

reassuring.

‘I’m glad that’s over. How’re you doing, girls?’

Nicole answered for both of them, an unsteady smile of relief on her face. Beside her, even Geneviève was smiling now. ‘Fine... now. I was scared stiff back there. We only just got away in time, didn’t we?’

Lucy managed to smile back at them, but she was in no doubt that she would relive the past twenty-four hours in her dreams – or more probably nightmares – for a long time to come. ‘But we got away, and that’s what counts. I just hope Miriam and the others managed to get far enough away as well.’

The helicopter made another sudden change of direction and she caught hold of the side of the seat for support. Determined to do her best to keep her companions – and herself – feeling positive, she decided to move the conversation on.

‘What are your plans now? A holiday?’

Geneviève shook her head. ‘I’m getting out. I’m afraid I’ve had enough. I’ve been thinking about it for months now, but this was the last straw.’

‘What? Giving up MSF?’

‘Afraid so. I’ve served my time. You’ve been at it even longer than me, haven’t you? Don’t you want to get out?’

Lucy hadn’t had much time to consider her future recently. For the past couple of fraught days it had been the present that had fully occupied her mind. She leant back and thought about it. Médecins Sans Frontières had been her life for the past four years. It was almost two years since she had been back to the UK and since then she had been here in Mabenta. She knew she needed a break. Even before this latest offensive, she had been feeling very run-down and she had no doubt that any doctor would have diagnosed her as suffering from

acute mental and physical strain and probably the onset of exhaustion. She had self-diagnosed extreme stress, but had chosen to tell nobody and had resisted the temptation to raid the medicine cabinet for tranquillisers. One thing was for sure: she needed to take it easy for a bit. Whether the time had come to follow Geneviève's example and pack it in completely was something she would have to think about. Seriously.

‘I'm not sure how long I want to go on, but I certainly think it might be a good idea to take a break. Maybe I'll take a holiday.’

‘That sounds good. Where'll you go?’

That wasn't so easy. Her mum and dad had sold their little house and moved to the seaside town of Budleigh Salterton in Devon a couple of years ago and Lucy had only been there once for a week. Their new flat was very comfortable and it had lovely views of the English Channel, but it didn't feel like home

and Lucy had been bored out of her skull within days. Of course she would go and see them, but then she knew she would need a real holiday somewhere where the average age wasn't in the late sixties. She only had a few friends back in London, none especially close, so she could pretty much choose to go wherever she wanted. One thing was for sure – it wasn't going to be Africa, at least not for a while.

'I'm not sure.' Then it came to her. 'Wait a minute. What am I talking about? Of course I know where I'm going. I've got a really close friend in Italy who's getting married next month. I told her I wasn't going to be able to go to the wedding, but maybe I can now if I'm out of a job for a while. I'll have to talk to the powers-that-be in Kinshasa.'

'Whereabouts in Italy?' Nicole was from southern France, not far from Avignon. 'I've never been to Italy, but our town's full of Roman remains and I know I'd love to visit

Rome.'

'A bit further north. My friend Daniela lives in Tuscany. Ever heard of Siena?'

'Yes, of course, and I've seen photos. Isn't that where they have the crazy horse race around the main square?'

The engine note suddenly changed as the helicopter banked sharply to the left and they clung onto each other for physical and moral support. Maybe, Lucy thought to herself, she had been a bit hasty in telling the pilot how much she now loved this form of transport. Trying hard to sound resolute, she did her best to carry on the conversation as if nothing had happened.

'The Palio, yes. That takes place every summer. I've only ever seen it once, but it was exciting and historically fascinating.'

'You've always had a thing for history, haven't you?'

'If I hadn't done medicine, I'd have loved to