

before
we
say
goodbye
Madeleine
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ZAFFRE



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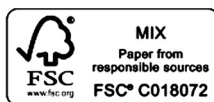
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For Felix, Olivia and Sidney with love



part one
winter



Chapter 1

SCOTT OPENED HIS BEDROOM DOOR AND A BLUE FOAM BULLET hit him between the eyes.

‘Yesss! Bang on target!’

Danny’s delighted face gleamed at him in the dim hallway and, despite being barely awake, Scott couldn’t help smiling back. Even this early in the morning, his housemate’s glee was hard to resist.

‘Don’t you ever sleep?’ Scott asked, edging round him and going into the kitchen. He hoped there would be enough milk to at least soften his cereal but he wasn’t optimistic. Three months of living in a dank student house in King’s Cross with one of the least-domesticated individuals on earth had made Scott realise just what stamina was required to keep it stocked up with even the most basic necessities of life.

‘I’ve a theory that we all sleep too much,’ Danny said, pulling out the stool from under what the estate agent details had fondly described as a breakfast bar but which was, in fact, a length of chipboard propped up on a couple of spindly legs. ‘Don’t you want to know how I did it?’ Danny asked, and then, without waiting for an answer, he plunged into his explanation.

‘I set up a program on my laptop. The webcam detected movement and prompted the mechanism I made with part of



an old food mixer and a battery pack to release the trigger. The challenging bit was finding the exact right spot to place the gun. I had to factor in your height and the speed at which you were likely to open the door,' Danny said and Scott shook his head in what he hoped was an appropriately awestruck fashion. Like any creative person, Danny relied heavily on an appreciative audience.

'One day you'll rule the world,' Scott said, pouring a meagre trickle of milk onto his cornflakes. Danny smiled so widely that his small grey eyes disappeared completely into a series of complicated folds. He seemed to possess more skin than other people. Danny's speciality, other than setting up elaborate surprises, was to pull the loose flesh on either side of his face and stretch it out a good two inches from his jaw line, giving him the look of a collared reptile.

'There's another of those gross slugs,' said Danny with a shudder, pointing to the giant black beast lying draped, like a desiccated tongue, over a dish on the draining board. 'I don't even know where they come from.' He looked around him fearfully as if he was expecting an army of the creatures to rise up from the floorboards and devour him. 'I think we should sprinkle it with salt. In fact, we should put salt all over the floor and they'll fizzle to death in the night.'

'I'll get rid of it,' Scott said and he scooped the creature up in a piece of kitchen paper and escorted it out of the back door, taking care to place it somewhere where it would be safe. The scrubby garden was in the grip of a frost and the lawn and pathway had a hard lustre. The sycamore tree by the fence stretched its slender arms into the white sky. Scott liked winter for the way





it seemed to freeze time – the days merging more easily into the nights so that they were harder to count.

‘Are you going to the SU tonight?’ Danny asked when Scott came back in. ‘It’s two pounds fifty a pint between half five and half seven and a silent disco. It’s a cheap night out and I could do with one of those.’

‘I’ll be there, although I don’t really get dancing on your own,’ said Scott. It seemed to him that the whole point of music was that it should blast out and fill the room all the way to the roof and everyone should be able to share it.

‘I think MAR-SI-A might be going,’ Danny said, giving Scott a side-eye look.

‘Is she?’ Scott said, trying what he thought might pass for an off-hand tone of voice, but Danny’s knowing, origami-like expression revealed that he wasn’t in the slightest bit deceived.

‘She made a particular point of saying she was going to be there. Almost as if she thought I would pass the information on to someone who might just, possibly, be interested.’

Marsia (spelled with an ‘s’, not a ‘c’, as she had made clear the first time Scott had met her, as if demonstrating just how unique she was) was studying English Literature. She wore almost transparent blouses and touched her hair frequently as if she needed to check its – admittedly – lustrous fall. He had noticed her from day one when she had been leaning against a wall outside the lecture theatre, her arms crossed, looking as if she would prefer to be elsewhere. He had been intrigued by the contrast between her disdainful face and her softly curved body, although he felt just a little ashamed of himself for noticing the latter. He didn’t want to be one of those men who talked to women’s breasts or





who dismissed people just because of the way they looked and he worried that he was shallower than he wanted to be. When he had been about seven and briefly left to his own devices with some magazines and a pair of plastic scissors he had cut out the pictures that he had found particularly appealing. His mother had walked into his room to the sight of thirty or forty chests, Blu-Tacked to his walls.

‘Oh God,’ she had said. ‘They are all someone’s mother or sister or daughter. Women are not just made up of separate bits.’

In the end she had allowed him to keep the two images of his choice and he had settled for Marilyn Monroe and Miss Piggy, both ladies who seemed to him to embody the feminine charms he admired and which he sensed his mother would find acceptable in the way the models in balcony bras were not. Now, at the age of nineteen, he thought his attraction to women with confidence (and ample cleavages) was born of his lack of experience. He liked women who seemed to know their own value because they would allow him a more comfortable reticence.

‘Are you not going in this morning?’ Scott asked Danny who was dressed in a Snoopy T-shirt and some alarmingly droopy boxers.

‘Got an essay to write. I’ll go in later,’ Danny replied.

Scott knew his housemate was already struggling with his uni work. He had met Danny’s father when he had first moved in and seen the way Danny’s body had sagged slightly under the weight of his father’s arm across his shoulders.

‘He’s going to be a lawyer,’ his father had said in a voice that hovered somewhere between pride and command. Scott was studying Biological Sciences, which was so absolutely what he





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wanted to do that he felt sorry for Danny's predicament. He had never known his own father and his mother was not the sort of person to impose her unsatisfied ambitions on him. Her hopes for him were not about academic excellence or career success, but they brought with them a burden of a different kind. Despite his mother's watchfulness, which had always made him feel like he was her only real aspiration, he had been free to make his own choices. He couldn't remember a time when he hadn't cared passionately about the environment in general and the sea in particular. This impulse seemed to him as innate as his inability to lie successfully, his tendency to heat rash and the way his hair stuck up in a weird fashion, whatever he did with it.

'Don't worry,' he said to Danny. 'You know you can always decide to do something else if this doesn't work out. There are a million things you're good at. You don't have to be good at this.'

Danny smiled wearily. 'Try telling that to my dad,' he said and he sloped off to his room.

Scott had been lucky to secure a flat so close to the university. Plenty of his peers had much further to travel. When his mother had dropped him off at the beginning of term she had been dubious about the tidemarks that rose up the outside walls and the smell of rotting vegetables that clung to the place, but he had loved it instantly. His bedroom was sparsely furnished with a desk and a bed that sagged in the middle but it had a window that looked out onto the garden and a fireplace with a massive marble surround and floorboards that one of his predecessors had painted in black and white squares like a giant chessboard.

After a hasty shower – the spored cubicle was not a place you wanted to linger in – Scott decided to walk to college. By the





time he had got himself on the Tube or waited for the bus it was almost quicker to go on foot, and, in any case, London was still new enough to be a novelty. Scott loved the way the city caught him up in it and carried him along heedlessly, as if he was a bottle floating along the Thames. Sometime during his first week in London he had gone to Waterloo Bridge and looked down into the grimy, sheeny mass of water and had felt overwhelmed by the sense that he had a part share in it. The river and the city along its banks seemed to be waiting for him to discover it. He had spent his childhood in a small town and although he felt disloyal, now that he had left, he realised how much he had longed to get away. He relished the fact that he could walk down the intricate, still unfathomable streets and nobody would know him. Back at home, if he picked his nose in a public place someone would make a note of it.



After his lecture Scott spotted Marsia in the canteen. He debated whether to go and join her, wondering if perhaps she had chosen to sit alone for a reason. He didn't want to force his company on her. While he hovered with his tray she looked up and caught his eye and waved at him, so he took a deep breath and weaved between the tables and chairs towards her, hoping that he wouldn't trip. Now would not be the moment, he thought, to spill tomato soup and coffee all over the place. He suspected that Marsia, with her green eyes and sulky mouth, had a low tolerance for fools.

'Is it OK to join you?' Scott said and then immediately cursed himself for asking the question. He probably sounded apologetic, unsure. Women like Marsia – although he knew she was



his age, she seemed so much older – surely liked men who were assertive. What would Hugh Jackman do? He often resorted to thinking of how the actor might behave in any given situation. It seemed to him that Hugh Jackman, with his sure jaw and wide chest, would never feel a moment's doubt. He would probably act as if it was Marsia's lucky day that he happened to be there when she was all on her own, with no one to talk to.

'Have you just had a lecture?' she asked. Her hair was pulled back from her face and her fingers on the table were tipped with a strident pink. She seemed so dauntingly formed that it made him feel fuzzy around the edges as if, by comparison, he hadn't yet quite come into focus.

'Yes,' he said sitting down opposite her. 'It was about the reason why there are two sexes,' he added and then felt himself flush. Out loud, his words sounded like a chat-up line. He hadn't needed to sit through Professor Langley's informative but over-long lecture on the evolution of sexual reproduction to see nature's startling efficiency in his own reactions to Marsia.

'And what *is* the reason?' she asked, resting her chin on her hand and looking at him. She was poised. That was the exact word for her. When animals were poised, he thought, it was generally because they were about to launch themselves for the kill. 'Surely we'd survive much better as a species if we had more choice about who we were able to reproduce with.'

She was poised *and* clever. He didn't have a hope.

'Well, it's still open for debate. There are lots of theories but it seems to boil down to the fact that if we reproduced like fungi, who apparently have about thirty-six thousand mating types, then mutations would occur very rapidly. A mushroom



doesn't have to go far to create another mushroom. It's harder for humans because they have less choice but it's a better way of ensuring the strength of the species.'

He thought briefly about making a joke about how he was a fun guy, but thought better of it.

'I see,' Marsia said. 'I thought the reason there are two sexes was something to do with how genetically superior eggs are to sperm. If men were able to reproduce without any help, the human race would probably be very feeble.' She had a way of half closing her eyes when she smiled and this gave her a slightly condescending look that Scott found inexplicably attractive. *I should find her annoying, he thought, and yet all I want is for her to smile at me again.*

'Well, yes. There's that,' Scott said, and he took a scalding gulp of his soup.

'Are you going to the party tonight?' she asked.

'I thought I would,' he said, trying to make it sound as if he had a hundred other places he could be.

'I'll see you there, then.' She got up and hitched her bag onto her shoulder. He watched the easy way she walked through the tables and chairs that he had found such obstacles and then returned to his soup, now made tasteless by his burnt mouth.

In the SU where, despite the cheapness of the beer, he stuck, as was his ingrained custom, to a single pint, Marsia danced – all swaying hips and expressive arms – to her own private tune. She offered him her other headphone so that he could share Calvin Harris and 'How Deep is Your Love?' He wasn't sure about love, but he thought he was feeling some version of it.





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They sat at a table by the wall and he kissed her. Her mouth was cool, then warm. They went outside and kissed some more. He thought she would be more restrained but she seemed urgent. Her tongue pushed into his mouth. He touched her breasts through her shirt and felt her hand go between his legs. He thought perhaps that they were moving too fast, then not fast enough. He thought of her long, pink-tipped fingers and the way she had of standing with her hands at her waist as if she was showing herself off and he felt dizzy.

Sometime later they went back inside, holding hands. He wondered if they would go home together and whether suggesting it was too pushy, too eager. He thought she was probably the sort of girl who lived in a room with cushions and a vase of peacock feathers and a family watercolour propped up against the wall. He pictured his shower facilities ripe with reproducing mushrooms and his clothes spread out in an insalubrious mass on the floor and had just decided he would suggest going back to her place when Danny, who had unhappily made the most of the two happy hours and was profoundly and mournfully drunk, dragged him away.

‘I need to shhpeak to you,’ his housemate said. ‘I can’t cope anymore with being here.’

By the time Scott had talked Danny out of his idea to run away to Cuba and suggested that his housemate sat down and had an honest talk with his father, the party was over. He looked around for Marsia and saw her walking towards the exit and rushed to get his coat. In the cloakroom a girl was on her hands and knees on the floor.

‘I’ve lost an earring,’ she said, looking up at him. ‘I dropped it somewhere here.’





She had dark hair, cut close like a cap, and pale skin.

‘My mother gave them to me,’ she said desperately and although the thought of Marsia waiting outside tugged at him, Scott got down on the floor and started searching. The girl really seemed upset and the sooner he found the dratted earring, the quicker he would be able to get away.

‘It’s a gold hoop,’ she said, running her hands across the floor and then reaching beneath the cupboard that ran the length of the wall.

‘You take this section. I’ll do the bit between the coats,’ Scott said, thinking that a methodical approach was likely to be more successful.

After about five minutes of fruitless searching, he asked, ‘Are you sure you dropped it here?’

‘I’m absolutely sure,’ the girl said, getting up and showing him the single earring in her ear. Her tights had holes in both knees. She was small and neat, like a bird. He thought her rather plain. He tried not to feel irritated. How long would Marsia wait? He thought she probably wouldn’t linger very long at all.

‘They were an eighteenth-birthday present.’ Scott noticed her mouth tremble, and so he renewed his efforts, pushing aside the selection of trainers and boots that had accumulated on the floor. After another five minutes he saw a glint on the floor in front of him.

‘I’ve found it!’ he said, holding it out to her on the palm of his hand and she gave an exclamation of pleasure.

‘Oh thank you so much. I’d almost given up hope.’ She took it and placed it carefully in her pocket. Scott got to his feet. If he was quick Marsia might still be outside.



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'I'm Emily by the way,' she said holding out her hand, almost as if they were at a conference or something.

'Scott,' he replied, shaking her hand before hastily making for the door. Outside, there was no sign of Marsia and Danny was being sick on the pavement. On the night bus home, Scott propped his housemate up against his shoulder and scanned his phone.

We have your test results. Please can you come in to see the doctor at your earliest convenience.

Chapter 2

JOSIE STARED OUT OF THE WINDOW. SHE HAD THE FEELING that there was something she had to do, but she couldn't quite catch what was hovering at the edge of her mind. Mondays were always quiet at the bed shop. Buying a new bed was seldom a decision that people made alone, unless they were just looking for a standard single for a child's bedroom or for a rented house. Saturday was when people's minds turned to springs and ticking. They would come into Sweet Dreams in pairs and solemnly test each of the beds in turn. Still in their coats and shoes, they lay side by side, looking up at the ceiling, their hands crossed at their waists like effigies on tombs. Some of the couples became quite skittish in the presence of a memory foam divan or a deep-filled orthopaedic mattress and would throw themselves about, giggling foreplay for what they would be doing later to christen their new acquisition.

In the years Josie had been running the shop, she had become adept at reading people. There were the couples that had just moved in together who were looking for a new mattress to cement their relationship and exorcise the bed ghosts of previous lovers. There were others, maybe married for a few years, who were hoping that the bounce of Yorkshire wool and pocket springs would inject some buoyancy into bedtime. Elderly



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people often wanted an upgrade from double to king-size because their days of lying spooned were over and they thought that by some magic a larger bed and new mattress would counteract the night sweats and aches. Then there were the recently single who were searching for I-can-do-what-I-want-now beds to accommodate their defiant crumbs.

Josie still found it strange that she had ended up there. It wasn't the sort of job you dreamt of having when you were young. It had started as part-time work when Scott had still been a baby. She had seen a sign in the window advertising the position and gone in on impulse, and within a couple of years she had become the manager. There were times when she thought she should perhaps find work that was more challenging. She had had a vague ambition to be a palaeontologist but after doing geography at university, she had delayed the post-graduate degree that was required. She had thought that she might go back into education after a break, but the years had slipped by and then Scott had fallen ill and everything else had become irrelevant.

He had been seven years old when it had become apparent that there was something wrong with him. Until then he had always been a child who found sitting still difficult. At six months he had wriggled his way off a beach blanket like a crab making for the sea. At a year he had careered around the house with destructive enthusiasm and at three he had climbed up the garden wall and sat at the top swinging chunky legs. When he was five years old, he had run ahead on walks, stopping only to unearth creatures from the cracks in logs or to cup the sandy water from rock pools, as if he was prospecting for gold. During a winter which was beset by storms that saw the sea lashing the cliffs and trees toppling from





root to tip across the roads, he developed flu-like symptoms – a high fever and deliriums which left him hollowed out and weak. He never quite seemed to recover. He stopped eating anything but the cheese biscuits she fed him in small segments through his dry lips. His breathing became more laboured.

‘It’s like I’ve been hoovered out,’ he said one day, and then on the way to the toilet he fainted.

‘My heart is beating so hard,’ he said when he came to and she laid her hand on his chest and felt the crazy pulse of him under her fingers. It was as if his heart was trying to get out of his body.

A queasy round of hospital visits had followed. A period of time in which she had sat, clenched, in a series of small rooms while her boy’s body was examined. Chest X-rays, electrocardiograms and echocardiograms – words she had never even heard before became the everyday currency of their lives. Tubes were forced through blood vessels into his heart. The internal map of him was suffused with dye to trace its passageways and dead ends.

‘Heart failure,’ someone said, eventually, and her own heart had stilled as if it too was suffering a malfunction.

‘It doesn’t mean his heart has stopped. It just means it’s not working very well.’

‘How?’ she had said, feeling for the word inside what felt like the suck and swell of dark oil.

‘To put it in its most basic terms, it’s pump failure, probably caused by a virus. Scott’s heart muscles have become inflamed.’

What virus? When? She tried to remember what she might have missed. Some food not properly washed? Someone laying infected hands on him? A cut not adequately plastered? She assumed it must have happened when he had fallen ill earlier in the year but she wasn’t sure.



‘You may not even have noticed him being particularly unwell,’ someone said, recognising her anxiety, but it didn’t soothe the guilt Josie immediately felt.

In that single, dizzying moment Josie’s world had tilted and never quite righted itself again. Sometimes she thought back to the oblivious person she had been before and she no longer recognised herself in the terrified, pinched, pleading person she had become. There followed weeks and months of operations to repair valves, a complicated regimen of medication, liquid diets to boost his growth, a frantic rush to the hospital in the middle of the night when she couldn’t rouse him from a sleep that felt like death. More tests and then an operation to fit a pacemaker that gave them hope for two months before it stopped functioning. More tests and more tubes. More days spent lying together on Scott’s narrow hospital bed while she held on to him as if it was nothing but her vigilance that was keeping him alive.

‘I’m afraid his only option at this stage is a heart transplant,’ the doctor had said some time afterwards. ‘I can’t tell you when. It may take a week to find a donor. It may take a year.’

‘Has he got a year?’ she had asked. It seemed to her a ludicrous question. He was seven years old. He still believed in the tooth fairy and thought that a dragon lived inside the walls of Bamburgh Castle.

‘He might not have,’ the doctor had said, moving his pen under his palm, rolling it back and forth across his desk as if he was trying to smooth something out.

She took Scott home and waited, knowing that what she wished for above all other things was going to mean the greatest possible sorrow to someone else. As the weeks went by, she lost even this passing compunction. She began to long fervently



for the right accident at the right place. She lay awake at night willing the disaster. Waiting so avidly for a death made her feel ashamed but not so much that she didn't still pray for it. She became fierce and frantic. Every day was an ugly fight.

She was never quite sure exactly what Scott understood about what was happening. He cried sometimes when hospital interventions hurt and once, she found him sobbing in the garden because he didn't have the strength to walk all the way to the shed, which housed his collection of bottled insects and lobster claws and dried starfish. But mostly he was strangely accepting of his new, constricted life. She took comfort from his patience, grateful for what she thought must be a childish inability to recognise or fear the things that adults knew. Even the stretch of a year was incomprehensible to most young children, let alone the possibility that, one day, they too would be adults. She thought perhaps he could not mourn what he didn't know he might have.

'Today was a good day,' he had said once when they had managed to walk together along the beach and he had sat watching her as she chipped away at the cliff face, hunting for fossils.

'If tomorrow isn't, I will remember today.' He smiled at her, his blue eyes bright in his pale face, as if it was enough to be there with the clouds chasing the watery sun and the waves curling around the base of the rocks. It had made her almost angry, the way he had sat raking through the sand as though the feel of it was a pleasure. She was greedy for all his days to come. She couldn't settle for now.

The shop bell sounded and Picasso came in with his customary bang of the door. Picasso, a school friend of Scott's, was actu-





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ally called David, but he'd been given his nickname by George the warehouse manager, a person prone to finding weakness and pursuing it to the death. George had seen Picasso doodling cartoons in his lunch break and had mocked him for it ever since. Much to Picasso's annoyance the nickname had stuck and now pretty much everyone used it in preference to his given name. It was Picasso's job to do the deliveries, which more often than not also involved taking the old beds away.

'It's not lugging them down the stairs I mind,' he had told Josie once. 'It's the fact that you get TMI from people's mattresses; they are as good as maps. Stains clustered across the same degree in longitude . . . Friday-night missionary position. Extensive ground covered with a degree of overlap . . . adventurous, multi-partner shagging. Central saturation . . . single guy with bad skin.'

Josie had told him that he was the one giving out too much information, but she thought the boy was wasted at Sweet Dreams. He had the sharp, derisive eye of a satirist.

'Morning, Josie.' Picasso still had the half-awake look he always wore until at least midday.

'Hello,' Josie said, going into the little office off the showroom floor and checking her computer. 'There are six deliveries today. Spread out all over the place. One in Seahouses, one in Ashington, so you'd better get your skates on. Do the ones in town first.'

Picasso nodded his head absently. He seemed preoccupied.

'Is everything OK?' Josie asked. Picasso had a girlfriend, a fragile-looking beauty about whom he was in a continual state of anxiety.

'Lois had a dream where I was an ant and she was riding on my back. She said ants in dreams represent an annoyance. Do





you think she was trying to tell me something?’ Picasso gnawed at his fingernails and looked at Josie.

‘Ants are hard workers. Maybe her dream was about how much she relies on you,’ said Josie, consolingly. She thought Lois spent far too much time dwelling on her unconscious and not nearly enough time out of bed.

‘Hmm,’ said Picasso. ‘Maybe.’ But he looked a little more cheerful and went into the office to check with his nemesis that the van was loaded and ready to go.

With no customers to attend to and the shop arranged and rearranged to her satisfaction, Josie had no distraction from the nagging sensation that something wasn’t quite right. She wondered if it was normal to feel so bereft when your children left home or whether Scott’s illness had made her less able to cope with it than other parents. It was what she had longed for and thought at one time that she would never see – Scott becoming an adult, moving on like all of his peers, and yet now that it had happened she felt as if her connection with life had been severed. She wasn’t sure who she was anymore.

Three months ago she had driven him to a house in King’s Cross and had helped him unpack his boxes. She hadn’t known in advance what he had chosen to take with him and had been moved almost to tears by the strange collection of objects she pulled out – a little china cat she had given him years ago, a lumpy vase he had made at school, a photo of the two of them that he had cut to fit a picture frame he had bought at a charity shop. She had felt then, even more keenly than she had through all the desperate days of his illness, how much sorrow there was in love. You felt it in all sorts of ways you never expected. She had heard



someone describe being a parent as having to accommodate a slow, pulling away, and it was true, even for those parents who hadn't had to cope with almost losing their children. The process started as soon as they drew their first breath through their bluish, beaked mouths and continued all the years you had them.

Josie remembered a trip to Prague Scott had taken when he was sixteen. She hadn't wanted him to go. She had never wanted him to be anywhere other than where she could reach out for him, but she had known, or at least forced herself to accept, that she had to let him do the things that other children took for granted as part of their coming of age. He had been away for a few days when her phone had rung in the night. Instantly awake, she had answered it in a blind panic. She had never lost the habit of vigilance. All she had been able to hear was the sound of a train like the beat of a heart. She had spoken, said his name, but there had been no answer and she realised after a while that he must have rolled over onto his phone and called her by accident. She had lain for several minutes with her mobile pressed to her ear, travelling alongside him, imagining the rail track snaking its way across the side of a mountain, through clusters of pine trees, past villages with unfamiliar roofs. Then, after a while, the phone had cut off and the train had taken him away from her.

At lunchtime, Josie left George in charge of the shop and walked down the high street to get a sandwich. It was a bright, sharp-edged day and after being in the muted light of the shop, which was designed to create the atmosphere of calm desirable in bedrooms, Josie found herself almost blinded by the sunlight, which bounced off roofs and pavements and gave everything a painful golden edge. Inside the café she ordered her food and



sat down at a table in the window. She usually made some lunch at home and brought it to work with her, but this morning she had opened her fridge to a nub end of elderly cheese and a soft tomato and closed the door again quickly. Since Scott had left she had been less assiduous about stocking up on food. There seemed little point now that she no longer had his wolfish appetite to cater for and she couldn't be bothered to cook for herself. There was something so lonely about single pork chops and lasagne for one and a loaf of bread was stale long before she managed to get even halfway through. She felt nostalgic for the times when she used to go to the bread bin and find it annoyingly empty. She shouldn't have been cross. She would have been glad to find it so now.

She took a nibble of her sandwich and then tried phoning him. His mobile rang unanswered and Josie felt another small stab of disquiet. This was the second time she had tried calling without success. He was usually very good about getting in touch at least once a week, but she hadn't heard from him for a fortnight now, not since he had gone back to university after the Christmas break. He had turned nineteen over the holiday, a day he had celebrated with his customary glee. He saw each birthday as a milestone won. He was the only person she had ever met who rejoiced in the fact that he was a year older.

He was probably busy, she told herself. All those lectures and essays to write, not to mention getting to know the city and the clubs and pubs and his fellow students. When he was a boy, there had been a gang of local children who ran wild through gaps in fences and hedges, treating all the gardens as their shared kingdom. Scott had always stayed out after all the other children had been called





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in, lured back to their homes by their mothers' voices and the smell of food. *It's still early*, he would say when she finally found him by knocking on all her neighbours' doors. *It's still light*. He was probably caught up in his new life the way he had been in his old one, staying up late, making the most of every day. She had an image of him walking over a London bridge. It was from bridges that you really saw the girth and span of the city and felt its rush and beauty. Perhaps he couldn't hear his phone. Perhaps he was on his way to meet someone, or deep in the underground, standing on the edge of a platform feeling that tarry surge of warm air that signalled that a train was coming.

Later, as Josie wandered around the house, pulling curtains together and turning out lights, getting ready for an early night and a book she was halfway through, she resisted the temptation to ring Scott again. She didn't want him to think that she was hounding him. She didn't want him to know that she was missing him so much that she no longer knew how to shape her days. He would surely ring tomorrow and when he did, she wouldn't demand to know why he hadn't rung before. She wouldn't ask any of the questions she knew made him impatient about how he was feeling or what the doctor had said about his annual angiograph. She would keep her voice light, neutral, interested, but not too much, and he would tell her which bridges he had crossed and how London was wide and wonderful and full of new adventures.



Chapter 3

SCOTT WAS AN EXPERT IN MATTERS OF THE HEART. HIS HAD been flown in a helicopter from a hospital in Birmingham all the way to Newcastle where it had arrived in a cool box, coated in saline and covered with ice. Although he hadn't seen it at the time, he knew what it would have looked like. It would have been the size of a small fist, not valentine red, but rather a muscular yellow, not visibly beating but still functioning under its own electrical system.

His mother had taken the phone call. She had come into his room and stood by the bed, holding the bag they always kept by the door. The fact that she had carried it upstairs when it was already packed, showed what a panic she was in. Her eyes had been wide and scared, as if she had seen a ghost, which, in a way, she had, because Scott's second chance to live was given to him by the parents of a child called Aadash who had drowned in a pond when he was trying to feed the ducks. Scott and Josie knew this because a year after his transplant they had been to visit the family. Josie had taken flowers and a letter, which spelled out what she would never have been able to say directly to them.

'I hope I've found the right words,' she had said, tucking the letter into the side pocket of her handbag.

Aadash's mother Ashish Kohli had touched Scott's face and given him a photograph of a boy and a plate of sticky spirals she had called sweets. Scott had been nine at the time and had been disappointed not to be given chocolate. On the way home his mother had cried silently, thinking that Scott, who was sitting on the back seat of the car, wouldn't be able to see, but he had charted the progress of her tears in the wing mirror. He had diverted her with 'Meals on Wheels', a game Josie had invented which involved creating a credible meal from the pictures of food on the side of passing lorries. He even let her claim a Waitrose truck he had already seen which acted like a wild card and meant she could choose any ingredient. This was a big sacrifice because Scott liked winning.

His heart had turned out to be a keeper, despite a blurry period when he was rushed back into hospital because it seemed as if his body was rejecting the gifted organ. He had also suffered several aggressive infections when his life had hung in the balance, although he hadn't known at the time that there was so much at stake. There was a lot he couldn't remember clearly, but he could still recall the responsibility he had felt that his heart should carry on beating, not only for himself and for his mother, but also for his donor's parents who wrote to him every year on his birthday. They always ended their letters with the words *from our hearts to yours* and enclosed a ten-pound note, which made Scott feel a bit uneasy, as if he was getting a dead boy's pocket money.

His mother had told him before his operation that people didn't feel with their hearts but with their brains and that he would still be the same person afterwards, just stronger and less



tired, but even now that he was grown-up and there was very little about the heart and its functions he wasn't dreadfully familiar with, the notion that he had taken on someone else's hopes and desires lingered. He still wondered if somewhere inside him there was a shadow of another boy with a round, puzzled face and dark eyes.

The thud of his transplanted heart didn't fluctuate after a long run or when he kissed a girl, but had an unchanging rhythm that seldom deviated from its almost mechanical pulse. He felt such things only in the deepness of his breath or in the rise of his blood. Left unconnected by the transplant surgery to the nerves that regulated its beat, his heart felt separate from himself. He worried sometimes, although he knew it was irrational, that this inability to show evidence of fatigue or desire in his core, the place that had generated a million love songs, meant his feelings were not quite to be trusted.

Now Scott was sitting in a hospital room, which seemed to have darkened around him, so that only the desk and the doctor sitting opposite him were properly lit. He was aware of a kind of buzzing sound in his ears, as if his body was trying to block out the doctor's words and of a feeling of panic that started in his hands and then seemed to take possession of the whole of him.

'There's been a significant thickening in the epicardial and intramyocardial arteries,' the doctor said, assuming, rightly, that she didn't need to worry about using layman's terms. Being a transplant patient had very few perks, but having doctors talking to you as if you understood what they were saying was a definite bonus. The other, not so great thing was their



tendency to swing their computers round to show you your X-rays, as if they assumed you were inured to the sight of the inner workings of your body. Scott had never quite got over the small horror he felt to see the vessels of his heart laid out for inspection. The doctor pored over the sinuous spread of veins and arteries as if she was contemplating one route over another on a road map.

‘The angiography reveals narrowing, here, here and here,’ she said, jabbing at his heart with the sharp end of her pencil.

‘I am sorry to say it looks very much like cardiac allograft vasculopathy, CAV,’ she said, looking at him at last. She had pale skin and almost colourless eyes and a tracing of blue veins in her neck. She looked like an X-ray of herself, Scott thought and then tried to focus on what was being said. He had always expected this, or some version of it – thickening, infection, blockages, ruptures, aneurisms and tumours – the words that would signify that his heart, for all its valiant pumping, had begun to degenerate and his life was once more in danger.

‘How’ve you been feeling?’ she asked.

‘Pretty good,’ Scott replied, but his response was more habitual than truthful, for he had been aware for as long as a couple of months of a fatigue that came and went that he had told himself was due to the upheaval of leaving home and getting to know a new place.

‘No swelling in your legs? No breathlessness after climbing stairs?’ the doctor continued, as if, as well as being familiar with the movement of the blood passing through his arteries, she could also trace his thoughts. He shook his head.

‘I’ve been a bit tired,’ he admitted.



Scott looked out of the window. The sky was the dull silver of a tarnished coin and the plane trees seemed all the starker for their spiky baubles. For a moment he felt a regret so deep it threatened to overwhelm him. He knew transplanted hearts did not last forever but recently he had allowed himself to believe that Aadash's heart was special. Now that his life, his proper life, was spreading out in front of him, he had tricked himself into thinking that his heart would continue its necessary beating through all that was to come. He thought of his mother standing at the end of his bed with her fists tight, ready for battle and his throat closed as if his body was trying to hold on to his inherited heart. What would she do when he told her this? How could he prepare her?

Outside, the air had the static fizz of coming snow and people hurried past, heading for comfort and company. He wanted to make a noise. Nothing as loud as a scream – he wasn't so lost to himself that he didn't still hang on to his sense of what people should and shouldn't do in public. He had been in London long enough to see the way people's eyes moved around the crumbled men who shouted, caught up in their own vehement story, the ones that wore heavy coats when the sun was shining, or who gathered their possessions to them as if they were the last defence. He just wanted to check that he still sounded like himself.

He found he was chanting under his breath – the sound he used to make when he was a boy and had a particularly arduous or scary task in prospect. He could remember resorting to this comfort on walks to school when a day of tests lay in wait, or once when he went caving, forced into it so as not to lose face





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amongst his peers, and found, as he lay on his stomach in the rank squeeze of the tunnel, that he couldn't move at all.

He started running – slowly at first and then faster and faster, past a restaurant where a child had his face pressed to the window, his tongue squashed flat like the belly of a snail, past the rhythmic railings of a park, past a house where two men sat tightly wedged together on the doorstep, the open door behind them emitting the smell of food, something savoury and rich, and Bowie singing 'Wild is the Wind' – on and on until his breath came in little ragged gasps that sounded as if he might be crying.

He stopped at last. He wasn't sure how long he had been running. There was a small enclosure just off the pavement with a bench, a tree, some shrubs, and he sat down, breathing heavily. Spots floated in front of his eyes like a 3D movie. As he sat hidden from the street his first feeling wasn't fear but rather loneliness. He knew that the terror would come. He could feel it waiting in his mouth like the juice that gathers before you vomit. He had felt lonely before, but only the kind that was mixed with boredom and was more about waiting for something or someone and not wanting to. This was different. This was a sense of being the only one. Of being chosen for a particular sort of isolation that he could never share. He waited for the pain to pass. He knew it would. Nothing, after all, had really changed. He still didn't know when he was going to die.

