

Hear Me

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PROLOGUE

My death comes as a surprise. Not because I find myself in the afterlife – I knew there would be one – but the problem is I’ve always expected my passing to be a kind of ‘*Aha*’ moment where everything finally makes sense ... Instead nothing does.

I don’t look any different, nor do I have any fear. I’m still Melissa Windsor, my twenty-eight-year-old self, even wearing my favourite white lace top and dark Levi jeans, yet I know with certainty that I’m dead. This is no vivid dream, no astral-travel experience; it’s too real for that.

I don’t know why, when or how I’ve died. There’s no spinning tunnel, no angel voices, no welcoming light like the near-death stories we hear about – nothing but a mountain of mist, ebbing and flowing all around.

The jigsaw of life, with its misty memories, does flash past. I suppose it has to because we live so fast, so superficially. ‘*It goes so fast we don’t have time to look at one another,*’ Thornton Wilder wrote, and he was right; most of us pass each other by while trapped in self-obsession, indifference and mediocrity. That is until Time snatches us away and throws us to the stars.

But where are these stars? I close my eyes and will the mist to give me the answers that I crave ...

CHAPTER 1

The oppressive heat fuels the growling storm. The sky is a curious mix of light and dark with tufts of low-lying cumulus reflecting the rays of the late afternoon sun, while a smudge of heavy cloud drowns out the blue above. Thunder rolls ominously overhead, followed by a sudden crack of earth-to-sky forked lightning. As a child I loved to listen to the undulating rumble of the thunder. I imagined it came from the giants who lived up there behind the black clouds, rolling out their barrels to have a party. It sounds like they have a pub full today as another crash of thunder, accompanied by a sharp vein of lightning, claps out across the sky. Large drops of warm rain break free and hammer against the lounge window. I get up and rest my face against the burglar guards to gulp down their earthy wetness and let it wash through my mind.

‘The rain’s coming in.’

I turn to Nat as she sits frowning at the open window. ‘I know. It’ll be over in a few minutes.’

Nat swallows. She tucks a strand of fly-away blonde hair behind her ears and fiddles with the end of it. ‘Liss, please think about ...’

‘Leave it.’

I turn back to the window and press my forehead against the iron bars. I should’ve known that’s all this visit was about.

‘You need it.’

I jolt around and slap the rain from my face. ‘No, I don’t.’ The air grows hot between us as we lock eyes. I blink away and click my tongue. ‘I’m going to make coffee. Want some?’

She nods and I lurch towards the kitchen. I switch on the kettle and snatch open the cupboard.

‘What’re you doing?’

I turn to see Nat standing behind me. 'Making coffee ... what the hell do you think I'm doing?' I jerk my hand forward and hook my fingers around the handles of two of the mugs.

Judgement clouds Nat's eyes. 'What kind?'

'For goodness' sake, Nat.' I slam the cupboard door shut and twist open the coffee jar.

'I just want to help ...' Nat's voice cracks and she places a hand on my shoulder. I shrug her off with one angry movement.

'I'm twenty-eight ... not fucking twelve.' The kettle whistles and I snatch it up and slosh the water into the mugs. 'Get the milk if you want,' I say as I pick up my mug and stomp back into the lounge. No wonder we've got this chasm between us. How can we be sisters if there's no trust?

I bury myself in the rising coffee steam and clutch my mug with white knuckles. Nat perches on the armrest of the chair opposite. She blows on her coffee and drinks it down in slurps which echo through the stiff silence. Her small, hunched frame and pained blue eyes just make me feel worse. Why does she even bother coming?

'The storm's over ... I guess I should go.' Nat waits for me to say something. 'Please, think about what I've said,' she implores as she gets up.

'I'm fine ... but thanks anyway.' I keep my head down as I utter the words, and lift it only when I hear my security gate clang closed. My whole body feels like a coiled spring. I wish she hadn't come. I love my sisters but I'm so sick of their never-ending judgement. They also drink. They're just deluding themselves like half the people out there. At least I'm honest, and anyway they're married; their lives are so different from mine. How can they understand, let alone judge?

My jaw clenches and I tramp back into the kitchen and throw some of the coffee into the sink before opening the cupboard and finding the Johnny Walker hidden behind the

muesli. I splash in a double helping and take a large swig. I breathe out a long, shaky sigh and lean back against the counter as it burns straight through me. I glance down. My hand's trembling, creating small ripples across the surface of the brown liquid. I frown. I can't deny that the comedowns are getting worse and I need a drink to ease them. I shake my head and gulp down some more. No, it's just Nat upsetting me that's made me tremble a little. I've been through a lot. Who wouldn't break under the kind of strain I've had? She's way off. I don't have a problem. I don't drink every day. In fact I can go days without drinking. No, actually I can go for weeks.

My back straightens. I go into the lounge and flick on the TV. The sportscaster is rattling on about the India versus South Africa cricket match. I click him off mid-speech with a scowl. Sure, it's great that we're no longer the sports pariah of the world, but we lost the series, and anyway there're far more important things going on than cricket. People in the townships are still burning each other like human torches, for fuck's sake. Maybe that's what they should be talking about and trying to stop. The image of the writhing, burning body jumps back into my mind. Water fills my mouth and my stomach jolts. I retch. The acrid stench of molten rubber is back in my nostrils. My throat tightens. I jerk my head from side to side and glug down the rest of my whiskey coffee. I push the memory back as the alcohol eases its way through my veins.

A slow smile slides across my face. Nat doesn't understand. She wasn't there. All I'm doing is blurring the edges. It's no bloody big deal, and anyway alcohol's much better than going on Prozac or Valium.

My armpits grow damp. The afternoon sun is still hot and streaming in through the window. Humidity smothers the room. Perhaps what I need is some sea air and crashing waves to drown out the fire-fuelled memories. I find my bag and

fumble around for my car keys. I've only had one. I'm still okay to drive.

I speed over the rushing Umgeni River, its brown waters swollen from the summer rains. I've got both front windows open so the sea breeze blows wildly through my hair. The sound of the whooshing water fills my ears. I turn and look down at the river as it roars under the viaduct to join forces with the crashing Indian Ocean. I jerk back as someone hoots behind me and give them the finger but swerve away from the fast-approaching concrete balustrade. I put my foot down as soon as I'm straight on the road again and smile to myself as the engine purrs out its power like a panther. Minutes later I reach the crowded beachfront. I slow to a crawl and scan the wide promenade of North Beach. My hands grow sweaty. It's five o'clock and it's still so busy? I don't want crowds of people around me. I just want a parking space and a little bit of beach to myself. Is that too much to ask?

At last I spy a gap, squeal towards it, and swing half-in, cutting off a Kombi coming from the opposite direction. The blonde surfer behind the wheel lifts his hands into the air and shakes his head. I grin at him and yank my steering wheel to the left. The arsehole Mercedes next to me is so badly parked I can't get in. I wrench my gear lever into reverse and grip the steering wheel as I squeal backwards, and then in again, missing it by inches. I climb over the seat and get out the passenger door. I'm at quite an angle, but who cares. I march onto the crowded boulevard and push past one fat lobster-tinged couple who're waddling, gawking at the waves with their puffy tongues glued to white mounds of a soft-serve ice-cream cone. What the hell's the matter with them; haven't they ever seen the sea before? Why don't they just go back to the Transvaal instead of taking over our beach?

My cheeks grow hot as the anger prickles through me. Deep inside I know I'm behaving badly, but I can't help it. I just want some peace and quiet. Don't they realise I need it? A beaming curio seller holds out strings of bright Zulu beads and calls, '*Sawubona*, nice necklace for you, Madam.' I ignore her, and her eyes harden. I rub my fingers across my forehead. Shit, why did I do that; now she probably thinks I'm just another white racist bitch and hates me, but she should realise I'm not a tourist.

I pace down the concrete steps towards the beach and rip off my sandals. I roll up my Levis. The swimming area is packed with people, but the far side away from the shark-net area has only a few stragglers lolling about. I run on tiptoes towards it, stopping only when I hit the cool wet band at the water's edge. I sink down onto the damp sand and draw in a long, slow breath of the sweet sea air. I stare out at the rhythmic coming and going of the swelling waves with their white sea-horses as they crash and recede onto the sand. Weird to think they've been coming and going like that forever, and will carry on long after I'm gone, never feeling the pain of what it means to be alive. I shake my head as the emptiness suddenly consumes me. My eyes blur. I just want to dive into their crashing power until they pummel me into nothingness. I don't want to live any more. I really don't.

Mike's face rears up like a rancid boil in my mind. You'd think by now I'd be mature and in control. All he did was use me. I remember his smug words of greeting when we first met. '*Welcome, Mike Mathews, senior microbiologist.*' He'd savoured the power behind each word while he watched me squirm blushing before him. Why was I so transparent, so weak, just because he was good-looking? The more I'd tried to wish my blush away, the hotter I'd become. I was like some silly little schoolgirl and he'd wallowed in my unease, using it no doubt to feed his ego and loving the power. He'd even given

a low victory laugh at my flinch when he touched my arm to guide me to the back of the lab.

'I'll introduce you to Mia,' he'd said, bending down towards me and squeezing my arm a little tighter. *'She's in charge of the poo bench which, I'm afraid to say, is going to be your first port of call.'*

I guess the shit bench should've been a warning of what was to come, but I was too blind to see it. I can't believe how gullible I was. I think I'd even felt grateful he wanted sex with me that first time because I thought it must mean he found me attractive. I let out a wry laugh. I also thought that for the first time I had one up on Nat and Els when he'd raved about my chestnut hair and said he hated blondes. I really thought he loved me. What an idiot I was. Bastard! This is all his fault. I hate him. My hands begin to shake and a hot panic smothers me. It's no good. I need a drink.

I push myself up and pace back across the soft sand to the promenade. I slap on my sandals and dust the wet grains of sand from my jeans. I shove past the strolling holidaymakers in the direction of the Maharani Hotel which stands tall and white, saluting the sky. I climb the tiled steps with jelly legs and stride through the revolving door into the white marble foyer with its smart reception area. My eyes dart around until they find a blue neon sign proclaiming *Ladies Bar*. 'Thank God,' I mutter as I head towards it with quick steps.

The interior is cool and darkened with a classy tourist feel. Good, this is just what I need. Semi-circular, plush velvet kiosks with low-slung blue glass shades are nestled up against the walls like cosy pods. My shoulders relax. Only a few are occupied. You never know if a bar will be crowded at this time of day.

I head towards the oak bar with its high silver stools. A few patrons are perched at the far end. Their heads turn as I approach but I keep my eyes fixed to the front and ease myself

onto the first stool. The bow-tied Indian barman gives me a wide, welcoming smile.

‘A red label Johnny Walker and coke, please,’ I murmur. ‘Make it a double.’

‘Yes, ma’am. Ice?’ he asks, before giving me another of his practised smiles.

I nod, fearing my voice will break and betray me. I clasp my hands in my lap to stop them trembling. The barman shows his professionalism by pretending not to notice, and in no time he’s placed a paper lace doily in front of me, followed by a crystal glass a third full of whiskey.

‘Say when.’ He clicks off the bottle cap and pours the coke in.

‘Okay,’ I say, as the darkness reaches the halfway mark. I hold my hand tense around the glass and take a big sip. The warmth of the whiskey sinks instantly to my legs and I let them dangle deliciously against the bar stool as I gulp down some more. I sigh deeply as it burns straight through me, melting away my anxiety. I’m sure the barman hears my sigh, but he keeps his eyes fixed forward and continues stacking the ice bucket. I guess he’s had enough experience of hearing the liquored relief, and the Johnny Walker wisdom. I wonder how many sob stories he’s heard from drunks once their numbness has blotted out their inhibitions and their pain comes tumbling out. There should be counselling awards for barman like him.

‘Hard day?’ asks a low, masculine voice behind me.

I jerk my head around to glare at a middle-aged asshole with a lustful sneer slashed across his face. His eyes are bulbous and he’s clearly drunk. I look him up and down. His tight chinos show an ugly bulge almost hidden by his beer paunch. The three open buttons of his black shirt expose a thick gold neck chain. My top lip moves instinctively upwards. What a prize prick. He even has that awful long strand of hair combed back across his bald head as if it’s fooling anyone. I

give him my best ‘Get lost!’ glare and turn back to the bar. Cold shoulder’s the best treatment for his type. I’ve no interest in being chatted up. I’m here for the drink and nothing else. I hear him huff behind me for a second and then mutter ‘Bitch’ under his breath. I suppress the urge to turn around and smack him one.

The barman moves over to me. ‘Let me know if anyone bothers you and I’ll deal with it,’ he whispers, motioning with his eyebrows at the asshole.

I nod and smile. ‘I’ll have the same again, please.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’ He rustles up another one and fills it up with the right amount of coke. He’s a nice guy and I have to bite back the temptation to start talking and let all my angst flow out. I must finish this one and go, otherwise I’ll end up staying here for hours and have to get a taxi home.

I down my second double and order a third. I smile broadly at my friendly barman. He really is a one of the best and has lovely, honey-coloured eyes. They’d go well with my green ones. We’d have beautiful children. My mind jumps to an image of the two of us lying, wrapped sweetly together under satin sheets. I bet he’d be a really attentive lover, a decent gentleman who’d care and not just use and abuse. I grimace. I guess one tiny slither of light in this dark, racial mess of a country is that we won’t be invaded by crashing doors and judgement police snatching our sheets for evidence under the Immorality Act. I lift my glass in a mock salute. Cheers to the new South Africa. Mandela is free and petty apartheid is dead. I won’t be arrested for sleeping with my barman any longer, that’s if he’ll even have me.

I wake with a pounding head and cotton wool tongue. I blink open blurry eyes. My mind’s a dark cave. I blink up at the ceiling while my breath lodges in my throat. Where the hell am I? A painting of a lion nestled in the long veld beneath a

crimson sunset adorns the wall opposite. To the side stands a mahogany counter with a large mirror and a stool in front. A tray with tea and coffee and cups and saucers sits on it. I push myself up onto shaky elbows with my heart thudding in my ears. I clutch the sheet against me. Why am I naked? An A4 leather-bound book sits next to bed. Maharani Hotel is etched in gold across the top. What the hell am I still doing in the Maharani?

Someone's in the shower. Is it the barman? Did my fantasy come true? I swallow back my shame and reach out quivering hands towards the pile of crumpled clothes lying strewn in the middle of the room. I must've been completely out of it to not even be able to remember. I pull on my knickers and yank on my jeans. They're stiff against my crotch. I collapse on the bed and bend my head towards my legs. I gag as the stink of urine assaults my nose. Did I wet myself? Was I really that drunk? Oh Lord – the barman must have known I wet myself, maybe even seen me do it? I retch and grab my bra and top as I hear the water stop. I put them on as fast as I can with shaking hands before grabbing my sandals and slapping them on. I don't want him seeing me like this. I push myself up and take a dizzy step forward to pick up my handbag from the floor. The bathroom door opens behind me. I turn. My eyes freeze on a pasty roll of white fat bulging over the top of a hotel towel. I move my eyes up and gag at the thick gold chain. Chino-man leers at me from the open doorway, his bald head shining and his long strand of hair stuck damply against the side of one fat cheek. He half-opens his mouth and shows me a bloated tongue.

'You were good,' he says, ripping away his towel. His flaccid trophy hardens as he grabs it. 'Fancy some more?'

Bile spews from my mouth as I rush to the door and stagger, crying, to the lift. 'Oh God! How could I? How could I?'

I stumble into the shower as soon as I reach home. I need to cleanse, wash away the indignity and the stink. Never again, I promise myself, but even as I scrub my skin raw the fear that there will be another time stands strong in my mind. I shudder. I still can't believe I actually slept with that repulsive man; how much lower can I go? The barman must think I'm a whore, and maybe he's right. It's not the first time I've woken in a strange bed and not known how I got there. I did it a few weeks ago with that bristly, moustached guy I met at the Keg and Thistle bar, whose name I don't even remember. What the hell's wrong with me? Dad would be so ashamed. God must hate me. Tears well in my eyes and I bend over and clutch myself as the truth of my disgrace sobs out. I can't even be proud of my job any more. I've made three mistakes with test results in as many weeks and that's three too many in the medical profession. Dr Pillay knows there's something wrong. I could kill someone next time. I'll probably get fired and be left with nothing but an STD. I'm nothing more than a drunken slut. I hate myself. I hate who I've become. I freeze. My thigh is mottled with ugly, purple bruising. When did I bump myself? I turn my hands over. My palms are also bruised. My heart jumps to my ears. Oh God. That's not a good sign. Maybe Nat and Elsa are right. Maybe I really do need help?

CHAPTER 2

My head's as light as air and my whole body feels numb, as if it belongs to someone else. I stare at the back of Elsa's head as the phrase 'I can't believe I've agreed to this' plays through my mind again and again like a stuck record. Elsa's knuckles are white around the steering wheel as she whizzes in and out between the rush of pulsating African taxis belting out their rap music. As she squeals through the amber traffic light up Goble Road and ignores the angry hooting and shouting of the taxis, she reminds me of that cartoon coyote with road rage I used to watch as a child.

We blur past the tall, white-walled mansions on Musgrove Road, all gated and electrified from the lurking black danger outside. I know this road so well and yet it feels so strangely unfamiliar. I shiver from the air-con inside the car. Why did I let them talk me into this? Why? My hand grips the door handle. Maybe I should just fling myself out, smear myself across the hot tarmac and end this farce called life?

Nat turns around and gives me a half-smile. She glances at my hand and reaches over to give it a squeeze. I shrug her away and seconds later we're winding our way up a long, leafy driveway with a large sign: *Welcome to Shaloma*. I'm surprised they don't have their slogan, '*Place of hope and new beginnings*' and their status as Durban's premier rehab printed below. I should've jumped while I had the chance.

'This looks nice, Liss,' says Nat as we pass under the dappled shade of tall wattles lining the driveway. I stare up at the thin, white-streaked trunks with their high clumps of rich green leaves. They look so serene, so strong and timeless. I wish I could just hide away in that greenness so that no-one could ever find me again.

Chino-man with his fat, naked body vomits back into my mind. I clench my jaw and give my head a shake in an effort to get rid of him, but it's no good; he remains squatting

centre stage like some perverted toad. I'll have to stick this out. I can't let something like that happen again. I've got to get myself out the gutter.

The long tarmac drive ends in front of a sprawling, whitewashed building. A wide wooden veranda draped with honeysuckle surrounds it, while a rolling lawn, dotted with clumps of purple hydrangea, stretches out in front. The green corrugated-iron roof gives it a farmhouse look and reminds me of those hazy childhood days on Aunty Yvonne's Karoo farm. A buxom, fifty-something woman with a bun of blonde hair and a nurse's uniform comes bustling down the wide front steps towards us. Her fat, round face and big blue eyes remind me of a cabbage-patch doll. She smiles broadly as she reaches the car.

'One of you must be Melissa. Welcome, I'm Helen.'

The air grows hot and I stifle the urge to run, screaming madly, back down the long driveway like some fleeing character in a horror film.

Elsa climbs out of the car. 'I'm Elsa, this is Natalie; we're Lissa's sisters.'

I clench my jaw as my cheeks grow hot. Fuck Elsa and her lawyer façade, always pretending to be in control. I glare at her and get out of the car to mumble, 'Hello.'

Helen shakes my hand and smiles before turning to Nat and Elsa. 'You two are welcome to come in and see Melissa into her room, but then I'm afraid you'll have to leave and only see her after the treatment is over.' She pauses and lowers her voice to a maternal tone. 'That might seem a bit harsh, but it's important for recovery.'

I yank my suitcase from the boot without looking at either of my sisters and follow Helen, stiff-backed, into the building. A bright, lime-green wall greets me as we enter the tiled foyer. My breath sticks in my throat as a childhood memory of sitting at the Aquarium Wimpy Bar happily

slurping up a lime milkshake with Dad comes flooding back. Lime was my favourite childhood colour.

‘Your room is down here in our female quarter.’ Helen’s voice breaks into my thoughts. I jerk my eyes away from the wall and follow as she pads down a long corridor. ‘The men’s bedrooms are on the other side of the building and the communal lounge and dining room are at the end of this corridor.’

Nat comes up at the side of me and squeezes my arm. Pressure constricts my chest. I increase my pace. Helen stops halfway down the corridor and opens a door to reveal a room swathed in pink with a candy pink duvet covering the bed like a giant marshmallow while rose-coloured curtains frame the large, paned window and its ingrained iron bars. A mottled, pink shaggy rug in the middle of the wooden floor completes the room’s rosy hue. I know pink is the stereotypical girlie colour, but it feels a bit over the top. I let out a wry laugh. I wonder if it’s blue for the boys in their segregated rooms. The childhood rhyme of ‘*Pink and blue will never do cause all the boys will wink at you*’ reverberates in my mind. This is ridiculous; it’s like being back at school.

‘There’s a wardrobe and dressing-table for your things and your en suite is through here.’ Helen pushes open a door to reveal a white tiled bathroom with bleached towels and a white bathmat. It’s bland and a bit clinical, but at least it’s a pink-free spot.

‘You’ve got your own tea and coffee facilities and we’ll bring fresh milk every day if you wish. I’ll leave you girls alone in a minute; the rules and regs are in that book on the dressing-table, but I’m afraid first I need to have a quick search.’

I step back and stare at her. ‘Pardon?’

‘I know it’s not nice, but it’s the rules, I’m afraid. You’ll be amazed at what some people try and smuggle in.’ She gives a maternal smile.

My mouth drops open and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.

‘It’s standard procedure, don’t worry,’ says Elsa. She picks up my suitcase and flings it open. The red lid clashes like a wound with the candy pink duvet. ‘Have a look through, Helen.’

A cocktail of disbelief and anger washes through me. Since when is she an authority on rehabs? She stands smug and blonde in her pinstriped power suit and heels, and purposefully avoids my burning eyes. Nat moves towards me and pulls her *you-know-what-Elsa’s-like* face as Helen has a quick fumble through my things.

‘That’s fine, Melissa. Now just a quick pat down, dear.’

I close my eyes as dark clouds of anger swirl and Helen’s hands pat up and down my body.

‘That seems fine,’ says Helen. ‘Right, I’ll leave you girls alone for a bit.’ She turns to me. ‘Don’t worry, the six weeks will fly by.’ She pads out and closes the door while an awkward hush consumes the room.

‘It’s certainly uber-pink,’ says Elsa. She stands tense, with her legs a little apart. Her face is set in a smile but a sad shadow flits across her eyes. I look away.

‘Can I help you unpack?’ Nat’s voice cracks and she hastily clears her throat and tries to look helpful by closing my case and smoothing the duvet around it.

‘It’s okay,’ I mumble.

Nat bites her lip. ‘Sorry, Liss. I know it’s hard ...’

‘You don’t know the half of it actually ...’

‘It’ll be a turning point.’ Elsa comes towards me and tries to take my hand. I jerk away.

‘Leave it ... I’m not a chronic alcoholic. I’m not.’

Nat and Elsa say nothing, but I can read the disbelief in their eyes. 'Oh, just go. Give my love to Mom and Yvonne. Have a fucking G & T together, why don't you.' But instead of leaving, my sisters remain staring at me with wide blue eyes like those girls in a Margaret Keane painting.

'There's a difference between having a drink and being dependant,' says Elsa in a measured tone.

'And how the hell do you know I'm dependant? Don't you think I'm the one who should make that decision?' My chest tightens as I spit out the words.

Elsa takes a step back. 'You agreed to come, Liss, and ultimately it's the right decis ...'

'Why don't you both go back to your cosy little lives with Dave and Greg? I've had enough. I just want to be alone.' I stomp over to the window and turn my back, waiting for the clip-clop of their heels. Instead a heavy silence shrouds the room.

'We'll be back to get you at the end of the treatment. We all just want you well again.' Nat comes over and puts her arm around my shoulder.

I drop my head down and hold it in my hands. The reality of being left here alone for the next six weeks hits me. Oh God, it's going to be so lonely. My heart pounds into my ears.

'Remember we love you,' whispers Elsa and uncharacteristically I hear her voice falter.

I turn towards my sisters and give them a small nod accompanied by a tight smile. They both give me an awkward wave and make for the door. It clicks closed. God, I wish I could have a drink. If I'm going to get through this I need to shut them and everything else out of my mind. This is going to be far worse than I thought. Heaviness creeps over me like a darkening sky. I'm going to crack. I shouldn't have come. I

collapse onto the edge of the bed and bury my head in my hands.

When I look up the sun has begun its downward journey across the sky. I go over to the dressing-table and page through the 'Rules and regs', as Helen called them. Bold letters along the top announce: *All programme activities are designed to introduce structure, self-discipline and other qualities essential to ongoing recovery.* What fun. Welcome to addict boot camp. This is going from bad to worse. *Wake-up is at six-thirty, a 'tidy room' at six-forty five, followed by an inspection and then breakfast at seven.* What the hell do I need a room inspection for? I'm not in boarding school, for shit's sake.

My shoulders hunch over as I skim-read the daily timetable. This isn't some spa break where I can relax and be pampered; it's an institution with therapies, doctor visits and medication. Four medication slots are listed. No way are they going to drug me with anti-depressant shit. I know what Valium can do.

I flinch at a soft knock at the door. It opens and Helen stands in the doorway, a black bag in her hand. 'Have you managed to unpack?'

'No.'

My chest tightens as she comes into the room and sets the bag down on the dressing-table. 'It's okay, my dear. The first day's always the worst.'

'What's this ...?'

'I have to check your vital signs.'

'What for?'

'Detoxing can be dangerous,' says Helen.

I roll my eyes at her patronising tone and feel like I've regressed twenty years.

Helen carries on as if she's oblivious to my resentment. She takes out a blood pressure monitor and stethoscope from

the bag before pulling forward the dressing-table stool. 'Please sit over here, Melissa,' she says. 'This won't take long.'

I remain on the bed for a few seconds before clicking my tongue and plonking myself on the stool. Helen tightens a pressure bandage around my bare arm and then records my blood pressure reading on a sheet. I sit tense and hunched as she takes out a stethoscope. 'If you'd like to just lift your shirt, I'll listen to your heartbeat. If needs be we'll do an ECG.'

I snatch up my satin shirt and flinch as the cold steel touches my chest. 'Is this really necessary ...?'

'We've quite a number of clients who need admission to hospital, I'm afraid,' interjects Helen sharply. 'I do need to do a basic check for you to stay.'

I pull down the sides of my mouth. A part of me hopes there will be something wrong just so I can get the hell out.

'Not too bad,' says Helen, filling in her sheet. 'I'll just take your pulse. When did you last have a drink?'

'The day before yesterday,' I mumble as my cheeks grow hot.

Helen places her fingers on my wrist and records my pulse.

'Please hold your arms out in front.'

I grimace and thrust out my arms. My hands tremble. I tense, trying to still them, but the quivering increases.

'The shaking will ease with time,' says Helen, scribbling more on my sheet. 'Any bruising?'

I keep my palms down and shake my head. Helen snaps the bag closed. 'You're one of the lucky ones. Some patients are in a very bad way when they arrive. Hopefully you've come in ...'

'I shouldn't be here.'

'Really?'

My head jerks back at her sarcastic tone.

‘Acceptance of your problem is the vital first step. You know that, and so do your sisters.’

‘What the hell have they got to do with anything?’

Helen studies me in silence for a few seconds. ‘You’re right. At the end of the day your recovery will be your decision and no-one else’s, but what you need to remember is that alcoholism is a fatal disease.’

‘Of course I know it’s a fatal disease,’ I snap, ‘but I’m not that type of drunk.’

Helen ignores my outburst and points to a red button on the wall near my bed. ‘That’s a *help* button. There’s someone at the desk 24/7 so please press it if you need anything. There’s another in your bathroom, and if you need a sick pan, it’s under the bed.’

I remain stony-faced while she pulls open the drawer of the bedside cabinet. ‘There’s a *Gideon’s Bible* in here with some highlighted passages that might help, and also some AA magazines to look through.’

I let out a wry laugh. ‘Wonderful.’

Helen moves to the door, then stops and turns. ‘It’ll get better. Remember we’re here to help.’ She gives me a smile. ‘Let me know if you need a sleeping pill later and try and drink as much water as possible.’

‘I’m not taking any medication.’

‘You don’t need to. You can have a chat to Dr Brink. Don’t worry, he’s lovely. We won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to, but my hope is that you’ll stick it out. This is rough, but it’s a turning point. You’re turning away from the nowhere road to one that will lead to victory. Keep that in your mind.’

For some ridiculous reason her words make me want to cry and I rapidly blink my eyes.

‘There’s a cream tea at four-thirty in the lounge.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘You do need to meet the others. We have three patients who have even chosen to stay for a further six weeks to really conquer their addiction, so I promise it won’t be as bad as you think. The lounge is straight down the end of the passage. You can’t miss it.’

My chest tightens. ‘I don’t want to.’

‘I’m sure you don’t, but it’ll be better if you do. Withdrawing from everything will make it worse.’ Helen’s tone is firm and measured.

‘So much for free choice,’ I snap.

‘I promise you’ll feel better tomorrow.’

‘What are you, a bloody psychic?’ I mutter.

‘Four-thirty in the lounge ... just down the corridor.’ Helen’s voice does not rise to meet my anger. ‘You do need to go.’

The door closes. I throw my clothes into a pile on the floor. Oh God, I hate this. I really do.

CHAPTER 3

I push open the door at the end of the corridor marked *The Lounge*. It's large and L-shaped, with magnolia walls and a bare pine floor. It smells strongly of polish and stale smoke. A woman stands with her back to me, gazing out of a floral-curtained bay window. She's small with an explosion of pink punk hair and a fluorescent pink tracksuit with Doc Marten boots. Perhaps this place and its rose-tinted perspective colours you pink after a while? She turns, and I see she's much older than I expect, probably late-thirties, with sunken cheeks and dark rings etched around her eyes. She gives me a smoke-filled smile, showing a row of small, bad teeth. I return a tight smile, but remain standing just inside the entrance.

'I'm Hattie ...' Her voice has an ugly, rasping tone.

'Melissa.' I dig my nails into my palms and flinch. The bruising's still surprisingly tender.

'Used to be called Heroin Hattie,' she speaks through another long exhalation of smoke. 'What you here for?'

I swallow. 'Uh ... not heroin.'

A scornful smile slides across her face. She raises her eyebrows. 'What then?'

'I just drink a bit, that's all.' I clench my jaw at the admission. Damn Nat and Elsa. I should never have listened to them.

'Sit,' says Hattie as she plonks herself in one of the armchairs and gestures to the one opposite.

I frown at her demanding tone but move towards the window and sit down. Hattie leans back and stretches out her legs. She takes a deep drag of her cigarette, leaving a fragile tower of ash tottering in its wake. She looks down her nose at it for a second and then flicks it expertly into a glass ashtray on the floor. It's overflowing with a mound of ugly, unfiltered stubs, most of them stained with fuchsia lipstick.

‘Don’t they mind smoking?’ I ask as the air grows thick between us.

Hattie sniffs. She bends forward to stomp her cigarette out. ‘No, it’s the one drug we’re allowed.’ She fishes in the pocket of her tracksuit pants and pulls out a crumpled packet of plain *Lucky Strikes* and holds it out towards me. ‘Want one?’

I twist a strand of hair between my fingers and shake my head. ‘I don’t smoke.’

She looks at me with weathered eyes and leans back in the chair. ‘So ... alcohol your only vice?’

My chest constricts at her derisive tone. I nod. ‘Only alcohol.’

Hattie sniffs again while I shift uncomfortably on the squeaking leather.

‘I’m doing a second round,’ she says, pulling out another cigarette and lighting up. ‘Karlos and Alison are doing the same.’ She utters the names and takes a deep drag, tilting her head against the back of her chair, waiting no doubt for me to ask about them. I give a small nod. She forms her mouth into a wide ‘O’ and puffs rings of smoke out towards the ceiling. ‘Neither of them is as fucked as me though. Had to go cold turkey in the first week. *Yslike*, it was hell.’ Her face distorts in a repulsive snarl.

I feel sorry for her, but it’s obvious she’s looking for sympathy. A cool ‘Shame’ is all I offer as I watch the rings drift up and dissolve one by one into the sullied ceiling.

‘Alcohol’s nothing compared to that fucker.’ Hattie pauses and leans forward. ‘You should’ve seen me – fuck, I was shaking, screaming, itching all over like a million red ants were eating me. It lasted three fucking days – I never want to go through that again – never.’ Her pink chest heaves up and down like a dying flamingo. ‘That’s why I’m still here. I’m going to defeat the fucker. I am.’ Seconds later her face contorts into an ugly cry and she lets out a loud wail.

I sink back into my armchair, wishing the soft leather would swallow me up. 'I'm sorry,' I murmur.

The wail transforms into crude laughter. Hattie takes one last drag from the burning cigarette before stubbing it out with a sharp jab of her hand. She sits back against the chair. 'There're three other okes who arrived on Friday night: Nic, Wolf and George – none of them done heroin.' Her eyes wash over me. 'How come you didn't come the same time as them?'

I shrug. 'I only made the arrangements yesterday.'

Hattie lets out an ugly laugh. 'You have a crisis?'

My chest tightens and my cheeks grow hot. 'Something like that.'

Hattie takes another drag and looks at me with narrow eyes. 'Agh, you can let it all out in the group meetings. We all have to wash our dirty panties for each other.' She gives a self-satisfied smirk. 'But no-one else's have been as dirty as mine.'

My head grows light and begins to spin. I grab the arms of the chair and move to get up just as the lounge door creaks open. I sink back down and turn. Two men enter. I draw in a sharp breath to try and chase the lightness from my head. The first guy looks like a male model with a touch of Michael Douglas about him. He's dressed well in Wrangler jeans and a crisp white shirt with the first two buttons undone; obviously one of Durban's surfer boys with that tan and sun-bleached hair just touching his collar. I was expecting ravaged addicts with dug-out crater cheeks and vacant eyes. What's he doing here? I swallow what spit I've got left in my mouth and try to ease the dryness which is constricting my throat. I don't want to let him know my dirty secrets. That's the last thing I want.

My cheeks warm as he watches me, watching him.

The other one is big and blonde with thick unbrushed hair. I feel a shiver of distaste as I take in the dull blue eyes, straight nose and square jaw. He's far too German looking for me and has those shapeless hippo legs I hate. I'm conscious

that Model-man is still watching me with the type of pose you put on when you want to look like you're in control. I turn unsmiling to the window to stare intently at the hydrangeas as his footsteps echo over the pine floor towards me. My chest mottles. Why do I have to suddenly feel so self-conscious just because a good-looking guy's come in?

'Howzit, Hattie.'

'Howzit, Nic. Meet Melissa, she's just arrived.'

I turn my head and give him a small nod of acknowledgement. He's got a faded bruise just below his hairline and a network of broken capillaries under the surface of his cheeks near his nose. Must be a drinker. Probably fell over?

A smile edges across his mouth. 'Good to have you here, Melissa. I'm also a newbie.' My name slips in syllables from his tongue. He offers me a smooth, tanned hand with no ring.

I push my body back into the chair and hold out my hand for a cursory shake. 'Thank you,' I mutter. Good, my voice sounded cool and confident. He's obviously a player; I'm not going to let him read into my soul like Mike.

'This is Wolf,' says Hattie, 'luckily he doesn't bite.'

I cringe as Wolf throws back his head in a fake howl, revealing teeth like blackened corn. He strides over on his hippo legs. He's even more repulsive close up with a bloated stomach and dry red patches under his eyes.

'Place is full of wackos, I'm afraid,' says Nic.

I ignore him and turn with a fixed expression to Wolf as he offers me his hand. My nose wrinkles. He stinks of sweat.

'Volfgang, but you can call me Volf.' He grins as if I should be grateful.

The accent is German. Damn, I'm good. I limply shake the offered paw and wipe my hand against my jeans as soon as he lets it go. Stereotypical Aryan. Hitler would have loved him.

I can just see him in an SS uniform. He moves to the side of Hattie's chair and scratches his forearm. Bile rises in my throat. He's got at least four open sores dotted across his arm. He really is vile.

'Wolf's from South West,' Hattie offers in a loud voice.

'It's Namibia now,' says Wolf, and his face contorts into a snarl.

Hattie snorts. 'Ja, sorry, I forgot. I suppose we'll be Azania soon, thanks to fucking De Klerk.' Her top lips curls. 'I don't trust that fucking Mandela.'

Wolf mirrors her sneer. 'Another fooking terrorist just like Njuoma. They'll fook zis place up just like South Vest.'

I turn on Wolf. 'Mandela's not a terrorist.'

'He let off bombs,' snaps Hattie, 'That makes him a terrorist.'

I lean towards her with my heart pounding in my ears. 'Only because our bastard racist government wasn't prepared to give an inch ...'

'She's right,' interjects Nic, 'Mandela's our only hope.'

'You're fooking *mal* if you think that,' says Wolf scornfully.

'Ja, hope for the kaffirs ...'

'Please don't use that word,' I snap at Hattie.

Hattie's head jerks back at my angry tone. 'I'll use ...'

'Leave it, Hattie.' Nic takes a step towards her. 'You know it's offensive ...'

'Ja, and I suppose they're going to throw us in jail now if we call them kaffirs?' She lets out an ugly laugh and leans back into her chair. 'I'm going to get the fuck out of this place ...'

'Who's for a drink?' says Nic. His tone is falsely jovial. 'Believe it or not, Melissa, I discovered we've got a bar here, except its stock is, wait for it: cream soda, ginger beer, Coca-Cola, lemonade and Fanta. What more could you ask for, hey?'

He pauses, waiting for a reaction from me. 'I'm having the green fizz. Can I get you one?'

He stands waiting.

'Ginger beer, please,' I mutter. My heart is still hammering in my ears and I turn to the window and stare at the hydrangeas until they merge into a purple haze. Tension like this is the last thing I need.

'Good choice.'

'I'll have a coke,' shouts Hattie as Nic makes his way to the far end of the room. She pulls out the packet of *Lucky Strikes* and offers it to Wolf. He takes the squashed pack and helps himself. He places the cigarette between his ugly teeth and bends down with his jeans halfway down his arse as Hattie flicks a cheap pink Bic lighter over the dangling end. Wolf inhales with a grunt. The cigarette trembles in his fingers. He blows out a long line of grey smoke and makes his way over to the bar. He examines a large poster plastered on the wall behind the bar and turns back to Hattie. 'Hey, this is a take-off of the *Mainstay* advert. You seen it?'

Hattie leans over the side of her chair to look in the direction of the bar. 'Ja,' she says and laughs. 'They put it up this morning; it's good, hey? Karlos says that's what happened to him except it was brandy, not *Mainstay*.'

Wolf laughs. 'Ja, Afrikaners like their brandy, was probably the Klippies brand. I've had a few Klippies and coke in my time.' He takes another long, shaky drag of his cigarette.

The poster shows a down-and-out drunk, holding a bottle of *Mainstay* cane spirit. Under him is written the usual slogan: *You can stay as you are for the rest of your life, or you can change.* I can hear the tune as I read it. It brings back memories of the beautiful people on their luxury yachts, sipping their *Mainstay* and sailing away to freedom in exotic places. A memory of me stumbling down a hotel corridor to bed and hardly being able to open my hotel door during a

holiday in Mauritius creeps into my mind, igniting the shame deep inside. There's nothing glamorous about being drunk and don't I know it.

Nic comes back with my ginger beer. 'No *Mainstay* in it, I promise.'

'Thanks,' I mumble as I take the glass with my thumb and forefinger poised, making sure I avoid touching his hand. He lingers next to me and takes a loud slurp of his cream soda before saluting me.

'I'm going to sit in the "business class" area. Why don't you guys come over there?'

Hattie stubs out her cigarette in the overflowing ashtray. She looks up at Nic and nods. 'Ja, okay. We can put on some sounds.'

I stay seated.

'It's over this side,' says Nic, waiting for me to follow. I suppress a sigh of irritation and follow him around the corner of the room. A thin girl, who looks about nineteen, is slouched at the end of one of the couches. She's immersed in reading a *Cosmo* magazine and keeps her eyes firmly fixed to the glossy pages as we come near.

'Alison, this is Melissa.' Hattie flops down on the couch next to her. The leather squeaks. Alison's jaw jerks, but she says nothing.

'Hello,' I murmur as I settle on the couch opposite.

She glances up with hooded eyes. Her face is pale with a long, thin nose. She reminds me of an Indian mynah bird. She flicks a strand of straggly black hair away from her face and mumbles an almost inaudible, 'Hi.'

'Alison likes to keep to herself,' says Hattie. 'She's on her second round, but still not better.'

'I'm sure Alison can speak for herself,' I say, shaking my head at her lack of tact.

'She doesn't like talking,' snaps Hattie.

‘Scones,’ says Wolf, snatching up one from the piled plate. He ladles large dollops of cream and strawberry jam onto it and, as he stuffs it in his mouth, jam runs down the side of his chin. I turn away as he chews loudly with the masticated mess clearly evident.

‘Let them eat cake,’ says Nic, helping himself to a scone. His hand shakes as he picks it up. ‘The more we stuff our faces with the sweet stuff, the less we’ll cry for booze.’

‘Or heroin,’ puts in Hattie.

‘Yes, or heroin,’ says Nic in a patronising tone.

Hattie’s eyes harden. She takes another drag of her cigarette before picking up a saucer from under one of the teacups and stubbing it viciously onto it.

‘Scone?’ Nic places his on a side plate and picks up another one. He holds it out to me.

I shake my head. ‘No thanks.’

‘*Agh*, such a charmer,’ says Hattie with a sneer. ‘You better take what he says with a pinch of salt.’

‘A dose of salts maybe,’ says Wolf. He throws his head back in an ugly laugh.

‘What’s this, pull Nic apart day?’ Nic’s jaw tightens.

No-one speaks. Hattie smirks. She lights up another cigarette and sucks deeply on it with twitching fingers. She crosses her legs and jerks her dangling boot up and down. A slow smile slides across my face. She might appear strong, but the constant chain smoking and this jerking speak volumes.

‘So, Melissa, tell for us your story,’ says Wolf, licking his lips but leaving smudges of jam down the side of his chin.

‘Don’t answer,’ says Nic, picking up a cup and sloshing in some tea. ‘Leave the shit for group therapy tomorrow.’ He gives me a sideways smile. ‘So much to look forward to, hey?’

I shake my head as Hattie’s dirty linen comment slinks back into my mind. I’m not saying anything about Chino-man

or anything else for that matter. Fuck the group therapy. They can't force me to talk.

Hattie laughs. 'Ja, you need to talk if the H-man's ...'

'We've all got the T-shirts,' says Nic. His shoulders stiffen.

Hattie sniffs and gets up. 'I'll play some Crash Test Dummies, that should suit us, hey?'

'Ja, make it *Afternoons and Coffee spoons* ...'

'Ah, just the thing for a car crash afternoon,' says Nic sardonically. He wipes a shaky hand across his forehead, his fingers lingering on the bruise.

Dark laughter rumbles across my mind as I can't help but agree.