

Jane

Chapter One

Jane counted the Paracetamol tablets and placed them in little piles on her bedside table, one, two, three, four ... twelve, four piles of three. She stared at them. Each was a perfectly formed little white disc. She reached for the bottle of whisky and read the name Johnnie Walker, Old Scotch Whisky. Old? As old as me or older? It didn't matter anymore. She dribbled it into the glass and watched the bubbles drift to the surface. Half a glass and she stopped. She couldn't remember how much she would need. She brought it to her lips and sipped a little, almost gagging. She reached over and took two more tablets. She tasted their dry powdery texture and rolled them around in her mouth. She lifted the glass and gulped down more liquid, stinging her tongue as she swallowed. She took another two tablets and another two. She was beginning to feel sick and dizzy, the room was starting to sway. She hung on trying to stay as still as possible as her slightest movement brought on another seesawing of the room. Slowly it settled. She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes, she was ready. She felt the tension in her face ease. She was at peace 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.

'Mum come and look what I've found?' Jane yelled from the back of the garden, her footprints tracing a line 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 her mother. She had just got home from the pharmacy where she worked and was still wearing her working clothes.

'By the apple tree, I can see you.' She waved.

'Jane come inside immediately. You'll catch your death of cold.'

'Please Mum,' she pleaded.

'All right I'll get your coat, it's freezing.'

'Mum, look it's so small.'

As her mother came closer she could see a small spiky animal in Jane's hands.

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

'Can I keep it?' pleaded Jane.

'I don't know. Bring it inside and we'll ask your Dad when he comes home, he'll know what to do.'

Jane cupped the small creature in her hands and followed her mother into the kitchen. She felt a warm feeling, a need to protect this tiny, strange looking animal. They found a small cardboard box, lined it with soft material and lowered the porcupine into it. It settled down and soon fell asleep. Little did she know then, that, this chance meeting with a vulnerable animal, would shape the rest of her life.

Looking back, Jane wondered if that was the first time she realised that she had a calling to help the frail and infirm.

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

'Come look what I've found.'

He lowered her to the ground.

'Let me show you,' she said, dragging him by the hand. 'It's in the kitchen.'

'Look Dad.' She eased open the lid of the box. In the shadow he could see a small spiky body. It was hardly moving. Cupping the small body in his hand, he lifted it out of the box and looked at it. It was breathing with shallow gasps.

'Is, is all right?' whispered Jane, her chest tightening. 'Please dad will it be OK?'

'Darling, I don't know. Give it some warm milk and let it sleep.'

Jane was the first out of class each day eager to get home to her patient. She named the porcupine Cupy. It was soon almost full grown.

Chapter Two

It was the last day of term.

'Good morning pupils, have you decided what you want to study in the 6th form?' asked Mr. Aherne the form teacher, wiping his unruly ruddy hair from his face. Tall, with an asthenic demeanor, he effortlessly instilled fear in his pupils.

When it was her turn, Jane mumbled,

'I want to study Biology.'

'Speak up girl, Biology? Why Biology?' he roared, his hair almost concealing his face. Summoning up her courage and fighting the words stumbling from her mouth she said,

'Because I want to understand what life is.'

Cupy immediately came to her mind; She remembered how she had to let her go. Her Dad had come home early and found her reading in her room.

'Jane dear, I think now that the weather has improved, we must return Cupy to the garden; to her family.' Jane knew he was right but didn't want to admit it. Cupy and she had become such good friends. Every day she opened the top of the box and Cupy looked up moving her mouth. It was as if she was speaking, saying good morning. Later that afternoon they went into the garden and chose a spot near the fence. Jane cried a little and then said goodbye as Cupy gave her one last look before disappearing into the undergrowth.

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

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

Biology enthralled Jane. There were so many facets to it, from studying animals to plants and trees; to the sea and the shoreline. 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.'

'Darling I guessed that; I knew the first time I saw you with Cupy.'

Many years had passed and Jane only vaguely remembered 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, comforting and reassuring, firm yet loving. 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 softer. She also remembered his hands, big and soft 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. She would sit staring at it as if in that moment he was present, and then the 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 coroner called it suicide but Jane knew that wasn't true. Dad would never have done that he loved life too much. She couldn't accept that verdict.

Just eleven when it happened, she still recalled the day she was told. She had got off the bus after school. Her mother was waiting on the front step; she never did that. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying.

Jane remembered how confused her mother was, stuttering and shaking as she told her.

'It can't be true; I want to see Dad, I want to see Dad,' she repeated her voice rising.

'He is no longer here, they have taken him to the hospital.'

'I want to see him please Mum, I need to see him.' In that moment, Jane was no longer a child.

The hospital mortuary was in the basement at the local hospital, a short drive away. The echo of their footsteps hammered into their heads as Jane and her mother walked along the windowless corridor following the signs to the Mortuary. Just outside the swing doors was a sign on the wall, *No children allowed*.

'Take no notice,' whispered her mother as they swung open the doors and entered. The cold hit them and then the smell of disinfectant.

'Sorry Ma-am no children allowed,' said the Attendant as they entered the room.

'Please, she hasn't seen her father...' Pleading, 'she was at school when it happened. Please she needs to see him.'

'OK, but don't tell anyone, I'll 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.'

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

'Are you sure about this Jane?' said Mum before reaching for the sheet.

'Yes,' Jane nodded and watched as her father's face was uncovered. She was prepared to be shocked as 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 whispered.

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

'Can I kiss him.'

Her mother hesitated.

'Please just to say goodbye.'

'May she?' she asked turning to the attendant.

'Yes, but be quick.'

'Goodbye Daddy.' Jane leaned forward and kissed 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 not possible 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?' Asked Elaine fearing that she might be on her own.

'Yes I am going to study here in Belfast, the Medical School is one of the best in the country.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, Mum, I'm 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.'

‘Mum, please, I love you and want to be here at home with you. I don’t want to leave you.’

The first time Jane stepped inside the hall of the Queen’s University Medical School she knew she was in the right place. She had arrived early on the first day and stood looking up at the portraits that dominated the large entrance hall. Over-life sized, 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.

A portrait of Elizabeth Gould Bell, the first woman to qualify, fascinated her. She memorized it, taking in all the details. The year was 1893, the late Victorian period. Bell was seated in a guided armchair, her pale white skin contrasting with her thick dark brown hair combed into an up style. She was wearing a full length pleated maroon dress with a low ruffled white neckline and elbow length ruffled sleeves. A small pile of books was piled on a side table to her left. Jane stared at the image and silently thanked her for breaking the ceiling for all future aspiring female doctors.

Making her way to the Introductory class, Jane was aware that so much had changed since those early days. Women were now often outnumbering 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 room where the 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 shocked her. It was quite different; it was of an old person with dried shrunken skin.

Chapter Four

Jane had finished her shift on the Surgical ward and glancing at her watch, approached the nurse’s desk,

‘I’m off now see you in the morning.’

‘Aren’t you coming to the dance this evening?’ Asked Mary one of the junior nurses.

‘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 a 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 got Jane out of difficulty. There was a 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 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 held in a large lounge in the doctor’s residence. It was usually used for meetings but by moving the chairs was easily converted into a dance area. By the time Jane arrived the party was in full swing. Jane 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 to Christine.

'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 also from Belfast, that's my home town.'

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 opened it.

'Hello, who's that?'

'It's me Donoghue,' a voice she didn't immediately recognise. 'We met at Christine's farewell party, do you remember?' Jane had remembered. She had thought about him and wondered if they would ever meet again.

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

'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 the 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. Can I call you back?'

'OK I'll wait for your call.'

When she arrived home, 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?'

'Oh, 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 ages.'

It was quite overcast when Donoghue's Triumph Herald arrived outside Jane's house. He had put the Coupé's soft top down despite the weather. She had been ready for about ten minutes and had waited watching for his arrival through the front room windows.

Earlier she had asked,

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

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

Suddenly his car arrived. She wasn't certain 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? He decided on the latter.

'Hi, are you ready?' He said admiring her outfit and hat. 'You look nice,' he said.

'So do you.' They both laughed.

'Let's go before the rain comes, it's forecast later.' He helped her into the car. 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 do.'

They set off from the Car Park and soon reached the Japanese Garden.

'Wow,' exclaimed Jane, 'everything is so neat, not a stone out of place.'

They then reached some stone steps.

'Be careful, they're a bit steep and still wet from the morning dew,' Donoghue said taking her hand. It was firm 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 have a break.'

Over coffee, Donoghue began to talk about himself.

'Medicine has always been in my family. My father was a GP and his father before him. 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?' Asked Jane feeling more confident.

'Sometimes; 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 buzz.'

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

'I've had a wonderful day, Donoghue,' she said. 'Thank you so much.'

'Me too. I have really enjoyed your company. Shall we do it again?'

Jane's face lit up,

'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 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 nearby 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 they 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 lay back.

'What about your bra?' he stammered, leaning forwards to help her to unclip it. She was 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 still cause her to blush when she thought about. She reached out and touched him. 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.' she responded.

Chapter Five

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

'Yes Mum. I just feel a bit sick; I think it must be something I ate.'

Elaine returned to the kitchen and was continuing to make breakfast when Jane 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 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 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 to Elaine's story and then asked,

'Does she have a boyfriend?'

'Boyfriend? Yes, she has a boyfriend, a nice young man, a junior surgeon at the hospital. They have been seeing each other for some time. You, you don't think she could be...?'

'Have you asked her if she and he have...?'

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

'Well maybe this is the time to start.'

Elaine had left it to the school and Jane's natural love of biology. Elaine realized that even when Jane's periods started she had glossed over the details. She was facing something that she dreaded to discuss. She had struggled to find a way to open the subject and kept running away. I'll tell her to see the doctor, he will know how to talk about it. But in the end she didn't.

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. I can't believe it; my whole life will be ruined.'

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

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

'Then it's going to be all right. 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 above 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 just a tonic, lemon and ice, no Gin.'

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

He arrived back in a few minutes.

'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? She wondered. I've only just found out myself.

'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's not listening, he doesn't care. All he's concerned about is himself, she realised. How could she tell him now?

Chapter Six

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

'What am I going to do?' 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. But she wasn't ready. It had all happened too soon, by mistake. If only she could wind back the clock.

Donoghue couldn't understand why Jane ignored his calls. Exasperated he would drive to her home and wait outside, hoping she would appear. Jane saw him waiting. She wanted to rush out and embrace him but she held back. He was no good to her unless he wanted their child.

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

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

Elaine couldn't watch her daughter suffering any more, she had to do something.

Without telling Jane she arranged to meet Donoghue 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 looking 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 postpone the last patient.

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

'You've really don't know; you have no idea? She tried to tell you the last time you met but you were so taken up with your promotion, you didn't hear her.'

'Tried to tell me what? When? I remember we were at the Pub when I told her about my promotion.'

'Yes, but she was also 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 with your child.'

'Pregnant! I had no idea.' Then the image of a screaming baby flashed into his mind. No I can't deal with 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. She saw him from a distance, recognizing 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 face was pale and devoid of make up, her eyes were swollen from 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.'

'I don't understand.' He whimpered.

'OK, let me spell it out to you. Do you want to be a father? It's as simple as that, do you?' Jane said, her voice almost cracking.

'I, I don't know, it's a big responsibility, I'm still training. Could you? Could you have an abortion, get rid of it?'

She ignored his suggestion.

'So the answer is no, is that what you're saying?'

'Look I need time.'

'I 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. 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.'

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

'Hi stranger, how are you? It seems 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 but no balls if you know what I mean.'

'To many balls as far as I'm concerned,' she murmured.

'Will you have an abortion?'

'It's what he wanted but I don't think I could.'

'What do you mean?'

'I just don't know, that's all. It's a life, how could I? I am so confused.'

'Well at least make sure it's not a phantom – you know? You need to get a diagnostic scan. I'll arrange it for you.'

A few days later the appointment arrived. Jane had tried to forget about it, even hoping it would go away but on the day her nerves were jangling. Her hands were sweating and shaking as she started her car.

'Let me come with you?' suggested her mother.

'No mum, let me do this.'

It was easier than she thought, just some gel on her tummy and a probe. She 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 are shocked at what they see. Look, you can see the outline of your baby's body, it's moving.'

'Yes,' Jane could see, the moving shadow, the outline of a small body. 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.

'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. Shall we arrange the termination?'

Chapter Seven

Jane was calm when she arrived home. All the uncertainty 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.

'The scan was negative? You must be very relieved.'

'No mum I'm pregnant. I saw my baby.'

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. 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 arm.

Elaine was secretly thrilled at her daughter's decision. When she heard that Jane was pregnant, she had prayed that Jane would at some time call upon her to help with her grandchild's upbringing and nothing would give her greater pleasure. She would bide her time. Since the death of her husband, her life had spiraled into emptiness but now, as a smile crossed her face, the possibility of caring for the little one gave her a new optimism, a new purpose.

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

You have been selected to attend for an interview for a registrar post in Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

'Mum,' she shouted from the back door.

'I've been shortlisted for Edinburgh.'

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

'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 to be held in the Boardroom of the hospital. Jane arrived early and sat in the outer office with four other hopefuls. They nodded to her but said nothing. Finally, it was her turn to be interviewed. She entered a large high-ceilinged room with full-sized paintings of past Surgeons and Physicians hanging on the walls. They seemed to be looking down making sure everything was done according to custom. She was directed to a seat facing the assessors. She had fielded a number of questions and all was going well. She was feeling relieved and was about to leave thinking the interview was over, when the chairman leaned forwards and asked,

‘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.

‘Why are you asking me that question?’

‘It so happens that we know that you have a child and are concerned that if selected for the job, you would you be able to fully commit yourself to the care of your patients?’

‘Yes, I have a 6 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.’

‘Well Gentleman and Lady, referring to Miss Burrows, the only female specialist on the panel, what do you think?’

Professor Blake the 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.’

There was a chorus of ‘yes you’re right.’

Suddenly Miss Burrows coughed and waited. The room became quiet.

‘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 suddenly 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? I don’t think so. Let’s call her in and give her the good news.’

‘Dr Frobisher please come in.’

It was an ecstatic Jane who 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.’

Later that day Jane approached her mother.

‘Mum you know what today’s decision means. I will be away for long periods so Sebastian will be your responsibility.’

‘Darling, you know I will be only too happy to look after him in your absence. I know you will try and get home as frequently as possible so that he never forgets that you are his mother.’

Chapter Eight

Jane’s mobile rang, it was Sebastian.

‘Hello Mum, how are you?’

‘I’m fine, how are you? Are you enjoying your new school?’

'It's OK. The sport is good. I'm now in the junior rugby team. We have a match on Saturday, can you come? I would love to show you off to my friends, my mum the surgeon.'

Jane paused, remembering she was on duty.

'Please come?' He pleaded.

'I'll do my best. I'm on duty but might be able to get someone to cover me for a few hours.'

It was at half time when Sebastian looked up and saw Jane waving madly from the sideline. He rushed over to her and they hugged.

'Mum, I am so happy you could come. Did you see my try?' he gushed.

'Yes,' she lied having only just arrived.

'It was wonderful. I got the ball in their 25 metre line and managed to weave my way through to reach their touch line. It was my first ever try.'

Jane listened amazed how much he had grown in the last few months. He now reached to her shoulders. He had Sebastian's light brown hair and grey-green eyes. For a moment she felt a pang of regret. If only he could be here to see his son. He would have been so proud.

'Shall we go for tea after the match?' she asked.

'Yes let's, that would be super I'll be starving.'

Jane watched as he ran back to the field and joined his team-mates. She saw him talking to them and pointing in her direction. She waved.

It was the first time she had seen a rugby match and was horrified by the apparent brutality. The tackling and the scrums seem to be just an excuse to batter the other side. She was amazed when the final whistle went that no one seemed to be hurt.

Tea was served on the lawn overlooking the library. Tables and sun-shades were laid out as the sky was clear and the sun was bright.

'What would you like Mum?' Sebastian announced.

'Do you think they will have scones with cream and jam?'

'Yes I think so. I'll have the same if they do.'

Jane watched as Sebastian later emerged from the teashop carrying a tray loaded with their tea. He carefully manoeuvred around a nearby table and set it down in front of her. She helped him lay out the plates and cups.

'This is delightful,' she said breathing in the fresh air. 'A wonderful break from the hospital.'

Sebastian watched her as she ate, her hands were so small and delicate. How could she be a surgeon? He wondered. He imagined one would need them to be big and strong.

Jane suddenly remembered and looked at her watch.

Darling I'm sorry, I have to go. It's been a wonderful day.'

'I'll walk you to the car park.'

On the way they met Jonathan one of Sebastian friends.

'Jonathan, this is my mother,' he said proudly.

'Hello Dr Frobisher, I am pleased to meet you. Is it true you are a surgeon?' Jane nodded.

'Wow,' he said blushing.

Chapter Nine

Jane 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. 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 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.

At fortyish she was tall and slim with short 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 front of the mirror. Not bad she thought although noticing the beginning of a bulge around her midline. She pulled it in.

It was just a routine day, surgery in the morning and a clinic in the afternoon.

She had met Penny at Uni and they instantly connected. Neither realised at the time that it would be more than a passing friendship. It just seemed natural to meet every day for coffee and then lunch until finally they would spend all their spare time together. They hugged when they met and began to hold hands when no one was looking and gave each other a peck on the lips when parting. But their love came as a surprise to both of them.

It was Easter and Jane was planning to spend it with her mother in the Lake District but at the last moment a colleague fell ill 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 and Sebastian. 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?'

Later that day that they were sitting together on the couch in front of a roaring fire. Neither had spoken about where they would sleep but Jane knew there was only 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'.

That night Jane woke. The room seemed strange, the walls were in the wrong place and it was too quiet. Then she remembered where she was 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. She began to stroke across 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 could feel Jane's hand exploring her body, her arms her 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.

Chapter Ten

Wearing her working suit of dark blue with a white shirt and silk scarf, Jane gulped down some orange juice and black coffee before leaving her one room apartment. Her car started immediately and she eased it out of the small parking area. Snow had fallen overnight creating a crackling noise under its wheels as the car slowly moved onto 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 her car and nodded to the attendant as she carried her case up the short flight of stairs into the large foyer. From there she took the lift to the main corridor. It was normally buzzing with patients and staff making their way to the wards and clinics. But at this time, the corridor 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-eight, 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.

As she was nearing forty, they talked about beginning a family. Roinna was keen but was concerned about her heavy periods and was frightened that they may make her becoming pregnant difficult. She decided to see her doctor. A friend at the hairdresser suggested Dr Crowder- 'he's getting on but is very kind and understanding.'

Doctor Crowder was nearing retirement after a long career as a GP. Tending to fat he still smoked and drank despite the warnings. He was the first doctor in his family and originally wanted to be a Specialist but failed the higher exams.

The surgery was almost empty when Roinna arrived, she had had difficulty parking and had almost given up when a space became vacant. She pulled into and gave a sigh of relief. She was still breathless when she was called in to see the doctor. He turned towards her from his computer screen.

'Hello Roinna, what's the problem.'

Roinna blurted out

'I want to have a baby but I am worried that I may be too old,'

'Are you still seeing your menses?'

'My what?'

'Oh um, your periods?'

'Yes doctor, but they are very heavy and last for several days.'

'Let me examine you?'

Roinna lay on the couch as Doctor Crowder prodded her tummy. Over the lower part her could feel a diffuse lumpiness.

'Does this hurt?' He asked.

'No, just a little sore.' she replied.

'Um, I think we need to get a specialist opinion. I would recommend Miss Frobisher; she's a Gynaecologist at the local hospital.

'What is the problem doctor, is it serious?'

'No nothing to worry about. I just wanted to make sure that you will be OK.'

A few weeks later Roinna attended the Gynae' clinic and saw Dr. Jane.

'Hello Roinna, your doctor has written that you want to have a baby but are concerned about your heavy periods.'

'Yes, I have met a lovely man and we want to get married and have children.'

'I see,' said Jane thinking to herself. She's left it a bit late but....

After taking her history Roinna was asked to go into a cubicle and undress. Following the examination. She was called back to see the doctor.

'Roinna, I am pleased to tell you that there is nothing seriously wrong but you do have a problem which could prevent you from becoming pregnant. My examination has revealed that you have several fibroids in your womb.'

'Doctor, what are they?'

'They are harmless growths in the wall of your womb. They are very common and in themselves not serious. I will arrange to confirm this by a scan but would advise you to have them removed as they can prevent pregnancy or complicate delivery.'

Chapter Eleven

The operation should be straightforward Jane thought 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 abdomen bared. 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.'

It was in the process of removing a fibroma that sudden bleeding occurred from deep in the abdomen.

'Swab,' please said Jane frantically trying to staunch the flow. 'And another please.' Slowly she controlled the bleeding. Now it was necessary to identify and tie off the blood vessels. Slowly she removed the swabs one by one until she could see the torn artery Carefully she tied a ligature around it. The bleeding stopped.

'Phew that's better.' she said stretching to ease her aching back.

She was preparing to close the wound when her assistant alerted her.

'Jane, look at the colour of the uterus.'

Instead of having a bright reddish brown colour, it had a distinct bluish tinge which was darkening as she watched. Jane felt her heart miss a beat. Was it possible that the artery she had tied off was the only source of blood to the womb? Her mind ticked over. Sometime in the past she had read about an anomalous blood supply but had never met it that is until now. Very rarely the uterus had only one main artery and today she had inadvertently tied it off. Once more in control her mind ticked over the choices. She knew she had to act fast. Finally, she decided to call her senior colleague. She rang John Lodge.

'John I need you to come to the theatre. Something serious has happened.'

John Lodge was the senior Obs and Gynae surgeon, a gentle softly spoken man now in his sixties. He had been appointed to the unit in his thirties and built up its reputation as a first class surgical Unit. He had been her referee and helped her get the job. They had hit it off

from the beginning. Now he was near retirement. He arrived in a few minutes and looked into the wound,

‘Jane what happened?’

‘I think her uterus is dying. I had just removed some fibroids and met some heavy bleeding. I stopped the bleeding by packing and then tied off the damaged artery assuming the anatomy was normal and the other arteries would take over- instead-you can see what's happening.’

John peered into the wound and in an instant summed up the situation.

‘I'm afraid you have ligated the one main artery to the uterus. It's a rare but well recognized anomaly. I don't think you can redress the problem; you will have to remove her uterus.’

Jane said nothing. She knew that he was correct. Roinna desperately wanted a baby but there was no going back. Once the uterus was removed, the bleeding had stopped and her condition stabilized.

Over coffee, Sister saw that Jane was looking pensive.

‘What's the matter Jane, are you OK?’

‘Not really, I have just stopped a woman from ever having a family. As she spoke she thought about Sebastian. She couldn't imagine her life without him.’

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

‘Good morning Roinna, how are 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 24 hours. The nurse had removed the outer dressing and left the gauze for Jane to remove. Holding a pair of forceps, she gently eased it off.

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

Now she knew what she had to do but was struggling to find the right words.

‘Roinna I have some bad news.’

‘Was it cancer?’ Roinna asked her face clouding in pain.

‘No, it was healthy but, I'm afraid to say something went wrong. I had removed the lumps you know, the fibroids when there was heavy bleeding. I found the cause and stopped it but unknown to me I had tied off the main blood supply to your womb and it slowly died. I had no choice but to remove it.’

‘You did what?’

‘I'm so sorry, it's not what I wanted to do but it was necessary as you were bleeding heavily and could have died.’

‘You had to remove my healthy womb? I can't believe what you are saying. How could you?’

Back in her office Jane pulled out her Gray's Anatomy and turned to the page showing the blood supply to the uterus. She read that the main blood supply was via two uterine arteries but that sometimes there was only one. Going over the operation in her head, she realised that in staunching the bleeding she must have tied off the one main artery thereby cutting off the only blood supply.

It was after seven when she let herself into the house. There was a welcoming smell of cooking coming from the kitchen. Mary 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 terribly bad mistake.’

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

They sat in silence, eating.

'That was delicious,' said Jane. It gets better every time you make it.'

She paused and then said,

'I need to tell you what happened.'

Mary listened intently as Jane described to her what happened.'

'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 her 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 body, one that she had been hiding 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 a 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 free 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.'

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. 'You look tired?'

'I'm really pissed off. I had another long session with 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?'

'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 brought up the subject. She felt worthless.

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

'I want to report him.'
'Did you have a witness?'
'No, but...'
'Then it's 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, at least that's what she wanted to believe. But his sarcastic tone had cut deep and she couldn't let it pass. The following day 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 Hilda Soper entered. They had met before. She had aged. Still tall and heavily built, there was now a hint of grey in her otherwise short brown hair.

'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.

'I think we have met. I'm a Gynaecologist 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 into the office. She was rehearsing what she would say so as not to appear trivial and childish.

'Please sit down. Now then 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.' She paused,

'I feel so embarrassed talking about it.'

'Just take it slowly, 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 what it was like. No one had bothered about remarks like that in the past. They just accepted them and carried on but now things were different and she knew she had to do something about it.

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 personnel problems. He remembered when he was first told about it.

'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 thought to herself. Every time something was introduced to make life easier for the staff, he complained. He thinks he is still in the army and the hospital staff, 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,' Hilda said. 'Good morning doctor. 'Thank you for sparing time to see me.'

'Good morning, can we get this over, I'm very busy. What's it all about anyway?'

'I'm afraid we've received a complaint, 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'

'She? 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 living in different times. She waited.

'What can I do? he whined.

'You can start by apologising to her.'

Chapter Thirteen

Betty immediately knew something was wrong. Robert had grunted something, went into his study and slammed the door. He normally greeted 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 chuntering to himself. She waited, sooner or later he would tell her what was the matter.

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

'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 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.

'It's a bloody disgrace,' he suddenly burst out. 'A bloody female surgeon complaining about me, about what I said to her. It's ridiculous and I'm supposed to apologize to her, apologize,' 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. It was bound to happen sooner or later. He had never accepted the idea of female surgeons.

'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, he stood up and announced,

'I'm going to the pub.'

'Don't you want dessert; I've made an apple pie your favourite?'

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 had 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 two customers standing at the bar when he entered, He knew them both and greeted them.

Peter was a local 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 and as soon as their conversation paused he stepped in.

'What do you think about this?' he began, raising his voice. They both turned and looked at him. His face was plethoric and he was sweating. He moped his forehead.

'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 Personnel. What did I do wrong? I wanted to be friendly. She took it the wrong way. I don't know what the world is 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 century. After a rather embarrassing silence, David spoke.

'You know Robert, you surprise 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 was surprised by the remark. He expected both men to agree with him.

'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 Fourteen

Jane was still smarting from the incident in the Manager's Office when she received a message to attend HR. They had decided to 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 are 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 stick together, they will try to make light of it, admitting the offence but asking you to overlook it.'

Jane was disappointed, sat staring into her teacup. 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. Brandishing the letter, he slammed it 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.'

'Darling don't upset yourself. It's probably just a routine procedure. I am sure you will be cleared after all you are the hospital manager.'

'Yes you're right. They won't dare pillory me, it's my word against a woman.'

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 paintings 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. It was still more difficult for a woman to get on the staff.

The room was now beginning to fill up. She recognized Hilda Soper head of HR. Also present were Rosemary Flinders, Obs & Gynae Surgeon due for retirement, John Lodge senior surgeon and Mr. Flint General Surgeon. There were several others whom she had seen but not met. Dr Smithers hadn't arrived yet.

Suddenly the door swung open and he appeared puffing and sweating.

'I'm sorry I'm late,' he hissed avoiding Jane's gaze.

Hilda Soper called the meeting to order and 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 Frobisher 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 Frobisher'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.'

Turning to Dr Smithers, she said,

'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 up out of all proportion. Why you may ask? Is she ashamed of her behaviour, she should be.'

Bellowing, he continued,

'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 horror 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 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. What you said was totally unacceptable, you seem to be living in the stone-age.' The room went silent, no-one knew where to look.

John Lodge rose slowly. waited and looked around. He was the senior. Looking at the ceiling with his hands behind his back he contemplated his answer. Slowly he began.

'Although this is an informal meeting, I think we need to come to a 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. I am appalled at his outburst. I think he is no longer suitable 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 finalised.'

Dr. Smithers stood up, his look almost apoplectic. He appeared to want to say something, spluttered then changed his mind. He turned and without a word marched out of the room.

Chapter Fifteen

Roinna was distraught. All her plans to start a family with Michael had been . . . She tried to return to work but dreaded the questions and in the end rang in to say she was still unwell. She couldn't sleep, lying awake hour after hour praying it was all a bad dream, but when dawn broke through she knew it wasn't. She was struggling with the reality of her situation. How could it have happened? How could the surgeon have been so careless? She has robbed me of my future, my eternity

Over supper she told Mike about her plans.

'Are you OK to come with me tomorrow to see the specialist. I want to talk about what happened and whether I can sue her.'

'Sue her?'

'Yes, she shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.'

'Darling, how will that help you. It won't bring back your womb.'

'Will you come please. I need some support,' she asked 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?'

'2 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 and knew that at the last moment he would cry off.

'Sure I'll be fine don't worry. I 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 overrun. 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 of 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 brown hair and grey-green eyes. She noticed he had cut himself shaving that morning and thought to herself that he of all people should know how to use a razor.

'Good morning, how may I help you?'

Roinna blushed.

'I don't know how to start.'

'Take your time and begin at the beginning.'

'OK. I met Michael two years ago and we became an item. The one thing missing from our lives was a family. But I was nearly 40 so we couldn't wait. My doctor found that I had fibroids and suggested that I arrange to have them removed before becoming pregnant. I saw a specialist and she recommended that I have them removed.'

Mr. Broders interrupted.

'Please don't upset yourself. I have the doctor's notes and have read what happened I am so sorry. Let me have a look at you. Go into my side room. Nurse will help you,' he said, pointing to a small room in the corner, 'slip off your skirt and let me have a look.'

Roinna waited while Mr. Broders made some notes. Apart from her panties, she was bare from the waist down 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 abdomen.

'Mmm,' he said finally, 'you can get dressed.'

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

Mr. Broders sat back in his chair. He was thinking. She waited.

'It's not easy,' He made a few notes. 'What would you like me to do?'

She paused looking into her lap. Tears began to appear in her eyes.

'Doctor I so wanted a child, I had found a man I loved and wanted to make a baby with him,' and then her voice trailed off.

'Please Roinna, try not to distress yourself I understand.' But of course he couldn't. How could he, a man, understand the pain of a woman unable to bear a child, something which is so basic to being a woman; a loss which occurred at the hands of a doctor, it was almost unbearable.

'I want her to feel my pain, to understand,' she whispered.

Chapter Sixteen

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 and belittled him. He couldn't believe how they had all ganged up on him as if he was a pariah. Dazed and confused he left the meeting appalled at their decision. He needed to get away from the hospital. What was once his retreat had now become his prison. He rushed along the corridors almost bumping into people in his haste to get away. He couldn't get out fast enough from this 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 looking unhappy.

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

His favorite drink was a single malt.'

'Make it a double please Maisie.'

It was still too early, there was no one in yet. He made his way to the snug where a roaring fire with logs crackling greeted him. He sat spreading his legs letting the warmth calm his spirits. He fell asleep.

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 Seventeen

'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. But her response was explosive.

'Don't you understand? I can never have a baby. My life is destroyed. That woman has taken my future away from me. I want her to know what she has done, to acknowledge it and to say she is sorry.'

'She has done that already, hasn't she?'

'I want her to say it in public so that all the world can hear it.'

No sooner had Roinna left his consulting room than Mr. Broders thought about phoning Jane. He hesitated at first. He remembered how 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 the responsibility of a family. 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 recall who he was but then her memory flooded back. 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 gotten 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 said rising. 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 to do an emergency hysterectomy 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're looking so well Jane.'

'Before we part, is there anything you want to ask me?' said Jane.

'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 seem to enlarge and his breathing became louder.

'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 Eighteen

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 me a bombshell. He said that the patient, I told you about with the fibroma 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 of slight build. 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. His name is Donoghue Broders, he is Sebastian's father.'

'Does Sebastian know?'

'No, I want to wait until he is a bit older and can understand. Up to now he has never asked me about his father.'

Chapter Nineteen

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 her daughter 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?'

'Annabel? 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

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 was 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.' His words were slurred.

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 up 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 be 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, Annabel.'

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

'Pleased to meet you,' he said, struggling to remain polite despite his revulsion at her appearance. As soon as he could he excused himself. There was an awkward silence in the kitchen as he left. No one spoke for a few minutes, each trying to avoid the eyes of the other. Then Mary broke the silence.

'He'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-one

Jane thumbed through the information pack sent to her by the Medical Defence Union (MDU). 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 to read up on it.

Passing over the advertising material she came to the history of the organization and why it was founded. She was totally absorbed by what she read. It 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 that they needed protection from avaricious patients and their lawyers. Over the years it has come to be the essential insurance for all practicing doctors

A few days later, Jane presented herself at the Offices of the MDU. She had an appointment with a Mr. Thomas a legal advisor. It was an imposing building clad in white Portland stone with the entrance situated between two marble Corinthian columns. The three steps up to the front door were smooth from the generations of feet landing on them. Jane entered the 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, I have an appointment to see a Mr. Thomas.’

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

‘Thank you.’

Jane easily found his office and 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. I am Robert Thomas. Now Jane may I call you Jane?’

‘Yes of course.’

‘I have studied the papers and have obtained a 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-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 the uterus was abnormal? It occurs in less than one in a hundred, less than 1%.’ Mr. Thomas looked up from his notes.

‘Let me try and explain.’ he said putting down his papers and leaning forwards. ‘You were not to know about the abnormal anatomy but she equally had a right to expect an acceptable result. Doctors accept the patients as they are, so she should be compensated.’

Jane was adamant.

‘No I just cannot accept that decision,’ she repeated

‘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-two

Penny could see that it 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 a change.’ Jane laid down on her bed and tried to sleep but couldn’t. She couldn’t get the recent conversation out of her head. She felt frustrated and reluctant to accept the MDU decision.

‘It’s not fair. I did nothing wrong. How can I admit liability when I did my best?’

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 the sobbing ceased and she 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. I tried to explain that there was an abnormal uterine artery that I could not have anticipated but he rejected that and said that 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 good 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-three

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 a small bar at the back of the club 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 staggered 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 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 shirt, making a long red splash.

'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 Italian with a broad mustache appeared.

'Please ladies, I 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-four

Dr Robert was acutely embarrassed. He hadn't expected to meet Joanna's friend in the kitchen that morning. As soon as he could, he mumbled something and left. Upstairs he sat on his bed trying to understand what was happening. Where had she come from so early in the morning? Did she stay overnight and if so 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 spied him moving in the green house. She put on her garden shoes and made her way to 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 come in and 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 Annabel.

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 Annabel are an item and may I remind you this is my house too!'

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

'It means they love each other.'

Chapter Twenty-five

Almost unconscious, Jane had a moment of clarity.

'What the hell am I doing?' She shouted at herself but no words came out.

Frantically she reached out, fumbling 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 clamouring 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 Miss Jane, the Gynaecologist demanded.' The line went dead.

Another voice,

'This is Sister Blake; may I help you?'

'Sister, this is Penny, we have met. May I speak to Dr Jane, it's urgent...'

'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, I won't disturb her. She returned to the phone.

Meanwhile Penny was counting the seconds, it seemed like hours before a voice replied.

'I think she's sleeping.'

'No please, she phoned me. I need to speak to her. I think she could be in trouble.'

Sister rushed back and tried the door again, attempting to force 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, Jane?'

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

'We have an emergency on Ward 6.'

Within minutes, a doctor, a nurse and two orderlies arrived outside the doctor's room.

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

In the gloom, Sister could see a form lying on the bed. It was 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 facemask, inserted a drip and began ventilating her.

‘Let’s get her to ICU now.’

Chapter Twenty-six

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 the unit, it felt so strange as if he had entered another world. He was aware of the rows of patients seemingly asleep, the only sound, breathing and the clicking of the screens. 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 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.

‘Her condition is stable,’ the nurse said.

‘Stable?’ What does that mean he wanted to ask?

‘May I sit with her?’

‘Yes, only for five minutes 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.

‘Dad, it’s you.’

She closed her eyes and slowly her gasps became longer apart then they speeded up. She moved her head and groaned.

‘Nurse,’ shouted Sebastian. ‘Please come,’ his voice failed.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

‘It’s OK, she is probably dreaming. They often groan and even talk,’ she said.

‘She’ll come round soon.’

Sebastian sat watching her. Later that night he fell asleep holding her hand. In the early hours, he awoke, someone was jogging him. He turned. It was a tall strangely familiar figure. He looked into eyes like his own.

‘Who are you?’ he gasped.

‘I am your father.’

Together they sat, the night slowly retreating and the morning sun rising on a new day.

