

CHAPTER 1

I'M ON A TRAIN. I can see through it, carriage after carriage, all empty. There is no driver, no guard, no other passengers, only me. The blare of a siren, a tunnel. We slam into it, lurching from side to side, a long black tunnel with no end. I'm thrown from my seat, screaming...

'No! Oh God, no!'

I come to with a start, heart pounding, the words stuck in my throat. Slowly my room comes into focus, the floral wallpaper that matches the curtains that match the duvet. The rag doll I've had since I was two.

I dread that nightmare. It's haunted me ever since I came out of hospital. I lie back on the pillow and take deep breaths. Relax, relax. Everybody has bad dreams. It's just the mind letting off steam. The train is my life and the tunnel is death. Very neat. The wailing siren is the kettle. My mother is already up, making tea.

It's a foul day, grey skies, rain slamming against the windows in gusts. I pull up the duvet and snuggle down. There's something to be said for being an invalid.

Feet scurry down the street, sloshing through puddles. Tyres swish along the wet tarmac. It's a good morning to stay in bed, soft pillows, soft lights, Rob at my feet snoring gently. Smell of toast coming from the kitchen. Sometimes it's nice to be a child again. For a while.

This is a soothing room, all lilac and leafy green. Mother had it repainted it while I was away. It used to be my father's study, dark blue and beige Regency stripe. Mother said it was too austere, not the kind of room to convalesce in.

Rob leaps off the bed when he hears the soft tap on the door, cunning animal. Mother pokes her head round cautiously, the worried frown already in place. She's frightened of finding me toes-up. She comes in with a tray – grapefruit, one thin slice of toast, tea, skimmed milk, no sugar. My new regime. What I'd give for eggs and bacon and half a pint of cappuccino.

'How are you, dear?'

Bright smile masking the worry. My father died of a heart attack, just slumped over the breakfast table one morning. She doesn't want a repeat of that so she's burying me in cotton wool. She'd breathe for me, pump the blood round my body with her own hands if she could.

'How do you feel today, dear?'

She puts the tray down on the bedside table and pours the tea. She moves slowly, her fingers stiff.

'Well, thank you.'

Shall I ever feel well again? Everything is such an effort, walking, climbing stairs. It would be so much easier to stay in bed.

'Did you have a good sleep?'

Same questions every morning, same answers.

'Yes, I slept like a baby.'

My doctor has given me sleeping pills but I won't take them. Supposing my heart stops while I'm asleep? I lie awake, every nerve taut, listening... Is my heart still beating? Am I still alive? Don't let me die yet. Please!

In those long, lonely hours before dawn I'm a little child again pleading with some old gentleman in the sky with the power of life and death.

My first night home I was sick with fear, away from all those efficient nurses, the machinery that held me to life, the constant attention. Mother watches over me but what could she

do if I had another attack? The second might be fatal. One in five, they say, I've read the statistics.

Coronary anxiety, my doctor calls it. Simpson's a brisk young man, more like a solicitor than a healer, no waste of National Health time on sympathy. Not that I'm a National Health patient but Simpson doesn't believe in privilege. I get no better treatment than the rest. I'm allowed ten minutes and not a second more. He'd stop me in mid-sentence if I ran over the limit.

'But, Doctor, I'm dying.'

'Sorry, Ruth, go away and die on your own time. Next patient, please!'

The grapefruit tastes bitter. It needs sugar, a lot. I push it away.

'How are you, Mother? You look tired this morning.'

She shakes her head. The arthritis bothers her but she never talks about her miseries, dismissing them with a shrug.

The letterbox clatters and Rob leaps up, barking furiously. I almost drop my cup, spilling a few drops of tea on the beautiful lilac sheet, and Mother lunges at him, grabbing his muzzle to silence him, looking at me anxiously... Don't panic, Mother, I'm still alive.

She thinks we ought to get rid of Rob. He's a Springer Spaniel, aptly named, a noisy, bouncy animal, but that's what I love about him. I reach out in the night and feel him lying next to me on the duvet, warm body, silky ears. Dear Rob.

'Two letters, both for you,' says Mother, slitting them open for me. She won't allow me to do anything that might tire me. Simpson said I should get up, do a few gentle exercises, go for short walks, start to build up my strength but Mother would strap me to this bed if she had her way. She's convinced overwork killed Daddy, the demands 'they' made on him,

'they' pushed him too hard. She's determined 'they' are not going to get her daughter too.

She sits on the bed waiting for me to read the letters out loud. I've always shared everything with her. We're more like sisters than mother and daughter. I've never quarrelled with her, not even when I was a teenager, that supposedly rebellious time in everyone's life. We seem to have led a very tranquil existence, just the two of us in this comfortable house, bolstered against the world by Daddy's money, a couple of sloths at heart, too lazy to squabble.

The first letter is from my cousin Delphine. She's as daft as her name. She enquires after my health, assures me there's nothing to worry about, lots of people have heart attacks and get over them, modern medicine is so wonderful, isn't it, the things they do today? Then she tells me about her neighbour, Trevor, prime of life, picture of health, dropped dead of a coronary last week, leaving a widow and three small – Mother snatches the letter from my hand.

The second is from an old school friend who moved to Bristol a few years ago. We were close once. Now she has a husband, three warring teenagers and a huge dog of uncertain breed which persists in jumping on visitors, playfully suffocating them. She would like me to go and stay with them when I'm well enough. Mother pulls a face.

'Ruthy,' she says, smoothing the lilac duvet. She is building up to something. Her hands are always busy when her brain is scheming.

Ruthy. I do wish she wouldn't call me that. I'm forty-four, a middle-aged woman. I have no delusions about myself. Ruth the Moabite. Loyal, obedient, stodgy Ruth.

'Matthew phoned last night,' she says. His bi-monthly call. Funds must be low. 'He'd like to come for the weekend. I told him I'd speak to you first.'

'Why? It's your house.'

'Don't be silly, dear. He wants to bring a friend.'

'Doesn't he always? Matthew couldn't get through the weekend without a girl in his bed.'

'Oh, Ruthy.'

Mustn't criticise our baby boy.

Poor old mother, she hasn't had it easy. It was thoughtless of Daddy to pop off like that, face down in the cornflakes. He left her well provided for though, big house in the stockbroker belt, money well invested. Merchant bankers are such sensible men.

Mother married in her early thirties. She had always lived at home, never had to work. There was always a man to look after her, a daddy then a husband to earn the money, pay the bills. My father died in the fifties when I was twenty, Matthew only five. Matthew was a mistake.

It had been a peaceful house for years, no voices raised in anger or passion, then Mother got pregnant – 'fell' she said – and nothing was ever the same again. I was embarrassed by her swollen belly and huge breasts, felt a fool walking down the street with her, praying we wouldn't meet any girls from school. My mother and father were far too old for that kind of thing. It was ridiculous. To this day Mother and I never discuss things sexual. We kind of skirt round them. Anyway, it's not part of our lives any more.

It was a difficult pregnancy. Mother was on her back for a lot of the time, especially towards the end, so I ran the house. I felt a strange mixture of devotion and rage looking after Daddy, feeling very proud and at the same time furious. It was his fault she was so ill.

They were both pleased it was a boy. And Daddy looked very smug. 'Takes a man to make a boy, Harold,' his friends

chortled, raising their glasses to him. 'So there's life in the old dog yet, eh?'

You would have thought he'd just climbed Everest.

Matthew started the way he intended to carry on, screaming day and night, his face scarlet, fists clenched, screaming for food, for attention, for the sheer cussed fun of it. Colic, said the nurse. Bad temper, said Daddy, who was clearly beginning to wish he hadn't been quite so potent in bed. I saw Mother feeding Matthew once. He was tugging on the nipple, his fingers digging into her breast as if he were trying to squeeze out every last drop.

'He'll only be here for one night, Ruthy,' she says. 'He has to leave on Sunday evening.'

I've grown very philosophical about Matthew. What choice do I have? He'll come for the weekend whether I agree or not. He'll bring a girl, one of those wannabe actresses he works with or somebody he picked up at a party. They'll go out on Saturday evening, get sloshed, come in at two or three in the morning and thump around in his room, giggling, too drunk to do anything but giving it a good try.

Sunday lunchtime he'll wake up with a sore head, throw a tantrum and drive off with or without the girl – quite a few of them have had to take the train. Like all bad actors, his greatest scenes are offstage. Somewhere in all that he will ask Mother for money just to 'tide him over'. It's become a tidal wave over the years.

'It's a horrible morning, Ruthy, why don't you stay in bed, dear?'

She tucks the lilac duvet under my chin, moulding it round my neck like pastry round a pie funnel.

'Oh, Mother, please, I'm so sick of bed. I've spent the last six weeks in this damned bed.'

She gets up quickly and takes the tray.

I've upset her again. She does so much for me, I think she'd rip the heart out of her own body and give it to me if I asked and all I do is snap at her. I never used to be like this, never swore, never raised my voice. Good old Ruth. Whatever happened to her?