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TAMMY ROBINSON
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Tammy Robinson is a novelist from New Zealand. After the tragic deaths of her mother and a close friend, she sat down in 2011 to write a book and hasn't stopped since. She now has eight novels to her name and is working on the ninth.

She lives with her husband and three young children on a small farm in rural Waikato, and is sick of the sound of cows.

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BY TAMMY ROBINSON

Differently Normal

PHOTOS OF YOU

Tammy Robinson

 hachette
NEW ZEALAND



Uncorrected book proof published in New Zealand and Australia in 2018
by Hachette New Zealand
(an imprint of Hachette New Zealand Limited)
Level 2, 23 O'Connell Street, Auckland, New Zealand
www.hachette.co.nz

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of New Zealand.

ISBN: 978 1 86971 379 9 (paperback)

Cover design by Victoria Chen
Text design by M Rules
Typeset in Garamond by M Rules
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



The paper this book is printed on is certified against the Forest Stewardship Council® Standards. McPherson's Printing Group holds FSC® chain of custody certification SA-COC-005379. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

[dedication to come]

Prologue

The End, it begins

In my dreams I go everywhere.

I am limited only by my imagination, but as my Year 7 English teacher once remarked, I was blessed with a rather robust one of those. Original and dramatic, she said; proudly, as if it were all down to her guidance and tutoring rather than the genetic card I was dealt. I wonder what she would say if she could see me now.

Such a shame, such a waste.

She wouldn't be wrong.

In my dreams, I travel to places I have never been but always wanted to go. On the one hand, it is preferable. There are no customs queues, pickpockets to keep a wary eye out for or tetanus shots to be had. Yet on the other hand, none of it is real. I will never see these places for myself.

Days have begun to merge. The passage of time is marked by the administration of pain medication. I don't remember the last time I left this bed, or this room. I am near the window, I am grateful for that. I watch clouds roll on by, and then . . .

Blink

. . . they are replaced by stars.

I hear them. The voices. Muffled, tearful, weary. I hate what I have put them through. Continue to do. Is it my fault? That I am still here? Am I hanging on when I should be letting go? Have I failed at the very thing that comes to us all?

Blink

I dream of him. With the water on his skin and the sunset in his eyes. The timing was all wrong. And yet, the timing was perfect. I wonder where he is, and what he is doing.

Blink

I tiptoe amongst the stars, along the Milky Way. Hitch a ride on a comet, dance with the man in the moon.

I am star dust; blow on me too hard and I will disintegrate.

Chapter one

I stopped listening a few minutes ago, right around the time he uttered the three words I had been most longing not to hear.

I'm so sorry

I watch as his mouth moves and a few other words filter through, even though I feel like I am underwater or listening to him from inside a vacuum.

Secondary

Bone

Incurable

Limited options

On their own, none of those words are particularly malevolent, but together they paint a grim picture. The cancer is back. And this time it's not going away. Numbness steals over me like an anaesthetic and I feel my whole body settle in cold stillness. This can't be happening.

I should be listening. As far as speeches go, the one he's

currently giving is right up there in terms of importance. I know I'll be fielding a million questions later, none of which I will have the answer for if I don't listen. Except one, if anyone is brave enough to ask it.

Are you dying?

Yes.

'Ava?'

I realise he's been saying my name and blink.

'Sorry?'

'Do you have any questions?'

'No.'

Yes. Why me?

'I know it's a lot to take in and you'll need time to process it all.'

He gets to his feet and comes around the desk, perching on one corner to look down at me sympathetically.

When did doctors stop wearing white coats? They barely even look like doctors any more. Half the time they look fresh out of high school. Like this guy, Dr Harrison. Under any other circumstances I would have been flirting with him. He was seriously good-looking in a cultivated, obvious way. I was willing to bet money that he had nurses falling all over him.

'Is there someone I can call? To come and pick you up?' he asks.

I blink again, realising I am staring at his lips. Wondering what it would be like to kiss them. Inappropriate, but if there's one thing I've learned it's that what one anticipates is an

appropriate reaction in a situation like this and what actually happens can be two very different things.

‘No, thank you,’ I tell him. ‘I’ll be fine.’

Except I won’t.

‘OK. Take a few days to think about what I’ve said and then we’ll discuss options going forward.’

I snort bitterly. Options. Discussing options when the end result is unavoidable feels futile, but I don’t say that. Ironically, I don’t want to hurt him.

The autumnal air outside the hospital doors is crisp and fresh and I inhale a big lungful through my nose, feeling my belly expand like a balloon, the way my mindfulness app on my phone has taught me. I hold it for exactly six seconds before releasing it slowly through my mouth. The balloon deflates.

It doesn’t help the rising sense of panic I feel.

There is a bench seat in a little garden to the right of the hospital car park. I have sat there countless times, though not for a while. I perched there through seasons, like a watchful bird. When the seat was cold and the ground was hard and frozen. I sat there when the trees that hulked above were barren, and the air hazy with the smoke of a thousand chimneys. When the ground softened with the first buds of spring and the air became expectant and giddy with new life.

On this day, I sit there and observe a carpet of colour as leaves of purple, orange and red litter the ground. Occasionally a playful gust of wind swirls through and collects them and they dance away like children, with no reservations.

I’ll never have a child.

I'll never marry.

One I always assumed would happen. The other I have dreamt of my entire life. The pain hits hard in my belly and I double over, clutching my stomach, my eyes squeezed tightly shut in an effort to block out the world.

'Are you OK?'

The voice is curious, concerned. Feminine but raspy, quivering with age. I refuse to look up. Whoever it is can clearly see they are intruding on a moment.

'Shift over will you?' the voice says, somewhat petulantly.

Resentfully I shuffle over on the seat, still without looking up. I feel the air shift as the woman settles in beside me.

'Do you mind if I smoke?' she asks, already flicking with her thumb at her lighter. Clearly her husky voice isn't the result of age alone and I find myself judging her before remembering I don't like to judge anyone, let alone someone I don't know. On the third flick it lights, and there is silence for a moment apart from the sound of her sucking on the end of her cigarette. Immediately she starts coughing and I finally look up, alarmed. Clad in a dressing down and slippers, she is clearly a patient of the hospital, escaping on an illicit mission to indulge her frowned-upon habit. Her grey hair is dishevelled and wispy, flattened at the back, and she is hacking and spluttering so hard I half expect to see a lung pop out on to the path at her feet.

'Are you OK?' I ask, unsure whether I should be dashing for help.

She holds up a finger, gesturing for me to give her a moment.

When she recovers she nods and takes another suck on her cigarette. This time she manages to breathe it out without the dramatic display.

‘Oh yes, that’s better.’ She nods. ‘That first puff always causes a bit of havoc.’

She eyes my face curiously and I realise I still have wet cheeks from the path of my tears. I quickly look back at my feet and wipe them away.

‘Bad news?’ she asks.

I nod.

‘Family member?’

I shake my head.

‘Ah.’ *Suck*. ‘Yourself?’

Nod.

She sucks a few more times. ‘How bad?’

‘About as bad as it gets.’

‘Cancer?’

I look at her, surprised. ‘How did you know?’

She pulls a face. ‘I’m not physic, if that’s what you’re thinking. Damn disease is everywhere.’

I notice the sickly pallor of her skin and the fact that the wrists poking out from her dressing gown are thin and sharp. Too thin. The hospital identification bracelet that encircles her left arm dangles loosely.

‘You too?’

She sighs. ‘Yes. Started in my lungs. Now it’s in my bones and pretty much everywhere else.’

I look at my feet. ‘They just told me it’s in my bones now.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. It hurts, doesn’t it?’

‘No. Well, not yet. Apart from a few minor niggles.’

‘Oh. Then it’s not that bad. Definitely bearable.’

I appreciate her vague attempt at reassurance, even though we both know she’s lying.

Suck.

I watch her inhale the smoke right down into the bottom of her lungs, as far as she physically can, before reluctantly letting it out again between her pouted lips. She angles her pout to one side so that the smoke goes to her right instead of her left, where I am sitting. It makes no difference; the wind blows it back towards me anyway. It has a horrible smell, earthy but bitter, strong and intrusive. I honestly can’t understand the appeal.

She notices me watching.

‘Do you want one?’ she asks, proffering the packet.

I shake my head. ‘No. Thanks.’

‘Good girl.’

Suck.

‘Go ahead,’ she says.

‘Sorry?’

‘You can ask me. You’re not the first and you won’t be the last. But you will get the same answer.’

It sounds like a riddle. I’ve never been particularly good at riddles.

‘What question?’

She holds what remains of her cigarette up towards me; the butt pinched tightly between two fingers so the circular shape

is now an uneven oval. Ash drops off the tip and lands on my jeans. I brush it off.

‘You’re wondering why I’m still smoking,’ she says.

‘No I wasn’t.’

‘Really?’

‘No.’

‘Oh right. You have bigger things to worry about. Ignore me. I’ll finish this and be out of your hair.’

I try to ignore her. I sit with my hands under my thighs and the toes of my boots trailing in the dirt, and look out east, over the hills that rim our town. Some people like to people watch. Me, I’ve always loved cloud watching and searching for hidden animals or faces. Today is a good day for it. A low bank of clouds stretches above the hills, quite a variety today. Fluffy white ones like snow cones, long grey cigar-shaped clouds with wispy ends. The occasional fat, heavy airship-shaped cloud, its belly swollen with rain.

Normally I’d feel joy at the sight of them. But today all I can think about is that someday soon I’ll drink in my *last* sight of them, and then that’ll be it. And I think, Will I know? That it’s my last sight? Will I watch them disappear into the sunset one night and *know* that I’ll take my last breath before the sun rises again and brings forth a fresh batch to be admired? Or will I be completely unaware. Unappreciative, delirious and most likely unconscious from a cocktail of drugs and disease. The panic starts to rise again, threatening to overwhelm me, and I turn to her, desperate to think of something, anything, else.

‘Why do you?’ I blurt out, my voice shaky.

‘Smoke?’

‘Yes.’

She shrugs. ‘Because I’m addicted.’

‘Oh.’

‘You were expecting a better answer than that.’

‘I don’t know what I was expecting.’

‘I know all the reasons to quit, believe me. The biggest reason being the damn lung cancer, of course. But I just can’t.’ She eyes the cigarette again ruefully. The yellow-stained filter is all that is left as she has smoked it down to the last millimetre. ‘I know it’s not the done thing to admit this,’ she says. ‘But I like it. So help me, I actually enjoy it. I’ve been smoking them so long now I can’t imagine being without them.’

She throws the butt on the ground and grinds it into the dirt with a slippered foot. I notice that her sheepskin slippers are faded and worn, and the toenail on her right big toe has almost poked through in a bid for freedom.

I wonder if she realises how ridiculous she sounds.

‘I know I sound ridiculous,’ she says. ‘But I’m old and I’m tired. I’m not going to start denying myself the only pleasure I have left.’

With some effort, she gets to her feet and stands still, lifting her face to the sky and closing her eyes. ‘Irony isn’t it,’ she says after a minute. ‘That the air always tastes sweeter to me after a cigarette.’

I don’t answer. I don’t really know what to say. She opens her eyes and looks down at me with sympathy. ‘It’s rotten luck, getting it at your age. It really is. Sometimes the lack of justice

in these things really pisses me off, and if there *is* some old guy in a white robe and dodgy sandals up there he'll be getting words from me, you better believe it. I have some questions I need answered.'

She pauses to cough a few times and I notice her hands and fingers are curled with arthritis.

'Listen to me. Don't make the mistake so many people in our position do,' she says once she's cleared her chest. 'I've seen it so many times. People just give up when they get the diagnosis, like their time is already gone.' She looks me up and down speculatively. 'You're young and from the look of you, still physically capable. Don't spend your last days here on earth dying. If you have something you want to do, make sure you do it. You hear me?'

I nod.

'Good.' She straightens up as much as her back will allow and shuffles off.

She doesn't look back.

I look at the sky again. The wind has shifted, coming in from the east, rolling the clouds across the hills like cresting waves. There is one rebellious one though, larger than the rest. It blooms upwards, gloriously white against the sky, billowing out like a meringue.

If you have something you want to do, make sure you do it.

Her words echo in my head as I watch that cloud. I've never been a big believer in signs. To me, you can find a reason to do anything if you look hard enough. But on a day when I have been given the worst possible news, I throw reasoning to

the wind and I seize it. The cloud like a meringue. Or a dress.
It's a sign.

Do what you want to do.

I want to get married.

Chapter two

‘Surprise!’

I feign shock as the lights come on and an assortment of family and friends materialise from behind door frames and up from behind couches.

‘What’s this? What’s going on?’ I ask, hand on heart theatrically, arranging my features into a quizzical frown.

My mother steps forward and rolls her eyes.

‘You can drop the act,’ she says. ‘We know you knew.’

‘Sorry? I . . . What? Oh fine. What gave me away?’

‘Your father confessed that he *forgot* it was a surprise and phoned to ask you what time you’d be arriving.’ She turns to frown at my father, who looks sheepish.

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘But in my defence I should never have been privy to the secret. You know I’m terrible at keeping them.’

‘It’s OK, Dad.’ I tiptoe to kiss the small patch of cheek that is visible through his huge grey beard. ‘I’m not very

good with surprises anyway,' I whisper. 'So I'm glad you warned me.'

'Phew.' He smiles.

I almost break down at the sight of him, my dad. My lovely, dependable, lovable dad. Wearing his faded, well-worn jeans with the hole in one knee that bugs the hell out of my mother ('They're comfortable!' he protests when she tells him to get rid of them. 'Why would I want to go through the hassle of breaking in a new pair?') I want to wrap my arms around his generous belly and hold on for dear life. But I can't. He'd know immediately that something is wrong, and I've made the decision not to tell them, not tonight anyway. I don't see why I should ruin this day for anyone else.

'I see you still haven't found your razor,' I say dryly, ruffling his whiskers.

'No, and I'm not planning to. These keep my face warm.'

'But you'd look so much younger without them.'

'Why do I need to look young? It's not like I'm out trying to find a new woman. Your mother is quite enough.'

He looks fondly across the room to where my mother is revelling in the role of hostess, passing around a platter of crackers with Camembert cheese and other toppings she's no doubt spent a fortune on. My parents are as in love with each other now as they were on their wedding day twenty-six years ago. Growing up, my friends thought they were cute. I thought they were embarrassing beyond belief, especially when they made out in public. Now, I am glad they have each other to lean on. They are going to need that support after I am gone.

‘Oh yes, happy birthday,’ my father says. ‘Your mother has your present waiting in the kitchen.’

‘It’s not a stripper is it?’

He chokes on the mouthful of beer he’s just taken. ‘No,’ he finally manages to splutter out. ‘No, I think you’re safe.’

My mother has a rather unorthodox approach to gift giving. For my sixteenth, while my friends were receiving beautiful bespoke pieces of jewellery with their initials engraved on the back, my mother gave me a gift certificate for a tattoo and a packet of condoms.

‘Go forth and enjoy,’ she said proudly when I unwrapped them. I’ll admit the condoms eventually came in useful, but the gift certificate expired unused.

I spend the next hour working my way around the room, thanking and making small talk with the people who have turned up to help celebrate my twenty-eighth birthday. The lounge is beautifully and tastefully decorated, hung with colourful lanterns and candles in jars. A food table is set up by the kitchen and is heaving under the weight of her wisdom acquired from many years’ trialling recipes. My mother has surpassed herself with the guest list, and there are people I haven’t seen in years, including, oddly, my seventh form geography teacher.

‘I ran into him in the supermarket,’ Mum explains. ‘He seemed lonely and asked how you were doing.’

I can feel their love for me; my parents, friends, people who have known me my entire life. It is palpable all around, in every lovingly thought-out detail. Normally a comfort,

tonight it feels suffocating. It is too much pressure. I have let them all down.

‘Drink?’

My best friend, Kate, is standing beside me holding two glasses of bubbly wine. I nod to her gratefully and take one of the glasses, draining it quickly. Passing it back, I take the other. Her eyes widen.

‘It’s not that bad is it?’ she says.

‘What’s not?’

For a moment I am worried she knows I am hiding something.

She gestures around the room with the empty glass.

‘This party.’

‘Oh. No, the party’s great.’

‘So why have you gone all white? Are you feeling OK?’ She has her concerned doctor face on. Kate is a GP at the local community clinic and finds it hard to shut off when she leaves the office. Especially when it comes to her own family and friends.

‘Yeah I’m fine. Just a bit overwhelmed.’

‘I thought you knew about the party?’

‘I did.’

‘You confuse me sometimes, Ava.’

‘Easily done,’ I tease, to show I am my usual self.

‘Hey.’ She swats at my arm.

‘Another drink for the birthday girl?’ I ask hopefully, holding up the empty glass.

‘Only because it’s your birthday.’ I watch as she weaves through partygoers to where the drinks are arranged on the

bench. She turns, holding up a bottle of Malibu and pulling a face.

‘Oh my God, do you remember that night we drank all your parents’ Malibu?’ she asks when she is back at my side again.

I wince, remembering the night she is talking about.

‘I’ve never been so sick,’ she goes on, poking out her tongue in a mock vomit and shuddering. ‘I still owe your parents for not telling mine.’

‘What are we talking about?’

Amanda, the third corner of our friendship triangle, interrupts. She is holding a paper plate and shovelling butter chicken into her mouth, her expression rapturous.

I squeal at the sight of her and throw my arms around her neck, nearly knocking her plate out of her hands.

‘Woah,’ she says. ‘Careful.’

‘When did you get here?’

She shrugs. ‘Last night.’

‘For how long?’

She spoons more food into her mouth and makes an extended ‘mm’ noise. ‘Not sure. We’re in between tours. Supposed to be heading into the studio soon but I don’t have a concrete date.’

I feel ridiculously happy to see her. For as long as we’ve been friends I’ve known she would one day be a star. She’s been singing since she first learned to talk, if you believe her mother, and it’s as natural to her as breathing. She has the most beautiful timbre to her voice, slightly husky but still angelic. She’s not an international star yet, but she’s on the cusp.

‘Well, it’s nice you remembered those of us who knew you before you were famous,’ Kate jokes.

‘Hardly famous,’ Amanda snorts. ‘A pub tour of New Zealand is about as glamorous as it sounds.’

‘Well, I’m just happy you could make it,’ I say, feeling emotional at the sight of her.

She stops eating long enough to give me an affectionate look. ‘As if I’d miss your birthday party.’

‘You missed my twenty-first.’ I pretend to sulk.

‘Oh my God, I was out of the country.’

‘Yeah, yeah, excuses.’

‘Get over it already. Anyway, so? What were you guys talking about when I came over?’

‘That night we drank all the Malibu,’ Kate answers her. ‘Seriously, Amanda, you need to take some breaths between mouthfuls. You’ll give yourself indigestion.’

‘Can’t. Too delicious. I remember that night,’ Amanda says with her mouth full. ‘I haven’t been able to stand the smell of that stuff since.’

I shudder. ‘Me neither.’

I watch them talking and feel a wave of love and affection for them. These women feature in most of the memories I have, spanning over half my lifetime. They’ve been there beside me through so much. Boyfriends, heartache, jobs, holidays and, of course, my cancer. The first time I was sick they were amazing. Sat with me through treatments. Bought me flowers and little gifts when I was at my lowest, to take my mind off things. They helped me bathe when I physically wasn’t up to

PHOTOS OF YOU

it, and rubbed my shoulders while I threw up in a toilet from the side effects. How could I tell them I was about to inflict that on them again? Only worse this time, because this time there was no hope.

Chapter three

Someone clangs on the side of a glass with a fork.

‘Excuse me? Can I have your attention please?’ Mum calls out. ‘Hi,’ she says when she has all eyes on her. ‘I think most of you know who I am, but for those who don’t I’m Gabby, Ava’s mum.’ She puts a hand on her chest and pauses, as if waiting for a collective greeting like the drawn out one kids give teachers every morning – ‘Good moooooorrrrrnnnnnnng, Mrs Greeeeeee’ – and seems disappointed when she is met with a wall of silence and shuffling feet instead.

‘Anyway, we – that is Ava’s dad, Ben, and I – would like to thank you all for coming to help us celebrate our beautiful daughter’s birthday.’

I feel all eyes swivel in my direction and give a nervous wave.

‘I think you all know what I mean when I say this day is more special, to us, than just a normal birthday. Ava, why don’t you come and stand beside me.’

'No, it's OK,' I say, but Kate pushes me forward.

'Go on, humour her,' she says.

I couldn't feel more like a fraud as I make my way to stand beside my mother. These people are here for me, to celebrate the anniversary of the day I was given life. On the *very same day* I've just been told my life is all but over. Which is a hell of a sick kind of irony now that I think about it.

'Do we have to do this?' I ask quietly through gritted teeth, smiling like my face has frozen.

'Yes, we do,' she says. 'Now smile properly. You look like someone ran over your hamster.'

'I don't have a hamster.'

'Figure of speech.'

'I don't think it is, actua—'

She ignores me and turns back to face the room. I look out at a room full of smiling faces and swallow hard. I can't lose it, not now, not in front of everyone.

'Twenty-eight years ago,' Mum says dramatically. 'At three twenty five in the morning, I was on a hospital bed staring up at the bright light, flat on my back with my legs wide—'

'Mum!'

'What?'

'Too much information. Far, *far*, too much information.'

'I wasn't going to give them all the details,' she says defensively. 'Just the general gist.'

'I think they've got it.'

'OK. Well, look.' She picks up one of my hands and looks at me proudly. 'Basically, what I'm trying to say is that your

father and I are so proud of you. There was a time we feared we couldn't have children, and then to be blessed with one as wonderful as you, so kind and caring and funny and sweet and talented, and really, I could go on and on here but I'm trying to keep it relatively short so people can get back to eating and drinking.' She pauses to look meaningfully at our friends and family. 'I don't want any leftovers.'

They laugh, because the amount of food on the table is ridiculous and *of course* there will be leftovers. This is a long-standing joke; my mother is an infamous over-caterer.

She turns her attention back to me. 'We love you, and we know things haven't been the easiest for you, but we're so proud of the way you fought the battle *your* way. With such courage and determination and an amazingly cheerful spirit. And the way you've gone on to live your life these last few years, sampling everything that life has to offer, well, obviously we think you're amazing.'

That's when the tears start. Completely against my will, they come. Her words sound awfully similar to a eulogy. I wipe the tears away quickly, hoping they will be put down to memories and sentimentality.

'Oh, Ava.' Mum sniffs, her own eyes glossy with tears. 'I wasn't trying to make you cry.'

'I know.'

'Ben,' she shouts, causing me to jump.

My dad pops his head around the kitchen door frame.

'Now?' he asks.

Mum holds up a finger. 'One second. Ava, we know that

you've been saving hard these last couple of years for your big Overseas Experience. And as much as it will probably kill me to wave you off for a year or so, your father and I have come up with something to make your journey a bit more—' she tilts her head, trying to think of the right word '—comfortable.' She gestures to my father.

'Now?' he asks.

She rolls her eyes. 'Yes, now.'

My father emerges from the kitchen carrying a large, dark blue backpack. The kind that costs hundreds of dollars and has a compartment for anything you could possibly think to take with you. I clap my hands over my mouth. I've been eyeing this pack up for ages. How did she know?

'Kate might have mentioned something,' Mum says, reading my mind.

'You're welcome,' Kate's voice calls out. 'Even though I'm still pissed off that you're going.'

'That's not all,' Dad says, barely concealing his excitement. 'There's something inside. Open it. Go on. Open it.'

'It's not something that might get me in trouble with border police is it?' I hedge, to buy myself time.

'No it's nothing illegal,' Mum sighs. 'More's the pity.'

The sight of the pack, such an innocuous thing in itself, is my undoing. It represents everything I've allowed myself to dream of and hope for since I'd heard those magical words just a couple of short years ago.

You're in remission.

Immediately afterwards, I'd had the overwhelming feeling

that I'd been given a second chance for a reason, that I was supposed to do more with my time than sit in an office counting down the hours and living pay cheque to pay cheque. The most obvious thing I could think of was to travel, explore the world. It gave me something to aim for. So I'd decided to save up and explore the world, with no time limit or concrete plans, just me and my pack, wherever the path took me. But now that dream was swirling down the plughole of the drain that was my life.

With trembling fingers I fiddle with the clips securing the pack until my mother, never overly patient, pushes me aside.

'I'll do it,' she says. 'We'll be here all night waiting for you.'

She opens the pack and tilts it so I can see inside. At first I think it's empty, but then I catch a flash of white and realise there is an envelope at the bottom. Inside the envelope, when I open it, is a card.

'Read it out loud,' Mum prompts.

I shake my head. 'I don't think I can.'

'Fine, I will.'

She takes it from me and clears her throat, adopting the same voice she uses in her amateur dramatics theatre productions, the voice she's been told is 'powerful' and 'commanding'.

Dear Ava, Happy birthday! Thank you for being such a wonderful daughter and making us prouder than we ever thought possible. As our gift to you, here is a flight ticket to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil! Open return, of course, so that you can come home whenever you're ready, (and if travel is not for you and your homecoming is soon no

one will judge you for it). As hard as it will be for us to bid you a (temporary!) goodbye, we wish nothing but for you to have a life of great adventure. While you're out there, doing what you need to do and making magical memories to last a lifetime, just remember we are here, loving you, and we'll be first up at that airport gate the moment you get back. Love always, Mum and Dad.

She finishes reading and looks at me expectantly, her eyes once again slick with tears. I hear murmurs from the assembled people, blown away by my parents' generosity no doubt.

'I don't know what to say,' I say, feeling very much on the verge of an emotional breakdown. 'Thank you. It's amazing and very unexpected.'

'Yes well, luckily your father managed to keep *one* secret for a change. And you're welcome.' She steps forward to embrace me and beckons my father in on the embrace. For a moment I allow myself to relax and just enjoy the feel of their arms around me, so comfortably reassuring, and I breathe in the familiar smell that is the backbone of my childhood, my memories, my life. The panic swells again. How am I supposed to tell them?

'I need the loo,' I say, ducking out of their arms.

'Are you OK?' Mum calls after me.

But I can't answer.

Instead of turning right at the end of the hallway into the toilet, I open the familiar door on the left and tumble into my childhood bedroom. Closing the door behind me and leaning

against it, I squeeze my eyes shut and breathe in and out until I feel my pulse slow down and the panic retreat. I reach out in the familiar darkness and flick the bedside lamp on. Instantly the room is cast in a warm, welcoming glow. It's only here, in the silence away from the chatter of the party, that I realise it has started to rain outside, the sound loud on the iron roof.

My room is the same as the day I left it. Well, that's not strictly true. When I'd left, seven years ago, I'd been giddy with new-found independence and freedom and I packed in a hurry, throwing anything I thought I might need into a bin bag and leaving the rest lying around like hurricane debris. My mother has been through and tidied, most likely seizing the opportunity to throw a few things out.

Lowering myself gently down on to the end of the bed, I look around, feeling a mixture of emotions. I grew up in this room. My parents bought the house before I was born, and even though I've lived under a few roofs since, this is the only one that has ever really felt like home.

I reach out to run a hand along the smooth wooden walls behind my bed. I can tell you exactly how many knots in the wood there are in my room (487) and which boards creak in the heat of the afternoon sun, and which ones constrict noisily in protest when it's winter and the air outside is cold. The stain is still on the carpet from where I spilt my pink nail polish when I was twelve and getting ready for my first disco, and there is the tiniest crack in the corner of the window from where I threw my shoe at it in frustration when I was sixteen and grounded, for a reason that seemed devastatingly unfair at

the time and something I'd never get over but which is nothing but a foggy memory now.

The walls feel like they are closing in on me and I can't breathe without making a strange choking sound. The tears come again. I fall backwards on to the bed and I let them fall. Noiseless but no less powerful, I rage internally against the unfairness of it all. Why me? Why again? Was it not enough for me to live with the fear of death hanging over me once? To have my body sliced open and bits that had turned against me like mutinous sailors be removed, carted off to some laboratory to be biopsied and then incinerated like a grim rehearsal, before the rest of me followed in the same manner? To be pumped so full of drugs I barely recognised my own reflection in the mirror, that of some bloated, bald woman who bore more resemblance to a corpse in some B-grade horror movie than the person I was.

Just enough time had passed for me to relax a little, let my guard down and the fear that followed me around dissipate. I let myself think I was in the clear, enjoying life. But now here I am, face to face with my own mortality again, only this time there is a limited amount of sand in the hourglass and it's trickling away fast.

I don't know how long I spend curled up in the foetal position, mourning a simpler time and the innocent person I was, but eventually I remember why I am here, and that there are people present just for me. They don't know why I have disappeared. To them I am simply being rude. So I turn the light back on and uncurl. Yesterday, those twinges in my back

and legs would barely have registered. Today, I know they are a symptom of the beginning of the end of me.

My reflection in the mirror is not great, but it'll have to do. I'm not the kind of girl who carries spare make-up around with her for touch-ups. I wipe the tears from my face with my hands and dry them on my dress. Yesterday, this dress consumed an inordinate amount of my thoughts. Was it OK for the party? Dressy enough? Not *so* dressy it looked like I was heading out for cocktails afterwards? It feels like a stupid waste of thought. I could have spent that time cloud watching, or reading a good book, or writing a letter to the pen pal I haven't thought of or written to in over ten years. Assuming she's still at the same address. The point is I could have spent that time doing something *meaningful* instead of worrying about whether my outfit looked good or not. I had learned that the first time, but somewhere over the couple of years I had slipped back into old habits. It's easy to spout off the catchphrases – 'life is short', 'live every moment as if it's your last' – but truly maintaining that kind of life long term is *exhausting*.

I'm turning to the door when something white catches my eye. A picture, pinned to my dream board. Another thing I'd left in my haste to leave the nest and flex my budding adulthood.

The rain is falling harder, the noise almost deafening, like it's a metaphor for the way I'm feeling. I walk over to the dream board and study the pictures I carefully cut out of magazines and pinned there so long ago. They are as familiar to me as my face, and I trace my finger over them gently. I spent so

much time back then looking at them, dreaming, imagining my future.

They are not pictures of exotic destinations. No pictures of Disney World or Paris or the pyramids in Egypt. Nothing like that.

The pictures are of bridal shoes, jewellery, bouquets. Cakes and flower-strewn altars. Brides wearing the most exquisite dresses, with immaculate hair and make-up and expressions of blissful rapture.

There is a knock on the door and I turn my head towards it. The handle turns and it opens, my mother's head pops around.

'There you are,' she says. 'Are you OK?'

I nod.

'Well, come back out then and mingle with your guests. They're starting to think you've deserted them.'

After a last, lingering glance at the pictures, I follow her, down the hallway back into the lounge.

'I found her,' my mother announces brightly to no one in particular. Still, most people turn and smile. Amanda has been in the kitchen getting a drink and comes over to peer at me shrewdly.

'You OK?' she asks quietly.

I put my arms around her neck and rest my forehead against hers. This close I can see the freckles on her nose that she spent a great deal of our teenage years caking in foundation to try to cover.

'No,' I say. 'I'm not OK. But thank you for asking.'

She frowns, confused.

‘How about a speech from the birthday girl,’ someone calls, and a hush falls over the room, the only sound the rain, which is pounding now. Everyone looks at me expectantly. I pull away from Amanda, although I leave one arm slung over her shoulders. I look out at the faces, all watching me expectantly, all familiar and yet so foreign, in that moment. These people have the rest of their lives to look forward to. They will mourn me, of course, at first. How long does that last though? Until ordinary life creeps back in and thoughts of me become further and further in between? Selfishly perhaps, the thought of my family and friends living on without me brings me no comfort, just fear.

Life just got urgent.

If you have something you want to do, do it. Do it now.

The old ladies words echo back to me.

‘I’m getting married,’ I say quietly.

My mother’s face creases in a quizzical expression as she tries to digest the words she just heard.

‘What?’ she asks.

‘Say that again?’ Amanda says.

‘I’m getting married,’ I say again, louder. ‘I’M GETTING MARRIED.’

The rain stops.

My mother looks from me to Amanda.

‘To her?’ she says.

Chapter four

‘There must be *something* they can do? A drug trial? Did you ask him about any new drug trials?’

Only my parents, Kate and Amanda and I are left. My mother all but hurried the guests out the door, plates of food pressed into their hands, shortly after my marriage announcement. She knew something was up, and it was confirmed when I started crying and seemed unable to stop. I sat at the dining table with the tears streaming into my nose, my mouth and my hair, until I was a sodden, damp mess that gaped like a goldfish every time one of them asked me what was wrong, incapable of words.

In the end my mother poured neat whiskey down my throat and that stopped the tears, at least long enough for me to tell them.

My father hasn’t said anything since, not a word. He is staring at the wall as if he can see through it, to some other

place, another dimension, one where his only daughter hasn't just told him he'll be burying her before the year is out.

Kate and Amanda are crying. Quietly, unobtrusively, low snuffles and pained breathing. My mother gave them glasses of whiskey for the shock too, Amanda is already on her third measure, her coping mechanism any time she has bad news is to get completely shitfaced. I feel like joining her. Anything that will help numb the sense of impending doom I feel, and the guilt that threatens to choke me for putting my parents through this.

My mother isn't taking the news lying down. Even though I have told her everything the doctor told me, she is insistent I must be wrong. That I've misheard something, that in my shock I missed out on a vital piece of the conversation. She is angry that I went without her, as if her presence today would have changed the very outcome of the meeting.

I shake my head. 'No. I didn't ask.'

'Right. We'll go see him again tomorrow, together. You're in too much shock to ask the questions that need to be asked.'

I take another gulp of whiskey. 'Fine.'

'We're not giving in to this,' my mother warns me. 'You have to fight, just like last time.'

The thought of going through all that again is unbearable. But what choice do I have? I nod.

My dad stirs for the first time and looks at me. 'Should you be drinking? In your condition?'

'She's not bloody pregnant,' Mum snaps, and he bows his head.

PHOTOS OF YOU

I put a hand on his arm. 'It's OK, Dad, it can't get any worse than it already is.'

He nods and pats my hand. His face has gone that pale yellow colour of the first spring daffodils, only on skin it isn't anywhere near as pretty.