles of three. She stared at them almost unaware of what they were and why she had put them there. Each was a perfectly formed white disc.

Nearing sixty, her face had lost the freshness of youth and wrinkles were now creasing her forehead and cheeks. Her hairline was beginning to recede and specks of grey were appearing at her temples. Her eyes, once her most admired feature, were looking tired and bags were now visible beneath them,

Staring at herself in the mirror, she wondered where the years had gone. How had they slipped by so quickly, almost without her being aware of their passing?

She reached for the bottle and read the label, *Johnnie Walker, Old Scotch Whisky*. Old? as old as me perhaps, or older? It didn't matter anymore. She carefully poured some into a glass and watched as the bubbles floated gently to the surface, -half a glass and she stopped, - enough.

She looked at it, admiring its pale colour. She brought the glass to her lips and sipped a little, gagging on the strong liquor.

Reaching forwards, she took two of the tablets and placed them in her mouth, their dry powdery texture causing them to stick to her lips. She rolled them around with her tongue, gulping down more of the liquid; stinging her mouth as she swallowed.

She reached for another two tablets and swallowed them. She was now beginning to feel sick and dizzy. The room had begun to sway. She wanted to giggle, it all seemed so funny.

The rocking increased until she had to hang on to the furniture. By concentrating, she managed to stagger to the bed and laid down, ready; the tension on her face easing.

She closed her eyes. She felt remarkably calm as if preparing for sleep. That's all she was doing, going to sleep. She was so tired of fighting, she just needed to sleep.

But a scene from her past suddenly intruded. She was a small child standing at the back of a large garden, calling her mother

'Mum, come and look at what I've found?'

Her footprints had traced a line across the lawn through the white blanket of snow.

Just six, she was beginning to see the world beyond herself.

'Come quickly Mum, look.'

'Jane, where are you?' called Elaine her mother, hearing her call.

She had just got home from the Pharmacy where she worked and was still wearing her working clothes.

'By the apple tree, Mummy, I can see you.'

Jane waved to her.

'Darling, come inside, you'll catch your death of cold.'

'Please Mum.'

'All right, let me get your coat, it's freezing.'

As Elaine came closer, she could see a small spiky animal in Jane's hands. Jane was smiling.

'Look Mum, it's so small.'

'Darling, it's a baby porcupine. What's it doing here? It should be asleep and not wake up until spring. It won't survive out here.'

'Can I keep it, please?' Jane pleaded.

'I don't know. Quickly bring it inside, in the warmth and we'll ask your Dad when he comes home. He'll know what to do.'

Gently cupping the small bundle in her hands, Jane followed her mother into the kitchen. She was aware of a warm feeling, a need to protect this frail, strange looking creature.

Elaine found a small cardboard box, lined it with soft material and handed it to Jane who gently placed the animal in it. It settled down and soon fell asleep.

Looking back, Jane wondered if that was the moment when she realised that she had an affinity for the weak and infirm. Little did she know then, that; that chance meeting with a defenceless animal, would shape the rest of her life.

'Dad, Dad,' shouted an excited Jane as she heard his key turning in the front door. Rushing into his arms, she shouted,

'Come, look what I've found.' He let her down gently.

Dragging him by the hand, she whispered,

'Let me show you, it's in the kitchen.'

'I'm coming.'

'Look Dad.' She carefully opened the lid of the box. In the shadow, he could see a spiky body. It was hardly moving. He gingerly lifted it out and looked at it. It was breathing with shallow gasps. It opened its eyes.

'Is it, is it all right?' she whispered, feeling her chest tighten.

'Please Dad, will it be OK?'

'I don't know dear. Let's give it some warm milk and let it try to sleep.'

Jane was the first out of class each day, eager to get home to Cupy, the name she had given the porcupine. It was now almost fully grown.

Chapter Two

'Good morning pupils, have you decided what you want to study in the Sixth form?' asked Mr. Aherne, Jane's form teacher, moving his unruly ruddy hair from his face. Tall and asthenic-looking, his manner put fear in his pupils.

Why are we so frightened of him, thought Jane? He can't really hurt us. But like all her fellow students, she was still afraid of him.

When it was her turn, Jane mumbled,

'I want to study Biology.'

'Speak up girl, did you say Biology?'

'Yes-s Sir.'

'Why Biology?' he roared, his hair now almost concealing his face.

Summoning up her courage and fighting a stammer, she said,

'B.b.because I want to understand what life is about.'

Then she remembered Cupy and how she had to let her go. Dad had come home early and found her reading in her room.

He knocked.

'Jane dear, I think now that the weather has improved, we must return Cupy to the garden.'

Jane knew he was right and that someday it would happen but she didn't want to admit it. Cupy and she had become such good friends. Every day she would open the top of the box and Cupy would look up, moving her mouth. It was as if she was speaking, saying good morning.

Later that afternoon, together they went into the garden and chose a spot near a hedge.

Placing Cupy on the ground, Jane cried a little and then said goodbye. Cupy gave her one last look before disappearing into the undergrowth.

'Oh Dad, I will miss her so much.'

'I know dear but she will be happier with her family.'

Biology enthralled Jane. There were so many facets to it; from studying animals, to plants and trees; to the sea and the shore line. Life was everywhere and the more she learned, the more she wanted to know.

One morning at breakfast, Jane announced to her father.

'Dad, I want to be a doctor.'

'I know dear, I knew it the first time I saw you with Cupy. There was something about the way you loved and cared for that helpless animal. I am so proud of you/

Many years had passed and now Jane could only vaguely remember her father, a memory that was fading with each passing year. It was his voice that she still recalled so vividly, a rich Irish brogue, soft yet clear, firm yet loving, comforting and reassuring. It echoed throughout the house when he and her mum spoke. His could always be heard, not because it was louder but because it was deeper. She also remembered his hands, big and soft and when she needed to be hugged, comforting.

Always wanting to be a teacher from a young age, he revelled in his chosen profession and was loved by his pupils. Years after his death, Jane would come upon a photo or

cutting of him in a newspaper article or a book. For a moment, he would seem to be real and then his image would fade.

His passing happened very suddenly. Unknown to her, her father suffered from Diabetes and injected himself daily. Meticulous to a fault, he would measure out the exact dose, check it and inject it but on that particular day he made a mistake and injected too much.

The coronor called it suicide but Jane could not accept that verdict. Just eleven when it happened, she still recalled the day she was told.

She had alighted from the bus after school and remembered how her mother was waiting on the front step, something that was unusual. Her eyes were red and swollen; she had been crying.

Jane remembered how confused her mother was, stuttering and shaking. How do you tell a child that her beloved father is dead?

‘It can't be true, I want to see Dad.’

‘Darling, he is no longer here, they have taken the bod- , him to the hospital.’

‘I want to see him, please Mum, I need to see him.’

In that short time, Jane had grown up, no longer thinking as a child.

The mortuary was in the basement of the local hospital. It was reached from behind the main building. Walking down some stone steps they entered a passageway. Their echoing footsteps hammered into Jane's head as she trailed behind her mother along the windowless stone corridor.

Just outside its swing doors was a sign on the wall, Mortuary, *no children allowed*.

‘Take no notice,’ whispered her mum as they opened the doors and entered. The chill hit them and then the smell of disinfectant.

‘Sorry Ma'am, no children allowed,’ said the Attendant.

‘Please, she hasn't seen her Dad since -’ her voice was pleading, ‘she was at school when it happened. Please, she needs to see him.’

‘OK, but don't tell anyone, I'd lose my job. Just wait over there,’ he said, pointing to a bench. ‘I'll call you.’

They heard the sound of wheels scraping and then he called,

‘Come but be quick, I'll leave you alone with the um, him.’

Her father's body was lying on a trolley that had been pulled out of a wall of lockers. It was covered with a white sheet.

‘Shall I?’ said Mum reaching for the sheet.

‘Yes,’ Jane nodded and watched as her father's face was uncovered. She was prepared to be shocked. She had never seen a dead person before but she was surprised, he looked so calm and peaceful.

‘Mum, he's just sleeping. Let me wake him up please.’ She pleaded.

‘No dear,’ she said, holding her. ‘You can't, he won't wake up, ever again.’

‘May I kiss him.’

Her mother hesitated.

‘Please just say goodbye,’ she begged.

‘May she?’ she asked, turning to the attendant.

‘Yes, I guess so but be quick.’

‘Goodbye Daddy,’ said Jane leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek. It felt cold and stiff. The smell of formaldehyde almost took her breath away.

Chapter Three

Where to study Medicine continued to challenge Jane. With her mother now living alone, she was torn. Leaving her was out of the question so she decided to apply to the local Medical School near her home in Belfast.

It was over breakfast that the subject came up.

'Darling, have you decided where to apply to study medicine?' Elaine asked, not wanting to influence her daughter's choice but fearing that she might be on her own.

'Yes Mum, I am going to study here in Belfast and want to live at home with you. The Medical School is one of the best in the country.'

Elaine felt an inner happiness. She struggled with her reply,

'Are, are you sure? I don't want you to be sorry and in time feel that I have held you back. You must make your own life.'

'No Mum, please, I love you and don't want to leave you now that Dad is no more.'

The first time Jane stepped inside the Entrance hall of the Queen's University Medical School, she knew she was in the right place. She had arrived early on the first day alone. She needed to do this despite her mother's plea to accompany her.

'Please mum,' she had insisted. 'I'll be OK, I want to do this for myself.'

Jane stood, her eyes shining, as she looked up at the portraits hanging on the walls of the entrance hall. Overlife size, they traced the history of the school's leading teachers from its opening in 1835 when it occupied a small brick building comprising only a Lecture Theatre and a Dissecting room.



1862-1934

Jane couldn't take her eyes off a portrait of Elizabeth Gould Bell, the first woman to qualify in Medicine at Belfast. The year was 1893, the late Victorian period. Gilchrist was wearing a long gown. Jane silently thanked her for breaking the ceiling for all future, aspiring female doctors.

Later she made her way to the Introductory class unaware that so much had changed since those early days. Women now often outnumbered men in the Medical School but as

she was to learn, many fell by the wayside with marriage and childbirth blocking their progress to the more senior posts.

She struggled at first with the amount of reading; so many facts to assimilate. Gradually she got used to it, helped by the handouts which accompanied most of the lectures and which became the basis of her own notes.

One morning, everyone was excited. They were beginning the Anatomy dissection class and were waiting for the Demonstrator to arrive.

‘Good morning everyone,’ he announced. ‘Follow me.’ They all streamed into the Anatomy Room where the draped bodies were laid out on long tables. Jane waited trembling at the thought of what she would see. She remembered her dead father but the body she saw was quite different, it was of an old person with dried shrunken skin.

She was allocated with three others to a table on which was lying the figure of a body covered by a white cloth. She remembered the moment when she saw her dead father. Would this be the same? But it was very different. She was shocked. It was the body of an old woman that had been preserved in formaldehyde. This had shrivelled the tissues.

Chapter Four

Jane had finished her shift on the Surgical ward. Glancing at her watch, it was almost seven o'clock. She approached the nurse's desk.

'Mary, I'm off now, see you in the morning.'

'Hi, aren't you coming to the dance this evening?' She asked.

'I didn't know there was one,'

'Yes, we're celebrating Christine's engagement; she's leaving at the end of the month.'

Christine was the junior sister, a tall, slim young woman who had been a great help to Jane when she first started on the ward.

Jane remembered struggling with an IV drip when Christine came over and whispered,

'Do you need any help?'

Jane nodded. In a flash Christine had set up the IV. On several other occasions, she had gotten Jane out of difficulty.

There was Mrs Rutherford who was complaining about the food. Jane had nothing to do with the choice but patients just complained to any member of staff who was passing by. Christine had overheard the conversation, stepped in, removed the tray and replaced it with a fresh meal.

'Yes, I would like to come and wish Christine good luck in her future marriage.'

The party was to be held in the doctor's residence where a large lounge usually used for meetings could be easily converted into a dance floor, by moving the chairs to the side.

It was in full swing by the time Jane arrived. She spotted Christine near the makeshift bar and went over to congratulate her. She was talking to one of the Surgical team.

She waited until their conversation paused and then spoke.

'I just heard your good news Christine, congratulations. I hope you will be very happy but I shall miss you, there will be no one to get me out of difficulties.'

'Thanks Jane, I shall miss you all. It's been great fun working with everyone. By the way have you met Donoghue, he's one of the general surgical registrars?'

Jane turned to see a tall fair-haired young man with twinkling eyes.

'Hi', he said with a broad Irish accent. 'I hear you're from Belfast, that's my home town also.'

It was a few days later when an unknown number flashed up on her mobile. About to delete it, she paused for a moment and curious, called it.

'Hello, who's that?'

'It's me, Donoghue,' a voice she didn't immediately recognise. 'We met at Christine's farewell party, don't you remember?'

Jane had remembered him, a tall good looking man. She had thoughts about him and wondered if they would ever meet again.

'Oh hello, yes, I remember, you're the Surgical Registrar?'

'Um, I wondered whether you would be free to meet some time.'

Jane couldn't believe it. He's asking me for a date, a surgical registrar? Her heart jumped a beat.

'Yes, yes that would be fun.'

'Do you like walking? We could go to St. Thomas and Lady Dixon Park- off Upper Malone Road. Have you been there?'

'Yes I think so, when I was very young but I can't remember it.'

'Good, then that's fixed. Are you free next Sunday?'

'Mmm, I need to check with my mum. Can I call you back?'

'Sure, I'll wait for your call.'

Jane could hear her mother pottering in the kitchen.

'Mum, I have been invited out for the day next Sunday. Is that OK?'

'Who with?'

'No-one special.' Jane didn't want her mother to get all excited.

'Yes of course dear, I will go and see my sister, I haven't seen her for some while.'

It was quite overcast when Donoghue's Triumph Herald stopped outside Jane's house. Despite that, he had put the Coupé's soft top down.

She had been waiting for about ten minutes, her heart racing, watching through the front room window, for his arrival.

Earlier she had asked,

'Mum, what should I wear? We are going to St Thomas and Lady Dixon's Park.'

'Wear something warm and good shoes, it might be rough underfoot.'

Jane saw his car arrive. She was confused and uncertain what to do; should she go out to him or wait for him to knock on the front door?

Donoghue was also uncertain, should he wait in the car expecting her to come out or knock on her front door? In the end, he decided on the latter.

She heard a knock on the front door, waited a few moments and then opened it. He was standing there.

'Hi, are you ready?'

'You look nice,' admiring her outfit and hat.

'So do you.'

They both laughed.

'Let's get going before the rain comes; it's forecast later.' They walked together to the car and he opened the passenger door. She stepped down into the seat, glad she had decided to wear her jeans.

'Let's start with the Garden Trail, it's about a mile, is that Ok?'

'I think so, let's see how I manage.'

They set off on foot from the Car park and soon reached the 'Japanese Garden'.

'Wow,' exclaimed Jane, having never been in that part of the park before.

'Everything is so neat, not a stone out of place.'

They then reached some very steep steps.

'Be careful Jane, they're a bit slippery, still wet from the morning dew,' Donoghue said, taking her hand. It was soft and reassuring.

When they reached the path below, he held onto it. She smiled to herself. They walked on.

'There's a cafe at the Golden Crown Fountain, let's stop and take a break.' Over coffee, Jane asked him how he became a doctor. Donoghue smiled.

'Medicine is in my family. My father was a GP and when I was younger he used to let me go with him when he did house calls. It was just assumed that I would follow in his footsteps.'

'Do you regret it?' Jane asked, feeling more confident.

'Sometimes I do. You give up an awful lot of your life especially if you choose surgery as I have. But that's enough of me, what about you? What are your plans?'

'It's early days yet. I am still very starry-eyed, excited by every new challenge.'

'That's good. That's how it should be. It's an amazing journey you're on, try not to lose that wonder.'

The day passed too quickly and then they were standing outside Jane's house saying goodbye.

'I've had a wonderful day, Donoghue, thank you so much.'

'Me too; I have really enjoyed being with you. May we do it again?'

Jane's eyes sparkled,

'Yes I would like that.'

Slowly he leaned forward, took her face in his hands and kissed her. She could feel her heart fluttering as she responded.

At breakfast the following morning, Jane was bursting to tell her mother about her date but waited to be asked. Mum knew not to be nosy so she said nothing, but she could see from Jane's face that it had been a success.

She waited and then as if in passing asked,

'Will you be seeing your young man again?'

'Oh Mum, I had a wonderful time, he was so kind and gentle.'

It soon became a regular outing for Jane and Donoghue, to visit a different park when they were both free. But it was at Belvoir Park that things took a different turn.

They had been walking for about an hour, the only sound being the wind in the trees and the clattering of their boots on the gravel path when Jane broke the silence.

Pointing to a shady area under a chestnut tree, she said,

'Let's stop here and have lunch.' She had prepared some sandwiches and fruit, and Donoghue had bought a bottle of wine.

After their meal, both felt sleepy and lay down beside each other when Donoghue decided to remove his shirt.

'That's better,' he said and lay back. Jane was suddenly conscious of his closeness and the slight smell of his sweat.

'You must be hot, why don't you take off your top, the breeze is lovely.'

His request surprised her and then she thought why not. They were alone and away from other walkers. Shyly she removed her shirt and then her bra, aware of her thumping heart. He took her hand.

'Isn't that better?' She was confused, she had never been naked with a man before but it seemed so natural.

She then did something that years later, would cause her to blush when she thought about it. She reached out and touched his chest. His skin was soft and warm.

She heard him gasp. He turned and reached for her. Suddenly they were kissing.

'Darling Jane, I love you,' he whispered.

'I love you too.'

Chapter Five

'Are you alright dear?' called Elaine, hearing Jane retching in the bathroom.

'Yes Mum. I am just feeling a bit sick, I think it must be something I ate.'

Elaine returned to the kitchen and was continuing to make breakfast when Jane, looking pale, struggled in and sat herself down at the kitchen table.

'Dear, what would you like to have? You haven't eaten properly for days.'

'Mum, I know but I feel really washed out. I'm not hungry, just a cup of tea, that's all. Then I think I'll go back to bed.'

'Darling, you really don't look well, do you think you should go and see Dr Macintosh?'

'Please Mum, I'm sure I'll feel better in a few days.'

Elaine tried hard not to interfere but in the end decided she had to do something. Unable to leave things as they were, she rang her friend Deidre, a nurse at the surgery; they had known each other since childhood.

Deidre listened patiently as Elaine's described Jane's symptoms and then asked,

'Does she have a boyfriend?'

'Boyfriend? Yes, yes, she has a boyfriend, a nice young man, a junior surgeon at the hospital. They have been seeing each other for some time.'

'Oh! you don't think she could be...?'

'No of course not! Why would you think that?'

'Common things are common. Have you asked her if she and he have... ?'

'I couldn't, we don't talk about those things.'

'You don't! Well maybe this is the time to start.'

Elaine had left it to the school to tell Jane about the birds and the bees. Even when her periods started, she had glossed over the details.

Now she was facing something that she dreaded to discuss. She remembered how her own mother had avoided the subject when she began her periods.

What to do now? Over the years she had struggled to find a way to open the subject and kept avoiding it. I'll tell her to see the doctor, he will know how to talk about it, she thought.

But in the end, she didn't so Jane was left with no protection. She's a good girl, she won't do something foolish, she reassured herself.

But it was Jane who suddenly realised.

Lying in bed she had time to think about her relationship with Donoghue. It had begun slowly just caressing. Then she remembered the day. They had returned to his room in the hospital and were together when he began to undress her. She made a feeble attempt to stop him but didn't want to so in the end she helped him with her underwear. Then it happened. He assured her he had protection and she went along with it.

Suddenly she leapt up, wide eyed.

'Oh my God! I'm pregnant,' she screamed, fear invading her thoughts. Panicking she shouted,

'no! no! I'm too young, I can't have a baby; my studies, everything will be destroyed.'

Elaine heard the cries from Jane's bedroom and rushed upstairs. Fearful, she burst into her room.

‘What it is dear, why are you shouting?’

‘Mum, I know why I am being sick, I must be pregnant. My whole life will be destroyed. I want to die.’

‘No dear,’ Elaine assured her. ‘Calm down, you can’t be pregnant unless you ...?’

‘We did Mum,’ she whispered, shaking with fear. ‘We did but he assured me he had taken precautions.’

‘It’s going to be alright. you love each other so you’ll get married, it won’t matter.’ Jane calmed down.

‘Yes Mum, you’re right. It’s wonderful news. I can’t wait to tell Donoghue I’m going to have his baby. He will be thrilled.’

It was an excited Jane that met Donoghue that evening at the *Dirty Onion and Yardbird*, a traditional pub not far from the Medical School. They could hardly hear themselves speak due to the rumpus coming from a local rugby team that had just won the cup.

‘It’s quieter in the snug,’ he said, guiding her expertly through the boisterous crowd.

‘Wait here, I’ll get some drinks. Your usual?’

She nodded, then,

‘No, not tonight. I’ll have a tonic, ice and lemon, no Gin.’

I need to be careful, she thought, it’s all going to be very different from now on.

He returned.

‘Here you are,’ Tonic. lemon and ice,’ announced Donoghue, setting the drinks up on the table.

‘What are you having?’ Jane asked.

‘A cocktail, I’m celebrating.’

How could he know, wondered Jane. I have only just found out.

‘I heard it this morning on the grape vine, I’m so excited.’ He continued.

Jane grabbed him around the neck kissing him passionately.

‘Darling, darling, I love you. It’s wonderful news...

He continued,

‘Yes wonderful news, I start in one month’s time. I can’t believe it, I’ll be a Senior Resident.’

It was like a knife piercing her heart. In a flash Jane’s world collapsed. He doesn’t know. All he’s concerned about is himself, she realised. How could she tell him now?

Chapter Six

Jane went into hibernation. She ignored all his calls as she struggled with her demons'. Meanwhile a miracle was occurring in her body. Each day her child was becoming more human-like.

'What am I going to do?' she wailed. Elaine looked on helplessly as her daughter tried to make sense of her life, tried to balance her ambitions to complete her training to be a doctor, against nature's call for her to be a mother.

She wasn't ready. It had all happened too soon, by mistake. If only I could wind back the clock? she begged.

Donoghue couldn't understand why Jane began to ignore his calls. He would drive to her home and wait outside, hoping she would appear.

'Darling you must tell him, it's only right.' pleaded Elaine.

'I have already tried to, I really have but he wasn't listening.'

Finally Elaine arranged to meet him in the hospital car park. Flustered and uncertain, she went over in her mind what she would say. By the time she arrived, her words had become jumbled.

Donoghue was standing by the entrance, he looked harassed. Still wearing his greens, he had just finished a long surgical list that had gone wrong. He was still fuming about how the technician had brought the wrong patient to the theatre causing a long delay so that he had to cancel the last operation.

'What's going on Elaine, why won't Jane speak to me?'

'You've really no idea? She tried to tell you the last time you met but you were so taken up with your promotion.'

'Yes I remember we were at the Pub when I told her.'

'She was trying to tell you her news but you weren't listening.'

'What news? What did she want to tell me?'

'That she was pregnant.'

'Pregnant?' he stammered. 'I had no idea.'

Then the image of a small screaming baby flashed into his mind. No I can't do that, not now, it will destroy my career. How can I tell her that she must have an abortion?

'What can I do?' He whimpered.

'You must meet her and explain.'

They arranged to meet on their favourite park bench. Jane arrived early and sat fiddling with her watch wondering whether Donoghue would turn up.

Then she saw him from a distance, recognising his rolling gait. He stopped in front of her.

'Hi', he said and leaned forward to kiss her. She moved her face away.

'How are you?'

'OK I guess,' she replied, her hands crossed demurely on her lap.

He was shocked by her appearance. Her pale face was devoid of make up, her eyes swollen as if she had been crying, her hair hung lankly over her shoulders.

'Look I didn't mean to hurt you, I didn't know.'

'You didn't listen, you were only concerned about yourself, your future.'

She stared at him.

'What do you want to do now that you know?'

'What do YOU want to do?'

'It depends on you.'

‘OK, let me spell it out. Do you want to be a father? It’s as simple as that, do you?’
Her voice was almost cracking.

‘I, I don’t know, it’s a big responsibility, I’m still training.’

‘So the answer is no, is that what you are saying?’

‘Look I need time.’

‘We don’t have time.’

Jane’s face told it all. Her mother didn’t need to ask.

‘He just doesn’t care. As far as he was concerned, he wished me as far away from him as possible.

‘And the child?’

‘He said, he had to think about it.’

Jane’s voice rising.

‘What was there to think about? It was a fact, either he takes responsibility for it or he doesn’t. In any case I saw a side of him, I wished I hadn’t.’

Chapter Seven

Jane's nursing friend Christine picked up the phone immediately.

'Hi stranger, how are you? It seems like a long time since we spoke.'

'Yes, a lot has happened since then.'

'Tell me.'

'Well you know that good-looking surgeon you introduced me to, well we became an item. I fell for him and....'

'Don't tell me?'

'Yes.'

'How many weeks?'

'I think about four.'

'Well you better get on with it, I presume he didn't want to...'

'No, he ran a mile when I told him.'

'They're all the same, pretty pretty words but no balls if you know what I mean.'

'Too many if you know what I mean'

They both laughed.

'But Christine, seriously, what do I do?'

'Get rid of it.'

'I d-don't think I can.'

'What do you mean?'

'I just don't know, that's all. I am so confused.'

'Well at least make sure it's not a phantom - get a diagnostic scan. I'll arrange it for you.'

A few days later, the appointment arrived. There was no preparation. Jane had just to turn up at the Unit.

Jane tried to put it to the back of her mind, hoping it would be negative but on the day her nerves were jangling. Her hands were sweaty and shaking as she started the car.

'Let me come with you?' suggested Elaine.

'No mum, let me do this on my own, I need to.'

It was easier than she thought, just some cold gel on her tummy and a probe. Leaning forward, Jane watched the flickering black and white images on the screen, hearing the technician explaining what she could see.

Suddenly she heard the word 'baby', she went cold.

'Where?' She shouted. 'I can't see it.'

'It's all right, just stay calm. Many mothers to be are shocked at what they see.

Look, you can see the outline of your baby's body, it's moving.'

Jane calmed down.

'Yes,' she could see it, there was no doubt.

A smile spread across her face. She felt an unfamiliar surge of love, that's my baby, that little speck of life.

A few minutes later,

'Jane, the result is through. Come into my office and let's talk about what you want to do'.

The serious look on the doctor's face said it all.

'My dear, the scan has confirmed that you are four weeks pregnant with a boy. Shall we arrange the termination?'

Chapter Eight

Jane was calm when she arrived home. All the uncertainty she had felt had gone. Her furrowed brow was no more and she looked years younger. Her mother saw the delight in her face and thought she knew the reason.

‘Oh good, the scan was negative? You must be very relieved.’

‘No mum, I’m pregnant. I saw my baby. a little boy.’

Confused, her mother struggled to understand.

‘How can you be so happy?’

‘When I saw the scan and realised that a miracle had occurred inside my body, I was no longer afraid. I knew what had to be done.’

‘Mum, I want my baby, I want to be a mother.’

‘But what about your studies? You can’t continue as a trainee doctor can you?’

‘I have thought about that. I can’t be the first female trainee doctor to become pregnant. I will see HR and discuss it.’

The word soon went around in the department and to her surprise, everyone was delighted. Even her chief, who was not inclined to emotions, congratulated her.

‘Don’t worry young lady, we will see you through.’ He said, patting her on the back.

Elaine was secretly thrilled at her daughter’s decision. She prayed that Jane would at some time call upon her to help with her grandchild’s upbringing, nothing would give her greater pleasure.

She would bide her time. say nothing and wait. Since the death of her husband, her life had spiralled into emptiness but now, as a smile crossed her face, the thought of caring for the little one, her Grandchild had given her a purpose. The future no longer felt empty, like a vacuum into which she was being sucked.

The letter fell through the letterbox and clattered onto the floor. Jane picked it up and read the address typed on it, Edinburgh General Hospital. She tore it open and read,

You have been selected to attend an interview for a registrar post in Plastic

Surgery.....

‘Mum,’ she shouted, from the back door.

‘I’ve been shortlisted at Edinburgh.’

‘Congratulations, when do you start?’ Her voice boomed from the green house.

‘No, no; I have an interview. There will be other candidates so I may not get the job.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

The interview was held in the Hospital Boardroom, a large high ceilinged room, the walls of which were adorned with full size paintings of past Surgeons and Physicians. They seemed to be looking down making sure everything was done according to custom.

Jane sat in the outer office with four other hopefuls. They nodded to her but said nothing.

Finally it was her turn to be interviewed. All was going well and she was feeling relieved. She was about to leave thinking the interview was over when the Chairman leaned forward and asked.

‘Finally Doctor, do you have any children?’

Jane almost choked. What has that got to do with anything?

She had to think fast. Should she tell the truth, lie or be surprised and offended? She chose the latter.

'I don't know why you are asking that question.'

'It so happens we know that you have a child/ We are concerned that if selected for the job, you would be able to fully commit yourself to the care of your patients.'

'Yes, I have a six-month-old son who is living with my mother, his grandmother. She is fully able to care for him while I am working. I can assure you that I will be able to do the job with complete commitment.'

'Thank you Doctor, please wait outside.'

If Jane had been a fly on the wall, she would have heard the following discussion.

'Well Gentleman and Lady- there was only one female on the committee. 'What do you think?'

Professor Blake, a senior surgeon coughed and began.

'Jane is without doubt the best candidate. She has an excellent reference from Professor Mortimer whom I know well.' There was a chorus of 'I agree'.

He continued,

'But and it's a big but, she has a child.' How will she cope with the job if he becomes ill. She will want to be with him, she will be torn between her two allegiances.'

A chorus of 'hear, hear.'

Suddenly Miss Burrows coughed and waited. to speak.

The room quietened.

'Gentleman, I see that I am the only woman here so perhaps I understand Jane's predicament better than you. All of us have relatives, siblings, parents who may become ill and call upon us.

At some time we may all have divided allegiances but that doesn't stop us from fulfilling our duties as doctors. Is Jane with her son any different? Let's call her in and give her the good news.'

It was an ecstatic Jane that rang her mother, but there was no reply. Later that day she received a call

'Sorry dear I was in the hairdresser. I didn't hear your call. Well how did it go?'

'Mum, I got the job.'

'Of course you did, dear. I told you, you would.'

'Oh Mum!'

Chapter Nine

At fortyish Jane was tall and slim with short pale reddish hair and blue grey eyes. She had lost her baby fat and was now lean and muscular. She stepped out of the shower and glanced at herself in the mirror. Not bad she thought although noticing the beginning of a bulge around her midline. She pulled it in.

Easter was coming soon and Jane had planned to spend it with her mother in the Lake District. At the last minute, a colleague fell ill and she had to cover for her. She hated putting her mother off. She now saw her so rarely and each time she was more frail. One day... , she pushed the thought away.

Suddenly her screen lit up. It was Penny.

‘Hi, are you OK?’

‘A bit sad. I have had to cancel my trip to see my mother. John has called in ill and I have to cover for him at the hospital. What about you?’

‘I’m working over the holiday.’

There was a pause.

‘Why don’t we,’ she hesitated. Jane waited uncertain what she was going to say.

‘Why don’t we spend it together at my place?’

It was later that day, that they were sitting together on the settee in front of a roaring fire. Neither had spoken about where they would sleep but Jane knew there was only one bedroom with one double bed.

She didn’t want to broach the subject, just wait and see, she thought. She knew what she wanted.

Finally, Penny got up,

‘I’m tired, let’s go to bed.’ No other words were spoken as they both prepared to sleep. Jane got into bed first.

‘I always sleep on the left side,’ she announced, slipping between the covers. ‘Is the other side OK for you?’

‘Sure fine,’ Jane wavered.

That night Jane woke up. The room seemed strange, the walls were in the wrong place and it was so quiet. Then she remembered and turned to feel Penny’s warm body beside her.

She was nude. Jane was shocked and excited. She cautiously touched her. Her skin was soft and smooth and she began to stroke her shoulders then down her back. There was something so calming and natural.

She could feel herself becoming aroused and for a moment hesitated. This was wrong, a voice in her head said but it didn’t feel that at all.

Penny didn’t move. She had woken and could feel Jane’s hand exploring her body, her arms and legs. She held her breath and then turned towards her. Their eyes locked with surprise and expectation. At first they were kissing gently and then more urgently, exploring each other’s lips and mouths.

Doctor Jane Frobisher opened her eyes and for a moment couldn’t remember where she was. The room was in darkness with thin rays of light peeking through the curtains. She felt a movement and glanced at the tousled head sleeping soundly by her side. Then she remembered.

A bomb wouldn’t wake Penny, she thought as she threw back the covers and stood up.

Monday? How had she agreed to operate on Monday? It would be just a routine day; surgery in the morning and a clinic in the afternoon. It was the least popular session but as the newest surgeon in the team it had fallen to her.

She walked unsteadily to the bathroom and sat on the loo, contemplating the day.

‘Is that you Jane?’ Penny called from the bedroom.

‘Yes, sorry to wake you. Go back to sleep.’

‘Have a good day,’ she heard Penny whisper before silence descended.

Chapter Ten

Wearing her dark blue working suit with a white shirt and silk scarf, Jane gulped down a glass of orange juice followed by a cup of steaming black coffee before leaving.

Her car started immediately. She eased it out of the small parking area. Snow had fallen overnight creating a crackling sound under its wheels as the car slowly moved into the main road.

She was focused, her mind going over the day ahead, preparing herself for the challenges that awaited. It was a short journey to the hospital. She parked in her reserved space and nodding to the attendant, carried her case up the short flight of stairs into the large foyer.

Then up the winding stairs to the main corridor. It was normally buzzing with patients and staff making their way to the wards and clinics. But at this time, it was virtually deserted apart from one or two night nurses going off duty. They nodded to her as she made her way to the theatre suite.

James, the theatre technician greeted her,

‘Good Morning Miss, lovely morning.’

‘Yes James, how are you?’

‘Fine everything is ready for the first case. We have sent for her.’

Roinna Thompson was thirty-five, single and living with her mother. She worked in a Lawyer’s office as a secretary. Recently she had begun going out with a new boyfriend Mike. They had met at the Skating rink where she regularly went on a Saturday night.

She usually met a few girlfriends, had a drink in a pub afterwards and went home alone. But one night a friend brought along her brother Mike, a tall muscular man with an infectious smile. They hit it off immediately and spent the evening sharing jokes and laughing. Later he took her home and they had sex.

She knew she had large breasts but they didn’t worry about her until she heard someone at the office refer to her as that girl with big boobs. Mike said he loved them but now she didn’t. At times they were uncomfortable and in the hot weather they hung down heavily and she began to hate them.

An article in a newspaper caught her eye. It was from a Plastic Surgical Unit. advertising breast reduction. She decided to investigate..

Jane, one of its surgeons, remembered the consultation.

Roinna was nervous and shy.

‘I really don’t like them,’ she finally said. ‘They are too heavy and uncomfortable.’

She hesitated, ‘I feel embarrassed.’ After a long discussion, she had agreed to have them reduced. It was an unusual request because most of Jane’s patients wanted their breast size increased.

Chapter Eleven

The operation should be straightforward Jane thought, after going over the details in her mind as she went through the routine of scrubbing up.

She watched through the glass panel as Roinna was transferred to the operating table and her upper body bared.

Poor thing, she thought, what a burden to have to bear for so many years? The hot water tingled her fingers. Let's get on with it, she thought as she was helped into the theatre gown.

'Good morning Sister, everything ready?'

'Good morning Jane, I've put out your favorite needle holders, the Gilles'

'Thank you, let's get started.'

Everything seemed to go well and at the end both breasts looked similar and much more normal.

Over coffee, Sister saw that Jane was looking pensive.

'What's the matter Jane, are you OK'

'Yes, but I am a bit worried. The skin on the left breast took a long time for its blood supply to return.'

The following day Jane did her ward round. Roinna was in bed three.

'Good morning Roinna, How are you feeling?'

'Fine, a bit sore but not too bad.'

'She's had an injection for pain this morning,' said the nurse, 'and settled down well.'

It was Jane's routine to inspect the wounds at twenty-four hours. The nurse had removed the outer dressing and left the gauze for Jane to remove.

Using a pair of forceps, she gently eased it off.

'It won't hurt,' she cautioned the patient. As the gauze was stripped off, the wound was slowly revealed.

The nurse gave a gasp. Jane was horrified. The skin over half the new left breast was bluish in colour - it was struggling to survive. There was no doubt that somehow in the process of refashioning the smaller breast, Jane had compromised its main arterial supply.

She caught the nurse's eye, reached for a dressing and redressed the wound.

'Fine,' she murmured, 'I'll redo it tomorrow.'

'When can I go home?' asked the young woman unaware of the seriousness of her condition. Jane didn't hear the question. Her heart was racing.

She had read about this complication but had never personally met it before. She knew she had to act fast.

As soon as she got back to her office, she rang John. His mobile was on message.

'John, I need to see you. Something unexpected has happened. Call me as soon as you get this.'

John Lodge was the Senior Plastic Surgeon, a gentle, softly spoken man now in his sixties. He had been appointed to the hospital in his thirties and had built up its reputation as a first class Plastic Surgical Unit.

He had been her referee and helped her get her present job. They had hit it off from the beginning. Now he was near retirement.

It was later in the afternoon when he returned her call.

‘John, can we meet in sister's office in half an hour?’

He was on time. Sitting opposite him, she noticed he now had a slight tremor.

‘Well Jane what's the problem?’

‘It's the Breast reduction I did this morning. I removed her dressing; part of the skin's dying. Somehow I have managed to damage its blood supply.’

‘Mmm, let's go and see her.’ He said calmly, squeezing Jane's arm.

Jane rang the ward and arranged to have the dressing removed.

‘Hello Rionna, I am Dr Lodge; a colleague of Dr Jane.’, he said, smiling at the patient. ‘We would just like to see your wound.’

‘Is there something wrong Doctor? Roinna asked, surprised by Jane's visit..’

‘No, everything is fine. I just wanted my colleague to see your incisions.’

Once the dressings were removed, John immediately recognized the problem. Almost half the skin of the reconstructed left breast was dusky in colour, indicating a compromised blood supply.

Dr Lodge had seen it before.

‘Bring me a stitch tray please nurse,’ he requested.

Turning to Jane he whispered, ‘We need to remove the stitches right away to release the tension on the flap.’

As the fine nylon stitches were removed, one by one, the skin flap loosened and colour began to flood back into it. By the time all had been removed, the flap was pink and looking much healthier.

‘That's much better,’ he announced.

Turning to Jane,

‘I would leave it for a day or two and then resuture it. By that time the circulation should have stabilized.’

Smiling at the patient, he said,

‘It's nothing to worry about, the skin was a bit too tight. I have loosened it and hope we can tidy it up in a few days' time.’

Later in the coffee room, Jane asked,

‘John why did that happen? It seemed OK at the end of the operation.’

‘It's difficult to say. Do you think you could have damaged the Mammary artery?’

Jane suddenly recalled. She never saw the artery - the main blood supply to the breast. Perhaps it was in an abnormal position and she hadn't recognised it.

Back in her office, Jane pulled out her Gray's Anatomy and turned to the section showing the blood supply to the breast. She read that the Internal Mammary artery was its main blood supply but sometimes, it was in an abnormal position.

Going over the operation in her head, she realised that having not seen it- she might have ligated it in error.

It was after seven when she let herself into the house. There was a welcoming smell of cooking coming from the kitchen. Penny was standing at the oven wearing a brightly coloured apron.

‘Hi, that smells good, what are you cooking?’

‘Your favorite Spaghetti Bolognese with a twist. How was your day, you look tired?’

‘OK I s’pose but I made a bad mistake.’

‘Look, why don’t you pour us each a glass of wine and you can tell me about it over dinner?’

Later in the snug. Jane said,

‘That was delicious, it gets better every time you make it.’

She paused and then said,

‘Now I need to tell you what happened.’

Penny listened intently.

‘Look Jane, I don’t understand surgery but aren’t you being a bit hard on yourself?

After all she did sign a Consent.’

‘Yes, all patients have to but they still expect nothing to go wrong.’

‘But things do, you are not Gods? You’re human.’

Chapter Twelve

Roinna was dozing when her mother visited that evening. She didn't hear her at first but became aware that someone was in the room.

She had been dreaming. Her boyfriend Mike and she had gone to a small isolated beach in Cornwall.

'Let's strip off,' he had suggested. 'There's no one around.'

It had been a long time since Roinna had removed her clothes in front of a man, she couldn't remember when she last did. But they were alone and she wanted to show off her new body, one that she was now proud of after hiding it for so many years. Slowly she began to undo her blouse and slipped it off her shoulders then her bra - it was clipped at the back she would normally twist to the front but he was there.

'Could you?' she whispered.

She felt him fumbling with the clip. Why are they so awkward he cursed? At last it was free and she felt her breast loosen - it was such a wonderful feeling to be free of clothes and feel the breeze on her body.

'You, you are so beautiful,' he whispered, cupping her breasts in his palms. 'They are so perfect.'

He leaned forward and kissed her nipple. She shivered feeling her excitement surge. Suddenly they were on the sand soft and yielding. He grabbed at her skirt and loosened the waist. She eased herself out of her pants. Meanwhile he was struggling with his own clothes, at last they were both naked.

She was suddenly awake confused, her heart beating furiously. Where was she? She remembered the hospital. She heard her mother's voice.

'Are you alright dear, you look so pale.'

'I'm fine, you surprised me I was far away.'

Jane had to tell Roinna that there was a problem. She went over in her mind what she would say. It was never easy for a doctor to tell a patient that things hadn't gone the way they intended. Patients always assume that everything will go smoothly.

Jane was hopeful that after a few days the circulation to the skin flap would recover and she would be able to sew it back in the correct place. But now she had to confront Roinna with the situation.

Roinna's dressing had been loosened when Jane arrived on the ward the next day.

'Let see how it is doing?' She said as she removed it. To her relief the skin flap was now pink and healthy. Releasing the suture had allowed the blood supply to return to normal.

'Good,' she announced. 'The skin flap is looking pink and healthy.'

Roinna was puzzled.

'What does that mean? I don't understand what you are saying?'

'Let me explain. During the operation it was necessary to release the skin from the underlying breast tissue in order to make the breast smaller. Yesterday when I examined the left side, the skin flap wasn't looking healthy so I released the stitches that held it in place to allow the circulation to improve. It now has. So I now need to take you back to the theatre to sew it up again.'

'Does that mean another operation?'

'Yes but it's a very simple one.'

It all went very smoothly; the skin flap was now looking healthy so it was easily sewn back into place.

'Both breasts look pretty good,' announced Jane to the nurses and assistants watching.

Chapter Thirteen

'Hi Penny I'm home,' announced Jane as she stepped into the hall.

'How did it go?' came a voice from the snug.

'Good, it all went well.'

You look tired?'

'I had another long session with the admin trying to get an extra doctor. We are very understaffed and if someone is ill, we are really stretched.

'We'll do what we can,' was the reply I got from Dr Smithers the Manager, and then...and then he had the cheek to say sarcastically,

'How is your girlfriend? I nearly choked.'

Jane's face crumpled.

'It's alright,' Penny said, hugging her. 'Don't upset yourself. What did you say?'

'It was so out of order, I was so angry, I think I just stamped out of the room. It's not right, why did he need to say anything? He's a manager not a judge'

After dinner and over a brandy, Jane again brought up the subject. She felt worthless.

'What do you want to do?' asked Penny.

'I want to report him.'

'Don't you think you should let it go?'

Jane thought for a moment. That would be the easy way, the coward's way.

'Did you have a witness?'

'No, but..'

'Then it's just your word against his.'

Try as she might, Jane couldn't let it go. She rehearsed the conversation and tried to make light of it. He didn't really want to embarrass her, she wanted to believe.

But his words had cut deep and she couldn't let it pass. Following a disturbed night, she went to see the manager of the Human Resources Department.

The waiting room was empty when she entered. Puzzled and uncertain what to do, she waited. Suddenly the far door opened and the manager, Hilda Soper entered.

They had met before. She has aged. Still tall and heavily built, there was now a hint of grey in her otherwise short brown hair. She was wearing a simple silk top and a tweed skirt.

'Hello Jane, can I help you?' she began with a faint air of impatience.

She had seen Jane before but couldn't remember when. They shook hands.

'We have met. I am a Plastic surgeon in the hospital.'

'Oh yes I remember now, how can I help you?'

'It's a bit difficult, can we go into your office?'

'Of course.'

Jane went ahead of her and was rehearsing what she would say, so as not to appear trivial and childish.

'Jane, please sit down. Please tell me what's the problem?'

'It's a remark made by Dr Smithers, the General Manager,' She felt herself blushing and struggling to keep calm, 'when I went to see him recently about a staffing problem.'

'What did he say?'

'As I was about to leave, he said, 'How is your friend?' I didn't understand the question so I asked him to repeat it.

'You know, your girlfriend.'

I was horrified. I didn't know what to say. How dare he? What's it to him? What was he insinuating? I just turned and left.'

'I see,' said Hilda. She knew things had changed. No one had bothered about remarks like that in the past but now things were different and she knew she had to do something.

Dr Robert Smithers was surprised to see a message on his desk asking him to report to Human Resources. He had never been there before. It was a new department that had been set up in the last year to deal with personal problems.

He remembered when he was first told about it.

'Human resources, it's a stupid idea,' he had told his wife Betty over supper.

"We are so short of fundamentals and they then waste money on a new department with three members of staff. They say it will deal with staff complaints. Staff complaints! I can't imagine how that would help. It would only encourage the wimps to go crying to mamma.'

Betty had heard it all before, she kept her thoughts to herself.

Every time something was introduced to make life easier for the staff, he complained. She muttered to herself.

'He thinks he is still in the army and the hospital staff are his batmen.;

Dr Smithers arrived on time. He entered the waiting room, saw the door to the office was open and was tempted to just push it and go in but hesitated and then knocked.

'Come in,' a voice said.

'Good morning doctor. 'Thank you for sparing time to see me.'

'Yes. I was very busy. What's it all about?'

'I'm afraid we've received a complaint about you, something you said to a member of staff.'

Dr Smithers feigned surprise, and appeared to be taken aback.

'A complaint about something I said?' he repeated, not wanting to understand what he had heard.

'Yes, one of the surgeons has reported you for an inappropriate remark. She was very upset'

'I don't understand. Who was it? What did I say?'

'It was Miss Frobisher. You asked her how her friend was?'

'Did I? Oh yes I remember. What's wrong with that? I was only being friendly.'

'She said you had finished your business and she was just leaving when you suddenly, out of the blue, asked her how her girlfriend was. Why did you do that?'

'I was only...,' he began and suddenly stopped. He had wanted to tease her about her girlfriend. He couldn't understand how two women could? He had tried to imagine it, two women doing it together. The thought horrified him.

'I was only making a joke, a harmless joke.'

Hilda looked at him, this pathetic man standing before her, struggling to understand that he was now living in different times. She waited.

'What can I do? 'he whined.

'You can start by apologising to her.'

Chapter Fourteen

Robert arrived home, grunted something and went into his study, slamming the door. Betty knew something was wrong.

He would always greet her when he came home from the hospital. They had been married almost twenty years but he was still a mystery to her.

She could hear him walking about muttering to himself. She waited, sooner or later he would tell her what was the matter.

It was Friday, fish night, his favorite, so she hoped his mood would improve.

Later that evening,

‘Dinner’s ready,’ she called, loud enough for him to hear through his study door. She waited. There was no sound so she repeated it louder and heard a faint,

‘I’m coming.’

Suddenly he marched into the room, sat down in his usual seat at the top of the table, stared ahead and said nothing. He normally took off his jacket and tie but tonight he hadn’t changed.

Betty waited. She put the plate of fried fish, chips and mushy peas in front of him and waited. He said nothing and mechanically began to eat, staring ahead.

Finally, she sat down at the other end of the table and they ate together in silence.

He suddenly burst out,

‘It’s a bloody disgrace. A bloody female surgeon complained about me, about what I said to her. It’s ridiculous and I’m supposed to apologize to her, apologize for what?,’ he shouted.

‘I bloody well won’t. I won’t apologize to any bloody woman. It was a joke, she has no sense of humour?’

Betty knew there was no point in interrupting him. He had to get it off his chest so she remained silent.

Female Surgeons! It was bound to happen sooner or later. He had never accepted the idea of a female surgeon.

‘They have the wrong temperament,’ he had said, over and over again, ‘not calm and patient like a man.’

Betty had tried many times to discuss it with him but he wouldn’t. She had also tried to dissuade him from applying for the Management job at the hospital when he retired from GP practice.

‘Haven’t you had enough dealing with sick people, why don’t you just relax and enjoy your retirement?’

Having finished his meal, Robert stood up and announced,

‘I’m going to the pub.’

‘Don’t you want dessert; I’ve made an apple pie your favourite?’ she pleaded. Ignoring her pleas, he stormed out of the room. She heard the front door slam.

The Kings Arms was his Pub. It was founded in 1780 in a house in which George III was said to have slept. It has remained unchanged since. Eschewing the calls for a restaurant, it still only served bar meals which is why he had remained loyal to it.

There were only two regulars standing at the bar when he entered. He knew them both and greeted them.

Peter was a farmer who kept a large herd of pedigree sheep and David was a Magistrate who also served on tribunals.

Robert was still smarting over the episode at the hospital and as soon as the conversation paused, he stepped in.

‘What do you think about this?’ he began. ‘One of the hospital female surgeons came to see me about a staffing problem and as we were parting, I knew she was a dyke so I asked her how her girlfriend was. It was an innocent question but she reported me to Human Resources that used to be Personnel.’

‘What did I do wrong? I wanted to be friendly. She took it the wrong way. I don’t know what the world’s coming to?’

Both men went quiet. They didn’t know what to say. It seemed Robert had somehow been left behind and was stuck somewhere in the 19th C.

After a rather embarrassing silence, David spoke.

‘You know Robert, you surprised me. I would have thought that you of all people, a hospital manager, would have been aware and sensitive to today’s gender climate.’

Robert said nothing.. He expected both men to agree with him.

Then,

‘Gender climate? What the hell does that mean?’ He shouted. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Yeah I can see that,’ barked David. ‘Oh! forget it, let’s talk about something else.’

Chapter Fifteen

Jane was still smarting from the incident in the Manager's Office when she received a message to attend HR. They had set up an enquiry. She was meeting Penny for lunch and no sooner had they sat down than she handed her the letter.

'Read this; at last they're going to do something about his remark.'

Penny read it slowly digesting every word then after a pause looked up.

'Do you really want to continue with this? You are right to be upset but you have to think of your future. You will be up against the Hospital manager, the establishment. They will be against you. They will stick together and will try to make light of it, admitting the offence but asking you to overlook it.'

Jane sat staring into her teacup, disappointed. She thought that Penny would agree with her feelings and would support her actions.

Robert, the hospital manager, thought the whole incident had been forgotten when he got the letter. Betty sensed there was something wrong when he came home that day. He slammed the letter on the kitchen table.

'You won't believe this, the damn office is setting up an enquiry. They want me to attend tomorrow at 10.'

The meeting was to be held in the boardroom. Jane remembered the last time she was there. It was when she was appointed as a surgeon. She remembered the walls, adorned with painting of the notable members of staff.

She had looked for a female portrait but there wasn't one. It now seemed a very long time ago. Things are not so different now. But it was still more difficult for a woman to get on the staff.

She entered the common room which was now beginning to fill up. She recognized Hilda Soper head of HR and Dr Robert Smithers. Also present were Rosemary Flinders, Obs & Gynae Surgeon due for retirement, John Lodge senior surgeon and Mr. Flint, General Surgeon.

Dr Smithers sat at the back avoiding her gaze. There were several others whom she had seen but not met.

Hilda Soper called the meeting to order.

She began,

'This is an informal meeting to deal with a matter raised by Miss Jane Frobisher. She has submitted a complaint against Dr Smithers for an inappropriate remark that he made.

'Miss Frobisher, would you like to tell the committee?'

'Thank you Hilda. On the 5th of last month, I came to see Dr Smithers to discuss a staff problem that we had on the unit. As I was leaving, he asked me how my girlfriend was. Many of you know that my partner is a woman. I have made no attempt to hide the fact. Dr Smithers's question offended me. I felt he was out of order to ask it and I would like a formal apology.

At this point Hilda Soper spoke.

'I wrote to Doctor Smithers about the incident but he has not replied. 'Doctor, would you like to say something about the incident?'

'Yes I would,' said Dr Smithers rising to his feet. His face was swollen, his eyes narrowed. He could hardly control his rage.

'This whole thing is preposterous, a parody of the truth. This woman,' he screamed pointing to Jane. 'I suppose that's what she is, is outrageous in her accusation. I made a simple friendly remark and she has blown it out of all proportion. Why you may ask? Is she ashamed of her behaviour? She should be. She's a dyke, a misfit, not someone suitable to be on the staff of this great hospital.'

By now he was breathing heavily, beads of sweat were appearing on his forehead. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. The room went silent. It was as if the occupants were watching a play in which the main character was going mad.

Hilda waited unsure what to do. Then she spoke, her voice too squeaky.

'Thank you Doctor Smithers.'

He was still standing.

'Your may sit down please.'

She looked around the room searching for support. Rosemary Flinders caught her eye and she nodded.

Rosemary felt very vulnerable as she spoke, her voice shaking and a bit too shrill.

'It is difficult for me to find words to express my disgust, yes disgust, at your behavior Robert. We have known each other a long time and I have never thought that you, of all people, harboured such prejudice and venom. What you said was totally unacceptable; you seem to be living in the stone-age.'

The room went quiet. The occupants were uncomfortable, shifting their seats.

Then John Lodge rose. He looked around. He was the senior. With his hands behind his back, he contemplated his answer.

'Although this is an informal meeting, I think we need to come to some conclusion as to how we deal with Miss Frobisher's complaint.

Turning to her, he asked.

'What would you like to happen?'

'From the beginning, I only wanted an apology, a recognition that what Dr Smithers had said to me was unacceptable. Hearing him today, it is clear that he has not altered his opinion. By his behaviour to me and his response today, I think he is unsuitable to continue as the Hospital Manager and should be required to take early retirement.'

There was a titter of 'hear, hear.'

John Lodge looked at each member in turn. Each nodded.

'Dr Smithers, you have heard the verdict of this meeting. I hope that you will act accordingly so that this unsavory matter can be finalized.'

Dr Smithers stood up, defeated, his look almost apoplectic. He hesitated and was about to say something then changed his mind. He turned, braced his shoulders and without a word marched out of the room.

Chapter Sixteen

Roinna was still not happy with her new boobs. The wounds had healed well and were now only fine white lines but their shape wasn't right. Jane had warned her that they would not look exactly the same. After all, Jane had said, no normal breasts are exactly the same, one is always a bit bigger than the other. But to Roinna the left side was much bigger than the right.

No matter how much she tried to ignore it, she found herself frequently staring at them. Mike caught her doing it one evening and stood behind her saying nothing. She suddenly heard his movement and turned.

‘What do you think Mike?’

‘They're beautiful,’ he said, trying to fondle them.

‘No I mean the size; they don't look right.’

Roinna couldn't let it go until one evening, Mike snapped.

‘Stop Roinna, I can't bear your grumbling all the time. If you don't like them, go back and see the surgeon and hear what she has to say.’

Roinna had thought about it and finally decided that she really ought to go back and see Miss Frobisher and tell her how unhappy she was. So she did and was told that everything was OK so what was the point of seeing her again.

Over the next few weeks she spoke to one or two friends at the hairdresser. They all said she should get a second opinion.

Searching on Google, she found a Breast Specialist who had his rooms not far from her home. His name was Mr. Donahue Broders. He had trained at a London Teaching Hospital and had written some scientific papers on Breast surgery. She toyed with the idea of speaking to her GP but decided to make her own arrangements.

Over supper she told Mike about her appointment for a second opinion

‘Are you OK to come with me tomorrow to see the specialist?’ she asked him as they began to clear up the dishes. She could see Mike hesitating. He was looking for an excuse; she knew he hated doctors and avoided them at all costs.

Feigning willingness he asked,

‘What time is your appointment?’

‘Two pm.’

She could see from the way he avoided looking at her that he was trying to sidestep the issue.

‘Sorry, I promised to meet the builder at that time. Will you be OK on your own?’

Roinna was resigned. She expected that, at the last moment, he would cry off.

‘Sure I'll be fine, don't worry. I'll let you know what happens.’

She could see the relief on his face.

Mr. Donahue Broders was running late for his rooms. The morning list had over-run. Stuffing down a sandwich on the way, he arrived 15 minutes late. He hated being late and greeted everyone already sitting in the waiting room.

‘Sorry, sorry...’ he said mumbling ‘my list...’

Wiping the sweat off his brow, he went into his office leaving the door ajar, sat down and glanced at the list, not too bad he thought.

‘Roinna please.’ He called through the open door. He preferred to call patients by their first name. Most liked it although there was the occasional person who didn't and would correct him.

He was younger than she expected with a good head of reddish hair and grey-green eyes. She noticed he had cut himself shaving that morning and thought to herself that of all people, he should know how to use a razor

‘Good morning, how may I help you?’

Roinna blushed.

"It's my breasts," she hated the word, it made her feel like a cow giving milk. ‘They have always been an embarrassment to me once I became an adult.

A year ago I went to see a surgeon and had a breast reduction. I thought that would make them OK but I think something went wrong.’

‘How do you mean?’

Roinna blushed again,

‘They are not the same. They...

‘I see,’ interrupted Mr. Broders. ‘Please go in there,’ nurse will help you,’ he said, pointing to a small room in the corner, ‘slip off your top and let me have a look.’

Roinna waited. She was bare from the waist up when he entered the examination room. She wanted to cover herself, feeling so embarrassed. The nurse squeezed her hand.

‘It’s OK,’ she whispered.

He looked at her for a while and then began to palpate her breasts. He then made some notes

‘Mmm,’ he said finally. ‘Nurse will take some photos and then you can get dressed.’

Roinna returned to the consulting room and sat down feeling calmer now that her top was covered.

Mr. Broders sat back in his chair facing her.

He was thinking. She waited.

‘It’s not easy, I can see what you don’t like. Your left breast is significantly larger than your right.’

‘What would you like me to do? I can make your left breast smaller or your right breast larger although that would be more difficult and would require an implant.’

Roinna didn’t want another operation. She really wanted to know whether Dr Jane had done a bad job, had been negligent but didn’t know how to say it so she asked.’

‘Does this always happen?’

My Broders recognised the insinuation. He wondered did she really not like her new breasts or was she looking to sue her surgeon. He knew Jane Frobisher very well. She was a good surgeon, conscientious and caring, so he didn't want to say a bad word against her.

‘Um that's not easy to answer,’ He began. ‘Surgeons can't always control how the body behaves. I have managed to get the hospital notes and I can see that she had some difficulty with the blood supply to your left breast and had to release the stitches.’

Chapter Seventeen

Dr Robert Smithers was dismayed. He expected his colleagues to support him, to say that her complaint was childish and for her to grow up so to speak. Instead they supported her. He couldn't believe how they had all ganged up on him as if he was a pariah.

He had left the meeting appalled at their decision. He needed to get away from the hospital. What was once his retreat had now become his oppressor. He rushed along the corridors almost bumping into people in his haste to get away. He couldn't get out fast enough from the place that was once so welcoming.

He pushed open the swing doors and emerged into the open air. The bright sun dazzled him. His mind was in a whirl. How could he continue to work in a place that held such views? He thought of ringing Betty, his wife but she would only say I told you so. That was the last thing he wanted to hear. In the end he made his way to the Kings Arms.

Maisie was behind the bar when he entered the dimly lit room. Dr Smithers remembered her as a slim vivacious young woman but the years hadn't been kind and she was now plump and homely.

'Good morning Doctor,' she greeted him. 'The usual?'

His favorite drink was a single Black Label.'

'Make it a double, please Maisie.'

There was no one in yet, it was too early, so he made his way to the snug where a roaring fire with logs crackling greeted him. He sat spreading his legs and felt the warmth calm his spirit. He fell asleep.

He was in the garden kicking a ball when he heard his mother shout out from inside the house.

'Don't, please stop!' He crept to the window and peered in. His father was standing over his mother with his hand raised. She was crying. He waited, unable to move. Then he rushed in and tried to separate them.

'Stop!' He shouted. 'Stop.'

His father grabbed him and pulled him away.

'Go into the garden and play!'

He felt a hand on his shoulder gently nudging him. He slowly woke, blinked his eyes and saw David Hunt staring down at him.

'Robert are you all right?'

Without answering he snapped,

'They've asked me to resign.'

'Who?'

'The Hospital management.'

'What did you say?'

'I was furious, I just walked out.'

David scratched his head

'Was that wise?'

'What else could I do? They asked me to resign,' he repeated, raising his voice.

'Calm down Robert. You were going to resign soon anyway so why are you so upset?'

'Don't you understand they told me to resign?' he repeated. 'I might lose my pension.'

Chapter Eighteen

'I can't leave it, I need to know whether it could have been avoided,' shouted Roinna through the bathroom door. Mike was having a lay-in, stretched out on the bed, his arms locked above his head. He had tried to reassure her to leave it. But her response was explosive.

'It's all right for you, you don't have to try to conceal what feels like a disfigurement?'

'Well then have it redone.'

'I'm scared. What if it can't be improved? What if it is made worse?'

No sooner had Roinna left his consulting room than Mr. Broders thought about phoning Jane. He hesitated at first. He remembered they had met during their training and had had a tempestuous affair which had ended abruptly when he got cold feet and didn't want any responsibility.

They hadn't seen each other since. Her line was busy so he left a message for her to phone him.

It was after six in the evening when Jane returned his call. She had seen his message and was puzzled. At first she couldn't remember who he was but then her memory flooded back. Then she remembered the hospital party. She was flattered, he was senior to her and she had fallen for him, a tall rugby type. But it all went wrong when she became pregnant.

What could he possibly want?

'Hi Donoghue, long time, how are you?'

She wanted to tell him how angry she was at the way he behaved, that she hadn't had the abortion and that he had a son, but she simply waited for his reply.

'Fine how are you?'

His reply was clearly very formal. She stiffened.

'OK what's on your mind?'

'Jane, it's something professional, can we meet?'

The cafe was almost empty when Donoghue arrived. For a moment he thought he had got the time wrong and was too early. He looked around and then saw her. Jane was sitting by the lake talking on her phone. For a moment he studied her face. She looked more mature, her baby face had gone and was now replaced by a strong jawline.

She must have felt his presence because she suddenly turned and saw him.

'Donoghue,' she waved. He walked over to her. He had aged and put on weight. No longer so upright, he stood with a slight stoop. She noticed greying at his temples. Time had softened her hatred for him.

She considered bringing up the past. She had relived meeting him so many times and wanted so much to tell him how much she despised him for what he had done but instead smiled and said,

'Great to see you.'

They hugged. She smelled his aftershave and remembered. He sat down facing her. For a moment they said nothing and then they spoke at the same time.

'It's been too long, you look good.' They both laughed.

'How have you been?'

'Fine and you?'

'No problems.'

She decided to take the initiative

‘What are you having Donoghue?’ she asked.

‘Just a glass of white wine please.’

They sat in silence for a moment then Jane spoke,

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘You remember you sent me your notes about a Roinna Thompson, you had done a breast reduction on her last year. She came to see me because she wasn’t happy with the result.’

‘I remember her. I had to do a second procedure on her.’

Donoghue turned and looked at the water, then he said slowly,

‘I think she wants to sue you.’

‘I see.’

They sat in silence as the sun began to disappear behind the horizon. Then Donoghue put his papers together and said

‘I must be off, it has been great seeing you looking so well Jane.’

‘Before we part, is there anything you want to ask me?’

‘No why?’

‘Because,’ she took a deep breath, it was now or never, ‘because I think you should know that I didn’t have the abortion.’

She waited watching the words sink in. At first there was no change and then his eyes seemed to enlarge and his breathing became louder.

‘I, I don’t understand? Are you saying that..’

‘Yes I am. I had a beautiful baby boy. I named him Sebastian. Let me show you a photograph.’

He saw a young boy about twelve years old, with his smile and his light brown hair.

Donoghue was speechless, he stood with his mouth open trying to take in what she was saying.

‘He is your son.’

Chapter Nineteen

Jane was very quiet when she came into the kitchen, Penny was busy preparing dinner.

‘How was your day?’

‘OK I guess.’

‘That's all?’

‘Well, it was difficult. A colleague whom I hadn't seen for years asked to meet me for lunch. He dropped a bombshell. He said that the patient I told you about with the breast problem, is thinking of suing me.’

Standing at the sink, Penny looked out at the garden. She couldn't imagine how Jane had become a surgeon. It seemed such a physical thing and she was only slightly built. Then when you have done your best and something goes wrong, you get sued.

Over dinner she raised the subject again.

‘Who was your colleague?’

‘Oh, he's a surgeon on the staff at a neighbouring hospital.’ She didn't want to tell Penny that they had been lovers, that they had planned to get married but when she became pregnant, he got cold feet. She hadn't told her that he was Sebastian's father.

Chapter Twenty

Betty was preparing breakfast when the phone rang.

‘I’ll get it,’ she shouted to Robert who had just come into the room.

‘Mum,’ a voice said, so low it was almost inaudible. But Betty recognised it.

‘Mum,’ it repeated. ‘I want to come home.’

Betty turned to Robert.

‘Why don’t you have your breakfast? I’ll take this call in the hall.’

‘Where are you?’ whispered Betty. ‘Are you alone?’

‘No I’m with Annabel.’

‘Your dad will go mad. You know his views.’

‘Yes but I need to see you. I am so confused. Please Mum.’

‘OK. Dad is still working at the hospital. He leaves at 9. Can you come after that?’

Betty began to panic. She so wanted to see Annabel but not her friend. Why couldn’t she be like other girls and have a nice boyfriend?

Betty was busy in the kitchen having almost forgotten about Annabel when the front door bell rang. Her heart jumped. She straightened her apron, glanced in the mirror and brushed back her greying hair. She braced herself. She hadn’t seen her daughter for over four years.

She slowly opened the front door. Joanna looked older, her face drawn, no longer babyish. Her blue eyes stared out from an adult face. They stood facing each other and then each made a gasping sound as they fell into each other’s arms.

‘Darling Joanna, it’s wonderful to see you- it’s been so long.’ They hung together conscious of each other’s breathing.

Then Betty asked,

‘Where is your friend?’ She had forgotten her name.

‘Annabelle, she is parking the car. I wanted to see you alone before you met her.

‘Can I bring her in?’

Betty turned and went into the hall. She stood looking at the floor waiting, uncertain what she would see. After a few minutes she heard footsteps and looked up.

‘Mum this is Annabel.’

Betty stifled her voice. Annabel was a mod with bright yellow hair, rings in her nose and ears and wearing a long dress of rough material covering sandals. She could just make out some tattoos on her arms.

‘How do you do?’ said Annabel formally. ‘I am pleased to meet you. Joanna has told me so much about you.’

Chapter Twenty-One

The house was in darkness when Robert returned from the pub. He couldn't go straight home from the hospital. He needed to get away from their prying eyes. The word had gotten around and everyone he met in the course of the day glared at him and walked by trying to avoid him. He had become a pariah.

He let himself in. The house was quiet. He turned off the hall light and gingerly climbed the stairs and entered the bedroom. The light was off but he could just make out the sleeping form of Mary. She stirred.

'Did you have a good day?' she whispered.

He grunted,

'OK, I s'pose,' he replied, slurring his speech.

He had decided not to go in the following day, he would sleep in. But he was awoken by the sounds of laughter coming from the kitchen. He listened and thought he heard several voices. Who was there so early? Unable to return to sleep, he decided to investigate.

The voices grew louder as he reached the kitchen. He recognized Mary's high pitched voice but who were the others. He flung open the door and stood dumbfounded. There were two young women sitting at the table. They turned as he entered. Before he could say anything Mary said,

'Joanna say 'hello' to your father.'

'Hi dad, how are you?' He immediately recognised the voice but not the young woman, could it really be his daughter? She had changed so much; she was so grown up. They had not seen each other for over five years. He felt a pang of regret, where have the years gone?

Joanna smiled and went over and hugged him. He felt awkward and only returned a brief smile. It was all too much. He wanted to rush from the room, he needed to get away.

'Hello Dr Robert,' another young woman, a total stranger, came forward to hug him. 'I'm Joanna's friend, Annabelle.'

He flinched as they touched. She was like an alien with her bright yellow hair and rings so many rings!

'Please to meet you,' he stammered, rushing from the room.

There was an awkward silence in the kitchen. No one spoke for a few minutes, each trying to avoid the eyes of the other. Then Mary broke the silence.

'Your Dad's very upset, the hospital has asked him to take early retirement.'

Joanna was the first to reply.

'Why Mum, what happened?'

'It's a bit embarrassing, I don't want to talk about it right now.'

Chapter Twenty-Two

Jane thumbed through the information pack sent to her by the Medical Defence Union. She had joined it soon after she qualified but knew little about what it did. Now that she was facing a Negligence Claim, she decided should read up about it.

It was a heavy envelope that clattered through her letterbox one morning. She put it on her desk to be opened and read later

Passing over the advertising material, she came to the history of the Organisation and why it was established. She was totally absorbed by what she read.

The MDU was established in England in 1885 following an outrage in the Medical Community. A GP Dr Bradley was convicted of assaulting a woman in his surgery and imprisoned for eight months before he was released with a full pardon.

Doctors realised that the practice of Medicine was an imprecise art and doctors were vulnerable. They needed protection from avaricious patients and their lawyers. Over the years, the MDU had come to be the essential insurance for all practicing doctors

A few days later, Jane presented herself at their Offices.. It was a prestigious building clad in white Portland stone with the entrance situated between two marble Corinthian columns. The three steps up to the front door were worn smooth from the generations of feet walking on them.

Jane entered the darkened foyer and waited for her eyes to accommodate to the gloomy interior.

A cultured voice from the darkness called to her,

‘Good morning, Madam, may I help you?’

‘Yes-s please,’ she stammered. ‘I have an appointment to see a Mr. Thomas.’

‘Mr Thomas? You will find him on the second floor, there is a lift to your right.’

Jane easily found his office which was entered through a glass fronted door, on which the words *Mr. R Thomas, Legal Advisor MDU* were written.

The waiting room was empty. Slightly confused, she sat down and idly picked up a magazine, ‘The Yachting World.’

‘Please come in,’ a voice boomed from an office off the waiting room. She entered and found herself facing a youngish man in a dark grey suit and a pale blue tie.

‘Good morning Doctor, please sit down.’

Jane studied his face, it seemed familiar.

‘Have we met?’ she asked.

‘I don’t think so. Now Jane, may I call you Jane?’

‘Yes of course.’

‘I have studied the papers and the medical expert’s opinion. The latter says that the patient has been left with a less than perfect result and she should be compensated. The expert is of the opinion that we should accept liability and settle.’

Jane couldn’t believe what he was saying.

‘What do you mean, accept liability?’

‘I mean that we should accept the opinion of the expert and settle the case out of court.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Jane said, raising her voice. ‘That’s tantamount to saying that I was negligent.’

‘No-Jane--it-is-not,’ said Mr. Thomas, slowly and deliberately. ‘We are accepting that

she has a continuing disability but not accepting that it was medical negligence. It's very different.'

'It may seem different to you,' argued Jane.' but to me it's the same. By accepting liability, I am saying I caused her disability. I was a negligent surgeon.'

She paused to catch her breath.

'I wasn't. I took great care as I always do. How was I to know that the blood supply to that breast was abnormal? It occurs in less than 100 cases, less than 1%.'

Mr. Thomas looked up from his notes.

'Please let me try and explain.' he said, putting down the papers and leaning forwards. 'I understand that you were not to know about her abnormal anatomy but she had the right to expect an acceptable result. So she should be compensated.'

Jane was adamant.

'No I cannot accept that decision.'

'It's your choice. All I'm saying is that the MDU will not fund a court case. If you want to continue you will have to go it alone.'

Jane left the MDU offices with that phrase ringing in her ears. 'You will have to go it alone.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

Penny could see that the meeting hadn't gone well from the look on Jane's face. She greeted her with a hug but said nothing.

Jane frowned.

'I'm tired; I think I'll have a lie down. Let's go out to eat later, I need to change.'

Jane went upstairs to the bedroom and laid down on the bed. She tried to sleep but couldn't get the recent conversation out of her head. She was frustrated and reluctant to accept the decision.

'It's not fair. I did nothing wrong. How can I admit liability when I did my best?' She shouted to the wall.

When Penny took her up a cup of tea, she heard her sobbing. She paused at the bedroom door uncertain whether to enter. She waited and then heard the sobbing cease and went in.

'A cup of tea,' she announced. Jane's face was blotchy and her eyes reddened from crying. Penny went over and hugged her.

'I don't know what happened Jane but I love you and I know it will all come right.'

Later over a glass of Merlot, Jane told Penny what happened.

'He was very thorough and went through the case, the operation and the problem of the poor blood supply in detail. I tried to explain that there was an abnormal mammary artery that I could not have anticipated but he rejected that and said, you take patients as you find them. It's not their fault either.'

'It sounds fair Jane.'

'I know it now but something inside me says that I did my best but that it wasn't enough. Am I always going to be looking over my shoulder wondering if someone is going to sue me?'

Penny said nothing but thought, yes I am afraid you are. That is the nature of the job you have chosen to do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

The music was too loud and the dancing too frenzied but Jane and Penny loved it. The Acropolis was a place where all could be at ease with girls dancing with girls and boys with boys, where gender was not an issue and no one judged anyone.

It was humming that night when the girls entered. The doorman nodded to them as they showed their passes, paid the nominal entrance fee and joined the crowd. Saturday night was the busiest, the DJ was well known in the town.

Immediately Jane grabbed Penny and together they moved to the music. Gasping for air, Jane mouthed at Penny,

‘I’m puffed, let’s get a drink ’ They made their way to the small bar at the back of the room where the music was muted and ordered drinks.

‘Do you want to eat here?’ asked Penny.

‘No let’s try that new bistro next door; I hear the food is very good.’

It was after ten when Jane and Penny left the club arm in arm and walked the short distance to the restaurant. There were still a lot of people eating when they entered. Jane spied a table in the corner and they sat down. Immediately a tall dark-haired Italian-looking waiter approached.

‘What do you drink ladies?’ he asked with a knowing smile.

‘Two Pinot Grigio,’ replied Jane. The drinks arrived and they drank in silence each savouring the presence of the other. They were giggling at a joke when a passerby lent over and said,

‘Let’s make a threesome ladies, are you up for it?’

Neither replied.

‘I s’pose you prefer each other, dykes?’ He added with a smirk. Penny saw red. She suddenly stood up and threw her glass of wine over him. The liquid spilled over his head and down his white shirt.

‘You bitch,’ he shouted, blinking the liquid away. In a flash the waiter arrived and he was bundled outside.

‘Let’s go,’ said Penny, picking up her bag. ‘I don’t want to stay here any longer.’ But before she could leave the owner a small dark man with a mustache appeared.

‘Please ladies, I am so sorry. Please accept my apology. Stay, your meal is on the house.’ Penny looked at Jane,

‘Shall we?’

‘OK but let’s sit somewhere else away from the crowd.’

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dr Robert was embarrassed. He hadn't expected to meet Joanna's friend in the kitchen that morning, a young woman who looked so strange. As soon as he could, he mumbled something and left. Upstairs he sat on the bed trying to understand what was happening.

Where had she come from so early in the morning? Did she stay overnight, where? Slowly a dread began to develop in his mind, one that he wanted to push away. They only had two bedrooms. Mary will explain it when we are alone, he decided.

Mary always knew when Robert had something on his mind. He went quiet and busied himself around the house. His final bolt hole was the garden shed. Having finished her chores, she decided to have it out with him. After calling him several times with no reply she put on her garden boots and made her way to the hut at the end of the garden. He was seated on a stool digging out some weeds around the tomato plants.

'There you are. I've been calling you for ages. Why didn't you answer?'

Robert stared at her.

'Why should I? You would only want me to do some stupid thing.'

'Well you're wrong. I want to talk to you.'

'What about?'

'Why were you so rude this morning at breakfast?'

'Rude? I don't understand, I wasn't rude.'

'Yes you were. You barged in, muttered something then left. If that isn't rude I don't know what is?'

'Well I was surprised. I didn't expect anyone apart from you to be there. I heard voices, several voices all female. Then when I went in and saw Joanna's friend Annabelle. What on earth was she wearing and all those rings? It was disgusting. I decided that it was no place for me and I left.'

'I know and you were very rude to do so.'

'Listen Mary, this is my house and I can do what I damn well like, including not liking my daughter's friends.'

'Well you may as well get used to her because Joanna and Annabelle are an item.'

'An item, what on earth does that mean?'

'It means they love each other.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

'What the hell am I doing?' Jane shouted at herself but no words came out. Frantically she reached for her mobile.

Penny was asleep when her phone rang. It rang several times before it woke her.

'Penny,' a weak voice said. 'Help me I....'

Penny instantly knew.

'Jane, where are you?' Silence. 'Jane, where are you?'

Frantic Penny repeated the question.

'Jane, where are you?'

There was no reply. Penny suddenly panicked, a clammering fear in her chest overtook her. She held on and slowly calmed and began to think rationally. Where is she? Slowly she ticked off the choices; she didn't come home last night; she must have stayed in the hospital for an emergency; she must be in the hospital but where?

The telephonist answered immediately.

'May I speak to Dr Jane, the Plastic surgeon urgently.' The line went dead. Another voice,

'This is Sister Blake.'

'May I speak to Dr Jane. This is Penny, we have met.'

'Oh yes, hello Penny, hold on. She may be in the doctor's room, I'll go and see.'

Sister Blake walked the short distance to the Doctor's room and knocked on the door.

There was no reply. She knocked again. She must be sleeping she thought

She returned to the phone.

Meanwhile Jane was counting the seconds, it seemed like hours before a voice,

'I think she's sleeping.'

'No please, she phoned me. I need to speak to her.'

Sister tried the door again and forced the handle, the door was locked. That's strange, she thought, it's never locked when a doctor sleeps over..

Suddenly she realised.

'Oh my God, Doctor Jane?'

Calming herself, she grabbed the phone and called the crash team.

'We have an emergency on Ward 6.'

Within minutes they arrived, a doctor, a nurse and two orderlies.

'I think there is someone inside but the door is locked.' Two of the orderlies stepped forwards and looked at Sister who nodded. Together they rammed the door. It suddenly splintered and gave way.

In the gloom, Sister could see a form lying on the bed. It was Dr Jane, her eyes closed, her breathing shallow with slow gasps; the remains of the tablets, white powder still on her lips.

'Quick.' shouted Sister Blake.

The team rushed forwards, attached an Oxygen face mask, inserted a drip and began ventilating her.

'Let's get her to ICU now.'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The ICU was peaceful when Sebastian arrived. He stood uncertain, uneasy, as if he was in the wrong place. This couldn't be real; he wanted to run away. It was the first time he had been in such a unit, it felt so strange as if he had entered another world.

He saw the rows of patients seemingly asleep, the only sounds, their breathing and the clicking of the pumps.

A nurse approached.

'You have come to see Dr Jane?'

'Yes my mother.' Sebastian blurted out.

'She's in bed six, follow me.'

Panic struck him. He was almost out of control. What would he find? Is she OK? He gripped his fists tightly controlling his fears.

They stopped at Dr. Jane's bedside. At first he didn't recognise her, her face was so pale, her eyes were closed, her breathing shallow and uneven.

'Is she alright?' Sebastian asked, forcing the words out.

'Yes, her condition is stable,' the nurse said.

'Stable?' What does that mean he wanted to ask?

'May I, I,' he stammered. 'Sit with her?'

'Yes for five minutes only as we need to attend to her.'

He sat watching her face, hearing her shallow breathing and the occasional moan. He reached out and held her hand, cool and limp.

'Mum,' he whispered. 'It's me, Sebastian.' She heard his voice as if from far away. Her eyes flickered. The voice seemed so familiar, a rich Irish brogue, soft yet clear, comforting and reassuring.

She closed her eyes and slowly her gasps became longer apart until they stopped.

'Nurse,' shouted Sebastian. Please come. I think my mum's...' his voice failed. He felt a hand on his shoulder.

'I'm so sorry,' she said.