

FEAR

GILLIAN
WELLS

Chapter 1

'SHIT, OH GOD, THAT HURT!'

'Mummy, you said that wasn't a nice word,' eight-year-old Mia said disapprovingly, her large blue eyes regarding her mother.

Isla hopped around; the pain in her foot was excruciating. Sudden tears pooled in her eyes as she looked around at all the boxes piled up in the small kitchen. Where was she going to put everything? Why had she insisted on taking so much stuff? *So Barry and his new wife wouldn't have it*, a little voice in her head told her.

'Why don't you go and help Josie or unpack your own things?'

'I've done my stuff and I can't help Josie. She doesn't want me to.'

'Josie!' Isla called. 'Let Mia help you or you won't get to bed tonight.'

'She's too bossy,' Josie called back. Isla sighed.

Although her two girls looked alike, they were chalk and cheese. Mia was very self-contained, knew exactly what she wanted, was very organised and seemed much older than her eight years. Josie, on the other hand, was messy and untidy but full of fun and very ebullient. Two years older, but in some ways much younger. *Just*

like her father, Isla couldn't help thinking. Barry was loud, carefree and took life as one huge adventure. Isla shook herself; Barry had found someone more suited to his free and easy lifestyle. She was like Mia: serious, hated mess and liked everything neat and tidy. She was quiet too. Barry used to say, 'Still waters run deep,' but towards the end of their marriage, he said he didn't think there was anything deeper there. It was all a sham and she had nothing to offer worth having. It had hurt, because in spite of his chaotic lifestyle Isla had loved him with all her heart. At least to start with. Trouble was, he also attracted women like a honey pot to bees.

Still nursing her sore foot, Isla got Mia to help her instead and slowly they made progress sorting the kitchen out.

However, it soon became plain Isla hadn't got enough cupboard space. Finally giving up, she decided that some things would have to stay in the boxes for now.

'When do you start your new job, Mummy? Is it Monday?' Mia asked.

'Monday week, the same day as you start your new school, the two of you.'

'Cool. I think it will be funny though, with only two teachers and only a few of us there.'

'Mmm. Maybe. It will certainly be very different, for me too, but I'm sure it will be great. You will get lots of attention.'

Though deep down, Isla was worried how her two girls would settle. They had been brought up on the outskirts of Ipswich and now here they were in the middle of nowhere. Isla had rather impulsively taken a job at the local medical centre as a receptionist, which had been advertised in a local newsletter. Normally she would have thought it through more, but she was still reeling from the hurt Barry had inflicted on her.

Towards the end of their marriage, he had been abusive and nasty. Partly because he wanted to be free of her like, yesterday. Always impatient for the next thing. So Isla herself had rushed into this move, something that was completely alien to her normal way of treading life's path.

Now here they were.

She was worried for the girls and even more for herself. It was a big leap from being a hotel receptionist in a city hotel to being in a small medical centre. She was all too aware she only got the job as they were desperate. They had assured her medical knowledge wasn't necessary – it was more to do with answering the phone and making the doctor's appointments. The whole thing had happened at top speed and the practice had this old Queenslander for her to rent. It was about four kilometres from the small town where she would be working, also where the girls would be at school. Someone, she guessed from the practice, had been in cleaning, but it was cramped and old and Isla's heart had sunk when she saw it. At the very least, it needed a coat of paint; the only redeeming feature was that the roof looked almost new. It smelt musty and damp.

A kind neighbour had lent her a large trailer and she had a big 4x4 that Barry had bought her sometime before. So she had managed to bring the girls things they most wanted, as well as her own belongings she didn't want to be parted from. Some very basic furniture had come with the house plus she had bought some small tables and a few chairs.

'Let's make your beds up then, girls, shall we?' she said brightly as the day started to draw to a close.

Just then they heard a car pull into the little driveway. Isla went to the door and, opening the fly screen, saw the lady from the medical

centre coming towards the house. Isla had met her earlier in the day when she had stopped to pick up the key.

‘Mrs Bartlett, how are you settling in? I’ve brought you a casserole for your dinner and a few other provisions as I’m guessing you wouldn’t have had much chance to stock up.’

‘Jane, that is so kind of you. I think I said do please call me Isla,’ Isla said as she took the large casserole dish from the woman.

‘You did but I have to confess, I couldn’t be sure how to pronounce it – an unusual name.’

‘My Scottish inheritance. Please do come in. It’s a bit chaotic.’

Jane came into the kitchen and looked around. ‘Gosh, you’ve worked hard to get it so neat and tidy.’

Josie and Mia appeared; they had gone to their rooms. Isla introduced them. ‘Can I get you a cup of tea or anything, Jane?’

‘Just a glass of water, please. You remembered what I said about not drinking the water straight from the tap?’

Isla, having gone to the old refrigerator – which seemed to work well, though it was rather noisy – held up a bottle of water. Jane nodded and plonked herself down.

She was a large woman with greying hair. Isla thought she was in her fifties. The chair groaned a bit under her weight. She was wearing a floral shift dress that covered her bulges rather well. She had sharp eyes and Isla thought she probably didn’t miss much. She was the practice manager.

‘I hope you will be comfortable,’ she said, looking around. ‘Our previous receptionist left rather suddenly. The place was in a bit of a pickle. I don’t suppose you’ve explored the outside much yet.’

‘No, only really seen the driveway and that small bit of lawn at the front. I haven’t really looked out of the window properly yet. I

noticed we are one side of a small valley and there is an old house opposite. Anyone living there?' Isla felt slightly isolated as that was the only other dwelling she could see.

Instead of answering, Jane said, 'Oh, before I forget, the landline here is the only telephone that works. Your mobile won't have a signal. Sorry, forgot to tell you.'

'Oh, is the landline connected then? I hadn't noticed.'

'Yes, it's there in the passageway.'

'I saw it as we arrived but hadn't thought about it. Nuisance about the mobile.'

'Well, you two girls. What are your names then?' Jane said, looking at the children.

'I'm Josie and she's Mia,' Josie said importantly.

'I can speak for myself, Josie,' Mia said crossly.

'Well, you are too slow and –'

'GIRLS. No arguing,' Isla spoke sharply. The two girls were tired and, she could see, getting cranky. 'Go and start on making your beds up. I've put the sheets there ready.'

'I imagine they can be a handful. How old are they again?'

'Eight and ten. Mia is the serious one, Josie the full-on one.'

'I haven't got any kids, thank goodness. They always seem hard to handle to me and they tie you down; though you seem to manage.'

Isla felt a very small fission run up her spine though she didn't know why. Jane seemed rather a strange woman in some ways.

'You haven't any then?'

'Not me, love. Now, I thought I'd give you the low down on the doctors we have, little things you need to know. Dr Clive Barton is the senior partner, as I have already told you. He's nearing retirement and can be a little cranky sometimes so be wary. He's married and lives

in town. Dr Paul Sinclair is in his forties, also married and has two children who are away at boarding school. He is very aloof – hasn't been with us long. His wife is a lawyer. I've never met her; she works away quite a bit. Then there is Maggie, the nurse, who you met this morning. Me and Cherry, our other receptionist. Dr Paul, as I say, is a strange man though good at what he does. Has a great bedside manner so I'm told whereas Dr Clive tends to be a bit brusque sometimes.'

'Gosh, lots to remember.' Isla said this more for something to say; she was good at remembering names and faces.

Jane looked worried. 'You are up for the job, I hope. I know it has all been very last minute. You are separated, I gather?'

'Divorced. It has just come through.'

'Oh, poor you. What happened? Did you just grow apart? Hard on your girls, I imagine.'

Isla didn't like the way this conversation was going so she said instead, 'Are you sure I can't get you a coffee, tea or something other than water?'

Maybe Jane realised she had spoken out of turn because she got to her feet.

'You have lots to do, I'm sure; I only came to drop the food off.'

'What about your dish – shall I transfer it to one of mine? It looks yummy.'

'Bring it when you come into the surgery. You're coming Friday to be shown the ropes, aren't you?'

'Yes, I can come before, if you'd like.'

'Friday's fine.'

A few minutes later when Jane had gone, the girls appeared.

'She was a funny lady, wasn't she, Mummy?' said Mia.

'Ummm.' Isla felt there was something decidedly off about Jane but what it was, she wasn't sure.