Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Weird Sisters

Written by Eleanor Brown

Published by HarperCollins

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

the weird sisters

ELEANOR BROWN



HarperCollins*Publishers*

HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollins*Publishers* 2011
1

Copyright © Eleanor Brown 2011

Eleanor Brown asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 00 739372 5

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.



FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

TO CHRIS

For springtime, for a rock-and-roll show, forever

But we only called the fire brigade, and soon the fire engine came and three tall men in helmets brought a hose into the house and Mr Prothero got out just in time before they turned it on. Nobody could have had a noisier Christmas Eve. And when the firemen turned off the hose and were standing in the wet, smoky room, Jim's Aunt, Miss Prothero, came downstairs and peered in at them. Jim and I waited, very quietly, to hear what she would say to them. She said the right thing, always. She looked at the three tall firemen in their shining helmets, standing among the smoke and cinders and dissolving snowballs, and she said, 'Would you like anything to read?'

– DYLAN THOMAS,
A Child's Christmas in Wales

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, *Macbeth*

PROLOGUE

We came home because we were failures. We wouldn't admit that, of course, not at first, not to ourselves, and certainly not to anyone else. We said we came home because our mother was ill, because we needed a break, a momentary pause before setting off for the Next Big Thing. But the truth was, we had failed, and rather than let anyone else know, we crafted careful excuses and alibis, and wrapped them around ourselves like a cloak to keep out the cold truth. The first stage: denial.

For Cordelia, the youngest, it began with the letters. They arrived the same day, though their contents were so different that she had to look back at the postmarks to see which one had been sent first. They seemed so simple, paper in her hands, vulnerable to rain, or fire, or incautious care, but she would not destroy them. These were the kind you save, folded into a memory box, to be opened years later with fingers against crackling age, heart pounding with the sick desire to be possessed by memory.

We should tell you what they said, and we will, because their contents affect everything that happened afterward, but we first have to explain how our family communicates, and to do that, we have to explain our family.

Oh, man.

Perhaps we had just better explain our father.

If you took a college course on Shakespeare, our father's name might be resident in some dim corner of your mind, under layers of unused telephone numbers, forgotten dreams, and the words that never seem to make it to the tip of your tongue when you need them. Our father is Dr James Andreas, professor of English literature at Barnwell College, singular focus: The Immortal Bard.

The words that might come to mind to describe our father's work are insufficient to convey to you what it is like to live with someone with such a singular preoccupation. Enthusiast, expert, obsessed – these words all thud hollow when faced with the sandstorm of Shakespeare in which we were raised. Sonnets were our nursery rhymes. The three of us were given advice and instruction in couplets; we were more likely to refer to a hated playmate as a 'fat-kidneyed rascal' than a jerk; we played under the tables at Christmas parties where phrases like 'deconstructionist philosophy' and 'patriarchal malfeasance' drifted down through the heavy tablecloths with the carols.

And this only begins to describe it.

But it is enough for our purposes.

The first letter was from Rose: precise pen on thick vellum. From *Romeo and Juliet*; Cordy knew it at once. *We met, we woo'd and made exchange of vow, I'll tell thee as we pass; but this I pray, That thou consent to marry us to-day.*

And now you will understand this was our oldest sister's way of telling us that she was getting married.

The second was from our father. He communicates almost exclusively through pages copied from *The Riverside Shakespeare*. The pages are so heavily annotated with decades of thoughts, of interpretations, that we can barely make out the lines of text he highlights. But it matters

not; we have been nursed and nurtured on the plays, and the slightest reminder brings the language back.

Come, let us go; and pray to all the gods/For our beloved mother in her pains. And this is how Cordy knew our mother had cancer. This is how she knew we had to come home.

ONE

Cordy had never stolen anything before. As a matter of pride, when our friends were practising their light-fingered shuffles across the shelves of Barnwell's stores in our teens, she had refused to participate, refused even to wear the cheap earrings and clumpy lipstick or listen to the shoplifted music. But here she was in this no-name desert town, facing off against the wall of pregnancy tests, knowing full well she didn't have the money to pay for one. A Wild West shootout: Cordy versus the little pink sticks at high noon.

She'd wanted to do this somewhere anonymous, in a wide-aisled store that hummed with soft, inoffensive music and belonged to a company, not a person, but those stores had long ago gotten smart, put anti-theft devices like hunch-shouldered guardians at the doors. So she was in this dusty little mom and pop drugstore, her stomach churning, cheeks bright with fire.

'Strike up the drum; cry "Courage!" and away,' she whispered to herself, and then giggled, one thin hand sneaking out to grab one of the boxes – any one, it didn't matter. They'd all tell her the thing she already knew but refused to admit.

She slipped the box into her gaping shoulder bag with

one hand, the other rooting around at the bottom for the remnants of her last, months-ago paycheck, the few loose coins buried in a grave of stale breath mints, lint, and broken pens. Along the way, she grabbed a toffee bar off the shelf and presented it to the cashier, digging for a few more pennies, her hand burning when she brushed against the box hidden in the loose depths.

Outside the store, a rush of elation. 'Too easy,' she said aloud to the empty street, her skirt whispering against the sidewalk, already gone hot and sullen in the rise of spring, her sandals so worn that she could feel the insistent warmth against her heels. The pleasure of the forbidden lasted until she had made it back to the house, ramshackle and dark, where she was staying, a few people crashed on the broken furniture in the living room, sleeping off last night's excess. She yanked open the box, tossing the instructions in the direction of the trash can, and did the deed. Huddled on the toilet in the bathroom, tile cracked and shredding beneath her feet, staring at the pink line, pale as fading newsprint, her conscience caught up with her.

'It doesn't get much lower than this, old Cordy, old sock,' she could hear Bean telling her cheerfully.

'How are you going to take care of a baby if you can't even afford a pregnancy test?' Rose harped.

Cordy brushed our imaginary voices aside and buried the evidence in the trash can. It didn't make a difference, really, she told herself. She'd been headed home anyway, wandering a circuitous loop, going where the wind or the next ride took her. This just confirmed what she'd already known – that after seven years of floating like a dandelion seed, it was time to settle down.

Settle down. She shuddered.

Those words were a bell ringing inside her. That was, after all, why she'd left. Just before exams in the spring

of her junior year at Barnwell College, she'd been in the study lounge in the psychology department, lying on the industrial carpet, her arms locked as she held a textbook above her face. Two women, seniors, were talking nearby – one of them was getting married, the other going to graduate school. Cordy lowered the book to her chest, its weight pressing harder and harder against her heart as she listened to the litany of What Was to Come. Wedding favours and student loans. Mortgages and health insurance. Careers and taxes. Unable to breathe, she shoved the book onto the floor and walked out of the lounge. If that was the future, she wanted no part of it.

It was our fault, probably, the way we'd always babied her. Or maybe it was our father's fault – Cordelia had always been his favourite. He'd never said no to her, not to her breathless baby cries, not to her childhood entreaties for ballet lessons (dropped before they got to fourth position, though she did wear the tutu for an awful long time after that, so it wasn't a total waste), and not to the desperate late-night calls for cash infusions in the years she'd spent drifting around the country, accomplishing nothing in particular. She was the Cordelia to his Lear, legendary in her devotion. *He always lov'd our sister most*. But whoever's fault it was, Cordy had thus far refused to grow up, and we'd indulged that in the same way we'd indulged every other whim she'd had for nearly her entire life. After all, we could hardly blame her. We were fairly certain that if anyone made public the various and variegated ways in which being an adult sucked eggs, more people might opt out entirely.

But now? Growing up didn't seem so much like a choice any more. Cordy fumbled around through one of the bedrooms until she found a calendar, counting backwards. It was almost June now, she was fairly certain. And she'd left Oregon, the last stop on that long, strange trip,

in, what, February? She rubbed her knuckles on her forehead, thinking. It had been so long since things like dates mattered.

But she could trace the journey back, before she'd started feeling so empty and nauseated in the mornings, before her breasts had grown tender enough that even the material of a T-shirt seemed like it was scraping against her skin, before the endless fatigue that swept over her at the strangest times, before she'd known. Washington, California, Arizona. Her period had come in Arizona; she dimly remembered a tussle with a recalcitrant tampon dispenser in a rest stop bathroom. And then she'd gone to New Mexico, where there'd been a painter, much older, his hair painted with shocking strands of white, his skin wrinkled from the sun, his hands broad and callused. She'd paused there for a few weeks, waitressing a handful of shifts to make money for the rest of the trip home, not that it had lasted. He'd come into the restaurant to eat, all by himself, and it had been so late, and his eyes were so lonely. For a week she'd stayed with him, spending the days curled on a couch in his studio, reading and staring out over the arroyos while he painted in silence: strange, contorted swirls of colour that dripped off the canvases onto the floor. But he'd been gentle, and blessedly quiet, and after so much Sturm und Drang, she'd nearly been sad to leave. The last night, there'd been a broken condom, a hushed argument, dark dreams, and the next morning she had been gone.

Slumping on the bed, Cordy let the calendar fall from her hands. What was she supposed to do now? Go back to New Mexico and tell the painter? She doubted he'd be excited to hear the news. She wasn't exactly thrilled herself. Maybe she'd have a miscarriage. Heroines in novels were always having serendipitously timed miscarriages

that saved them from having to make sticky decisions. And Cordy had always been awfully lucky.

Until now.

Cordy stepped over the piles of dirty clothes on the floor and back into the hallway. The crashers in the living room were still snoring as she tiptoed through to the kitchen, where she'd left her backpack. She'd lived here one winter – it seemed like years ago, but it couldn't have been that long, since this was the address the letters had come to. Had it been years ago? Had it really been years since she had been in one place long enough to have an address?

Gritting her teeth, Cordy began shoving things into the bag. She didn't know what to do. But that was okay. Someone would figure this out for her. Someone would take care of her. Someone always took care of her.

No problem.

Bean absolutely and positively did not believe in anything even vaguely paranormal. But for the past week or so, she'd had the strangest feeling that something bad was coming. She woke up in the morning with a hard pit in her stomach, as though she'd swallowed something malignant, growing, and the weight stayed with her all day, making her heels clack more sharply on the subway steps, her body ache after only a few minutes of running on the treadmill, jewel-toned cocktails simmer in her stomach until she left them in their glasses to sweat into water on the mahogany bars of the city's trendiest watering holes.

Nothing in her bag of tricks made the feeling go away – not seducing a hapless investment banker over the din of a club, not a punishing spin class that left her so rubbery and tired that she vomited into the toilet at the gym, not a new pair of shoes that cost as much as the rent she paid for her tiny closet of a bedroom in a shared apartment

in Manhattan. As a matter of fact, that last one made the rock inside her turn into steel.

When the moment she had been dreading finally came, the managing partner of the law firm she worked at arriving at her desk and asking to see her in his office, it was almost a relief. *'If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly,'* she quoted to herself, following his wizened steps into his office.

'Have a seat, Bianca,' he said.

In New York, everyone called her Bianca. Men, upon asking for her number in a terminally hip watering hole, would have to ask her to repeat it, and then, upon comprehension, would smile. Something about the name – and, honestly, few of them had the synapses to rub together at that point in the evening to make any sort of literary connections, so it must have been something else – made her even more attractive to them.

To us, however, she would always be Bean. And it was still the way she spoke to herself. 'Nice going, Bean,' she would say when she dropped something, and her roommates in the city would look at her curiously. But being Bianca was a part she played well, and she wondered if part of the sickness she felt inside was knowing that performance was coming to an end. Forever.

She perched on the edge of one of the leather wing chairs in his sitting area. He sat in the other. 'We've been doing a bit of an accounting audit, you see,' he said without preamble.

Bean stared at him. The pit inside her stomach was turning into fire. She stared at him, his beetled, bushy eyebrows, his soft, wrinkled hands, and wanted to cry.

'We've found a number of . . . shall we say, anomalies in the payroll records. In your favour. I'd like to think they're errors.' He looked almost hopeful.

She said nothing.

'Can you tell me what's been happening, Bianca?'

Bean looked down at the bracelet on her wrist. She'd bought it at Tiffany months ago, and she remembered the strange seizing in her stomach as she'd handed over her credit card, the same feeling she'd gotten lately when she bought anything, from groceries to a handbag. The feeling that her luck was running out, that she couldn't go on, and maybe (most terrifying of all), maybe she didn't want to.

'They aren't errors,' Bean said, but her voice caught on the last word, so she cleared her throat and tried again, louder. 'They aren't errors.' She folded her hands in her lap.

The managing partner looked unsurprised, but disappointed. Bean wondered why they'd chosen him for this particular dirty work – he was practically emeritus, holding on to this corner office for no good reason other than to have a place to escape from his wife and while away the hours until he died. She considered trying to sleep with him, but he was looking at her with such grandfatherly concern the idea withered on the vine before she could even fully imagine it. Truthfully, she felt something that could only be described as gratitude that it was him, not one of the other partners whose desperation to push themselves to the top had made their tongues sharp as teeth, whose bellows of frustration came coursing down the hallways like a swelling tide when things dared not go their way.

'Are you well?' he asked, and the kindness in his voice made her heart twist. She bit her tongue hard, blinked back tears. She would not cry. Not in front of him, anyway. Not here. 'It's a great deal of money, Bianca. Was there some reason . . . ?' His question trailed off hopefully.

She could have lied. Maybe she should have been picturing this scene all along, planning for it. She was good

at the theatre of life, our Bean, she could have played any part she wanted. But lying seemed desperate and weak, and she was suddenly exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep for days.

'No,' she said. She couldn't meet his eyes. 'No good reason.'

He sighed at that, a long, slow exhale that seemed to make the air move differently in the room. 'We could call the police, you know.'

Bean's eyes widened. She'd never thought about that. Why had she never thought about that? She'd known stealing from her employers was wrong, but somehow she'd never let herself think that it was actually criminal (criminal! How had it come to that?). God, she could go to jail. She saw herself in a cell, in an orange jumpsuit, stripped of her bracelet and her makeup and all the armour that living in the city required of her. She was speechless.

'But I don't think that's entirely necessary. You've done good work for us. And I know what it's like to be young in this city. And it's so unpleasant, involving the police. I'd imagine that your resignation will be enough. And, of course, you'll repay your debt.'

'Of course,' Bean said. She was still frozen, wondering how she'd managed to miscalculate so badly, wondering if she really was going to squeak out of here with nothing but a slap on the wrist, or if she'd be nabbed halfway out of the lobby, handcuffs on her wrists, her box of personal effects scattering on the marble floor while everyone looked on at the spectacle.

'It might be worthwhile for you to take a little time. Go home for a bit. You're from Kentucky, aren't you?'

'Ohio,' Bean said, and it was only a whisper.

'Right. Go back to the Buckeye State. Spend a little time. Re-evaluate your priorities.'

Bean forced back the tears that were, again, welling out of control. 'Thank you,' she said, looking up at him. He was, miraculously, smiling.

'We've all done foolish, foolish things, dear. In my experience, good people punish themselves far more than any external body can manage. And I believe you are a good person. You may have lost your way more than a little bit, but I believe you can find your way back. That's the trick. Finding your way back.'

'Sure,' Bean said, and her tongue was thick with shame. It might have been easier if he had been angry, if he'd taken her to task the way he really should have, called the police, started legal proceedings, done something that equalled the horrible way she'd betrayed their trust and pissed on everything she knew to be good and right in the service of nothing more than a lot of expensive clothes and late-night cab rides. She wanted him to yell, but his voice remained steady and quiet.

'I don't recommend you mention your employment here when you do seek another job.'

'Of course not,' Bean said. He was about to continue, but she pushed her hair back and interrupted him. 'I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry.'

His hands were steepled in front of him. He looked at her, the way her makeup was smudging around her eyes, despite her impressive ability to hold back the tears. 'I know,' he said. 'You have fifteen minutes to get out of the building.'

Bean fled.

She took nothing from work. She cared about nothing there anyway, had never bothered to make the place her own. She went home and called a friend with a car he'd been trying to sell for junk, though even that would take nearly the last of her ill-gotten gains, and while he drove over, she packed up her clothes, and she wondered how

she could have spent all that money and have nothing but clothes and accessories and a long list of men she never wanted to see again to show for it, and the thought made her so ill she had to go into the bathroom and vomit until she could bring up nothing but blood and yellow bile, and she took as much money as she could from the ATM and threw everything she owned into that beater of a car and she left right then, without even so much as a fare-thee-well to the city that had given her . . . well, nothing.

Because Cordelia was the last to find out, she was the last to arrive, though we understand this was neither her intention nor her fault. It was simply her habit. Cordy, last born, came a month later than expected, lazily sweeping her way out of our mother's womb, putting a lie to the idea that labour gets shorter every time. She has been late to everything since then, and is fond of saying she will be late to her own funeral, haw haw haw.

We forgive her for her tardiness, but not for the joke.

Would we all have chosen to come back, knowing that it would be the three of us again, that all those secrets squeezed into one house would be impossible to keep? The answer is irrelevant – it was some kind of sick fate. We were destined to be sisters at birth, and apparently we were destined to be sisters now, when we thought we had put all that behind us.

While Bean and Cordy were dragging their baggage (literal and metaphorical) across the country, Rose was already safely ensconced in our childhood home. Unlike Bean and Cordy, Rose had never been away for very long. For years she had been in the habit of having dinner with our parents once or twice a week, coming home on Sundays. Someone, after all, had to keep an eye on them. They were getting older, Rose told Bean on the phone,

with exactly the right amount of sighing to convey that she felt she was doing Bean and Cordy's duty as well as her own. And usually her visits to our house for Sunday dinner felt like duty, equal parts frustration and triumph as she reminded our father that he had to mow the lawn before the neighbours complained, as she bustled around the living room putting bookmarks in books left open, their spines straining under the weight, as she reminded our mother that she actually had to open the mail, not just bring it inside. It was a good thing, Rose invariably told herself when she left (with not a little satisfaction on her face) that she was here. Who knows what kind of disarray they'd fall into without her?

But moving home? At the advanced age of thirty-three? Like, for permanent, as Cordy might say?

She should have been living in the city with her fiancé, Jonathan, having recently signed her first contract as a tenured professor, waving her engagement ring around wildly whenever she came back to Barnwell just to show that she was, in fact, not just the smart one, that Bean was not the only one who could land a man, and our father was not the only professorial genius in the family. This is how it should have been. This is how it was:

ACT I

Setting: Airport interior, and Jonathan's apartment, just after winter break
Characters: Jonathan, Rose, travellers

Rose had changed positions a dozen times as the passengers on Jonathan's flight came streaming through the airport gates. She was looking for the

right position for him to catch her in; the right balance of careless inattention and casual beauty, neither of which would betray how much she had missed him.

But when he finally did emerge, cresting over the gentle grade of the ramp that led from the gate, when she could see his rumpled hair bobbing above the heads of the other passengers, the graceful way his tall, reedy shoulders were bent forward as though he were walking into an insistent wind, she forgot her artifice and stood, dropping her book by her side and smoothing her clothes and her hair until he was in front of her and she was in his arms, his mouth warm against her own.

'I missed you,' she said, running her hand down his cheek, marvelling at the fact of his presence. Light stubble brushed against her palm as he moved his chin against her touch, catlike. 'Don't ever go away again.'

He laughed, tipping his head back slightly, and then dropped a kiss on her forehead, shifting his bag over his shoulder to keep it from slipping. 'I've come back,' he said.

'Yes, and you are never allowed to leave again,' Rose said. She'd think back on that later and wonder if his expression had changed, but at the time she didn't notice a thing. She picked up her book and slipped her hand into his as they headed to pick up his luggage.

'Was it that awful? Your sisters didn't come home when they got your father's letter?' He turned to face her so he was standing backwards on the escalator, his hands spread over the rails.

'No, they didn't come home, and thank heavens, because that would have been even worse. It's just been me and Mom and Dad.'

'Lonely?' He turned back and stepped off the escalator, holding his hand out to help her step off. Swoon-worthy, as Cordy would have said.

'Ugh. I don't want to talk about it. How was your trip?'

Jonathan had been gone for two weeks, nearly the entire break, presenting at a conference in Germany and stopping on the way back to visit friends in England. Rose had carefully crossed each passing day off in her day planner, feeling like a ridiculous schoolgirl with a crush but unable to stop herself. Ridiculous, she knew. When they had been a couple for only a few months, she'd been the one to utter the magical four-letter word first, breathless and laughing as they lay on his bed and he alternated between kissing her neck and tickling her mercilessly. She'd been thinking that this was love for weeks, but she couldn't say it first, and then the words slipped out in a rush of giddiness. She'd frozen, horrified at her own lack of control, but then he'd whispered back that he loved her, too, and her relief and happiness made her feel faint. Being without him had felt like a cruel amputation, and she reached out for his hand to remind herself that he was there, after all.

He took her hand in his and lifted it to his mouth, kissing her fingertips. 'You look lovely,' he said. 'I'd forgotten how beautiful you are.'

Rose blushed and shook her head, smoothing her clothes again with her free hand. 'I look awful. I didn't have time to change and –'

Jonathan cut her off with another kiss, this time in the centre of her palm. 'I wish you could see yourself through my eyes,' he said softly. 'My vision is better.'

She drove them back to his apartment and they hauled his suitcase inside. She hadn't been here since he'd left – he had no pets, no plants, and there was no reason for her to visit unless he was there – and the air was thick and stale. She opened the windows and turned on the fan, and they sat together on the sofa, fingers entwined, until he cleared his throat awkwardly. 'I've got a little news.'

'Good or bad?' Rose wasn't quite listening. She reached out with her free hand and stroked a wayward lock of hair behind his ear. It had gotten long – she'd have to make an appointment for him to have it cut.

'Excellent, actually. While I was in Oxford with Paul and Shari –'

'How are they, by the way?' Paul had been Jonathan's roommate in their doctoral programme, and many of Jonathan's best stories revolved around their misadventures.

'Great – sleep-deprived, you know, but head over heels with the baby, and they seem happy. I've got pictures. They'd love to meet you.'

Rose laughed. 'Not likely, unless they're considering a transatlantic flight with a newborn.'

Jonathan swallowed awkwardly. 'Well, that's the thing, love. When I was over there, Paul and I had lunch with his dean.' He paused, searching for the next words, and Rose felt her heart growing colder, a thin sheet of ice covering its surface like frost on a windowpane.

'He's very interested in my research. He wants me to join the faculty there – a lab of my own, graduate students to work with me. It's ideal. A perfect opportunity.'

Rose reached for the glass of water he'd left for her

on the coffee table. Her mouth was painfully dry, her throat ached. Alone again. It seemed it was Just Her Luck to have finally found her Orlando, her perfect love, only to have him leave her. Shakespeare's Rosalind had never had this kind of problem; she was too busy cross-dressing and frolicking around in forests with her servant. Rough life. Rose set the glass back on the table and slipped her other hand from his.

'So you're leaving,' she said dully, when she could push her parched lips into words again.

'I'd like to,' he said softly. He reached for her hand again, but she moved so she was facing forward, away from him, her ankles crossed primly, hands folded in her lap, as though she were waiting to be served at a particularly stuffy tea party.

'But we were supposed to get married,' she whispered.

'And we will, of course we will. I'm not saying that at all. But I'd be a fool to turn this down. You can see that, can't you?' His voice was pleading, but she turned away.

'When are you going?'

'I haven't said I am, as of yet. But I could start at the beginning of the third term, just after Easter.'

'Your contract here goes through the end of the year, doesn't it? You're just going to break your contract?'

'Rose, don't be like that. Please hear me out. I want you to come with me.'

Rose turned her head towards him and barked a short, harsh laugh. 'To England? You want me to come to England with you? You have got to be kidding, Jonathan. I have a job. I have a life here. I'm not like you. I don't get to go globe-hopping every time I get a whim.'

'That's a bit harsh, don't you think?' he asked, recoiling from the bite. Our Rose, *whose tongue more poisons than the adder's tooth*! He rubbed his hands quickly on his knees and stood up, rumpling his hair impatiently. 'It could be good for us – for both of us. For me, yes, but for you, too. You haven't got a job past next year, right?'

'Is this supposed to make me feel better?' Rose had been told this spring, in no uncertain terms, that her adjunct contract wouldn't be renewed after this year. No hard feelings, nothing personal, but they hadn't any tenure-track positions open, and it was so important to keep the department adjuncts fresh, to keep the curriculum vital, you know. Yes, Rose had thought sourly, and because you can keep milling through those brand-new PhDs and never have to give them a penny more than you think you can get away with. The thought of having to find a new job paralysed her, the thought of being without a job paralysed her, and she was highly tempted to stick her fingers in her ears and sing until the entire thing blew over.

'I don't know about better. But I'd hoped you'd be at least a little happy for me.'

She looked up at him, his eyes sad and wounded, and she crumbled a little. 'I am. I'm sorry. But it's so big . . . It's such a huge change from what we were planning.'

'We always knew we'd have to consider it, love. My position here is only temporary, you know that.'

'But I thought maybe . . .' Rose didn't want to say what she had thought. She'd just assumed that he would give up this fancy academic jet-setting and find something nearby, something where she

wouldn't have to go anywhere. Where she wouldn't have to change at all. 'I'm sorry,' she said again.

'Oh, Rose, I'm sorry, too. Let's not talk about it any more. Let's just enjoy being together for a bit.'

He came over to her and put his arms around her and kissed her, and that did only a little to soothe the ache inside where her heart had been bruised. So that was it. He wouldn't stay, and she wouldn't – couldn't – go. It was ridiculous to even think about it.

His hands were in her hair, slowly pulling the pins out and letting it fall down her back the way he liked it, stroking the tresses the way she liked it, the gentle pull against her scalp so soothing. She wasn't paying attention. Bean and Cordy were sitting on her shoulders, whispering in her ears like a cartoon devil and angel. Or two devils, really. 'You could go if you wanted to, Rosie,' our youngest sister said. 'Just pick up and go. It's not so hard. I do it all the time.'

'What are you afraid of?' Bean mocked. 'Don't want to leave your glamorous life behind?'

Okay, so it wasn't a glamorous life. But it was important. She was important. We needed her. Didn't we?

Bean and Cordy didn't answer. Bean was adjusting her horns, and Cordy was chasing her own forked tail. You need me, Rose thought fiercely. They turned away.

'Hush,' Jonathan said, as though he could hear the busy spinning of Rose's thoughts, and he kissed her, and we fell off her shoulders as though we'd been physically brushed aside.