

# Twin Turmoil

By

Vanessa Brooks

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## For my friend Annie

This book is a work of fiction and except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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# Prologue

Josie Carter tossed the cardboard box onto her sofa and kicked off her shoes. Padding barefoot around the breakfast bar into the kitchen area, she opened her fridge and grabbed a diet coke. Before she could open it, her mobile chirruped and she set the ice-cold can down on the kitchen counter and read the text. *Have you decided yet?* It was from her boyfriend, Max. She texted him back: *No, you said I had until Friday!*

Josie wandered back into the living room and realized that the box she had launched at the sofa had bottomed out and the contents were spilling everywhere. She sighed and went to retrieve a heavy crystal vase that had probably been the cause of the collapse due to its weight. It had been her mother's favorite vase. Her English great-grandmother, Susan St. Clare, had given it to Josie's mom as part of her mother's wedding gift when Josie's parents had married. She picked up the vase and set it on the counter, out of harm's way. The vase didn't quite fit in with Josie's minimalist décor, but she wanted to keep it as a reminder of her departed mother.

Josie's mother had died two years ago from bowel cancer. It had been a terrible time for all the family, especially for her father. Josie was pleased that he had sold the family home near San Diego and bought himself a condo. The new place was a much better fit for him as he was nearer to the golf course where he practically lived nowadays. Visiting the family home had been a painful reminder to Josie that Mom had gone; salt in the wound as she used to say.

So Josie had been there today helping her Dad make the new condo homey and he had given her a box of Mom's memorabilia to take home with her.

Still sipping from the can of coke, Josie pushed the box along the sofa and sat beside it, delving into it randomly with her free hand. She lifted out her Mom's old year book from school and flicked through it briefly before setting it aside and digging into the box again. This time she brought out an old hard backed writing pad. Josie flicked it open; it seemed to be some kind of diary but not in her mother's handwriting. Setting the coke down on the floor next to the sofa, she flicked open the book to the first page. Her Grandmother Nicola's diaries... wow! Why did her Mom have this?

Josie's grandparents were both psychology experts, specializing in working with teenagers. They had run a boot camp for wayward teens on their ranch in California for years. Three years ago, they had retired and moved to Corbin's Bend. The community was located near Denver, where Josie's grandfather had grown up.

Because Josie's mother had been diagnosed with cancer at about that time, Josie had never visited their new home. There had been no time for visiting once her mother had become terminally ill. Her Grandmother Nicola had come and stayed with them, nursing her dying daughter with love and deep sorrow, all the while giving comfort and support.

After her Mom's funeral, Josie's grandparents had encouraged her to get on with her own life, to finish her education and training as a nurse. They offered their home to Josie as a safety net, any time Josie should need their love and support. So far she hadn't the time to visit them in Colorado.

Settling herself comfortably against the cushions, Josie began to read.

1967

*To exorcise my ghosts I have written my story down. Perhaps someday my children and grandchildren will want to read my tale but for now this is just for me, to help me process the trauma of my recent past.*



## Chapter One - Shock

I struggled to get the key into the lock. It was no easy task with my arms full of shopping bags and wet hair dripping into my eyes. Swearing gently under my breath, I stabbed at the lock and at last the door swung inwards. As I stumbled inside, I caught sight of myself reflected in the hall mirror, and I stuck out my tongue at the bedraggled apparition. "So much for capable and well groomed," I muttered with disgust; the cold March day had done its worst.

It was proving more difficult than I had thought, pursuing a career in the world of publishing. I had to maintain the highest standards of appearance if I was to compete with my male colleagues. Although I was hopeful that one day I would be a full-fledged editor, I was at present a sub-editor in a small publishing house that dealt with mainly medical publications. Publishing was a hard industry to break into as a woman, even with a first class degree in English Literature.

Dumping the groceries bags onto the table in the hallway, I made my way through to my bedroom while flicking through the handful of mail I had retrieved on my way inside. Bills, bills.... and, yes... more bills. I threw the offending letters onto the bed and, shivering violently now, quickly stripped off my wet clothes. In the bathroom, I turned on the bath taps and filled the tub with steaming hot water.

Climbing in, I leaned against the back of the bathtub and sighed. Closing my eyes, I let the heat soothe and warm me as images of my horrible day passed across my closed lids. Unusually clumsy, I had started the morning badly by spilling my precious early tea all over today's copy. Strangely, I had felt emotional and close to tears all day, yet my period wasn't due for another fortnight or so. I always got emotional and weepy just before a period, whereas my mother always seemed to sail through hers without a hiccup—typical. "Don't go there!" I spoke aloud. The last person I wanted to think about after the horrible day I had just endured was my dearest mama.

A foul and disjointed day it had been, but it was behind me now, and I gradually eased and let the stress drain away. I gave myself up to pure physical relaxation, contemplating with pleasure an evening at home in front of the newly acquired television set, perhaps even one of the first colour television sets in my apartment building. How cool was that?

The simple chore of preparing my supper soothed my rattled nerves. I carried my meal through to the sitting room and switched on the electric fire. Wearing my bathrobe, I sat down with a bowl of steaming tomato soup and crackers balanced on my knees. After turning on the television set, I took a few spoonfuls of soup while I waited for the television to warm up. When it finally came into focus, I froze, paralysed by the unbelievable sight of an image of *my face* filling the small bulbous television screen. My tray slipped unnoticed to the floor, while I jumped up and fumbled uselessly with the knobs on the set frantically trying to turn up the sound. By the time I managed to do so, the piece ended and the reporter had moved on to the next news item.

A repetitive ringing penetrated my brain, drowning out the sound of the television, which now blared out something about the forthcoming London political elections. Then it dawned on me, the noise—it was the telephone! I stumbled on the discarded tray, slipping and burning my bare foot in the hot soup. Muttering crossly, I managed to reach the phone and grab it, "Chelsea, two, four, one," I bellowed above the now blaring television.

"Darling, you're home!"

"Mother?"

"Look," she interrupted. 'I assume you've seen the news?"

"Yeah—"

"Darling listen, I don't want you to worry. I'm going to send Jenkins over with the Rolls because I want you to come and stay here tonight."

"Mother do you know anything about this? What is going on? How did you pull this one off? The news—the photograph it was—*me!*"

"Look, Nicola darling, I cannot talk to you about this over the telephone. Just come here a.s.a.p. please."

"Come on, Mother, out with it. Did you give them my photograph? What is going on... is this some kind of a hoax? Because I can tell you now that I am not amused!"

"Please, Nicky... there are... things. Oh dear, I must *see* you... *talk* to you. I can't do this over the telephone. Just throw some bits and bobs into a bag and Jenkins will be there shortly. Nicky? Nicola? Do you hear me? Are you still there, darling?"

"What the *hell* is going on, Mother?"

"I left several messages at your firm today asking you to contact me."

*Yes, I know, and I ignored them all, just as I always do when I am at work. I knew from past experience what sort of trivia my mother considered important.* I dragged a hand through my damp hair. I didn't know what to think. My blasted mother, what had she done now? Knowing from past experience that I would get nowhere questioning her over the telephone, I acquiesced.

"I'll be with you shortly... oh, and, Mother?"

"Yes, dear?"

"This had better be good!"

I slammed down the phone and wrapped my arms around myself, shut my eyes and shuddered. All day I had felt off-key, sort of unbalanced with an overpowering sense of impending doom. What was this piece about me on the news and how had they gotten hold of a photograph of me? Mother perhaps was trying to impress some friend or other, but it seemed incredible and unlikely that a news researcher had allowed some sort of practical joke. I hurried into my bedroom to pack an overnight bag.

After the short drive to my mother's house, Jenkins carried my holdall up the steps and into the hall; I knew that insisting that I carry my own bag was a complete waste of breath. Jenkins had been with my mother for the last fifteen years. He was a gentle, shy Welsh man with a will of iron and a heart of butter. He adored my silly mother. He was happily married to my mother's housekeeper-cook, Dilys. Between them, the pair cosseted and spoiled my selfish and infuriating mother. She, in return for their loyalty, bought them a cottage in Wales so that they could be near their family. They spent holidays and the odd weekend up there, generally when my mother was away herself. The plan was to retire there together, but I privately think it unlikely that they will ever leave my mother, so devoted are they to her. However, I hope they will because they deserve time to themselves after the years spent chasing around after the extremely demanding Susan St. Clare.

Knowing that my mother would be in her drawing room, I headed up the stairs. Out of habit, I tapped lightly on the door before entering. She called out, her voice wavering slightly, "Nicola is that you, darling? Come in, do."

Standing before the fake log fire was my mother. Her slight, straight body was clothed in black and her perfectly made up face looked pale. From the doorway, I could see that she had been crying. "Mother, are you feeling quite all right... whatever is wrong?" My anger towards her dissipated with concern; she *never* cried. Quickly, I crossed the room and hugged her small frame. She allowed me that brief contact, even leaning into me slightly before stepping deftly away.

"Sit down, Nicola, please, what I have to tell you won't be easy for either of us." I did as she asked, taking a seat next to the fire, grateful on this occasion for the overly warm room and comforting blaze. My mother stood and smoothed her hands nervously down her Jaeger skirted hips. She stood turned away from me as she began to talk in a low voice. I felt uneasy at her obvious distress as my mother was normally always so very sure of herself. This behaviour was not like her at all.

After a few false starts, she began again in that strained voice. "I married very young you see, very rashly in a whirlwind of romance. Not a suitable man, my father said, and that was putting it rather politely."

"Not cool, Mother. I know all this, please just tell me why my picture was on the news bulletin tonight!"

"Nicola, please be patient. I have to tell you the whole story. Just listen please and stop interrupting me. Where was I? Ah yes, your father. He was a bear of a man—a veritable giant—larger than life in every way. In his laugh, his capacity for joy, his gargantuan appetite, oh how that man could eat and make... hmm, anyway, he had tremendous drive and energy." She fell silent, lost in thought.

Confused, I waited. As far as I knew, my father had never been described thus before. He was rarely mentioned while I was growing up. I had assumed his death had been a huge blow to my mother, one that meant she could not bring herself to mention his name due to the weight of her grief. As I grew older, I refrained from asking questions about him out of consideration for her feelings. When I was about six-years-old, my maternal grandparents had died in a car accident while on holiday on the continent. Thus, I had no close family to question about my father. I had been told that his parents had died before I was born.

Suddenly, she swung around to face me and looked at me with such a strange and wistful expression. "Forgive me, Nicola," she pleaded softly. Alarmed, I stood up but she shook her head at me and flapped her hand, indicating that I should stay where I was. I lowered myself back into the chair.

"Mother, you must tell me what the matter is. I can't help you unless you tell me what is wrong."

She walked over and lifted her hand to my cheek, resting it there in an uncharacteristic caress. "My darling, I have lied to you... oh for the very best of intentions, but I have lied nonetheless. I do hope you will understand that when I explain to you..."

"Explain what? Just tell me, Mother!"

Taking a deep breath and straightening up, she said, "Your father is *not* dead, Nicola. He is very much alive and is on his way over from the United States to meet with you." I stared at her in shock. My father *alive*... on his way to meet me? How and... why?

I realised that I was standing beside the fireside chair with no recollection of moving there. My mother walked to the drinks table and poured me a drink. When she handed me a glass of scotch, I took it gratefully even though I only usually drank wine. I took comfort from a mouthful of amber liquid which warmed me through.

"Nicky there is more... but first let me tell you that I love you more than anyone in the world and that I would not deliberately hurt you for anything. Nicola?"

I roused myself and stared at her, was this the mother I thought I knew so well? I shivered. "What is his name—*my father*?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"Carl Keedon."

"Not the motel millionaire?" Keedon Motels were situated in every state of America; the distinctive C.K. interwoven logo a familiar sight to travellers. The appeal was universal, people knew what to expect from a Keedon motel. Each room was decorated in the same way using the same colour scheme. The menu offered the same choices whether you were in California or New Hampshire. The quality was consistently good and affordable. It was a new idea, a motel chain identical in every way, throughout every state. It was a highly profitable venture that had turned Carl Keedon into a millionaire.

My mother continued. "That's right. Carl and I met at the Torrington's end-of-war celebration party. As soon as I saw Carl, I knew I had to have him. Today, we would have simply had a torrid affair and gone our separate ways, but our parents were such a strong influence on both of us, and so we were married. We lived on his parents' ranch in Arizona and, at first, everything was fine. At that time, he was at the very beginning of his business venture. I travelled with him whenever he was away on business trips investigating suitable locations to build his motels. Then a year after our marriage, I discovered that I was pregnant. Carl was an old-fashioned sort, pig headed and stubborn; he stopped me travelling with him. I was to stay on the ranch with his mother. Well, you know me, darling, I need people, not cows, and I became lonely and bored. I would have followed him on his travels regardless, except that the doctor discovered... something... rather unusual about my pregnancy."

She faltered and reached for her drink, and to my amazement, she downed her glass of scotch in one swallow. She carefully replaced the glass on the small table. "You see, darling, I was expecting twins and I had to rest all the time." She stopped speaking and looked at me. I stared back at her not allowing any thought into my mind—I didn't dare to think.

"Go on," I said softly.

"Ellie, Carl's mother, your grandmother, was ill at that time, lung cancer. Shortly after the babies were born, she died. I was very depressed and so very unhappy. The marriage had been a mistake; we had nothing in common and I was so very homesick. I tried, Nicola, I really did. Then I found out that your father was having an affair, and I decided to leave, but he wouldn't let me take my babies! He said he loved you both too much. He was a good father; I have to admit that. He doted on you both, adored you, actually I was even jealous... yes, of my own daughters!"

"Daughters, plural?" I queried dully, *for I knew*, deep in my soul I had always known.

"Yes, Nicola, you and your twin... your sister, Claire."

She carried on talking trying to justify what she and my father had done. We looked alike, and so they each took one of us and felt it was a good compromise. I sat heavy with silent horror.

I had seen the 1961 film *The Parent Trap*. It had starred the actress Hayley Mills—she had played both of the twins in the film. Separated as babies, each parent had taken a twin and raised her, without either of the girls realising that they had a twin sister. In a chance encounter at a summer camp, the twins realise they are sisters and work out what their parents have done. Each twin swap places with the other, so that they could each meet the other parent. The film ends happily with the parents reunited and the family together once more.

My mother knew that I had been fascinated by that film. I had talked about it for some time afterwards; I even asked her if I had a twin living somewhere since the story in the film had got under my skin in such a peculiar way. She had laughed, teasing me about liking such a childish film. Over the years, I have thought about that film many times, always with a deep and unexplained longing.

As I sat in the overheated room, my skin prickled and burned. Inside me, anger steamed and rose up like molten lava, filling me, bubbling and boiling, desperate for release. With a rush of uncontrolled rage, I leapt forward and slapped her silly, selfish, face.

"How could you!" I said, hissing with rage, pushing my face into hers, this woman, my mother, whom I had trusted had betrayed me. She had betrayed my twin, and she had denied me the right of a father, a sister, a twin sister. Oh God, a *twin sister*! All fluent command of the English language deserted me; I was speechless with disbelief and absolute fury.

A sudden terrible thought jumped into my mind. "The face on the news, tell me..." Her face had already been pale but now was white. She shook her head, and a tear rolled down her face.

But of course I knew.

Hadn't I felt it all day?

*I was the Sycamore seed that would no longer spin joyously in the autumn breeze, for I had lost my other half, and I fell sickeningly to the ground.* Suddenly, I felt so alone. My mouth was dry, and I felt desperate. The vitriol poured out of me in a vicious torrent bursting forth towards my mother.

"I asked you if I had a twin!" I think I was screaming at her, so wild and livid was I—so hurt. "You lied about my father... lied about my twin! You... utterly... deceitful... bitch! When I think..."

"Stop right there! I'd say that will just about do. Not-one-more-word-comes out of your mouth, young lady—not if you know what's good for you!"

I spun around in shocked surprise at the sound of the man's voice booming into the room. A large man, with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair, was standing on the threshold of the drawing room. My impression was of a man with a heavy jaw line and deep craggy face; his eyes were the deepest blue.

"If you want to blame anyone, Nicola, then blame me. Blame..." he paused and stared intently at me, "*your father.*"

I stiffened, rigid with shock, unable to speak. He moved swiftly for a large man and caught me as I swayed. The blessed darkness washed over me, ending for a while at least, the horror of it all.