‘It’s the most selfish, ghoulish, horrible thing I’ve ever heard,’ Jennifer said. The words came out with difficulty. Her trained legal brain was used to logical thought, to temperate advocacy. ‘But why are you telling me now? Do you really expect me to give you my blessing on this? Is that what you’re hoping?’

These were the people closest to her in the whole world. Closer even than her children, closer than Simon had ever been. All she expected of them, all she had ever been taught to expect, was unconditional, enduring support and love. She needed them desperately. But now this. They had summoned her back home to tell her this.

She came straight from the Law Courts on a crowded commuter train, still in the plain black skirt suit and simple white shirt chosen carefully to flatter her slim legs and neat figure.

Loving her so much, knowing her so well, they tried hard to soften the blow, prefacing the announcement with all manner of affecting, persuasive evidence.

Jennifer’s incredulous blue eyes swept from her mother’s tired, patient face to her father’s, anxious and sheepish. She felt a spasm seize a muscle in her cheek, the inside of her mouth turn unbelievably dry.

Lost for words, she somehow found the will to lever herself out of the familiar old armchair, looking down at the hand, at the immaculately varnished nails that gripped the arm of the chair, as if they belonged to someone else entirely.

How could they even think of doing this to her? She strode to the French windows, to stare out at the gaiety of midsummer flowers that filled the tidy beds, the blackbird that crossed the shaven panels of the lawn in measured hops. In a far corner, hardly visible, the willow tree with the ropes of her childhood swing still embedded in one gnarled branch.

Her parents sat close together on a floral chintz sofa, bracing themselves for an expected onslaught. Turning towards them, with a tiny part of her mind Jennifer registered their careworn air, saw how much they had come to resemble each other as they grew older. The early evening sunlight caught the day’s growth of grey beard on Robert Hamilton’s chin. Why had her mother never dyed her perfectly coiffed white hair? Jennifer’s own stylist already applied a chestnut rinse to cover the greying strands in her dark bob.

Impatiently she thrust away the twinges of compassion.

‘Surely you don’t imagine yourselves sitting on a cloud together somewhere later on, sipping your G & Ts and listening to a Brahms sextet?’ Her tone was scornful, her voice loud and not really under control and she made no attempt to modulate it.

Fiona Hamilton gave her daughter a regretful, appraising look from where she sat buttressed by cushions on the sofa. ‘Darling, have you considered that you might be behaving a little selfishly yourself, refusing to see things from our point of view? I’m not sure how long I can continue, as things get worse. Oh no, don’t imagine that I’m not in a lot of pain, that the painkillers work all the time.’

The illness had changed her, Jennifer thought. She would never have spoken like this before. Under the circumstances she had every right to change, she supposed. Into her mind’s eye crept long-forgotten images of the old Mummy: care and commiseration during a long bout of chickenpox, delicacies lavishly supplied for
a close-knit threesome at a school picnic, a willing pair of arms in which to deposit a screaming new baby.

‘My very dear child… We’d hoped we could help you understand our decision,’ her father said, the faint trace of a Scots accent adding a poignant lilt. ‘It’s partly for you that we’re doing it,’ he continued. ‘Can’t you see? We want to spare you the weeks of suffering as Mummy goes into… terminal decline? And then you’d be lumbered with me, an old man. I’d get on your nerves, become a real burden as the years draw on and yet you’d have to look after me, take painful decisions on my behalf. Surely the other way is infinitely preferable.’

He rose to his feet with a weary smile. ‘Since you mentioned it, it must be about time for a drink. The usual, Jennifer?’ She had always been Jennifer, never Jennie, even at school.

She barely heard the question. She was astonished at the frankness with which her parents were able to talk about all this. Of course, they had been a medical family, were used to discussing illnesses, their own and other people’s, but this was a matter that she could not contemplate with anything approaching objectivity.

‘I think it’s hateful of you both to put me through all this. I don’t just mean what you plan to do eventually, but the ghastly preliminaries, the horrible discussions, as if we were talking about an unloved and antiquated pair of cats. You talk about love but surely you can see that I need you more than ever. Since… since Simon left us for that bloody woman my life has been hell….’ Now she felt close to tears, thinking of the long evenings on her own after endless days in court, the children in bed; the piles of family paperwork, bills to pay, holidays to organise; the kindly, humiliating invitations from friends.

They heard Robert’s footsteps click across the hall towards the dining-room and Fiona said briskly to Jennifer: ‘Let’s be honest. What we’re really talking about, what’s really upsetting you, is the thought of your father’s death. Mine is a foregone conclusion, anyway. Sooner rather than later.’

Jennifer hardened her heart against the forlorn wistfulness in her mother’s face.

A couple of weeks went by without mention of the subject and Jennifer began to hope that they had abandoned the idea, that she had persuaded them not to proceed. They must have listened, realised how devastated she would be. And then a phone call from her father. Could they meet? What about lunch? Perhaps an exhibition afterwards? Mummy couldn’t come, was feeling under the weather.

Robert’s face was if anything greyer, the lines more deeply etched, than when she had last seen him. But his smile was warm, his embrace as affectionate as ever when he rose to greet her as she reached the table.

The waiter had taken their orders - asparagus and Dover sole for him, beef carpaccio and salmon risotto for her – and, thank God, a wine was selected - a comforting Sancerre - before the conversation proceeded beyond pleasantries.

He began hesitantly. ‘I thought it might be a good idea to have a talk, just the two of us. Mummy knows I’m here but, to be frank, she thought we might get on better without her. She’s in a lot of pain and is starting to get quite….’ He broke off to transfix Jennifer with haggard eyes. ‘Look, darling. It may not be very long and we need to start thinking seriously. I haven’t come to get your consent. That would be too much to ask. But I must try to explain, I want to make you understand.’
Jennifer made a conscious decision not to help him, not to make things easy. She did not want to be persuaded. Perhaps he would quickly realise how preposterous the idea was. A long silence. The wine waiter carried a rattling ice bucket to the table and placed it on a silvered stand beside them. Another offered bread rolls from a napkin-swatthed basket.

Trying hard not to catch his eye, not to read the plea it transmitted, Jennifer looked down at Robert’s hand as he chose a seed-encrusted brown roll. It was almost identical to hers, if you disregarded the liver spots and prominent veins; and if you stripped away the nail varnish and the exquisite diamond and sapphire engagement ring that sat beside the wedding ring she still wore on her own left hand.

‘What I want to say is... I’m not sure you realise how much Mummy and I love one another. Of course, after you were born you shared our life.... I expect you think you know us inside out. But no one ever really knows what goes on inside other people’s marriages, not even their children.... Especially not their children.’

Jennifer listened, nodding gently as if she had known all along about the perfection of their love. She looked round the dining-room, her eyes skimming over the other patrons: many clusters of businessmen, several groups of two or three fashionably-dressed women, a middle-aged couple who might be minor royals, to judge by the deference shown by the maître d’hôtel and waiters.

If only she’d had a brother or sister, she thought, someone to share the burden of ageing parents. But Mummy had been unable to have another child. Jennifer remembered herself aged four, alarmed by her mother’s panic-stricken dash to hospital, confused by the saddened, diminished woman who returned home.

‘We’ve been together so long. Almost forty years,’ she heard her father say. ‘I’ve consulted your mother on everything. I couldn’t have managed without her all those years at my side. I can’t imagine any other kind of life. I don’t even want to try. It would be joyless and mundane. Such a large part of what we are has been lived through each other. We depend on one another. Like two old trees twining round each other for support. What would be left would be less than half a life. I couldn’t just sail off and start afresh.’

He picked up his knife and slid it under a moist segment of fish, transferring it to his mouth in a decisive sweep of his fork.

Jennifer gave a resentful grimace. Her own marriage had not been like that. Fluttering images of an angry Simon, his face cold with fury during one of their Friday night rows, rose before her eyes. What had they fought about? Just trivia, really. But she had once smashed a glass, hurling it to the tiled kitchen floor. No, not just trivia. At the end, almost everything. Why had she not been able to keep a decent relationship going?

‘So you see,’ her father said. ‘My own life wouldn’t be worth continuing.... I don’t want to go on without her. And I’m desperate to save your mother from suffering. I’ve seen so many patients die like that. You really can’t imagine...’

‘Daddy. I don’t understand why you can’t just help Mummy to go. I’ve listened to what you’ve said but you haven’t made any attempt to see it from my point of view.’ She struggled and failed to keep a raw note of impatience from her voice.

‘Oh, darling. No. I couldn’t let her go on her own. She’d be too afraid. We’ve always done everything together. I can’t let her face that alone. And anyway, for me it’s a difficult thing, to take a life.... Any life, but especially not hers. I couldn’t just kill her. And anyway, it’s easier if my own stops at the same time. No loose ends.’
Jennifer let out her breath in an angry gust. ‘I suppose you’ve decided how you’ll do it, if you do it? A short drive off Beachy Head?’

Robert’s smile was tight, humourless. ‘Oh no, my dear,’ he said. ‘Nothing as dramatic as that. I’m still a doctor, darling. Insulin’s how it’s done nowadays. Gentler than potassium chloride.’ Another little smile, now with a hint of pride in his expertise.

She shook her head in irritated frustration.

‘How can I persuade you not to do this? It’ll be bad enough losing Mummy, but for both of you to go at the same time…’

She moved onto the attack more aggressively once they crossed the threshold of the Royal Academy. If Robert thought the discussion had come to an end over lunch, he had another think coming.

‘So how am I supposed to explain to Laura and Alexander that their grandfather didn’t love them enough to stay around long enough to see them grow up?’ she snapped.

He stepped back from examining one in a set of twelve portraits: a dozen delicate beauties at leisure, with dark, fawn-soft eyes, painted to delight the senses of an eighteenth century Manchu emperor.

‘That’s just not fair, Jennifer.’ She heard a rare flash of annoyance in his voice and threw him a sideways glance. He raised one straggly eyebrow in vexation as he stared steadfastly at the nearest imperial court lady.

‘There’s no reason why you’d have to tell them the truth,’ Robert said. ‘Truth’s often compromised to soften reality for children. I don’t see why you couldn’t tell them we’d both died of some awful bug. SARS… or something.’

Jennifer forged straight on to her next objection. ‘How do you think I’m going to manage with two funerals at the same time? All on my own with no one to help? It’s terribly unfair. Honestly, Daddy, I really don’t think you and Mummy have thought it through properly. You’re acting out of pure emotion, without any consideration of the practicalities.’

Robert said nothing, compressing his lips into parallel strips of forbearance.

They walked slowly on through the exhibition, next pausing to marvel at a magnificent summer robe, worked in scarlet, green and cornflower silks on a lemon ground. In the subdued light of the gallery it shone like a fragment of rape-field, almost supernaturally bright.

Drifting into a notion that they were merely sharing a pleasant experience during the course of a rare afternoon off, Jennifer tilted her head to consider the intricate embroidery, the multiple symbols contained in the design. What must it have felt like to wear that robe? To wield omnipotent sway over millions of obedient subjects? She envied the Academy’s featured Three Emperors, father, son and grandson, with their powers of life and death in the complex affairs of an almost boundless Chinese kingdom.

Then she returned to her purpose. ‘How does the Church stand on such things? Isn’t suicide a sin? You may be refused burial at St Edmund’s.’ She knew the vicar as a starchy if well-meaning bachelor, set in his ways.

‘Oh, I don’t think so. I’ve sounded Adrian out already. In an indirect way. I don’t think there’ll be a problem with Adrian.’

His words seemed to bring it closer, the reality of death, of a funeral to dispose of their bodies, her parents’ dead bodies, to say goodbye. And Jennifer felt a surge of
real grief, combined with outrage at being dispossessed. This simply wasn’t working. She’d have to try something else.

‘Oh Daddy, please, please don’t do it. Please don’t leave me on my own. I can’t handle this. I just can’t take any more. How could you? You and Mummy gave me life.... And now you’re just going to abandon me.’ She felt tears trickle from the corners of her eyes but made no attempt to brush them away. A small girl standing beside a massive jade boulder carved into intricate scenes of Chinese life looked up at her with candid curiosity.

For the first time that day, Robert looked uncomfortable. ‘I’m sure you’ll find a way to cope. You’re not a child,’ he said.

Just after four she watched him walk slowly away along Piccadilly towards Green Park tube station. She waited for him to look back and wave but he just kept going. Taking her mobile out of her bag, she slipped back inside the Academy courtyard where it was quieter. “Oh, Adrian, it’s Jennifer. Jennifer Hamilton as was,” she said when the call was picked up.

The funeral was exceptionally well-attended. Jennifer had inserted announcements in all the serious national papers and spent hours on the phone putting relatives and friends in the picture. She found comfort in making the arrangements; it seemed to cushion her from thinking too hard about death, although once or twice, on her own in the evenings, she found herself unexpectedly tearful for a minute or two before resuming absorption of the latest brief, a cup of coffee at her elbow and the faint harmonies of Radio 3 wafting through from the kitchen.

Now she sat in a pew at the front of the church, flanked by the two children. They had not wanted to come but she had insisted, saying attendance was a duty, part of growing up. Their school uniforms were dark in colour, navy blue for Alexander, dark green for Laura, sparing her the need to buy mourning clothes, and Jennifer had stuffed each child’s pockets with Kleenex tissues. She herself wore her normal black work suit. She was glad she had chosen pure white for the flowers, overruling the vicar. They looked both fresh and dignified. Roses, pale chrysanthemums, lilies, all white, the colour of mourning in Asia.

‘Lord of all Hopefulness, Lord of all Joy...’ The choir was semi-professional and sang well, although the mourners, determined to do their best, also pealed out the verses with élan. She had wanted nothing lugubrious: no place here for ‘Lead, kindly light...’, ‘Abide with me...’

From somewhere further back Jennifer heard the mannered voice of domineering Aunt Muriel, who had trained as a singer but never made it to concert platform or opera house. Immediately behind her, another aunt, her mother’s sister Freda, cried softly into her handkerchief.

The children were behaving impeccably, she thought as she sang. But now she felt Alexander stiffen as he sneaked a glance over his shoulder and back down the nave. He turned his head, eyes towards the altar again, and then she saw him take another look behind. ‘It’s Daddy. Daddy’s here,’ he said.

This was something Jennifer had not expected. Simon must have seen it in the paper. Why hadn’t he warned her? Surely he realised what a shock the children would get?

Conscious of her trembling knees, she forced herself to concentrate on the next phase of the service, to walk to the lectern for her reading. She glimpsed
Simon’s lean, clever face at the back of the church as she surveyed the crowd before starting to speak, and then forced her eyes away from him and down to her text.

‘...We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And to know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate...’

She had always loved T.S. Eliot’s elliptical, sensuous verse and she read well, neither bland nor over-emphatic.

Prayers, more hymns, another reading, the eulogy: a family friend, affectionate and slightly pompous, spoke of ‘exceptional courage..., fortitude..., unusual closeness..., loving only child Jennifer....’

After the committal the mourners congregated in the churchyard, chatting quietly in the warm September sunshine.

Simon would have to express his condolences, could not avoid speaking to her and she saw him thread his way among the gravestones towards her and the children, a tall, impressive man in a dark suit. Could there be more to his attendance than plain sympathy for the bereaved?

She saw Laura’s face crumple as Simon scooped her up into a tight hug. He threw an arm round Alexander, who blew his nose hard, standing stiffly to attention.

‘I shan’t be coming back to the house, so I’ll say now how sorry I am.’ His manner was formal, chilly even and his eyes refused to meet hers. ‘We were all good friends once. I had to say goodbye.’

He let Laura slip to the ground and she stood for a moment midway between her parents, uncertain which way to move. Jennifer reached out and pulled her up tight against her own body. She could find nothing to say beyond: ‘I understand. It’s good of you come.’

The embarrassment in the pause that followed was almost palpable. And then he said: ‘Where’s your father, Jennifer? I was hoping to see him.’

This she could talk about; it rescued her from their own awkwardness. ‘Poor Daddy. We’ve had to sedate him,’ she said. ‘He’s at home. The last few weeks have been very hard. He found Mummy’s last days almost unbearable and then..., well, when she finally went, he just collapsed. The GP’s got it all under control but he’s on so much Diazepam that he just couldn’t handle it today. He wouldn’t have wanted people to see him like that. Luckily I’ve been able to take charge.’

Simon looked at her directly for the first time, his eyes clouded with concern.

‘I’m terribly sorry. He must be completely... I remember how close they were. How on earth will he cope? He’ll be thoroughly desolate without your mother.’

Jennifer gave a faint smile at his lack of insight. She knew she’d been right to raise her game, enlist the vicar’s help in forcing Robert to honour his commitment as a father. In time he’d be deeply grateful.

‘He’ll be all right. Don’t worry. He’ll need a little while, people always do, but he’ll be fine. He’s a survivor. He’ll bounce back. And he won’t have time to be lonely. Aunt Muriel’s moving in with him next month. I asked her a couple of days ago.’

She saw his expression darken, realised she needed to elaborate. ‘I know. I know they’ve never really got on. He always said she made his life a misery when they were children. But it’s extremely good of her under the circumstances. It’s by
far the best solution, Simon. Honestly. They’ll be wonderful company for each other. She won’t stand for any moping. Not likely. It won’t be long before he gets his old joie de vivre back.’