EM & ME

BETH MORREY

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A wise woman once said to me:
'There are only two lasting bequests
we can hope to give our children.
One of these is roots; the other, wings.'

Hodding Carter,
Where Main Street Meets the River

Autumn Term

Chapter 1

Every morning, Maman used to fling open the curtains, calling, '*C'est le premier jour!*' Every day was the first day, a new beginning. That was how I remembered her: turning with a smile, the sun streaming through her hair, alight with expectation and possibility.

Pressed up against a cold wall, as dawn broke, I lay staring at the mould on the ceiling, pretending I hadn't done it a thousand times before. It crept across a crack that ran along the corner above us, a blooming sphere amidst a crescent of smaller blue-black circles; my own little Rorschach test. There was a time when I loved tests. Was it a waxing moon, an apostrophe, or a bass clef? The body beside me shifted uneasily, pushing me further against the damp Anaglypta. A sickle, a fish hook . . . An elbow jabbed me in the rib as I eased myself out of bed. When it came down to it, it was just mould – mould I didn't have the time, money or energy to get rid of. Pulling on a jumper, I heard a murmur from the ruffled head buried in its pillow.

'Go back to sleep,' I said, and headed for the kitchen.

There was a pot soaking in the sink and, after putting the kettle on, I plunged my hands into the congealed water, nails scraping at the softened pasta that clung to the sides. Outside, the sun was coming up, but it hadn't yet reached our basement flat, never really did any more. The house I dreamed of was always perched up high, in the trees, light pouring through the windows. But that was like the pictures in the mould, existing only in my head. Dad didn't stir when I tiptoed in to give him his tea, and when I went back to our bedroom, the body was barely visible under the duvet. Grabbing my clothes, I edged towards the door, but the head emerged, round eyes fixed on me.

'Don't be late for school,' I said, and backed out. No need to worry; she never was.

Le premier jour. It was mid-September, which still felt like the beginning of the year to me, even though I left school twelve years ago. On the bus to work, I squared my shoulders, ready to take the day by the scruff of its neck. That mould was a beckoning finger, a call to arms, to new beginnings.

Gio clicked his tongue in irritation when I arrived at the café, although I was never late either.

'*Andiamo! Dai!* Giddy-up!'

'Sorry.'

He picked up his *Daily Mail* and shook it, as I hurried to unload the dishwasher, tying my apron behind my back. The radio was playing, Elton John belting out 'Tiny Dancer', and my hips swayed involuntarily as I riffled through the cutlery tray, thinking of my daughter's nightly gyration around our bed, poking and kicking

me as she turned. Picturing her tousled head, pirate smile peeking over the covers, my heart squeezed a little, the sudden lurch of love that unbalanced me, even as I was staring at my distorted face in the back of a spoon. She was getting too big, our bed too small, but, like the mould, I didn't really know what to do about it.

The day disappeared in a blur, frothing like milk around a steam wand. Grinding, stirring, chopping, spreading, wrapping, dashing. Morning rush, followed by mid-morning rush, followed by lunch rush, then a lull that made me long to slump at one of the tables and squeeze my aching feet. But Gio hated to see inactivity, so I propped myself on the counter to polish the cutlery again, surreptitiously easing my toes out of my shoes to flex them. He wouldn't let me wear trainers, said it looked sloppy. If only I could get through the rest of the day, then go home to Em for hot chocolate, and maybe a bath if there was enough hot water, and—

'Delphine Jones!'

A woman stood before me, vaguely familiar. About my age, but with the glow of good fortune draped around her like a fur stole. She had the kind of buttery highlights that can't be achieved with a packet dye, skin as shiny as the stainless steel I was holding, glacé nails clutching a leather purse she definitely didn't buy at a market stall. Staring at her, my mind did a rewind, and freeze-framed on her aged sixteen, spraying her hair and rolling up her skirt in the school toilets.

'Lexy?'

'Fancy seeing you.' She put her purse on the counter between us. 'You . . . *work* here?'

That much was obvious, and it seemed stupid to deny it, standing

there in an apron, holding a tea towel. What was also stupid was that I felt the need to, to claim I was just passing through on the way to my skyrise corner office overlooking Canary Wharf.

'It pays the bills.' It didn't even manage that, entirely.

'How funny.' She raked a hand through ramrod-straight hair. 'I always imagined you doing something a bit more . . . scholarly. And here you are, a coffee-maker.'

'Barista,' I said. 'Do you want anything?'

'Decaf latte with soy milk.'

I kept my back to her, yanking the filters, pretending I couldn't hear over the noise of the radio, Freddie Mercury singing about rage, the flame that burns, secret harmonies . . .

'You were always such a swot at school, I thought you'd be running the country by now, but of course you had a *baby*, didn't you. What a shame.'

My hands stilled around the hot cup, head bent to inhale the bitter scent of the beans as I pictured my crooked-toothed friend sobbing after Lexy called her Metal Marni. It seemed the years hadn't mellowed her.

'Why you dilly-dally about? Lickety-split!' Gio's voice roused me, and I turned, holding the coffee.

'Your latte. Sorry about the wait.'

She smiled, but her eyes were ice chips. What had gone wrong in her life that made her this way? There were rumours about her dad having a nasty temper. As I pushed the mug towards her, she leaned forwards and lightly circled my wrist in a chummy, confidential grasp. Up close, she smelled of jasmine and something woody. She'd need a lot of perfume, to mask the polecat.

'Do you see Adam at all?'

I swallowed. 'No.'

She gave a sympathetic tut. 'What a shame. Still, I suppose at least *he* went on to bigger and better things.'

The cluster of carpal bones are what make wrists particularly flexible. Em told me that, once, after she spent an evening committing them to memory. Not an evening, really, not even half an hour; when Em sees something it shoots into her brain and lodges there instantly. I remembered them only because she taught me the mnemonic: Sally Left The Party To Take Cathy Home. Scaphoid, Lunate, Triquetrum, Pisiform, Trapezium, Trapezoid, Capitate, Hamate. The hamate is hook-shaped, like the mould on the ceiling. Keeping my expression neutral, the bones moved together in perfect formation, strong and supple.

'Arrrrrrgh!' Lexy's scream brought Gio running. Grabbing a stack of napkins, he began swabbing her steaming crotch, leaving white shreds of tissue on her designer jeans. What a shame.

'I'm sorry, it was an accident.'

Gio grabbed more napkins to dab on the wet patch, as Lexy raised her snarling face to mine.

'She did it on purpose,' she hissed.

My boss looked from his employee to his customer. Me, Delphine Jones, in my apron, scraped-back frizzy hair, red-raw knuckles, bitten nails. Her, Alexa Marshall, Shellacs curled to claws, white teeth bared, her tiny, pale-blue leather bag still on the counter. It was quilted, with two interlocking 'C's on the catch. Gio saw how it was. He was annoyed with her forcing

him into it, but of course he couldn't show it. So he turned his anger on me, his punchbag barista.

'Why you act like a crazy woman? After all I do for you! Always causing trouble, *pigro*, this is enough! *Basta!* Go at once.'

Once he'd got into his performance, Gio started enjoying himself, reading the riot act, while I let my mind drift to a climate change protester in the street the other day, holding a placard: 'TOO HOT TO HANDLE'. Such a scorching summer, still burning itself out, everything heating up, bubbling and spitting until it boiled over . . . I could tell Gio was already having second thoughts, even as I collected my stuff, but Ms Marshall would have considered it a personal insult if he went back on his word. So he stood, holding the door open, waiting for me to leave, and I squeezed awkwardly past him, head down, out into the dense heat of that sultry September.

Standing on the step, I found I was holding the long-handled silver spoon I'd been polishing, plucked from the apron pocket. It glinted as I rotated it, the inside of the bowl battered dull and grey, but the curved outer side shooting off sparks, fired up by the sun. I thought of my mother – Maman recounting how the father of one of her pupils had ordered her about like a minion; how at the time she said nothing – '*Rien de tout!*' – and only afterwards thought of the perfect retort. '*L'esprit de l'escalier, ma chérie*.' Staircase wit – you only ever think of the thing you should have said on the way out, and by then it's too late.

Gio was still standing in the doorway, accepting tearful thanks from Lexy, neither of them expecting my sudden return, brandishing my shiny talisman.

'Just so you know, Gio, *tesoro*, I wouldn't work another minute in this sub-Starbucks shack, even if you offered me a raise. Which you would never do, because you're a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone – a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner!' *Thank you, Miss Challoner, for schooling me in Dickens.* Lexy's turn. 'And *you*. You liked Adam, didn't you? What a shame he didn't like you.' Back to Gio. 'Just in case I didn't make myself clear, you can take your job, and your crappy espresso-maker and *ficcatelo su per il culo*.' Back to Lexy. 'That means shove it up your ass. Which is what you can do with your Chanel.'

It's one thing to think of it, another to act. The spirit was willing, had the speech ready, but the flesh was weak, my legs trembling at the image, the audacity. The Lexys of this world said what they liked and left the mess behind, but I kept my head down, and cleared up. What had I *done*? Throwing away my job, the job I needed to keep our house of cards from falling, was insane, unhinged. But underneath it all, somehow, the bones had been flexing, pushing me forwards, before the rot set in.

I pivoted on the step and pushed open the door. Gio and Lexy looked at me in silent astonishment as I threw the spoon on the floor that still bore the marks of my mopping.

'Shine your own silver.'

Not much, but better than nothing. I turned and exited once more, out into the sunshine, squinting against the light, shading my eyes against my future.

Le premier jour.

Chapter 2

With nothing else to do, I went to pick up Em from school. Hadn't been back since the first day she started, earlier that month – a shift, or shopping, or some other task had always got in the way. The truth was, I didn't want to go to her school, because it used to be mine. Brownswood High, a scruffy, sprawling state secondary run by Gerald Haynes, an ex-army officer who would have been happier running a work-house. Now it was an Academy, with a new library and a super-head called Mrs Boleyn, who believed in something called 'co-operative learning', so Em told me. I shivered as I saw the red brick looming ahead, the scene of several crimes.

Would Em want to see me there? It was probably really shaming to be picked up by your mum, particularly one with mascara tracks down her cheeks. I thought about sneaking off, but caught sight of her talking to a woman with piled-up blonde hair and Biro marks on her cheek. My daughter's eyes widened when she noticed me, drawing a hundred conclusions, probably

the right ones. She whispered something to the woman, who turned and smiled, sparking a flicker of recognition. She had a Bic stuck in her messy bun, and what looked like a seed in the gap between her front teeth.

'Hi, Mum, what are you doing here? I've got my first fast-track class.'

In the official letter, emailed by the head just a week after she started, they'd said Em was extraordinary: 'A special class for special students.' Extraordinary and special. It wasn't that I disagreed, but sometimes it was better – easier – to be ordinary and normal.

'Sorry, I forgot.'

'Mrs Jones! Lovely to meet you. We haven't met, have we? I'm Mrs Gill, Emily's English teacher.'

The famous Mrs Gill, who Em went on about. She'd sent me an email, too, about a theatre trip, and I fobbed her off because I hadn't got the money together yet. How would I get it, now? I blinked back fresh tears, because Em was desperate to go, but had made out it didn't matter. Just last night, standing in the kitchen running hot water into the pasta pan, shrugging her skinny shoulders. '*If there are any issues with payment, maybe the school could help?*' Mrs Gill had written. '*That won't be necessary*,' I'd replied. An extra shift, sell something on eBay, scrape coins off the pavement rather than admit it was a problem.

'I'd better be going . . .' I stepped away, but she barrelled on.

'Emily is doing brilliantly, she's very well-read for her age. For any age, really! We're so glad she's joining our new group, she'll really benefit from a bit of extra pushing.'

She was pushy, hassling me at the school gates, gabbling away. I was overwhelmed by the day, the looming horror of job-hunting, and the memory-deluge just being here had unleashed.

'Well, it was her decision . . .' I dashed away a rogue tear and her eyes narrowed.

'Of course, but if the parents are on board it's such a . . . Are you OK?'

A tissue appeared under my nose.

'Thank you,' I mumbled, taking it. 'Sorry . . . don't know what made me . . .'

'Emily, Mr Davidson is taking the class today – you'd better get going or you'll be late. I'll show your mum round for a bit. Off you go.'

Mrs Gill nodded at Em, who trailed off, throwing us suspicious glances.

'Come with me.' She led me through a revamped reception, along various bright corridors, both new and weirdly familiar, chatting the whole way, as I tried to ignore the influx. There was the classroom where Marni and Sheba plaited their hair together and spent the day lurching around like Siamese twins until Miss Kornack threatened them with a pair of scissors – unprofessional but effective. The dining hall where Leroy Ellis had an allergic reaction to fish, and Mr Wilsden had to give him an EpiPen injection in the middle of lunch. The science lab where Sally Barclay . . . *No. Stop it.* It was Em's school now, everyone else had moved on.

'I can't tell you how brilliant Emily is. I'm sure you already know – I knew from the very first lesson. We were reading *Much*

Ado, Benedick and Beatrice arguing, and I asked for other examples of couples who argue. Of course, I was getting *nothing* – someone said Ant and Dec – I mean, I *ask* you – and then Emily pipes up from the back: "Kate and Petruchio." Then her *Twelfth Night* speech! So, when Mrs Boleyn asked me who should join the fast-track class, I said immediately – "Emily Jones."' She opened the door to an empty unlit classroom and beckoned me in. 'Take a seat.'

The classroom didn't have any particular associations, and even in the dim light it was clear what a vibrant space it was – colours and thoughts and effort everywhere. There was a Word Wall between the windows, a display of paper butterflies emerging from an open book, each wing covered in synonyms for the word that spanned its thorax. *Rich: wealthy, prosperous, abundant, bountiful, productive, fertile* . . . Mrs Gill handed me another tissue, and for a second was silent as I calmed myself down. When I looked up, she smiled and picked at the seed between her teeth.

'It's almost impossible to cry on camera, you know. They use these drops, and some make-up artists have a tear stick they use. Sometimes they blow menthol air in your eyes. Dangerous really, because if you got any of the actual oil in your eye you could damage it. Which would mess up the scene completely, continuity-wise.' She reached into the drawer of her desk and produced a pretty pink box. 'Have a macaron.'

Having read the list of staff in the school prospectus, I'd been relieved to see few from my era had survived. Mrs R Gill (BA) was one of the new wave, and Em had researched her thoroughly

when she found out who she was. She was still recognizable when she smiled – that famous gap between her teeth. More than twenty years before, as a teenager, Miss Rosalind Cartwright played Rosalie Murray in the Oscar-nominated movie *Agnes Grey*, dancing round the schoolroom, reeling in Sir Thomas Ashby with her ringlets. It seemed impossible to imagine, in this Hackney classroom. I watched the film with my dad, twelve years ago, when I'd just found out I was pregnant. Sitting in our cold living room with a dinner tray, angry because, although I was watching it with Dad, he wasn't really there; angry because I'd just given up my A levels, and would never be able to do the things I wanted to do with books like *Agnes Grey*. The anger never really disappeared, just lingered, dormant, with nowhere to go.

Rosalind Cartwright must have made a fortune, so what was Mrs R Gill doing teaching at Brownswood? Surely that kind of past was a deadly weapon for students to taunt her with. Unless Em was the only one who knew – my daughter harvested information like other children stockpiled conkers. She'd told me her teacher had married a rock guitarist and for a while they'd been one of those couples in magazines, but gradually things had petered out. Apart from some crime drama a couple of years ago, Roz Gill hadn't been in anything for a while and, in her new incarnation, she certainly didn't look like a famous person. Burnt-blonde hair greying at the roots, a network of fine lines around the startling blue eyes – an older, messier, chattier version of the screen persona. Both of us were fallen stars.

'So, is something the matter? You looked upset back there.'

My daughter's teacher bit into a macaron, using her cupped hands to catch the falling crumbs and cram them into her mouth.

'Just had a rough day. Lost my job.'

'Oh, no. How come?' Resting her chin on her hand, she fixed me with an intense stare. There were sugary specks on her lips.

'It was . . . a misunderstanding.' It was true in a way. Gio didn't understand that Lexy deserved to be drenched in coffee.

'Can you explain? Get your job back?'

'There's no point.' I traced the subtle pink ridges of the macaron with the tip of my finger. 'Besides, I hated it. My boss was awful and the pay was terrible.' I'd put up with two years of it, because terrible pay was better than no pay, an awful boss was better than no boss. On the wall behind the desk someone had written on the whiteboard: 'Can you be rich and poor at the same time?' *Poor: impoverished, needy, broke, substandard, faulty, pitiful.*

'Well, maybe it's for the best. Can you get another job? What is it that you do?'

'Waitress. And cleaner.'

'I used to do bar shifts when I was studying for my teaching diploma – it's hard work, isn't it. I could ask around if you like? Still got a few contacts.'

'Thanks, but it's fine. I've got my cleaning job.' It wasn't fine but, like the money for the Shakespeare play, there was no way I would accept help. As soon as you did that, it opened the floodgates. Questions, forms, social workers, reports. Help became interference. Best just get on with it, keep your head down.

'Is there a Mr Jones?' She immediately checked herself. 'Sorry, that's none of my business.'

I thought of Sid, my most recent ex, and Dad, the only Mr Jones in my life, and shook my head. She looked about to say more but thought better of it, squeezing my shoulder. 'Sure you'll find something.' She got to her feet, brushing off biscuit crumbs. 'Now, I'm going to have to escort you out of school, because if anyone catches you wandering round without a pass you'll probably get arrested.'

Trying to laugh, I stood up, still holding my uneaten macaron. But as we moved towards the door, someone else opened it, flicking a switch and flooding the room with light. My watery eyes adjusting, it was a second before I could focus.

'Delphine Jones!'

Another older version of a woman I remembered. But the same piercing gaze, same mannish suit, same short brushed-back hair – greyer now. So many hours spent watching her, listening to her, writing down the words she said, hanging onto every one. Until I walked away from it all.

'Miss Challoner.'

Eyes wide with surprise, she extended a hand. 'Mrs Boleyn now,' she said.

So Miss Challoner was the super-head. When she'd taught me, she'd been a lowly English teacher, struggling to get funding to refurbish the library. The library where Adam and I . . . Stuffing the biscuit in my mouth, I took her hand, hoping she wouldn't feel mine shaking.

'Delphine was my star pupil, once upon a time.' Miss Challoner – Mrs Boleyn – nodded to Mrs Gill.

'Really?' Mrs Gill looked delighted. 'And now her daughter is mine!'

Mrs Boleyn shot me a sharp glance and I tried to meet her eye. 'Daughter? You're a parent here?'

'Em Jones,' I mumbled, swallowing. How much would she guess? She taught English; how was her maths? 'She's . . . eleven. Just started in Year Seven.'

She frowned for a second, before her brow cleared. 'Ah yes, Emily. Roz mentioned her. Quoting Shakespeare. Extraordinary. Chip off the old block, eh? She joining the fast-track class?'

'Yes,' I said. 'She's very excited.'

Mrs Boleyn nodded in approval. 'Excellent. Just like you!'

But I was determined that Em would be nothing like me. She would succeed where I failed.

Chapter 3

You never forget a good teacher. They stay with you, kindly ghosts at your shoulder reminding you you're worth something. I remember the teacher who taught me to read and write, who told me my story of Icarus was excellent: 'What wings you gave him!' she said, as I beamed brighter than the sun. That bond between teacher and student is precious and profound, the knowledge teachers possess as rosy and tempting as a newly plucked apple. They're the gateway to a new life, a *better* life – or at least, that's what I believed, once upon a time. Miss Challoner was one of those teachers who could open up a whole world and, in my case, that world turned out to have Adam Terris in it. He was another apple I couldn't resist.

Adam joined Brownswood at the beginning of Year Ten. His dad had some posh job in the civil service, had transferred from Brussels to London, so there was already glamour attached to him. Straight away he established himself as brainy, and chilled out about it. Miss Challoner ran a book club at lunchtime on

Wednesdays, and when Adam joined it suddenly became well-attended, everyone coming to gaze at him, lounging in his chair, making the paperbacks look small in his big hands. I went because of her, not him. To listen to her talk about Thomas Hardy, and Charlotte Brontë, hear her read Elizabeth Bishop. But gradually I started listening to him, too, noticing the way a lock of his copper hair fell over his face when he read aloud; a stirring as potent as the fieriest villanelle.

The only time I felt properly warm was deep in a book, escaping to another world where I wasn't Delphine Jones. I spent hours at the local library because it was cosier than our flat; the dank basement with Dad slumped in his chair, pulling me down when I wanted to soar. Another English teacher, Mr North, started bringing in books for us, so I devoured them too. The only time I felt properly seen and heard was when I was talking about what I'd just read, Adam watching me, waiting for my teacher's approval.

Outside school, it was like a light switched off. It *was* a light switched off – to save the electricity. Keep food in the fridge, fix the leak, find the money and, above all, stop anyone guessing what was going on. Floodgates closed. I started waiting on tables at weekends to pay bills Dad couldn't manage, eating dry rolls from the café for dinner, reading into the night by torchlight. In the beginning, keeping up with schoolwork was just a way of fending people off, making them believe everything was fine. But necessity became a pleasure. What started as a flirtation became something much, much more.

School was the beacon – the bright, warm rooms; the noise

and colour, the hot lunches. Teachers like Miss Challoner, pushing us to be the best we could be. Books, offering an escape route. And Adam, in class, listening to me and looking at me, *noticing* me in a way that Dad couldn't manage any more. Since Maman had gone, all I'd wanted was to be overlooked, for no one to see the mess we were in, but Adam was different. He was the sun, and I wanted him to shine on me, flying higher and higher until I could feel the warmth on my wings.

Chapter 4

After her fast-track class, Em and I wound down the best way we knew, with hot chocolate and chess. The old wooden set belonged to Dad, who taught me to play. I was six and it was a rainy afternoon; we sat on the floor with the board between us as he explained the rules. My favourite was that a pawn could become a queen if it reached the other side. He called me his queen after that, and we had a match every weekend. Now Em and I played on the little fold-down table, while Dad sat in stalemate beside us, eyes glued to the TV.

'Why did you come to pick me up today?' Em opened with her pawn.

I winced, thinking of the showdown at the café, and pushed my own piece forwards. 'Just wanted to see you.' That wouldn't pass muster. 'Wanted to see if you skipped school to go on climate strike.' Em had read about a young girl protesting outside the Swedish Parliament, and was considering making her own stand.

She frowned at the board. 'Thought about it. But I didn't want to miss my new class.'

'How was it?' I brought a knight out, feeling reckless. Em would win anyway.

'It was cool. We're doing more on *Twelfth Night*.'

That trip. I had to find the money somehow. 'That's great. Given that you've pretty much memorized it already.'

Em released a bishop with a wry smile. 'Still got Act Five to go. How was work?'

My hand hovered. 'What do you mean?'

'You were out early. And you were crying.'

'I . . . handed in my notice.'

Em took a sip of chocolate, checking it was cool enough to drink. 'Good. Act Five, the resolution. You can get a better job.'

'I'm not exactly inundated with offers.'

'Anything's better than Giovanni.' The few times Em had dropped by the café, Gio had not been welcoming, and she'd noticed him giving the wrong change to customers too many times for it to be accidental.

Anything was better than Giovanni, but I didn't have anything. If I got a better job, then we could move out of Dad's flat, get a place of our own, rooms of our own, begin the life I wanted to build for Em. But how could I possibly help with Dad's rent, and pay mine, leave him to fend for himself, find a job with a decent wage, when I had no qualifications, no prospects? Once, in the park, there had been a kind of travelling fair, and right in the centre of all the rides was a bungee run. People climbed on and ran like hell, only to be pulled back at the last moment.

I'd had no money for a go but, in many ways, I didn't need any to feel that sensation. My whole life was that run.

"'*Thou must untangle this.*'" Em shifted her queen.

I stared at the board. "'*It is too hard a knot for me t'untie.*'"

'Checkmate,' she said, with her pirate smile.

So many permutations, and Em had them all figured out. Getting to my feet, I began putting the pieces away. 'I'll start dinner. Why don't you get your homework done?'

'Did it on the bus on the way home.'

'Of course you did. Go and sit with Granddad while I sort us out.'

Three fish fingers, two tubs of Pot Noodle, mixed with tinned sweetcorn, bread and margarine on the side. There was satisfaction in arranging the jigsaw pieces of our kitchen cupboards. I could see Em through the serving hatch, curling her way around her grandfather's armchair, the only one who could stir a morsel of delight in him. He was watching *Back to the Future,* the scorches of the DeLorean burning on the road. Every week, I went to the library to borrow something. He particularly liked sci-fi and fantasy – I guess the further away from reality the better. After putting the fish fingers in the oven, I flicked the kettle on and went into the living room to perch on the other arm of his chair.

He was quiet for a minute or so, then said, 'Eighty-eight miles per hour.'

'That's right.'

'It's not that fast.'

'No.' The film made time travel look easy, like anyone could

cobble together a machine in their garage, and that appealed to Dad, who was always looking for a way out. Maybe the past was within reach, if he could just get up to speed.

Hearing the click of the kettle, I went back to pour it over the noodles, and we ate watching Marty McFly find his way back to a future he could live with. When the film finished, I took the DVD out of the machine and gathered up the others to return to the library. Dad examined the latest offerings – *I, Robot*, *All About Eve*, *The Truman Show*, turning them over in his hands, lips moving as he read the blurbs. Em made him a cup of tea while I cleared up and did a stocktake for tomorrow's dinner. As Em waited for the tea to brew, she looked out of the window, at the steep grass verge that sloped up to the communal garden beyond. A garden Dad didn't visit any more.

'Tell me about JoJo,' she said.

My daughter often asked about her grandmother, and I didn't like to deny her, though it was painful to dredge it up, to supplement her bank of knowledge with my precious memories.

'When she was down, her favourite thing to play was "But Not for Me".' I rested my hands either side of the sink. 'She'd pick it out, just a couple of notes, slowly, so you could hardly hear the tune. But when she was happy, she'd play "On the Sunny Side of the Street", thumping on the keys, humming, sometimes breaking into song. But she still sang with her accent: "*Leave your wureez on ze doorstep* . . .'" I sang, softly, so Dad couldn't hear.

'When was she happy?' Em took the tea bag out of the mug and went to the fridge for milk.

'Most of the time. Didn't take much to put her in a good mood. Your granddad bringing back daffodils. My drawings – she'd thread them into a kind of bunting across the living room. Cooking. She liked making things from home – crêpes, onion soup, clafoutis, that sort of thing. Sometimes she'd make an afternoon tea, if we were celebrating.'

'When was she sad?'

Running the hot tap to wash the plates, steam rose around me, and I batted it away.

'When we ran out of money,' I said. 'When she thought we might have to sell the piano.'

We both looked back towards the living room to the piano, a dusty altar, untuned and unplayed, but unsold.

'Well, at least it never got that bad,' said Em, carrying the tea through. I laughed, though of course it wasn't funny. The piano was still there, but Maman wasn't, and neither was Dad, really. He was in the DeLorean, trying to scorch his way back to a time before things went wrong.

Once upon a time, Dad told stories and Maman sang songs. He didn't read much, but they were all in his head, somehow, and he was always ready to tuck me up and weave a new world. He told me Greek myths, ghost stories, brutal fairy tales, tender love stories. They worried about me being an only child, but I grew up surrounded by the magical characters he created – my imaginary friend a cheetah called Yara who had travelled the Hindu Kush mountains to carry an enchanted amber stone back to its ancient cave. Maman once left food out for her – a dish of oat biscuits sprinkled with hundreds and thousands. I went

to bed thrilled at the thought of it, and the next morning the plate was clean.

I tried to make magical worlds for Em over the years, but it was hard on my own, jingling bells out the window on Christmas Eve, writing a card from the tooth fairy, without another parent to be my partner in crime. Dad and Maman used to chuckle in corners, tell each other the things I'd said, meet each other's eyes before they answered my questions. When his stories finished, her songs would start, a beautiful flourish at the end of the tale. We danced from story to song and song to story until my thirteenth birthday, when the music stopped, and the stories ended, and from then on it was just silence, me sitting on my bed with my arms around my knees, my father in his chair, both of us talking to the shadows.

The past was done, and there was nothing you could do but carry on, leaving the wreckage behind. I thought about the day Em was born, that miraculous bundle handed to me – Emily Josephine Jones; how her tiny fingers reached out, and in that moment everything shifted. Seventeen years old, alone in a hospital room, torn and bleeding, but somehow, looking down at her, I felt settled into new grooves that would carry us away from the mess I'd made. Before she arrived, I thought I might have her adopted, that she could have a better life away from me, but the moment her hand held mine, I knew she was my future, and all that mattered was making sure hers was the best I could provide. Like the queen who wishes for a daughter with lips as red as blood, skin as white as snow and hair as dark as ebony, I vowed I'd make a home for us with a red roaring fire,

a white picket fence and a bank account that was finally in the black.

But that night, as we wriggled down together in the bed we shared, in the damp, narrow room I'd slept in since childhood, it didn't seem like I'd made good on that birth-day promise. Instead, I felt like Snow White in the casket, waiting for someone to rock up and knock out the poisoned apple.