

'Finn? Come in. I'm awake.'

A dark, tousled head appears round the edge of her door. It was clear a long time ago that Findley Buchanan was going to have his mother's hair. By the end of his time at primary school, his mother had realised that what had always felt like a curse to the growing girl and the woman was going to be a gift for the boy and the man. It has taken her thirty years of trial and error to find that the only way to look half-way sensible is to ask her hairdresser to cut her hair shorter than she either of them likes. Her son never bothers about looking half-way sensible. He lets it grow wild, like a thorn bush and, on him, it is captivating. Give him ten years and they'll fall at his feet for his hair alone, whoever they may be.

The boy sidles sideways into the room clutching the larger of the two cats in the crook of his arm. He glances at her, appraising. His eyes are brown and they melt her soul. 'Weasel wants to say hello,' he said.

'Does he? Bring him in then.' Weasel is lithe and black with green eyes and muscles of spun steel and an extraordinary capacity for killing rabbits. Frances is constantly surprised at the patience with which he tolerates an eight year old's haphazard affections.

'He brought me a mouse,' says Finn and he shows Frances the fresh blood stain on his pyjama trousers as proof.

'Did he? That's nice. Was it dead?'

'The first one was.'

'Oh. Good.'

The cat reaches its threshold of tolerance and slides free of the grip on its neck. It flows out of her window like so much dark water and returns to the killing fields outside. The boy watches it go then turns and bounces onto the edge of Frances' bed. He grabs her arm and looks at her watch. The time is five o'clock or thereabouts. He shoves her hand back where it came from. 'It's too early,' he says, 'you should still be asleep.' He is grinning and it is difficult to know if he is giving her orders or simply reading her thoughts. Either way, she is too mellow to argue.

'Is it?' She curls into an arc and lifts the corner of the duvet. 'So then do you want to come and sleep with me until breakfast?' This is a special ritual, saved for those rare mornings when mother and son are awake and alone. The boy slides in beside her and curls in a foetal position, nesting in the curve of her abdomen. He lays his head on the her shoulder and drapes his forearm across hers. The pale boy-skin lay white against the relative dark of her tan.

'Why am I whiter than you?'

'Because I work outside all day and you have to sit in a class-room away from the sun.'

'Will I be able to work outside when I'm big?'

'If you want to.'

He thinks about that. 'What happens in the winter?'

'I get cold. And very wet.' Actually, this is not true. In winter, they set up the breeding tanks under cover of the barn and do their best to keep the fluctuations in ambient temperature to a minimum. She considers explaining and decides it is too complicated for the time of day.

Finn, too, has been thinking. 'Then I'll work inside,' he says, decisively. 'But only in the winter. In the summer, I'll come and work with you outside.' He rolls over to look up at

her. 'Would you like that?' His eyes are widely innocent and there are small crusts of sleep at the inner corners.

'I'd love it,' she says and this is true, if unlikely ever to be tested. She licks her thumb and wipes his eyes. He screws them up, frowning and then relaxes when it is clear she is not going to insist on cleaning him all. 'I want to go for a walk on the hill before school,' he says.

'Maybe. If there's time. But you have to sleep some more first.'

'I want a story.'

'I know. I'm going to give you a story.'

He turns his back to her and she runs her hands through the wild hedge of his hair, dragging her fingertips lightly across the skin of his scalp and then settles to telling him stories of magic cats and even more magic mice who fall to the cat at night and are reborn at dawn the next day to re-live their short lives under the sun. He sleeps before the end, his head growing heavier on her shoulder, his mouth slack. For nearly an hour beyond that, she lies awake and watches the sun move round and the clock hands with it and feels the small pool of her son's saliva collecting in the hollow beneath her clavicle. Her thoughts wander to the day ahead; to the work and the meetings and the timing of the complex jigsaw that is her life. 'I'll be late at work, she says, dreamily to the sleeping head on her shoulder, 'Jill will pick you up from school and you can play with Daniel. She has a friend coming for dinner so you can't stay late. I've promised I'll pick you up by six.'

The woman coming to collect the child is late, but this is not a surprise. When then six o'clock news comes and goes and she has not appeared, Jill Winter wrinkles her nose and says, 'Frances is never on time. We'll be lucky to see her before nine.'

Her guest is lying on the floor with her head cushioned on her arm and her legs crossed at the ankle. She has been lying like this for an hour and is remarkably comfortable. The night is warm and the company reminds her of her student youth, which is not so far away as to be nostalgic but just far enough that she can remember the good parts better than the bad. She remembers particularly Jill Winter when she was Jill Forsyth and unmarried. She was not so different to now. Jill Forsyth played hockey for Scotland's under twenty-ones but only because women's rugby wasn't considered suitable by a father who spent a great deal of his time intimidating everyone. She studied law, because her father had studied law and then married to escape it because that was the only acceptable route to freedom and then waited until the day after Forsyth senior died before she filed for divorce. In his absence, she has mellowed. It doesn't always show. Now, for instance, she is caught with a bottle of white Burgundy in one hand and a glass in the other and she is glaring at the clock as if it alone is responsible for the fact that her son still has his friend to play with.

Her guest pushes herself to sitting and says, 'I'll go then. The flat's a mess. I could do with an early night and then I can tidy up in the morning.'

Jill is not impressed. 'Really? I thought your body clock was set on California time, eight hours behind Glasgow, and you weren't going to get any sleep 'till the morning?'

'I can always try.'

'Give me a break. You're not fit to walk, never mind drive. Sit where you are and I'll make us a meal. Unless you object to sharing a dinner table with the boys?'

Jill Winter wouldn't ask a question like that if she believed there was more than one possible answer. Dinner comes and goes and the children with it; the big beefy red-head who inherited his mother's hair and his father's bulk and a double dose of bullish obduracy and is already shaping up to be a handful and the small, wiry, dark-haired one with the quiet, knowing smile and the disconcertingly watchful eyes. There is a battle underway and a meal with a stranger doesn't count as a suitable reason to call off hostilities and so the large red-haired Viking continues to wage war on the small, dark-headed Celt with every sign that rape and pillage are on the agenda for the final onslaught. The meal is messy on the grounds that everyone knows Viking warriors only eat with their knives, which is an interesting achievement with spaghetti bolognese. Fortunately the Celts have better table manners and are, as a result, spared washing up duties. On reflection, the Viking's duties are deferred to a later date with a view to protecting the crockery from the inevitable fallout of war.

The children retire to plan the new campaign. The adults wash and dry and catch up on the details of the ex-husband on the one hand and the ex-lover on the other; the small minutiae of relationship-endings that never made it into the letters and the phone calls, and then they sit at the table in the kitchen – which has been declared a neutral zone on pain of an early night – and drink wine on the one hand and water on the other and wait for the mother of the small, dark-haired Celt to come and rescue her son from certain death.

The doorbell rings shortly after the start of the nine o'clock news.
'And what kind of time do you call this?'

If you didn't know Jill well, you would run from that voice. The incomer does not run and so must know Jill almost as well as her dinner guest does. She says, 'I'm sorry Jill. You could just file for adoption papers now, it would be so much easier in the long run.' Her voice, heard from the kitchen, is dry and husked, as if she has spoken for too long without water; a west coast accent with a roughening overlay of Glasgow, the modulation of someone used to speaking and being heard, but it is the humour, the raw intelligence of it, that catches the ear.

Jill is on a roll and will not stop for someone else's humour. 'You think I want two of the little bastards? Permanently? Do I look completely insane?'

There is only one possible answer to that and it comes, dryly. 'You've been completely insane for the whole of your life, Jill Winter. It's genetic. There's no escaping it. You've only got to look at your son.'

That takes the wind from the matriarch's sails, which is all that the incomer needs. She slips up the steps into the light of the hall and it can be seen that she is slim and slight like her son and with the same dark hair but that the eyes, on an adult, have learned a guardedness that is lacking in the child. Then she steps forward, one hand out stretched, the other pushing the hank of hair from her eyes.

'Hello, I'm Frances Buchanan, Finn's mother. You must be—'

'Meet Grace,' Jill is never subtle with her introductions, 'Grace McLeod. Grace, this is Frances, who used to be a friend in the days before she forgot how to read the time. Her son is the body on the patio with the stake through its heart awaiting a Viking's funeral.'

Jill is grinning and Frances, who must be used to this, does not run to the rescue of her

child. Instead she stands very still, as if the world has become suddenly fragile. Jill Winter's grin fades and is replaced by something quite different. She says, 'I'll go and referee the funeral pyre. You two sit here and finish the wine, or drinks the taps dry of water – whichever you prefer. Let me finish the introductions first: Grace, this is Frances, she's technical director of a firm making genetically modified fish. Frankie, this is Grace, she's the international legal advisor for Green Peace. The combination of which should prove fairly incendiary should you choose to explore it. And, yes, I have slept with you both. But not in the last ten years. Have fun.'

The door closes softly behind her.

There is a certain quality of quiet in the kitchen that comes when a crossroads has been reached and not yet passed. Two women sit opposite each other and neither knows what to say. Beyond the door, a pair of child-warriors harangue an adult who takes pleasure in altering the lives of her friends, not always to their detriment. Presently, Grace says, 'Jill can always be relied on to cut through the small talk. We could have spent the next several hours working our way round to that last fact.'

'And still never got there.' Sarah is living in a dream. The ordered boundaries of her reality have folded and imploded and the world of fiction and fable is threatening to overwhelm her. She has found a chair by feel and her hand, with a will of its own, has poured her a glass of wine. 'Except that I think I've seen you once before. On Peppermints, on Great Western Road. I was a 4th year medical student, hiding in the shadows with the others of the infant underclass and you were with Sarah Crawford and we were all wildly jealous.'

'Ah.' There is a moment's thought and old memories rekindle. Grace moves to the floor. The tiles are hand-made Mexican terra cotta and there is a solidity and coolness to them that is stabilising. She is not sure, yet, if the instability is jet lag or something greater. It can't be alcohol, because she has had none, although she may need to change that, shortly. 'Why were you jealous?' she asks.

Frances says, 'Everyone was jealous of Sarah. She was every woman's dream; beauty and intelligence combined. And she'd just started as SHO at the Western. As I remember, we were all incredibly impressed that anyone could come through their houseman's year intact and have a life at the end of it.'

Frances is taking refuge in the past. The blurred patina of memory is safer than the rawness of the present. She watches Grace, who has pulled one knee to her chest and rested her chin on the looped hammock of her fingers and is blowing a sudden sigh through ballooned cheeks, saying, 'I'm not sure you could ever say Sarah Buchanan was intact. Just that the scars were well hidden.'

In the reflected light from the floor tiles, her eyes are oddly amber. Earlier, and in Frances' memory, they were grey, flecked with brown. Grace is tall and would be angular but for the unconscious grace with which she holds herself. Her hair has grey streaks in a sandy blond but is otherwise the same as it was fifteen years before. Were she an animal, Grace McLeod would be a lioness. They played that game once in Peppermints and Frances, who had been named variously as otter, seal and stoat, had not had the courage to say what she thought. She was much younger then. Now, she can ask the question that has been growing inside her from the moment she entered the kitchen. 'Are you and Sarah still together?'

'No.' The pain of that may be old, but Grace feels it and Frances sees it. Grace says,

'She left two years ago. She's a consultant paediatrician somewhere south of the border. We don't keep in touch.' And in that is a lifetime's hurt. Grace rises from the floor and pours herself a glass of wine. She sits on a chair, tipping it back against the wall. The silence has fallen again and must be broken. 'You're married?' she asks.

Grace knows this is the case because Jill has told her. Only now is it apparent why. Frances places the flat of her hand on the table, her fingers either side of the wine glass stem and swirls Jill Winters' best Burgundy dangerously close to the rim. 'After a fashion,' she says at length. 'Neil is a friend if nothing else. We share a home. We share the occasional dinner party. We share our work.'

'And a son.'

'And Finn. He is the reason we still share as much as we do.'

'All this after evenings spent in Peppermints.' That could have been said to hurt but is not. Grace can soften her lawyer's voice when she chooses. She leans her elbows on the table and draws looped infinities in a patch of dribbled wine. 'What happened?' she asks.

'I fell in love. And then fell out of it. Finn had happened in between. I couldn't undo the past without undoing him and I wouldn't do that.' In that, too, is a lifetime's hurt and the weight of isolation without the promise of respite.

They are hovering on the cusp of the crossroads. They could say everything, or nothing. There is no half-measure in between and either way, life will be different afterwards. With a courage she was not aware she possessed, Frances says, 'In Peppermints, everyone else was jealous of you because they wanted to be with Sarah. I was different; I wanted to be her, to be with you — except you were a year past your Finals and so you had passed into the world of the adult and were beyond reach of the pond life.' She lifts her eyes from the table and makes herself look into the waiting grey gaze opposite. 'I was very young. Three years seemed like an impossible gap.'

'And does it still?'

'No.'

Their hands are flat on the table, fingertips a hair's breadth apart. It takes the smallest of movements for Grace to bridge the gap, for skin to meet skin and a thousand nerve endings to touch and connect, for hand to slide over hand and grip and change the way of the world forever.

And then the door opens and Jill Winter enters, flanked on either side by a Viking and a Celt, and the world crashes back into place and all that has happened is a hand shake. Frances withdraws her hand first. 'Jill, I'm sorry. You've had the maniacs all evening. Let me take Finn home.'

'Oh, Mummy, no...'

'Frances, you can't, Mummy, tell her she can't...'

'You can't Frances. At least, not without an exceptionally good reason. I promised they could turn Daniel's bed into a long-boat and sleep at the oars.'

It is late and Frances is tired and her mind is too slow. 'What?'

Grace is smiling her long, slow lion's smile. She says, 'Finn has asked to stay the night and Jill has said yes. Am I right?'

'You are. Good woman, I'm glad one of you is still awake. Finn will stay here and I'll take him to school in the morning. Unless Frances has any serious objections, which would

be bloody silly, if you ask me.' Jill is smiling as only those closest to her have seen her smile. Both Grace and Frances have been that close, if only briefly. Their eyes meet across the table and the crossroads has been passed, effortlessly and there are only the minor practicalities to sort out.

Grace says, 'The flat's a mess, I haven't been home for 4 weeks and I left in a hurry and there's washing up in the sink and I have two suitcases full of clothes you really don't want to see. But it has no husband sleeping in the next room which may give it the edge. Will it do?'

Sarah smiles as she has not smiled in fifteen years. Finn is at her shoulder, not understanding but happy that she is happy. She kisses the top of his head and runs her fingers through the wild mess of his hair. 'I think it'll do fine,' she says.