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Opening Extract from...

After the Fall

Written by Charity Norman

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CHARITY NORMAN

After the Fall



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For Paul

Hawke's Bay Today
Local News

In the early hours of this morning, the Lowe Corporation rescue helicopter was scrambled to airlift a five-year-old boy from a coastal address north of Napier. He was flown to Hawke's Bay Hospital where he underwent emergency surgery for extensive internal injuries.

It is understood that the child was injured as a result of a fall from a first-floor balcony. However, hospital staff declined to speculate on the circumstances of the incident.

'I can confirm that a small boy with life-threatening injuries was admitted earlier today,' said a spokesperson. 'At this stage it would be inappropriate to comment further. Police and child protection agencies have been alerted, and comprehensive enquiries are ongoing. I am not in a position to release any details until that investigation has taken its course.'

The injured child remains in the hospital's intensive care unit, where his condition is reported to be critical. His name has yet to be released.

One

Finn fell.

I don't think, if I used a million words, I could call up the horror. It isn't a matter of words.

My son plunged headlong, tiny hands clutching at nothing. He never made a sound. I can see his pyjamas disappearing into the greedy dark. Mr Men pyjamas, from his Christmas stocking. I can see his pirate doll, cartwheeling out of reach.

No moon yet. In films, tragedy always strikes during a torrential storm amid lightning and thunder, and the heroine's hair is plastered to her tear-streaked cheeks—though she's wearing waterproof mascara so no harm done. But it was a calm night, when Finn fell. A starry winter's night, and the hills were gentle swells against a singing sky. There was only the screech of a plover in the fields; the mother-in-law bird, bossy and reassuring. A calm New Zealand night.

And then the world exploded. I can still hear the swish of bushes. I can feel the thud as my baby hit the ground. Really, I can feel it. It shook the house. It shook the hills. It shook the heavens. I hurled myself down the stairs, trying to outrun this unholy terror.

Something lay lifeless beside a lemon tree, a dark little mound in the garden of my dream house. I thought my boy was dead. I touched the white face, feeling the miracle of his pulse, bargaining with a God in whose existence I'd

never believed. You will, too. Oh yes you will, if ever your own nightmares come alive. You will pray with all your heart, and all your soul, and with some part of your brain that you've never used before, never even knew was there. Believe me, you will. At such a time, atheism is a luxury you can't afford.

It took so long for them to come. *So* long, while Finn hung suspended over the abyss of death, and fear pressed us both into the black earth. Buccaneer Bob sprawled close by. Where Finn goes, his pirate goes too. At last I sensed the throb of rotor blades beating through the pitiless dark, the rhythm of rescue; brilliant lights rising over the hillside. The Heavenly Host. They landed in our front paddock in a hurricane of sound, sprinted towards my waving torch—two men in red coveralls, not a choir of dazzling angels—and worked with urgency and few words: fixed a line into Finn's arm and a brace around his neck, muttering together about his spine as they lifted him across the lawn and into the helicopter.

Neither asked how it happened. Not yet. They knew—as I knew—that this could be Finn's last journey. He's in trouble, they were thinking. Head injury, internal bleeding, God knows what else. In all likelihood, this one isn't coming home.

We were gone within minutes, Finn and I, lifting tail-first into the future.

Even as we landed, people and equipment appeared out of nowhere, mobbing us in an efficient scrum. Through a fog of panic I heard that Finn's blood pressure was falling, that heart and respiration rates had increased. Figures were called out—eighty–forty; sixty–thirty—with increasing insistence. They cut away his favourite pyjamas and covered him with a worn flannel blanket. Now he was anonymous.

I was with him when they began a blood transfusion, when they fed a plastic tube through the gentle mouth and into his airways, when his lonely body moved through the massive complexity of the CT scanner. I couldn't hold him, I couldn't care for him. I was useless. Soon they took him away, wheeling him rapidly through impassable doors to where surgeons' knives were waiting.

I know someone led me to this quiet cubicle and tried to explain what was happening. They've done their best, but my mind has seized. I'm

hunched in a plastic chair, my fingers wrapped around a white mug that has inexplicably appeared in one hand. I clutch Buccaneer Bob's floppy body to my chest. We're trying to comfort one another.

Finn is alone under vicious white lights and the eyes of adult strangers. They'll be discussing the weather as they cut my baby open. Hardest frost on record . . . nearly two metres of snow up at Ruapehu, going to extend the ski season. We're losing him, says the anaesthetist.

A woman ambles past. Another patient's mother, I imagine. She has wide hips and a comfortable bread-dough face, and she reminds me of Louisa. I'd give anything to see my sister's matronly form in a flowered skirt, swinging solidly up the hospital corridor with her arms held out wide and love in her smile. I'd give anything to see an old friend, someone who likes and trusts me because we go back a lifetime. I've no old friends here. In this whole country, this whole hemisphere, there's not one person outside my family—no, including my family—who truly knows me.

I curl my legs onto the sharp plastic of the chair, knees pulled up. I know I look a sorry sight, a bag lady on a bad day. A passing nurse obviously thinks so because she turns into my cubicle, tugging on the curtain. She's a tidy creature with a curling fringe. When she speaks, I dully register a familiar accent. Liverpool, I'd say.

'How're you doing?' It's made-in-China sympathy, but better than nothing.

I shake my head, driving my teeth into my knees. I'm rocking.

'Whoops! You're going to spill that.' She takes the mug from me, resting it on a stainless-steel trolley. 'What a horrible thing to happen. He's getting the best possible care, that's the main thing.'

Then she asks the question. She's the first, but I know she won't be the last.

'How did he come to fall?'

Honesty is the best policy! hisses Mum, right in my ear. Makes me jump. She's long dead, my mother, but that doesn't stop her and her clichés. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not having auditory hallucinations, nor—so far as I know—am I a medium. My mother's personality was so assertive and censorious that she took up residence in my head when I was about

three. I've been trying to evict her ever since. Sometimes she disappears for months at a time, but always pops up to twist the knife when the going gets tough.

The truth sets us free! she whispers now.

I think about the truth. I really do. I turn it over and over with a sense of horrified disconnection. I look at it from every angle, like a 3-D image on a computer screen. And on that screen I see police, and a courtroom, and a prison cell. I see disaster.

Finn's a sleepwalker, I tell the kind nurse. Always has been. It's funny because his twin brother never does it. Funny peculiar, not funny ha-ha. I should have locked their door. It's my fault.

That last part is true, at least.

'Nah. Could have happened to anybody,' she croons, in comfortable ignorance. She isn't really listening. People don't. 'It's an accident waiting to happen when they mess about in their sleep. I've got one who did it till he was thirteen. We lost him in a resort in Fiji, two years old!'

'Awful.'

'Worst ten minutes of my life. Lucky he wasn't floating face down in the pool.'

'Lucky.' I think of Finn, whose luck ran out.

'So what brought *you* out here?' she asks.

It's a perennial question. This country is home to many immigrants, and every one of us has our story. I wonder how many tell the whole truth.

'My husband,' I say. 'He fell in love with the place years ago, always wanted to come back. You?'

'Married a Kiwi. Broke my mum's heart, but what can you do?'

I try to answer, but Finn is falling. He's falling, and I hear the thud. The nurse pulls some tissues from a box, handing them to me with a sisterly rub of my shoulder.

'Sometimes you have to wonder, don't you?' she muses, smoothing the breaking wave of her fringe. 'You have to wonder *why* these things have to go and happen.'

Clattering feet, the rumble of a trolley. A baby's fretful wail.

'Got to go,' she sighs, giving my shoulder one last pat. 'No rest for the wicked.'

Ah, I think, as I watch her twitch back the curtain and hurry duck-footed to the latest emergency. There's the question. Not how. *Why.*

I'm haunted by that question as the night wears on.

Why, why, and why.

Two

If I had to stick a pin in the map of space and time, marking the start of our journey, I'd choose a Bedfordshire village on a Friday in June. Our village. Our house.

I remember driving home from work through a brief summer downpour. For ten minutes I skulked in the car by our garden pond, while the cooling engine tick-tick-ticked, summoning the will to go into the house. Finally I dug out my phone. Delaying tactics.

How did physics go? xx

Immediately, the screen flashed and buzzed. *dunno xxx*

Very informative, I thought resignedly as I hauled myself out and up the path. My daughter was coming to the last of her fifth-form exams, and I had no idea how she'd done. I stood for a long moment in the porch, steeling myself. Then I opened our front door.

The change struck me as soon as I stepped into the hall. That morning, I'd escaped a house pervaded by the cold draught of Kit's despair. Now I caught the cheerful whiff of toasting crumpets and his mellow voice, accompanied by the twins' merry discordancy.

Jack and Jill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

I followed these sounds of revelry to the kitchen. Kit stood ironing a shirt while his sons lumbered on the tabletop among the plates. Charlie

paused to give me smacky crumpety kisses, but Finn was reaching an ear-splitting crescendo, shaking matted dark locks:

Jack fell down and broke his crown

And Jill came tumbling af-ter! Hello, Mummee!

Inevitably, he stood in the butter dish.

'Yuck!' he squawked, hopping on one narrow foot while holding the buttery one up in front of him.

'Butter toes,' said Kit, and flashed me a vivid smile.

Charlie pointed a chubby forefinger, delight on the cartoon-round cheeks. Fair-curled and sturdy, he was the elder by half an hour. 'Butter toes, butter toes.'

I gave Finn a piggyback to the sink, dumped him on the draining board and doused his foot. Then I stood close behind Kit, running my hands around his waist and basking in his buoyancy. When he was on top of life, we could cope with anything at all. Sacha's dog slithered out of her basket to headbutt my knees. Muffin has a lot of Old English sheepdog in her and a touch of something smaller, and wanders through life with an air of genial absent-mindedness, like a professorial teddy bear.

'Hey, Muffin,' called Finn from the sink. 'D'you want to lick some lovely butter?'

'You're ironing a shirt,' I said, watching Kit turn a crumpled rag into something crisp and immaculate. 'Why are you ironing a shirt?'

'Think I've had a bit of a break.' Steam hissed from the iron. I could smell washing powder. 'I'll be taking the train to London in an hour. I called Stella Black today—remember, from way back? Graphic designer, I've worked with her on a couple of projects—she reckons her boss might have some consultancy work for me.'

'That would be wonderful,' I breathed, rubbing my cheek into the warmth of his shoulder. Consultancy work would be more than wonderful. It might even be a lifeline.

Kit was taut with hope and nerves; I could feel them jangling through his skin. He always had a deceptively lazy, understated way of moving—never seemed to pick up his feet—yet I sensed a frantic excitement that day. He finished the shirt, kissed me enthusiastically and strode off to the

shower. Our house was one of the oldest in the village, the stairs steep and uneven. I sat halfway up, fretting, while the boys plotted mischief in the kitchen. My chest seemed to be squeezed in a vice, as though it was I who had the vital meeting. There was so much at stake. I had to force myself to exhale.

That's where Sacha found me. She paused in the hall, grinning, schoolbag swinging from one shoulder. 'Mum! You on the naughty stair?'

My daughter inherited the syrup-and-caramel ringlets from me. I can't seem to grow my hair beyond shoulder length and it sticks out like a string floor mop, but hers is glorious, rippling exuberantly down her back and around her face. She has the Norris family hooked nose, too. I've always thought—as her adoring mother—that her high forehead and imperfect nose are what make Sacha truly beautiful.

'I put myself here,' I said. 'It's my place in life. Now gimme the lowdown on that exam, and if you say "dunno", I'll tan your hide.'

She held up innocent palms. 'Well I *don't* know, do I? I think I did okay. Bastards never asked about electromagnetism though, after all the swotting I did. That was scummy.'

'Kit might have some work,' I blurted, and she promptly dumped her bag and sat on the stair beneath mine, resting her forearm on my lap while I told her about his trip to London.

'How bad *are* things, Mum?' she asked seriously. 'You can come clean, now GCSEs are almost over. I know you two have been trying to cover up.'

She was right, of course. We'd been shielding her from the worst. I reached down to plait her hair, comforted by the heavy skein of it under my fingers.

'Our lifestyle—this house, everything—it all came from Kit's income, from the heyday of his agency before the economy melted down. My salary isn't nearly enough. I don't earn much more than his PA did! Pretty galling, but there we are.'

'So we'll have to sell this house if he doesn't get another job?'

'Maybe,' I agreed cautiously.

'And I'll have to shift schools, won't I?'

'We'll see.'

'That means yes.'

I shrugged, wishing I could deny it.

'Um . . .' She began tapping a syncopated rhythm on my knee with her palm. 'I know Kit's drinking again.'

'You do?'

'I have eyes, Mum, and I have ears. Last Friday the twins told me they locked themselves out in the rain and got soaking wet while he was asleep on the sofa. Charlie said he'd "gone funny again". Poor little beanies! No prizes for guessing what went on there. And I heard on the grapevine that you had to collect him from the pub.'

'They don't want him back,' I confessed.

That call was excruciating. Our local landlord, concerned and embarrassed: *I've had to take his car keys off him again . . . might be best if he doesn't come here for a while.*

'Losing the agency was his worst nightmare,' I said now, needing to defend Kit. 'Letting people down, when they had mortgages and school fees too. The past few months have been really rough and—well, endless knockbacks and money worries have finally worn him down. Alcohol's a sort of self-medication.'

'Poor Kit.' Sacha wrinkled her nose. 'Banned from the local? That's pretty screwball.'

Charlie appeared in the kitchen doorway, lighting up at the sight of his sister. 'Come and see,' he squeaked, beckoning. 'We've made a slide on the kitchen floor.'

'A slide? How?' Sacha sounded suspicious.

'With loads and loads of butter. It's *really* slippy.'

Sacha's jaw dropped, but I flapped a hand in defeat. 'Leave it for now. There are worse messes than butter.'

I found Kit in our bedroom, shrugging into a jacket and looking every inch the successful advertising guru. He had a way of wearing clothes as though they didn't matter; it was peculiarly stylish.

'You still scrub up good,' I murmured, taking his arm in my hands and watching us both in the wardrobe mirror. When the man in the mirror smiled back at me, I saw the old spark dancing in his eyes. After eight

years of marriage, and all our troubles, Kit's smile still made me feel happy. I turned him to face me, took hold of his lapel and began to fuss with it. 'The picture of civilised man,' I said, brushing my knuckles along the firm line of his jaw. 'Good luck.'

He caught my hand and pressed it to his mouth. I felt a small tremor in his fingers, and ached for him. 'I've run out of doors to knock on, Martha. If this doesn't come off, I'll have failed you.'

Sacha hurried in, pretending to do a double take. 'Wow, Kit! You look like James Bond. Well, except for that zany black mane, which is more Mumbai street urchin.' While her stepfather made a dutiful attempt to tame his hair, she plonked newly shined shoes at his feet. 'I gave these a quick polish for you. Found them by the back door. They're the right ones, aren't they?'

'You're a princess,' said Kit fervently. 'How was the exam?'

'Murder.'

'Oh, bugger. Really?'

'Nah, not too bad. Only one left—and then it's party time!'

'I'll bet you've sailed through,' predicted Kit, sitting on the bed to tie his laces. 'Jesus! Look at the time.'

Minutes later he'd hopped into his car and was roaring away towards Bedford. Sacha and I stood at our gate, watching that bright green blur threading between the traffic. It seemed terribly significant somehow, the only coloured dot on a sombre landscape.

'I really hope he gets it,' said Sacha.

I held up two sets of crossed fingers, blinking hard, overwhelmed by the strain of the past weeks. I felt Sacha's arm around my neck.

'Don't worry, Mum,' she whispered, kissing my cheek. 'Whatever happens, it'll all come out in the wash.'

She and I spent the rest of the evening eyeing the clock, begging fate to give Kit this break. The phone rang twice. We jumped both times, but it wasn't him. The first call was from Sacha's boyfriend, Ivan, wondering how she'd done in physics. The next was male too, with a Dublin accent.

'Gerry Kerr,' he said, and instantly I remembered. One of Kit's art college cronies, Gerry had become a dealer and swanned around the States

for a few years before buying a gallery in Dublin. I had a mental image of the man at our wedding reception—an urbane figure, cornering me to swear that Kit McNamara was a fucking genius and I had to get him painting again, he didn't care how much filthy lucre he could make in advertising.

Kit's career was rocketing when we were married, and then the twins arrived and took up every spare second. There was never enough time to indulge his passion, unless you counted the enchantment he'd created for his family. In the boys' bedroom it was Palaeolithic cave paintings: exquisite stags and bison chased one another all around the walls and over the ceiling, to the envy of visiting children. For Sacha he'd conjured a bewitching mural of mermaids.

'Gerry!' I cried now. 'How are you? Kit's out at the moment.'

Just touching base, Gerry said, wondering how we were doing. He'd heard about the agency going under.

'Ad agencies are falling like ninepins,' I explained. 'Kit hung on for grim death but . . . well. Advertising budgets are the first thing to be slashed.'

Gerry sounded genuinely concerned. 'Poor old McNamara. Still, look on the bright side. That man of yours is wasting his talent. This is a wake-up call.'

I looked at the sitting-room walls, where I'd hung a trio of Kit's paintings from college days. They were strange portraits: mud-brown, impish people with angular faces. I couldn't make head nor tail of them. I much preferred the mermaids and bison.

'He hasn't really painted for years,' I said doubtfully.

'Bloody crime. The man's got something, Martha, and he knows it.'

'Yes,' I retorted, laughing. 'You're right. He's got a family to support. And he knows it.'

I tried calling Kit after that. His phone promptly trilled from under a box of cereal in the kitchen. Forgetting his phone was a habit of Kit's.

By eight the boys were fast asleep, tangled among mounds of soft toys. At nine, I persuaded Sacha to turn in too. I could tell she was shattered. Much, much later, the house phone rang.

'Martha,' said Kit, and my hopes plunged. His voice was flat.

He was calling from Euston station. Stella's company had lost a crucial contract that very day and was reeling. Kit had spent the evening in a bar in Soho, consoling Stella and the boss who were now battling to stay afloat themselves. They wanted to help, he'd be top of their list if something came up, but they had nothing for him now. Sorry, mate.

'So that's that,' said Kit. I could hear the alcohol clouding his voice and his thoughts. 'I'm bloody useless.'

'Are you coming straight home?' I wanted us to face this together. 'Please don't . . . you know. Just come home. Take a taxi from the station.'

'Soon,' he said quietly, and rang off.

Bed was out of the question. I'd lie there rigidly awake, anxiety ricocheting around my head like a stray bullet. Instead I grabbed the in-tray—hair-raising bills screamed from its papery depths—and sat in front of the computer. I'd have to juggle everything somehow, and buy us time to get the house on the market.

Sacha had been messing about online. She must have been distracted by Ivan's call, and forgotten to log off. There were several websites left open: YouTube, eBay. Ah, and here was her Facebook page; never anything sinister on that. I was about to close it when a warning siren blared, somewhere between my ears.

Looking for my real father!! Name is Simon apparently, passed thru Bedford 16–17 years ago. Brwn hair brwn eyes, tall. Wld be 35–40 by now? Mum swears that's all she knows but I'm not so sure. Anyone—any ideas??? Wld really lve to trace my dad.

I sat stunned, a rabbit gaping into the harsh glare of the screen. Her Facebook friends had plenty of ideas, of course.

Have u checked ur birth certificate?

Hi sash, ask everyone in your family and all your mum's old friends, someone knows something, lock them in a room until they spill

My dads called simon LOL we might be sisters!!! I will ask him did he shag yor mum

cld try private detective

It's an icy shower, the moment you realise your child is an independent being who questions family mythology. Whenever she asked about her

father I told Sacha the story of Simon, a pleasant young man who couldn't be traced. Now, it seemed, she'd started digging. One day her spade would hit a landmine, and we'd all lose limbs in the explosion.

See? Mum popped up, her voice gleeful. *Those chickens are coming home to roost! One girl's sordid secret is another girl's father.*

I staggered into the kitchen and filled the kettle, as though a nice cup of tea might somehow save us all from ruin. I couldn't face those bills, now. The latest copy of my occupational therapy magazine lay half-read on the kitchen bench, smothered among charitable appeals. I leafed vaguely through it as the kettle boiled. Techniques in the classroom, wheelchair fitting. Several recruitment agencies advertised regularly. Jobs in Australia . . . Canada . . . New Zealand. Kit had been to New Zealand as a student, and raved about the place. Carrying the magazine back to the computer with my mug, I typed in the website address. Just for fun, I told myself. Just to pass the time until he came home.

Seductive thing, the World Wide Web. Within an hour I'd educated myself on work, education and costs of living on the other side of the world. I was scrolling my way through visa information when the little carriage clock on the mantelpiece whirred, sighed and struck midnight. The tinny chime sent fear tapping on the door of my mind, though I tried to be rational. He'd roll up any minute, and I'd give him a royal bollocking.

By the time it struck the half hour I was pacing, literally wringing my hands. Kit was wrapped around a tree—oh my God, *why* did I let him take the car?—brilliant eyes blank and staring, blood trickling from the corner of a mouth that would never laugh again. Perhaps he was dying alone in the rain, pulverised by thugs, his vitality flowing away down the drain. Maybe he'd thrown himself into the river.

Inactivity was unbearable. Grabbing my handbag, I scribbled a note for Sacha. *Sorry gone to look for Kit. Love M x*

The phone rang as I was opening the front door. *Thank God*. I lunged for it, expecting to hear my husband's familiar tones—depressed, slurred, contrite. Light-headed with relief, I drew breath for a first-rate fishwife impersonation.

It wasn't Kit.

'Mrs McNamara? Barry Prescott, Bedfordshire police.'

The room darkened. I stared in terror at one of Kit's paintings, and the imp smirked back at me. This was it, then: the voice of doom. I was a widow. I felt the first jolt of grief.

The voice of doom sounded matter-of-fact. 'We've got your husband here. In the cells. He's, erm, you might say he's a little bit the worse for wear.'

'You mean he's drunk,' I croaked furiously. Not wrapped around a tree, then; not pulverised by thugs or under the waters of the Great Ouse.

'We picked him up off the High Street. Lucky he didn't get himself run over.'

They were really quite nice about it down at the police station, though I expect they'd all been having a good laugh. Sergeant Prescott seemed positively avuncular as he led me to the cells, jingling his keys. He was well past middle age, bushy-browed and seen-it-all. 'Your bloke's a bit of a mess,' he warned. 'Bet he'll be in hot water once he's slept it off.'

I've never been so humiliated in my life—for myself, for Kit. It was like collecting a mangy dog from the pound. My beautiful husband lay sweating on a concrete bench, his once-immaculate shirt grubby and torn, reeking of vomit. Hair hung lankly over his face. At Prescott's good-natured urging he swung his legs to the floor and sat up, pressing his head into his hands.

'Sorry,' he groaned. 'Oh God, Martha, what the hell is happening?'

I needed to be out of that place; I needed to get my man home and clean and human. Prescott swiftly processed the paperwork and gave me back Kit's wallet. Then he steered him outside and into my car.

'Next time we find him in this state, we'll have to charge him,' the policeman said, and he wasn't smiling any more. 'You do appreciate that, Mrs McNamara? We can't have people rolling around in the gutter.'

I dimly recall rain-soaked streets, the lights of McDonald's, a black cat streaking across the road with a flash of luminous eyes—did that mean we were in for good luck or bad? Kit half lay with his head against the window, whispering hoarsely—*sorry, sorry . . . Christ, I'm such a fucking fool*—and I knew the morning would bring a thudding head, crippling guilt and even deeper despair. He'd try to pull himself up by the bootstraps, swear off the drink for a week, maybe three, and then the whole miserable cycle would begin again.

'I've heard it all before,' I said wearily.

'Me too. I'm sick of myself.'

I swerved into our driveway and yanked at the handbrake. 'This is bloody ridiculous. Okay, so your business went down. Okay, you can't find work.'

'And we're broke.'

'And we're broke. It's been hell. But it's happened, and now it's time—'

While I ranted, Kit was fumbling at his door. 'I can't get out,' he said. I walked around and opened it from the outside.

'There,' I declared coldly. 'You're a free man.'

'Am I?' He put his arms around me, leaning his head against my waist. 'I don't think I want to be.'

'C'mon. Bed.'

It was a struggle, because he didn't have the will to move. I manhandled all six foot of him into the house and up the steep stairs. We'd almost made it when he sat down heavily on the top step, his head drooping as though it was made of stone.

'Don't wanna go to bed,' he muttered. 'Leave me here.'

'Rubbish!' I balanced on a lower step, bending to hook my elbows under his armpits. 'Couple of Alka-Seltzer, good night's sleep, you'll be right as rain.'

His voice rose to a bellow. 'Jesus, Martha! Leave me alone, will you?'

'Shh!' I was furious now, pushing and pummelling, trying to drag him to his feet. 'For God's sake, pull yourself together!'

I really, truly don't believe he intended what happened next, though he called me a fucking smug bitch as he shoved me away. I remember thinking, as I fell—clutched at the handrail, missed—and rolled and hit the bottom step, that he had a deal of strength for someone so shambolically drunk.

I was still crumpled and dazed in a heap when I felt shaking hands on my face. Kit sounded stricken, breathy with panic and almost sober. 'Martha? Look at me. Come on, Martha, *look* at me! Can you hear me?'

His face loomed close to mine, sheet-white, eyes wide and bloodshot as he searched my pupils for signs of concussion. I'd landed on my shoulder,

not my head, but I felt as though I'd been run over by a truck. Kit abruptly pulled me to his chest and wrapped his body around mine. His voice was pitched higher than usual.

'Christ Martha, Christ Martha, please be okay.'

'Bloody hell,' I moaned, feeling the slick warmth of blood seeping from my nose. 'How much worse can things get?'

Then my self-control crumpled, and I began to cry, out of pure misery. Kit sprawled on the bottom step, his back against the wall, cradling my head and saying sorry, sorry, sorry.

It was there at the foot of our stairs—at rock bottom—that we finally began to talk, and to listen. We talked about our marriage, our past and our future. We faced the facts of our crisis: mortgage, school fees, frozen bank accounts. We worried about Sacha and about the boys. We seemed unable to stop talking, faces close together, whispering anxiously through the early hours. Then we began to look for a way out.

By the time we disentangled our limbs and stood up, our future was utterly changed. I felt stunned by the decisions we'd made, yet quietly elated. Kit brought me a cup of tea, gently wiping the blood from my face with a warm flannel.

'Jesus, I'm an idiot,' he murmured.

I laid my finger on his lips. 'Enough,' I said. 'Enough regret. I need you whole, Kit.'

The midsummer dawn was a silver gleam at the window. A new day.