

## Tuesday 23 February

### 4.15 a.m.

She's not sure if her eyes are tricking her or not, but the quality of the light seems to be changing again, and Imelda prays that it means dawn isn't far off.

She's not doing well. She's sore all over, and that ache in her right side that not so long ago felt manageable as long as she didn't move isn't just an ache any more. It's a hot, radiating pain. Although she's pretty sure she still can't feel her legs, she can also weirdly feel pain in them, which is a contradiction she can't explain but is just the way it is. Her head is full of pounding pain – the worst headache she's ever had – and the pounding is also in her face, which feels swollen and feverish.

And flip, she's thirsty.

She's spent the last few hours – it's felt like days – trying to distract herself by remembering how she and Dewald met, and their 'whirlwind romance' (it's what they call it when they refer to it to each other – they both enjoy the silliness of it), and their marriage, and their life since. And it's worked, up to a point. But now all she can think about is how much she needs water.

She stares out of the passenger window, through the trees – searching for visible light or movement, for anything to break the terrible monotony of this endless flippen night. But all remains darkish and still.

She'd got married in a dress she'd bought at the town's secondhand – 'pre-loved' – clothes shop. It was pale blue, knee length, with cap sleeves and a sweetheart neckline – not most people's idea of a wedding dress, but she loved it.

Dewald had paid for it, although she had refused to let him see it until their wedding day. It had been on sale because it was a summer dress and she'd bought it in the middle of winter.

flipped

By some miracle the late-July day when they got married had dawned clear and had warmed up so much by early afternoon that when they had to present themselves at the magistrate's office, she hadn't even had to use the woolly cardigan she'd bought to go with it.

Dewald had worn jeans and a smart shirt, pale yellow. He had looked so handsome.

They had put a picnic together – just egg-mayo sandwiches and a bottle of sparkling wine, and some crisp green apples – and driven to the river, where they'd had their 'reception'. The river back then was overfull. It had broken its banks already once that winter and drowned the vineyards alongside. The water was fast-moving and noisy.

Dewald had used the wine to toast her: 'To the bride.'

'To the groom,' she'd countered with a smile.

They were a perfect family of two. Imelda had never believed in love at first sight, or that there was only one special someone out there for each person on earth. It just seemed so completely unlikely that out of seven billion people, there was one made exactly for her. But it turned out there really was, and that he'd found her. They'd found each other.

Even now, hanging upside down in her crashed car, with pain in every part of her body and her tongue grotesquely swollen from injury and lack of water, she gives a tiny grin: she can hardly believe how lucky she's been.

They had only known each other for two weeks when they got married but it had felt, right from the start, as if they'd known each other forever – from other lives, maybe. She felt that Dewald got her on a level she'd never experienced before, and she knew that he felt the same. He told her often enough.

They'd had the 'children or no children' talk early on. It

had, in fact, been among their first conversations, as if they'd both known by some sort of instinct that it was an important subject to address. Neither wanted children. Neither had had a happy time growing up; both had had parents who had at best disappointed them and at worst made their lives a misery. They had no wish to either revisit this with their own offspring, even if not intentionally, or to try to correct the wrongs of the past by doing it over again.

'Just you and me,' Dewald had said, holding Imelda tightly in his arms on their wedding night. With perfect timing, the rain had started again in the early evening, and by the time they'd got into bed, it was bucketing down outside. Their little home was a warm cocoon, their double bed a nest.

'Just you and me,' she tries to whisper to herself, remembering, but her throat is too dry to produce recognisable sounds.