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Written by Nicci French

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Until it's Over

NICCI FRENCH



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*To Rafi, Martin, Tommy, Vadilson,
Arthur, Tilly and Dougie*

Part One

Chapter One

I had cycled around London for week after week, month after month, and I knew that one day I would have an accident. The only question was, which kind? One of the other messengers had been heading along Regent Street at speed when a taxi had swung out to make a U-turn without looking. Or, at least, without looking for a bike, because people don't look for bikes. Don had hit the side of the taxi full on and woken up in hospital unable to recall his own name.

There's a pub, the Horse and Jockey, where a whole bunch of us despatch riders meet up on Friday evenings and drink and gossip and share stories and laugh about tumbles. But every few months or so there'd be worse news. The most recent was about the man who was cycling down near the Elephant and Castle. He was alongside a lorry that turned left without indicating and cut the corner. That's when the gap between the lorry and the kerb shrinks from about three feet to about three inches. All you can do is get off the road. But in that case there was an iron railing in the way. The next time I cycled past I saw that people had taped bunches of flowers to it.

When these accidents happen, sometimes it's the cyclist's fault and sometimes it isn't. I've heard stories of bus drivers deliberately ramming bikes. I've seen plenty of cyclists who think that traffic lights don't apply to them. But the person on the bike always comes off second best. Which is why you should wear a helmet and try to stay away from lorries

and always assume that the driver is a blind, stupid psychopath.

Even so, I knew that one day I would have an accident. There were so many different kinds, and I thought the most likely was the one that was hardest to avoid or plan against. So it proved. But I never thought it would take place within thirty yards of my own house. As I turned into Maitland Road, I was about to swing my leg over the cross-bar. I was forty-five seconds from a hot shower and in my mind I was already off the bike and indoors, after six hours in the saddle, when a car door opened into the road in front of me, like the wing of a metal bird, and I hit it.

There was no time for me to respond in any way, to swerve or to shield myself. And yet the events seemed to occur in slow motion. As my bike slammed against the door I was able to see that I was hitting it from the wrong direction: instead of pushing the door shut, I was pushing it further open. I felt it screech and bend but then stop as the momentum transferred itself from the door back to the bike and especially to the most mobile part of the bike, which was me. I remembered that my feet were in the stirrups and if they remained fastened, I would get tangled in the bike and might break both my legs. But then, as if in answer, my feet detached themselves, like two peas popped from a pod, and I flew over the door, leaving my bike behind.

It all happened so quickly that I couldn't protect myself as I fell or avoid any obstacle. At the same time it happened so slowly that I was able to think about it as it was taking place. I had many thoughts, but it wasn't clear whether they were happening one after another or all at the same time. I thought: I'm having an accident. This is what it's like to have an accident. I thought: I'm going to be hurt, probably quite badly. I thought: I'm going to have to make arrangements. It looks

like I won't be at work tomorrow. I'll have to phone Campbell and let him know. Or someone will. And then I thought: How stupid. We're meeting for dinner tonight, one of those rare occasions when we all sit round the table together, and it seems like I won't be there. And I even had time to think: What will I look like, lying flung out on the road?

At which point I hit the ground. I had flipped over like an incompetent acrobat and landed on my back, hard, hitting the wind out of me, so that I made an 'oof' sound. I rolled and felt bits of me bang and scrape along the road surface. When I heard my body hit the Tarmac, there was no pain at first. It was like a bang and a bright flash. But I knew that the pain was on its way and suddenly there it was, at the centre of everything, beating against me in wave after wave, light pulsing in my eyes in reds and purples and bright yellows, each pulse a different sort of hurt. I made an attempt to move. I was in the road. The road was a dangerous place. A lorry might run over me. It didn't matter. I was incapable of movement. All I could do was swear, over and over again: 'Fuck. Shit. Fuck. Shit.'

Gradually the pain started to locate itself. It was like rain that had fallen and was now settling into puddles and rivulets. I felt dizzy but my helmet had saved my head. My upper back was numb where I had landed on it. What really hurt for the moment were lots of other places – my elbows, the side of one knee. One of my hands had been bent back and was throbbing. With the other I touched my thigh and felt sticky wetness and bits of gravel. A tiny part of my brain still had time to think: How stupid. If this had not happened, I would be in the house and everything would be normal. Now I'm here and I'm going to have to deal with it, and if only I didn't.

I lay back and the Tarmac was warm against me and I

could even smell it, oily and sharp. The sun was low and yolky in the fading blue.

A shadow fell across me, a shape blocking the sky. 'Are you all right?' it said.

'No,' I said. 'Fuck.'

'I'm so sorry,' it said. 'I opened the door. I didn't see you. I should have looked. I'm so, so sorry. Are you hurt? Shall I call an ambulance?'

Another wave of pain hit me. 'Leave me alone,' I said.

'I'm so, so sorry.'

I took a deep breath and the pain receded a little and the person came into focus. I saw the vaguely familiar face of a middle-aged woman and I saw her silver car and I saw the open door, which had been bent outwards by the impact. I took another deep breath and made the effort to say something that wasn't just whimpering or swearing. 'You should look.'

'I'm so sorry.'

I was going to tell her again to go away but suddenly felt nauseous and had to devote my energy to stopping myself vomiting in the street. I had to get home. It was only a few yards away. I felt like an animal that needed to crawl into its hole, preferably to die. With a groan, I rolled over and began to push myself up. It hurt terribly but through the fog I noticed that my limbs were functioning. Nothing was obviously shattered; no tendons had been torn.

'Astrid!'

I heard a familiar voice and, indeed, a familiar name. My own. Astrid. That was another good sign. I knew who I was. I looked up and saw a familiar face gazing down at me with concern. Then another swam into focus behind the first: two were staring at me with the same expression.

'What the hell happened?' one said.

Stupidly and inexplicably, I felt embarrassed.

‘Davy,’ I said. ‘Dario. I just came off the bike. It’s nothing. I just –’

‘I opened my door,’ the woman said. ‘She rode into it. It was all my fault. Should I call an ambulance?’

‘How’s my bike?’ I said.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ said Davy, bending down, his face creased with concern. ‘How are you doing?’

I sat up in the road. I flexed my jaw, felt my teeth with my tongue. I felt my tongue with my teeth.

‘I think I’m all right,’ I said. ‘A bit shaken.’ I stood up, flinched.

‘Astrid?’

‘What about my bike?’

Dario walked round to the other side of the car door and stood the bike up. ‘It’s a bit bent,’ he said. He tried to push it but the front wheel was jammed in the fork.

‘It looks . . .’ I was trying to say that it looked the way I felt but the sentence seemed too hard to construct. Instead I said I wanted to get into the house. The woman asked again about getting an ambulance but I shook my head and groaned because my neck felt sore.

‘I’ll pay for the bike,’ the woman said.

‘Yes, you will.’

‘I live just here. I’ll come and see you. Is there anything else I can do now?’

I tried to say something snappy, like ‘You’ve done enough already,’ but it was too much of an effort and, anyway, she looked upset and bothered and she wasn’t defending herself like some people would have done. I looked round and she was trying to close the offending door. It took two goes to get it shut. Dario picked up my bike and Davy put an arm carefully round me and led me towards our house. Dario nodded at someone.

'Who's that?' I said.

'Nobody,' he said. 'How's your head?'

I rubbed my temple cautiously. 'Feels a bit funny.'

'We were sitting outside on the front step,' said Dario, 'having a smoke and enjoying the evening, weren't we, Davy?'

'Right,' said Davy. 'And there was a crash and there you were.'

'Bloody stupid,' I said.

'Can you make it? It's just a few more yards.'

'It's OK,' I said, though my legs were quaking and the door seemed to be receding rather than getting closer. Davy shouted for Miles, then Dario joined in even more loudly, and the sound echoed round my skull, making me flinch. Davy led me through the gate and Miles appeared from inside at the top of the steps. When he saw the state of me, his expression was almost comic. 'What the hell happened?' he said.

'Car door,' said Davy.

I was quickly surrounded by my housemates. Davy tried to hang the bike on the hooks on the wall in the hallway. Because it was damaged it didn't fit properly. He took it down again and started to fiddle with it, getting oil on the front of his lovely white shirt. 'That's going to need some work,' he said, with relish.

Pippa came down the stairs and said something rude to Davy about how it was me that needed checking, not the bike. She gave me a very light hug, hardly touching me. Mick looked at me impassively over the banisters from the floor above.

'Bring her through,' said Miles. 'Get her downstairs.'

'I'm fine,' I said.

They insisted and I was half helped, half dragged down

the stairs into the large kitchen-dining area where we ate and talked and spent our time when we weren't in our own rooms. I was placed on the sofa near the double doors and Dario, Pippa and Miles sat staring at me, asking over and over how I was feeling. I was clear-headed now. The shock of the accident had settled into simple, ordinary pain. I knew it was going to hurt like hell the next morning but it would be all right. Dario took a cigarette from a pack in his pocket and lit it.

'We should cut her clothes off,' he said. 'The way they do in A and E departments.'

'In your dreams,' I said.

'Do you need to see a doctor?' Miles asked.

'I need a hot bath.'

'About the hot part,' said Dario. 'There might be a problem with that.'

Chapter Two

There's something satisfying about the aftermath of an accident in which you haven't really been hurt. Especially when you look worse than you feel. I felt all right, but there was a lovely bruise flowering on my calf, a raw graze down my thigh, a gash on my hand, and my left cheek had an ugly scrape. My wrist was swollen. I stung and throbbed and ached, but in a masochistically pleasurable way. I kept pressing my cuts to make sure they were still bleeding. After a shallow, tepid bath, I lay on my bed in old jogging pants and a T-shirt, and assorted members of the household strayed in to ask me if I was all right and to hear yet again how it had happened. I began to feel almost proud of myself.

'It was all in slow motion,' I repeated for the fourth time.

Davy and Dario, the two heroic rescuers, were looking down at me. Dario lit another cigarette, except it wasn't a cigarette, and a familiar illegal smell drifted across my room.

'You must have fallen in a really natural way,' said Davy. 'That's why you didn't get seriously injured. It's pretty impressive. It's the way they train paratroopers. But you did it naturally.'

'It wasn't in my control,' I said.

Dario took a huge drag on his spliff. 'Or like a really, really drunk person,' he said. 'When really drunk people fall over, they don't get injured because their body's so relaxed.'

‘Let’s have a look,’ said Mick, sitting on the edge of the bed.

I might have made a caustic remark if someone else had said that, but with Mick you don’t really make caustic remarks. He’s a man of few words. It’s as if it takes a painful effort for him to speak, and when he does the rest of us generally fall silent. I wanted to ask why he was more qualified than anyone else to assess the damage, but I knew he would simply shrug.

‘Does this hurt?’ he asked, as I flinched. ‘Or this?’ He pressed a hand against my ribs, then lifted each leg, one after the other, feeling along my calves over thick daubs of oil that no amount of scrubbing with warm soapy water had removed. ‘Nothing broken,’ he said, which I knew anyway.

Pippa appeared with a small bottle of blue liquid and a handful of cotton wool.

‘Will it sting?’ I asked.

‘Not a bit,’ she said, and applied a liberal dousing of disinfectant to my cheek.

‘Shit!’ I yelled, squirming away from her. ‘Stop at once!’

‘Be brave.’

‘Why?’

‘Because, because,’ she said mysteriously, slapping another sodden wad of cotton wool on to my thigh.

‘Have a drag on this,’ said Dario, offering me his spliff. ‘It’s good for pain and nausea.’

‘I’ll pass,’ I said.

‘Are you all right for the meal?’ said Pippa.

‘I’m starving.’

‘Owen’s bringing it on the way back from his studio.’

He arrived with an Indian takeaway in brown-paper carrier-bags and put them on the table, then looked up and saw

me at the head, in a large chair, propped up with pillows. He frowned. 'You get into a fight?'

'With a car door.'

'Those are some bruises,' he said.

'I know.'

'They'll be worse tomorrow.'

'You should have seen her,' said Davy, sitting beside me. He looked more shocked than I was. 'She flew through the air.'

'Like a human cannonball,' said Dario, taking the chair on the other side.

'Does it hurt?'

'Not so much.'

'Of course it fucking hurts,' said Pippa. 'Look at her.'

'No. Don't look at me. My nose is twice its usual size. How much do we owe for this lot, Owen?'

'Eight quid each.'

There was muttering as people fumbled in pockets and purses, counted out coins and demanded change. Dario pulled a roll of notes out of his pocket, peeled off a twenty and tossed it to Owen. 'Keep the change,' he said. 'I probably owe you anyway.'

'Did you win the lottery?' said Owen, with an expression of distrust.

Dario looked shifty. 'Someone owed me,' he said.

Everyone sat round the kitchen table and eased off the foil lids, pulled tabs on beer cans, passed round chipped plates and an odd assortment of cutlery. Pippa helped herself to Dario's spliff and took a deep drag.

'Are lawyers allowed to do that?' asked Miles.

'Not in the office,' Pippa said, and looked round the group. 'How often does this happen? It's us and just us.'

'Now we are seven,' said Dario, clinking his fork against

his plate for silence, then immediately shovelled an enormous amount of rice into his mouth and chewed for several seconds while we all waited. 'Like the Seven Dwarfs,' he said at last.

'There are certain things we need to discuss,' said Miles, rather formally. 'To start with, can I say –'

'You're Doc,' said Dario.

'What?'

'If we're like the Seven Dwarfs –'

'Which we're not.'

'– you're definitely Doc,' said Dario.

'Because I own this house? And who else is going to get the drains fixed and make sure the bills are paid?'

'The dwarfs represent the parts that make up the psyche,' said Dario.

'Is this what I flew into a car door for?' I said. The beer was making me feel mellow and the pain had receded.

'You're Angry,' said Dario to Mick.

Mick ignored him.

'Is there an Angry?' I asked. 'I don't remember him.'

'There's Grumpy,' said Davy.

'Pippa's Randy, right?' said Dario, winking across the table at Davy.

This was a reference to the fact that Pippa was not in a proper relationship, but instead had a fair amount of extremely short ones.

'Oh, boys, boys,' I said. 'That's pathetic.'

'I think we can agree that Dopey's taken,' said Pippa.

'You can have Sleepy, then,' said Dario. 'No one can sleep like you.'

This wasn't strictly fair. Pippa only sleeps at weekends, when she goes to bed in the small hours and gets up in the afternoon, looking puffy, dazed and replete. During the week

she's a dutiful worker who rises at seven. Dario, on the other hand, sleeps whenever he likes.

'We're running out of the good ones,' said Davy. 'Owen can be Sneazy.'

'Why?'

Davy looked at me. 'Which leaves you and me fighting over Bashful and Happy,' he said. 'And you, Astrid Bell, are not bashful. Unless you want to be Snow White.'

'I want to be the Wicked Queen. There's a real woman.'

'You're spoiling the game,' said Dario. 'You're Happy.'

Happy. And groggy. And relaxed. I sat back in my chair. I looked round the people at the table: a motley collection who were, just at the moment, the closest I had to family. There were only three of us left who had been here from the beginning, or perhaps the real beginning was before that, when we were at university together. Miles had bought the house when he was still a post-graduate student who wanted to change the world, paying a ridiculously small amount for this rambling, run-down place at the rougher end of Hackney. Then, he had had no beard and his hair was long, often tied back in a ponytail. Now he had a closely trimmed dark blond beard and no hair at all. If I ran my hand over his head I could feel all the bumps of his velvety skull. Pippa was the other long-term. In fact, she and I had met in my first term at university and we'd shared a house in our final year, so by the time we moved in with Miles I already knew her domestic habits well. She was tall and willowy, and had a delicate kind of beauty that could mislead people.

So we were the original trio and we'd survived, even though for a year of that time Miles and I had been sort of a couple and for another six awful months had been sort of not a couple and then definitely not a couple. Now Miles

had a proper new girlfriend, Leah, and that felt good, like a fence between us. ‘Good fences make good neighbours,’ someone had said.

Around us, there had been various others, and the current seven was bound to change sooner or later. Mick was older than the rest of us, and carried his years as if they were a burden that weighed on his broad shoulders. He was stocky and short. He stood with his legs apart as if on the deck of a ship in stormy weather. His eyes were pale blue in a face creased by the sun and wind. He had spent years travelling restlessly round the world. I didn’t know if he’d been searching for something, or even if he had found it. He never talked about it. Now he worked, doing odd jobs, and had drifted to a temporary halt in Maitland Road. When he was at home, he spent much of his time in his small room at the top of the house, though I never knew what he did up there and I’d rarely visited him. None of the doors have locks on them, but some are more firmly closed than others. Sometimes I went downstairs in the middle of the night because I couldn’t sleep, and he was there, sitting quite still at the kitchen table with the steam from a mug of tea curling round his face.

We were never quite sure how Dario had come to be living here. His previous girlfriend (who I suspected was the only real girlfriend he had ever had) had rented a room for a year so he had often stayed over. Then we blinked and she was gone and somehow he was still there, digging himself into the smallest room, which was on the second floor, then gradually colonizing the empty room next door. Although he had no job and couldn’t pay the rent, no one had the heart or the necessary steel to throw him out – perhaps because he didn’t look much like a Dario. He had untidy ginger hair and thick freckles; his teeth were slightly

crooked and when he smiled he seemed like a goofy little boy. In the end, Miles came to an agreement with him: that he should renovate the house, top to bottom, in return for living there. I don't think it was such a good deal for Miles. As far as I could tell, Dario spent most of his time smoking weed, reading astrology columns, watching daytime TV, playing games on other people's computers and doodling on walls with stiff-bristled paintbrushes that he wasn't scrupulous enough about cleaning or replacing.

Davy was the most recent member of the household, being here just a couple of months, along with Owen. He was a carpenter and builder. A real one, not like Dario. Despite the disadvantage of not being Polish, he had plenty of work. Enough of it was outside so that he was lightly tanned. He had light-coloured hair, which fell thickly over his shoulders, and grey eyes. He was good-looking, but he didn't seem to know he was, which I found charming. He had the anxious manner of a new boy in the house, but also a nice smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes, and when he arrived I had let myself think, Perhaps? and then decided probably not. Sex in the house felt like a taboo, and my experience with Miles was an awful warning.

And then there was Owen Sullivan, sitting across from me right now. With his pale skin, his straight, shoulder-length dark hair, and his wide-set, almost-black eyes, he had a faintly Oriental air, though as far as I knew all his ancestors had been Welsh. He was a photographer. He hawked his portfolio round magazines and got the occasional commission. But what he really wanted was to do his own stuff. He had once said he hated magazine work. I had giggled and said then it was lucky he got so little of it. He hadn't replied but he had given me such a sharp look that I had realized you couldn't safely tease him where his work was concerned. He

used to watch people as if he was sizing them up for a photograph, checking the light, framing them. I sometimes wondered if he really saw, really listened to what they had to say.

‘Seven ages of man,’ said Dario, dreamily. ‘Seven seas, seven continents . . .’

‘That’s not right.’

‘Listen,’ said Miles. ‘I hate to break into this, but it’s very rare that we’re all together like this. Just the seven of us. Don’t you dare start again, Dario.’

‘You’re right, it *is* rare,’ said Davy. ‘Why don’t we have a group photo to mark it?’

‘We even have an official photographer.’

‘I don’t do snaps,’ said Owen, with finality.

‘Let’s not forget he’s an artist,’ I said sarcastically.

Davy just smiled. ‘I’ll take it,’ he said.

‘My camera’s in the drawer over there,’ said Miles, wearily.

Davy stood up and pulled it open. ‘It’s not here. You must have moved it.’

‘Someone’s nabbed it, more like, and forgotten to put it back.’

‘I’ve got one upstairs,’ said Davy.

‘Let’s just forget it,’ Mick was starting to say, but Davy was out of the room and bounding up the stairs two at a time.

A silence settled over us. Outside, a car horn blared several times and then we heard footsteps running down the road. A door slammed upstairs.

‘Who else thinks this lamb tastes like dogfood?’ said Dario.

‘What does dogfood taste like?’

‘Like this.’

Dogfood or not, there was the sound of chewing and plates being scraped. There was little conversation. Everybody seemed distracted. Then Davy returned, breathless and slightly flushed, but triumphantly brandishing his camera. 'It wasn't where I thought. Now, all squash together. No, you don't have to move, Astrid. Everyone can stand round you. Owen, you're out of the picture like that. I still can't see you.'

'Good.'

'Dario, your face is hidden by Pippa's shoulder. Mick, you look a bit weird with that smile. Scary, actually. OK, ten seconds. Are you ready?'

'What about you?' said Pippa.

'Just wait.'

Davy pressed a button and ran round to join us. His foot hit the table leg so he stumbled and half fell on to the tightly massed, scowling, smiling group as the light flashed. That was how the camera caught us, a blur of flailing arms and legs, and me in the centre, mouth open in surprise in my grazed and swollen face, like the victim of a drunken attack.

'Look at us!' screamed Pippa in delight: she came out the best of us all, of course – dainty and gorgeous in the scrum.

'My eyes are shut,' groaned Dario. 'Why does that always happen?'

'Right,' said Miles, once we'd sat down again. He pushed away his plate of congealing orange curry. 'I want to say something.'

'Yes?'

'This isn't easy, but I'm giving you plenty of warning.'

'It's about the state of the bathroom, I know it.'

'Leah and I have decided to live together.'

Pippa gave a little whoop.

I frowned. 'So why the solemn face?' I asked.

'She's moving in here.'

'We can cope,' said Dario. 'Can she, though? That's the real question.'

'I mean,' said Miles, 'it will be just Leah and me.'

For a moment, nobody spoke: we stared at him while his sentence hung in the air.

'Oh,' said Mick at last.

'Fuck,' said Pippa.

'You're chucking us out?'

'Not like that,' said Miles. 'Not at once.'

'How long?' I asked. My face was starting to throb.

'A few months. Three. That's all right, isn't it? It'll give you time to settle in somewhere else.'

'I was just settling in here,' said Davy, ruefully. 'Oh, well.'

'You couldn't all stay here for ever,' said Miles.

'Why not?' Dario looked stricken. His freckles stood out in blotches.

'Because things change,' said Miles. 'Time passes.'

'Are you all right, Astrid?' Davy asked. 'You've gone a bit pale.'

'I need to go to bed,' I said. 'Or at least lie down for a bit. I feel odd.'

Pippa and Davy levered me to my feet, hands under my elbows, making tutting noises.

'I'm sorry,' said Miles, wretchedly. 'Maybe it was the wrong time.'

'There's never a right time for things like this,' said Pippa. 'Come on, Astrid, come into mine for a while. It's one less flight of stairs to manage. I can rub Deep Heat into you, if you want.'

I shuffled up the stairs, taking them one at a time, and edged my way into Pippa's room, which was thick with the smell of perfume. It was a large room at the front of the house. When we had first moved in, it was the designated sitting room, and didn't seem to have been decorated since the fifties. Pippa had done nothing to change that, just filled the space with the frippery and clutter of her life. The effect was peculiarly jarring. Two walls were a grubby mustardy yellow, and another was covered with flowery wallpaper busy enough to make your head ache and peeling at the joins. The lightbulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling had a brown paper shade, split along one side. A large bay window gave out on to the street, but Pippa kept the shutters half closed so the room was in permanent shadow.

In my woozy state, the mess she had created took on an unsettling, almost hallucinatory aspect. There was a metal bed – a large single, which was particularly inappropriate to her lifestyle – with a lusciously crimson velvet bedspread; a small divan that her grandfather had left her, which was heaped with clothes, both clean and dirty; a chest with every drawer open and underwear and shirts spilling out on to the floor; a wardrobe, similarly open, in which hung her gorgeous dresses, suits, skirts and jackets; a flimsy desk buckling under the weight of papers and files. A full-length gilt mirror was propped against one wall, and at its base were piles of makeup, bottles of body lotion and tubs of face cream, ropes of necklaces, scattered earrings, a couple of belts. Yet out of this room Pippa emerged every morning fresh and immaculate, not a hair out of place, smelling of soap and Chanel No. 5.

I pushed aside a pair of knickers and lowered myself cautiously on to the bed.

'Paracetamol?' She reached under the bed and plucked

out a box of pills. 'With whisky?' Like a magician, she produced a bottle from beneath the pile of clothes on the divan and brandished it.

'Maybe not the whisky tonight.'

'Go on.'

She shook two white tablets into my hand, then poured a couple of fingers into a tumbler and handed it across. I swallowed the paracetamol and took a sip of whisky to chase them down.

'Shall I rub your shoulders?' she asked.

'I think that might hurt too much.'

'You're not making nearly enough fuss.'

'Strange day,' I said.

I could hear voices from downstairs, then the unmistakable heavy trudge of Mick making his way to his room.

'For you, mainly,' Pippa said. She took the tumbler from me, poured herself a generous slug of whisky and tossed it expertly down her throat. 'Bastard,' she added loudly.

'Miles?'

'Who else?'

'I don't know, Pippa. It had to happen some time.'

'Bah!'

'And if he and Leah want to live on their own together ...?'

'She's the one behind it.'

'You make it sound like a conspiracy.'

'Of course it's a conspiracy. So we're going to have to be the counter-conspiracy.'

She went on talking, saying something about the bump on my head making me too reasonable. But I didn't really hear the words, or make out their sense. I was feeling crushingly tired. The room swam in and out of focus. I lay back against the pillows and closed my leaden lids. 'Perhaps I'll go to sleep here tonight,' I said thickly.

Pippa grabbed my arm and pulled me into a sitting position. ‘Oh, no, you don’t. Not tonight, darling.’

I went crabwise up the second set of stairs, into my own room, which was white and empty after the garish mess of Pippa’s: just a small double bed, a narrow wardrobe, a chest on whose surface stood all the objects I’d dug from the garden, and a big wooden rocking-chair Dario had picked out of a skip for me and I’d covered with cushions I’d bought at Camden Market. I tugged off my tracksuit trousers, then wriggled under the duvet. But I stung and throbbed, and although I was so tired, it took me a long time to sleep. I heard sounds: the front door opening and closing; voices; someone laughing; water in the tank; footsteps on the stairs; an old house breathing.