



**NOT
BAD
PEOPLE**

BRANDY SCOTT

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*To my mum and dad,
for making me a reader*

CHAPTER 1

Aimee took a slurp of pinot and tried to decide who she didn't need in her life any more. There wasn't really anyone. She loved her children, obviously; she and Nick had a great marriage, the best, even after a decade and a half. The cat was displaying worrying levels of incontinence, and the vet had started to make noises about ultrasounds and potential tumours, and don't worry, there's always chemo — for a *cat*? — all of which sounded hideously expensive, but the kids adored Oscar and besides, they could afford it. Sort of. She'd just hide the bills. She wasn't particularly fond of her mother-in-law, but the woman was nearly seventy and riding on one lung, so getting rid of her seemed like a waste of a wish. Or a resolution. Whatever.

A letting-go exercise, Melinda had said. Bring a bottle, and something you want to be free of.

'Something or someone?' Aimee asked her friend, who'd already finished writing her own list, naturally, and was rummaging under the sink for more wine.

'What?' asked Melinda. A head of ginger curls popped over the kitchen bench. 'Are you still faffing?'

‘I don’t really have anything to let go of,’ said Aimee. ‘I like my life just as it is.’

‘Lucky you,’ said Lou, from the other side of the dining table. She sounded tired. Lou was always tired. ‘I’ve got too many to fit. I’m going to need another piece of paper.’

Melinda gave a little snort as she opened a new bottle. ‘It’s supposed to be about self-improvement,’ she said. ‘Letting go of a bad habit, or a resentment. Something you don’t want to carry into the new year.’ She flicked the screw top into the bin. ‘I so thought this would be your kind of thing.’

Aimee doodled a small flower on Melinda’s pale wooden table top, then quickly rubbed it off. ‘I like the idea,’ she said. ‘I’m just ... blank. Give me another minute.’ She pushed her glass across. ‘And another drink.’

The wine Melinda poured her came two-thirds up the glass. Aimee reached for it guiltily. She’d have to get a taxi, send Nick to pick up the car in the morning. God, would she even get one of Hensley’s three cabs on New Year’s Eve? Her husband was down at the river supervising the fireworks, a display Aimee herself had helped organise after an exceptionally wet December. ‘Don’t you want to come see?’ he’d asked. ‘After all your hard work?’ Aimee didn’t. She was happier being a long-distance observer.

The taxi company rang out without answering. Bugger. She should have booked one before she left home. Or they could have just done this at hers. Aimee would have preferred it if everyone had come over to her place, with her squishy sofas and multiple spare beds, furniture already battered so it didn’t matter if someone spilled something, where they could have all got proper drunk and just crashed out. And then her friends would still be there in the morning, and she could have made pancakes and big pots of tea, and they could have hung out all day if they wanted. ‘Aimee, Aimee,’ Melinda had said when Aimee suggested it. ‘You do actually have to leave the house, occasionally.’

Maybe that's what she should wish for: a bigger life. Wider horizons. But Aimee had everything she needed right here in Hensley, much of it in this room. She smiled at her two oldest friends — cousin, technically, in the case of Melinda, although nearly everyone in this town was related to one another, if you went back far enough. The three of them had been a unit since primary school, despite the age gap: scrappy Lou, ambitious Melinda, romantic Aimee. Schemey, Dreamy and Trouble, Melinda's dad had christened them. They weren't an obvious fit, but out here you became friends with the people whose houses were closest and whose parents could tolerate drinking with each other.

Aimee gazed fondly and slightly pissedly around the open-plan kitchen, at Melinda's pale skin and sinewy arms, the silk vest she'd said was Country Road but Aimee knew was designer. She smiled lovingly at the slight muffin top escaping Lou's faded jeggings, which Aimee and Melinda had privately agreed were Not A Good Idea, but what could you say? They'd grown even less similar over the years, but they had the strongest friendship of anyone she knew. Aimee felt a little emotional just thinking about it.

'Finished,' said Lou, waving her little notecard triumphantly. Aimee reached into the middle of the table and pushed over a matching envelope. The stationery Melinda had supplied for their letting-go exercise was sorbet pink, its edges rimmed with gold, like something from a posh florist. Aimee wondered if she'd bought the cards specially. They looked very Melinda: expensive, exclusive and just a bit much.

'So what did you put?' Aimee leaned over. There was so much *wrong* with Lou's life, bless her. Where would you even start?

'Yes,' said Melinda, leaning in from the other side. 'What did you put?'

'No,' said Lou, covering her card. 'Sorry. Private.'

'I'll tell you mine,' said Melinda.

‘You don’t have to.’ Aimee doodled another flower. ‘We can guess.’

‘Can we?’ asked Lou. ‘I can’t.’ She pushed her chair away from the table. ‘What on earth do you have to let go of, Mel? You don’t have any shitty relationships or jobs you’ve outgrown. No ungrateful children. No bad habits. You don’t even have a junk drawer.’

‘Yes, but this is Melinda, professional superwoman,’ said Aimee. ‘It’ll be about adding things, won’t it. *Achieving*. Building on her empire. It’s only us mere mortals who have to cast off our imperfections.’ She caught Melinda’s eye. ‘Oh, come on, you’ve got an awesome year ahead, Mel, admit it. Raising a trillion dollars, expanding into America. Is world domination on the list?’

‘Ten million,’ Melinda corrected, leaning back against her kitchen bench — her award-winning kitchen bench, with its double farmhouse sink and a vintage coffee grinder salvaged from a country hospital and featured just last month in *House & Garden*. Aimee coveted the sink, but wasn’t sure about the six-burner stove. She’d questioned Melinda when she had it installed. Melinda didn’t cook. Melinda said she also didn’t care. Aimee admired that about Melinda. Aimee cared too much; everyone said so.

‘Although it might be more,’ Melinda was saying now. She smiled into her wineglass. ‘I don’t want to boast, but it does look as if we’ll be significantly oversubscribed.’

‘Ah, you can boast to us.’ Aimee put her pen down and picked up her glass. ‘We’re only teasing. You know we’re super proud of you.’ She smiled a little blearily at Melinda, the woman who’d taught her everything from how to insert a tampon to how to parallel park. ‘To LoveLocked, Australia’s favourite success story.’

Lou leaned over and clinked glasses with them both. ‘To LoveLocked,’ she echoed. ‘And a fantastic new year.’

* * *

Melinda pushed the French doors open and led her friends onto the balcony. No matter how often she stood out there the view never got old, nor the private thrill that it was hers. The whole of Hensley lay spread before them: river whispering in a corner to the left; purple hills rising behind the town lights to the right. On the outskirts, uniform rows of vines stood in shadow now, imposing order on the landscape. Hensley was small, but it was wealthy. Wine money mostly, and finance, from bankers who'd earned enough to enjoy the dubious privilege of stashing wives and children in a desirable country town and driving two hours into Melbourne a couple of times a week. Twats, the locals called them: Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday in the city, Friday to Monday in the country. Melinda knew the drill well, although she no longer had to do the drive if she didn't want to. These days, the meetings came to her.

'Let's get this done then,' she said. 'I've still got a party to look in on.'

'And I want to see what kind of state Tansy arrives home in,' said Lou. 'I've told her half past twelve, and if she gets in a minute later, I'll — well, I'll probably do nothing. Or at least, nothing that will have any effect.'

'It's not getting any better?' Aimee pulled a sympathetic face and handed Lou her wine.

'Everything I say, everything I suggest, I just get called a hypocrite.' Lou took a healthy gulp. 'Drinking. Smoking. Eyebrow piercing. Driving across Victoria to a music festival with some guy who doesn't have a last name. She's even started —'

Melinda leaned down and fussed with a dwarf lime tree so Lou couldn't see her smile. Lou had been the first one of them to get drunk, to get stoned, to lose her virginity. The only one of them to lie about her age and get a dolphin tattooed on her arse. Aimee had been too much of a rule-follower, Melinda too much of a goal-setter. The others still teased her about her vision boards and ten-year plans.

‘So I said, “If you don’t have enough time for hockey, you don’t have enough time for pole dancing.”’ Lou gave a little snort. ‘And it’s not a bloody sport, I don’t care what anyone says. Body confidence, my arse. Thirteen thousand a year for St Ursula’s and she wants to become a pole dancer —’

‘Aimee.’ Melinda used her boardroom voice to cut across the chatter. ‘Shall we get started? Did you bring them?’

‘In here.’ Aimee placed a large cardboard envelope on the table.

Melinda picked the folder up, examined it. ‘I thought they’d be in a box.’

‘There’s not much to them,’ said Aimee. ‘Quite frankly, you’re lucky I even found them. They were in the loft, behind the kids’ old dressing-up box. Next to the remains of a dead rat Oscar probably killed six months ago. Now that was disgusting, a pile of bones and fur with the stomach —’

‘Okay.’ Melinda just wanted this done now. She’d hoped the letting-go exercise would be meaningful, that the others would gain something from it, but the whole project had lacked the positive spirit she’d been aiming for. Lou was becoming cranky, as she always did when she drank too much, and Aimee wasn’t taking it seriously at all. ‘So let’s assemble them or whatever, and attach our cards. I want to let them off before the fireworks.’

The sky lanterns were surprisingly delicate: thin rustling paper attached to a wire ring, a miniature hot air balloon with a strange, industrial smell. Melinda blew into hers experimentally; the tissue parachute filled, then deflated.

‘Do we need to make a wish?’ asked Aimee, as she tied her notecard to the narrow wire.

‘No,’ said Melinda. ‘Just let your mind picture what you want to let go of. A really bold image, lots of colours, sounds. And then imagine all that bad stuff sailing off, into the sky, leaving you forever.’

‘Is that what they teach you on your leadership retreats?’ asked Lou. ‘Because it sounds awfully like the rubbish Aimee shares on Facebook. You could save yourself a fortune.’

‘Lou!’ said Aimee.

‘If you want to do it, do it. If you don’t ...’ Melinda shrugged. Lou could stay exactly where she was, how she was; Melinda didn’t care. Except she did, of course. If she could change Lou’s life for her, she would. Fill her card with wishes for her friend, rather than herself. She tried sometimes. Lending Lou motivational books and recommending podcasts, inviting her to come and hear speakers in the city. Lou always refused, politely but definitely.

‘Hey,’ said Lou, smoothing out her lantern. ‘These have got your and Nick’s initials on them.’

Aimee shrugged. ‘Wedding madness,’ she said. ‘I even had our napkins monogrammed. We’ve still got stacks of those as well.’

Aimee’s wedding had been a lavish yet tasteful affair. Melinda and Lou were bridesmaids, in strapless dull black satin. They’d lined up along the vines with four flower girls, two pageboys and a ring-bearing labrador as Aimee and Nick recited their original blank-verse vows. The dinner after was less enjoyable. Melinda had fended off more than a dozen enquiries as to why she wasn’t getting married and whether she was scaring them all off, ha ha ha, before she finally snapped and told an elderly aunt that she had herpes. The rumour had got back to the only eligible man at the reception, someone’s cousin from Adelaide who’d been happily slow dancing with Melinda until his father tapped him on the shoulder and told him not to bloody go there, son. Melinda had spent the rest of the night propped against a trellis with a bottle of red.

‘So what happens now?’ she asked, emptying the last of a bottle from the same vineyard into a sticky glass.

‘We push the wire loop through the waxy candle thing,’ said Aimee. ‘Then light it. That’s the tricky bit. If you’re not careful, the whole thing will go up. Nick’s mother nearly lost an eyebrow.’

The sky was darkening, its velvet morphing from dark blue into black. They lit the little paraffin squares and saw the lanterns swell in response.

‘Come on,’ said Melinda, and they lined up along the edge of the balcony, three thirty-something women who’d been finishing each other’s sentences and keeping each other’s secrets for nearly three decades. You didn’t get to choose your family, and these women were hers. More supportive than her real family, anyway. And just as infuriating sometimes.

‘I do love you guys, you know,’ Lou said suddenly, into the silence.

‘We know,’ said Aimee.

‘I’m just a bit stressed out,’ said Lou. ‘Bloody Tansy is being impossible, and I can’t seem to —’

‘Shhh,’ said Melinda. ‘Let it go.’

‘Literally,’ said Aimee, wobbling her lantern.

Lou giggled. ‘I just want to explain why I’m being such a bitch.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Aimee. ‘We’re used to it.’ She blew her friend a kiss. ‘And we love you too.’

Melinda smiled. This was more like it. ‘Right then,’ she said. ‘All together. One, two, three.’

The lanterns rose slowly, drifting lazily on unseen currents. Lou was surprised. She’d expected them to shoot up and off like they had at the wedding. Or maybe she was misremembering that. Everything about Aimee’s big day, Aimee’s entire relationship, had seemed to happen so fast: one moment Nick was dating Melinda and the next he’d fallen for Aimee, knocked her up, proposed, married her and knocked her up again, all before Aimee was twenty-three. Lou had expected Melinda to be upset, but Melinda had just shrugged and said they were better suited, and wasn’t it great that Aimee had ended up with someone so stable.

Stable. What would it be like for life to feel stable, rather than a constant struggle? A never-ending battle against wilful teenagers and rising expenses. But it would all soon be worth it: the tight budget, the extortionate education. Two more years, barring unforeseen disaster. Two years until Tansy was off to university, with a part-time job and a student loan covering her fees, and Lou would finally have her life back. Although she didn't plan for it to be stable, exactly. The first thing she was going to do when Tansy was settled was travel. Spain, Greece, France. Finally having the overseas adventures the others had experienced in their teens and twenties while Lou was pureeing carrots and scrubbing baby sick off rented carpets. Her own midlife gap year. Lou couldn't wait. Maybe she'd start a blog.

'They're not going anywhere,' Aimee fretted.

'Shhh,' said Melinda. 'They are. Be patient.'

Lou leaned over the balcony. To the left of them stretched the riverbank, where Tansy and the rest of the town's teenagers were no doubt drinking and snogging and smoking shit they shouldn't be. Beyond the river stood the vines that made the region so prosperous, two and a half hectares of which paid for Aimee's four-bedroom house and allowed her to stay at home writing poetry all day, living in her imagination, which, Melinda and Lou agreed, was lovely, but might not be the healthiest thing. They kept a close eye.

'See,' said Melinda. 'They just needed to get high enough.'

The lanterns were flying now, three tiny night-lights bobbing in front of the river that gave the valley its Goldilocks climate: not too hot, not too cold, but just right to keep half the town in Range Rovers and the other half picking for pocket money during the season. Lou used to pick grapes. She'd stopped when Aimee married Nick. Switched to strawberries and chestnuts. She didn't need her best friend handing her a cheque.

'So where's the party?' Lou asked.

‘Meadowcroft,’ said Melinda. ‘I’ve got a driver coming.’

Above the town, the first fireworks exploded to a muffled cheer. ‘Do you think you could drop me off?’ said Aimee. ‘I really shouldn’t be driving.’

‘Me neither,’ Lou admitted. ‘I don’t need to give Tansy any more ammunition.’

‘I’ll order another car,’ said Melinda, as a second round of fireworks went off, the sound echoing off the hills.

‘You don’t have to do that,’ said Lou.

‘It’s not a problem,’ said Melinda. ‘We’ve got an account.’ She pulled a phone out of her silky trousers and started to type.

Lou turned. ‘Could you ask them —’

‘Hey!’ Aimee said, pointing. ‘Look!’

There was a flare of light in the distance, a yellow dot that grew steadily brighter.

‘One of the lanterns must have caught fire,’ said Aimee.

Lou squinted, trying to bring her pinot vision into focus. The glowing dot didn’t look like a lantern on fire, but to be fair she was nearly a bottle down.

Melinda shrugged. ‘Don’t worry, it’s just paper. It’ll burn out in a minute.’

But it didn’t. Instead, the small circle expanded as it rose steadily upwards, then popped — that was the only word for it — into a cartoon ball of fire, yellow and orange and white.

Aimee turned to Melinda. ‘Quick, give me your phone.’

‘No,’ said Melinda, holding it out of reach.

Aimee stared at her. ‘But we have to call it in.’

‘No,’ Melinda said again. ‘You’ll just cause a world of hassle.’

‘But what if it sets fire to something?’

‘Aimee, it won’t.’ Melinda’s voice was firm. ‘There’s nothing up there for it to set fire *to*.’

Lou cupped her hands around her eyes. The little flame was floating above the ranges, like an angry star.

‘The fire danger’s been low for ages,’ Melinda said. ‘People are literally barbecuing in the streets. You don’t need to worry.’

The fireball was breaking up now, falling towards the earth in a shower of sparks. It was too far away to see where, exactly; too far and too dark. Lou tried to figure out the right thing to do.

A third round of fireworks exploded, then a fourth. ‘Look, everyone’s staring at the sky; someone else will spot it,’ said Melinda. A fifth explosion, and a golden constellation fizzed above the river. Then, in the distance, the familiar wail of an emergency vehicle, followed by the whoop of a police siren. ‘See? Sorted. And it’s gone out anyway.’

Lou gazed over to where the glowing ball had been. Like a magic trick, the small blaze had disappeared. Thank God for that. Lou didn’t like trouble; she’d seen enough for one lifetime. ‘Let’s go inside,’ she said.

CHAPTER 2

Pete lay in a cradle of twisted metal, pain racing from one limb to another. His shoulder looked wrong somehow, and his arm had split open like a sausage; he could see white fat and bone beneath the blood, but never mind that, he needed to get out of the plane before the whole thing exploded. He felt for his seat buckle with the other hand and found fingers, warm and sticky. Lincoln. Pete's brain came rushing back to life as he remembered that he wasn't alone, Lincoln was with him. The whole flight had been Lincoln's idea and therefore Lincoln would be trapped in the Cessna as well, with the world bursting fire all around them. The flashes came from both above and below — some from the engine, gently burning, others from the night sky as though the heavens were sending up distress signals on their behalf.

'Lincoln,' he whispered, for some reason unable to shout. 'Lincoln!' There was no answer. Pete reached painfully towards his son and snapped him free, then tried to manoeuvre Lincoln's gangly teenage limbs up and out the sparkling hole that was now the windscreen. The ground tilted dizzily towards him as the little plane swung with their weight.

He tugged at his son as hard as he dared, careful to support the neck, worried that something was broken, that he'd do more harm than good, but more worried about an explosion, with the flames, the fuel. The fuselage was blistering hot as he finally dragged them both up and over and then thumping onto the ground, Pete cushioning the blow as Lincoln landed on top of him. There was a quick series of pops and he felt his ribs go, his whole torso ignite with pain, but he ignored it as he dragged them both backwards, agonisingly slow against the packed earth — where had they even landed? A farm? — towards what he had no idea, but away from the smell of fuel.

One metre, two metres. Pete pulled them across the ground, like swimming backstroke almost, pushing with his hips, his feet, one arm, whispering to his son, 'Come on, Lincoln, hang in there, mate, take it easy.' Three metres, four — a major achievement given the fact each breath was like a knife — but not far enough. There was an earsplitting explosion, close enough to singe the ends of his hair, but instead of the world going red, it all went black.

CHAPTER 3

‘Did you have a good time?’ Aimee tried to keep her voice casual, to sound almost uninterested in her son’s answer as she watched him dump his cereal bowl in the sink and tried to read his body language.

‘It was all right. S’pose.’

‘Just all right?’ Aimee peered at his eyes to figure out if he was hung over or simply tired. Or, worse, had been smoking something. Lou had horrified her in the car on the way home with stories of what Tansy and her friends were taking — pills of all sorts, crushing up other children’s ADHD medication and *snorting* it, Lou had admitted.

‘It was fine.’ Her son shrugged as he sprayed water into the sink, rinsing off his bowl as well as the surrounding workbench and floor.

‘Byron —’

‘S’all right. I’ve got it.’ He grabbed a tea towel and made a few ineffectual swipes at the bench, sending a stream of water flooding towards the bank of ancient kitchen appliances lined up under the window. The edge of the towel caught a pot of basil; it toppled into the sink. ‘Ah shit.’

Don't tell him off, Aimee, you'll only make him uncomfortable. Byron had grown nearly five centimetres in the few months since his birthday, and acquired a pair of hands that seemed far too big for him. They were man's hands, Aimee observed, as she took the tea towel from him and mopped up the deluge, righted the plant. Grown-up hands. They seemed all wrong on her fifteen-year-old boy, the boy who now towered over her, liked to pat her on the head. The boy who seemed to have a grown-up social life as well, with friends she didn't know and activities she wasn't privy to. Grown-up activities, possibly. And how did she feel about that?

She tried once more. 'So who was there?'

Byron gave a sigh. 'People, Mum,' he said. 'There were people there.'

'I'm only asking.'

'It was just another boring night in Hensley. Same people, same conversation. Just with added fireworks.' He sighed again. 'We live in fucking Riverdale, Mum. You've known everyone I hang out with since I was four years old.'

'Don't swear at your mother.' Nick's voice, from the doorway, was mild, but Byron stopped slouching immediately, pulling his shoulders back and gaining another inch Aimee wasn't aware he possessed.

'Sorry.' Byron grabbed his backpack, shoving a small box from his pocket — cigarettes? condoms? — into its murky depths and zipping the bag up before Aimee could get a proper look. He smiled at her, sudden sunshine from behind indifferent clouds. 'Hey, can I take the car? Just to go down to Murt's? Please?'

The car. Damn. 'Absolutely not, Byron, you don't have your licence.' He started to protest, and Aimee held up a hand. 'You know the score. Anyway, I left it at Melinda's.'

'Bugger.' The clouds — and the slouch — returned.

'Byron.'

'Bugger isn't a swear word.'

‘Just don’t, all right, mate?’ Nick ruffled his son’s hair as they passed each other in the doorway. ‘And be back for dinner.’

‘K.’

And he was gone, leaving Aimee no wiser or calmer about the previous evening’s activities.

‘You need to talk to him,’ Aimee told Nick as he collapsed into the nearest sofa, six foot three inches of sweat-stained T-shirt and faded rugby shorts. She could see the circles around his ankles where his boots had rubbed the hair away, the line of farmer’s tan across his biceps as he reached for a pillow.

‘Byron? He’s okay. He’s just at that stage where speaking to us is exhausting, and unnecessary.’

‘No, you need to *talk* to him.’ Aimee gave her husband a meaningful look.

‘What, about sex?’ Nick laughed. ‘I think he knows how it all happens. We had that chat years ago.’

‘Yes, but it’s different now.’ Aimee perched on the edge of a faded armchair, a hand-me-down from a relative that had been absorbed so thoroughly into their own family history she couldn’t even remember the original donor.

‘What, because he’s gay?’

‘Nick!’ Aimee shot a look at the door.

‘Aims, he told us, remember?’

‘Yes, but —’ Aimee felt like someone’s ancient maiden aunt. ‘We can still be *sensitive*.’

Nick started inching off his socks. ‘I don’t think he wants us to be sensitive,’ he said. ‘I think he wants us to act like it’s normal. Which it is.’

‘I’m not saying ...’ Aimee closed her eyes. He knew what she meant, dammit. Why did he have to make it difficult? ‘He’s only fifteen. I’d be concerned whoever he was having sex with.’

‘Who’s having sex?’ Shelley wandered into the kitchen, followed by their overweight labrador, Lucinda.

‘No one,’ said Aimee.

‘Your mother thinks your brother is,’ said Nick.

‘Nick!’ said Aimee.

‘He’s not,’ said Shelley.

‘There you go then,’ said Nick.

‘He watches a lot of porn, but he hasn’t actually done anything yet,’ said Shelley. ‘Says there’s no one around here to do it with.’

‘Shelley!’ said Aimee.

‘I’m going to give this dog a bit of a run around,’ said Nick. He smiled at them both, his easy good-guy smile. ‘See, Aims. No need to get your knickers in a twist.’ And he was out the door, Lucinda trotting uncertainly behind him.

Aimee straightened her ancient bathrobe, twisted her hair into a dark knot on top of her head. She had the Donnelly curls, like Melinda, only Aimee’s were more likely to be a frizzy mass than Melinda’s serumed cascade. Aimee had also managed to inherit the Donnelly arse and hips, still more an L than an M, while Melinda’s bottom half would barely dent an S. Wouldn’t dare. She claimed it was Pilates, but Aimee secretly believed that Melinda’s body was scared of disobeying her, like everyone else.

She smoothed down the sofa, pissing off the cat. Oscar hissed at her, ears back. ‘Oh bugger off,’ said Aimee. ‘You’re lucky to even be in here.’

His recent bowel issues meant Oscar was supposed to be confined to the laundry, but the children — and the cat — had protested noisily. Aimee brushed at a smear of dirt Nick had left behind, checking that’s all it was. She could see her husband out the window, lobbing a ball for Lucinda, unconcerned. Maybe he was right. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. Byron was growing up; she had to learn to give him space. Aimee moved into the kitchen and made herself a comforting cup of tea. And it wasn’t like he could get pregnant, or was even in the market to get anyone else pregnant. She should leave it alone. Not question,

not pry. Respect his privacy. Aimee sat down at the kitchen table next to Shelley. A dignified silence, that was the thing.

‘So how do you know Byron’s not sleeping with anyone?’ she asked her daughter.

Shelley gave her a look. ‘Really, Mum?’

Aimee sighed. ‘Well, you can’t throw something like that into the conversation and just leave it *hanging*.’

‘So ask Byron.’ Shelley crunched into a piece of toast.

‘I can’t have that kind of conversation with him.’ Aimee smiled winningly, reached over to stroke a smooth forearm. ‘Not like I could with you.’

‘Stop smarming, Mum.’

‘But I could. You’re my daughter. We have a special bond.’

‘There’s nothing for us to have a conversation about. I’m not having sex with anyone either.’

‘Well, of course you’re not.’ Shelley was only thirteen, and an easy thirteen at that. Still happily wearing clothes her mother bought her, not a sniff of boyfriends or underage activities. Aimee thought of Lou’s constant battles with Tansy and said a silent prayer of thanks.

‘I could be. Other people are.’

‘Oh God, don’t joke. You’re my good child. You’re the one I rely on to keep me sane.’ Aimee tried not to guess which of Shelley’s friends were already at it. ‘But Byron — I’m concerned. That’s all.’

‘Would you be concerned if he was straight?’

‘Of course.’

‘Liar.’

‘Shelley!’ Aimee set her mug down on the table, hard. ‘Don’t you dare try and make out I’m some kind of ... bigot. That’s not fair.’

‘Then leave him alone.’

‘I’ve been nothing but supportive. You know that. I bought him all those books when he first came out.’

Shelley rolled her eyes.

‘And he knows both your father and I are absolutely fine with whatever he does.’

‘You just want to know what it is he’s doing.’

‘Yes.’ Aimee tucked her hands into the comforting pockets of her towelling robe. ‘As I will with you, when it’s your turn.’

Shelley stood and walked her plate over to the sink. Rinsed it off, with soap, then dried it and placed it carefully back in the cupboard. ‘He told me, okay?’ she said finally. ‘If it makes you feel better. He was having a moan about his skin. Said he’d probably still be a virgin when he goes to uni at this rate. But don’t you dare say anything or he’ll kill me.’

‘I won’t,’ Aimee promised. ‘And ... the porn? I assume that’s all online.’ They had an unlimited data plan; maybe it was best to change that. If only so he got some homework done.

Shelley sighed. ‘You okay now?’

‘I am.’ She was. ‘Thank you, darling.’ Aimee reached over to give her daughter a grateful hug.

Shelley pulled a face. ‘You’ve got tea in your moustache,’ she said, sidestepping her mother and heading for the door.

Aimee wiped her top lip on the sleeve of her bathrobe. There you go. Nothing to worry about. Fingers crossed both her children would remain safely bored and virginal until they went off to university. Aimee got up humming from the kitchen table and made her way to the bench. She’d have a piece of toast herself, maybe even an egg. Scrambled, why not? She cracked two fresh eggs from Shelley’s hens into a bowl and pulled the local paper towards her while she whisked. There was a large picture of an accident on the front page, twisted metal and first responders. Awful. Thank goodness none of them had tried to drive last night.

Aimee shook out the newspaper so she could read the accompanying story below the fold. She got three paragraphs in

before she dropped the whisk. The mixing bowl tipped off the bench, egg splattering all over the tiles, but Aimee barely noticed.

‘Oh my God,’ she whispered, eyes glued to the paper as though the words might rearrange themselves if she stared hard enough. ‘Please, no. Oh my God.’

Lou sat stiffly upright on her parents’ green velour sofa — her sofa now, she reminded herself — and wondered where her daughter was. As no doubt her parents had spent many an evening wondering about Lou. The irony wasn’t lost on her. Although she hadn’t been half as bad as Tansy. Yes, she’d yelled and sworn and slammed doors and all the usual teenage stuff, but she’d never stayed out all night. Or stolen from them. Lou shook her head at the half-empty drinks cabinet. Tansy and her friends hadn’t even bothered to pull its stupid wooden roller door back down. Just left it gaping, all the good stuff gone, and quite a lot of the rubbish as well. Blue Bols. Who even drank Blue Bols? There’d been a bottle of champagne as well, that she was saving for her birthday. What was the point, Lou asked herself. What was the point of buying anything nice when it just ended up getting nicked or lost or ruined? Well, things were going to change. The situation couldn’t continue. It had gone on for long enough.

The back door creaked open, then was gently shut by someone trying not to make a sound. Lou let the footsteps tiptoe halfway down the hall before calling out.

‘In here,’ she said. ‘Now.’

Tansy looked tired and slightly sheepish. She was wearing a crumpled red dress Lou didn’t recognise, and a pair of tarty open-toed boots they’d fought over before.

‘Really, Tans?’ she said, jerking her head towards the drinks cabinet.

Tansy went for defiant. ‘We’ll replace it,’ she said. ‘We couldn’t get anything in town. They were checking IDs.’

‘You couldn’t get anything because you’re not supposed to be drinking,’ said Lou. ‘You’re not old enough.’

‘You always say you’d rather have us here where you know what we’re doing,’ Tansy countered.

‘When I’m here,’ said Lou. ‘And I don’t know what you’ve been doing, because you haven’t been home. And because you turned your phone off. So I’ve been sitting here, on this bloody couch, worried out of my bloody mind, for the past nine hours. You’re lucky I didn’t call the police.’

‘I didn’t turn my phone off,’ said Tansy. ‘It ran out of battery.’

‘BECAUSE YOU WERE OUT ALL BLOODY NIGHT.’

‘All right, all right,’ said Tansy, backing towards the door. ‘Calm down. I stayed at Zarah’s. It’s not a big deal.’

‘IT IS A BIG DEAL.’ Lou took a deep breath and tried not to turn into her mother. ‘It is a big deal,’ she said again. ‘You can’t do this. You’re sixteen years old. You will come home and sleep in your own bed, and you will be home when you’re told, and you will not take my stuff, and you will bloody well behave yourself.’

‘Or?’

‘Or you’ll board.’ Lou had already thought this through. ‘And not at St Ursula’s either.’ She’d recently moved Tansy to the private day school in the hope it would keep her on the straight and narrow: clearly not. ‘I’ll send you to Sacred Heart. They can sort you out.’

‘But that’s in the middle of nowhere.’

‘I know,’ said Lou. ‘Great, eh?’

The look on Tansy’s face was close to hatred. ‘Bitch,’ she said.

Lou stared at her daughter, scowling in the doorway of Lou’s own childhood home. She had the same dirty-blonde hair as Lou — although Lou’s had a bit of help, these days — the same top-heavy figure. The same habit of standing with her toes inward. It was like having an argument with herself. There was something

especially hideous about having this fight in the same room where, for weeks, she'd argued about her own future — and Tansy's — with her parents. Surrounded by the same stupid Lladro figurines, under the same ugly brass light fittings. Lou and Tansy had moved in nine months earlier, after her parents' death. She didn't have the money to redecorate, or even the energy to move the awful china somewhere out of sight — the thought of touching her parents' things still made her feel slightly odd — but the moment she did she'd rip the whole bloody lot out. She didn't need any reminders. And yet, she was about to do to Tansy what they'd done to her.

No. This was different, Lou reassured herself. Completely different.

'Sit down,' she said.

Tansy, surprisingly, sat.

'You're going,' said Lou.

'Going where,' said Tansy.

'Sacred Heart,' said Lou. 'I've had it.'

'You can't,' said Tansy.

'I can,' said Lou. 'Nothing's going to change otherwise. We're just going to keep yelling at each other and it's only going to get worse. You need discipline, and I don't seem to be able to give it to you.'

A mobile phone began to ring. 'Don't you dare answer that,' said Lou.

'It's not mine,' said Tansy. 'Mine doesn't have any battery, remember?'

Lou rummaged inside her handbag and shut off the call.

'You can't send me to boarding school,' said Tansy. Her face was white — hangover or fear? — with two high pinpricks of sweaty pink flush. 'We can't afford it,' she said belligerently, an almost perfect echo of Lou.

Lou sighed. 'We can,' she said. 'I've been saving hard, for university, but at this rate you won't bloody make it to uni.'

‘You didn’t go to uni.’

‘That’s got nothing to do with it. My circumstances were slightly different, and you know it.’

‘Don’t blame me because you didn’t get to go to university.’

For the love of God. ‘I’m not blaming you. For Christ’s sake, Tansy, I’m trying to do what’s best for you. I’m trying to make sure you don’t end up like me, stuck in this bloody town for the rest of your life because of a few stupid mistakes you made when you were too young to know any better.’

‘Are you calling me a mistake?’

‘No!’ said Lou. ‘And you know I’m not, so stop trying to put words in my mouth.’ Her mobile started up again. She turned it over: Aimee. Not now, Aimee. Lou switched off the phone. ‘I just want something different for you,’ she said, wriggling down off the sofa and shuffling awkwardly across the carpet on her knees till she was crouched beside her daughter. ‘More opportunities. Decent qualifications.’ Lou bent her head until they were making eye contact. ‘I don’t want you to end up like me,’ she said again. ‘Trust me, Tansy, you want to do better than this. You *can* do better than this.’

Tansy looked very pale, and very young. ‘It’s too late,’ she said.

‘No, it’s not.’ Lou gripped the small hands in front of her. Child’s hands still, the nails bitten down to the quick. ‘You’ve got so much potential and you’re only just going into your VCE. You can turn this around, I know you can. That’s why Sacred Heart is such a good idea. You’ll be away from any distractions, somewhere you can start fresh and get your head down.’

Tansy was crying now. ‘But I can’t.’

‘Yes you can. Of course you can.’

‘No I can’t.’ The voice was almost a whisper. ‘Mum, I’m so sorry, but I think I’m pregnant.’

* * *

Melinda groped for her mobile in the dark. London was nine hours behind, New York fourteen: she'd stopped turning it off to sleep months ago. Once they went public she'd delegate answering random middle-of-the-night questions about production lines and sales targets to one of her managers, but for now she was too afraid of anything going wrong. 'You get one shot,' her IPO advisor Clint had said. 'Don't fuck it up.'

Except it wasn't an international centre of finance calling, it was Aimee. And it wasn't the middle of the night, it was 10 am. How had that happened? Her Type-A body clock rarely let her sleep past five. Melinda smiled to herself. Well. She'd had a good night. A very good night.

'Hellooooo,' she whispered, wondering if Aimee could hear it in her voice.

'It wasn't paper.'

'Eh?' Melinda rolled over towards the edge of the bed.

'It wasn't paper. On fire. I mean, it was, but I think the explosion was a plane.'

Melinda closed her eyes at the panic in Aimee's voice, the words tripping over each other. It was a tone she hadn't heard in years, but she still recognised it. And knew enough to dampen down its embers straightaway. 'Aims,' she said lightly, 'what on earth are you talking about?'

'The *fire*.' Aimee sounded scared. 'Last night. When we let off the — you know.'

'The lanterns?'

'Shhhh.'

'Okay, okay.' Melinda sat up. 'What about — them?'

'I think we might have caused an accident.'

'Oh, Aims.' Melinda pulled the doona up over her breasts. 'Of course we didn't.'

'But we might have.'

Melinda sighed. 'And how do you figure that?'

‘Because.’ Aimee was whispering as well. ‘It was around the same time, and in the same area, sort of. And the newspaper says that the engine *exploded*.’

Melinda edged regretfully out of her Westin Heavenly bed, purchased after a particularly memorable weekend at the hotel chain’s Melbourne property. The relationship had come to nothing, but the bed was still one of her best investments. She slipped on a Japanese robe and padded out onto the balcony. God, it was bright.

‘All right,’ she said, dragging a deckchair into the shade. ‘Tell me exactly what the paper says.’

Aimee began, falteringly, to read. Melinda stopped her after the second paragraph.

‘Aimee, Aimee.’ Melinda glanced down her robe. There were bruises on her left breast, finger and mouth marks. She shivered, remembering. ‘They flew into a hill. End of story.’

‘But how do you know?’

‘Well, there’s no way those lanterns could have travelled as far as the ranges, for starters. They’re just tissue and wire. They don’t have engines.’

Aimee was silent.

‘And they’ve got very limited fuel. They just burn out.’

‘But —’

‘But nothing.’ Melinda got back to her feet. ‘Trust me on this one, okay? You’re hung over, and reading into things. This has got nothing to do with you. With us. It says they went into a hill. In the ranges. In the dark. There’s no mystery.’

‘You’re sure?’

Melinda examined herself in the glass door. Some of last night’s mascara had transferred onto her upper lids; she carefully wiped it off. ‘I’d bet the company on it.’

‘O-kay.’

‘Believe me. Our little lanterns won’t have made it over the river.’ Melinda stretched. ‘Look, I’ve got to go.’ She paused, smiling. ‘I’ve got someone here.’

‘No way? Really? Who?’

Melinda stepped back inside, enjoying the mystery. ‘Just someone,’ she said. ‘I’ll call you later.’ She hung up before Aimee could ask anything more.

‘Everything all right?’ He was awake now, propped up in bed, a rare male presence in her ultra-feminine bedroom. The chest hair and thick arms looked out of place amid her broderie anglaise pillow cases, the satin throw cushions that had been well and truly thrown. Melinda kicked one aside as she made her way across the room.

‘Absolutely.’ She climbed back in beside him, unsure of how close to get now they were both sober. He was older than she’d realised, and slightly chunkier, but still good looking. Salt-and-pepper hair, morning-after stubble. A couple of unfortunate tattoos, but it wasn’t like she was perfect. He stretched out an arm and she rolled into it, letting her breasts brush against his side.

‘Good,’ he said, staring down at her nipples. They hardened from the attention, and he grinned. ‘Really good.’ He pushed her robe back and stroked a rough hand across her breasts. Melinda made an appropriate noise as he bent his head down. God. How long had it been? A good nine months of pointless waxing and exfoliating, but it just showed, it payed to keep it up. Act as if, her books said. Melinda sucked her stomach in as his hand drifted lower.

‘Did you turn your phone off?’ he asked, one thumb moving in slow circles, not quite in the right place, but close enough.

‘Mmmm,’ lied Melinda, tilting her hips. *Yes. There.*

‘Good,’ he said again, grinning at her. Clearly a man of few words. ‘Your friends call far too early.’

‘It’s not really that early,’ she murmured, enjoying the growing intensity as his fingers moved faster. Fantastic. She wouldn’t even have to fake this one.

The fingers stilled. 'What time is it?'

Melinda pressed herself against the hand, willing it to continue. 'Ten?' she said. 'Quarter past maybe.'

'Fuck.' The fingers withdrew. 'Sorry, Mel. I've got to go.'

'Oh.' And just when things were getting interesting. 'Really?'

She got a quick half-hug, then he was up and pulling on his jocks. 'I promised I'd take the kids over to the lake,' he said, searching under cushions. 'At eleven. Bugger.'

'Right.' She tugged her robe back on, tied the sash tight to give herself a waist. He was wearing a shirt now, his underwear bulging beneath it, and just one sock. She pointed to the other under the chest of drawers, but didn't get up.

'But this was great,' he said. 'I'm really glad we did this.'

'Sure.'

He paused, mid-trouser. 'I've got your number, right?'

Melinda shrugged.

'Hey,' he said. 'Don't be like that. I need to be on time for these things.' He shoved a wallet in his pocket. 'I'll make it up to you. Take you out for dinner. In the city. Somewhere swanky.'

'Okay.'

'Anywhere you want. You name it. My treat.'

Melinda forced herself to look excited at the idea of a meal she could easily pay for herself, at a restaurant where the maitre d' would already know her name, and she'd have to ring first and tell him not to use it, not to make a fuss of her, so her companion didn't feel less important. 'Give me two minutes to pull some clothes on and I'll drop you off,' she said.

'You don't need to do that,' he said, lacing up a pair of slightly scuffed dress shoes. 'I'll get a taxi.'

'You sure?' A quick nod. 'Well then, I'll walk you out. Give the neighbours a bit of a thrill.'

'Ahhh, maybe not.' He paused, his bulk blocking the doorway. 'Probably not a good idea for me to be seen with someone else

at this stage, while it's all still going through the lawyers. It'll just upset her.'

'Right.'

He bent down and kissed her, hard, gave her breast a quick squeeze. 'But I'll be back,' he said, as he let himself out. 'That's a promise.'

Melinda leaned against the hard wood of the door, the sexy feelings from just a few minutes earlier evaporating in the air-con. This was the problem with dating in your late thirties. They came with baggage. Cargo, sometimes. Ex-wives, kids, custody battles. Lawsuits. And you couldn't rule them out on that basis, or else there would be literally no one, only weirdos who had never married. Like her. What she needed, she reminded herself as she scooped up the local paper, was to be open-minded. Melinda had spent four hundred dollars on a half-day course about Settling for Mr Good Enough, where a stiletto-shod twenty-something wearing too much bronzer had tried to convince six businesswomen twice her age that lowering their standards wasn't necessarily a bad thing. It increased the catchment area. Stop worrying about the little things, she'd advised, such as whether a man had hair, dress sense, a job. You need to think older, she'd insisted, waving a hand smug with diamonds. You're all working. A retiree might be useful! And then, when the women had risen up in revolt, bronzer-girl had snarkily pointed out that they weren't going to be dating people in their own age group anyway, because all the forty-year-old men were dating thirty-year-olds and the thirty-year-old men were dating twenty-year-olds, so they might as well get used to it.

Melinda popped a capsule in the coffee machine. Dave had hair. And teeth. He was on the right side of fifty. The sex had been fun, not weird or gross in any way. She knocked back the espresso like a vodka shot. He'd paid for drinks, and the taxi home. He wanted to see her again. He'd said so, twice. The fact that he was considerate of his soon-to-be ex-wife and kids was a

good thing, surely. Admirable even. You wouldn't want to date a jerk. Melinda smiled. And he'd been good with his hands. Very good. The caffeine hit her stomach with a reawakening jitter, and she decided to head back to bed and finish herself off. This was a good start to the new year. Only eleven hours in, and she already had a lover. Melinda shoved the newspaper in the bin and went to find her vibrator.

There was *déjà vu*, and then there was life openly mocking you as karma bit you on the arse. Lou didn't believe in God, but she could imagine Him laughing as she paid for the pregnancy test, could imagine her parents beside Him, tutting smugly, full of I-told-you-so's as she drove an almost catatonic Tansy back home. Could picture them all rolling hysterically around whatever heavenly judgement cloud they sat on as Lou led her daughter into the same avocado-and-peach bathroom she'd used for her own test seventeen years before. *Your chickens will come home to roost one day*, her mother loved to tell her. *Mark my words*. Lou turned away as Tansy pulled her underwear down, tried not to look shocked at the lack of pubic hair. There was a pathetic tinkle as Tansy forced herself to urinate.

They sat, waiting, for the test to decide their fate, Lou on the floor, Tansy on the toilet, making the world's worst small talk.

'So how many periods have you missed?'

'Two.'

'Have you been sick?'

'Sort of.'

'Oh, Tans.'

'I know. I *know*.'

There was no need for the test, obviously. But still they sat, hoping, just in case it proved them wrong.

When it didn't Tansy said nothing, just crumpled forward and buried her face in her hands, underwear still around her ankles.

Lou leaned her head back against the cold bathroom tiles. Images of cobbled European streets and foreign balconies flitted through her mind. Paella. Sangria. The Eiffel Tower. Not for her, once again. She sighed and got to her feet. It was only a couple of metres from one end of the bathroom to the other, but it was far enough for Lou to kiss goodbye to one future and reluctantly acknowledge another. She knelt down and placed her hand on Tansy's quivering back. 'It's going to be okay,' she whispered. 'Don't worry. It's all going to be okay.'

If she shifted all the wineglasses to the unit on the far wall, she'd have more room in the pantry for her baking stuff. But then where would they keep the good china? Aimee stood in the middle of her kitchen, every surface covered by three generations of mismatched crockery, and tried to focus on the task at hand. Maybe at the bottom of the wall unit, to anchor the glassware, keep everything steady.

'If we had a cellar door,' Nick said, from somewhere behind her, 'you wouldn't have to keep all this crap in here.' His answer to everything: create a dedicated space where customers could taste and buy wine at their leisure. Customers whose happiness and wellbeing Aimee would ultimately be responsible for.

'If we had a cellar door,' she countered, without turning around, 'we'd just have more crap.'

A banging door signalled his escape to the calmer surrounds of the vineyard. Aimee dragged a stepladder into the pantry and began to pull linen from the top shelves. White. Cream. Ecu. The napkins opened themselves out as they fell, parachuting slowly to the ground where they lay like shrouds over the stacks of cups and saucers.

'Mum, what are you doing?'

Aimee put one tentative foot on a middle shelf so she could reach the placemats at the back. 'Can you hold the ladder, darling?'

Shelley stepped carefully through the obstacle course of china, frowning.

'Thanks, love.' Aimee leaned forward and grabbed an armful of her mother-in-law's embroidered runners and place settings. She'd kept it all in case it came back into fashion, but the trend for everything retro didn't seem to include Monica's God-awful cross stitch. 'Watch out!' she called, as she dumped the entire lot over the side.

'Mum, we sorted all this out last month,' said Shelley.

'I know.'

'So why are you doing it again?'

'Just keeping busy.' Aimee pushed a pile of fabric off another shelf. A damask tablecloth caught a cluster of antique vases, one of which tipped over with an ominous crack.

Shelley stared at her mother. 'Are you all right?'

Aimee didn't answer, just wiped the shelf clean.

'You know that was a Wembley swan you just broke, don't you?'

'I know.'

Shelley frowned. 'Do you want a cup of tea or something?'

No, she didn't. She wanted to keep moving, to keep doing, not stop and sit and *think*. 'I'm fine,' she said. 'Absolutely fine.'

'Okay, okay,' said Shelley. 'I'll leave you to it then.' She paused at the door. 'Can you give me a ride to Emma's later?'

No, thought Aimee, heart stilling. She couldn't. Shouldn't. She needed to stay right here, resist the urge to venture out and see things for herself. Just count forks and wipe out drawers, keep her brain busy. She'd been taking care of her head long enough to know the drill. 'I can't, love,' she said, grateful for an excuse. 'I left the car at Melinda's.'

'We could bike over and get it.'

Her daughter's face was hopeful, and Aimee felt selfish.

'Please,' asked Shelley.

Then again, maybe it would be good for her to get out in the fresh air. Because that was another weapon in her self-care arsenal: exercise. Get the blood circulating, put the focus on the body not the head. And she didn't need to go anywhere near the crash site, could stick to the back roads. Come straight home afterwards, no diversions.

'All right,' she said. 'Just let me sort this lot out and I'll get changed.'

Aimee pulled on a pair of leggings — still too tight. 'You need to lay off the cheesecake,' she told her reflection. But quietly, in case Shelley was nearby. She didn't want to be responsible for her daughter developing a bad body image.

She wrestled her hair into a ponytail, shoved her car keys down the side of her sports bra. I'll just open the kids' windows, she thought, ducking into Shelley's room. Tidy as ever, bed made, even in the school holidays. Byron's was usually a different story: dirty dishes, half-drunk Milo, abandoned sandwiches thick with appreciative ants. Aimee steeled herself. But there was only Byron, typing away in the messaging box of his favourite world-building game. He shut the screen down as she walked in.

'Sorry, love,' she said. 'I thought you were out.'

'Got bored.'

'Really? It's such a nice day out there. Shelley and I are going for a bike ride. Why don't you come?'

He looked at her as though she'd suggested cleaning his room for fun.

'Or you could go skateboarding, or down to the river. Why don't you call some of your friends, see what they're up to.'

'They're busy.'

'There must be someone you can hang out with.'

He shrugged, but with a brief flash of angst among the acne. There was a fresh crop on his chin, the spots red and embarrassed

for themselves. God, hormones were a bitch. Aimee reached out, her own worries forgotten. 'Let me put some arnica on that. It'll calm it right down.'

Byron twisted away. 'Get off.'

He was so awkward, bless him. Like she'd been. But it must be so much harder for him, with all this new territory to navigate. *A virgin till university*. Not that there was anything wrong with that. Aimee sat down on the edge of her son's bed.

'You know, love,' she said gently, 'I didn't have a proper boyfriend till I was nearly twenty, and that was your dad. He was the first guy to ever ask me out.'

Byron flushed. Aimee felt herself blushing too, but she took a deep breath and kept going. It was important that he felt okay about himself, especially now.

'I had terrible skin, worse than yours, and my hair was horrendous. A total frizzball. None of the guys wanted to speak to me, let alone go out with me.'

Byron slumped in his chair. 'Mum —'

'I'm saying I understand, that's all. And that you don't have anything to worry about. This is all completely normal. Your skin'll clear up. You'll meet someone. And it's probably better to wait.' God, how should she put this? Directly, all the websites said. No euphemisms. They'll appreciate how open you are. 'And gay sex is just as emotionally involved as straight sex. You don't want to rush out and do it with just anyone. It'll be better if you're really ready, and with someone you care about.'

'Mum. *Please*.'

'I know some of your friends are probably doing it. But there's no shame in not being experienced. I didn't sleep with anyone till I got together with your father. And you're still so young. You need to —'

'MUM. STOP TALKING. PLEASE, JUST STOP TALKING.'

‘Okay, okay,’ Aimee got to her feet, inched backwards out of the room. ‘But you know you can always talk to me if —’

The door was shut before she could finish her sentence. Ah well. At least she’d shown she understood. And she’d talked about sex like it was a normal everyday thing, which it was. So hopefully he’d take less risks, if it didn’t feel taboo. Aimee mentally congratulated herself on her courage. *See, Nick, he did need another chat, and obviously I was the only one brave enough to have it.*

There was a slow hand clap on the landing behind her.

‘Oh Mum,’ said Shelley, sounding disappointed. ‘You are *such* a dork.’

CHAPTER 4

Pete lay listening to the gentle breathing of machines and the soft lies of medical staff. ‘It’s all right, Pete,’ they kept telling him. ‘It’s going to be all right.’

The sight loss was temporary, or at least as far as the doctors could tell. A psychological response to the accident. Nothing permanent. Just give it time. Same with the ribs and the facial fractures. His shoulder had separated, something Pete didn’t know could even happen, but his injuries were mild, considering. The catheter? ‘Just to help you out, mate. Till you’re back on your feet.’

What they wouldn’t tell him was what was going on with Lincoln. ‘Intensive care,’ they said, ‘but don’t worry, we’re looking after him. You just rest up and take it easy.’ Platitudes. No real detail. And it wasn’t like he could read their expressions. But he could hear the whispers just beyond the swinging door, the soft sobs of his sister, clutching his good hand as though she had nothing else to hold onto. He tried to press her for information but she just cried harder, said she didn’t know any more than the doctors told him. He could hear the lie in her hesitation, but it wasn’t fair on the woman.

‘I want to see Cameron,’ he said. His elder son didn’t bother to bullshit anyone, wasn’t worried about feelings and sensitivities; he’d tell him the truth. Pete kicked the end of the bed out of frustration. ‘Where’s Cam? Someone get Cam.’