

It takes just a moment for a family's life to be changed forever. For a twelve-year-old boy to dash across the street for a pack of peppermints. For his seven-year-old sister to follow him into traffic. For a bus to swerve out of control. And with that terrible moment, a family's search begins for the unlikely miracle that will put together their shattered lives — and bring their daughter back to life....

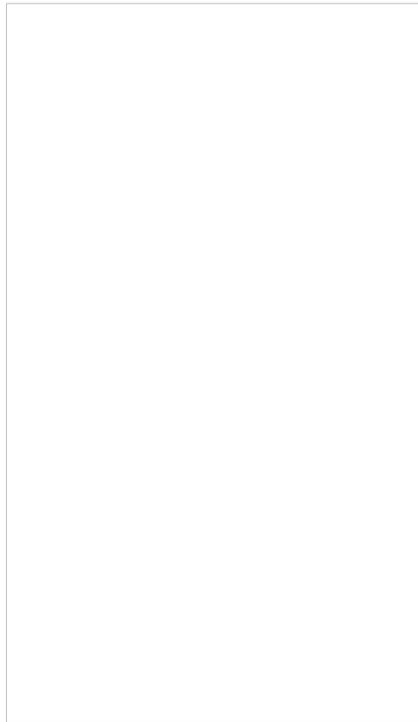
In a small hospital room, little Frankie Heywood lies in a coma so deep, no one — not even those who love her the most — can reach her. It is a parent's worst nightmare. For months the Heywoods have kept an uneasy vigil at their daughter's bedside, waiting in vain for the least sign of hope. There they watch helplessly as doctors come and go, unable to do anything for Frankie but keep her body functioning.

Now the experts are telling them that prolonging Frankie's existence may be damaging to their son Ben, who is slipping deeper and deeper into a dangerous emotional isolation. Their marriage already strained to the breaking point, the Heywoods are desperate as only a family can be. Against the expert judgment of all around them, they grasp at their last chance: the brilliant neurologist Elizabeth Chase.

Lizzie Chase knows what it's like to lose a loved one to the darkness. She has dedicated her life to coaxing children back from the brink of oblivion. Her revolutionary work offers the only hope to families like the Heywoods. It has also drawn the unwanted attention of those who through ignorance, greed, or fear would do anything to stop her.

But Lizzie and the Heywoods refuse to be stopped. They are certain that somewhere, just beyond their reach, Frankie is waiting for the lifeline that will lead her back to them. Together this passionate healer and this courageous family will take any risk, make any sacrifice, and defy all odds to turn the ultimate tragedy into the ultimate triumph... but not even miracles occur without a price.

The Lazarus Child is that rare novel that touches you in a way you didn't know you could be touched. It is an unforgettable testament to the power of love, hope, faith — and the inexplicable magic of family.



THE LAZARUS CHILD

By

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Chapter 1

At twelve years old, Ben Heywood did not think it fair that he should have to witness the death of his younger sister at such close quarters. Yet at the instant of its happening he also knew that having to witness it was part of the punishment.

They left the house at the usual time, the air crisp and sparkling, the early morning sun bright on their hastily wiped faces.

'Sunnyday,' said Frankie from the porch, looking up as brilliant white petals of cherry blossom drifted from above. It was the last thing she said to him. Ben said nothing, but glanced at her as she gazed upwards, taking in the zigzag parting down the middle of her pigtailed brown hair, the telltale trace of green felt pen on her chin, the gap formed by the collar of her too large shirt where her incorrectly knotted school tie nestled incongruously off centre, way below the base of her throat. Fleeting it occurred to him that he could reach out and straighten it for her. If he felt like it.

'Come on,' he said morosely. 'We've got to go.'

They walked along the pavement in silence. Ben allowed her to remain at his side as far as the gate of Isabelle's house. As usual Frankie's best friend was already waiting, perched on top of the gate, repeatedly tossing a scruffy rag doll high into the air above her, its limbs spreadeagled ridiculously as it spun skywards.

'Hi, Ben,' Isabelle called mischievously, as though there was some great mysterious secret going on that only she and Frankie knew about. But he ignored her, walking on without pausing, head down, hands thrust deeply into pockets, school-bag slung over one shoulder, irritated beyond measure. How he detested having to walk with the girls to school these days, it was so humiliating. He heard them fall into chattering step behind him, fussing and giggling idiotically.

It happened at the corner of Newmarket Road, where Goldhanger Crescent joins, on the bend right outside Mr Gupta's newsagent's shop. Ben glanced across the road at the shop, then back at the girls, by now thirty yards behind. Unhurriedly they ambled after him, arms linked, heads bent together, deep in conspiracy. If he was quick, he could run across, check if the latest Road Ranger pack was in, pick up a packet of peppermints and be back with the girls before they realized it.

The road was wide and busy with early morning commuter traffic. Timing a gap in the cars he darted to the middle, waited as a taxi sped by in the other direction then sprinted the last few yards and into the shop.

He emerged less than a minute later onto the pavement. The girls were half way across, clinging together in frozen terror as startled drivers from both directions swerved violently to avoid them. Ben gaped, Frankie's eyes found his, wide with fear and uncertainty, her lips working, mouthing his name. A driver sounded his horn in shock, then another. Ben lost sight of the two small figures for an instant as a lorry thundered by, the driver's voice a receding shout: 'For Christ's sake!' A motorcyclist moving swiftly up the centre between the two traffic streams saw the girls too late, swerved into the oncoming stream and smashed into the side of a van before careening sideways into the gutter at Ben's feet. Suddenly the air was filled with the sound of car horns, screeching brakes, squealing tyres and a succession of splintering crashes as cars piled into the back of one another. Ben scarcely noticed it. Above the noise and confusion he could hear Isabelle. She was screaming, panicked and disoriented, struggling to run back, blindly, across the far stream to the pavement. Frankie turned, grabbing her friend, bending almost double as she dragged at Isabelle's arm to stop her. But Isabelle was unstoppable, wild-eyed and thrashing like an injured animal, desperately intent on achieving the far pavement as her only chance of salvation. Ben saw Frankie pulled one faltering step, then another, in slow motion like a tug-of-war. There was the blood-chilling sound of six heavy locked-up wheels sliding uncontrollably across the tarmac, a frantic drawn-out blast from the bus driver's horn. Then, with a sickening, muffled thud, the bus struck the girls.

They were in the air. A confusion of arms and legs, hair, clothes, school-bags, flying across the clean blue sky, limp and flapping and spread-eagled. Like tossed rag dolls.

Jack Heywood awoke with a start. He lay for a moment, blearily striving to force his mind into focus through a fog of drink and sleeplessness. Something important... He checked his watch, then remembered with a curse, and jerked upright. Throwing back the travel rug, he gasped, piercing pain shooting through his neck and upper back. He stiffened, straightening slowly from the couch, wincing as he rubbed his hand against the base of his neck.

It was ten to nine. Ten minutes. They'd be here in ten minutes! Precious seconds elapsed as he stared dumbfounded at his watch: the damn alarm must have failed. Or maybe he'd failed to set it. He licked his lips and looked around him. His head hurt, his mouth was dry, throat like sandpaper. Unkempt hair escaped his fingers as he brushed it back, gazing round the room in mounting horror. The executive lounge looked more like a student's apartment after an end-of-term party: overflowing ashtrays, half-empty takeaway containers, dirty plates and coffee mugs, empty bottles.

And the smell. Suddenly he was galvanized into action. Moving swiftly around the room he began clearing the wreckage, carrying all into the little kitchenette where he threw it into rubbish bags, tipped it into the sink or hid it in cupboards. At the same time he poured fresh water and a coffee pack into the machine and switched it on. Sniffing distastefully he returned to the lounge, pulled up the blinds and threw open the windows, gulping at the crisp spring air. Bright sunlight flooded in, the sound of lark-song and the idle burbling of a Lycoming as one of the flying-club Cessnas warmed up. Away to the west, spectral spires were barely visible, the distant Cambridge skyline materializing through the early-morning mist. Glancing down, he took in the company's three polished silver and green executive turboprops neatly parked on the tarmac below. Then he turned once more for the room.

He stripped his bedding from the settee, plumped up the cushions and straightened the aviation magazines on the coffee table. Clearing the conference table and reorganizing the chairs he glanced up at the wall clock. Any minute! Where the hell was Bill? And Carol, for that matter. What the hell use is an executive air-charter business without a receptionist? He had told them nine. Hadn't he?

Five minutes later he emerged from the tiny bathroom clean-shaven, hair brushed and wearing a fresh white shirt under his slightly rumpled navy blue suit jacket. He checked the straightness of his tie nervously and looked around the now restored executive lounge with something approaching a flicker of pride. Its leather-upholstered furniture, its glass and chrome tables and chairs, its metal-framed photographs of liveried aircraft gliding gracefully across azure skylines. Carefully chosen to suggest respectability, reliability, professionalism. But the leather was beginning to wear thin, the chrome to tarnish, the brightly coloured photos fading like dreams.

There was a buzz at the door. They were here. He took a deep breath, subconsciously lifting his chin and straightening his shoulders as he went across the room. As he skirted Carol's desk the phone rang.

Outside the newsagent's, a quiet had descended. All traffic had stopped in both directions, dazed drivers were getting out of cars, passers-by were gathering at the kerbside. Mr Gupta emerged from his shop. 'What happened?' he asked. 'Is anyone hurt?' Beside him a dark-haired schoolboy stood rigid and motionless, an unopened packet of peppermints clutched in one fist.

'Call an ambulance quick!' somebody shouted from across the road. Mr Gupta hurried back into his shop. A knot of onlookers was gathering around two small, unmoving forms lying on the pavement. On the near side a leather-clad motorcyclist groaned, struggling feebly to free himself from the tangled wreckage of his machine. A dazed van driver bent slowly to help him. 'Easy now, mate. Easy does it.' Across the road a woman's voice rose from the growing crowd, like a lamentation, a wail of protest. 'Mary Mother of Jesus, they're just little girls! Little girls — Mary Mother of Jesus.'

'Doctor. Is there a doctor? Anywhere?' An elderly man with a small dog straightened up and looked around. 'Is there a doctor here?'

Suddenly there was the sound of heavy boots running hard along the pavement towards the crowd. Moments later a beat policeman arrived. 'How many hurt?' he said breathlessly.

'These two,' said the man with the dog. 'And a motorcyclist on the other side.'

'Right,' said the policeman, elbowing his way into the throng. He dropped to a crouch beside the body of a young girl dressed in school uniform. She was face down, her pigtailed hair awry and sticky with blood. 'Right,' he murmured again to himself, through gritted teeth. Cocking his head to the VHF radio on his shoulder, he reached out to feel the girl's neck.

'I believe she's dead,' said the man with the dog.

'How are the children taking it?'

Alison sighed, picking up an uneaten corner of toast from the breakfast table. 'Okay. I think,' she said doubtfully, tucking the telephone receiver under her chin as she munched. The circular table had been laid for three by one of the children. Ben, she suspected. But instead of spreading the three places evenly around the circle, he had deliberately left a fourth place bare. Jack's place. He'd even put a chair there, testament enough to his views on the matter. 'Well, actually I don't know. Frankie seems fine, doesn't really talk about it — you know Frankie. But Ben, well, I can tell he's not happy. He's very, well, quiet. Withdrawn.'

'Oh darling, are you quite sure you're doing the right thing? Ben adores Jack, they both do.'

'Mum, he went to bed with the damn secretary!'

'Yes, but apart from that. I mean, have you asked yourself why?'

'Apart fr— Mother, I'd have thought that it was enough that he did it, don't you?'

There was silence on the line. 'Well, I suppose you know best,' her mother said eventually, although Alison knew from her tone that she clearly thought nothing of the sort. 'Where is he staying, living?'

'I don't know. Bill's, the damn secretary's — park bench for all I care. It's not my problem.' *It was* her problem. She looked up from the table. There was a meeting. He'd told her about it — today, was it? Shit or bust, he'd said. She tried to remember, staring through the kitchen window at the cherry tree outside, the blossom falling silently like snow. Recently every meeting had been shit or bust. 'I think he's been sleeping at the office,' she said quietly.

'What will you do?'

'Move, I suppose. Sell this place, get out of Cambridge, back to London, get the children into schools somewhere and put this whole sorry mess behind us as fast as possible.' It sounded simple enough when she said it like that. But every time she considered the prospect her head filled with worries and anxieties, so many unknowns, so many questions, so many doubts. God damn you, Jack Heywood.

'What if he hadn't done it? You know, slept with the secretary.'

'Mum, that's like saying "Apart from that, Mrs Kennedy, how did you enjoy your drive around Dallas?" It happened. He did it. Now he must deal with the consequences.'

'Yes, but what if he hadn't?' she persisted.

Alison sighed again. 'It probably wouldn't make any difference.' She picked up a green felt-tip pen from the table, snapping the cap back on with her thumb. 'It's been going wrong for ages, years really, ever since we moved to Cambridge. The business, it's all to do with the bloody business.'

'Couldn't you talk to him about it? You know, explain your feelings?'

'He's never here. I'd have to make an appointment,' she snorted ruefully. 'Probably with the damn secretary.'

'What about counselling? Couldn't you see someone, make some enquiries?'

'Mum, for God's sake what about him? I'm the wronged party, he should be making the effort, but he doesn't do anything, not a—' The doorbell rang. Once, then immediately again. 'Hang on, Mum, somebody's at the door.'

There were two of them. A male and a female. Both uniformed. She remembered thinking how short the female was beside the man. And how young and petite the face, the roundness of the eyes beneath that ludicrous little hat. The black-and-white-checked neck scarf tied in a neat bow on the starched white shirt. The frumpy black uniform skirt, the heavy black tights, the solid flat-heeled shoes.

'Mrs Heywood? Mrs Alison Heywood?'

The young policeman straightened up from the body of the girl and exhaled slowly. She was gone, there was no doubt about it. He was no doctor but he had seen dead bodies before and he had been through the basic training like everyone else on the Force. Her eyes were open, fixed and staring, he could find no evidence of a pulse, she wasn't breathing and, well, just from the look of her, with her head twisted up and sideways at that unusual angle, the ugly dark purple bruise on her forehead, the congealed trickle of blood coming from one ear. He suspected her neck was broken.

He sat back on his heels, the pavement hard and cold beneath his knees. Around him the crowd looked on. It was awful, she could only have been six or seven. He picked up an old rag doll lying beside her and placed it on her chest. As he did so he saw that his hand was shaking, the child's face blurring as his eyes filled. Two little girls, for God's sake, just wiped out like that. Why? A moment later he heard the wail of a distant siren. At last, he thought, thank God.

He stood up quickly, brushed the dirt from his trousers, hastily wiping a sleeve across his nose. He started to move through the crowd, his boots crunching on shards of smashed headlight. This he could do, this was what he should be doing, getting things organized as best he could for the emergency services. As he gesticulated to drivers to clear a path he glanced across to the far side of the road. A shopkeeper had his arm around a man who was sitting on the pavement openly weeping. The bus driver, the policeman concluded. He made a mental note: there'd be a lot of statement-taking later. A few yards further along, a small group of onlookers had extricated the motorcyclist from the wreckage of his bike and propped him into a half-sitting, half-lying position against the shop wall. One of them was holding a bloodstained handkerchief to the motorcyclist's head.

Between them the policeman caught sight of a boy. He appeared to be unaccompanied, standing quite alone, completely still and holding something in his hand. His face was expressionless. Probably saw it happen, thought the policeman. Terrible shock for a young boy to have to witness something like this. He thought about going over to speak to him but a renewed burst from the approaching siren stopped him and he turned back into the road, waving and shouting to clear a path as the ambulance, blue lights flashing, picked its way slowly through the lines of unmoving traffic. A minute later it pulled up in front of him and two men jumped out.

'What have we got?' said the first. Both were wearing fluorescent silver and yellow jackets with the word 'paramedic' emblazoned in blue across the back. The second man immediately set off towards where the girls were lying.

'Two girls hit by a bus,' said the policeman, nodding towards them. 'Motorcyclist over there crashed avoiding them. He's conscious. A few cuts and bruises suffered by other drivers in shunts behind.'

'Right then. First we'll need to clear this lot so we can get out quickly. Can we leave that to you? There's two more units on the way from Addenbrooke's — they'll take care of the cuts and bruises. Meantime we'll have a look at these three.' He lifted his chin. 'Stan?' he called. The second paramedic stood up and shook his head with a grimace. 'Jesus,' murmured the first.

The older man closed the file and removed his spectacles. Conjuring a handkerchief he began to polish the lenses, his face thoughtful. The room was silent; outside they could hear the drone of a Cessna buzzing round the circuit, while on the far side of the field a Hercules was running up an engine. Jack forced himself to relax, lowered his gaze to the white knuckles of his tightly interlaced fingers on the glass tabletop and waited.

'Tell me, Jack, is Bill Knight coming?' the second man enquired politely. He was younger than his superior, lean, balding, always smiled when he spoke, rested a hand on your back at the door and never failed to ask after your loved ones. But behind the genial façade and the guileless blue eyes, Jack knew, lay a razor sharp mind and a brutal capacity for ruthlessness.

'Yes, yes he is. He called just before you arrived. He's been held up in traffic, accident or something, he'll be here as soon as he can.'

'Well, I think we'll get on,' said the first man, reopening the file. 'If that's all right with you. Let me just say that you seem to have gone to a lot of trouble producing your new business plan, Jack, very thorough, very professional.' Jack nodded, smiling weakly. 'Now, let me see if we've got this straight. We're looking at a complete rescheduling of Heywood-Knight's existing debts plus an immediate injection of sixty thousand, which is basically to be financed out of a remortgage package on the three aircraft sitting outside. Is that correct?' Jack nodded again. That was it, in a nutshell. He surreptitiously tugged the side of his collar away from his neck, cursing inwardly. Where the hell was his so-called business partner? Bill was the bloody accountant for God's sake. 'And the extra cash to pay for this refinancing comes from the new business derived in part from our package. Just tell us again about that, Jack, in your own words, if you would be so kind.'

He drew a deep breath. 'We've got tenders in on two big air parcel-handling contracts already, a Cambridge-Amsterdam-Glasgow and a Heathrow-Madrid, both nightly,' he said, not looking them in the eye. The Heathrow-Madrid tender had been rejected two days ago. 'There are a number of other contracts coming up for renewal during the summer that we will be bidding for. In addition, we're looking into the possibility of setting up a daily Cambridge-Dublin scheduled passenger service. Finally we will be using part of the sixty thousand on an advertising and marketing campaign to promote the air-taxi side of the business.'

'What, heaven forbid, Jack, but what if you don't get these two contracts? How would you meet the repayments over the short term?'

'Well, as I say, there are several other tenders coming up, in the er, pipeline, and what with the extra marketing on the air-taxi side, I — we are confident that the repayments can be met. As you can see from the projections in the business plan, at the bottom there...' He trailed off.

The room fell quiet once more. Eventually the second man sat back, the open file falling to the table in front of him. 'It's just...' he began slowly, wincing as though in excruciating pain, '... ever so slightly thin, though, wouldn't you say? Hmm, Jack?'

'Thin?'

'Jack, whatever happened about that offer?' the older man interrupted. 'The takeover offer from that other air-charter company on the airfield — Myriad, is it? Did you ever have a serious look at that?'

Suddenly Jack felt the bile rising. He pushed back his chair, palms flat on the tabletop. 'Now look here,' he sputtered, 'I've spent six years building up this business. It has cost me dear, very dear, and if you think I'm simply going to roll over and give up or, worse still, sell out to those sharks at Myriad—'

There was a knock at the door. Carol's face appeared, worried, apologetic. 'Jack, excuse me, I'm so sorry but there's a message, on the answering machine. It— You'd better come right away.'

The ambulance braked hard, heeling as it sped into the bend, siren blaring. Instinctively the paramedic in the back braced himself on a hand grab before continuing as the vehicle straightened.

He worked quickly. Tearing open a fresh pack, he withdrew a nine-inch flexible plastic tube and, gently tilting the second girl's head back, eased it into her throat and the entrance to her trachea. Next, he clipped tubing onto the mouthpiece and opened the gas regulator valve. A black rubber ambubag connected to the tubing inflated with oxygen. 'Airway straight, open and unrestricted, air on,' he murmured to himself like a mantra, re-fastening the Velcro on the neck brace at the child's throat. 'Maintaining CPR.' Moving his hands swiftly back to her chest, he placed one palm above her sternum, the other resting on top of the first. Then with a series of brisk thrusts, he jerked the heels of both palms hard into her chest. 'One, two, three, four, five,' he hissed through clenched teeth with each push.

Without pausing he squeezed the bag once then immediately ran the cycle again. Five quick jerks to the heart, a steady squeeze of oxygen to the lungs, pause and check for life signs. 'Oh, now come on sweetheart!' he scolded breathlessly, the stethoscope head moving swiftly over the pale skin of her chest. A bead of perspiration trickled down his cheek. 'Try a little harder, please. I know you can do better than this.'

Stopping only to fling off his heavy jacket, he swivelled through a crouched hundred and eighty degrees to face the inert form of the other girl strapped onto the opposite stretcher. 'Right then, little Miss Blue Eyes, and what about you?' Immediately he repeated the resuscitation cycle. There would be bruised, possibly cracked ribs after much more of this, he knew, as he thrust vigorously downwards onto her chest. But this was no time for half-measures, and the clock was ticking.

'About five minutes to go,' called the other paramedic from the driver's seat. 'How are we doing?'

'Christ knows.' He straightened for a moment. 'Never saw a pair play harder to get.' He wiped perspiration from his brow with his arm. 'I'd say one's a no-no, the other a don't-know.' He looked down at them, their blank faces, the stained white blouses, striped uniform ties, little grey skirts, white socks, one missing shoe.

'But I'm buggered if I'm done with them yet,' he swallowed, leaning forward once more.

Alison leapt out of the car and sprinted through the hospital main entrance. 'Accident!' she said loudly, casting around frantically. 'Where's Accident and Emergency?'

'Wrong entrance, miss,' said an orderly, pushing a wheelchair. 'You'll have to drive right round the other side, follow the signs to the A and E car park.'

'Jesus, isn't there any other way?'

The orderly nodded at the floor. 'Just follow the red stripe,' he intoned. 'That'll get you there, eventually.'

Four minutes and three wrong turnings later, she was running breathlessly down an endless corridor when it opened suddenly into a large entrance lobby that looked exactly like the first. She was back where she'd started. 'For God's sake!' she cursed, half gasp, half sob. She stared around. On the far side of the lobby there were people, some

sitting, some walking about. Some looked like doctors, others with bandaged heads or arms in slings, were clearly patients. Then she saw the glass-fronted counter and the sign above it: Accident and Emergency Reception.

As she hurried across towards the counter, automatic entrance doors beside her swung open and a fluorescent-jacketed paramedic's back appeared followed by a stretcher. Beyond him she could see that an ambulance had backed right up to the entrance, its doors gaping wide. She froze. Something leaden turned over in her stomach. 'Frankie,' she whispered.

'Excuse me, madam,' said the paramedic brusquely, as he backed towards her. A second stretcher was being unloaded from the rear of the ambulance. 'Madam, please, the through way must be kept clear at all times!'

Alison remained unmoving, heart pounding in her throat, eyes locked on the second stretcher as it was manoeuvred through the doors. Two medical staff dressed in short-sleeved green coveralls appeared beside the first paramedic. 'Two on board,' he reported, as they bent over the stretcher. 'Road-traffic accident, no vital signs at scene, been carrying out standard resusc since.'

'Uh-huh. How long?' asked one of the physicians, as the other moved quickly towards the second stretcher. Alison found herself following. Slowly, as though in a trance.

'Estimated forty minutes,' replied the paramedic.

It was Frankie. The second stretcher. Her face was ashen, deathly pale. But unmarked, her

expression calm, almost serene. She looked as though she were sleeping peacefully. Like she did as a baby. With that plug in her mouth like her old dummy, her head turned slightly to one side, her eyes closed and the blanket tucked up to her chin. Just exactly as she had looked as a sleeping baby.

'Darling,' Alison murmured, watching from a great distance as they fussed around her. 'My darling, darling baby girl.'

'Suspect both DOA,' said the second doctor, straightening up, 'but get them into the emergency room and we'll have a look. Anyone know if the families have arrived yet?'

Within an hour the tarmac had been swept clean, the twisted wreckage of the motorcycle removed and the damaged vehicles towed away. The mid-morning traffic sailed swiftly by once more as if nothing had happened; the only evidence remaining was a set of telltale twelve-foot heavy black skidmarks from the bus and a small dark brown stain on the far pavement. Shoppers walked across it without a second thought.

Mr Gupta put down the telephone again. What a morning. His mother this time. It seemed all his friends and relatives had heard about the accident and wanted to know every detail. A minute later he accepted money from a lady buying sweets for a child in a pushchair, then moved swiftly round the counter to hold the door open for her. As she thanked him with a smile he noticed the boy outside. The boy with the dark hair who had been there during all the fuss.

'Hello there,' he said, stepping onto the pavement. 'You still here?' The boy said nothing, just stood there, his head slightly lowered, his hands at his sides. Mr Gupta looked around at the passing traffic. 'It was a terrible terrible thing and there's no doubt,' he said, shaking his head. 'And absolutely not nice to see I'm sure.' He looked down at the boy once more. 'But you know, sometimes things like this just happen. It's — it's a part of life, although that may sound silly to say that a tragedy like this is part of life but it is.' Still the boy said nothing. 'And nobody's really to blame, you see. That's the whole point. These things just happen.'

He fell silent, worrying about the boy. Who was he? It was strange that he didn't recognize him. Shouldn't he be at school? Or with his family somewhere, or something? 'I'll tell you what,' he said, patting the boy's shoulder, 'why don't you come inside and have a Coke and we'll telephone somebody, eh?'

Ben turned from him and walked quickly away. As he went Mr Gupta saw something fall from his hand. It was a partially opened packet of peppermints, and as he watched the retreating boy's back, it rolled slowly down the pavement and into the gutter.

Chapter 2

Alison threw the door open rather wider than she intended. It slipped out of her grasp and hit the door-stop with a bang. 'Whoops!' she sang out cheerfully, crossing the room without a pause. 'Well, good morning, my darling. Phew, is it stuffy in here or what?' She dropped a heavy shoulder-bag onto a chair, swept aside the curtains on the single window, lifted the catches and pushed it open as far as it would go. 'That's better!' she continued briskly, sucking down lungfuls of air like an over-enthusiastic PE teacher. 'And may I say that it is indeed a good morning, a truly "sunnyday", you could say.'

She stood at the window, gathering herself. Brilliant white puffs of cumulus clouds drifted across the blue like sailing ships on an ocean. The scent of newly cut grass, damp with dew, rose with the smells of shops, cars and streets five storeys below. All around her were the sounds of the city as people flowed along its arteries, hurrying to start their day: the clink of a nearby milk float above the background murmur of traffic, further off the chime of a college clock puncturing the persistent clamour of a shop alarm, in the distance the rumble of jetprops as a military transport climbed steeply out from the airport.

Flexing her arms on the window-sill like a boxer in the ring, she allowed herself a few seconds more to focus her thoughts, then took a final deep breath, set her face in a bright smile and turned back into the room. 'Now then,' she began, rubbing her hands, 'we have got one busy morning ahead of us. First it's a wash and brush-up, then the dreaded physio. There's a stack of reading material for us to go through, then Dr Stanhope's coming and, oh yes, look, all your classmates have sent another card. Isn't that sweet of them? We'll have to write back straight away...'

As she dropped into a bedside chair, her nonstop commentary never faltering, Alison plucked a notebook from her bag, automatically scanning the readouts on the tabletop monitor beside it. Heart-rate sixty-eight, temperature thirty-six, blood pressure a hundred over seventy, respiration eighteen. No change, she knew them all by rote. She jotted them down and only then, in accordance with her strict routine, did she allow herself to look at her daughter.

Frankie lay motionless on the bed. Her eyes were not quite fully closed, thin slits of filmy grey visible between the long brown lashes. The corners of her mouth were pulled slightly downward in a vague grimace of distaste, a shiny snailtrack of dried saliva trailing from one corner. At her throat, bandaging covered the entrance point of the tracheotomy tube through which air was pumped to her lungs from the ventilator beneath the bed. Intravenous drips entering below her collarbone and in one arm fed fluids, nutrients and medication directly into her bloodstream; beneath the bedcovers catheters drained waste to disposable bags from her bladder. Electrodes measured her heart-rate and blood pressure, a rectal probe the temperature of her body.

'Oh and by the way, I bought the new CD by that all-girl pop group you're always going on about — what are they called, Storker? Well, I really don't know, Frankie, is that supposed to be rude or what? Oh yes, here it is, Stonker, that's better, I suppose. We'll have a listen later, shall we?' A nurse came into the room, frowned at the open window, smiled thinly at Alison and picked up the clipboard hanging at the end of the bed. 'Good morning, Mrs Heywood, good morning, Frances,' she chanted, shuffling past Alison's chair towards the monitors with exaggerated difficulty.

'Frankie,' corrected Alison. 'Good morning, Emily. What time is the consultant coming?'

'Oh my goodness who knows? Could be any time, I should think,' replied the nurse unhelpfully. She scribbled on the sheet, returning the clipboard to the end of the bed.

You know these consultants, law people, eh? See later.'

In the fourteen weeks since the accident, Frankie had shown no sign of regaining even partial consciousness. She occasionally moved, a sudden twitch of the head or shrug of the shoulder. Sometimes her eyes could be seen roving from side to side beneath the pale veined skin of her eyelids, and quite often the muscles of her face altered, so that her nose wrinkled or her mouth fell into a lopsided grin. But there was no pattern, no sense that she made the movements herself. 'Spontaneous and involuntary,' the doctors called them. Alison had reluctantly conceded they were probably right.

Physically Frankie had been fortunate to escape serious injury. X-rays at the time of the accident revealed a cracked pelvis and fractured left femur, both now almost completely healed. There were some deep lacerations down her left thigh, which had become infected but which eventually responded to antibiotics. It seemed she had been astonishingly lucky. But the Heywoods' initial relief that Frankie had evidently not suffered multiple life-threatening injuries had been quickly muted. Scans showed she had sustained a big blow to the back of the head, the brain was badly bruised, the first twenty-four hours would be critical, and thereafter the prognosis for a full recovery was very guarded.

For forty-eight hours Jack and Alison had barely left Frankie's bedside in the intensive care unit. They exchanged few words: there was little to say. 'This is all my fault,' Jack murmured at one point.

Alison looked up at him across the bed, her eyes softening. 'You mustn't think like that.'

During that period, Frankie's brain swelled alarmingly, driving up her temperature and suppressing vital life functions. On two occasions her heart stalled into bradycardia, triggering the monitor alarms and bringing resuscitation teams at the sprint. Throughout, she remained unconscious and unmoving except for a single moment late during the first night when she raised her head suddenly.

Startled from an exhausted reverie, Alison had jerked forward. 'Frankie?' she whispered, squeezing her hand.

Cheeks flushed, Frankie swallowed, her eyes staring sightlessly ahead, her neck swaying with effort.

'Frankie darling, Mummy's here. Everything's going to be all right.' Alison looked around anxiously, but before she could do anything Frankie's head fell back onto the bed.

Isabelle was dead, her neck snapped by the impact of the bus. The Heywoods spent a nightmare hour and a half waiting with her parents in an airless little room off the Accident and Emergency waiting area, while doctors fought to save their daughters. All feared the worst, none dared voice it. They spoke little, punctuating long silences with the illogical expressions of incredulity of the profoundly shocked.

'I don't understand it, she was absolutely fine at breakfast.'

'She's got a birthday party to go to at five. What should we do?'

'I haven't brought any of her night things.'

When the news finally came, broken cruelly and inexplicably to all four of them at the same time, as though they were all part of the same family, an awkward embrace was all any of them could manage before they were separated and led along different corridors towards the living and dead bodies of their children.

One overcast afternoon about a week later Jack and Alison stood among rows of gravestones in a breezy churchyard and watched in silence as the half-sized coffin was lowered into the ground. Neither of them could entirely banish the unsolicited sense of guilty relief that it was not their daughter they were burying. Glancing up as he carefully placed the spring-flower wreath, Jack's eyes met the heartbroken and uncomprehending gaze of Isabelle's mother, sensing her unasked questions with a sudden chill. They did not stay long after the funeral: a barely perceptible tinge of unspoken recrimination was pervading the grief.

Alison looked up as the door opened. Jack appeared. 'Have they come yet?' She shook her head. He picked up the only other chair and sat down across the bed from his wife.

'Ben all right?' she asked.

'Fine. Just dropped him off. Your mother's picking him up later.'

'Good, thanks.' She waited, looking at him expectantly, eyebrows raised.

'Right, yes, um well now,' he stuttered, clearing his throat. 'Hi there, Frankie, it's very good to see you. Sorry I'm late, got hung up at the office.' He hesitated. 'As usual, yes I know. Um, Bill sends his love. And Carol too—' He stopped at the gaffe. Alison's head was down. He exhaled slowly as his gaze circled the walls — the cheerful lurid glare of the pop posters, the soft pastels of the framed watercolour from Frankie's bedroom, the busy coloured patchwork of well-wishers' cards. Finally his eyes returned to his daughter's face, pale and lifeless. 'Sorry,' he said eventually.

'Is that it?'

'Pardon?'

'Sorry I'm late and Bill sends his love. Is that it?' She was scowling at him, nodding towards Frankie.

He sighed. 'Oh er, yes, Frankie, where was I?' he went on, speaking loudly and slowly as though to a dim-witted relative. 'By the way, had a meeting yesterday in Liverpool with an air-freight operator who is possibly interested in some kind of partnership tie-up or joint-venture thing, provided he can stump up the necessary, er, anyway that's by the way

Alison pushed back her chair. 'Oh for heaven's sake,' she breathed, walking to the window.

'Look, I'm just not very good at it, this talking-to-her thing, okay?'

'Well, you seemed to manage it all right before the accident, didn't you?' she said, her back to him. 'What's the difference?'

'The diff— Christ, all the difference in the world. It's just very hard for me, that's all.'

She turned from the window. 'I know. Sorry. It's hard for all of us.' She nodded towards Frankie. 'I expect it isn't much fun for her either.'

'Alison,' he went on quietly, 'you know how much I want to believe, desperately want to hang on to the slightest hope that there's something, a chance, the faintest glimmer.' He looked at his daughter. 'But it has been more than three months and there's nothing, absolutely nothing at all. Not one single sign that she can hear, can feel, is in any way aware of anything. Don't you see that?'

'No I don't. I won't. She's still in there and she's going to come out. And I don't think you should bother coming here any more if that's how you feel.'

It was Jack who found Ben on the day of the accident. Hours later, in the middle of the afternoon. At first, they had been so wrapped up with Frankie and the crisis at the hospital that it simply didn't occur to them that he wasn't at school. But then, around noon, while Frankie was being wheeled away for X-rays, Jack slipped off to the telephone and discovered that he had never arrived. The head teacher, who had been notified of the accident by the police, had assumed that Ben was with them.

Jack set off immediately. He drove home first, calling Ben's name as he let himself in through the kitchen door. Nothing. He scribbled a note and left it amid the abandoned wreckage of the breakfast table then ran back to the car. He tried the park and the playground, places nearby that Ben was familiar with and liked to go. He drove on to the school where the head teacher immediately interrupted Ben's class to ask if anyone had seen him at all that day. Jack telephoned the police from the head teacher's office before setting off once more. He tried the shops, leaping out to run the length of the arcade, stopping breathlessly to cup his hands at windows — the toy shop, the modelling shop, the sweet shop, the supermarket.

Then he drove to the scene of the accident. The owner of the newsagent's confirmed the exact spot, pointed out the skidmarks, the little shards of headlight still left after the sweep-up, even the bloodstained pavement. And with a stomach-turning lurch Jack learnt that, yes, there certainly had been a young, dark-haired boy matching Ben's description there, he had watched the whole thing, stayed there while the ambulance took the little girls away, until long after everyone had gone in fact.

Finally Jack drove home again to check with the police and ring the hospital. Half-way through dialling, he replaced the receiver and doubled up the stairs.

He was in his room, lying on the bed. Facing the wall. Curled into a ball.

In the first few days afterwards, Ben remained quiet yet somehow composed. He didn't talk about the accident at all and Alison and Jack were advised not to ask him. He ate food that was put before him, watched television, looked at his books and magazines, and went to bed at the normal time, asking only that the light be left on. He slept deeply, and frequently took extra naps throughout the day. He never once asked about Frankie, although Alison reassured him that she was going to be fine, nor did he mention Isabelle, whom he was not told about. He said he did not want to see anyone apart from Jack, Alison and Grandma, nor did he want to go out of the house. At all.

And his hair turned white.

It happened over a period of days, about a fortnight after the accident. At about the same time as the first visit by the child psychologist, Heather Pritchard. She said that up until that time Ben had probably completely blocked the accident from his conscious and subconscious mind. It didn't exist, it didn't trouble him, even when he was asleep. It was a defence mechanism, she said, very effective, very valuable. The problem was that it could only ever be a temporary block. The effort of sustaining it was exhausting him and severely affecting his ability to function at other levels. Sooner or later, she cautioned, he would have to begin to allow aspects of the trauma to seep back into his awareness and then be taught how to manage this.

Ben was fearful of the sessions with the psychologist, hiding in his room or locking himself in the bathroom as the hour of a visit approached. But Heather was deft and patient, never pressing him, always relaxed and encouraging. In early sessions they would sit in the kitchen or living room, alone or with Alison and his grandmother, he could choose. She would try to draw him out gently on any subject at all — school, sport, computers, space travel, whatever he seemed interested in. Sometimes he was cooperative and talked a little, sometimes he remained monosyllabic or silent, slipping away quickly to his room again as soon as the session ended.

One afternoon, seven weeks after the accident, he told Heather about a holiday the family had taken together in France two summers previously. He spoke more volubly than on any previous occasion, recalling more details of the house, the village, the food, the people than Alison would have believed possible. Towards the end, and for the first time, he mentioned Frankie by name. She had been stung on the leg by a jellyfish and got a huge rash.

Heather nodded. 'Frankie had an accident. Did you know?' she said after a while, very softly.

'She's dead,' replied Ben immediately, staring at his hands.

'No, she isn't. She's in hospital. She had a bad bump on the head but she's okay. You could go and see her if you like.'

'She's dead!' he shouted suddenly, his eyes filling with tears. 'I know she is. They both are!'

That night and every night thereafter he woke up screaming.

The consultant and his entourage finally arrived at around noon. Jack was staring out of the window while Alison transcribed notes from a medical journal into an A4 folder. The rhythmic tinny twittering of pop music came from a pair of headphones covering Frankie's ears.

'Incredible!' exclaimed Alison, picking up the journal. 'Listen to this. There was this patient in Stockholm who lost nearly eighty per cent of his brain tissue in an accident yet he could hold a perfectly normal conversation with his doctors.'

'Hmm?' Jack looked round, glancing at his watch. 'Yes it is. Doesn't seem possible, does it?'

'Apparently it's all to do with the remaining, undamaged parts of the brain training themselves to carry out functions that the damaged bits used to do. It really is an astonishing organ. Listen to this.'

Jack looked across at her. She was wearing grubby old jeans and scuffed trainers, the same blouse she'd had on when he'd last visited three days ago, and a ghastly old knitted cardigan that looked like a leftover from the sixties. Her face was tired and pallid, her once meticulously groomed hair dragged back harshly into an elastic band. In the space of just a few weeks she had changed beyond recognition. She actually looked scruffy. She had never been scruffy, never. In all the years he'd known her. Casual yes, informal yes, relaxed certainly, but never, ever scruffy.

He watched her, hunched forward on her chair, biting hard into a thumbnail, rocking back and forth as she pored over the journal on her knee. The woman he had married had been trim, neat, conscious of her own attractiveness, fastidious about her appearance. Not vain or anything, just particular, careful. He liked that. When they had met, she was an air hostess, always managed to look good, even when she had just finished a twelve-hour stint and was exhausted, grimy and jet-lagged. They first spoke on a Luton to Athens holiday charter. He was a co-pilot, newly converted on to 737s, she brought the flight-deck refreshments and leant over him to refill his coffee cup. She had smiling, mischievous brown eyes and shiny brown shoulder-length hair, and she smelt wonderful.

'Ever done the Acropolis?' he'd ventured with a shy grin.

'Never on the first date.' She'd winked, backing out of the flight deck. The captain looked out of the window, sniggering into his coffee.

Now she looked for all the world like a fagged-out student fallen on hard times. But then, that's exactly what she was, Jack mused. She carried her worldly goods around in a canvas shoulder-bag overloaded with medical textbooks and clinical study papers, neurological theses, magazine articles, anything she could lay her hands on that might have any possible bearing on Frankie and her condition. And why? He didn't understand why. Of course it was natural to be concerned. Of course they wanted the best possible care for Frankie. Of course they wanted to do the right thing for her. But what was the point of this obsessive scrabbling for knowledge? What good would it do? They weren't the doctors.

Discreetly he studied her as she rubbed exhaustion from one eye before continuing with her note-taking. She was here every day, all day if she could manage it. She neglected herself, she never ate properly, just snatching sandwiches and vending-machine snacks when the need arose. She neglected the house — it had looked like a complete tip the last time she'd let him through the door. He worried that she might be neglecting Ben too: he seemed to be spending more and more time being looked after by her mother.

And she neglected *them*. They both did. Every day the gulf between them widening a little more. If only they could talk, if only he could try to explain his feelings, and she hers. Everything.

'Al!' he began gently. There was a tap on the door.

There were three of them. With Jack and Alison and then a ward sister, who appeared quietly at the last minute, the room was suddenly crowded. Jack retreated to the far wall to observe from behind. He was joined by the ward sister and a slight, pale young man in corduroys and a sports jacket who introduced himself as Colin Winstanley. 'P-postgraduate research,' he stammered nervously, by way of explanation, as he shook Jack's hand. 'Here to assist P-P-Professor Keach, t-t-take notes and generally g-get in the way.'

'Ah,' replied Jack, more mystified than ever.

One face he did recognize was Trevor Stanhope's, the consultant in charge of Frankie, a small balding man of fifty with a penchant for loud ties, unnerving good humour and a tendency towards condescension. He began proceedings by introducing Keach to everyone, including Frankie.

'He's a neurology professor, Frankie, come up all the way to London especially to see you. How's that, eh?'

Alison, who had not budged from her bedside position, accepted Keach's proffered hand with a polite smile, noting at the same time that he did not say hello to Frankie.

It was a check-up, a progress report, a routine service. Stanhope began by cheerfully confirming that the latest set of scans continued to show the brain swelling to be completely reduced, which was very good, that there were still substantial areas of shadow indicating possible damage where blood had haemorrhaged into the brain cavity, which was less good, and that the last encephalogram set showed no change at all in Frankie's brainwave pattern, which was not really very good at all.

Jack shifted uncomfortably at the wall while they ran all the usual tests. At one point Keach, in a useless attempt to move Alison, suggested that perhaps it was a little crowded. Alison ignored him. Jack, who would have gratefully left the room, almost volunteered. But since nobody else did, he remained silent, his hands fisted behind his back.

Tight-lipped, he watched them prise open Frankie's eyelids and shine lights into her eyes, peer with otoscopes into her ears, scrape skin cells from deep inside her throat. Then they removed the bedcovers and pulled up her nightgown, exposing the awful pale thinness of her body, the wasting of her limbs, the concavity of her stomach. They drummed on her chest, pressed in her stomach, flexed her arms and elbows and turned her to examine her back. They fiddled with her catheters, palpated her internal organs and examined her genitals. They lifted one arm and dropped it again, they pricked her fingertips with a pin, they bent her leg up and hit the knee with a little rubber hammer and they scratched the soles of her feet with a wooden spatula. He'd seen it all before and it never failed to upset him. She was like a lump of meat to them, a specimen, an interesting conundrum. Not a person, his daughter, his Frankie. He wanted to scream, to stop them. To make them leave her alone.

Throughout it all Alison's attention never faltered, her expression remaining fixed and concentrated as she peered under their arms or around their backs to be sure not to miss anything. Occasionally she made notes in her book. They carried on working around her as though she were part of the furniture.

At last they replaced the covers and stepped back, apparently satisfied. Jack exhaled with relief, and to his surprise he heard the ward sister beside him do the same.

'Well, that all seems tickety-boo,' said Stanhope, beaming around the room. 'Professor Keach and his young assistant, um, Colin here, are doing some work on, on patients with similar symptoms to Frankie's, and he and I will discuss things and write to one another in due course, which I'm sure will be helpful and, er, jolly useful. Don't we?'

'What about the breathing-tube test?' Alison said quietly, flicking through her notebook.

'I beg your pardon?'

'It's a well-known test, you said. Disconnect the breathing tube to see if she will breathe unaided. You mentioned it last time.'

'Did I? Ah, well yes, I may well have, dear lady,' blustered Stanhope. 'But that was really only in passing. I didn't mean that we would necessarily be doing it today.'

'Why not? She's fit enough, isn't she?'

'Fit? Why yes, fit as a fiddle!' Stanhope laughed nervously. 'All things considered, that is. No, it's just that we hadn't decided that now was necessarily the right time and we didn't want to put you, or Frankie, under any extra, ah, unnecessary pressure at this stage.'

'I'd like it done. Now. We both would.'

Jack's mouth opened, but he was unable to speak.

'May I say something?' It was Keach, speaking directly to Alison for the first time. 'The breathing test is not in itself a determinate indicator of awareness.'

'Maybe, but my understanding is that as an autonomous function, breathing is almost unique.' She quoted calmly and fluently, her eyes fixed on his. 'Although under the general control of the autonomic nervous system, respiration is largely but not completely an involuntary action. To breathe unaided requires some minimal conscious or subconscious input.'

'That is possible but it is not fully proven,' replied Keach. 'And there have been many examples of PVS patients breathing unaided, sometimes for several hours and then stopping.'

'Frankie is not vegetative,' said Alison coldly. 'That diagnosis cannot be made after fourteen weeks. Kindly never refer to my daughter as PVS.'

He lies on the bed, his arms held rigidly at his sides, blinking up as a piercing shaft of bright afternoon sunlight catches the camouflaged wings of a slowly turning plastic Spitfire hanging from the ceiling. After a while, his chest begins to feel a bit calmer, his breathing slower as the dream fades. The dream. The one with Frankie. She's calling, shouting, but he can't hear her. There's too much noise, like a kind of thundery wind, and things keep moving slowly between them. Big shapes like huge ships or buildings, getting in the way, blocking his view even though he moves his head to try to see past them. Every time she reappears she's smaller, further away. She's calling him, calling his name, trying to tell him something. He can see her mouth moving. It's important, he wants to hear, wants to go to her, but he's afraid and part of him wants to run away. Soon she's very small, very far away and even though he can see she's still calling, she gets smaller and smaller until she's practically gone and the part of him that is afraid is glad that she's gone. Then he wakes up and sometimes the bed is wet.

He turned onto his side and let his hand fall to the floor, fingertips brushing the carpet. Mum had asked if he wanted to have a go at going back to school again today. But he refused. He hated it. Everyone tried to be so nice and then they looked at him strangely. The doctor said it was normal and they'd soon get used to him being there again. Give it time. But it was terrible, he could feel them gawping at him, or sometimes not looking at him at all, on purpose, like he was invisible.

It was his hair. And the accident. Mr Rawlings, the head teacher, had been very nice that first morning he went back. He had a long talk with him in his office and gave him a toffee, explaining that he'd spoken to the whole school at assembly. That he'd talked to everyone about what had happened with the accident and everything, and about his hair and that everyone was to treat him exactly like before but not to pester him with questions. To carry on as normal.

But nobody spoke to him at all. Except the teachers, who were all friendly and that wasn't normal, and one or two of the sixth-form prefects, who must have been told to talk to him, which was even less normal because sixth-formers never bothered speaking to second-formers.

Even Kevin and Davey wouldn't speak to him. His two best friends in the world. That was most un-normal of all. Once he'd seen them in the distance, walking back together along the cinder track from gym. When they saw him they ran away. He'd told the lady doctor about it afterwards but she said they were just nervous and didn't know how to manage being friends with him again yet, or something. Give it time, she said, give it time. She was always saying it. But that day he came back from school and told Granny he wasn't going back. Shit or bust. Mum was furious and said she'd telephone the school in the morning to complain about Kevin and Davey. Dad said you couldn't blame children for being children and to leave it. Then they had an argument.

He rolled over to face the wall. A while later Granny called him for lunch.

Frankie's breathing-tube test was a disaster. After ten minutes of preparation, Stanhope and Keach were finally ready to proceed. Once again Keach tried to clear the room. 'This really would be best carried out with just myself and Dr Stanhope present,' he said, looking around. 'You might find it a little distressing.'

Once again nobody moved. 'Thanks, I'm fine,' clipped Alison, shooting Jack a glance. He closed his eyes and propped himself against the wall. He felt dizzy and nauseous. 'Very well then.'

Keach leant towards the breathing tube.

Alison's hand shot out to his arm. 'Just a moment, if you don't mind.' She raised her mouth directly beside Frankie's ear. 'Frankie, darling, we're here, Mummy, Daddy and Dr Stanhope. The professor's going to take out the tube in your throat and I want — we want — you to see if you can breathe without it, all right?' Her voice faltered. 'Don't be frightened, darling, and we know you'll try your best.' Swallowing, she sat down again slowly. Then she picked up her notebook and nodded at Stanhope.

The tube came out of its seating with a soft click. Jack gritted his teeth, eyes tight shut. What seemed like an eternity later he opened them. It was like a video on freeze frame. Everyone was motionless. Stanhope and Alison were staring down at Frankie, the disconnected tube ready in Stanhope's hand. On either side of him Jack could sense the rigid and unbreathing presence of Winstanley and the ward sister. Keach was studying the second hand on his watch. Frankie's chest was unmoving. Jack clenched his fists, closing his eyes again. The silence went on.

'Stop,' he whispered after an age. He could stand it no more. 'Please stop.'

'Doctor.' It was the sister, just a murmur but it was enough.

Stanhope stiffened. 'Well, I think that'll do us all for now,' he said briskly, and reconnected the tube. Frankie's chest resumed its regular rise and fall. 'Well done, everybody, well done, Frankie. I think that was splendid — for a first time, that is.'

Alison's head was bowed. 'When are you going to start doing something?' she said quietly.

'I beg your pardon?'

She looked up, her gaze red and exhausted, switching between Stanhope and Keach. 'When are you actually going to start doing something about getting her back?'

'Well, Alison, we are doing everything we can, believe me, but we must proceed with—'

'No you aren't!' She shot to her feet, pencils clattering to the floor. 'You feed her, change her tubes, mop the dribble from her mouth, pump stuff in and pump it out again. You make sure she's warm enough and gets turned enough and has her exercises and her scans and her EEGs and her ECGs, but you don't do anything about reaching her, about actually reaching in to get her. Not one single thing!'

'Mrs Heywood,' interjected Keach quietly, 'I have studied this condition quite extensively, attended many patients with the same or similar symptoms. What I have seen here today leaves me in very little doubt that your daughter has suffered extensive and irrevocable damage to significant areas of the brain dealing with higher cognitive functions. In my view, we must face up to the possibility that this impairment may be permanent.'

'No. I won't do that. I just won't do it.'

'Alison,' continued Stanhope, resting a hand on her arm, 'we all want to do what's best. It's just that we must be careful. Proceed cautiously. So much of this is uncharted territory. We simply don't know enough—'

She shrugged him off. 'Well, if you don't know enough then who the hell does?' Tearfully, she picked up her belongings, stuffed them into her bag and walked out.

She took the lift to the ground floor, ignoring the stares as she fled, hand at mouth, across the lobby and into the street. Head down, she walked briskly, the tears flowing unchecked, blurring her feet as they carried her steadily away from the hospital. She turned at random, following no particular direction, but at last subdued residential avenues began to give way to the high-street bustle she sought. Soon she was among busy early-afternoon shoppers, office workers hurrying back from late lunches, college students pedalling towards tutorials. Humanity, hustle, activity, life. She slowed, inhaling the city's breath, reaching to feel for its pulse, immersing herself in its steady ebb and flow. Borne on a fleeting moment of release, she let go gratefully, drifting free, without direction or purpose, unfettered, anonymous and invisible.

Gradually her chest slackened, the pain receding as the storm subsided within her. Blowing her nose on a crumpled scrap of tissue pulled from her bag, she caught sight of herself in a shop window and stopped, arrested by her own appearance. She was a wreck, her eyes red-rimmed and darkly ringed, cheeks flushed and blotchy, hair lank and dishevelled. Beyond the glass, a young woman was lifting summer dresses from rails, holding them thoughtfully against her body, replacing them, choosing others. She was dark and pretty, taking her time, engrossed, quietly absorbed in her own private moment. Alison stared at her, mesmerized. In an hour or so this woman would go to meet her children from school, walk them home for tea, listen patiently while they bombarded her with minute accounts of their day's triumphs and tragedies. Later she'd bathe them and put them to bed, read to them until their father came home. They'd embrace, go downstairs, have a drink together, talking about their day while she prepared food for them. Afterwards she'd settle against his shoulder to watch television, or listen to music, or read. After a while they'd snuggle closer, exchange tiny secret signals. So she'd go up, and while he turned off lights and locked doors, she'd make ready, relaxed and warm with anticipation, for him to come to her.

With a start Alison realized the young woman was watching her through the window. Their eyes met, the other woman smiling self-consciously, a dress on a hanger in either hand. Alison smiled back, the soft longing in her eyes closing the space between them. The union held a moment longer than the woman broke away as a sales assistant appeared at her side. Alison's gaze fell. She turned from the window and walked back to the hospital.

As she opened the door to Frankie's room she saw her mother standing at the bedside, peering intently while a nurse adjusted the flow of fluid into a drip tube. Everyone else had gone.

'Right, there we are then. Can you see?' said the nurse cheerfully. 'Once the new bag's hooked up and clipped on, you just turn the little tap until you have the correct drip rate set and that's all there is to it.'

'Marvellous,' Janet Catchpole said doubtfully, lifting spectacles up and down in front of her eyes. 'Rather small though, if I may say so. Thank you, Donna, that was most interesting.' She sat down and picked up a children's book lying on Frankie's chest. Alison held open the door for the nurse, then walked slowly over to the window. Her mother glanced at her, then began to read out loud from the book, at high speed, her voice a quickfire accentless monotone.

Alison turned round. 'What on earth are you doing?' she said. 'Where's Ben?'

'Ben's absolutely fine,' said her mother reassuringly, turning the page of the book. 'He's downstairs having a poke around the hospital shop. I'm devising a speed-reading teaching method for Frankie.' Alison watched as her mother gabbled an entire paragraph of the story in a single unbroken breath, then immediately thrust the book in front of Frankie's nose. Seconds later she removed it again and repeated the process with the next paragraph.

Alison sighed, and slumped heavily into the chair opposite. Janet rattled off the next paragraph, glancing at her daughter over the top of her spectacles as she held the book in front of Frankie.

'I saw Jack,' she said quietly. 'He told me about the breathing-test thing. I'm so sorry.'

Alison lowered her head into her hands. 'It doesn't necessarily mean anything,' she said doggedly. 'In any case, they didn't try for long enough.'

'Of course.' Janet put down the book. 'Darling, he's terribly worried about you, you know. Jack is. We all are.'

'I know.'

'Won't you talk to him about it?'

'He doesn't believe. He hates it, it upsets him.'

'Yes, but he does care. Desperately.'

'I know he does.' She fell quiet. 'But then there's the whole other business. I can't pretend none of that happened just because of Ben and Frankie, can I?'

'Perhaps you could... sort of put it to one side for a while. He so wants to help, to understand, to be allowed to participate, have a voice. Don't you see? Whatever he's done, he is still their father.'

Alison shook her head miserably, turning to look at Frankie. Her tongue was protruding slightly, parting the lips at one corner of her mouth. A lock of brown fringe had fallen across one eye. Alison brushed it back from the slack face. 'I just feel so utterly alone with all this,' she said quietly. 'In his heart I know he believes it's hopeless, everyone does, but I can't—' She broke off, the tears starting again. She turned to her mother, face anguished. 'I just can't give up on her. I can't!'

'I know, darling.' Janet reached across the bed and squeezed her hand. 'I know.'

In the evening Jack came round to visit Ben.

'Hi there, how's it going?' he said cheerfully, closing the kitchen door. Ben was sitting at the table, idly leafing through a book. Jack flicked a glance towards Alison. She was at the sink, her back to him, a glass of wine at her side. She turned as he entered, smiled wanly.

'All right?' he asked pointedly, eyebrows arched.

'Fine, I'm fine, thanks. Sorry about the walkout earlier. Stupid, I overreacted.'

'No, you were right,' said Jack. Ben stared sightlessly at his book, listening from the table. 'A good old-fashioned ear-bashing now and then doesn't do anybody any harm.'

'Christ, that bad, was it? How was Stanhope?'

'Water off a duck's back, dear boy,' Jack mimicked. 'Absolutely understandable reaction from the little woman, poor dear delicate creature.' There was the smell of cooking coming from the oven. Jack swallowed, he'd eaten nothing since breakfast.

Alison nodded wryly. 'I didn't like the other one, Keach.'

'No, humourless bugger, wasn't he?' Jack dumped a plastic carrier bag on the table. 'But he is supposed to know what he's talking about. Leader in the field, according to Stanhope.'

Immediately Alison turned back to the sink. Jack stared at her for a second, then pulled out a chair next to Ben. 'Anyway, look, Ben, I've brought some stuff, thought you might be interested.' He began emptying the bag onto the table. It was strange: he felt perhaps he should ask permission first. No, not strange. Stupid, humiliating. To ask if he could sit at his table. In his kitchen. With his son. 'Here we go, couple of aeromodelling mags, another one here all about the space shuttle and an Airfix Superfortress — thought we might have a go at it together. What do you think?'

'Okay.' The voice was neutral, noncommittal.

'Don't be too long, Ben, supper-time in a minute,' said Alison lightly from the sink.

'Don't stay too long, Jack, I want you out of here,' was what she meant, he reflected. 'Great! So tell me, what have you been up to today?' But Jack knew exactly already. Up at the usual school-time but no school. A one-hour session at the therapist's in the morning, lunch with Alison's mother, then back for a nap in the afternoon before tea.

'Nothing much,' came the reply.

At least he was getting out and about a bit, Jack mused, as Ben opened the model box. But he still refused to see Frankie, still refused to go to school and still refused to talk about the accident. Even after more than three months. It wasn't right, wasn't working. It was as though he was slipping further away from them, not getting nearer. Jack studied him as Ben looked through the model's instructions. He too had changed. Thinner, slighter, smaller almost. As though he had actually grown shorter, although Jack knew this was impossible. Diminished, that was the word. And the hair, of course, even though they'd grown used to it now. The psychologist told Jack and Alison privately that it would almost certainly change back to its natural colour eventually. 'When the original shock begins to wear off and when he is able to find a way of resolving the crisis within himself.' She'd said to watch the roots for darkening. Jack peered closely as Ben leant over the box, but there was no sign. Looking up again, he saw Alison watching him, lips pursed. She took a sip from her wine-glass and turned back to the sink.

'Right then,' he went on. 'What have we got? Wings and undercarriage first, is it? Okay, I'll trim, you stick.'

None of them knew exactly what had happened on the road that day. They only knew that Ben had been given the responsibility for walking the girls to school each morning and something had gone wrong. The police said that eye-witnesses had described the girls in the middle of the road, panicking, then trying to get back to one side or the other, then being hit by the bus. Although the statement details varied, sometimes wildly, in one respect they were all consistent. No one recalled a third child being involved.

It wasn't right, bottling it up like this, it couldn't be right. There must be something more they could do. He rested a hand lightly on Ben's shoulder. He'd speak to the therapist again in the morning, fix a meeting.

'I've been thinking,' he began, picking up a piece of fuselage, 'what about a holiday? You know, a bit of a break. Long weekend or something.'

At the sink Alison's head lifted. Ben turned, looking at him. 'What, you mean go away? All of us?'

'I don't see why not. Seaside or something. Would you like that?' Ben stared at him then nodded slowly.

'Ben, could you go and wash your hands now, darling? It's supper-time.'

'But, Mum—'

'Quick as you can please.' A moment later they were alone. She turned to him, cheeks flushed. 'Have you gone completely mad?'

Jack shrugged. 'It was just a suggestion. I thought it might be good for him, lift his spirits.'

'Jack, we are separated. I am trying to help Ben and Frankie come to terms with that.'

'Good God, Alison, it's for Ben's sake. We don't have to do anything, be together or anything. We can get separate rooms, whatever you want.'

'Oh yes and maybe we can get a separate room for the bloody secretary too while we're at it! Wouldn't that be cosy?'

Jack shook his head wearily. 'Alison, listen to me just for a minute—'

'No, you listen, Jack.' She jabbed a wooden spoon towards him accusingly. 'There is absolutely no question of us going away on holiday together.' She walked across the kitchen towards him, ticking off reasons on her fingers. 'First, I am not leaving Frankie, not even for a day, she needs me. Second, we don't take Ben anywhere without consulting with the doctor first.'

The telephone was ringing. 'Of course, Alison, I understand that, for God's sake.'

She continued past him towards the phone. 'And third, we do not start sending the wrong signals to either of them by going off for weekends together. Is that quite clear?' She picked up the receiver, cupping one hand over the mouthpiece. 'It's bad enough, quite frankly, your coming round here every day, but I put up with it for Ben's sake. Hello?'

It was Colin Winstanley.

'Who?' she repeated irritably.

'C-C-Colin, Mrs Heywood. I was at the hospital this afternoon with Professor K-K-Keach.'

'Oh, yes, Colin.' She sighed. 'I blew up, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that, it wasn't your fault. How can I help you?'

'Well, I d-d-don't know if I should t-t-tell you this b-b-but...' His stammer was getting worse.

'Tell me what, Colin?'

'Well, there's this p-place. It's in Virginia. It's called the P-P-Perlman Institute.'

Chapter 3

After nine years at Stanford University, California, right at the end of her residency, Elizabeth Chase MD fell in love while carrying out postgraduate research. Ultimately to prove an unhappy although educative experience, the relationship and its aftermath nevertheless provided the catalyst for a chance encounter that would alter the course of her life.

She was twenty-six, shy, pretty, highly intelligent, but dangerously inexperienced in the ways of the heart and sexually naïve. He was more than twenty years her senior, twice divorced, a father of two grown-up children and a serial seducer of young women. Although alert to the power of her intellect and appreciative of her fine features and the way her legs moved beneath her summer dress, it was, as usual, her innocence and vulnerability that were of principal attraction to him.

He was a professor of biochemistry at Stanford, she was his star protégée and he ensnared her the way he had ensnared many others before her. Inviting Elizabeth to stop by his office after a lecture one day, he told her that he had found her last paper very well researched and presented but potentially flawed. Unfortunately, he went on, peering at the pages of his diary over the rim of his designer spectacles, he didn't have time to go through the paper right then, but he did feel it important to do so. Therefore might he suggest they get together Wednesday afternoon for a one-to-one.

At the appointed hour he arrived slightly late, apologized, said his office was being used by a colleague and since it was such a fine afternoon proposed they spread themselves on the grass outside. They sat beneath the shade of an old cedar and he spoke non-stop for an hour. Kindly but firmly dissecting her paper, flattering her for the accuracy of her research, chiding her good-naturedly for non-existent weaknesses in her methodology, complimenting her on the strength of her argument. As the afternoon wore on she found herself paying less attention to what he was saying and more to the charming manner in which he was saying it. Suddenly she realized that he had stopped talking and was simply smiling at her. He looked at his watch, concluded that in any case she was not to worry, it was an excellent paper in all respects, and the least he could do after all his hectoring was buy her a glass of wine before they called it a day.

At the second meeting, they worked for a while, discussing outline ideas for a new project she was planning, then they went for a walk. She learnt that he too was reluctant to talk about himself, was the solitary, studious type and found relationships, even friendships daunting. When she pressed him daringly on the issue, he paused in their walking and looked at her sadly. Then he admitted quietly that, having been badly hurt in the past, he had long since abandoned the search for a companion and had resigned himself to a bachelor lifestyle with his books, his record collection and his cat. By the third rendezvous she was nauseous with anticipation. It took place in a bar up in San Francisco. They drank a bottle of Napa Chardonnay, talked for two hours without mentioning biochemistry once and then, almost without realizing because it felt so natural, she found herself returning with him to see his apartment, listen to some of his music and meet his cat. While she wandered about his living room, admiring his lithographs and scanning the crammed shelves of his bookcases, he cooked seafood pasta, plying her with Chianti and Burt Bacharach.

'But don't you ever get lonely?' she asked an hour later, her head spinning as she gazed around at the ordered masculine clutter of the room. They were cross-legged on the floor, a third wine bottle now open between them, their candlelit shadows flickering across the ceiling. A gentle breeze lightly stirred the Indian-cotton curtain at the balcony window; beyond, the late-evening sky over the bay was soft and pale blue-orange.

'I suppose you learn to adapt.' He sighed and leant forward to kiss her. Within minutes they were in bed.

It lasted a month. She had never known such happiness, such passion, such depth of feeling. It was exhilarating, exciting and fulfilling. At last she had found a soulmate, somebody who understood her and was not in awe of her, could talk to her as an equal, could teach her new things about life, politics, culture and love. And sex, lots about sex. He was so generous, so giving, yet at the same time so experienced and bold. They met regularly at his apartment; he kept a key hidden behind a loose brick by the door so she could let herself in. One afternoon she let herself in and found him being experienced and bold with a first-year student from behavioural sciences. She turned and walked out without a word, returned to her room on campus, closed the door and remained there for three days.

The opening at Boston General Hospital was posted the following week. It was for an internship in the neurology department, a discipline she knew little about and had hitherto not considered as a possible specialty. In any case she was a research graduate, not a clinician. But the post had two immediate attractions. First, it was open to her right away and, second, it was on the far side of the continent, four time zones and a million miles from Stanford. She packed her bags, headed back east and became a neurologist.

At first she was surprised and frustrated by the slow pace of clinical development at the hospital. While respecting traditional mechanisms and values, her own work methodology tended towards empiricism, a *modus operandi* that had already brought her into occasional conflict with professorial staff at Stanford. She frequently rejected established conventions in favour of a fast-track intuitive approach that owed more to the processes of induction and experience than the much slower deduction and analysis. Lesser brains soon fall foul of such methodology as it requires enormous powers of retention. But from an early age it had always been clear that Elizabeth's was no ordinary brain.

Gradually she settled into the new culture. One evening, about four months after she had begun, during a routine tour of the department, she came across a new patient, recently moved to Boston from another hospital. A glance at his case notes told her that he was sixteen, he was on life support and that he had been unconscious for nearly two years. His name was Gary Perlman Junior. Sitting at his bedside in the private room were an elderly couple. They turned out to be Gary's paternal grandparents. They told her that he had suffered head injuries in a car crash in which both his parents had been killed, that there was no sign of his condition changing, let alone improving, and that they were beginning to wonder whether they should give in to mounting pressure to terminate his life support. When Elizabeth asked them what action doctors had taken to try actively to revive Gary, they just looked at each other and shrugged. Simply tending to his basic needs and keeping him alive, they replied.

Elizabeth was astonished. Later that evening, long after the old couple had left, she went back to Gary's room and sat down at his bedside. She remained there the whole night. In the morning, just as the first streaks of pink were suffusing the Massachusetts skyline through the window of his room, she left his side and walked down the hall towards the payphone.

From early on in her life it was clear to Elizabeth Chase's parents, Elliot and Mary, that in their firstborn they had created a prodigy. The revelation, first evidenced when Lizzie began to talk and read at the age of two, brought both delight and concern to the bright young psychologist and his linguist wife. Elliot knew well the downside of an unusually powerful intellect. As a boy his own father had driven him mercilessly, goading him to ever greater heights of academic attainment, at the same time denying him the simple pleasures of unpressured childhood. Long before Lizzie was born, Elliot had vowed that his children would never suffer similar deprivation. Even so, Lizzie's capacity for

earning progress at an astonishing rate. By the time Mary walked her through the little grade school near their Albany apartment for the first time, she was already reading fluently, had mastered fourth grade mathematics, and as well as eloquently articulating her native tongue, had picked up the basics of both French and German. Although the Chases were careful never to push their freckle-faced daughter, feeding her only as much as she wanted, she appeared insatiable. Like a newborn chick her mouth seemed permanently agape: the more her harassed parents strove to satisfy her, the more she demanded.

Soon Mary, quietly conceding the superiority of her offspring's mental aptitude, gladly surrendered responsibility for its development to her husband. Father and daughter grew close, all of Elliot's spare time being given over to Lizzie. They visited zoos, art galleries and museums together, listened to classical music, read poetry or simply sat together at the kitchen table, working through maths problems. He was always careful: rest and recreation periods were built into the schedule and he insisted she spend time with children of her own age, even when she protested they were dull and stupid. Also he strove to ensure that her intake was balanced: they watched Disney films together, he bought her pop and rock cassettes, they joined a little-league baseball team. And he gave her a sibling. He drove with her to hospital one day when she was seven and watched her closely as she was introduced to Daniel, her new baby brother. He needn't have worried, she was immediately entranced, sitting straight-backed at Mary's bedside for hours at a time, wide-eyed and motionless, while the tiny bundle in her arms yawned and blinked up at her.

After a while, the steady growth of his psychology practice prompted Elliot to relocate the family from their cramped upstate New York apartment to a small house in Connecticut. From there he could commute to service his expanding Manhattan patient-base and Lizzie had access to a better range of schools and colleges. As she grew into her teen years, she continued to excel, quickly developing the knack of grasping the fundamentals of a subject, retaining them, moving swiftly on to the next, then returning to the original, often months or even years later. She evolved a talent for constructing great leaping bridges of intuitive deduction, effortlessly spanning the confused seas and jumbled thought processes of lesser minds to link previously unconnected notions, ideas or concepts. To her it mattered not one jot whether it was a different topic, or a different subject altogether: if there was a possible connection between an algebraic formula she had learned two years previously and the writings of Plato, she would make that connection and pursue it relentlessly until either she convinced everyone else or disproved it to herself.

Socially, however, she was far less adept. With the onset of puberty, she found it progressively harder to make and sustain close friendships at school. Her intellect masked a debilitating shyness, which people often mistook for disdain. Her genuine eagerness to please was misinterpreted as gaucheness. Also, in truth, she had difficulty in sharing the eternal fascination with trivia that seemed so to obsess girls of her age, and despite her innate prettiness, she found that boys were nervous of her and stayed away. Although she continued to try to join in, it became a habit to keep herself to herself at school, focus inwardly and concentrate on her studies.

Her family was her life. Whenever his increasingly hectic schedule permitted, she continued to spend hours with her father. Catching a train into Manhattan after school, she'd wait in his office while he tidied up, stretching out on his couch, riffling through his medical journals and pestering him for stories about his patients. Then they'd walk down Fifth Avenue together and spend the evening at the theatre or at a jazz concert or a movie. Afterwards they'd go to Pizza on the Park or Benny's Grill or occasionally a swanky French restaurant.

Her relationship with her mother was more subdued. Mary was introspective and bookish by nature, disliked social over-contact, vastly preferring to stay in and read of an evening than dine out with Elliot's work colleagues or go to a show. Quietly she acknowledged the strength of the bond between Lizzie and her father, recognizing without rancour that it substituted in part for certain aspects of her own relationship with her husband. She and Lizzie enjoyed an easy closeness but they were not intimate. When Lizzie's periods began, it was Elliot she ran to tell first.

But above all Lizzie adored Daniel. Right from when he was a baby she fussed over and cosseted him as though he was her own. It was Lizzie who taught him to walk, taught him to read, taught him to ride a bicycle, taught him to swim. On summer evenings they spent hours together out in the backyard in Connecticut, playing catcher's mitt or shooting baskets. She assisted him with his schoolwork, gently encouraging and cajoling him to help himself towards solutions. She was patient and tolerant, well aware that his prowess was not on a par with hers, would never even get close. For his part Daniel, more than making up in enthusiasm what he lacked in mental agility, taught Lizzie the importance of having fun, the joy of not taking the world too seriously, a love of sport, the exhilaration of the occasional broken rule.

One day he taught her the meaning of life.

With the full consent and support of his grandparents, Elizabeth began work on Gary Perlman. Her intention, she told them, during that first early-morning phone call, was to embark upon a comprehensive regime of treatments and therapies, some of which they might find quite unusual, but all of which would be designed with a single objective in mind: to try to recover Gary from his persistent vegetative state. She told them that, having studied his notes in detail during the night, it was clear that up to now most of his medical care had been directed towards maintaining a stable condition, the prevention and treatment of physical ailments or infections, and the ongoing monitoring of his unconsciousness. Very little, apart from 'a few handclaps, pin-pricks and bright lights' had been done to try to jerk him out of it. All that, she explained, was about to change.

From that moment on her every spare minute was spent on Gary and his condition. She scoured libraries, devouring textbooks, scientific journals and research papers by the basket load. She buttonholed bio-neurologists, biochemists, biosensory physicists. She doorstepped homeopaths, acupuncturists, behaviouralists, hypnotherapists. She cold-called hospitals with other patients like Gary, cajoling them, begging them, or simply deceiving them into sending her copies of their case notes. She spoke to their doctors, their relatives, their friends, their hairdressers — anyone she believed might contribute to her rapidly expanding information base. She attended seminars, lectures and conferences, hanging around in corridors like an over-eager schoolgirl just to catch five or ten minutes with a neurology professor or a behavioural therapist or endocrinologist. Then at the end of it all she would return to her apartment near the hospital and work, late into every night, writing up her notes, recording her findings, storing everything away in her swiftly growing data bank.

And planning her attack. For three or four hours every evening, after completing her normal round of duties, she worked on Gary. She began slowly, methodically running a series of long and exhaustive tests on the teenager using ever more complex combinations of stimulating and monitoring equipment. Almost immediately she encountered a problem. It quickly became impossible for just one person to operate the growing elements of the equipment, and watch for responses at the same time. So she seduced a young computer programmer called Nathan Greenwater from the bioscience department to patch it all together. Nathan, a tall gum-chewing black from Atlanta, was reluctant at first. Working late for that scatty bitch from Neuro for no pay sounded like a poor deal. Elizabeth, looking him straight in the eye, said she'd need him to test everything on her. All the electronic hook-ups, senders, receptors and feeds would have to be attached, by him, to literally every part of her body. To the bare skin of every part of her body.

Nathan was aboard. Soon he was able to sequence innumerable combinations of different stimuli from the expanding piles of equipment, and monitor for reactions, all from a single computer screen. By the time the new equipment was ready to be moved into Gary's room, he knew everything there was to know about Elizabeth's anatomy and was completely hooked on the programme.

Elizabeth started each session by raising Gary's physical metabolism with intravenous stimulants — her 'wake-up call', as she termed it. Then she and Nathan would begin programming different combinations of stimuli, separately and together. Sounds, ranging from low-frequency hums to inaudible ultrasonic whistles, patterns of fixed and flashing lights across the full visual spectrum. Minute electrical stimulation of Gary's nervous system, small pulsed charges to his lips, earlobes, fingertips and toes. Then she would alter the combinations slightly and begin the sequences again.

It was painstaking, laborious work and throughout it all there was not a single reaction from Gary that repeated or could be attributed to anything but an involuntary response. Furthermore, after three months and with nothing apparently achieved, doubts were being raised as to the advisability of the programme. Questions were asked about some of the more extreme methods being used by this little-known intern; rumours of bizarre experiments, even abuses, were spreading through the department. Before long a 'Stop the Chase' whisper campaign was circulating the hospital corridors. Finally, the head of the neurology department called a case-study meeting and demanded to know, in detail, exactly what Elizabeth was doing. Others at the meeting expressed grave doubts, talked about Gary's 'dignity', said the experiment might be doing him more

harm than good, that artificially stimulating Gary's heart and other organs could place him at risk. And how did Dr Chase know that Gary wasn't in distress? Worse still, what if he were to suffer a collapse or die? The legal implications for the hospital could be disastrous. She was given two weeks to wind it up.

In the end she got him with intravenous epinephrine, a high-speed strobe and Motorhead at full volume. That, plus a highly complex sequence of circulating low-power electrical discharges, a slightly raised body temperature, direct stimulation of the vagus nerve, repeating short cycles of vigorous foot massage and a heartfelt final curse.

It was late on a Thursday night, half-way through the final week. Elizabeth had just reset the strobe for the fortieth time that evening, she was exhausted and irritable, nothing was working properly, the computer program had crashed repeatedly, Nathan was sullen and Gary as unresponsive as ever.

'Set?' Elizabeth ran her sleeve across her forehead wearily, then placed her hands on Gary's foot ready to massage. Nathan grunted, his eyes on the screen.

'I said, set, Nathan?'

'Set, man, Jesus.'

'Right then. Go!' Nathan clicked the mouse, the cycle began. Elizabeth drove her thumbs hard into the ball of Gary's foot, the strobe burst once for two seconds then stopped altogether. Elizabeth exploded. 'For fuck's sake, Nathan, get it together!'

Nathan rocked back, raising his hands. 'Hey, back off, bitch, I never touched the mother!' He studied the screen. 'Something interrupted the sequence. Look, there it is again. It's — it's something on the receptor bank. It's one of the fucking receptors, man!'

Elizabeth dived to the screen. 'My God, it is!' For ten agonizing seconds they stared in silence. 'Yes, look, there, and it's repeating, there it is again. It's the tongue receptor. Oh my God, Nathan, he's trying to move his tongue!'

Every summer Elliot and Mary Chase took the children to a cabin in Vermont. It was peaceful and remote, set on the edge of a still, wide lake surrounded by dense pine forests. A scattering of other cabins dotted the lakeside around them; five miles away was a small town with a general store, a gas station, an ice-cream parlour and a bar. The roads were no more than bumpy tracks, the mailman came by boat and knew everyone by name, there was no television and no telephone. Sometimes the power went out, nobody minded, days passed in an endless, tranquil blur of fishing and swimming, sunbathing and sailing, evening cook-outs and nights under the stars. To Elliot and Mary it was a blessed haven from the manic hurly-burly of the city. To Lizzie and Daniel it was a magical wonderland. As the children grew older the family began escaping to the cabin for a few days over Christmas. Elliot would clear his diary for a week, load up the car with suitcases of warm clothes and boxes of provisions, snow chains and shovels. They'd lash a Christmas tree to the roof, clamber aboard and set off on the long drive northwards.

In winter the lake was transformed, the sparkling clear water solidified to sugar-dusted granite, the summertime buzz of motorboats and resonating children's laughter banished by a thick, snow-muffled silence, the heady tang of warm evergreen forest and barbecue replaced by resinous woodsmoke from the log fire. Although it was never designed for winter occupation, the cabin was thick-walled and sturdy. They moved camp beds into the front room, lit a big fire in the grate and settled down around it to read books or talk, play box games or pore over giant jigsaw puzzles, Christmas carols sounding from the cassette recorder in the background.

It was Christmas Eve morning. Lizzie sat by the window, feet curled up beneath her, flexing her cocooned toes within a pair of Daniel's thick hockey socks. On her lap was her diary, its pages filled with tiny meticulous handwriting. She'd always kept one, since she was seven, nearly ten years. Faithfully and accurately recording in microscopic detail her innermost thoughts, anxieties, hopes and dreams. She flicked back rapidly through the pages, eyes subconsciously speed-reading through the months in just a few seconds. Another week and it would be time to start a new year, a fresh volume. It lay waiting for her, wrapped in shiny silver paper beneath the Christmas tree, one of her presents from Dad as always. As the pages flashed before her she was unsurprised to detect a sea change in her disclosures over the year. Boys increasingly dominated her preoccupations. One boy in particular seemed to have accrued a statistically disproportionate number of entries.

She looked out of the window, hugging her knees. Her parents would be back soon: they'd driven into town for some last-minute provisions at the general store, to pick up any mail and, most importantly, phone through to the answering-service in Connecticut for messages. She stared out at the solid expanse of the lake. Daniel was there as usual, endlessly circling the same carefully swept patch of ice on his skates for hours every day. She watched as he looped around the back of the two goalposts he'd set up, deftly flicking the puck from side to side as he doubled round, completed the figure-of-eight, turned and fired the puck with relentless accuracy between the posts before circling back, arms raised triumphantly, to collect it and begin the manoeuvre once again. He must have done it dozens of times already, she mused, her thoughts returning to her parents and the answering-service. Happy Christmas, Lizzie, have a great vacation, looking forward to seeing you next semester, yours, Tom Ryder. And who might Tom Ryder be? Dad would demand, eyebrows raised in mock disapproval. Just a friend, she would reply mysteriously.

'Idiot,' she muttered, picking up the diary. 'New year's resolution number seven...' she jotted briskly, at the back of her mind an image, watching her father as a little girl, he, lost in work at his carpentry bench in the garage at Albany, carefully scoring glass for a cabinet he was making. '...give up useless fantasizing,' she wrote, scribbling the figure fifty-six in the margin.

It happened incredibly quickly. There was a high-pitched muffled shout from outside. She looked up. Daniel was gone. Two precious seconds were lost as she gaped in disbelief across the suddenly deserted lake. Then she was diving through the door, down the snow-covered foreshore, skidding out onto the ice. Her shoeless feet lost grip and she fell heavily, the ice catching the back of her head a stunning blow. Dazed and disoriented she scrambled back to her feet. Behind her a car was pulling up outside the cabin. 'Danny!' she screamed, running on towards the goal posts. As she drew nearer she saw him, just his head and shoulders, one hand still grasping the hockey stick, fingers scrabbling at the edge of a pitch-black gash in the white.

She slowed, the ice undulating beneath her feet as she drew nearer to the breach. Instinctively she sank to her knees, crawling towards him on all fours while the ice made sickening splitting sounds, new cracks fanning out all around them. Behind her on the shore her father shouted in alarm for her to wait. But she crawled on, sinking lower and lower onto the heaving ice as she drew near, until finally she was flat out on her stomach. Suddenly, when she was within a few feet of him, the ice beneath her dipped forward, a wavelet of jet black water rolling slowly up towards her chin as the edge of the floe tilted into the lake. She stopped, gasping with shock as freezing water soaked through her clothes to the skin of her stomach and thighs. The ice tilted down further, then steadied. At its edge, six feet away from her outstretched arms, Daniel struggled weakly, arms and elbows slipping uselessly as he fought to lever himself from the water.

'Danny, the stick!' she called, inching forward. Immediately the ice ahead of her started to dip again. To one side, horribly near, there was a crack like a rifle shot as a new fissure opened. She ignored it, turning slightly onto her side to stretch one hand towards him. 'Don't struggle, reach out to me with the hockey stick! Come on, Danny, reach out to me now. Dad's coming.'

'Lizzie.' He shuddered, eyes wide with panic.

'Now, Danny. Reach out to me with the stick!' She could hear his breathing, slow and hollow as the freezing water sucked the heat from his body. 'The stick, Daniel, now!' Slowly he responded, one arm reaching ponderously towards her, the hockey stick gripped between colourless fingers. She stretched for it, but it was still too far. She inched forward a little more. The ice tipped precariously downward, her chin and upper torso were awash with icy water. Still she crawled on, flat out, head sideways, one hand stretching into the space ahead of her. Finally her fingers brushed the stick. 'That's it, Danny! Reach out just a little more.' A moment later she had it. 'I've got it!' She lifted her head to look at him. 'I've got you. Don't try and pull, just hang on. Dad's coming. He'll be here any minute.'

He managed another two. All the while Lizzie talked to him non-stop, encouraging him, berating him, begging him to hang on. Without pausing from talking, she turned her head, peering past her outstretched body to the distant shore. People had arrived — she could see more vehicles, men with coils of rope and ladders setting out onto the ice. She turned back. 'Look, they're coming!'

Her stomach lurched. He was quite still, gazing at her, just his head and one arm showing above the surface. His lips were blue, cheeks ashen, but the panic had gone, his eyes were calm and steady. 'Can't any more. Sorry.'

'You must! They're coming, they'll be here any minute! Danny, you must hold on, you must!'

'It's okay, Lizzie.' His voice was no more than a whisper. 'It's okay.' His eyes held hers, mouth moving, the ghost of a smile touching the corners of his lips. 'Don't cry.'

'No!' she wailed, hauling desperately on the curved blade of the hockey stick. She felt it give suddenly, staring in horror as together they watched his mittened fingers sliding from the handle. His eyes found hers again. A moment later his head slipped silently beneath the slate black surface.

As word of Gary Perlman's 'Return from the Abyss', as one newspaper headlined it, flashed around the country, Elizabeth found herself caught up in a spiralling whirlwind of media attention. Newspapers, television stations, documentary film-makers, even movie companies wanted to talk to her. There were endless interviews with TV and radio commentators, magazine editors and newspaper journalists. Endless photo sessions — Dr Chase outside the hospital, Dr Chase at work, Dr Chase at Gary's bedside. Always the same repeating rounds of banal questions, the same bemused smiles as she attempted to explain, the same lack of serious interest or even superficial understanding. It was fun at first but quickly wearying.

Inevitably others cashed in, scrabbling anxiously lest the spotlight of attention should pass them by. The head of Elizabeth's neurology department wrote an article for the *Boston Globe* and took part in a radio phone-in about the trail-blazing work being undertaken 'under his guidance' by his talented team. The corporate communications director at Boston General, never one to miss a media opportunity, also made best use of the story: 'Boston Leads World in Coma Recovery Treatment' heralded one of his press releases. Boston's mayor went on live television, talked about the pioneering New England spirit being alive and well. Even Nathan was briefly feted by the press for what Elizabeth described as his 'priceless and patient assistance'.

At the same time, beneath the surface hubbub, an underlying debate began to circulate like a current through the medical profession. How had the breakthrough been achieved? Was it just luck? Had anything been published? Who was she? Who had she trained under? Scientific and medical journals wanted to publish Elizabeth's case notes, she was in demand to speak at seminars, offers from other institutions began to appear in her mail.

And then there were the requests to treat other patients. Initially it was just the odd tentative enquiry from another neurology department, or a low-key request for a second opinion from a consultant on a particular case. But one day, about three weeks after the breakthrough with Gary, she received a telephone call from an attorney in Portland.

'I represent the family of Dana Konakowski,' he said, by way of introduction. The name meant nothing to her. 'Following a horse-riding accident nearly three years ago, Dana has been in hospital here in Oregon, in what doctors diagnose as a persistent vegetative state—'

'I don't believe in the term,' interrupted Elizabeth.

'Er, no, indeed, if you say so. Anyway, Dana's family have approved, and their medical insurers have underwritten, a provisional referral to your facility for a preliminary treatment period of up to six months.'

Elizabeth was stunned. Within a week four other families were asking for transfers. She didn't know what to say. Her work with Gary had been a one-off. She wasn't running a department, or even a ward. Strictly speaking, she didn't even have use of Gary's room any more. The 'facility' consisted of a tangled mess of mostly borrowed equipment that didn't work very well. That was it. She didn't have the people, the equipment, the computers, the beds, nothing. She didn't have the time, she didn't have the authority. Her 'facility' didn't exist.

That evening as usual she went to see Gary. His grandparents were there, as they were most evenings. They rose as she entered, hugged her warmly. 'Look at this!' said Mr Perlman, proudly holding up a little notepad. 'He says he feels absolutely fine, says it's too damn hot in here and that he wants a beer.' Elizabeth glanced at the pad, three words, HEAT FINE BUD. It could mean anything, she realized, but it was still enormous progress.

Gary was propped into a half-lying, half-sitting position, his head resting to one side. His gaze was fixed and staring, however tests showed that his vision was improving and had not suffered irrevocable impairment. He was still on the ventilator much of the time but as his chest musculature reaccustomed itself to the work of breathing unaided, he had begun coming off it for increasing periods each day. His left leg seemed to be showing signs of returning voluntary movement, and although he was as yet unable to generate sound, it was clear that he could hear perfectly and that his mind was alert and eager to communicate.

Elizabeth sat down on the bed. 'Hello, you,' she said softly, taking his hand in hers. A thin plastic tube ran from the corner of Gary's mouth to a little box the size of a paperback book which sat on his lap. Flexing the muscles of his tongue and jaw caused a buzzer to sound on the box, thus he could signal a simple one for yes or two for no. In the last few days he had begun the laborious business of spelling out short words by buzzing through the alphabet. Nathan was working on a mouth-actuated voice-synthesis programme designed for quadriplegics and hoped to have it ready for Gary to try out in a week or two.

'There's something you should know,' she went on quietly, 'all of you.' She smiled at Gary, scratching lightly at the tip of his nose. Along the corridor a telephone buzzed; in another room someone was watching television. 'Getting Gary back was kind of an experiment, as I explained. But the thing is, I don't know, nobody knows, what happens from here on, how far it can go. It's up to Gary now.' She looked at him again, her blue eyes searching his face. 'But I'd like to thank you all, for giving me the chance, for having the confidence to let me try.' She broke off, head falling.

'That's not necessary,' said Rose Perlman, patting her hand. 'It's us that wants to thank you.' Silence fell again. Rose sniffed and fumbled for a handkerchief. Suddenly Gary's buzzer went once and they all laughed.

'In fact,' said Mr Perlman, clearing his throat gruffly, 'we wanted to talk to you about a little gift. A donation. Something to help your research, something that might enable you to help others like Gary.'

It was an endowment for two million dollars.

Daniel was dead. A diver pulled his ten-year-old body from beneath the ice thirty minutes after Lizzie had been dragged screaming to the shore. A waiting helicopter ambulance airlifted him and Elliot directly to the hospital at Montpelier, seventy miles away; en route attempts were made to revive him. He was given CPR, force-fed pure oxygen, injected with stimulants and repeatedly jolted by shocks from the air ambulance's portable heart defibrillator.

By the time they touched down on the hospital rooftop forty-five minutes later, a thin pulse had been re-established. But even before Mary pulled up in the car outside the hospital that evening, a stunned and heavily sedated Lizzie sitting in the back, it was already becoming clear to Elliot and the emergency room team that the damage sustained to Daniel's brain by half an hour's oxygen starvation was catastrophic.

Two weeks later he was flown back to Connecticut on life support and installed in a private room at a clinic in Hartford. There he remained for six further weeks while his condition was monitored and Elliot called in every expert on the eastern seaboard to examine him and put forward a prognosis.

They were all the same. Danny was a vegetable and there was no hope. One evening, two months after the accident, a week before her seventeenth birthday, Elliot sat down in the kitchen with Lizzie and explained that they were going to switch off Danny's life support and let him go peacefully. At first she said nothing, staring silently into her lap while tears rolled down her nose and dropped onto the table. Eventually she looked up at her father, her eyes searching his. 'You can't!' she sobbed, collapsing onto his chest. 'There must be something more we can do?'

After a while, he replied quietly. 'Nothing. There's nothing more anyone can do.'

'But how do you know? How can you be sure?'

Elliot sighed, stroking her hair. 'The human brain needs a constant supply of oxygen to function, Lizzie, you know that. Danny's brain was denied oxygen for over half an hour, it suffered terrible damage, all the tests show it is not working any more, and never will again.'

'But it might, one day. I read about fish and frogs frozen in lakes for weeks, months sometimes, then recovering.'

'I know,' he said softly. 'But these are different metabolisms, different processes, different organisms. It's not the same.'

'But—'

'Elizabeth,' he interrupted, gently holding her away. Her face was pinched, eyes red and lifeless, her skin pallid. She'd lost weight, having barely eaten, barely slept since the accident. Elliot had consulted privately with colleagues. They had all confirmed what he already suspected. Prolonging Daniel's inanimate existence was only prolonging her suffering. 'We have to let him go now. We have to. We were right to try, right to do everything we could. But we can do no more, so keeping his body going now is wrong, simply wrong.'

He was buried ten days later. Within a few weeks Elliot realized his instincts and the advice of his colleagues had been right. But almost simultaneously he had also to concede that they were wrong. Yes, Elizabeth seemed to begin managing the crisis within herself, subconsciously at least, Elliot revisiting the trauma with her in the privacy of his consulting room, a deeply painful ordeal for them both. Yes, she began to eat, to sleep, to exercise. Gradually she appeared to regain her composure, her equilibrium, a measure of self-confidence. She returned to school, continued her studies, even socialized a little with classmates.

But she was changed. Their relationship was changed. A chasm had opened between them. She no longer sought him out at every opportunity, she stopped taking the train into Manhattan in the evenings. She spent more time with her mother, or in her room or, when the spring sunshine came to Connecticut, simply out walking. Although he tried gently to draw her out on the subject, she would not talk about Danny's death, carrying the burden of it inside her like a private injury. Gradually Elliot was forced to admit that far from losing one child under the ice that Christmas, in effect he had lost them both.

In May she graduated, passing out way top of her year as predicted. They didn't go to Vermont for summer vacation. Elliot booked a month-long tour of Europe for the three of them instead, springing it on Lizzie as a surprise graduation present. She thanked him warmly but said she had been invited to spend the summer with a girlfriend's family in Toronto and if it was okay she'd like to do that. Earlier they finalized arrangements for her entry into college, deferred following Daniel's death. A number of offers were being held open for her. Elliot favoured one of the east-coast colleges, MIT or Harvard. But at the last moment Lizzie quietly explained that she probably wanted to carry out research when she graduated, genetics or biochemistry perhaps. Having re-studied the prospectuses, Stanford seemed to offer excellent opportunities for her in that direction and so, if it was all right, she wanted to study in California.

When the time came he drove her to La Guardia for the flight to San Francisco. They were silent in the car, Lizzie staring through the window as Connecticut's leafy green gradually gave way to the graffiti-covered concrete and grid-locked tarmac of the city.

They checked in, then he carried her bag to the barrier. 'I love you,' he said simply, hugging her slight body to him. 'Please keep in touch.'

'I will,' she promised. They clung together for a moment longer, then she broke away and picked up her bag.

'And y'all come back real soon now!' he joked, his stomach like lead.

It was ten years before she did.

Chapter 4

At nine o'clock Alison and Ben were ushered into a waiting room outside the psychologist's office. Jack was already there, hands thrust deep in pockets, pacing nervously. He stopped as soon as the door opened, smiled brightly at Ben. 'Well, hi there, folks, how are we doing?' he said, bending to kiss his son. Ben went immediately and sat on a plastic chair in the corner, swinging his legs and looking out of the window. His usual place, Jack guessed, raising his eyebrows at Alison. 'Okay?' he mouthed, tilting his head at Ben. She pulled a quick grimace, fluttering the fingers of one hand uncertainly. Today was The Day.

'Well, now then, Ben,' began Heather Pritchard, a little later. 'How have you been getting on these past few days?'

'Okay,' he said quietly. He was very tense, Jack could tell. Hardly surprising, sandwiched between them on that ridiculous little sofa. It probably felt strange having them there at all: normally Ben saw the doctor alone.

'Okay, fine. Last time, Ben, as you'll remember, and the time before, we talked about the idea of going upstairs to see Frankie, do you remember?'

The shock of silver white hair nodded fractionally, but Ben's gaze stayed fixed on the floor in front of him.

'We talked about the possibility of doing that today, didn't we? How do you feel about that idea?'

Rag dolls flying through the air, arms and legs splayed.

'All right.'

'Ben tells me there is the possibility of a holiday,' Heather went on, deftly shifting topic from the contentious to the rewarding.

Alison stiffened. 'Well, it was just an idea, nothing definite, it may be too soon.'

'I wanted to ask about that, Doctor,' Jack broke in. 'What's your opinion of the idea?'

'Oh, I think it's an excellent idea. A change of scenery would be of enormous benefit. To Ben, and probably to you too.' She smiled at Ben. 'Provided he'd like to go that is.' He nodded slowly.

They talked for a while longer then Heather led Ben back into the waiting room. When she returned, she closed the door. 'I wanted a quick word with you both before we go upstairs. Ben is progressing quite well, but there are one or two things that are giving me cause for concern. Tell me, how do you both find him at home at the moment?'

'All right,' replied Alison thoughtfully. 'Much the same as he has been. As you see him now. Quiet, the same.'

The psychologist glanced through her notes. There was the sound of birdsong outside; further off a road drill hammered into distant concrete.

'I don't,' Jack said quietly.

Heather looked up. 'I'm sorry?'

'I don't find him all right. Not at all.'

'In what way?'

'Every time I come round to see him he's more and more distant, remote. Not necessarily so much with me, but with himself, kind of detached, I can't explain it.'

'Every time?'

'Hmm?'

'You said every time you come round to see him.'

He felt Alison move on the sofa beside him. 'My husband and I are separated,' she said quickly.

'Oh, I see.' The psychologist fell silent, frowning at her file. 'I didn't know that. Is this a recent development, if I may ask?'

'Shortly before the accident. Um, perhaps we hadn't made it completely clear, properly.'

Jack took a breath. 'Is it, significant — would you say, detrimental to Ben? You know, harming his recovery?'

'Well, the break-up of a family is always significant to a child, Mr Heywood, no matter what the circumstances. And, well yes, in Ben's case it could be interfering with the normal course of his recovery. It's bound to be an added preoccupation, an extra worry. It's difficult to say but certainly it might explain some aspects of his behaviour.'

'How do you mean?' They stared at her, anxious and attentive, like two otherwise model school-children inexplicably caught playing with matches.

She had become increasingly concerned, Heather explained. Something was impeding Ben's progress, if not blocking it altogether. He appeared to be fighting something. Something other than his feelings about Frankie and the accident, something that ran very deep. 'Now, I can't say for sure what it is yet,' she went on, switching her gaze from one to the other, 'but I'm sure you don't need me to tell you it might be connected with your domestic situation.'

There was a long silence. Jack sagged forward on the sofa, his face in his hands, elbows on knees. Alison stared at the tired curve of his back, the rumpled creases in his jacket, the un-ironed collar of his shirt. He looked exhausted, had lost weight. She suspected he was not eating properly. And she knew he was still sleeping at the office. She'd checked.

They all went up in the lift together. When the doors opened onto the fifth floor, Ben stayed at the back of the lift, head lowered.

'We don't have to do this today if you don't want to,' Heather said kindly. Ben didn't move. Jack bent to him, Alison holding the doors. 'Listen, it's okay to be scared,' he said quietly. 'I was, first time. Still am in fact.' He held out his hand. Slowly Ben reached out and took it. Alison took the other, smiling encouragingly.

The room was small and stuffy, the walls covered in get-well-soon cards, posters of pop stars and paintings by children from school. There was a bad smell, disinfectant and dead flowers and something else, like diarrhoea. Frankie was lying on the bed, which was cranked up a bit so that her head was slightly raised. It was turned to one side and rested on her chest like a sleeping pigeon. Her hair had grown. Her eyes were open, or at least one was; the other was only half open. They were red and watery and sort of staring but also flickering, jerking from side to side. A small bubble of snot was coming from her nose; one corner of her mouth was hanging down and she was dribbling. There was an electric machine under the bed. A black rubber bellows rose up, then stopped, then with a hiss pushed back down. A pipe from the machine led to Frankie's throat. When the bellows pushed down, the pipe jerked a bit and Frankie's chest moved up, not smoothly like normal breathing but rather suddenly, lifting her chin up a bit, like a puppet's. When the machine clicked and let the air out, her chest went down and her head sank once more. There was a tube in her neck and another in her arm that led to a bag of clear liquid hanging on a metal stand. Wires came from her chest to a machine next to the bed with spiky green lines going across a screen. A nurse was standing by the bed, disconnecting a plastic bag of yellow-brown liquid from another tube coming from under the bedclothes. She put a clip on the tube before attaching a new bag.

'We've got a bit of a cold today,' said the nurse, wiping Frankie's nose. 'Goodness knows where we got that from but we'll have to keep an eye on it. We don't want it going to our chest.' She finished tucking in the bed, picked up a tray of instruments and the bag of yellow-brown liquid and left the room.

'Frankie, look who's here to see you,' said Alison, moving into her bedside chair. 'It's Ben.'

He stayed back, near the door, the psychologist observing from the wall opposite the bed. Jack went and leant against the window, feigning nonchalance, watching him closely.

'Do you want to come and sit with me next to her by the bed?' continued Alison.

Ben took a step back, shook his head. 'What's the matter with her?'

'She's, well, she's unconscious, as we explained.'

'Then why are her eyes open? And moving about like that.'

'That's because, being unconscious, the conscious part of her mind is not controlling her eyes just at the moment, and other parts of her body. So sometimes her eyes are open, and sometimes she moves a bit, or makes a face. They're called involuntary movements.'

She shouldn't be here, she doesn't belong. 'Can she see?'

Alison took a deep breath. 'Some people think so.' She flicked a glance at Jack: his arms were folded, his lips compressed. 'Some people don't. Because Frankie's unconscious she may not be quite aware of what she sees. In her mind. But that doesn't mean that she can't see and can't feel, and hear, maybe in another part of her mind. I believe she does. That's why we talk to her, and play pop music to her. You could talk to her, if you like. It might help her. Would you like to?'

He said nothing, staring at the foot of the bed.

'Isn't there anything you'd like to say to her, Ben?'

He hung his head. 'Sorry,' he whispered. Immediately his face crumpled.

'No, Ben! I didn't mean that, I didn't mean apologize, I meant anything, you know, news from school, silly things, Ben, please.' But suddenly he was on his knees, folding onto the floor like a collapsing paper bag, a distant cat-like wail coming from deep within him. Alison and the doctor started towards him but Jack was already moving. Cutting them off in one stride, he plucked the stricken boy from the floor and up into his arms in a single movement. 'It's okay, it's okay, shush now, it's okay.'

'I wish I could die!' he cried out desperately from Jack's arms, crushing tears from tightly squeezed eyes. 'I do! I wish I could, I wish I could die!'

Jack dumped the briefcase on the carpet by his desk and picked up the morning post together with a sheaf of faxes liberally garnished with sticky yellow notes. A moment later the intercom warbled on his desk.

'Hello there. Bill's doing the banks this morning, be here after lunch,' said Carol's voice. 'Desmond phoned from Engineering, small hydraulic leak on Charlie Echo's brakes, says it ought to be fixed but it means the aircraft will be down until tomorrow, needs to know what you want to do.'

'Uh-huh, what else?' Jack tucked the receiver under his chin, flicking through the mail as she ran through the list.

'Shell wants last month's fuel bill paid. Today. Marshall's want to know what happened to the office rent, LAC have picked up a spare Brussels-Gatwick this afternoon, four passengers, need to know right away if we want it, if not they'll pass it to Myriad.'

'Yes we do! Bob Burgess can do it in Charlie Delta when he gets back from Glasgow.'

'And Bob Burgess is holding on the other line from Glasgow. Charlie Delta's autopilot is down again and he's not happy.'

'Isn't he? Poor lamb.' Jack dropped the heap back onto his desk. 'Right, tell Desmond to go ahead and fix the brakes, tell LAC we'll definitely take the Brussels-Gatwick, and ask Bob Burgess if it isn't too much trouble perhaps he could fly Charlie Delta back here the old-fashioned way, using his hands and feet. Shell can hang on a bit longer and I'll speak to Marshall's about the rent.'

'Got it. Coffee?'

'Great, and thanks, Carol, for holding the fort.'

'That's okay. How did it go?'

He pinched the bridge of his nose between forefinger and thumb. Outside, someone was running an engine up to full throttle, the noise building to a rumbling crescendo, rattling the glass in his windows. 'Not good,' he said, the floor vibrating beneath his feet. 'Not good at all.'

At noon he rang Alison. 'How is he?'

'He's asleep now, finally went off half an hour ago.'

'Thank God. What a nightmare.' He paused: she sounded very down. 'You all right?'

'Sick.' She sighed. 'I can't believe I said it. It was so crass, so absolutely bloody stupid. I just didn't mean it to come out like that.'

'Of course not, you mustn't blame yourself. He was very wound up, we all were.' He hesitated. 'Look, Alison, I really think we need to talk, alone, away from the hospital.'

'About us? Not sure I'm really up for that right now, Jack.'

'Not just about us. About the children, about everything. About this Perlman place, for instance. I know you're very hot on the idea but we haven't talked about it at all.'

'Did you check their web site?'

He glanced guiltily at his computer screen. 'Not yet,' he confessed. 'But I will, today, soon as I can.'

'Doesn't matter, I've already got most of the information.'

'Right,' he said flatly, pursing his lips. Of course she had. 'So how about it?'

'Mum promised to take Ben to the cinema this evening. Supposed to be a treat for going to see Frankie.' She hesitated. 'Okay, come round about seven. We should have the place to ourselves.'

In the afternoon, his partner Bill Knight appeared at Jack's door, his face drawn. 'How did it go?' Jack asked immediately, putting down the telephone.

Bill slumped onto a chair in front of the desk, running stubby fingers through his hair. 'Well, we've managed to talk them into another temporary stay of execution. Extended line of credit for a month, maybe two tops.' He wrenched his tie loose, unbuttoning his shirt collar with a relieved gasp. 'But the refinancing package is still on hold. They refuse to go ahead with it at the moment, not without firm deals.'

'But we have firm deals. There's plenty happening, lots in the pipeline.'

Bill shrugged. 'They want hard evidence, not warm words.'

'Like what kind of hard evidence?'

'Like customers' signatures at the bottom of bits of paper for a start.'

'But that's ridiculous! This business doesn't work like that.'

Bill shot him a warning glance. 'I know that, Jack,' he enunciated slowly. 'I did explain, again. But, as you may have noticed, they're not in a terribly listening mood these days.'

'Sorry, yes of course.' They fell quiet, lost in thought. Bill picked up a desktop model of one of their aeroplanes and began to fiddle with it.

'Little bit nip-and-tuck right now, wouldn't you say?' he said, avoiding Jack's eye.

Jack looked at him. 'What are you saying, Bill?' he asked. 'Are you saying we should sell out?'

'Not necessarily. But maybe we should have another look at Myriad's offer. Just in case.'

'But it's a terrible offer. That vulture Gateskill only made it because he knows we're in difficulties. In any case, Bill, we don't need it. We can work through this patch, I'm sure we can.'

Bill said nothing, idly spinning the model's propellers.

Jack's gaze fell to the confused jumble of notes, names, columns of figures and telephone numbers scribbled on the blotter before him. Air charter agents, aviation marketing consultants and freelance co-pilots mixed up with child psychologists, medical-insurance brokers and special-needs providers. Beyond the blotter, next to the telephone, folding framed photographs of Alison, Ben and Frankie. Smiling, happy, unconcerned, normal. All completely different people now, he mused. Changed, altered. Gone from him. He looked up at Bill. 'You're saying you want out.'

He was walking through a garden. It was warm and sunny, he had just a pair of shorts on, his old school plimsolls and the wide-brimmed straw hat Dad had bought him in France. His top was bare but he wasn't cold: there was a gentle breeze, warm and comfortable as it caressed his back and shoulders. The garden was huge, wandering but tidy, with long tunnels of twisted vines leading to little hidden corners with wooden seats, rose-covered arches opening suddenly onto patterned flower-beds, wide green lawns edged with box circling playing fountains. He had been walking a long time but he wasn't tired. Loping easily down a slight slope he followed a neatly trimmed lawn path, which meandered between beds of marigolds and pansies, turned beneath a tall privet archway and found himself at one end of a long, wide, tree-lined avenue. It was cool and shaded, occasional piercing arrowshafts of sunlight splitting the shadows thrown by tall beech trees along either side of its length. At the far end of the avenue, where the shadows converged, he could see a distant bright arch of sunlight. He began to walk towards it, the smell of warm soil and moist leaves filling his nostrils, the sound of birdsong and the hissing of beech leaves to either side. Moving closer towards the light, he could see that beyond lay a field of gently swaying grass and in the far distance beyond that the tiny speck of a figure walking towards him. As he neared the end of the avenue there was a wooden gate. It opened onto a wide meadow of long grass dotted with blood-red poppies, the grass swaying and swirling as the air wandered lazily through it like fish in a lake. The smell was of drying hay and cornflowers. He stopped at the gate. A girl was moving easily through the knee-high grass towards him. She was young, about his age. She was wearing a simple patterned swimsuit under small white shorts, and a straw hat the same as his. She had long hair the colour of corn and laughing green eyes beneath the hat, which splintered the sunshine on her face, dappling the tiny freckles on her cheeks. Her legs were long and bare beneath the shorts, the skin smooth and brown. He could see tiny golden hairs on the bare skin of her arm as she reached out a hand towards him. 'Come on.' She smiled, soft swellings showing beneath the swimsuit where her new breasts grew. In the distance he could hear the sound of other people, other children, where the meadow dissolved into far-off hills, beyond that, snow-capped mountains. 'Come on,' she said again, her face melting.

Janet Catchpole upended her handbag onto the hall table for the third time. 'For God's sake, where the bloody hell are they?' she fretted, rummaging through the scattered heap once more. 'Ben, come on!' she shouted in the general direction of the stairs. 'We'll be late! And have you seen my car keys anywhere?'

Alison appeared. 'In the kitchen,' she said, dangling them. She looked at the table. 'Mother, is that a packet of condoms? It is! What on earth are you doing with condoms in your handbag?'

'Good gracious, Alison, don't be such a prude. Shouldn't I be allowed to carry condoms if I want to? Ben! For God's sake, come on!'