The Other Family

Joanna Trollope

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

Looking back, it astonished her that none of them had broken down in the hospital. Even Dilly, who could be relied on to burst into tears over a shed eyelash, had been completely mute. Chrissie supposed it was shock, literally, the sudden suspension of all natural reactions caused by trauma. And the trauma had actually begun before the consultant had even opened his mouth. They just knew, all four of them, from the way he looked at them, before he said a word. They knew he was going to say, 'I'm so very sorry but—' and then he did say it. He said it all the way through to the end, and they all stared at him, Chrissie and the three girls. And nobody uttered a cheep.

Chrissie didn't know how she had got them home. Even though Tamsin and Dilly could drive, it hadn't crossed her mind to hand either of them the car keys. Instead, she had climbed wordlessly into the driver's seat, and Tamsin had got in – unchallenged for once – beside her, and the two younger ones had slipped into the back and even put their seat belts on without being reminded. Unheard of, usually. And Chrissie had started the car and driven, upright behind the wheel as if she was trying to demonstrate good posture, up Highgate Hill and down the other side towards home,

towards the house they had lived in since Amy was born, eighteen years ago.

Of course, there was no parking space directly outside the house. There seldom was in the evenings, after people got home from work.

Chrissie said, 'Oh bother,' in an overcontrolled, ladylike way, and Dilly said, from the back seat, 'There's a space over there, outside the Nelsons',' and then nobody spoke while Chrissie manoeuvred the car in, very badly, because they were all thinking how he would have been, had he been there, how he would have said, 'Ornamental objects shouldn't be asked to do parking. Gimme the keys,' and Chrissie would – well, might, anyway – have laughed and thrown the keys at him ineptly, proving his point, and he'd have inserted the car neatly into an impossible space in no time so that they could all please him by saying, 'Show-off,' in chorus. 'I make my living from showing off,' he'd say. 'And don't you forget it.'

They got out of the car and locked it and trooped across the road to their own front door. There were no lights on. It had been daylight when they left, and anyway they were panicking because of the ambulance coming, and his frightening pallor and evident pain, so nobody thought of the return, how the return might be. Certainly, nobody had dared to think that the return might be like this.

Chrissie opened the front door, while the girls huddled behind her in the porch as if it was bitterly cold and they were desperate to get into the warmth. It occurred to Chrissie, irrelevantly, that she should have swept the leaves out of the porch, that it badly needed redecorating, that it had needed redecorating for years and Richie had always said that his granny, in North Shields on Tyneside, had scrubbed her front doorstep daily – except for Sundays – on her hands and knees. Daily. With a brush and a galvanized bucket.

Chrissie took the keys out of the door, and dropped them.

Tamsin leaned over her mother's bent back and switched on the hall lights. Then they all pushed past and surged down the hall to the kitchen, and Chrissie straightened up, with the keys in her hand, and tried to put them into the door's inside lock and found she was shaking so badly that she had to hold her right wrist with her left hand, in order to be steady enough.

Then she walked down the hall, straight down, not looking in at the sitting room and certainly not in at his practice room, where the piano sat, and the dented piano stool, and the framed photographs and the music system and the racks and racks of CDs and the certificates and awards and battered stacks of old sheet music he would never throw away. She paused in the kitchen doorway. All the lights were on and so was the radio, at once, KISS FM or something, and the kettle was whining away and all three girls were scattered about, and they were all now crying and crying.

Later that night, Chrissie climbed into bed clutching a hot-water bottle and a packet of Nurofen Extra. She hadn't used a hot-water bottle for years. She had an electric blanket on her side of their great bed – Richie, being a Northerner, had despised electric blankets – but she had felt a great need that night to have something to hold in bed, something warm and tactile and simple, so she had dug about in the airing cupboard and found a hot-water bottle that had once been given to Dilly, blue rubber inside a nylon-fur cover fashioned to look like a Dalmatian, its caricatured spotted face closing down over the stopper in a padded mask.

One of the girls had put some tea by her bed. And a tumbler of what turned out to be whisky. She never drank whisky. Richie had liked whisky, but she always preferred vodka. Or champagne. Richie would have made them drink champagne that evening; he always said champagne was

grief medicine, temper medicine, disappointment medicine. But they couldn't do it. There was a bottle in the fridge – there was almost always a bottle in the fridge – and they took it out and looked at it and put it back again. They'd drunk tea, and more tea, and Amy had had some cereal, and Tamsin had gone to telephone her boyfriend – not very far away – and they could hear her saying the same things over and over again, and Dilly had tried to pick some dried blueberries out of Amy's cereal and Amy had slapped her and then Chrissie had broken down at last herself, utterly and totally, and shocked them all into another silence.

That shock, on top of the other unbearable shock, probably accounted for the whisky. And her bed being turned down, and the bedside lamp on, and the bathroom all lit and ready, with a towel on the stool. But there was still a second towel on the heated rail, the supersized towel he liked, and there were still six pillows on the bed, and his reading glasses were on top of the pile of books he never finished, and there were his slippers, and a half-drunk glass of water. Chrissie looked at the glass with a kind of terror. His mouth had been on that glass, last night. Last night only. And she was going to have to lie down beside it because nothing on earth could persuade her either to touch that glass or to let anyone else touch it.

'Mum?' Amy said from the doorway.

Chrissie turned. Amy was still dressed, in a minidress and jeans and ballet slippers so shallow they were like a narrow black border to her naked feet.

Chrissie said, gesturing at the bed, at the whisky, 'Thank you.'

'S'OK,' Amy said.

She had clamped some of her hair on top of her head with a red plastic clip and the rest hung unevenly round her face. Her face looked awful. Chrissie put her arms out.

'Come here.'

Amy came and stood awkwardly in Chrissie's embrace. It wasn't the right embrace, Chrissie knew, it wasn't relaxed enough, comforting enough. Richie had been the one who was good at comfort, at subduing resistant adolescent limbs and frames into affectionate acquiescence.

'Sorry,' Chrissie said into Amy's hair.

Amy sighed.

'What for?' she said. 'You didn't kill him. He just died.'

For being here, Chrissie wanted to say, for being here when he isn't.

'We just have to do it,' she said instead, 'hour by hour. We just have to get through.'

Amy shifted, half pulling away.

'I know.'

Chrissie looked at the Nurofen.

'Want something to relax you? Help you sleep?'

Amy grimaced. She shook her head.

Chrissie said, 'What are the others doing?'

'Dilly's got her door shut. Tam's talking to Robbie.'

'*Still*?'

'Still,' Amy said. She looked round the bedroom. Her glance plainly hurried over the slippers, the far pillows. 'I don't know what to do.'

'Nor me,' Chrissie said.

Amy began to cry again. Chrissie tightened the arm round her shoulders, and pressed Amy's head against her.

'I know, baby—'

'I can't *stand* it—'

'Do you,' Chrissie said, 'want to sleep with me?'

Amy stopped crying. She looked at the extra pillows. She shook her head, sniffing.

'Couldn't. Sorry.'

'Don't have to be sorry. Just a suggestion. We'll none of us sleep, wherever we are.'

'When I wake up next,' Amy said, 'there'll be a second before I remember. Won't there?'

Chrissie nodded. Amy disengaged herself and trailed towards the door. In the doorway she paused and took the red clip out of her hair and snapped it once or twice.

'At least,' she said, not turning, not looking at her mother, 'at least we've got his name still. At least we're all still Rossiters.' She gave a huge shuddering sigh. 'I'm going to play my flute.'

'Yes,' Chrissie said. 'Yes. You do that.'

Amy flicked a glance at her mother.

'Dad liked my flute,' she said.

Then she went slowly away down the landing, shuffling in her little slippers, and Chrissie heard her starting tiredly on the stairs that led to the second-floor conversion that she and Richie had decided on and designed so that Dilly and Amy could have bedrooms of their own.

She did sleep. She had thought she neither could nor should, but she fell into a heavy, brief slumber and woke two hours later in order to fall instead into a pit of grief so deep that there seemed neither point nor possibility of climbing out of it. She had no idea how long she wrestled down there, but at some moment she exchanged her embrace of the Dalmatian hot-water bottle for one of Richie's pillows, scented with the stuff he used on the grey streaks in his hair, and found herself crushing it, and groaning, and being suddenly and simultaneously aware that there were lines of incipient daylight above the curtain tracks, and that a bird or two was tuning up in the plane tree outside the window. She rolled over and turned on the light. It was six-thirteen. She was six hours and thirteen minutes, only, into the first day of this chapter of life which she had always dreaded and, consequently, had never permitted herself to picture.

'I'll be a hopeless widow,' she used to say to Richie, and, if he was paying attention, he'd say back, 'Well, I'm not giving you the chance to find out,' and then he'd sing her something, a line or two of some Tony Bennett or Jack Jones ballad, and deflect the moment. He'd always done that, defuse by singing. Once she thought it was wonderful. Recently, however, in the last year or two, she thought he found it easier to sing than to engage. Oh God, if only! If only he *had* engaged! If only he'd done even that!

She drew her left hand out from under the duvet, and looked at it. It was a well-kept, pretty hand, as befitted a well-kept, pretty woman. It bore a narrow white-gold plain band and a half-hoop of diamonds. The plain band was not new, in fact it was quite worn, having been on Chrissie's finger since shortly after Tamsin's birth. She remembered the occasion exactly, since she had bought it herself, in order to wear it in hospital, and put it on her own finger. The diamonds, however, were new. They were quite big, bigger than they possibly might have been had they been dug out of the faraway depths of South Africa. Instead, they had been made, ingeniously, in a small factory near Antwerp, by a process which simulated what nature might have managed over millennia, but in only three weeks. They were, Chrissie told Richie, known as industrial diamonds. He had looked at her hand, and then his attention went back to his piano and he played a few bars of Gershwin, and then he said, 'You wear them, sweetheart. If they make you happy.'

She said, 'You know what would make me happy.'

Richie went on playing.

She said, 'I have to be Mrs Rossiter, for the girls. I have to be Mrs Rossiter at school. I have to wear a wedding ring and be Mrs Rossiter.'

'OK,' Richie said softly. He began on some mounting chords. 'Course you do.'

'Richie—'

'Wear the diamonds,' Richie said. 'Wear them. Let me pay for them.'

But she hadn't. She told herself that it was principle, that a woman of independent mind could buy her own manifestations of the outward respectability required at the school gates, even in liberal-minded North London. For a week or two, she registered the glances cast at her sizeable diamonds – and the conclusions visibly drawn in consequence – with satisfaction and even tiny flashes of triumph. When Tamsin, who missed no detail of anyone's appearance, said, 'Oh my God, Mum, did Dad give you those?' she had managed a small, self-conscious smile that could easily have passed for coquettish self-satisfaction. But then heart quietly overcame head with its usual stealthy persistence, and the independence and the triumph faded before the miserable and energetic longing for her status as Mrs Rossiter to be a reality rather than a fantasy adorned with meaningless – and engineered – symbols.

It wasn't really just status either. She was Richie's manager, after all, the controller and keeper of his diary, his finances, his pragmatically necessary well-being. She had plenty of status, in the eyes of Richie's profession, as Christine Kelsey, the woman – girl, back then – who had persuaded Richie Rossiter that a bigger, younger audience awaited him outside the Northern circuit where he had thus far spent all his performing life. Richie only answered the telephone for pleasure and left all administration, and certainly anything technological, to her. No, it wasn't really status, it really wasn't.

It was instead that hoary old, urgent old, irreplaceable old need for commitment. In twenty-three years together, Chrissie could not shift Richie one millimetre towards divorcing his wife, and marrying her. He wasn't Catholic, he wasn't in touch with his wife, he wasn't even much in touch

with his son by that marriage. He was living in London, in apparent contentment, with a woman he had elected to leave his wife for, and the three daughters he had had by her and with whom he was plainly besotted, but he would make no move of any kind to transfer his legal position as head of his first family to head of his second.

For years, he said he would think about it, that he came from a place and a background where traditional codes of conduct were as fundamental to a person as their heartbeat, and therefore it would take him time. And Chrissie at first understood that and, a little later in this relationship, continued at least to try and understand it. But his efforts – such as they had ever really been – dwindled to invisibility over time, corresponding inevitably with a rise in Chrissie's anxiety and insistence. The more she asked – in a voice whose rigorously modulated control spoke volumes – the more he played his Gershwin. If she persisted, he switched to Rachmaninov, and played with his eyes closed. In the end – well, it now looked like the end – she had marched out and bought her industrial diamonds and, she now realized, surveying her left hand in the first dawn of her new widowhood, let him off the hook, by finding – as she so often did, good old Chrissie – a practical solution to living with his refusal.

She let her hand fall into the plumpness of the duvet. The girls were all Rossiter. Tamsin Rossiter, Delia Rossiter, Amy Rossiter. That was how they had all been registered at birth, with her agreement, encouragement even.

'It makes sense to have your name,' she'd said. 'After all, you're the well-known one. You're the one people will associate them with.'

She'd waited three times for him to say, 'Well, they're our children, pet, so I think you should join the Rossiter clan as well, don't you?' but he never did.

He accepted the girls as if it was entirely natural that they should be identified with him, and his pride and delight in them couldn't be faulted. Those friends from the North who had managed to accept Richie's transition to London and to Chrissie professed exaggerated amazement at his preparedness to share the chores of three babies in the space of five years: he was a traitor, they said loudly, glass in hand, jocular arm round Chrissie's shoulders, to the noble cause of unreconstructed Northern manhood. But none of them, however they might covertly stare at Chrissie's legs and breasts or overtly admire her cooking or her ability to get Richie gigs in legendarily impossible venues, ever urged him to marry her. Perhaps, Chrissie thought now, staring at the ceiling through which she hoped Dilly still slept, they thought he had.

After all, the girls did. Or, to put it another way, the girls had no reason to believe that he hadn't. They were all Rossiters, Chrissie signed herself Rossiter on all family-concerned occasions, and they knew her professional name was Kelsey just as they knew she was their father's manager. It wouldn't have occurred to them that their parents weren't married because the subject had simply never arisen. The disputes that arose between Richie and Chrissie were – it was the stuff of their family chronicle – because their father wanted to work less and play and sing more just for playing and singing's sake, and their mother, an acknowledged businesswoman, wanted to keep up the momentum. The girls, Chrissie knew, were inclined to side with their father. That was no surprise – he had traded, for decades, on getting women audiences to side with him. But – perhaps because of this, at least in part – the girls had found it hard to leave home. Tamsin had tried, and had come back again, and when she came home it was to her father that she had instinctively turned and it was her father who had made it plain that she was more than welcome.

Chrissie swallowed. She pictured Dilly through that ceiling, asleep in her severe cotton pyjamas in the resolute order of her bedroom. Thank heavens, today, that she was there. And thank heavens for Amy, in her equally determined chaos in the next room, and for Tamsin amid the ribbons and flowers and china-shoe collections down the landing. Thank heavens she hadn't prevailed, and achieved her aim of even attempted daughterly self-sufficiency before the girls reached the age of twenty. Richie had been right. He was wrong about a lot of things, but about his girls he had been right.

Chrissie began to cry again. She pulled her hand back in, under the duvet, and rolled on her side, where Richie's pillow awaited her in all its glorious, intimate, agonizing familiarity.

'Where's Mum?' Tamsin said.

She was standing in the kitchen doorway clutching a pink cotton kimono round her as if her stomach hurt. Dilly was sitting at the table, staring out of the window in front of her, and the tabletop was littered with screwed-up balls of tissue. Amy was down the far end of the kitchen by the sink, standing on one leg, her raised foot in her hand, apparently gazing out into the garden. Neither moved.

'Where's Mum?' Tamsin said again.

'Dunno,' Dilly said.

Amy said, without turning, 'Did you look in her room?'

'Door's shut.'

Amy let her foot go.

'Well then.'

Tamsin padded down the kitchen in her pink slippers.

'I couldn't sleep.'

'Nor me.'

She picked up the kettle and nudged Amy sideways so that she could fill it at the sink.

'I don't believe it's happened.'

'Nor me.'

'I can't—'

Cold water gushed into the kettle, bounced out and caught Amy's sleeve.

'Stupid cow!'

Tamsin took no notice. She carried the kettle back to its mooring.

'What are we gonna do?' Dilly said.

Tamsin switched the kettle on.

'Go back to the hospital. All the formalities—'

'How do you know?'

'It's what they said. Last night. They said it's too late now, but come back in the morning.'

'It's the morning now,' Amy said, still gazing into the garden.

Dilly half turned from the table.

'Will Mum know what to do?'

Tamsin took one mug out of a cupboard.

'Why should she?'

'Can I have some tea?' Amy said.

'What d'you mean, why should she?'

'Why should she,' Tamsin said, her voice breaking, 'know what you do when your husband dies?'

Amy cried out, 'Don't say that!'

Tamsin got out a second mug. Then, after a pause, a third.

She said, not looking at Amy, 'It's true, babe.'

'I don't want it to be!'

'None of us do,' Dilly said. She gathered all the tissue balls up in her hands and crushed them together. Then she stood up and crossed the kitchen and dumped them in the pedal bin. 'Is not being able to take it in worse than when you've taken it in?'

'It's all awful,' Amy said.

'Will Mum—' Dilly said, and stopped.

Tamsin was taking tea bags out of a caddy their father had brought down from Newcastle, a battered tin caddy with a crude portrait of Earl Grey stamped on all four sides. The caddy had always been an object of mild family derision, being so cosy, so evidently much used, so sturdily unsleek. Richie had loved it. He said it was like one he had grown up with, in the terraced house of his childhood in North Shields. He said it was honest, and he liked it filled with Yorkshire tea bags. Earl Grey tea – no disrespect to His Lordship – was for toffs and for women.

Tamsin's hand shook now, opening it.

'Will Mum what?'

'Well,' Dilly said. 'Well, *manage*.'

Tamsin closed the caddy and shut it quickly away in its cupboard.

'She's very practical. She'll manage.'

'But there's the other stuff—'

Amy turned from the sink.

'Dad won't be singing.'

'No.'

'If Dad isn't singing—'

Tamsin poured boiling water into the mugs in a wavering stream.

'Maybe she can manage other people—'

'Who can?' Chrissie asked from the doorway.

She was wearing Richie's navy-blue bathrobe and she had pulled her hair back into a tight ponytail. Dilly got up from the table to hug her and Amy came running down the kitchen to join in.

'We were just wondering,' Tamsin said unsteadily.

Chrissie said into Dilly's shoulder, 'Me too.' She looked at Amy. 'Did anyone sleep?'

'Not really.'

'She played her flute,' Dilly said between clenched teeth. 'She played and played her flute. I couldn't have slept even if I'd wanted to.'

'I didn't want to,' Tamsin said, 'because of having to wake up again.'

Chrissie said, 'Is that tea?'

'I'll make another one—'

Chrissie moved towards the table, still holding her daughters. They felt to her, at that moment, like her only support and sympathy yet at the same time like a burden of redoubled emotional intensity that she knew neither how to manage nor to put down. She subsided into a chair, and Tamsin put a mug of tea in front of her. She glanced up.

'Thank you. Toast?'

'Couldn't,' Dilly said.

'Could you try? Just a slice? It would help, it really would.'

Dilly shook her head. Amy opened the larder cupboard and rummaged about in it for a while. Then she took out a packet of chocolate digestive biscuits and put them on the table.

'I'm trying,' Dilly said tensely, 'not to eat chocolate.'

'You're a pain—'

'Shh,' Chrissie said. She took Dilly's nearest wrist. 'Shh. Shh.'

Dilly took her hand away and held it over her eyes.

'Dad ate those—'

'No, he didn't,' Amy said. 'No, he didn't. He ate those putrid ones with chocolate-cream stuff in, he—'

'Please,' Chrissie said. She picked up her mug. 'What were you saying when I came in?'

Tamsin put the remaining mugs on the table. She looked at her sisters. They were looking at the table.

She said, 'We were talking about you.'

Chrissie raised her head. 'And?' she said.

Tamsin sat down, pulling her kimono round her as if in the teeth of a gale.

Dilly took her hand away from her face. She said, 'It's just, well, will you – will we – be OK, will we manage, will we—'

There was a pause.

'I don't think,' Chrissie said, 'that we'll be OK for quite a long time. Do you? I don't think we can expect to be. There's so much to get used to that we don't really want – to get used to. Isn't there?' She stopped. She looked round the table. Amy had broken a biscuit into several pieces and was jigsawing them back together again. Chrissie said, 'But you know all that, don't you? You know all that as well as I do. You didn't mean that, did you, you didn't mean how are we going to manage emotionally, did you?'

'It seems,' Tamsin said, 'so rubbish to even think of anything else—'

'No,' Chrissie said, 'it's practical. We have to be practical. We have to live. We have to go on living. That's what Dad wanted. That's what Dad worked for.'

Amy began to cry quietly onto her broken biscuit.

Chrissie retrieved Dilly's hand and took Amy's nearest one. She said, looking at Tamsin, gripping the others, 'We'll be fine. Don't worry. We have the house. And there's more. And I'll go on working. You aren't to worry. Anyway, it isn't today's problem. Today just has to be got through, however we can manage it.'

Tamsin was moving her tea mug round in little circles with her right hand and pressing her left into her stomach. She said, 'We ought to tell people.'

'Yes,' Chrissie said, 'we should. We must make a list.'

Tamsin looked up.

'I might be moving in with Robbie.'

Dilly gave a small scream.

'Not now, darling,' Chrissie said tiredly.

'But I—'

'Shut it!' Amy said suddenly.

Tamsin shrugged.

'I just thought if we were making plans, making lists—'

Amy leaned across the table. She hissed, 'We were going to make a list of who to tell that Dad died last night. Not lists of who we were planning to shack up with.'

Chrissie got up from the table.

'And the registrar,' she said. She began to shuffle through the pile of papers by the telephone. 'And the undertaker. And I suppose the newspapers. Always better to tell them than have them guess.'

Tamsin sat up straighter. She said, 'What about Margaret?'

Chrissie stopped shuffling.

'Who?'

'Margaret,' Tamsin said.

Amy and Dilly looked at her.

'Tam—'

'Well,' Tamsin said, 'she ought to be told. She's got a right to know.'

Amy turned to look across the kitchen at Chrissie. Chrissie was holding a notebook and an absurd pen with a plume of shocking-pink marabou frothing out of the top.

'Mum?'

Chrissie nodded slowly.

'I know—'

'But Dad wouldn't want that!' Dilly said. 'Dad never spoke to her, right? She wasn't part of his life, was she, he wouldn't have wanted her to be part of – of—' She stopped. Then she said angrily, 'It's nothing to do with her.'

Amy stood up and drifted down the kitchen again. Chrissie

watched her, dark hair down her back, Richie's dark hair, Richie's dark Northern hair, only girl-version.

'Amy?'

Amy didn't turn.

'I shouldn't have mentioned her,' Tamsin said, 'I shouldn't. She's no part of this.'

'I hate her,' Dilly said.

Chrissie said, making an effort, 'You shouldn't. She couldn't help being part of his life before and she's never made any claim, any trouble.'

'But she's *there*,' Dilly said.

'And,' Amy said from the other end of the kitchen, 'she was his wife.'

'*Was*,' Tamsin said.

Chrissie held the notebook and the feathered pen hard against her. She said, 'I'm not sure I can quite ring her—'

'Nor me,' Dilly said.

Tamsin took a tiny mobile phone out of her kimono pocket and put it on the table.

'You can't really just *text* her—'

Chrissie made a sudden little fluttering gesture with the hand not holding the notebook. She said, 'I don't think I can quite do this, I can't manage—' She stopped, and put her hand over her mouth.

Tamsin jumped up.

'Mum—'

'I'm OK,' Chrissie said. 'Really I am. I'm fine. But I know you're right. I know we should tell Margaret—'

'And Scott,' Amy said.

Chrissie glanced at her.

'Of course. Scott. I forgot him, I forgot—'

Tamsin moved to put her arms round her mother.

'Damn,' Chrissie whispered against Tamsin. 'Damn. I don't—'

'You don't have to,' Tamsin said.

'I do. I do. I do have to tell Margaret and Scott that Dad has died.'

Nobody said anything. Dilly got up and collected the mugs on the table and put them in the dishwasher. Then she swept the biscuit crumbs and bits into her hand and put them in the bin, and the remaining packet in the cupboard. They watched her, all of them. They were used to watching Dilly, so orderly in her person and her habits, so chaotic in her reactions and responses. They waited while she found a cloth, wiped the table with it, rinsed it and hung it, neatly folded, over the mixer tap on the sink.

Chrissie said absently, approvingly, 'Thank you, darling.'

Dilly said furiously, 'It doesn't matter if bloody Margaret knows!'

Chrissie sighed. She withdrew a little from Tamsin.

'It does matter.'

'Dad wouldn't want it!'

'He would.'

'Well, do it then!' Dilly shouted.

Chrissie gave a little shiver.

'I'd give anything—'

'I'll stand beside you,' Tamsin said, 'while you ring.'

Chrissie gave her a small smile.

'Thank you—'

'Mum?'

Chrissie turned. Amy was leaning against the cupboard where the biscuits lived. She had her arms folded.

'Yes, darling.'

'I'll do it.'

'What—'

'I'll ring her,' Amy said. 'I'll ring Margaret.'

Chrissie put her arms out.

'You're lovely. You're a doll. But you don't have to, you don't know her—'

Amy shifted slightly.

'Makes it easier then, doesn't it?'

'But—'

'Look,' Amy said, 'I don't mind phones. I'm not scared of phones, me. I'll just dial her number and tell her who I am and what's happened and then I'll say goodbye.'

'What if she wants to come to the funeral?' Dilly said. 'What if she wants to come and make out he was—'

'Shut up,' Tamsin said.

She looked at her mother.

'Let her,' Tamsin said. 'Let her ring.'

'Really?'

'Yes,' Tamsin said. 'Let her do it like she said and then it'll be done. Two minutes and it'll be done.'

'And then?'

'There won't be an "and then".'

Amy peeled herself off the cupboard and stood up. She looked as she looked, Chrissie remembered, when she learned to dive, standing on the end of the springboard, full of excited, anxious tension. She winked at her mother, and she actually smiled.

'Watch me,' Amy said.