

Chapter 1:

Forgiveness is a tricky thing. It's sought for all types of deeds, from the clumsy child who breaks his mother's beloved clock, to the cheating spouse who succumbs to a moment of weakness. Sometimes, if we are very fortunate, we are blessed with forgiveness for our selfish or misguided actions. Sometimes, the deed can be so cold, so ghastly, that we know better than to ask for such luxuries.

My own deeds I'm afraid will survive long after I am gone. Some things can never be forgiven.

All the warmth and human kindness I've had in my life could not have existed but for my silence. I can't lie, I have willingly played my part and I've played it well. I've enjoyed and exploited the benefits my silence has brought me.

I did not enter my demise with some sudden or painful irony. Nor did I wither under the shadows of a concrete cell or heavy iron bars. The world has never known my face but when I die, it will never forget my name. I am Frances Thames. No one has known me by that name for a very long time but this morning something happened, something that would change everything.

We sat in the small medical room. White paint covered every wall. The smell of antiseptic creams hung in the clammy, July air. A small fan faced upwards. It succeeded only in spreading the warm air round. It stuck occasionally as it struggled to compete with the heat.

I had been sick for some time but this morning we came for the results of my scans. My daughter, Alana, had sobbed into both her hands. Neither of us truly expected to hear those words.

I couldn't pronounce the doctor's name. He was a small Korean man with fat fingers and troubled eyes that shifted nervously between Alana and me. He'd delivered the news in a calm manner. His voice defied his training and allowed a crackle of empathy to slip through.

"I'm so sorry Mrs. White but the cancer has spread rapidly," he said, "it's very aggressive and I'm afraid there's no treatment that can successfully cure it."

"What are you saying?" demanded Alana. Her hands trembled uncontrollably despite her intentions. "Are you just going to let my mother die?" She wrung her hands together. Her normally

pretty features contorted as she battled to stop the tears escaping the corners of her eyes.

"We can continue the radiotherapy," he said, "but it may only extend your mother's life by a few months." He lifted the white porcelain mug from beside him on the desk and took a sharp sip. Perhaps he didn't really take a sip; perhaps he just lifted it to his lips to distract his hands. Either way, he gulped hard.

Alana let out a croak from somewhere deep inside her throat. She wasn't ready to deal with this.

"How long have I got?" I asked. The question forced itself from my lips before I'd time to think about it. I hadn't quite taken it all in.

"Five months, maybe longer," said the doctor. He shuffled nervously, expecting at any moment that I might break down, become hysterical.

I admired his compassion, envied it even but I knew even that was dependent on my silence.

Alana clung to my arm. Her body shook as she sobbed. I hated to see her suffer. She looked up at me with her glistening hazel eyes; eyes that had every day for the last thirty three years reminded me of her father. It was uncanny how much she looked like him.

I held her tightly, knowing soon my death would be the smallest trouble she would have to overcome.

Chapter 2:

Alana spent the rest of the day and half the night fluttering around me in a daze, unsure how to best comfort a beloved and dying mother. I had no doubt she adored me. From the moment she was born, the same moment I had looked into those eyes and from the first time I smoothed her soft brown hair, I knew I had made the right decision. It was with the same instinct I knew it was time once again to do the right thing.

It was close to 2am by the time I was able to convince her to get some rest. Another hour passed until I could no longer hear her quiet sobs from her make-shift bed on the couch across the hall from my bedroom.

I ventured out to check on her. She clutched a small brown bottle of sleeping pills in one hand. I put them on the table. She was rarely without them, hadn't been for the better part of a year. Still, she didn't think anyone had noticed. But I noticed. I'm her mother. I wouldn't have got any thanks for confronting her; you never do with such things. We all devise

our own way of coping with life's ails and this was hers. In sleep, she could dream.

The worn shadows from the TV danced and flickered across the living room walls. I switched it off and adjusted the covers over her. It reminded me of how I used to tuck her in when she was a child. I used to be able to protect her from life's torments but now I was about to do something which would expose her to them, and unlike the make-believe monsters she conjured up in her childhood imagination, these weren't pretend.

I returned to my room and opened a large lined notebook. I looked at the first blank page for a long time before I could bring myself to write something. I had considered just telling people my story but had decided against this for two reasons. The first was, I realised the importance of recounting every detail and the second was I didn't think I could bring myself to talk aloud about it. I had my own reasons for setting the record straight and they were purely selfish - for that I hope my family will forgive me - but I knew I must leave this world as the same person I entered it as. No one wants to die as something they are not or as someone who does not really exist. You see, I was already a ghost. I had been for the longest time. Before my time came I wanted to make amends and I couldn't do that without revealing the truth. I knew this would turn my daughter's life upside-down but this was a story too important to die with me, not even to spare my own

daughter the pain of having it dredged up. I hoped the knowledge in this journal, the secrets of our family's past, would stop the same mistakes from ever being repeated again. I wanted my daughter to understand the lengths I had taken to make her life so different from my own. I wanted her to know me, the real me and completing this journal was the only way I could do that without having to see how she might look at me once she did.

I gripped the blue biro pen tightly in my hand, took a deep breath and began what I hoped would be the final chapter in laying my demons to rest.

They say evil is as evil does. I don't believe I started out with malice and hatred coursing through my veins although the ingredients required to darken my soul were ever present in my youth. Perhaps had fate intervened, my story could have turned out differently. Though had this been the case, I may have lived a life that would not have been worth the bother of telling you about. After all, the human condition dictates, the best stories and certainly the most interesting ones are those which help to satisfy our morbid and curious minds.

I'll begin my story in 1964. I was eight years old.

I grew up on a secluded farm on the outskirts of Aberdeen. The tranquil setting was merely a hiding place for the terrors that lurked in that place we called home.

Our father, Paul, had inherited the farm from my grandfather before I was born. It was a fraction of its former glory, with chipped, flaking white paint, and water logged land where once a well maintained field had been. One surviving photograph showed a thriving business and cared for farmhouse, which had long since yellowed and frayed just like that photograph.

My father wasn't a natural farmer and when he came to realise this he sold off most of the livestock. He kept only a few cows, sheep and chickens to tide us over.

From the age of six, my parents would force me to wring the chickens' necks so we could eat them. I never found it any easier after the first time. I've never been able to forget the abrupt snap as that first chicken's neck cracked in my small hands and its limp body flopped between my fingers. I loved animals and I had wanted to protest my father's orders but I knew better than to object. My father's towering shadow was an unforgiving and persistent presence and I knew what would happen if I disobeyed.

My mother kept herself in good condition. Her petite figure was the envy of neighbouring women and her flawless complexion would have rivalled most movie stars. She was naturally blonde and blue-eyed but her genes weren't strong enough to carry through to us. There were six of us kids in total and of us all, only Kurt inherited her fair hair and blue eyes. I believe it was why my father despised him.

Kurt was a good natured boy. At fourteen, he was the second eldest and he possessed a near unbreakable spirit. He took after neither my mother nor father in nature and this was never more evident than when he smiled. He had a gift for making a room light up and he brought some hope to the rest of us without even trying. But my father would pick on him. No matter how badly my father hurt the rest of us, we could always be certain Kurt would receive something much worse.

We weren't strangers to our father's punishments. He was a cruel and violent man driven by his own self loathing and a constant supply of whisky. But one day stands out for me from any other and I've relived it in my nightmares ever since. For a reason still unknown to me, my father marched over - his face twisted with rage - and he dragged Kurt into the barn. This was something he often did when he intended to beat one of us.

The open barn lay about a hundred feet from the house and was over-looked by the large kitchen windows.

I stood in bare feet, covered in muck up to my ankles alongside my older brother Marcus and our youngest sister Mary. We shook from the cold of the hard rain.

We watched from mid-way between the barn and the kitchen windows, which faced out onto it, while our mother casually did the dishes with the door open. She acted like it was normal and it was normal, for us.

Kurt's screams projected out over the sound of the rain as my father forced him to bend over the workbench and began unbuckling his belt. Marcus and I dropped our heads to look into the mucky ground beneath us. I was eight and Marcus was ten but even then, we were old enough to understand what our father was doing to our brother. Terror rooted my feet to the spot. Kurt's screams came again and this time they forced me to look back to the barn. I couldn't see Kurt, only my father moving against him in violent motion as he grunted and panted. A warm sickness welled up inside my stomach until the taste of bitter vomit stung my throat. Marcus stood rigid with his fists clenched and his gaze fixed on our mother. She could hear this, see this and yet she continued with the dishes. I watched the rage gather in Marcus's eyes. He wanted to stop this. He longed to march in there and rescue Kurt but he was only ten and no match for my father.

My mother noticed we were looking at her; she clicked her tongue - like we were merely a mild interruption to her chores - and abruptly snapped the blinds shut so she didn't have to look at us.

I looked at Mary. She stood less than a foot away from me and Marcus, in her shabby cream dress. Her tiny face was masked by the rain but I could tell she was crying because her eyes looked swollen and like the rest of us, she looked so small, so lost.

Suddenly, Kurt's screams changed, they rang out with a new urgency and no amount of rain could have drowned them out. When I brought myself to look again he was crawling across the barn floor on his back with one arm shielding his face as my father brought a bike chain down against his body mercilessly, again and again. Mary's face wore a renewed expression of panic. She grappled for my hand and held onto it for dear life. I couldn't bring myself to comfort her but now I wish I had picked her up, held her tight against me and not let her go until it was over. So, all three of us stood there rooted to the spot as our hearts pounded and our souls ebbed away with each and every one of Kurt's terrified screams. We screamed inside for Kurt as every lash from the chain came down against his fractured, broken body and we felt his pain just as if it were our own. Yet, our lips didn't move and nor did our feet. We stood pale and fragile, no more than mannequins of ourselves. We couldn't even comfort each other for fear of inviting our father's rage.

Kurt's beating seemed to last for an eternity. *This is it*, I thought, this is the day my father is going to kill him.

Finally, my father stopped; his face red with fury as he threw the chain to one side. Kurt barely moved. He wasn't even crying anymore, at least not out loud. My father called out some obscenity and gave Kurt one final hard kick for good measure before staggering out of the barn. He wiped the sweat

from his mouth with his arm and pushed through us and into the house.

At first, we still didn't move. We were too afraid to go to Kurt; terrified of what we would find when we did.

Marcus looked at me, the anger fresh in his eyes.

"Wait here," I said to Mary. She nodded. She was only four but already the thin skin under her eyes wore the shadows of suffering.

I followed Marcus into the barn. Kurt looked up at us with pleading eyes. I gasped in horror. His eyes were almost completely swollen shut. Blood trickled down from the gaping cut in his head. It merged with the dirt on his cheeks and slithered over his chin to spill in thick dollops on the ground.

Marcus and I stood rigid. We didn't know how to comfort Kurt. Other kids might have screamed, panicked, ran away or thrown their arms around their brother to soothe his horrific injuries but instead we stood, looking down at Kurt's mangled body.

We weren't normal kids.

Kurt took a sharp breath to speak but at first his words came out as a series of spluttering coughs. He sipped in thin gasps of air before trying again, "I think my arm's," he breathed in sharply, "broken," he managed. He held his arm close into his chest as his face crumpled with the effort of speaking.

"Can you walk?" asked Marcus. "I mean you have to walk otherwise he'll get you again."

Kurt didn't answer; instead he reached down and struggled to pull his trousers and underwear back up.

Marcus and I began to help him up until he yelled out with the pain. "Be careful, it hurts." We lifted him carefully, struggling to balance his weight between us.

Tears crept from my eyes. "I thought da would kill you this time for sure."

"I need the doctor," said Kurt between sobs. "Do you think you can carry me to Doctor John down the valley?"

Marcus and I shared a concerned look.

"What would we say happened? What if they tell social work?" I said. "Kurt da would go mad."

"Fuck da," snapped Marcus. We all looked over our shoulders to check we hadn't been overheard. "I can carry you, no bother."

"But that's two miles down the road," I protested, concerned our father would surely notice them missing and unleash his wrath upon their return or, before.

"There's no choice," said Marcus firmly. "Frances we have to, look at him. His arm's damn near twisted off and his eyes..." Marcus trailed off to fight back tears.

"I'll say that," began Kurt still struggling to talk, "I'll say I was climbing that old fence down by the burn and I fell."

"Da will pass out with the drink soon and we'll be back before he wakes up," said Marcus. He adjusted Kurt's good arm over his shoulder.

"I'll come with you," I said.

"No," said Kurt, "just in case we don't get back in time."

"We don't need you slowing us down more," said Marcus. He was already struggling to carry Kurt, "and what about Mary?"

Mary was pressed up against the entrance to the barn peering in from one side with wide, frightened eyes. I put my hand out to her and she ran over and grasped it tightly.

"Mary will come too," I said. "You can't carry Kurt there and back without help."

Kurt and Marcus looked at each other.

"Maybe, the lassies would be safer with us, 'stead of here with him," said Kurt breathlessly.

Marcus sighed, defeated. "Alright Frances, but you can't slow us down because it'll be getting dark soon and we don't want to be walking back through fields with no light."

I nodded.

We set off down the valley. The two mile walk was no easy feat hampered by an injured party and a four year old with legs too small to keep up the pace. We had to stop when we reached the halfway mark. Thunder clapped in the sky above but we barely noticed the rain anymore. We were already soaked through.

Marcus carefully positioned Kurt to rest against the stone wall. "Let's only take five minutes," he said. He glanced up to the dark rain clouds.

My heart pounded. What if they had shouted out for us and we hadn't come? What if my father was waiting for us to get back with that rusty bike chain at the ready?

"I wish we didn't have to go back," said Kurt. He squinted his swollen eyes to meet with the angry sky above, "even this is better than going back."

Another roll of thunder came, somehow it offered a comfort. Out here we were free, even if only for a while. We could turn to look behind us and know he wasn't going to be standing there.

Marcus stared out into the path ahead as though he was looking out into a mirror of his own fate. I wondered what he could see the rest of us didn't. He turned back to us with defiant eyes. "One day I'm going to kill him," he said blankly. He folded his arms and shuddered before turning back to stare at the road. "He thinks he's smart because he's bigger than us, stronger," he turned back to us again, this time with a distant sparkle inside his troubled eyes, "but one day he won't be. That's how I get through it, that's what I think about when he beats us."

I gently rubbed his arm. He jumped, but then he relented and forced a smile instead.

"I think about being a vet and getting enough money for us to leave here," I said, "that's what I think about."

My brothers looked at each other until Marcus's face broke into a grin. I looked at Kurt accusingly; he was smiling too.

"You can't be a vet," he said, managing to maintain his humour despite his injuries. "You're supposed to heal the animals not kill them."

"That's right," said Marcus. He tried his best to put on his most serious face. "If they find out how many chickens you've murdered, they might not let you near their animals."

I pushed Marcus hard. "That's not funny! You know how I feel about that!"

Marcus laughed a little. Ordinarily, I would have stormed off because of their taunting but right then, the chickens didn't seem to matter much. Secretly, I was just relieved to catch a glimpse of Kurt's smile because earlier I'd been sure I wouldn't see it ever again.

Kurt coughed hard. The colour drained from his face. He opened his hand out to us; the rain splashed off the thick, dark pool of blood in his palm. Marcus rushed to pull him back up on his feet. A sinking feeling engulfed the pit of my stomach.

"We need to hurry," said Marcus.

Already Mary was exhausted and I had to carry her the rest of the way.

I was relieved to see Doctor John's house at the bottom of the hill. Marcus banged on the door until it was answered.

A tall, thin woman stood looking down at us. She had thick curly hair and a stern look but it quickly subsided. "What on God's earth?" she asked. She had a distinctive Welsh accent.

"Missus please," pleaded Marcus, "my brother took a fall and he needs to see the doctor right away."

"John! John!" She yelled as she ushered us into the house.

Marcus, Mary and me waited on the big couch in the treatment room while Doctor John looked Kurt over on the opposite couch. The kind lady returned with fresh white towels. She wrapped one over each of our shoulders. I savoured the crisp, fresh scent of the towel as she draped it over me. It wasn't covered with stains and it didn't smell musky like the ones we got at home.

"Heavens above, you'll freeze to death in this weather," she said. She rubbed at Mary's muddy bare legs to heat them up. "And what's a little one like this doing walking all this way? Lonsdale must be at least three miles out." She bent down to Mary and gently wiped her cheek with the end of the towel. "Would you like a wee sweetie? Would that help to heat your bones?" she gave Mary a knowing look. Mary nodded, her small face lit up with a rare smile. "Well," continued the lady, "just you let me see what I can find, eh?" She rushed off to the kitchen. I smiled too but I had almost cried thinking how

alien it must be for Mary to have someone show her a simple kindness. Mary grinned up at me and rubbed her hands together excitedly. I smoothed her hair.

I looked around the large room and its sensible but eloquent decor. I wished we had a home so grand. My stomach rumbled to remind me I hadn't eaten since the day before. I wondered if the lady might bring a sweet back for all of us. We never got treats. Mother said it was sheer greed to ask when we had so many mouths to feed.

"Now Kurt," said the doctor with a focused look, "this will sting." He tipped a dark bottle against a small towel and then pressed it onto Kurt's head-wound.

Kurt winced with the pain but he was too exhausted to yell out.

The woman returned with a shiny silver tray. It brimmed with biscuits and mugs of warm milk. I resisted my instinct to snatch up a whole handful of biscuits and wolf them down. It would be bad manners, I thought, to be so rude. Instead, I took a delicate bite from one biscuit and handed another to Mary. Marcus however, took a whole handful and shovelled them into his mouth with no care for what our hosts might think of us. I shot him a look.

"What?" He asked with his mouth so full that fragments of biscuit pinged out from the corners of his lips.

"It's not polite to eat like that," I hissed.

The Welsh lady heard me and looked up. "Now that's what they're there for." She gave me a warm smile. "Go on then, dig in."

Marcus gave me a look and grabbed up another few biscuits. I gave the last one to Mary and heated my hands around a warm mug of milk. I watched the doctor with Kurt.

He tied a strong knot on the make-shift sling around Kurt's shoulder. "Now just rest for the moment son," he said. Doctor John walked with a strong but quiet grace across the room. He made a space on the table and sat on it facing us. "Your brother's arm is broken in three places," he said, with a serious tone. "A broken arm isn't so bad, it'll heal up nicely and so will his head," he added, upon seeing our worried expressions.

"What about his eyes?" asked Marcus.

"His eyes will be just fine with a few days of rest," answered Doctor John. "But Kurt will have to stay on here for a few days because he's got a punctured lung and that's why his breathing's hampered."

"Stay here?" I gasped. "He can't stay here da will-" I stopped abruptly feeling Marcus's elbow clip my side.

"He has to come home with us sir," said Marcus. "Da forbids him from playing by the burn and he'll get in a lot of trouble for causing you so much bother at this hour."

Doctor John gave a slow nod. "Well son, I have to treat this lung and let the blood out of it, there isn't much choice. If

I don't treat the lung Kurt won't be able to breathe at all in a while. It's not the type of thing that can mend on its own."

Marcus stood up. "Doctor John we can't leave Kurt here with you," he said. Panic tinged his young voice.

Doctor John laid one hand on Marcus's shoulder; he looked so tall compared to my brother. Sometimes, I almost forgot he was still just a little boy. "Now, if you're worried about some trouble with your father, I'd be happy to drive over in the morning and talk to him."

"You can't talk to him!" spluttered Marcus, "I mean it's nice of you and so is everything you've done for Kurt," Marcus stopped and then continued in a small voice, "but please don't tell our da."

Doctor John looked at the Welsh lady. They stepped into the hall and closed the door behind them. I pressed myself against the doorframe so I could hear their conversation. They spoke in hushed voices.

"Those injuries didn't come from any fall," said the doctor.

"No," said the Welsh lady, "Did you see the little one? Doesn't look as though she's been fed properly."

"The boy," said the doctor, "The injured one, he has a lot of older scarring. Whatever's going on has been happening for a long time."

"Makes you sick, doesn't it? You'd think someone would notice at the school. Doctor, I don't feel right about sending

the rest of them home. It gives me chills, just the thought of it. Is there nothing else we can do?"

"Leave it with me."

I moved away from the door quickly as the handle turned and they both came back in.

The Welsh lady put her hand on my shoulder. "Come on girl," she said quietly, "give me a hand into the kitchen with these trays." I hesitated in the doorway with the silver tray in my hands. I looked back toward Marcus and Mary. Mary was now curled up on one side of the couch, deep in sleep. "Come now," said the Welsh lady from the hallway. I followed on into the kitchen. She took the tray from me. "Thank you dear," she said. She slid it into the sink with the rest. She stared out into the dark outside the window before turning to me. "Don't worry girl," she said in a kind voice, "the doctor will have your Kurt back to his old self in no time."

I nodded, unsure how to reply.

She opened a jar on the counter and handed me a large home-made cookie.

"Thanks," I said.

"That's for you. I saw your brother polished off most of the others and you gave the last to the little one." She smiled. "What's your name? I didn't ask in all the commotion."

"I'm Frances," I said.

"They call me Wurver," she continued, "course my real name's Lizzie."

"Why do they call you Wurver?" I asked, squinting up at her.

"Well my surname's Worthington, like the place. I don't know where the Wurver come from right enough. I suppose it's just short."

"It's a nice name," I said.

She turned to me with a worried expression. "Did Kurt really fall from that fence girl?" I looked at the floor. "It's just I've seen as many falls as the doctor has and I've never seen a fall like his." She knelt down to me and placed her hands on my shoulders. "Has someone been hurting you children?"

"No," I said, almost managing to convince myself. A warm prickle rolled down my spine and made all the tiny hairs on my neck stand up. Wurver knew something was wrong and what if I couldn't convince her otherwise? Father would put an end to the lot of us and it would all be my fault.

"Has your daddy been doing you wrong? Is that why you're all so frightened to go home?"

"No," I repeated. I did my best to battle back tears because if I cried she would know I was lying. I wanted to let go and sob my torn heart out on the floor. I wanted to scream out about everything that was happening to us but then what would happen? Would we be brandished as liars? Troublemakers? Or be believed and be carted off to some grim institution for children whose parents didn't care? No, I couldn't let that happen, it seemed to me the alternative was just as daunting as the reality. At least my silence would buy me the

familiarity and comfort of being with Marcus and Kurt and I would be able to look after Mary and I'd be there to protect her in whatever small ways I could. "Kurt fell from the fence," I added, this time with conviction.

Wurver stood up. "Alright girl," she said. A soft sigh escaped her lips as she turned to tend to the dishes.

That was my first lie, the one I'd told to Wurver. I have often wondered how things might have turned out if I hadn't told that first one.

Chapter 3:

Faint footsteps padded across the landing. I took a sharp breath in as the creek of the floorboards stopped behind my bedroom door. My heart raced. I lay still in the dark and watched in terror as the door handle eased downwards, and the dull light from the hall crept across the floor to illuminate my father's silhouette. His monstrous shadow loomed on the ceiling and spilled across the room. I held my breath as the stench of whisky flooded my senses.

I woke with a start and screamed out as I grasped at the bed sheets, still with the biro in my hand and my journal spread out open-paged over my chest. Breathlessly, I sat bolt upright and searched the room. Confusion set in. I'd expected to open my eyes and see the stale setting of my childhood home but instead, I was in the comfortable surroundings of my present life. Relief washed over me. He wasn't really there, it was only a dream, I was safe, and I was...dying. My heart sank

again. I was dying and every morning when I woke up a few moments of comfort would pass before that fact would cross my mind. Every morning from then on would begin much the same, until the one when I didn't wake up at all.

I jumped as my door flew open and a panic stricken Alana rushed to my aid. She'd just been ripped from sleep and still wore her favourite blue patterned pyjamas, the ones I'd got for her last birthday.

I wondered if I'd live to see her next.

"Mum, what's wrong?" she asked, "What's happened? Did you fall? Are you in pain again?" I shook my head. "No, no. Just a bad dream sweetheart."

She looked me over and gently brushed my hair from my face. "I heard you scream, did you know you were screaming?"

"I didn't mean to frighten you." I managed a weak smile as she sat down on the bed beside me. "Honestly, it was just a silly dream." I put my hand on top of hers and she held it tightly.

"What did you dream?" she asked.

"Oh I don't remember darling," I said, trying my best to sound convincing. "Did I wake you?"

"It's OK," she said, "I wasn't really sleeping anyway, just dozing."

I gave her hand a firm squeeze. "You need your sleep. You've got the boys to think about. You don't have to spend all your time here, you've got a house of your own to run."

She shook her head and pushed her hair back in place behind her ears. "It's still sinking in," she said. She looked away from me. "Look, I want you to know that I'm going to be here for you. You're not going to go through this alone."

"You shouldn't worry about me. You've got your own little family now and they should always come first. They need you a lot more than I do." I said, while edging my journal out of sight under the covers.

"Mother," she said assertively, "don't you start this crap about being independent. I know you'd love to believe you can deal with everything on your own but you can't," she looked at me again with a firm determination, "not this time. This time you need your family around you and we're going to be there every step of the way whether you like it or not because, that's what families do."

I smiled at Alana's kind words. I was happy she had turned out to be such a decent human being. I was happy she truly believed family really meant something to each other because it meant for the last thirty three years I had done a good job of hiding the harsh reality that sometimes the opposite is true.

"You're a good girl," I said. I smiled. She tried her best to smile back but her face was fraught with worry.

"I'll get your pills out."

I knew the medication would make me drowsy. "No," I said. I couldn't write when I was drowsy.

"What?" she asked. Her voice tight with surprise, "Mum you have to take your medication. You know it helps with the pain."

I ran the words over in my head, *helps with the pain*, yes, I thought, it helps with the pain and makes the days pass in a quick haze. I didn't have many of those days left, and I'd no intention of letting so much as a single one get out of my grasp. I was going to make the most of every moment, while I could. I piled on the enthusiasm, "I feel quite good today and they just make me so sleepy. I don't feel I need them all the time."

Alana sighed, "Look mum, morphine takes time to work and you have to keep taking them. You can't just stop and start with these. They aren't paracetamol you know. It doesn't work like that."

"I know what they are and what they do," I said in a dry voice, "and I know they make me feel sleepy."

Alana was starting to lose patience. "Mum," she began, "I know you feel fine today but if you don't take them today, then, well, you'll feel worse tomorrow." She gave me a look. She wasn't about to back down because she was stubborn, just like her father. "Mum, you have to take them."

"Ok," I said with a sigh, "I know you're just trying to do what's best. Maybe I should just lie down for a little while after I take them to let the drowsiness wear off." I gave her a reassuring smile. She gave me a concerned half-smile in

return before going to gather up all my pills from the kitchen.

She returned with a chilled glass of water and my three pills. Of course, I didn't really swallow them. As soon as she'd left I fished them out from the side of my mouth and took my journal out from its hiding place under my pillow.

Chapter 4:

Marcus paced the hallway outside Doctor John's treatment room while Wurver and the doctor battled to save Kurt and ease his breathing. I sat on the stairs holding Mary; she was slumped across my knees with her head nestled against my shoulder. She was still asleep but occasionally she would stir and give me a quick glance to make sure I hadn't gone and left her alone.

Wurver had closed the heavy wooden doors over tightly. Experience had taught her there would be a lot of blood and she was keen to shelter us from seeing it. Wurver was nice - I'd decided - not like our mother one bit.

"It's getting really late," said Marcus. He stopped pacing long enough to talk to me, "Frances, even if we left right now..." he shook his head, "they'll probably have already noticed us gone and what will we say? That we've taken Kurt to the doctor? That they've been asking questions?"