

LET ME GO

By

Michele Sagan

For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast,
And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed;
And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill,
And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still!

-Lord Byron-

'While I thought that I was learning how to live, I have been learning how to die.'

Leonardo da Vinci

PART 1

Before

It is David's last birthday so I bake him a cake instead of buying him one from the store. I decide on a chocolate sponge with buttercream. David's favourite.

He helps with the frosting, one shaky hand propping up the other as he squeezes the piping bags. I clasp my own hands together to stop from reaching out and helping him. When he's done, he needs to throw up, so I take him to the bathroom and rub his back while he vomits.

After that, I find the takeaway menu and order us tikka masala, pilau rice and naan. David won't be able to eat much but it's enough to pretend. When the food arrives, I serve everything in the nice dishes his mother left him. I also pour us each a glass of Cabernet even though I know I'll end up finishing both. Table set, I bring out the cake and light the candles — forty-six altogether, there will never be forty-seven.

We sing a quick song, me in a fake cheery voice, David in a whisper. Then he gives a weak puff that makes the flames flicker. He glances at me; his eyes are glistening. Before he breaks down completely, I blow all the candles out.

His face is wet. I hold him.

'Did you make a wish?' I ask. I know I had. I wished him better.

'Yes,' David says. He doesn't have to tell me what it is. I already know he wishes to die. He cannot bear for me to see him like this. Strong, beautiful David now a shadow of his former self. 'I'm sorry, Ally,' he says. 'I'm so sorry.'

Tears are falling down my face because I want David to live even though he suffers. 'The time will come,' I say, 'when it will all be over.' We touch foreheads, breathing in each other's scent. His is a blend of disease, medicine and mouthwash.

'Not soon enough,' he replies.

There's a dull ache in my heart that I carry everywhere. When David says things like this the pain grows sharp, tearing a hole through me.

'Will you help me?' he asks.

Once again, David does not have to tell me what he means. I already know what he's asking. It's been the same question for months now. It's the question I contemplate whenever I lie beside him — his cold feet tucked between mine — listening to his ragged breaths, the one I turn around in my head whenever we drive to the hospital for his chemo sessions.

'Oh, David,' I say, because I have no answer.

Chapter 1

She's already dead when I get there. My fourth and last patient of the day. She lies on the bed, silvery hair a mess of cobwebs on her lace pillowcase, crooked arthritic fingers like talons resting on a matching duvet.

She's not my first dead body. I've had others: a suicide and an accidental overdose. Usually, after checking for a pulse and finding none, I would call the Hospital and ask for assistance. But this evening, I break down before I can pull my phone out. I know it's not professional, but it all seems too much as I perch on the side of Mildred's four-poster bed, head in hands, and weep.

Is this all we will ever come to? Dying alone?

The Hospital said Mildred was a recluse, suffering from early-stage Alzheimer's. A sixty-one-year-old retired physicist, she was a widower with a son who travelled often. They said she needed someone to talk to, that she was lonely. Today was our fourth meeting. Mildred assigned to me because of my specialty in treating the sick and the elderly.

Staring at Mildred, I imagine myself years from now. No one to hold my hand as I slip away. A possibility after my fight with James this morning. 'You scared the shit out of Jess,' he said over breakfast after I woke from my stupor. 'She thought you were dead.'

I spilled some of the orange juice I was pouring. 'I'm sorry. I didn't know I would be out that deep or that long.'

He snorted. 'Oh, stop it, Ally. You're the fucking shrink. You know what those medicines do to you.'

He was right. I did know, but I took the pills anyway. It was bad yesterday and I wanted to forget. When I had nothing to say, James shook his head. 'Look what you're doing to Jess.'

Jess. She refused to look at me before she left for school this morning. Jess with her misty gray eyes, and her dogged attitude towards life — an attitude that only the young and foolish can pull off. She left with no kiss goodbye. Not even a 'See you later, Mum,' as she slammed the front door behind her, oversized backpack slung over one shoulder, dance bag swinging off the other, headphones blaring in her ears. I know I'm alienating my daughter with my erratic behavior, frightening her to death with my pills, but these days everything is about David. How can it not be?

'I can't do this anymore,' James said before he left for work. 'I'm moving out tonight.'

The velvet curtains in Mildred's room are slightly parted and the street lamp outside her window fills the bedroom with a yellow glow. I've always hated this time of day when light gives way to darkness. A wave of emotion stabs me in the chest and the pain makes me buckle. I don't bother to switch on the lights as I rummage through my bag, looking for my pills amidst my makeup, balls of tissue, and vials of drugs. One white tablet swallowed dry and I tell myself I'll be all right. I'll think about David when I don't have to worry about Mildred Turner.

Then I call the Hospital. Howard, Mildred's oncologist, jumps straight to attention. Considering how much Mildred pays the Hospital for its private medical care, it's no surprise the service is top notch. Conley Memorial in Marylebone only caters for those able to afford their premium rates. Mildred, being on their VIP list means she's at the top of the pecking order.

Howard tells me to wait with the body. It'll take half an hour for the response team to get here. No urgency now she's dead. In that time, I feel the pill start to take effect, smoothing out the rough edges inside me. A few minutes later, I'm almost back to my old self.

While I wait for the response team to arrive, I comb Mildred's hair out with her silver hairbrush and uncurl her fingers. Her body is stiff, her skin icy cold. I remember my last

session with Mildred, how there were moments when she would float into another space and time. Times when she was sharp and witty, able to converse on a myriad of topics, and other times, like last week when she was paralysed with fear, certain that her life would soon be over. At the time I thought Mildred's terror was part of her illness, her imagination gone feral but maybe even then, she'd already had a premonition of her imminent death after all.

Convinced Mildred looks decent, her hair spread out in a semi-circle around her head, fingers no longer claw-like, I head to the bathroom to clean myself up. The woman who looks back at me from Mildred's liver-spotted mirror is not someone I know. She's aged, grief adding years to her face. Apple cheeks, now gaunt; eyes rimmed red, peppered with flecks of mascara. Staring at myself, I wonder if I can face James when I get home — that is if my husband is still there. Perhaps this time, it's no longer a threat and he's moved out for real.

My stomach turns. Jess. What about Jess? Has James taken Jess with him? Or would she have refused to leave our family home? Is my daughter sitting alone in our darkening kitchen waiting for me? Suddenly, I'm desperate to see her.

I'm pacing back and forth on Mildred's plush pile carpet when the response team arrives. I'm relieved to find I've worked with the medical examiner before — Hubert, pointy head, six feet tall and burly. Gratefully, he ignores my puffy face, keeping everything professional as he addresses me. 'Caught a bad one, eh?' he asks.

'Yes, it's been a terrible day.'

Hubert bends over Mildred's body as he examines her. Grunts as he turns her over and gently lifts her white cotton nightgown to check for livor mortis. 'It looks like she's been dead between ten to twelve hours now,' he tells me.

I nod. 'That's the best way to go, really. Peacefully in your sleep.'

Hubert's big face wrinkles. 'I think you've got it wrong. Come and see.'

Stomach dropping, I step forward, and Hubert pulls Mildred's eyelids back with his

stubby fingers. I notice the petechia immediately, the whites of Mildred's eyes now completely red.

'And look at this.' Hubert points at the broken capillaries at the tip of her nose where pressure had been applied. When he tilts her head back, I see the thumb size bruising under her chin. Someone had forcibly held her mouth shut so she couldn't catch a breath.

'Yes, that's right,' Hubert says when he sees my expression. 'It looks as if she was smothered to death and there's nothing peaceful about that.'

Chapter 2

How could I have missed it? Mildred was murdered. The idea of her dying other than peacefully brings bile up my throat. Had she kicked her legs when she was suffocated? The thought makes the room spin and I have to force myself to stay on my feet.

While Hubert calls the police, I do my grounding exercise. I shut my eyes and brace myself, taking several deep breaths. Then, I stamp my feet, clench my stomach, lengthen my spine. I cross my arms in an X shape over my chest, squeezing one shoulder, then the other.

'Are you okay?' Hubert asks after he hangs up the phone.

I open my eyes. 'Are the police on their way?'

Hubert nods. 'They're sending a patrol car over right now. A detective will be here in the next hour or so.'

I swallow hard. 'I can't believe I didn't catch it. How could I have missed something like that?' Hubert runs a hand over his smooth scalp. 'She was old. She had cancer. There was no reason to think it was anything other than natural.'

I shake my head. 'No. I should have noticed. I should have — ' Should have what? Should have been less selfish? Focused on Mildred instead of me? If I had, I wouldn't have missed the signs so obvious now that I'm no longer trapped in my own pain. I was careless and it was unforgivable.

'Do you think it's the Angel of Death?' Hubert asks.

I sigh. I don't want to talk about the Angel but I know I must. That's the only thing everyone's been fixated on the last few months. Since the Angel's appearance, the country has been divided, some hailing the Angel's mercy killings as an act of compassion, others condemning them as murder. 'The papers say the Angel uses poisons on his victims,' I say. 'This seems far more violent.'

'Killing is killing,' Hubert says. 'It's all the same in the end.'

'You don't support what he's doing then?' I ask, recognising the judgment in Hubert's voice.

Hubert sighs. 'I don't know. It just doesn't seem right. My Mam suffered for a long time. Took nine whole years before she gave in to the cancer. She fought hard, Mam did, every single day so she could spend that little bit more time with us. What he's doing, the Angel, it's like he's telling everyone it's okay to give up.'

So much of me rebels against what Hubert is saying but I don't have the energy to retort. Not today. Not now. 'I need to call my daughter,' I say as I step into the hallway. Fingers suddenly too big for the keypad, I fumble with my phone.

'Mum,' Jess says, picking up after the third ring. 'Where are you?'

I'm relieved to hear her voice. 'Hey, honey. Something's come up. I'm stuck with a patient. Are you all right? Is Dad there?'

There's a pause. 'Dad left half an hour ago,' she says. 'He said he'll call you from the hotel. He had a suitcase. He — he...' and then she's crying, wracking sobs that break my heart.

'Jess, please,' I say, wanting to drop to my knees and cry with her. I'm about to tell her I love her when I hear voices and heavy footfalls from downstairs. 'I'm sorry but I need to go,' I say. 'I promise I'll be home soon.' Jess is still crying when we hang up.

The first to arrive are two uniformed policemen followed by the crime scene investigators. The officers ask me questions about finding the body then tell me to wait — a detective will be here soon. Twenty minutes later, he appears — a heavysset man with jowls that wobble as he climbs the stairs. For a while, I lose him amongst the crowd as he does a walk around. Pacing the hallway, phone clasped in my sweaty palm in case Jess calls, I wait another fifteen minutes for him to emerge again.

'I'm Detective Inspector Granger,' he says when he's standing in front of me. He gestures to the small squirrely man beside him. 'And this is Detective Inspector Hawkes. I hear you're the first on the scene. Dr Valor, is it?' He doesn't shake my hand. Up close, I see he has food stains on his tie and a smear of ketchup by the side of his lips.

'Yes,' I say. Determined to get this over with quickly, I repeat what I told the police officers earlier.

'Did you notice anything strange when you got here?' Granger takes notes, beefy fingers grasping a ballpoint pen. 'Did anything seem out of place? Was anyone lurking about?'

'No — I don't know,' I say. 'I can't tell you if anything's amiss.' I think back to the time I arrived. 'I do remember the house feeling empty. Quiet. Like no one had been in it recently.'

'So, no open windows. No doors left ajar?'

'Not that I remember. I got the key off a neighbour.'

Granger raises an eyebrow. 'A neighbour?'

'Mr Fogel,' I explain. 'He lives at number forty-six, across the road.'

'Was this the normal arrangement?'

I shrug. 'I suppose. Sometimes Mildred forgot things. Purse. Phone. Appointments. She always left a spare key with him just in case. She told me about it the first time we met. He was warned about my visits.'

'And the body is how you found it? You didn't touch it?'

'Only to check her pulse.'

Granger makes more notes. 'Didn't you suspect it was murder? When you found her like that?'

I repeat what Hubert told me earlier. 'She had cancer. She was old. I didn't look for evidence of foul play.'

Granger's expression tells me he doesn't think much of this — that he thinks me incompetent. When he holds his open palm out to me, I'm confused until he says, 'Mildred's key?'

I remove it from my pocket and place it in his hand.

'Thank you,' he says. 'And Dr Valor, we'll need to speak to you again soon. We'll be in touch.'

When I'm free to go, I run to the station. Changing at Waterloo, I make it in time to catch the next train to East Dulwich. On the way home, I can't settle and my mind races between Mildred and James — Mildred's violent death, and James' abrupt departure.

Mildred had spoken of death before. The last time we talked, she hadn't yet decided if she was ready to die. There were things she said she wanted to do, things she didn't elaborate on. Turning it over in my mind, I realise what bothers me is not so much Mildred's death but the rude way in which she was forced to leave this world. An exit without dignity or grace.

It matters how we die. It matters who decides, when, and why. It mattered with David and it mattered with Mildred. Mildred, now robbed of all those choices, every single one of them — even the right to choose not to choose at all had she handed God (or fate or whatever you want to call it) the right to play the ultimate hand.

As for James, the last few years have been difficult, both of us struggling to keep up the pretense of a marriage when we're both in love with other people. It's exhausting, constantly having to censor what we say each time we speak. We're pretending that the sickness in our marriage isn't real when what we really have is cancer — one so malignant we ought to be cutting it out with a knife. And Jess? How was she going to take all of this?

Fourteen minutes later, my head is still buzzing when the train stops at my station. More desperate than ever to see Jess, I jog to the house. When I get home, I don't bother to remove my coat as I clomp up the stairs in my boots. 'Jess?' I call before I reach her bedroom

door.

My daughter is sitting legs crossed on her bed with her back towards me. She's still in her school uniform — tie cast aside, green skirt bunched around her. She has her headphones on and she's bobbing her head to something. Polly, our mixed-breed mutt, is curled on the floor and thumps her tail when she sees me.

'Jess,' I say, climbing onto the bed and wrapping my arms around my daughter. She jumps at my touch and when she turns around, I see her face is streaked with tears. 'Mum,' she says, thin arms embracing me in return.

Holding her close, I realise that my daughter — so proud, so arrogant, so confident in her youth — has reverted to a child once more. A child adrift in a world where adults mess up with no one to clean after them. Even though I hate James for hurting Jess, a tiny part of me relishes having my daughter to myself, allowing me to mother her again. It's a role I've neglected for so long, grief and pills stripping away whatever motherly instinct I once had. I miss my daughter and I want her back but it's not easy to bridge the gap between two people when they're both so used to walking away from each other.

Outside her bedroom window, an engine revs and a car screeches down the road. In the distance, a solitary dog barks. 'Everything will be okay,' I say as I wrap my arms around Jess, shutting out the world.

She leans against me. 'How can you say that?' she asks. 'Dad's gone.'

I kiss the top of her head. 'We'll manage,' I say. 'I promise, Jess. I promise.' But even as I tell her this, I'm not so sure. How can anything ever be right again? Especially after David.

Chapter 3

Granger watches as the coroner bags Mildred Turner's body. Like Viv, Mildred's tiny and he feels his heart tug. For a moment, he has an irrational fear that it's Vic they're carting away in the black bag. He's about to call out to them to stop when he sees Hawkes eyeing him with a smirk.

Watch it, Granger tells himself. Pull yourself together. Now is not the time.

'Sir, are you all right?' Morgan asks beside him. She is staring at him in that way again. Like she wants to hand him a tissue and tell him everything will be just fine. Granger clears his throat and scowls at her for Hawkes sake. 'Where were we?' he asks gruffly.

Morgan reads out her notes. 'CCTV cameras in and out of the neighbourhood to be crosschecked against vehicles caught on camera during previous Angel attacks —'

'Yes,' he interrupts, 'as I was saying, I've spoken to the coroner's office and they've agreed to make this a priority. Forty-eight hours they've promised. So, put the pressure on SOCO. I want everything cross-examined against all the other Angel crime sites. And I want feet on the ground, officers knocking on every door within a two-kilometre radius. Roadblocks in place. Death was estimated to be around five and six am. Let's just hope some nosy old geezer with a bout of insomnia and a penchant for voyeurism saw something. God made curtain twitchers for a reason.'

Morgan scribbles furiously, taking notes like the star pupil she is. Just promoted to detective a year ago, Granger can smell the enthusiasm reeking off her like a cheap perfume. 'And I want to speak to all of Mildred Turner's medical team. Anyone who's been in contact with her. Doctors. Nurses. Administrators. The fucking janitor if I have to.'

'So, you reckon it's really the Angel?' Morgan asks.

Granger gives the bedroom a cursory glance. Everything is pristine in here, exactly

like the rest of the house. The walk-around he conducted earlier showed nothing amiss, nothing missing. The knick-knacks on Mildred's dressing table — half-empty bottles of perfume, a box of costume jewelry, a wooden cross with a rosary draped around it — looked untouched. No cupboards ransacked. Mildred's shapeless dresses, all smelling like talcum powder and potpourri, are still on their hangers. Her blouses and old lady underwear folded away neatly. 'It'll be a fucking shit storm if it is,' Granger says, 'but it well may be him. Mildred Turner was terminally ill and from the way the body was posed, it does look like our perpetrator. But we know better than to speculate. Let's wait for the coroner to come back. We can't assume anything so remove any blinkers you have on. Let's treat this like any other homicide until we're certain.

'And find out who benefits from Mildred's death. Who inherits her money? Her children? A second cousin? Or some cat charity in Chelsea. And I want a list of anyone who's been in this house in the last month. Who knows about the key? Friends? Family? We need fingerprints, DNA, the lot. Get DI Carolyn and DC Samuel to scrape a team together to cross-check everything between all the Angel vics immediately.'

Morgan is scribbling again, biting her bottom lip in concentration.

'And someone get hold of her son. He needs to know his mother's dead.' Granger glances at his watch. It's a quarter to one in the morning. He thinks about Viv at home, waiting for him

'How's the missus?' Hawkes asks.

As soon as the words pass Hawkes' lips, Granger kicks himself for being so obvious. 'She's fine,' he says quickly and cringes when Morgan gives him that look again. Determined to change the subject, Granger says, 'Let's make sure everyone keeps their mouths shut about this last body.' He looks pointedly at Hawkes. 'We don't need the press getting wind of it. We'll have the whole country in an uproar if they link another murder to the Angel.'

After that, he marches downstairs and heads to the house across the road. Number forty-six is a replica of Mildred's except for the cherry blossom growing in the front garden. Granger rings the doorbell. An elderly man in a tattered bathrobe answers the door. 'DCI Granger,' he says to the man. 'Are you Mr Fogel? May I have a word?'

The man nods. 'That's me. Is Mildred all right? I saw the commotion.'

Granger shakes his head. 'I'm afraid she's dead, sir. That's why I'm here.'

Fogel's mouth drops open.

'I understand you have a key to her house?' Granger asks. 'How many sets do you have with you?'

'Just the one.'

'And who knows about it?'

Fogel recites the names, counting them out on his fingers. 'Her son, Holden. A nurse that comes to visit. That psychiatrist who was here earlier, Ally something. The handyman, Tom. The cleaning lady.'

'Mildred seems to be very trusting,' Granger says.

'Only with people she could trust.' Fogel returns Granger's gaze steadily.

Granger clears his throat. 'Do people always return the key immediately after they're done with it?'

'Oh, yes,' Fogel says with a nod. 'I usually call to check if it's taking them too long to bring it back. I don't want to be responsible if it goes missing. I almost always have the key back within a day or two.'

'Does it happen often? People forgetting?'

Fogel cocks his head. 'Once with the maid and once with the handyman.'

'How long have you known Mildred Turner?'

Fogel sighs. 'We've lived across from each other for almost thirty years. I would say

pretty long.'

'Was she a good neighbour? Were you close?'

'I supposed. I used to play poker with her husband, Jim, before he died. My wife, Nelly, used to babysit her son.'

'And what was Mildred like?'

Fogel's eyes dart towards Mildred's house. 'She had a brilliant mind. Very inquisitive. And she was stubborn. Wouldn't give up a fight if she thought she was right. She used to drive Jim crazy like that.' He pauses. 'So what happened over there? How did she die?'

'I'm sorry,' Granger says, 'but I can't release that information. One last question, did you see anyone or anything suspicious in the early hours of the morning, say between five and six am?'

Fogel shakes his head. 'My wife, Nelly, used to say I sleep like the dead. I wouldn't know if a bomb dropped.'

'Did Nelly see anything? Can I speak to her?'

Fogel lowers his gaze. 'Nelly passed away five years ago now. So that would be a no.'

On the drive home, Granger kicks himself again for letting his defenses down in front of Hawkes. He knows the younger detective would nick his job in a second if he could. No two ways about it. Hawkes is unscrupulous and Granger's sure he's the one who's been leaking information to the papers. And the way Hawkes was ogling Valor. He would have told him to wipe the drool off his chin if they hadn't had an audience.

As for Valor, she was upset, distraught by the murder. Her hands shook the whole time he questioned her but there was something else about her that doesn't feel quite right. Something he can't quite put his finger on. He decides to file it away to process later as he climbs the stairs up to his bedroom.

Viv is in bed when he opens the door and peeps inside. She's lying on her back, her hair spread around her head like a crown. In the dim lighting, Vic looks like Mildred Turner and Granger's heart clenches. Viv is not Mildred, but he can't help tiptoeing over to her side of the bed to check. His heart releases its fist-like grip when he sees her chest move. She's breathing.

Viv, he cannot lose her. Not now. Not ever. He reaches out a hand to touch her but pulls back quickly. It's late and she must rest. Doctor's orders.

Undressing quietly, Granger hangs his suits up carefully. Then he returns his tie to its place on the rack. In their en-suite bathroom, he opens the cabinet to find that Viv's pills have been refilled. Herceptin. Perjeta. Guilt makes his stomach roll. He should have been there for her today. It's another doctor's appointment missed, another chance to be the doting husband gone. Suddenly, he's desperate to hold her.

He showers quickly, changes into his pajamas, then climbs into bed. When Viv snuggles against him, he pulls her close and shuts his eyes, relieved to feel her alive and breathing in his arms.

Chapter 4

Viv wakes to find Ed already dressed. He has a clean shirt on but his suit from the day before hangs off him limply. Viv's heart squeezes because she knows it kills Ed to go into work looking like this, especially when he's leading a case this big.

Sitting up in bed, she rubs the sleep from her eyes. The blinking numerals on her bedside table shows that it's just gone six in the morning. 'I'm sorry I couldn't make it to the dry cleaners,' she says to Ed's turned back. 'Your suits were ready yesterday.'

He is startled by the sound of her voice. 'Good morning,' he says, coming over and planting a kiss on her forehead. He smells like toothpaste.

'I'm really sorry about your suits,' she says again.

Perching on the edge of the bed, Ed grunts as he bends over to pull his socks on. 'Don't you worry about it. It's just a suit. If the team doesn't bloody like how I look, they can ask for a bloody transfer.'

'Bad night?' she asks.

He nods. 'It looks like there's been another Angel murder.'

'Another woman?'

He looks up. 'From what I understand, she was another terminal cancer patient.'

Viv tries not to flinch but it's too late and Ed catches sight of her expression. 'I'm the one who should be apologizing,' he says, face worried. 'I should have joined you at the doctor's. What did Dr Lim say?'

She drops her eyes. 'He says my recovery is on track.' The lie passes her lips without hesitation. 'No new tumors.'

The relief on Ed's face is instant. 'Thank God. And when's your next checkup?'

'In six months' time.'

Ed's big hand engulfs hers and Viv feels herself relax, fears of being less than what the world expects of her, evaporating. 'Let's celebrate tonight,' he says. 'I'll get us a bottle of Prosecco.' He's about to say something more when his pocket buzzes. He pulls out his phone, an old Nokia, and checks the screen. 'Lee wants a heads up before the briefing. I've got to run.'

'Off you go then,' she says. 'You don't want to keep him waiting.'

When she hears the front door slam, Viv climbs out of bed. Getting to her feet, she feels a little unsteady. There's a pounding in her head and an ache in her bones. In the bathroom, she relieves herself and flushes. Then she stands in front of the bathroom mirror and lifts up her blouse.

Each time she looks at her chest, at the surgical scars where her breasts used to be, she dies a little. She's never been a vain woman, but she's learned in recent years that she's far more conceited than she previously allowed herself to believe. She never realised how much her appearance mattered until Dr Lim took a scalpel to her body.

She runs her fingers down the thin red lines until she feels the soreness under her ribcage. Dr Lim said the results were conclusive. The cancer cells have spread to her bones. Three years it's been since the mastectomy. Three years the cancer's stayed away. Until now.

Viv thinks of the lies she told Ed earlier. She's known her fate for three months but has been unable to divulge the news. Her body is failing her and she needs time to deal with this fact on her own. To come to terms with how powerless she feels against the disease that ravages her.

When Ed said he wanted to join her for her appointment with Dr Lim yesterday, she panicked. She told him it was a routine visit and was relieved when he called to say another murder had been committed and he wouldn't be able to make it. And thank God he hadn't. Heading over to see Dr Lim, she still harboured some hope that the doctor would tell her that

her cancer was in remission, that the chemotherapy treatments worked even if Dr Lim did make it clear from the beginning that the chances were slim — if non-existent.

He didn't. Instead, Dr Lim asked, 'Have you informed Edward yet? I'm sure he'll want to know how he can support you. You can't keep hiding the truth from him.'

Viv hadn't replied. She didn't know how to tell Dr Lim that she couldn't. It wasn't that she didn't want to tell Ed. She'd intended to do so every day for months but the time was never right. It wasn't last night when Ed came home exhausted from work. And this morning, well, this morning, she just couldn't bring herself to say the words.

Six months to a year, that's all the time Dr Lim has given her. Six months to a year for the disease to eat its way through her body. She examines her face in the bathroom mirror. She still looks healthy. Somewhat. On the outside, there are no signs yet of the disease but she knows it won't be long now before her skin turns sallow.

She thinks of Ed, of the bottle of wine he will be opening tonight, and bile collects at the back of her throat. She knows she's not being fair to Ed and the guilt makes her nauseous. She vomits into the toilet bowl. When she feels better, she takes two tablets and stumbles back to bed. She's so tired. Her eyes are closing. She can't help them. Her last thought before she falls asleep is of Ed. She must go to the dry cleaners today. She can't leave Ed without a clean suit for tomorrow.