

# ANYTHING FOR HER

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ZAFFRE

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*This book is dedicated with love and gratitude to  
Ruby Julia Minett.  
Mum*

## PROLOGUE

SATURDAY 25TH JULY 2015

The storm, when it finally arrived, was every bit as impressive as the forecasts had predicted. It was meant to materialise sometime around midday and maybe that was what lulled everyone into a false sense of security because well into the afternoon the skies were still clear and any thoughts of hail storms and forty to fifty millimetres of rain within the first hour seemed fanciful in the extreme. *Typical Met Office*, was the general consensus. *Haven't got a bloody clue!* Except, of course, they did. Their sense of timing might have been slightly awry, but there was nothing wrong with their assessment of the storm itself. They knew exactly what to expect.

It came almost literally out of the blue. The first warning shot was a stiff breeze which announced itself by ruffling awnings and newspapers, lifting skirts and skimming the dust and litter from the surface of the pavement. Then the clouds came scudding across like locust swarms, treacle black, thick as molasses, chasing the light from the sky and squatting over the West End like some malevolent entity. Nature's literal five o'clock shadow.

People were slow to react at first. There were a few puzzled glances at the shapeshifting skies as everyone tried to work out what had happened to the sun. Then a handful of nervous uh-ohs turned into a collective gasp as the first fat drops of rain began to fall.

The effect on the streets below was electric, casual strollers diving for the nearest available shelter as if their lives depended on it, queues washed away in an instant. The rain and hail sluiced and skidded their way down the streets like mischievous children, puddles forming in seconds and inching their way towards each other to create a series of mini-lakes as the beast of the storm breathed its fury over the scene below.

In the foyer of The Prince of Wales Theatre, where the matinee performance of *The Book of Mormon* had only just finished, there was momentary chaos. Those who had decided to skip the encores and get to the head of the taxi queue had barely staked their claim when the first wave of hailstones swept over. A few resilient souls decided to stand their ground, until a passing van, hugging the kerb too tightly, sent one of the mini-lakes arcing into the air like a rogue wave. This was enough to send them scuttling back to the foyer, where they were met by a solid wall of people coming the other way as more and more members of the audience began to drift out of the auditorium and press forward, unable to understand why nothing seemed to be moving up ahead. Tempers were already beginning to fray at the edges.

Aimi was several rows back and still a good way from the doors but she heard the first crash of thunder all right. If it had been up to her she'd have been happy to go off to the bar and sit this one out. They had plenty of time to get back to the hotel

room and change before dinner – a few minutes either way wasn't going to make much difference.

Unfortunately Joe was cut from a different cloth. Joe didn't do patient. To be fair, he also didn't do crowds or confined spaces, but that was no more than incidental here. She'd seen the glint in his eye and knew that his real motivation stemmed from the element of competition, a challenge to the ego he simply couldn't resist. No sooner had he realised that nothing was moving than he started using those broad shoulders of his to break up the impasse in front of him, one hand easing loiterers out of the way and the other clamped firmly around her left wrist as he dragged her along in his wake.

It's fair to say his efforts were not meeting with the general approval of others around them and one woman, having been jostled by him, looked as if she was about to put him straight on a few points of etiquette. Then she caught sight of Aimi and stopped in mid-protest, rearranging her features as best she could to sketch at least an approximation of a smile.

'Oh . . . hello,' she said. 'I almost didn't recognise you.'

Aimi turned to face the woman, struggling to place her.

'I'm sorry?'

'Oh, you probably won't remember me. We met earlier this year . . . Vicky Finn?'

Aimi's uncertain half-smile was strangled almost at birth. Swap the flowery summer dress for a professional dark blue business suit and the tablet she felt obliged to consult every five seconds and the missing pieces slid easily into place. She knew exactly who this woman was . . . and she also knew this was not good. Not good at all. Joe had turned to see what was going on, his interest no more than half-hearted for now, but even half-hearted was unwelcome.

'I'm sorry,' Aimi said. 'You must have the wrong person.'

'No,' the woman persisted, clearly a little slow on the uptake. 'The charity dinner in Brighton – you remember?'

'Actually, my husband and I . . . we're in a bit of a hurry,' Aimi said, and with that she turned her back, urging Joe forward with a new-found sense of purpose. She hoped that would be enough. Surely she'd take the hint now. Even so, she didn't dare to look back in case it was viewed as an invitation to continue the conversation.

As it happened, Joe solved the problem anyway by clicking back into gear. He'd spotted a gap up ahead and decided that offered a possible way forward. And when she *did* finally risk a glance over her shoulder some thirty seconds later the woman was nowhere to be seen, already swallowed up by the crowd.

Only then did she realise just how fast her heart was beating.

Vicky Finn meanwhile was less than impressed.

'I think I just got snubbed,' she said to her sister.

'You sure you've got the right person?'

'Oh yes,' said Vicky, removing her glasses and slipping them into their case. 'I spent an entire afternoon and the best part of the evening running round after her. I'm not likely to forget Mrs Vedra in a hurry.'

She dropped the case into her bag.

'I'll tell you something else too – the man who was with her?'

She smiled.

'That's not Mr Vedra.'



# PART ONE



## FRIDAY 14TH AUGUST 2015

Ashford. Ashford . . . *International*.

There was something about that adjective that always niggled away at Billy, brought out the cynic in him. It came across as just that little bit too desperate to impress, as if seeking to confer upon the place a status, a sense of glamour and mystery which was never entirely warranted by the town itself. Even the positioning of the word felt like an afterthought, almost a pose if you like.

He knew this was unfair, that he wasn't really in a position to offer any informed opinion on Ashford and its merits. Quite apart from anything else, he hadn't actually been into the town centre since he was six or seven years old and plenty of water had passed under that particular bridge. A lot might have changed in twenty years – certainly Mia always spoke highly of the town. She said he ought to try it sometime. It was apparently a pretty place with a real buzz about it on market days. She ought to know – she'd been making that journey into the gallery every day for years.



Even so, he had no memories of Ashford that would raise it above the level of most other towns nestled in that south-eastern corridor. It seemed to him that but for a quirk of geographical location which placed it in a direct line from St. Pancras to the Channel Tunnel, many more appropriate adjectives might just as easily have sprung to mind.

Ashford *Anonymous*, for instance. Or maybe Ashford *Average*.  
Ashford . . . *Anywhere*.

He picked up his rucksacks and slung one over each shoulder, his mind automatically seeking out other examples of alliteration that might fit the bill.

Ashford *Afterthought*, he decided eventually as he stepped down onto the platform.

A number of passengers had got off the train with him. Some headed for the exit, others were now dotted along the platform, waiting likewise for the connection to Rye. He decided against taking a seat, preferring instead to stretch his legs for a while. Even ten minutes was better than nothing. He'd been sitting all day in the media suite, not to mention several hours at home the previous evening, hunched over laptops, converting graphics into manageable file sizes. Sometimes it felt as if he spent more time using HTML, CSS and JavaScript than English. A bit of gentle exercise would do him good. It might also present a moving target for the sense of despondency that was hovering in the wings, waiting for a chance to settle over him. He knew it was there, knew as well that he'd never outrun that particular cloud, but it went against his instincts just to sit there and give in to it.

He'd done this journey three or four times a year since he first left home, initially for university and then for a variety of jobs

in London when his studies didn't work out quite as envisaged. Christmas, he thought, ticking them off mentally. Mia's birthday certainly. His own, of course. Even Matthew's for a while because he knew how important it was for Mia to be able to feed the illusion that they were a family.

Every trip seemed to follow the same template somehow. The early stages always offered plenty in the way of distractions. There was the bustle of St. Pancras for one thing, St. Pancras *International*, a place which more than lived up to the adjective. There was something about the noise, the energy, the excited chatter echoing throughout the station concourse that he found compelling. Thousands of lives all converging at once. So many potential destinations for each of them, so many plans. It fired his imagination, inspired him to believe that the more prosaic Southeastern service he himself was taking might somehow draw upon the magic of its illustrious neighbour. For a short time at least, he was part of this great collective adventure. Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Marseille – they were all clamouring for him to reach out and seize an opportunity for himself. The fields rushing past the window in a blur were like some cinematic representation of the life he could be leaving behind. It was so easy to believe that all he had to do was stay in his seat and everything would come to him.

But it was never the Eurostar and as Ashford began to draw near he'd be jolted out of his trance, aware suddenly of a shift in the atmosphere which took on a physical form. His foot would start tapping, he'd realise he had a crick in his neck from sitting awkwardly with his head pressed against the window. He'd start counting down the minutes, then the fields, the buildings. He'd get up and drag his rucksacks out of the overhead rack and hug

them to his chest, trying to squeeze from those final few minutes some last vestige of the fanciful alternative lives that had been distracting him earlier. Then, as the train began to slow before grinding to a halt with an audible groan, he was back to being a poor relation again. Back in the real world.

In Ashford.

Ashford . . . *International*.

And the moment he picked up the rucksacks and stepped down onto the platform he knew this trip was only ever heading one way . . . and it wasn't into the future.

Now, well into the final leg of the journey and only a few minutes out from Rye, he gazed through the window at fields which, to the untutored eye, were not so very different from the earlier ones. But these were not opening the way to a brighter future – instead it felt as if they were rushing past to attack from the rear, suck him in and close the zip behind him. And as the first strands of early evening mist drifted past, he recognised each and every wisp for the fragment of memory it represented.

The past, it seemed, was never going to leave him alone.

And it was never more than a whisper away.

JUNE 2002

*Thirteen years earlier*

*The car's there when he arrives home. He can see its roof rack from several yards away, sticking up above the fence that divides their property from the Wilsons' next door. Neither house has a garage, just a small concreted area directly in front of the house and separated from Udimore Road by a narrow strip of pavement.*

*He pauses for a moment on the front step, digging deep into his bag for the little purse in which he keeps the door key. His mother gave him one of her old ones and makes him take it to school because he's managed to lose three keys in as many months. He's not happy about it 'cos it's gross. It's got flowers on it and looks a bit gay, so he makes sure it stays right at the bottom of his bag where none of his mates will see it. He has to admit though that he hasn't lost a key since he started using it.*

*He's just managed to find it when he hears the phone ringing in the hallway and his first thought is school – they've sussed he's bunking. And it's not like it's his fault. Until the illness – they just call it that now rather than give it a name; that way*

*they can pretend it's not so serious – his mum used to go through his bag every evening. She'd take out his planner and find out what homework he had and then check his timetable to see what lessons he'd got for the following day so she could pack all the right books for him. It's only recently he's had to worry about his PE kit. It's always been there by the front door in his sports bag, waiting for him when he comes downstairs in the morning. Even after they found out what was wrong with her, she was still managing to get up early, sort out breakfast for everyone, do him a packed lunch and make sure he was set up for the day.*

*But things have been getting a lot worse lately and she can't do half the things she used to. She's getting clumsy and her fingers don't seem to do what she wants them to. His dad's been on at him about how it's time he started thinking for himself instead of expecting everyone else to run around after him. 'You're thirteen, not six. You're not helpless!' And he doesn't mind that . . . he can see it makes sense. Only it takes some getting used to and sometimes he just forgets, that's all. He doesn't do it deliberately.*

*His heart starts hammering inside his chest as he waits there for his dad to come and answer the phone. He's been working from home for a couple of weeks now because he doesn't want to leave her on her own any more than he has to. They both try to make out it's nothing to do with the illness – they've always planned for this, they say, 'cos he's ten years older than her and getting near retirement anyway, but Billy's not stupid. He knows.*

*But no one comes to answer the phone. Instead it carries on ringing and even though he hasn't been counting he knows the answer phone will kick in any second now. And sure enough, to his relief, the ringing falls silent. He can't tell whether they've left a message or just hung up but it feels like a reprieve of sorts, however temporary it might be. Hardly daring to believe his luck, he waits*

*a few more seconds, then cautiously inserts his key in the lock and lets himself in.*

*The first thing that strikes him is the silence. He can hear the fridge whirring in the kitchen and the slap, slap of his shoes on the tiles in the hallway, but that's it. No TV coming from the front room. No radio playing in the kitchen. Nothing. His first instinct is to call out to ask if anyone's home but he doesn't want to break the spell that seems to be hanging over the house at the moment. Doesn't want to push his luck. He leaves his bag by the front door and walks through to the front room, wondering if his mum has gone to sleep on the settee instead of going through to her room. They've moved their bedroom downstairs now because it's too difficult for her to get up and down the stairs and if she's going to need a wheelchair before long they'll have to get some sort of chair lift installed and his dad says they cost the earth. So he's taken their double bed apart so he could get it out of their bedroom and then reassembled it in what used to be the dining room, having shifted the table into the front room. It's all a bit cramped but that's not the sort of thing you can complain about really, is it?*

*She's not in the front room. That means she'll be in the bedroom and he's about to poke his head round the door to let her know he's home before deciding against it. She may not have been in there long and if he disturbs her now it might take her ages to go back off. Instead he starts to climb the stairs, assuming his dad will be in the new study he's created out of their old bedroom, only he's not there either, which is a bit of a puzzle.*

*He goes back downstairs, noting with some relief that the light on the answer phone isn't flashing. Then he walks through to the kitchen and makes himself a cheese sandwich while he tries to work out what his dad's up to. He can only come up with two possibilities. One is that he's popped out for a couple of minutes, maybe to get*





*a paper or some groceries, but if that was the case he'd have taken the car. He doesn't walk anywhere if he can help it. The other is that he's in the bedroom with her. Maybe he's got one of his migraines and has decided he needs a break from work. Or maybe they're just having a quiet chat together, a bit of privacy, but if that's the case surely he'd have come out to answer the phone?*

*There's an obvious way to find out but if there's even the slightest chance his dad's asleep in there, the last thing he wants to do is wake him. He'll be finding things for Billy to do – homework, cleaning, tidying his room. There's always something, as if he can't stand the thought of anyone being able to sit and relax. No . . . better to let him carry on sleeping if that's what he's doing. Maybe it'll put him in a better mood for later.*

*Billy pours himself a glass of milk, picks up the sandwich and as he's doing so he hears the noise for the first time . . . a scratching sound, half a dozen strokes followed by a plaintive mewling. It's coming from the bedroom opposite. Luna, he realises. He hasn't even thought about her. If she's in when he gets home she usually comes and wraps herself around his legs before he's had a chance to shut the door behind him but they've got a cat flap now so as often as not she's out sunning herself in the garden instead. By the sound of it, she's managed to get herself trapped in the bedroom. If she keeps on making that noise, she'll wake them up and he can kiss goodbye to any chance of having some time to himself. He'll probably get chewed up for making a sandwich without asking and helping himself to a glass of milk as well. He can't let that happen – he needs to get her out of there.*

*He tiptoes over to the door, turns the handle and opens it as quietly as he possibly can.*



## FRIDAY 14TH AUGUST 2015

When the train pulled into Rye, Billy walked straight through the tiny waiting area and out of the building. There was no sign of Matthew yet but that was no great surprise. Mia had sent a text earlier to say it might be touch and go because he was driving back from a meeting in Hove. He'd do his best but a lot would depend on the traffic. Billy had offered to get a taxi instead but she wouldn't hear of it and he knew better than to insist. She was always quick to pick up on anything like that. Nuances were her speciality, especially where the relationship between her brother and husband was concerned.

He sat on the step immediately outside the building, leaning against one of the pillars, his legs draped across the rucksacks. Much of the heat had gone out of the day but there was enough residual warmth for him to feel comfortable in just T-shirt and cut-offs, even though it was gone seven. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly aware of just how tired he was.

*Double whammy*, he told himself. Work was manic just now, the only word for it. He was starting to think maybe moving into

a flat with Karun and Zak wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done because although they got on well it was inevitable they'd be taking the job home with them more often than not. It was getting harder and harder to find a clear dividing line between work and downtime. Even so, he felt he'd probably be able to handle the workload and the odd hours if he could just recharge his batteries from time to time, but ever since that first call from Matthew a month or so ago, he'd been going to bed dog tired and taking an eternity to get to sleep.

The moment he'd heard about Mia, he'd dropped everything and caught the next train back to see her. She spent the whole weekend he was there protesting that her *funny turn* had been blown out of all proportion and he'd done his best to go along with that because that's what she desperately wanted him to believe. But he'd never really bought into it and the moment he was back in London the doubts had begun to eat away at him. He needed answers badly, if only to enable him to settle into some sort of regular sleeping pattern and now, after Matthew had called again last night, it seemed the perfect opportunity had presented itself. This time, he promised himself, he wouldn't be returning to London without the full picture.

He opened his eyes as a white Audi convertible pulled up in front of the station, roof open, Massive Attack playing on the sound system. He was no authority on cars but knew more than enough about the A3 Cabriolet, having had to sit through a ten-minute lecture plus guided tour under the bonnet the last time he came home. Matthew Etheridge sounded the horn even though Billy was already getting to his feet.

'Need a hand with those?' he called out, one arm resting casually on the door frame. He nodded at the rucksacks but showed

no signs of unfastening his seat belt. Billy shook his head and hoisted them into the back of the car, draping them across the rear seats. He got in the front and was still pulling the door to as Matthew swung round in a 180-degree turn to rejoin Station Approach.

‘Sorry, I’m late,’ he said. ‘You been waiting long?’

Billy puffed out his cheeks and shook his head. ‘Fifteen . . . twenty minutes.’

‘Bloody traffic – I tell you, I could never live in Brighton. It’s all stop start stop start right the way along the seafront. Nightmare.’

Billy shrugged his shoulders to make it clear it wasn’t a problem, then leant back in his seat and closed his eyes. He didn’t need to look at the route they were taking. It was imprinted on the inside of his eyelids – Cinque Ports Road, Tower Street, Landgate, then right into Fishmarket Road.

‘It’s good of you to drop everything like this, mate’ said Matthew, just a hint of the Aussie twang sneaking through as it did from time to time. He’d been here since he was a teenager but had never really lost it completely.

‘No problem.’

‘Naah, I mean it. Really appreciate it. I’d have given you a bit more warning but the US guys switched dates on us late in the day as usual.’

They’d already been through all this on the phone the previous evening, but this was the way their conversations had tended to go in recent years. Repeating the tried and tested always felt like the safe option.

‘When are you off?’ asked Billy.

‘Wednesday morning. I’m meeting their legal team in Boston on Thursday, then I’ve got an appointment with the

CEO in New York on Friday and back Saturday. You OK to stay that long? I mean, it's not eating into your leave too much?'

'It's fine.'

'That's good . . . because I didn't mean you to come straight away. You could've left it a few days. I'd feel bad if –'

'It's fine, Matthew.'

'Right.'

Billy opened his eyes as they dropped down to Skinner's roundabout and turned left onto the A259, heading for Camber.

'So how is she?' he asked, deciding there was no harm in chancing his arm here. There might be some mileage in rehearsing a few questions before they arrived.

'Mia? She's good, she's good. You know what she's like. Always trying to take on more than she should. I've managed to nag her into taking the week off from the gallery so you can spend some time together and she can relax a bit. Do her good – she's really looking forward to it.'

'But she's OK.'

'Sure.'

'So why the summons?'

Matthew laughed. 'It's not a summons, mate.'

'So why the invitation then? It's not like I need one to come and visit my sister. And it's not the first time you've been called away on business either but you've never worried about leaving her on her own before, have you?'

'Well . . . no.'

'So why now? What's so different this time?'

Matthew ran one hand through his number four buzz cut, one of his more predictable tells whenever he wanted to buy some time before answering.

‘Nothing. Not really. It’s just . . . look, I thought maybe it would be better to have someone here with her, given what happened . . . you know.’

‘But that was just low blood pressure, right? That’s what you both told me.’

‘Absolutely.’

‘And they’ll have given her something for that, won’t they?’

‘Well, I think it’s more a question of making a few adjustments to diet and lifestyle actually –’

‘So there’s no reason we should be worrying about her blood pressure, is there?’

‘Well, if you put it like that . . .’

There was a silence which Billy was determined not to break if he could help it. The question was still out there.

‘It’s just . . . look, it’s all a bit isolated out here. I guess I’d be happier knowing someone was with her, you know? Better safe than sorry . . . especially at night. She tell you someone broke into the golf club just last week?’

Billy turned away and looked at the scenery as they drew clear of the town.

‘I hope you’re more convincing when you’re talking to your clients.’

‘No, seriously,’ said Matthew, risking a glance to his left as if seeking to lend weight to his reasoning. ‘There’s been a few complaints recently about kids on motor bikes making a nuisance of themselves late at night. I don’t like the thought of her being out here on her own, is all.’

Billy turned to look at him more closely. Matthew never seemed to change somehow, physically at any rate. There were a few more worry lines around the forehead and eyes but he was

still in really good shape, all those sessions in the gym keeping the years at bay. Billy ran a lot and played football for a Sunday league team so he considered himself to be fitter than most but he guessed Matthew would probably have the edge over him. He'd turned forty a year ago but you'd never know it to look at him.

'It's not just that though, is it?'

'Billy –'

'What's wrong with her?'

Matthew indicated right and turned into Camber Road. There was a pause in the conversation which felt to Billy like a diversionary tactic, as if Matthew was rethinking his strategy.

'Look,' he said eventually, 'I really think this is a conversation you should be having with Mia not me.'

'So there *is* something wrong with her.'

'I didn't say that.'

'You didn't say there isn't either.'

'Tell you what,' he said, reaching out to turn off the music. 'We'll be home any minute now. I'm just going to dash in, grab my kit and head straight back out to the gym so you and Mia will have plenty of time together and you can ask whatever questions you have then, OK?'

'And she'll tell me she's fine, never been better and there's nothing at all to worry about . . . which is why I'm asking you. What's wrong with her?'

The golf club flashed past on the right, Point Farm on the left. Almost there now. Matthew gave a deep sigh.

'She'll tell you, Billy,' he said eventually, turning into the drive as they reached the sandstone house they'd designed themselves. 'It's why you're here, OK? Her idea not mine. She

wants to tell you herself rather than have you find out some other way.'

'Shit.' That moment when your worst fears are confirmed. And he'd known all along. He just knew. 'Find out what?'

'Unh unh . . . no way. You can talk with Mia. But it's not what you think, OK? I'll tell you that much.'

'You don't know what I think.'

'It's not what you think, Billy.'

Matthew pulled on the handbrake and switched off the engine.

She's standing at the kitchen window when they arrive. She goes to the front door and they're still sitting in the car until Matthew looks up and realises she's watching. Then he grabs his briefcase and puts on the big smile he always brings to the fore when there's an audience – the one that never quite joins all the dots – and gives her a quick peck on the cheek on his way into the house to collect his sports bag.

Billy dumps his rucksacks on the doorstep and hugs her.

And hugs a bit longer.

*He knows*, she thinks to herself, as the embrace continues. *He knows*.

There's a flash of irritation with Matthew for the briefest of moments before she realises this is unfair. He hasn't necessarily said anything. Billy's just very intuitive when it comes to things like that. Despite the age gap of nearly nine years she and Billy have always been so close. He was the miracle baby who came out of nowhere long after their parents had given up all hope of a second child, and she'd thrown herself wholeheartedly into the role of protective older sister. They'd spent so much time in



each other's company when he was younger it's hardly surprising that each has this ability to sense when all is not right with the other. Almost telepathic – like twins, their mum always used to say. Matthew likes to imagine he's got a good poker face but the truth is he's more or less transparent and Billy was always going to sniff out the lie of the land before they got here. She should have realised.

So as soon as Matthew has dived back into his latest toy and roared out of the driveway once more, almost burning rubber in his anxiety to leave them to it, she brings through the meal she's prepared for Billy, pours him a glass of his beloved Tizer from the two-litre bottle she managed to track down especially this morning, and sits down opposite him at the dining-room table.

And opens up.

Because there's no point in delaying things with small talk. There's no skirting their way round this particular elephant. He knows why he's here and they're not going to be able to relax and enjoy their time together until they've got this out of their system. So she talks.

And talks.

Eases her way into it because she knows the first priority has to be to allay his fears about ALS. It has absolutely nothing to do with what's been happening lately but that will have been his initial, instinctive assumption. He'll have done his research and will be aware that even though ninety per cent of cases are not inherited, that still leaves ten per cent that are, and a one-in-ten chance won't sit well with him. In that curiously fatalistic way of his he's been glimpsing shadows and fleshing out worst case scenarios from the flimsiest of evidence bases for thirteen years

now. Logic won't be enough – it's never made even a tiny dent in his conviction. And because these fears are so deep-seated there's no way he's ever going to buy into any feeble evasions such as they've been using till now. It has to be the truth.

So she tells him everything – or everything she feels she can at any rate. She watches his face as she promises him, offering to swear on a stack of bibles, that when she collapsed a month ago it was not in any way related to ALS or any other form of motor neurone disease for that matter. She can see the conflicting responses flickering in his expression, the desperate desire to believe her doing battle with the wariness that comes with embracing hope because they both know from bitter experience that hope's what kills you in the end. She assures him the fainting fit – it's verging on the dramatic to call it a collapse – was down to working too hard and having abnormally low blood pressure, both of which she's put right since he was last here. It has nothing to do with ALS. Nothing at all. It's just that the tests they put her through led to further tests and referrals and . . .

She's been able to carry him with her so far because it's all been true. She's given nothing he can pick up on that infallible radar of his. But from here on in she knows she'll need to be a little more selective as to which truths he needs to be told because she's not sure he can handle the whole of it. She's not sure *she* can.

So she works her way through the sanitised account she's been preparing all day and she can see the shadow fall across his face before she's even touched on the most challenging areas. She reaches across the table and takes his hand, *squeezes* it as if to show him – *look, look at how hard I can squeeze, feel the vitality in there. There's nothing to worry about.* And she's about

two or three minutes in before it dawns on her that he hasn't interrupted once to ask a question or to challenge her on some element of the narrative which he finds dubious. She's not sure what she was expecting to see – tears probably, maybe a flash of anger over her decision to keep this from him until now. But this is not the Billy she and Matthew took in and cared for until he was ready to leave home. It's not the obsessive young man who threw himself into his degree course in web design with such total absorption that he burned out two thirds of the way through and had to leave. This is a different Billy – calm, reflective, analytical, as if aware that the balance has shifted to some extent and it's his turn now, at twenty-six, to play the protective, parental role that she's shouldered for so long.

Encouraged, she presses ahead, playing safe, sticking to the facts, embroidering nothing, merely massaging a few percentages and highlighting some factors at the expense of others.

*Too close to the optic nerve for surgery to be risk-free* – true, but only in the sense that any brain surgery carries an element of risk. Billy doesn't need to know that the specialist certainly wouldn't rule it out as an option.

*Even if they do go for surgery, it's unlikely they'd be able to remove all of it.* They could however have a much better chance if they went in after radiation has reduced the size but again . . . better not to confuse things. She has no intention of putting herself through radiation, chemo or anything else that invasive.

*Radiation is possible but there's an eighty per cent risk of further damage to eyes and brain.* Partially true at least, but she's plucked that figure out of nowhere in the hope that this will lend weight to her argument.

She knows she's being disingenuous, placing question marks against the one option she really doesn't want to consider because she knows Billy well enough to be sure that's the one on which he'll fixate, the one he'll see as offering hope. She'd rather keep her feet on solid ground, can't bring herself to try anything that might result in her losing her sight because that's the one outcome that terrifies her more than anything else. She hopes in time he'll understand this. He knows how important her work at the gallery is to her. Take that away from her and she's not sure what the point is anymore.

As a final clinching argument she throws in her one out-and-out lie of the evening, telling him that the specialist feels there's a realistic chance she'll be fine without any treatment. It might be years before her condition worsens. He's known several cases where the tumour hasn't grown or moved and the patient has gone on to lead a happy and successful life. This is what she wants to try, what she chooses for herself.

Billy doesn't look happy about this. She wonders if she's over-egged it and would have been better off just sticking with the facts. But he says nothing for now. He goes back to his meal, chewing over every morsel of what she's just said.

Nothing's won just yet.

But it's a start at least.