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This Child
of Mine



Would you take a child, to save its life?



London, June 2011

Sophie sank back in the couch and put her bare feet up on the coffee-table. It was one of those hot, sticky London summer evenings. Holly came in with two glasses of wine and plonked down beside her. 'Anything good on?' she asked, as Sophie channel-surfed.

'Nothing. Oh, hang on,' Sophie stopped on BBC1. They were interviewing some artist. The camera was showing an enormous orange canvas.

'Oh, God, no!' Holly groaned. 'Not another artist. You're obsessed. I know I'm never going to see you next year when you're at art college. You'll be too busy with all your arty-farty friends for me.'

Sophie smiled. 'Holly, you've been my best friend for as long as I can remember. You'll never get rid of me. I love coming to your house.'

'I should think so, too.' Holly grinned, as she sipped her drink.

Sophie turned back to the TV. The artist's name was Laura something, and she was Irish – Sophie could tell by her accent: she sounded a bit like her mum. The interviewer asked Laura about the orange painting.

Laura explained that she had painted the picture the previous year, on the day of her daughter's birthday, and that orange was the colour she saw when she felt pain.

Holly stared at Sophie. 'That's just like you.'

Sophie sat forward to listen closely.

'Your synaesthesia has influenced a lot of your painting, hasn't it?' the interviewer said. 'Could you explain how the condition affects your life?'

'Having synaesthesia has made me see the world differently from most people. As an artist, it's a blessing. I don't see emotions,

I see colours. I visualize numbers and letters as colours. Music translates to colour. Everything is illuminated. And the real beauty of it is that everyone with synaesthesia has their own palette of colours. So we all see things in a unique way.'

Sophie was riveted.

'What colours do you find come up most regularly?' the interviewer asked.

'Well, blue is my happy colour, orange is pain and green is fear.'

Holly turned to Sophie. 'You see? You're not the only freak in the world.'

The camera panned from the orange canvas to another painting, a purple and green one. The interviewer asked Laura about it – she had just sold it to the rock star Hank Gold for two hundred thousand euros.

'It's nice to have finally found a level of success after years of struggling, but money is not what drives me.'

'What does?' the interviewer asked.

'Regret,' she said softly.

'Does that have to do with your baby daughter drowning all those years ago?' he probed.

There was silence. All you could see was the purple and green canvas, and all you could hear was Laura's laboured breathing.

'It must have been a terrible time for you,' the interviewer suggested.

'It still is,' she whispered.

'And they never found your little girl's body,' he noted.

'No, and I believe she's still out there.'

'Do you?' He sounded surprised.

'Yes.' Laura's voice grew stronger. 'I never believed she drowned. I always hoped I'd find her or that someone would discover her and bring her home to me.'

The camera moved from the painting to Laura's face.

Holly gasped. 'Oh, my God!'

Sophie's glass hit the floor and shattered into a thousand pieces.

PART I

Then

I.

Anna

December 1992

Anna beamed at herself in the bathroom mirror. Carefully, she applied makeup to hide her green complexion. Never had she been so thrilled to feel sick. The worse she felt, the happier she was. She hummed as she put on her mascara.

Barry came in and kissed her cheek. 'I'm off, early meeting. See you about seven.'

'OK. I'm going to yoga at six thirty so I'll be home after that.'

'Yoga?' Barry said. 'Are you sure that's a good idea?'

Anna smiled. 'It's fine. Honestly, this time is going to be different. I'm not scared or worried. I know that my mum sent me this one. I know this one's a keeper. Besides, yoga is one of the few things I can do with this big bump.'

'OK, but please don't overdo it. Take it easy.'

Anna turned away from the mirror and placed her hand gently on her husband's arm. 'Before Mum died, she promised me she'd send me a baby. This is her gift to me. Nothing is going to go wrong this time. I promise.'

Barry attempted a smile. 'I hope you're right.'

He left for work and Anna continued layering on her makeup. She hated anything tight around her bump, so she opted for a black shift dress and her flat black boots. She had promised the kids she'd make Santa Clauses with them today so she had bought a big bag of cotton-wool balls, glitter, glue, twenty paper plates and twenty red markers.

She packed the materials into her backpack and headed off to

school. If it wasn't raining, Anna liked to walk. It took half an hour and it cleared her head so that when she reached the school gates, she had left her worries behind and could focus on teaching.

Of course, there had been many days over the last few years when she hadn't been able to leave her troubles behind. There had been some days when getting up at all had been a struggle. Days when she had literally had to drag herself out of bed and ask Barry to help her get dressed because she was crying so much she couldn't see the buttons on her shirt. Days when she had been catatonic with grief and wanted nothing more than to pull the duvet over her head, curl up in the foetal position – which was ironic when you thought of it – and grieve for the children she'd never have.

Seven miscarriages in five years. The longest she'd managed to hold on to a baby was fourteen weeks. That had been the hardest one. She'd finally made it past the three-month mark, had allowed herself to hope, to get excited . . . and then it was gone. Snatched away from her. That had been number five. The last two she had lost at seven and nine weeks. And then her mum had got sick and she'd put everything on hold to look after her. She was an only child and her dad had died when she was twenty-three, so there was no one else. She was all her mum had. Ovarian cancer, the silent killer, the doctor called it. And it had been – silent and deadly. Within four months her mother was gone.

But even then she'd only taken four full days off work. She didn't like letting the kids down. She was their only stability. Their little lives were filled with drugs, alcohol, abuse, poverty, neglect and violence. How could she, the one constant in all that, disappoint them? She couldn't. So even on those days when she had woken up feeling as though she was drowning, as if the water was coming up and engulfing her, dragging her down into the depths of depression, even on those days she had got out of bed and gone to work.

She had always been glad she had, because when she saw their little faces, her heart lifted. She had recognized in their eyes some of the grief she felt. They had no choice, no way out. They were

stuck with deadbeat dads and alcoholic mums. They were trapped in homes where love was a distant memory. Where cruel words and violence were a daily occurrence, hugs and clean clothes an anomaly. Where help was not at hand because overworked social workers were crumbling under the weight of their caseloads.

Anna had received the precious gift of a happy childhood. She had been loved, cherished, encouraged and nurtured in every way. It was something most of her pupils would never experience, so she felt it was her duty to show them that there was another way. She wanted to show them that their dysfunctional lives were not 'normal'. She wanted to give them love, kindness, affection, warmth and, most of all, hope.

Anna knew that school for most of those children was a sanctuary, the one place where they could be at peace for a few hours. Barry told her she put far too much energy into teaching a bunch of kids who were just going to end up being junkies, like their parents. In the seventeen years that Anna had been teaching at the school, the majority of her students had not grown into upstanding citizens, but a handful had got jobs that didn't involve criminal activity and two had even gone on to college. It was a meagre statistic, but it still made her proud to know that, in some small way, she had helped those children. That when they had come to her at five years of age, she, their first ever teacher, had paved the way for something better. She clung to those success stories and tried every day to do her very best for the children.

She got to school early and set up for the day. She liked to have everything ready for the children when they arrived. They found the familiarity of the classroom and the structure in their day reassuring. At nine o'clock they came streaming in. She had twenty in her class this year: eleven boys and nine girls. Of those twenty, she had six very bad cases. Three single mums who were alcoholics, one single mum who was a junkie and had moved in with a well-known drug dealer, another single mum whose husband was in prison for armed robbery, and one mother who was routinely physically abused by her boyfriend.

Each year, when the children arrived on their first day, she could tell immediately which ones were neglected. There were the obvious signs, like dirty clothes, head lice, no coats or warm jumpers, but then there were the other things – language delay, stuttering, low self-confidence, inability to engage in any class-work. There were also the children who reacted outwardly instead of inwardly to their unhappy situations: they were hyper-active, destructive, disruptive, couldn't sit still or concentrate for more than a minute on anything.

This year she had one very difficult boy, Ryan. His mother was addicted to crystal meth and his dad was serving fifteen years for armed robbery. Ryan was very physical and difficult to manage, but Anna loved him. She could see through his aggression. Behind it, he was just a scared, scarred five-year-old, who was completely neglected. She was determined to try to show him another way.

The children ran into the classroom and those who had coats took them off. Ryan, Kylie, Francie and Jason never had coats. Anna sat the children down in a circle on the floor and asked them to talk about their weekend and to tell her about the good things or the bad things that had happened.

Sally went first. 'My mammy took me to the cinema.'

'Wow, that's great! How about you, Ronan?'

'I fell off me bike and hurted me leg.'

'Oh, you poor thing – is it OK now?' Anna asked.

'Yes, Mrs Roberts, it is. My mammy put a big plaster on it.'

'Good. Derek, how was your weekend?'

'Shite. Me da was pissed drunk and stood on my Lego what I'd just spented an hour making.'

'Derek, you know we don't curse in class, it's not nice. I'm sorry your Lego was broken. Were you able to fix it?'

'Me ma told me da he was a useless fucker – oops, sorry, Mrs Roberts – but that's what she said. And she maded him fix it, so it's OK now.'

Anna moved on to Kylie. 'How about you?'

Kylie shrugged. 'Nothing.'

‘Did anything happen?’

‘I dunno.’

‘Were you inside all weekend or did you go out anywhere?’ Anna prodded. ‘Did anything bad happen? Anything that made you sad?’

Kylie stared at the floor. ‘Me ma fell down the stairs and me granny haded to call an ambooance and she haded to get ten of them stitches here.’ She pointed to her eyebrow.

‘I’m sorry to hear that, Kylie. Your poor mum and poor you. You must have got a terrible fright.’

‘There was lots of blood.’

‘Oooooooh!’ The other children were impressed.

‘Millions of blood.’ Kylie warmed to her theme, enjoying the rare attention. ‘Blood everywhere. On the walls and the carpet and it was all squirting out of her head.’

‘OOOOOOOOH!’ Her classmates liked this detail.

‘M-m-m-my da p-p-p-punched my m-m-m-ma one time and her nose squirted b-b-b-blood like an alien,’ Francie piped up. Then he went bright red and looked at Anna wide-eyed. ‘But it was ages ago. Like a m-m-m-million years ago.’

Anna knew that Francie’s dad spent most of his spare time beating his mother and once, about six weeks ago, Francie had come into school with bruises on his arm. Anna had notified the principal, who had called Social Services. A social worker had gone to speak to the parents, but they had denied it. Francie hadn’t had any bruises since, but Anna had seen his mother trying to hide bruises on her neck with a scarf. So, yet again, a child had fallen through the cracks.

‘Now, everyone,’ Anna said brightly, to distract them from their gory tales, ‘today we’re going to make Santa Claus faces.’

‘Boring!’ said Ryan, jumping from one chair to the next.

‘It’ll be fun – come on, Ryan, I’ll let you hand out the cotton balls for Santa’s beard.’

‘Santa never came to my house last year. My ma said he losted our address,’ Ryan said, almost absentmindedly.

Anna put her arm around him. 'Well, I bet he'll find it this year.' She made a mental note to make sure that Ryan's family received one of the twenty hampers the school delivered to the neediest families every Christmas.

She was on her way to get the materials for the Santas when she heard Jordan say, 'Maybe Santa didn't lose your address, Ryan. Maybe he didn't come because you're so bold.'

'Shut up, you,' Ryan shouted.

'Don't say that, it's bad words.'

'Fuck off, then, you ugly minger.'

'My ma said your ma's a dirty junkie.'

'That's enough!' Anna stood between them. 'I want you both to say sorry for being mean.'

They muttered, 'Sorry,' to each other and Anna managed to get all the children sitting down to make Santa Claus faces. A few minutes later Ryan was up again using his paper plate as a Frisbee.

They stopped for a break at ten twenty. A healthy mid-morning snack and lunch was provided for all the children daily, because the school knew that some of them didn't get fed at home.

'What's this?' Molly asked, holding up a kiwi.

'It's a fruit. It's yummy, very sweet and soft.' Anna cut the kiwis and divided them up between the children.

'It's hairy, Mrs Roberts.' Timmy sniffed it. 'And it smells disgusting.'

'It looks like a monkey's arse.' Jenny giggled.

Anna finished scooping the kiwis on to plates.

'There's no way I'm eating that,' Molly said. 'It's all green and mushy. It looks like snot.'

'Yuuuuuuuuck!' the children squealed.

Anna took a deep breath. 'Molly, I want you to taste it and then decide if you like it or not.'

Molly clamped her mouth shut.

'I'll have it,' Jason said, slurping up Molly's portion.

'You ate snot!' Molly shrieked. 'You're disgusting and you smell.'

'That's enough, Molly,' Anna scolded. She knew that Jason

rarely, if ever, had breakfast or a bath. His mother spent most of her time out of her mind on heroin.

‘You’re a cunt,’ Jason roared, and bit Molly’s arm – her yells could have been heard in Timbuktu.

Anna took Jason by the shoulder and marched him to the other side of the room. She crouched down. ‘Jason, I know Molly was taunting you but –’

‘What’s taunting?’

‘Teasing. But you had no right to call her that really terrible word and to bite her. You know biting is naughty.’

‘Don’t tell. Me da’ll kill me.’

‘I’m sorry, Jason, but I have to report bites. Molly’s mum is going to see the tooth marks tonight anyway.’

‘I’m dead.’ Jason sighed.

Later that day, Anna stood with Molly’s mum and Jason’s dad, explaining what had happened. ‘So, unfortunately, they had an argument about the kiwi. Molly was teasing Jason and then Jason got a bit angry and bit Molly.’

Molly’s mother stared at the marks in her daughter’s arm. To Jason, she hissed, ‘Listen here, Jaws, you’d better apologize to my Molly for taking half her arm off. I might have to get a tetanus injection for that.’

‘Sorry,’ Jason muttered.

‘He called me a cunt,’ Molly said, loving the attention.

‘What?’ Her mother was shocked.

Jason’s dad swivelled to his son. ‘You little prick. What the fuck is wrong with you, cursing and biting at school?’

Jason looked at his feet. ‘Sorry.’

Anna patted him on the back. ‘Good boy, Jason. Now, Molly, you need to apologize for teasing Jason.’

Molly’s mother wagged a finger at Anna. ‘Excuse me, she’ll be apologizing for nothing. Jaws here needs a muzzle to stop him ripping the arms off innocent bystanders and from using bad words in the class. I’ve a good mind to call Social Services about this.’

‘What the fuck are you on about?’ Jason’s dad asked. ‘He’s said sorry to your precious daughter. It’s over now.’

Molly’s mother folded her arms defiantly. ‘What if he decides to go for her again because he can’t handle a bit of teasing? What if next time he bites her ear off, like that Mike Tyson?’

‘He’s not a fucking heavyweight boxer, he’s a little kid.’

‘It’s hardly surprising he’s got problems, with a junkie for a mother.’

Jason’s dad narrowed his eyes. ‘Leave my wife out of it.’

‘She’s out of it, all right,’ Molly’s mother proclaimed. ‘She’s out of her tree morning, noon and night.’

Anna stepped in. ‘OK, folks, we need to keep this civil. Jason has apologized and –’

Jason’s father shook a fist at Molly’s mother. ‘Don’t you slander my wife, you stupid cu–’

‘STOP!’ Anna jumped in before a fight broke out. ‘The incident is over now and tomorrow we’ll start afresh. Molly and Jason, I want you both on your best behaviour in the morning. Now we can all go home and cool down.’

Molly and her mother stormed off. Jason’s dad turned on the little boy. ‘If you ever embarrass me like that again I’ll fuckin’ kill you. I’ve enough on me plate trying to get your mother off the gear. I don’t need you causing me hassle.’

Jason’s eyes watered. ‘I’m sorry, Da.’

‘Mr Cooney,’ Anna said, ‘Jason is trying very hard in class and his behaviour is generally good. I’m very pleased with his progress.’

Jason’s dad looked surprised. ‘Oh, right. Well, that’s good to hear. If he keeps his fangs to himself he should be all right so. Come on, Jaws, let’s get a burger – I’m fuckin’ starving.’

Jason looked over his shoulder at Anna, and smiled gratefully.

2.

Laura

Christmas Eve 1992

Laura groaned. Her head was thumping. She had the worst hangover ever. She lay back on the couch and closed her eyes.

Joan came in and glared at her. 'Where were you until three this morning? Have you no shame?'

Laura sat up, the last thing she needed was her mother knowing she'd been drinking last night. If Joan even suspected it, there would be World War Three.

'Relax, Mum. I was just out with the girls, we stayed in Chloë's house chatting, it's no big deal.'

Joan clicked her tongue. 'It is a big deal. Pregnant women need rest. You're always out – you need to stay at home and put your feet up so the baby has time to grow. The doctor said it was on the small side and that you were to stop gallivanting about and take it easy.'

Laura rolled her eyes. 'Leave me alone. You're such a nag.' She switched on the TV and turned up the volume.

Joan stood watching her daughter and prayed silently for patience. When Laura had told her she was pregnant and wanted to have an abortion, Joan had been shocked. To find out, in the space of thirty seconds, that your nineteen-year-old daughter is pregnant by a stranger and wants to have an abortion is too much for any mother. She had begged Laura not to terminate the pregnancy. No matter what people said, abortion was wrong in Joan's eyes, and she could not – would not – let that happen.

She had promised Laura that she'd help her raise the baby, and eventually Laura had relented.

For the millionth time Joan wondered how her sweet daughter had turned into this angry, selfish stranger. If she was being honest she had to blame Harry for some of it. He had spoiled Laura far too much. And after he was diagnosed with lung cancer, he had gone into overdrive. He had said that whatever time he had left in this world was going to be happy, and he was determined to enjoy the money he had made. He never said no again. He gave Laura and her elder brother Frank everything they wanted. In those last two years of his life, before the cancer had beaten him, they had gone all over the world, dined in the finest restaurants, shopped in the swankiest stores and had the most elaborate birthday parties imaginable.

But he had died when Frank was eighteen and Laura was sixteen and had left a huge hole in their lives. Joan was glad Harry wasn't here to see this. Laura had become uncontrollable since he had died. He would have been heartbroken to see his beautiful daughter pregnant at nineteen. He had called Laura his little princess, and it would have devastated him to think she had had unprotected drunken sex with a stranger, whose name she couldn't even remember.

'He was just some American musician over in Dublin for a few days with his band,' she had said, when Joan had demanded to know who the father was. 'I met him one night at a party. He's long gone.'

'But you have to find him and tell him,' Joan insisted.

Laura had laughed. 'Find him? Mum, I don't even know his name. I was drunk, it's over. I'll get rid of it.'

That was when Joan had started to plead with her to keep the baby and now here she was, a forty-two-year-old woman, soon to become a grandmother.

Joan left the room before she told Laura what she thought of her. She couldn't face another argument – and it was bad for the baby to have Laura shouting and screaming. She passed Frank on the way out.

‘Talk to your sister, will you, Frank?’ she asked her eldest and finest. ‘She was out until three a.m. It’s not good for the baby.’

Frank grimaced. ‘Sure, Mum, I’ll have a word.’

He went into the lounge, picked up the remote and switched off the TV. He sat down opposite his younger sister.

‘Hey, I was watching that,’ Laura grumbled.

‘How’s your head?’ he asked.

‘Bloody awful.’ Laura groaned.

‘Hardly surprising – you really went for it last night.’

‘Yeah, it was a fun party. I needed a blow-out.’

‘You were very messy. It looked pretty bad, Laura.’

‘I was not messy,’ Laura said indignantly. ‘The drink went straight to my head, that’s all. It must be the bloody hormones or something.’

‘You were out of your head. You were all over Danny like a cheap perfume.’

Laura blushed. ‘Sod off.’

‘He had to peel himself away.’

‘That’s bullshit. He was all over me.’

‘Laura, you were completely pissed. A pregnant girl falling around is really embarrassing. Seriously, sis, go easy on the drink.’

‘I wasn’t that bad.’

Frank raised his eyebrows. ‘You set Tara’s hair on fire when you were trying to light a cigarette. Seriously, smoking when you’re pregnant is not cool.’

Laura giggled. ‘Did I really burn her hair?’

‘It’s not funny – she freaked.’

‘It only caught fire because she had so much hair spray in it.’

‘Luckily for you, Nick threw his scarf over it so she only lost a few hairs.’

‘Tara could do with a trim.’

‘No one thought it was funny except you.’

‘Did Danny say anything?’

‘About the hair fire?’

‘No, the other thing, me being a bit keen.’

‘No, but he was stone-cold sober. None of the guys on the team are drinking because we’ve got a big game next week.’

‘Sober? Oh, God, I thought he was drunk too.’ Laura put a cushion over her face.

‘He had to help me carry you out to my car.’

‘Stop! Don’t tell me any more.’

‘You also called Vanessa an air-head.’

Laura rolled her eyes. ‘Well, she is. She thought Marc Chagall was a French rugby player.’

‘She’s not thick. I know he isn’t a rugby player because I can name that French team in my sleep, but who the hell is he? A singer? Chef?’

‘Duh! He’s, like, a really famous amazing French painter.’

Frank yawned. ‘We’re not all studying history of art, Laura. Some of us are studying real subjects.’

‘Give me a break. Social science is a sad excuse for a course. The only reason you’re in college is so you can play more rugby.’

Frank smirked at his sister. ‘Social science was a stroke of genius. There are only three guys in the class and one of them is gay. All the rest are babes.’

‘Most of whom you’ve shagged.’

‘Not most, but I’m working on it.’ Frank flexed his muscles. ‘This body was made for lovin’.’

‘It’s not fair. You can go around sleeping with tons of people and no one thinks you’re a slut, and I get pregnant on my third bloody shag and I’m labelled a whore.’

‘The key is not to get pregnant.’

‘I’m paying for my mistake every day.’

‘I know,’ Frank said, with a sigh, ‘but you have to deal with it and stop pretending it’s not happening. You’re huge now and you can’t hide it any more. You need to cut out the drinking and smoking.’

‘That’s easy for you to say. You’re not trapped with a baby for the rest of your life.’ Laura’s eyes welled.

Frank patted her arm. ‘Come on, you know Mum will help and I’ll do my bit. You’ll be OK.’

‘I’m scared, Frank. What the hell am I going to do with a baby?’

‘You’ll just take it one day at a time. Now get some rest. You’ll feel better when the hangover wears off.’ He stood up. ‘I’ve got to go. I’ve got training.’

Laura watched Frank leave and began to feel panic rising inside her. She was getting these waves of terror every other day now, as her due date drew closer. She felt bile rising in her throat and ran upstairs to the bathroom where she threw up.

Warily, she dragged herself into the shower to try to wash away the night before and the smell of vomit. While the water could wash away the smell, it couldn’t do anything about her feeling of claustrophobia. She felt as if she was drowning under the weight of this unwanted pregnancy. She hated it. She hated being trapped. She didn’t want to be a mother. She didn’t want a kid. She could barely look after herself. She wanted to have fun. But she knew that once this baby was born, she’d never be free again.

Laura dried herself slowly and then, afraid to spend any more time on her own with her dark thoughts, she decided to call her best friend Chloë. She needed to get out of the house.

‘Come on over,’ Chloë said. ‘A few of the girls are calling in for wine and mince pies tonight, except I forgot to buy the mince pies.’ She giggled.

‘Great. I’ll see you later.’

A few hours later, Laura went downstairs. Joan was sitting on the couch watching a cookery programme.

Laura took a deep breath. ‘Mum, I’m just popping over to Chloë’s. She has a Christmas present for me,’ she lied. ‘I won’t be long.’

Joan looked up. ‘I want you home at eleven, do you hear me? You need an early night and I want some help with the Christmas dinner tomorrow. There’s a lot to do.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Laura rushed out of the door before her mother interrogated her.

When she got to Chloë’s, Hayley and Amber were already there, tucking into white wine. Chloë’s parents had a big wine cellar in their house, and whenever her mum and dad went out, Chloë would go down, pull out some bottles from the back where they wouldn’t notice and share them with her friends. Tonight, she had selected three very dusty bottles of white wine.

‘Oh, my God, Chloë, this one says 1938 on it. I hope it isn’t mouldy or anything,’ Hayley said, waving the bottle in the air.

‘It tastes a bit funny.’ Amber scrunched up her face.

‘It’s not great.’ Chloë stood up and went to get a large bottle of Sprite. She mixed the lemonade with the wine in her glass. ‘That’s better.’ She knocked it back.

The other girls did the same. After two drinks, Laura felt much better.

‘Wow, Laura, you really are getting big. You look like you’ve got a bowling ball in there.’ Amber smirked.

Laura shuddered. ‘I really don’t want to talk about it tonight. Honestly, guys, I can’t take much more of this. I am way too young to have a kid. It’s like having a noose around your neck.’

‘I can’t even begin to imagine it. I mean, my little brother is five and he wrecks my mum’s head and she has a full-time nanny for him,’ Hayley said.

‘Maybe that’s what you need, like, proper help. Why don’t you hire a nanny?’ Chloë suggested.

Laura lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. ‘I wanted to, but my mum said no way. She keeps going on and on about taking responsibility and raising my own child, blah-blah-blah. I’m sick of it.’

‘It’s such a bummer you didn’t get that musician guy to wear a condom,’ Hayley said.

‘Such bad luck,’ Chloë agreed.

‘I think about it every day.’ Laura sighed. ‘Why was I so stupid?’

‘Probably because you’d just done five tequila shots,’ Hayley reminded her.

'I'll never drink tequila again,' Laura said, shaking her head.

'Didn't Danny look amazing last night?' Amber gushed, changing the subject.

They all nodded in agreement. Laura tensed. Danny was her guy. Well, he wasn't actually *her* guy, but he was Frank's friend and she had fancied him for years. They had kissed a few times but then she'd met the American musician, got plastered and pregnant and blown her chances. Her friends knew she still really liked Danny so they didn't flirt with him out of loyalty.

'I saw you talking to him for ages, Laura,' Hayley said.

'It was less like talking and more like swaying and spilling your drink all over him,' Amber said drily, running her fingers through her auburn hair.

'Frank said I was a disgrace,' Laura admitted.

'You were not.' Chloë was loyal to the end. 'You were just chatting.'

'I'm sorry, but I think friends should be honest with each other and you were all over him,' Amber said. 'You followed him around all night.'

'It wasn't that bad,' Chloë said.

'You were just a bit pissed,' Hayley added.

'Paralytic.' Amber stubbed out her cigarette. 'He had to help Frank carry you out to the car. I met him on the way back in. We had a really good chat, actually. He said he's worried about you. That you seemed to be drinking too much and kind of a mess, and he's worried for the baby. I mean, it is pretty dangerous, you know.'

Laura jutted out her chin. 'And what did you say?'

'I just said that being pregnant was hard for you and that you weren't going out much any more because you were so ginormous. So when you do get out, you get overexcited and drink goes to your head. He was really sweet about it. He said he felt really sorry for you and that it was such a pity you'd wrecked your life.'

Laura thought she might be sick.

'It's not wrecked!' Chloë said.

'It's just complicated,' Hayley added.

'I'm just telling you what he said.' Amber reapplied her lip-gloss. 'Anyway, I have to go. I'm meeting my parents at Midnight Mass.'

'I'll come with you.' Hayley got up and put on her coat. 'Happy Christmas, everyone!' She kissed Chloë and Laura, and the two girls headed out into the night.

Laura took a long drink of wine and sighed. Chloë put her hand on her friend's arm. 'Ignore Amber. She's a bitch. You know she fancies the pants off Danny.'

'Well, she can have him. He clearly has no interest in me now. God, Chloë, I wish it hadn't happened. What am I going to do? I can't be a mum, I just can't. I'll never be able to do anything spontaneous again. I'm never going to be able to go away with you on your college summers. Everything has to be planned and checked with Mum first. I'll never be able to travel and go and live in Paris, like I always wanted to, and study art. I'll be stuck in Dublin for ever. This is it – this is my life. And no one is ever going to want to marry me. Who the hell wants someone else's kid? And, besides, they all think I'm a slut and it was only my third time having sex. It's just not fair.' Laura laid her head on the table and bawled.

Chloë rubbed her back. 'No one thinks you're a slut. You're stunning-looking so guys are always going to fancy you. You've got the most amazing blue eyes and your hair is, like, to die for, so thick and curly. Come on, Laura, it'll be OK. You'll get through this.'

'But the thing is, Chloë, it's never going to end. I'll never be free again. This baby is always going to be there, needing to be looked after.'

'I know it's scary but you'll be a great mum, a cool young mum. You can be friends with your kid and have fun together.'

'I wish I'd never told Mum I was pregnant, just gone to London and had the abortion.'

'Come on, Laura. I know it's hard on you but you'll love the baby when it's here, and I'll help babysit.'

'I just want to run away from it all. I wish –'

The kitchen door swung open and Chloë's father walked in. 'Ho ho ho, and a very merry Christmas,' he said, swaying slightly. 'I see

you've been having your own little party.' He nodded at the empty bottles on the table.

Chloë jumped up and tried to hide the evidence, but it was too late. Mr Jackson-Black picked up an empty bottle and peered at the label.

His face went pale. He turned to his daughter and, in a controlled but quivering voice, asked, 'Chloë, are you aware that this is a Château d'Yquem 1938 Sauternes?'

Chloë looked sheepishly at him. 'I thought the ones at the front of the cellar were your favourite so I took the oldest-looking ones.'

Mr Jackson-Black was hyperventilating. 'Do you have any idea how rare this is?'

'It was at the back and it was all dusty so I thought you'd forgotten about it.'

'FORGOTTEN ABOUT IT? I was saving it for a very, *very* special occasion.'

'Well, it is kind of a special occasion – it's Christmas Eve. And, anyway, it tasted rotten so we had to mix it with Sprite.'

'SPRITE!' her father exploded.

'Jeez, Dad, chill. You've got ten zillion more bottles down there.'

'Not of the Château d'Yquem 1938 I don't.'

Laura stood up. 'I'm very sorry. We'll replace it for you.'

'*It costs a bloody fortune!*' he roared.

'What?' Chloë and Laura were horrified.

'But it tasted awful, Dad, honestly. It must have gone off or something.'

Chloë's dad leaned in so that his face was close to his daughter's. 'It had not "gone off". You and your brainless friends have just drunk one of the finest wines in my cellar and you destroyed it by mixing it with LEMONADE. If I ever see you near my wine again you'll be grounded for life. I'm going to bed now before I say something I regret. Tidy up and remove the bottles from my sight.' To Laura, he added, 'It's time you went home, young lady. You shouldn't be out this late and you certainly shouldn't be drinking. Have you no consideration for that child? Go home.'

‘Dad!’ Chloë glared at her father and walked Laura to the door. ‘Don’t mind Dad. He’s just obsessed with his stupid wines.’

‘It’s cool, don’t worry. Merry Christmas.’ Laura hugged her friend and walked down the driveway, pulling her coat round her. She shivered, but it wasn’t because she was cold. She saw white, but it wasn’t because it had snowed: it was because of the way Mr Jackson-Black had looked at her – as if she was trash, a loser, a nobody, a has-been.

*Anna**Christmas Eve 1992*

Anna reached up to hang the fat Santa they had got in Las Vegas on the tree. Barry had thought she was mad buying a Christmas decoration in the scorching heat but she liked to collect them from all her travels. That Vegas holiday had been a good one. It was before they had started trying for a baby, before everything had got complicated and stressful and tense between them.

Vegas had been fun and carefree. They had gone to shows, eaten in fantastic restaurants, gambled at the blackjack tables until the sun came up and then slept all day in their oversized room. Everything in Vegas had been super-size. They had gambled too much, eaten too much, drunk too much, and had lots of passionate sex. It had been wonderful.

But then they had decided to try for a baby and everything had changed. As the months had turned into years, Anna had become more and more obsessed with being a mother. She'd read every book she could find. She'd stopped drinking alcohol and caffeine; she'd cut down on her sugar intake; she'd taken awful Chinese herbs that made her feel sick. Sex had become robotic, functional and, finally, loveless. She knew Barry was at the end of his tether. He was sick of the whole baby trail. After the last miscarriage he had begged her to stop. He'd said they could just have a life without children: her obsession with getting pregnant had turned her into a person he no longer recognized. They never had fun any more. Everything was so serious and sad and depressing. He

wanted to live a little, to stop being ruled by her monthly cycle. He'd said he was feeling worn out and ground down. He wanted to turn back the clock to before they had started trying to have a baby.

But she couldn't do that. She wanted to be a mother. She yearned for a baby. She ached to have her own child. It was all she could think about. Every second of every day was taken up with how, why, when . . . She hardly went out because she couldn't bear to listen to their friends chattering about their babies and moaning about their sleepless nights. She'd wanted to scream, 'I have sleepless nights, crying for the baby I don't have and for the babies I've lost. You're lucky to be up with your babies. You should be thanking God, not complaining.' She'd known it was irrational, they meant no harm, that they were exhausted, struggling with newborns and toddlers, but she still couldn't stand listening to it. She had preferred to stay in and read books or watch movies. It took her away from herself for a few blissful hours. It briefly silenced the noise in her head and gave her a little relief.

But Barry had wanted to go out. He'd wanted to get drunk and talk about football, cars and politics with his mates. He'd wanted to get away from their house, from their situation and, she feared, from her. When they were out together and someone mentioned babies, Barry would check to see if she was OK. But when he was alone she'd known he could forget about infertility and immerse himself in the lively banter he so enjoyed with his friends. In the last year they had barely gone out together at all. When they did go out, they usually went to the cinema. They didn't need to talk there. They didn't need to fill the silence. In the dark cinema they could pretend everything was normal, ignore the cracks and the rot that had seeped into their marriage.

When Anna's mother had got sick and died, Barry had thought it would push her over the edge, finish her off. But it hadn't. In a really strange and surprising way it had helped. For four months she had stopped thinking about babies all the time and focused on her mother. She had gone to see her straight after school every

day, and when she was too sick to manage, Anna had moved in with her. She had loved those few weeks she had spent in her old home. She and her mother had always been close and the time they had had together in those last months was precious. Her mum had told her not to worry so much, that a baby would come to her. She had told her that she knew Anna was destined to have a child of her own. She had to put her trust in God. She also warned her not to neglect Barry because she could see that he was suffering too, that he was heartbroken about the miscarriages, but men reacted to grief differently.

Anna and her mum had talked about everything. They had looked over old photo albums, laughed a lot and cried a lot. It had been very cleansing and cathartic. Anna had got out a lot of her sadness and pent-up emotion. Instead of pretending she was strong, she had allowed herself to fall apart, and her mother had encouraged it. When she had died, although part of Anna was devastated, another part was glad. The last few weeks had been awful for her mother and she was happy that her suffering was over. She also knew how lucky she was to have had such an incredible mother in her life for thirty-eight years. They had said all the things they wanted to say to each other; they had loved and been loved. She believed with all her heart that her mother would send her a baby. God had taken her mum so now He owed her a baby. She knew her mother wouldn't let her down. She'd make it happen.

Three months after she had died, just when Anna was beginning to panic, she had found out she was pregnant. And she had known that this baby was a keeper. All her nerves were gone. This baby made her feel close to her mother, as if she was still with her. This child kept her warm inside. This life would replace the one that was lost.

Anna put on some Christmas music and looked out of the window. She couldn't wait for Barry to come home so she could tell him about the Christmas play. She wanted to make him laugh again, like she used to. They had never been able to return to

their Vegas days, but since she'd got pregnant this time, things had been better between them. This was going to be a great Christmas.

She giggled to herself as she thought about the children's play and the mayhem in Bethlehem . . .

The nativity play was one of Anna's favourite tasks with the class. She knew that, with schools becoming multicultural, it would soon be a thing of the past so she was cherishing the few years she had left with her mini Marys and Josephs.

As usual, all the girls wanted to be Mary and all the boys wanted to be Joseph. Anna reminded them that there were lots of other important roles – like the narrator and the innkeeper and the donkey and the three wise men and the shepherds and the angels. Then all the girls decided they wanted to be angels and the boys wanted to be the donkey. Everybody had a part. Kylie was Mary, and Francie a shepherd – he didn't want a speaking part because of his stutter. Jason was the angel Gabriel, and Ryan had begged to be the donkey. Anna had thought this was a good idea as it was a physical role that should keep him out of trouble.

On the night of the concert, after weeks of preparation, Kylie refused to get up on the donkey.

'Why not?' Anna asked.

'I don't want to say.'

'Come on, Kylie, you can say it.'

'I'm just not riding him.'

'Are you afraid of falling off?' Anna asked.

'No. It's because Mary is the Mother of God and there's no way she'd be riding around on a donkey that smells dirty.'

'OK, that's enough,' Anna said. 'Just get up now.'

Ryan stood up, hands on hips. 'Well, I'm not letting you get up on me anyway, Kylie, because I don't want your smelly knickers on my back.'

'Stop it, both of you,' Anna said firmly. 'We're going to use this blanket as a saddle. Now, I want you all to be nice to each other

and no more cross words.’ She placed the blanket on Ryan’s back.

She peeped out from behind the makeshift curtain to see if the parents were all settled in their seats. She was relieved to see that each child had a family representative in the audience, whether it was a parent, grandmother, older sister or brother. Even Ryan had someone: his sixteen-year-old sister had come to support him. Anna was thrilled. Kylie’s mum looked a bit unsteady, but the granny was there too, so hopefully she’d keep her in check. Jason’s dad was in the back row beside Francie’s mother, who was wearing dark glasses that didn’t hide her black eye.

‘OK, everyone, are you ready? We’re going to start now.’ Anna smiled down at her little class. She had made the costumes with the children. The angels were wearing white shirts and had halos made of tinsel. The shepherds wore the traditional tea-towels on their heads. Mary had a blue dress and a matching tea-towel, and the kings had crowns made of cardboard and gold paper.

‘Right, narrator, off you go.’ Anna gently nudged Karen on to the stage.

The little girl went bright red. ‘A very long time ago, like ages and ages ago, in a place called Naz– Naz– . . .’

‘Nazareth,’ Anna prompted.

‘Oh, yeah, Nazareth, there was a girl called Mary and she was gorgeous-looking and everyone fancied her. And she was a lovely girl, not a slut at all, and she never took drugs or anything like that. No way. Anyways, one day she was having a cup of tea and the angel Gabriel came to see her.’

Jason strutted on to the stage and stood in front of Kylie, who was pretending to drink a cup of tea. ‘Howrya, Mary?’

‘Grand, thanks. Howzit going?’ Mary said.

‘Are you not surprised to see me?’

‘Oh, Jesus, yeah, sorry, I forgot.’ Kylie’s hand flew up to her mouth. ‘Sorry, Mrs Roberts, I didn’t mean to curse.’

The parents roared laughing.

‘It’s OK,’ Anna said, from the side of the stage. ‘Go on.’

‘You’re all right, Mary,’ the angel Gabriel said. ‘So, anyways, I came to tell you brilliant news. You’re going to have a baby and his name is Jesus.’

‘But I’m not married!’ Kylie said.

‘Neither was your mother,’ one of the women shouted up at Kylie.

‘Shut up, you witch,’ Kylie’s granny hissed. ‘Leave the poor child alone. Go on, Kylie, you’re doing great.’

The angel Gabriel reassured her: ‘Don’t worry about it because this is God’s child and you’re going to get married to a different fella called Joseph. He won’t mind that the baby’s daddy is actually God.’

‘He’s a bigger man than me.’ Jason’s dad laughed.

‘Shut up, Da,’ Jason scolded. ‘I’ll forget me lines.’

‘Is this Joseph fella good-looking? Does he have money?’

Jason looked confused: this was not part of the script. ‘Eh, yeah, he’s OK, like, and I think his da owns a chipper so you’d get free chips and nuggets.’

‘OK, then. I’ll do what God says.’ Mary and Gabriel walked offstage.

The narrator then said, ‘Loads of soldiers came and turfed Mary and Joseph out of their house and they had to go on a donkey for, like, ages, and Mary was huge and fat and knackered.’

Joseph and Mary appeared on stage. Mary was on the donkey, and was looking a bit unsteady. The donkey was busy trying to find his sister in the crowd.

‘Howrya, Siobhan,’ Ryan shouted, when he saw her. She waved at him. He waved back and Mary fell off.

‘For God’s sake, Ryan, will you stay still?’ Mary shouted at her donkey. Then, to Joseph, she said, ‘I’m very tired, Joseph. I think we need to stay in a hotel. This donkey is crap – you should get rid of it.’

‘Piss off,’ the donkey snapped.

‘Stop that,’ Anna scolded from the side.

‘OK. I’ll go and see if there’s any room.’ Joseph knocked on a

cardboard door. ‘Hello – any chance of a room with a flat-screen TV and some cheese and onion crisps?’

The innkeeper snorted. ‘You must be joking. There’s no room here for the likes of you. Look at the state of you, all dirty and smelly. No way.’

‘Come on, please! Me wife is about to have a baby,’ Joseph begged.

‘OK, you can stay in me shed.’

As Mary was shuffling towards the lump of straw that was the manger, she looked into the audience to see her mother fast asleep.

‘WAKE UP, MA! I HAVEN’T HAD THE BABY YET!’ she shouted.

‘She’s pissed, love,’ the woman behind her mother said.

Kylie looked crestfallen.

‘It’s all right, Kylie, I’m recording it. She can watch it tomorrow.’ Her granny waved her camera in the air.

The Virgin Mary stormed over to the hay and plonked herself down. The cushion that was her pregnant stomach fell out of her skirt.

‘You just went into early labour,’ a man shouted. Everyone laughed.

Kylie stuffed the cushion back up.

The narrator came back on. ‘So, anyways, some shepherds and some kings then followed the shining star and came to see Mary and the baby and give them loads of presents, a bit like Santa. I’m getting a bike from Santa for Christmas, amn’t I, Mam?’

‘Yes, love,’ her mother answered.

‘Deadly. And I’m getting a Barbie.’

‘Get on with the play, Karen. I’m startin’ me shift in Tesco’s in fifteen minutes,’ her mother urged.

‘So then the baby was born.’ The narrator summed it all up.

The Virgin Mary, who was lying on her back, legs akimbo, began to scream. ‘Oh, Jaysus, get the baby out! I’m in agony! Give me some drugs for the pain. Pull it out, Joseph – come on, will you?’

‘Push, Mary, push,’ Joseph said, getting into it.

‘It’s coming. Oh, God, here it comes, oh, the pain of it.’ Mary let out an ear-shattering scream, and Joseph pulled the plastic doll from under the hay and waved it about proudly by one leg.

The audience clapped, cheered and whooped.

In the excitement, Joseph threw the baby up in the air and then dropped it.

‘You’ve killed him!’ Mary roared. ‘You’ve dropped me baby on his head, you gobshite!’

Joseph picked the doll up and shook it. ‘No, it’s OK. He’s grand. Just a bump.’

‘Well, I’m not leaving him on his own with you again. You’re a crap dad.’

Joseph shook the doll in Mary’s face. ‘Fine, it’s not even my kid. God’s the dad, so why don’t you get him to look after the baby?’ With that, he stormed off the stage.

Anna stopped him. ‘You have to go back, it’s the last bit of the play.’

‘I’m not going. Kylie’s a pain. She said I tried to kill Jesus and I didn’t. It was an accident.’

‘I know, pet, and you’re very good with the baby. Now go on back and finish the play, there’s a good boy.’

Joseph stomped back on to the stage, followed by the shepherds, angels and wise men. They all sang a tuneless but very enthusiastic rendition of ‘Away In A Manger’ and there wasn’t a dry eye in the house . . . except for Kylie’s mother’s: she was still snoring.

Anna saw Barry’s car pull into the driveway. She waved at him and hurried out to open the door. She was so full of joy she thought she might burst. This year, Santa Claus had given her the best present ever. She was finally getting the gift of motherhood.

4.

Laura

January 1993

‘Give me drugs, you stupid cow!’

The midwife gritted her teeth. ‘You need to push. The baby’s crowning. The sooner you push, the quicker this will all be over.’

‘I hate you and I *hate* this baby,’ Laura screamed.

‘Stop making a show of yourself,’ Joan hissed in her ear.

‘I’m in agony, Mum. Everything is orange – bright orange. Give me something – painkillers, vodka, anything.’

‘It was too much vodka that got you into this mess,’ Joan snapped.

‘Come on now, Laura, a big push,’ the midwife encouraged her.

Laura closed her eyes, let out an almighty roar and pushed the baby into the world. ‘Is it out? Please, God, tell me it’s out,’ she wailed.

‘It’s all over now,’ the midwife assured her. ‘You have a beautiful . . . little girl.’

Laura looked up and saw a wriggly, bloody thing coming towards her. She could see green, dark, murky green, as panic enveloped her.

‘Would you like to hold your daughter?’ the midwife asked.

‘Get her away from me.’ Laura shut her eyes. ‘She’s ruined my bloody life.’ She began to sob into the pillow.

Joan leaned over and took her tiny granddaughter into her arms. The baby opened her eyes and sighed. Joan kissed her and began to cry softly as she held her close.

An hour later, Laura was sitting up in bed feeling much better. They had given her tea and toast, and when no one was looking she had laced the tea with vodka. She desperately wanted a cigarette, but knew her mother would freak if she smoked in front of the baby. Joan was into aerobics and healthy living, which was so boring.

The baby had been washed and wrapped in a nice clean pink blanket and was tucked up in a cot beside Laura, sleeping peacefully. Laura leaned back into her pillows and took another slug of her tea. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, after all.

The door swung open and Joan came in. She ignored Laura and went straight to the baby.

'Jesus, Mum, don't wake her up.' Laura was terrified she was going to start screaming again.

'She's the image of you,' Joan said, gazing down at her sleeping granddaughter. 'You were such a sweet baby and then –'

'And then I turned into a nightmare. Yeah, yeah, I know the story, Mum – the perfect child who turned into the horrible teenager.'

'Well, your wild days are behind you now. You've a baby to look after. Responsibilities. Duties.'

Laura's head snapped up. 'Hold on a minute. I didn't want to keep this baby. The only reason she's here is because you said you'd help bring her up. Don't start backing out now or I swear I'll give her up for adoption.'

Joan prayed silently for patience. She faced her daughter in the small hospital room. 'I said I'd help you and I will, but you are the baby's mother and you have to take responsibility for her.'

Laura flicked back her blonde curls. 'I'll look after her on the mornings I don't have lectures, but don't expect me to stay in on the weekends and mind her because I won't. No way. Besides, you hardly ever go out at the weekends any more, so it's no big deal for you to babysit.'

The baby started crying. Joan picked her up to soothe her. 'I think she needs her nappy changed,' she said, handing her to Laura.

Laura folded her arms. 'No, Mum. I don't know how to do it. I can't.'

Joan set about changing the baby's nappy. 'Have you decided on a name? I was thinking Amanda, like your father's mother.'

Laura shook her head. 'No. Amanda is a brown name. I'm calling her Jody because it's a pink name and she's a girl.'

Joan bit her tongue. She'd never understood the way Laura and her father saw names, numbers and emotions as colours. It had been a very strong bond between father and daughter. When Laura was six, she had announced at dinner one night that her name was purple, just like the colour for funny. Harry had dropped his fork. He couldn't believe that she saw the world in the same way he did. Their colours were different. The only colour they matched on was orange for pain. Harry saw yellow for fear, red for happy and brown for funny. But he was thrilled to have a child who understood his world. Frank, Laura's brother, didn't see colour, and Joan was glad. Otherwise she would have felt like the odd one out.

She clicked the Babygro back on and hugged the baby. 'Hello, Jody, I'm Joan. I'm actually your granny and this young girl here is your mummy.' With that, Joan handed Jody firmly to Laura and went to wash her hands.

Laura looked down. The baby stared up at her, unblinking. 'Sorry, kid, you pulled the short straw with me as your mother. I haven't got a clue and I'm only nineteen so you're going to be hanging out with your granny a lot. She's been really lonely since Dad died, so this could actually work out quite well. She can focus her attention on you and get off my back.'

Joan came back in, drying her hands. The door opened. It was Frank, holding a half-dead bunch of carnations.

'Nice flowers. Are they for me?' Laura smiled at her brother.

'At least I tried.' He dumped the flowers on the windowsill. 'Well, there's a sight I never thought I'd see.' He grinned at Laura holding Jody.

'Isn't she beautiful?' Joan gushed.

Frank gave the baby a cursory glance. 'Not really.' He sat on the edge of the bed. 'She looks weird. Is that normal or is she ugly?'

'Frank!' Joan was annoyed.

'What? She's all red and scrunched-up.'

'Your niece is perfect.' Joan kissed Jody's head. 'Don't listen to that nitwit. You're gorgeous.'

'I'm calling her Jody, by the way,' Laura said, trying not to drop the baby. 'It's a pink name.'

Frank nodded. 'Cool. The only Jody I know is a fox.'

'Jody Kerrigan?' Laura asked.

'Yes.'

'She's so dense. She thought the chorus of "Bohemian Rhapsody" was – "I see a little silly wet man, scare him much scare him much, will you do the fand and go."' Laura threw her head back and laughed.

Frank shrugged. 'Who cares about her singing when she's got a body for sin?'

'You're so shallow.'

'Have you not just had a baby by a nameless, faceless man?'

Joan thumped the side table loudly. 'Stop it, you two. You're behaving like –'

'Teenagers?' Laura smirked.

'Immature teenagers,' Joan retorted.

'Sorry, Mum,' Frank said. Then, to Laura, he added, 'So, Danny was asking if you'd had the kid yet.'

'He's a lovely boy,' Joan said.

Laura looked down. 'Did you tell him?'

'I called him before I drove over.'

Laura almost dropped the baby. Joan leaned over and grabbed Jody.

'What did he say?' Laura asked.

Frank took his chewing gum out of his mouth and stuck it on Laura's saucer. 'Nothing.'

'Nothing at all?'

‘He just said he couldn’t believe you were, like, a mother now. That it was weird.’

Laura fought back tears. ‘He’ll never go near me now.’

‘You’ve only yourself to blame,’ Joan reminded her. ‘Now, hold your daughter while I go home and sort out some more clothes and vests for this gorgeous girl. It’s been a long day. I need to get something to eat. I’ll be back first thing in the morning to help you out.’

‘You’ve had a long day?’ Laura exclaimed. ‘What about me? What about my pain and suffering?’

‘Hopefully the baby will sleep now and you can get some rest.’

‘Don’t go, Mum,’ Laura begged. ‘I don’t know what to do. Don’t leave me on my own with her.’

Joan buttoned her coat. She went over and patted Laura’s hand. ‘You’ll be fine. Every new mother panics on the first day. But the only way to learn how to look after a baby is to get lots of practice. If you need anything, call the nurse or you can phone me at home. Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. She’s a little dote.’

She gave Jody a final cuddle and settled her in her cot. She turned to Frank. ‘I’ll see you at home. I made some lentil soup yesterday and some pumpkin bread.’

‘Mum! I’ll be starving after rugby practice.’

Joan smiled. ‘OK, I’ll grill a steak for you.’

‘Brilliant, thanks.’

‘I thought you were too tired to do anything,’ Laura huffed.

‘Frank needs to keep his strength up,’ Joan replied, closing the door behind her.

‘Poor little Frank needs his steak,’ Laura teased.

‘She likes doing stuff for me.’

Laura sighed. ‘You can do no wrong and I can do no right. I’m sick of her giving out to me.’

‘Try being nicer to her and not getting pregnant.’

Laura rubbed her eyes. ‘What the hell am I going to do, Frank? I can’t be a mother. I’m too young.’

‘Don’t sweat it. Mum will look after the baby most of the time,

and you can use some of the money Dad left you to pay for babysitters when she's not around.'

Laura looked at her daughter. 'Does everyone think I'm a total loser?'

'Not a loser, more a slut.'

'Thanks a bloody lot. I feel so much better now.'

'Laura, if you don't want to know, don't ask. You having this baby will be the talk of the town for a few weeks and then it'll be old news. Just put your head down and keep your legs closed.'

'Do you think anyone will ever fancy me again?'

'Did anyone fancy you before?'

'Come on, Frank, be serious for a minute. Would you go for a girl who had a kid?'

Frank got up and stretched his arms over his head. 'If I liked her enough it wouldn't matter,' he lied.

Laura sat up straight. 'Really? Seriously? No kidding?'

'Sure – why not?'

'So you don't think I'm a social pariah?'

'No, but make sure it doesn't happen again. Having a slapper for a sister is ruining my image.'

'Cheers!'

Frank peered into Jody's cot. 'Did Jody Kerrigan really think the lyrics of "Bohemian Rhapsody" were "I see a little silly wet man"?''

Laura nodded and they both roared laughing. 'But the best one was that idiot you went out with last year, Nikkie Holmes. Remember, she thought Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" was "Might as well face it, you're a dick with a glove".'

'And Dad thought Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" was "Billy Jim is not my plumber".' Frank cackled.

They laughed until they cried.

'I miss Dad,' Laura said, her tears turning from happy to sad.

'Me too.' Frank squeezed her hand.

*Anna**January 1993*

Anna was reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. It was Ryan's favourite book and she knew he'd sit still for a few minutes to listen to it. She was twenty-five weeks pregnant now and she felt tired today. She needed to sit down for a while.

Anna read: '. . . pop, out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar.'

'Is an egg going to pop out of your tummy?' Timmy asked.

'No, I have a baby in my tummy.' Anna ran a protective hand over her swollen belly.

'Do you have any other children at home?' Penny wanted to know.

'No, this is my first.'

'But you're really old. I thought you'd have millions of them,' Kylie said.

'Are you happy to have a baby?' Molly asked. 'My mammy was crying when she found out she had another baby in her tummy. She said eight is too many.'

'I'm sure she'll be happy when it arrives,' Anna soothed her.

Molly shook her head. 'She wasn't a bit happy when Fintan arrived. She said she wished she got a new washing-machine, not a baby.'

'My da got his willy snipped for my ma's birthday,' Penny announced.

'What?' The other children were shocked.

'Yeah, she said it was the only present she wanted so he did it. He chopped his willy.'

'Chopped it off?' Ryan covered his own protectively.

'Snipped it off,' Penny said.

'Oh, my God, your ma is a wagon. There's no way I'd cut my willy off for any girl.' Jason was outraged.

After years of teaching, Anna had decided that her young children needed to be allowed to chat among themselves for a few minutes every couple of hours. It allowed them to switch off for a bit, relax and speak freely, which she knew was important as many of them had such difficult home lives. But it was time to step in.

'What Penny means is that her daddy went to the doctor to have a little procedure called "the snip". But he didn't cut his willy off. It's just a little thing that some daddies have done when they're finished having children.'

'My granny told my ma to have her tubes tied,' Molly told them.

'What's that?' Penny asked.

'It's where you go in and you get these tubes inside you where the babies are made and you tie them in a big knot and then no more babies can come out.'

'Are the babies stuck in the tubes?'

Molly frowned. 'I don't think so.'

'Imagine if you tied a big knot and a baby was stuck in the knot and he was all crying and shouting, "Let me out! Let me out!"' Ryan giggled.

'Babies can't talk,' Penny reminded him.

'You'd hear him crying so you'd just untie the knot and let that one out and then tie another one.' Molly had figured it out.

Anna clapped her hands. 'Come on, children, enough talking. I want you to settle down and listen.'

'I saw your ma throwing your da's clothes out the window yesterday,' Jason said to Timmy.

Timmy went bright red.

‘That’s enough, Jason,’ Anna said.

‘She was shouting, “Get out of here, you cheater, and don’t come back,”’ Jason said breathlessly.

‘Did he cheat at cards?’ Jack wanted to know. ‘My ma goes mental when my da cheats at cards.’

‘No, you thick, he cheated with another girl,’ Kylie explained.

‘Oh. My da did that and my ma was mad with him, but he said, “If I’m not gettin’ any at home I have to look somewhere else,”’ Jack told the class.

‘What wasn’t he getting at home?’ Jason asked.

Anna raised her voice over them. ‘I’m going to get cross now. I want you all to stop talking and listen.’

‘I think he meant nice food,’ Jack said. ‘My ma is a vegitarian and she’s always cooking yucky vegetables and brown rice. My da wants chips and sausages, like me. I bet the other girl what he went off with cooked chips or maybe they went to the chipper on the corner. My ma says that chipper should be shut down.’

‘Why?’ Ryan looked horrified.

‘Cos she said the meat what they put in the burgers is like cow’s arse and nose and eyeballs and stuff.’

‘Eeeeeeeew,’ the kids said.

‘It tastes lovely, though,’ Ryan noted.

‘I love chipper chips,’ Kylie said. ‘When my ma has a sore head from drinking too much orange juice she gives me money to go down for a snack box.’

‘My da said if you eat too much chipper stuff you’ll get big and fat and no one will want to marry you,’ Penny said. ‘He said that’s why my aunty Rosie has no husband because her arse is huge.’

Anna tried not to laugh. ‘OK, class, come on now, that’s enough. Listen to the story.’ She continued to read. Halfway through, she jumped up to get Ryan down from a table.

‘Oh, Mrs Roberts, your skirt’s all dirty,’ Molly said.

‘It’s red,’ Kylie said.

‘It’s b-b-b-blood!’ Francie shouted.

Anna spun around. She looked down. There was a big red stain on her skirt.

‘BLOOOOOOD!’ Ryan roared. ‘Teacher’s dying, teacher’s dying.’

All the children started to scream. But Anna couldn’t move. She was having trouble breathing. She tried to speak but no words came out. The room began to spin . . .

She came to in hospital. Barry was beside her, white-faced, gripping her hand. Her obstetrician was standing on her other side.

‘Anna, can you hear me?’

She nodded.

‘The baby has decided to come early, but we’re going to try to keep it inside the womb as long as possible. Even if we can delay the birth for forty-eight hours, it’ll be a big help. Now, I’m giving you an injection of corticosteroids to help the baby’s lungs mature before delivery. In the meantime, I need you to lie very still. If you need to go to the toilet, the nurse will get you a bedpan. You are not to move.’

‘Is the baby OK?’ Anna was desperate to know.

Mr Walsh nodded. ‘So far, so good. I’ll be back to check on you in a little while.’

Anna lay back and tried not to cry. She had to be calm. She had to be still. She had to let the baby grow.

‘I asked him what the stats were for babies born at twenty-five weeks to make it,’ Barry said, stifling a sob. ‘He said fifty per cent, so we’ve got a good shot.’

Anna squeezed his hand. She had to stay positive. She prayed silently to her mother: Help me, Mum. Don’t let my baby die . . . please don’t let it die.

As Anna lay in her bed, praying, she could hear a young girl screaming in the room next door. ‘Puke! She’s puked on me again!’

A nurse came into her room to look at her chart. ‘Is she all right?’ Anna asked her.

The nurse rolled her eyes. 'She's fine – but every time the baby needs to be changed or fed or has a little vomit she starts screaming for help. She has us all driven mad.'

'Maybe she's nervous,' Anna suggested.

The nurse shook her head. 'No. She's just a nineteen-year-old girl who got herself pregnant and now doesn't want to look after her own baby. Thank God she has a sensible mother who can help her out.' She sighed and went to the door. 'I'd better go and check on her.'

Anna heard her snap, 'Laura, calm down – it's only a bit of milk.'

Barry sighed. 'I hope if we have a girl she doesn't turn out like that!'

Anna smiled. 'She won't. She or he will be just wonderful. They'll have your kindness and mathematical brain –'

'And your patience and compassion and hopefully your amazing hair.'

Before Anna could reply she felt a searing pain in her abdomen. She gasped and hunched over. 'Barry!'

He jumped up and wrenched open the door. 'HELP!' he shouted. 'HELP!'

Within seconds a midwife was at their side. She saw the blood and called for Mr Walsh.

'I'm afraid this baby is determined to be born,' he said, as soon as he had examined her. 'OK, Anna, here we go.'

Anna's mind and spirit floated above the scene. She saw her baby being born. She was tiny and red. People were rushing about, Mr Walsh was barking orders, and there was blood, lots of it. Anna felt her head getting lighter. She was beginning to drift away, but she forced herself to stay present. I will not miss this, she told herself. I will not leave this moment.

'It's a girl,' Mr Walsh said.

She heard a cry, a tiny kitten-like mew. She felt salty tears on her lips – she must be crying too. Tears of joy. She wanted to hold her baby but the room was getting darker . . .

★

Anna opened her eyes. Mr Walsh was standing next to her bed. She could tell by his face. He didn't need to say it. She knew.

'I'm terribly sorry, Anna. We did everything we could. I'm afraid the baby was just not ready for this world. She suffered a bleed in her lungs and brain. And I'm afraid there were complications with you too. We had to perform a hysterectomy. I'm so very sorry. I know how much this meant to you.'

Anna looked at the ceiling. 'Where is she?'

'Here,' Barry croaked.

Anna turned her head. He was sitting in the corner of the room rocking back and forth, tears streaming down his face, holding their baby girl.

Anna reached out her arms. Barry stood up, walked over and gently placed the almost weightless bundle on her chest. Her daughter's tiny face peered out. Eyes closed. Lips blue.

Barry sat on the side of the bed, his head in his hands, sobbing.

She looked down at her baby girl. Her mother's sign. Her mother's gift. Dead. Not breathing. Born too soon. Too fragile. Too weak. Too helpless. Not for this world.

A nurse offered to take some pictures. 'You'll find them a comfort,' she said softly. She took one of Anna holding the baby and one of the baby's face.

Anna thanked her and asked her to leave them alone with the baby for a while.

Barry didn't speak. He just continued to cry, as if a river of grief had opened up inside him.

'Hope Sophie Roberts,' Anna said, staring at her child. 'Her name is Hope. Because that's what she was to me. Hope. My last and final hope. And Sophie for my mother, who will have to look after her now.' Anna squeezed her eyes tightly shut and let out a primal wail – she keened for her lost love, her broken heart and her shattered life.

Anna held her baby girl close, inhaling her scent. She kissed her, she held her, she cuddled her, she poured all of the love in

her heart into her. She sang to her, she whispered to her, she prayed for her, she breathed in her smell, she clung to her . . . until eventually the doctors took her Hope away.

As she watched her baby girl disappear from her life for ever, Anna didn't cry. There were no tears left and there were no words to describe her pain. Barry sat silently by her side, unable to speak, unable to offer words of comfort because there were none. He was a broken man.

During the time she was in hospital, the only person she agreed to see was Joe: her oldest friend, the only person left in the world who had known her from the age of three when his family had lived next door to hers. Joe was a GP and had been so kind to her mother when she was sick. Her mother had called him her surrogate son. It was Joe who had arranged for Anna and Barry to see every fertility specialist in Ireland and two in London. He had shared their disappointments. He had held her hand in his surgery while she cried for her unborn babies. He had given her sleeping tablets when her desperation for a baby became too much. It was Joe who had listened to her, time and time again . . . and now.

He stuck his head around the door. His hair was rumpled and his jacket was creased. He always looked as if he had just got out of bed. 'Congratulations on becoming a mother.' He came over and enveloped her in a bear hug.

Anna half smiled. Only Joe would say something like that. She was a mother. She hadn't thought about it like that. She had given birth to a child. She was someone's mother. Hope's mum.

Joe held her hand. 'Barry said you called her Hope Sophie.'

Anna nodded.

'It's beautiful, Anna. Your mother would be so proud of you.'

Anna turned away. 'My mother would be broken-hearted. I'm glad she's dead. I'd hate her to have seen this.'

'Do you have a photo?'

Anna handed him the two pictures she had of Hope.

'She's perfect,' he said.

'She's dead,' Anna said.

'Yes, she is.'

'After five and a half years and eight pregnancies, I have nothing. I don't even own a uterus any more. I think I'm what they call washed up. Used goods. Fit only for the scrapyards.'

Joe fiddled with his glasses. 'Come on, Anna.'

'Come-on-Anna what? Buck up? Chin up? Stiff upper lip? There's nothing left, Joe. I will never have a child of my own. All I ever wanted was to be a mum. That's never going to happen now. It's over. The waiting, hoping, praying . . . it's all over. I will never see a first smile, first tooth, first day at school. I'll never hear the word "Mummy" said to me. I'll never buy a Hallowe'en costume or a Christmas stocking for my mantelpiece. Santa Claus will never come to my house. No Tooth Fairy will leave money under my child's pillow. I'll never dress my daughter in pretty clothes and tell her she's the most beautiful girl in the world. I'll never tuck her in at night and tell her I love her, to have sweet dreams. I'll never know the unconditional love that I ache to give her. I'll never be a mother and I don't know if I can handle it.'

Joe didn't say anything. He just held Anna while the tears that had been buried deep beneath her broken, shattered heart finally surfaced.

After five days she was discharged. She left with a prescription for antibiotics and painkillers. Two days later, on a crisp January morning, Barry and Anna buried their baby girl and all their hope with her. They stood at the tiny grave, united in grief, torn apart by sorrow.

As the coffin was lowered into the ground, Anna felt the light go out inside her. She knew that her life from now on would be half a life. She'd go on living but inside she was dead.

Later that day when she was about to take some sleeping tablets to try to obliterate the pain in her chest, Barry came in, still

wearing his black suit, and sat down on their bed. With his back turned to her, shoulders hunched, he asked, 'What did we do that was so bad? Why are we being punished?'

'I don't know,' Anna said.

'You see these losers – drug addicts, abusers, rapists – having kids and here we are, two nice normal people who could give a child a happy home, and we get nothing.' Barry pulled at his tie as if it was choking him. 'I tried not to get my hopes up, I knew we could lose it again, but four months passed, then five and then six, and I thought, OK, this is it. This is the one. Anna was right, this is a keeper. I'm going to be a dad. I'm finally going to be a dad. And now she's gone. Buried under the ground. Our little Hope. My daughter, my little girl.' Barry's face was full of rage. 'WHY, ANNA? WHY US? WHY?'

Anna reached over to him, wincing as her scar throbbed. She held her husband in her arms and they wept for their lost child. Their stolen baby.

6.

Laura

May 1994

Jody was toddling around Laura's bedroom in a pair of high-heeled shoes, squealing with delight. But at only sixteen months she was still unsteady on her feet. She toppled over and began to cry.

'For God's sake, Jody,' Laura snapped. 'Stop trying on my shoes. You're always falling over.'

Jody looked up at her mother, her big blue eyes spilling tears. But Laura ignored her daughter: she was in a really bad mood. Yellow was the colour she could see, mustardy yellow. She was furious that her mother couldn't look after Jody: she wanted to go to Frank's rugby match at the university – not that she was remotely interested in rugby, but Danny was playing and she had been planning her outfit all week.

She'd gone for skinny black jeans, flat black boots and a black Che Guevara T-shirt that he had admired a few months ago. But now Joan had told her she was going out to lunch with six of her friends and wouldn't be back until much later.

Laura knew she didn't really stand a chance with Danny now that she had a kid, but he was always nice to her and chatted to her whenever they bumped into each other, and he wasn't going out with anyone so she held out a tiny sliver of hope that maybe one day they would get together.

She plonked Jody down to watch cartoons while she went to get ready. When she'd done her makeup, smoky eyes and neutral lips, she examined herself in the mirror. Her eyes were the best

thing about her face. They were big and deep blue. She liked that because blue was her happy colour. She wondered if Jody would see numbers, letters and emotions as colours too. She had loved that special connection with her dad. She remembered the first time she'd said that her name was a purple name and her dad had been so excited. He had kept hugging her and saying, 'You're a very special girl.' They had laughed about it all the time. It was wonderful to have someone close to you who had the same quirks and characteristics as you.

It was also nice to know that she wasn't alone: when she had said in school that she saw colours for numbers and names, some of the other kids had called her a weirdo. She'd come home crying and Joan had told her just to keep her colours to herself and not tell the other kids so she wouldn't be considered different. But then her dad had come home and told her to hold her head up high and never be ashamed of the gift God had given her. He always called it a gift because it had made him a genius with numbers and had led to his huge success in computer programming.

'Don't hide what you are. Be proud of it,' her dad had urged. 'You're lucky to have this unique view of the world because it'll make you see things differently and that's a good thing. Who wants to be the same as everyone else? Being unique is wonderful. What we have is called synaesthesia and it makes us special. My grandmother had it and my mother too, so hopefully your children will be lucky as well.'

He had made her feel so good about being different. But he was wrong about school: it was better for her not to mention it because she didn't want to be different. She didn't want to stick out or be thought odd. She wanted to fit in. She wanted to be like the other kids. So she had hidden it and used it to her advantage in getting good results. She had found it easy to remember names and numbers and had done well in her exams. But her heart had always been in art.

From as far back as she could remember she had loved paint-

ing. She saw everything through colour – when she listened to music she saw colours. Painting was second nature to her, the best way to express what she saw in her head. Her art teacher had told her she was very talented. She had decided to study history of art because she wanted to go to college with her friends and have fun for a few years, then go to Paris to continue with her art. But Jody had come along and ruined that dream, destroyed that hope. She'd never get to Paris now.

Jody came wobbling in. 'Mama.' She grinned up at her mother, her little pearly teeth showing.

'It's Laura. Call me Laura.' Laura was furious with Joan for teaching Jody to call her 'Mama'. She didn't want to be called that. It made her feel worse than she already did. She wasn't a mother – at least, she didn't feel like one. She hated being burdened with a kid and didn't need to be reminded of it every five minutes by being called 'Mama'.

Jody frowned. 'Lala,' she said.

'Yes, good girl, that's it – Laura. Now, come on, let's get you dressed. We're going to a rugby match and I want you to be good, no shouting or whingeing.'

Laura took her daughter into her bedroom, changed her nappy and put her into one of the many flouncy dresses Joan had bought her. She strapped her into her buggy, gave her a bottle and closed the door behind her.

When they got to the match, Laura turned the buggy to face her and whispered to Jody, 'Listen, there's a guy here that I really like called Danny. If he comes over to talk to me, you must smile and look really pretty and sweet. If I have any chance with him, he has to think kids are easy. So, none of your hissy fits today. OK?'

Jody sucked her bottle and blinked.

Laura kissed her forehead. 'I'll take that as a yes.' She took a deep breath and pushed the buggy into the rugby stadium where four thousand students were shouting for their teams. She heard her name called.

‘Laura, over here.’ Chloë was waving her arms to catch her attention.

Laura manoeuvred the buggy towards her friend, who was sitting with Amber and Hayley.

‘Oh, my God, how cute is Jody,’ Chloë cooed.

‘Do you think it’s a good idea to bring her to a rugby game? It’s very loud. Won’t she be frightened?’ Hayley wondered.

‘I had no choice – my mum’s out.’

‘It’s not great for your image. I mean, I thought you were trying to get people to forget you had a kid and now the whole university can see her,’ Amber said.

‘Like I said, I had no choice.’

‘You could have stayed at home,’ Amber suggested.

‘God, Amber, give her a break,’ Chloë snapped.

‘I’m only trying to help.’ Amber flicked back her hair and pouted. She was wearing the same skinny jeans as Laura, but she had really high spike-heeled black boots on and a sparkly top.

‘Aren’t you a bit overdressed for a rugby match?’ Laura said.

‘No.’ Amber scowled.

‘Her thighs look bigger than Frank’s,’ Chloë whispered, and Laura giggled.

‘How hot does Danny look?’ Amber said.

‘Very,’ they all agreed.

Jody began to wriggle and squeal.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, be quiet,’ Laura muttered.

‘Here, let me hold her.’ Chloë reached over and lifted Jody out of the buggy. Jody went to her happily. She was used to being handed around between Laura’s friends when they called to the house. She never made strange. ‘She’s such a cutie.’ Chloë kissed her chubby cheeks.

‘I’d kill for hair like that,’ Hayley said, looking admiringly at Jody’s blonde curls.

‘She’s the image of you,’ Chloë said. ‘Like a mini-me.’

Laura shrugged and looked back to the pitch, where Danny was about to kick a penalty. The ball sailed over the goal posts.

Laura jumped up to cheer. ‘Did you see that?’ she squealed. ‘He’s amazing.’

‘I think someone’s still got a crush.’ Amber placed her arm on Laura’s. ‘You really need to focus on someone else. He’s a lost cause.’

‘Why?’ Chloë challenged her.

‘Do I have to spell it out?’ Amber pointed to Jody. ‘He’s not into other people’s kids.’

Laura willed herself not to smack Amber’s bitchy face.

‘Well, I think he still fancies Laura.’ Chloë smiled at her best friend.

‘Frank looks amazing.’ Hayley sighed. She had been obsessed with Frank since she had first set eyes on him in college. She had spent the last eight months blushing every time she saw him and becoming either mute or talking incessantly whenever he said hello to her.

Laura shook her head. ‘Honestly, Hayley, you’re better off without him. He’s a slut, determined to shag his way through college.’

‘I know, but I can’t help myself.’

The match ended and the girls headed to the campus bar where everyone was meeting up. Thankfully, Jody fell asleep in her buggy. Laura pushed her into a corner and went to get a drink. When the team arrived in, everyone cheered their victory.

Frank came straight over to Laura. ‘What the hell is Jody doing in here?’ he barked.

‘Mum went out so I got lumped with her.’

‘You need to take her home. This is no place for a baby.’

‘She’s fine – she’s asleep. I’m only staying for a bit.’

Before they could argue any further, Hayley came over. ‘Hi, Frank, you were brilliant today,’ she gushed.

‘Thanks.’

Hayley went a deep shade of red. ‘So, how are you?’

‘Great.’ Frank started to walk away.

Hayley, emboldened by beer, blocked his way. ‘How are you

feeling? I mean, you must have a sore arm – I saw you getting stood on in the match. Is it sore? Does it hurt? Are you in pain?’

‘No, it’s fine.’

‘You look really fit. Have you been working out?’

Frank sighed. ‘Yes, I have. The team trains three times a week.’

‘Oh, right, yeah, I knew that. Of course. So, what are you doing? What are your plans for, like, the rest of the day and stuff?’

‘Well, I’m going up to the bar – if I can get past you that is – to get another pint and then I intend to chat up the fox in the red mini-skirt and, hopefully, all going well, shag her senseless.’

Hayley froze.

Laura grabbed Frank’s arm and pulled him to one side. ‘There was no need for that.’

He shrugged. ‘She asked me what my plans were. I was just being honest.’

‘A bit too honest,’ Laura retorted. ‘Come on, you know she fancies you, God only knows why.’

‘She’s certifiable,’ Frank said. ‘She follows me around every day asking me how I am, how training’s going, how I’m feeling. She needs to be sectioned.’

‘She’s a really sweet person.’

‘She’s a stalker.’

‘She’s my friend.’

‘As her friend, you should tell her it ain’t gonna happen. I’m not interested in having sex with someone whose arse is twice as big as mine.’

‘That’s really mean and, anyway, she’s not like that. She’s quite a prude.’

‘You mean she’s a virgin.’

‘She’s saving herself for the right guy.’

‘With an arse that size she might be waiting a while.’

Danny came over and handed Frank a pint.

‘I need this badly.’ Frank knocked it back. ‘My stalker’s here.’

Danny grinned. ‘She just told me how lucky I was to play on the same team as the one and only Frank Fletcher.’

They all laughed.

'Hey, Danny, well played today,' Laura said, still giggling.

'Thanks. Nice T-shirt.'

Laura was thrilled he'd noticed. 'Thanks, so are you –'

A wail cut through the noisy bar. Laura cursed under her breath.

'What's that?' Danny asked.

'It's Jody.' Frank rushed over to her and lifted her out of the buggy.

'Ank, Ank,' she said, giving him a toothy smile.

'How's my girl?' He kissed her and threw her into the air. She squeaked with delight.

Hayley appeared at his side. 'You're so amazing with babies. You're going to be an incredible dad some day. She loves you.'

Frank winked. 'She's only human.'

Hayley blushed again. 'Would you like to have children?'

'I'm not into procreation, I'm into sex. Dirty, raunchy, any-way-I-can-get-it sex. So, unless you fancy coming into the jacks for a quick shag, move aside.'

Hayley gripped his arm. 'Don't you think sex should be about two people who love each other connecting physically?'

'I'm a straight man. Sex is about getting my rocks off.'

'But it's a loving act between –'

Jody wriggled in Frank's arms. 'Look, Hannah –'

'It's Hayley.'

'Right, yeah, Hayley. I just want to have some fun and get laid. You seem like a nice if slightly unhinged person, so why don't you go and find yourself a guy who wants to hold hands and look at sunsets? You're barking up the wrong tree here.'

'Ank, Ank.' Jody slapped Frank's head.

Hayley was not to be deterred. 'Loveless sex is meaningless, but if you –'

Frank cut across her: 'I like meaningless sex. I like getting laid with no strings attached. I like loose women. I want to shag and go. I'm not interested in what their favourite song or movie is – I

couldn't care less. I'm in it for the sex, not the conversation. Yes, I really am that shallow.'

While Hayley struggled to come up with a response, Frank took Jody to Laura and Danny. He had Jody on his shoulders. She was gurgling happily.

Danny stared at the baby. 'You brought her here?' he asked Laura.

Laura took a slug of vodka. 'Yeah, well, I couldn't get anyone to look after her and I didn't want to miss the match. Where are you guys going later?' she asked, attempting to get off the subject of her bloody kid, but before Danny could answer, Frank let out a loud groan.

'Jesus, Jody, that's bad.' He thrust his niece into Laura's arms. 'She's got a smelly arse and Uncle Frank doesn't do nappies.'

Laura glared at him.

'Oh, my God, what is that stink?' Amber had arrived, pinching her nose with her fingers.

'Jody's dropped a bomb.' Frank grinned.

'It's horrendous,' Amber said. 'Seriously, Laura, you need to take her out.'

'I'm going,' Laura barked.

'Calm down. I just think you should look after your child.' Amber batted her eyelids at Danny. 'There's a big crowd heading into town to the Dirty Duck. Are you coming?'

'You can't bring a kid in there,' Danny said.

'Laura's heading home now, aren't you?' Amber turned to her. 'It must be Jody's bedtime.'

'Yes, Amber, it is. Thanks for reminding me. Have fun without me.' Laura almost choked on the words.

'Sorry you can't make it. I guess babies kind of complicate things,' Danny said.

'You can say that again.' Amber laughed. 'Come on, let's go before it gets too packed.'

They all put on their coats. 'See you, kiddo.' Frank kissed Jody's head.

‘Bye, Laura, have a good night.’ Danny walked out of the door, with Amber hot on his heels.

Laura tried not to cry. She looked around for Chloë but her best friend was kissing a cute blond guy in the corner of the bar.

Laura knocked back the rest of her vodka, put Jody in her buggy, and cried, ‘I hate my life.’

As she walked home, all she could see was a wall of orange mixed with yellow and white – pain, anger and shame.

Laura felt nothing so she did another line. Her throat was numb. Yes! Now she was feeling it. Brilliant. She was ready to go out and face the world. She wiped her nose, reapplied her lipstick and headed downstairs.

‘I’m off now, Mum,’ she said to Joan, who was watching *Tom and Jerry* with Jody on her knee.

‘Don’t be late. I heard you coming in at five o’clock on Thursday. I want you home at a decent hour tonight. You’ve to look after Jody tomorrow morning. I’ve got my aerobics class at nine.’

‘Fine, yeah, ’bye.’

‘Are you not going to kiss your daughter goodnight?’

Laura sighed, and walked over to Jody. She pecked her on the cheek and hurried out of the door.

She swaggered down the road. She felt fantastic. On top of the world. She just wished she’d discovered cocaine before. She’d taken it for the first time a few days after Amber and Danny had got together. It had happened the night after the rugby match when she’d had to go home because she’d had bloody Jody with her. Amber had finally got her claws into Danny.

Laura hadn’t felt pain like it since her dad had died. When Chloë had told her about Danny and Amber, she’d run into the bathroom and thrown up. For days all she could see was orange – so bright and searing it made her feel constantly nauseous.

Frank had been his usual blunt self. ‘What do you expect? She’s available, he’s a guy.’

‘I’m available!’ Laura said.

‘No, you’re not. You have a kid. Danny couldn’t handle that.’

‘You said to me in hospital that it wouldn’t matter, that if a guy liked me, having Jody wouldn’t stop him.’

‘I lied.’

‘What?’

‘Come on, Laura, you can’t be that stupid. A lot of guys will run a mile when they find out you have a kid.’

‘You bastard, I believed you.’

‘You were in hospital. I didn’t want to make you feel worse. Besides, there are some guys who would take on someone else’s kid, but Danny isn’t one of them. He’s way too conservative. Forget him, it’s never going to happen.’

Laura had to leave the room to throw up again.

After four days of being sick and miserable, she’d had to get out of the house. She’d arranged to meet Chloë in the Leopard bar and they had drunk vodka after vodka. But it hadn’t made Laura feel better. If anything, she’d felt worse . . . until they’d bumped into Hilary, a friend from school, who had promised Laura she had the perfect solution to her problems.

‘I have something that’s going to make you feel so good you won’t give a damn about Amber, or whatever her stupid name is. Come on, follow me.’

Chloë had only tasted the cocaine, she was too scared, but Laura had hoovered up two lines and Hilary had been right. She’d felt brilliant, full of energy and confidence. Who the hell cared about stupid Danny and Amber? Laura was on top of the world.

The next day she’d called Hilary and asked her where she could get more. Hilary had put her in touch with her dealer, and now Laura was buying it direct from a guy called Rozer. She had met him in town, behind the Brendan Behan statue in Granville Park on a Tuesday at three o’clock, and bought two grams. She didn’t have a clue how much cocaine that was but it was the amount Hilary had suggested. She’d said it would do her for a few weeks.

Laura loved it. The coke numbed her pain and now she could see Amber and Danny together without feeling sick. It also helped her to study. She felt really alert all the time. At first she had told Chloë she was doing it, but her friend started to worry about her and begged her to stop. So Laura had to be careful that Chloë didn't find out. She also knew that if Frank discovered what she was up to he'd kill her, so she did it alone and was careful to cover her tracks.

Laura met up with Hayley before the party.

'Wow, you look amazing!' Hayley gushed. 'That dress really shows off your figure. They'll be queuing up tonight.'

Laura beamed. 'I love this dress. I feel really good in it.'

'Is Frank coming?' Hayley asked.

'No, he has to study for his last exam.'

'Oh.' Hayley looked crestfallen.

Laura put her arm around her friend. 'Come on – there are loads more guys out there. Let's go and find some cute ones to chat up.'

They headed off to the house party, where Laura drank vodka after vodka. When Amber and Danny walked in, she went to the toilet and did another line of coke. When she came out she marched straight over to them. 'Hi, guys, how are you?'

'Amazing, thanks.' Amber put her arm around Danny's waist.

'How about you, Danny?' Laura stared at him.

'Um, yeah, fine, thanks.' He looked uncomfortable.

'Cool, so we're all good.' Laura smiled. 'Oh, God, I love this song – come on, Danny, let's dance.' Before Amber could react, Laura had pulled him close and begun to dance with him. Laura knew she was hot, she knew she was sexy. Danny looked embarrassed but Laura also knew that, deep down, he wanted her. She threw her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear, 'I know you fancy me. I can see it in your eyes.'

Amber came over and yanked Danny away. 'You slut. What are you trying to do? Steal my boyfriend? Don't you get it? No guy

here would go near you. You're used goods. You had a kid and you don't even know the father's name.'

'You're just jealous because you know your boyfriend wants me,' Laura sneered.

Amber threw her head back and laughed. 'Everyone wants to sleep with you, Laura, but no one wants to call you the next day.'

'Come on, let's go.' Danny pulled Amber away.

As she watched them leave, Laura began to feel her buzz waning. She didn't want to feel the hurt she knew was inside so she went into the toilet and did two more lines. When she came out, she felt fantastic again and ended up snogging Gerry, one of the guys on Frank's rugby team. He was a friend of Danny's and she knew it would get back to him.

'Come on, let's go upstairs and have some fun.' Gerry led Laura up the stairs and found an empty bedroom. He pulled her down beside him on the bed and shoved his hand up her dress.

'Hold on, relax. What are you doing?'

'Getting your pants off.'

'Stop, no!' Laura pushed him aside and sat up.

'What do you mean, "no"?''

'I mean no. It's not going to happen.'

'But everyone knows you're easy.'

'I am not,' Laura spat.

'You have a kid – it's a bit late to be tight now. Come on, Laura, I know you want it.' He put his hand up her dress again.

A kind of rage she'd never known before came over her. She grabbed his wrist and twisted it. 'How dare you?' she screamed. 'You pig! I wouldn't sleep with you if you were the last man on earth!'

He pulled his wrist free. 'A slut like you can't be choosy.'

She jumped off the bed and raced out of the room. 'FUCK YOU!' she yelled, running down the stairs, not caring who heard. 'I HATE YOU ALL!' She tore out of the party and all the way home, spurred on by fury and cocaine.

By the time she got back, the cocaine and vodka had worn off

and she was feeling really low. She took her shoes off and massaged her feet, which were covered with blisters. She went into the kitchen to get some plasters and found Joan and Frank sitting up waiting for her.

Joan was gripping something in her hand. Frank pulled his finger silently across his throat. Laura knew she was in big trouble.

‘Sit down, please,’ Joan said, her voice shaking.

‘Not now, Mum. Whatever it is, please don’t start now. I’ve had a really bad night and I just want to go to bed.’

‘I said sit down,’ Joan barked.

Laura sat at the table, facing her mother. Joan opened her hand, held out a little bag and shook it in her daughter’s face. ‘Explain this.’

Laura thought she might vomit. It was her stash of cocaine. How the hell had Joan found it? She had hidden it in the toe of her boot at the very back of her wardrobe.

‘Is it coke?’ Frank asked.

‘No, it’s just powder, it’s just . . . it’s nothing . . .’

‘Oh, well, that’s a relief because Jody found it,’ Joan said, her cheeks flushing bright red. ‘She was trying on your shoes and she felt something in your boot and pulled it out. When I found her, she’d opened the bag and was tasting it.’

Laura’s hand flew to her mouth.

Frank thumped the table. ‘Is it cocaine?’

Laura nodded. ‘Is Jody OK?’

‘I arrived home as Mum was calling the doctor. We didn’t know how much she’d taken.’

‘I knew it couldn’t be much because I’d only left her for a minute.’ There were tears in Joan’s eyes.

‘The doctor said she seemed OK but we had to keep her awake and watch her for two hours. She’s asleep now.’

‘He said that if she’d ingested all of it she could have died.’ Joan began to cry.

Frank crossed his arms. ‘He wanted to call the authorities but we managed to persuade him not to.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Joan whispered. ‘How could you do this? You could have killed our little Jody.’

Laura’s whole body was shaking. She was sweating and she felt cold. She could see dark green. She was terrified. She put her head into her hands and sobbed. ‘I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I never meant . . .’

‘NEVER MEANT WHAT? FOR YOUR BABY GIRL TO FIND IT AND DIE OF A DRUG OVERDOSE?’ Joan stood up and began to hit Laura, slapping her about the head, face and shoulders.

Frank jumped up and pulled his mother back. He sat her down in her chair. ‘We all need to calm down. The important thing is that Jody’s OK.’

‘I’m sorry, Mum.’ Laura willed her mother to forgive her. ‘I’m an idiot, I know I am. I messed up. I just wanted to forget for a while. I’ve been really stressed and unhappy. I’ll never do anything so stupid again. I swear. Look.’ She went to the sink and flushed away the cocaine.

Joan stood up. ‘I don’t know who you are. The girl I raised, the girl your dad was so proud of, would never have done this. Some kind of monster has taken over my Laura. You’re not fit to be a mother. You don’t deserve a beautiful child like Jody. You put her life in danger. What kind of a person are you? How could you do that to an innocent child? A child who loves you and craves your attention, and who you ignore most of the time. You’re her *mother!*’ Joan walked to the door. ‘I can’t look at you any more.’ She slammed it behind her.

Laura looked at Frank. ‘Do you hate me too?’

He sighed. ‘What the hell are you doing messing with cocaine? How stupid are you? You’ve got a kid.’

Laura pummelled the table with her fists. ‘Don’t you get it? That’s why I took the cocaine – *because* of Jody. Because I can’t be the person I want to be. I can’t be a student. I can’t be a normal twenty-year-old girl. I’m a mother. I can’t be carefree. I can’t go to pubs because I have to babysit. I can’t flirt with guys because

they think I'm a slut. Scrap material. I *hate* my life. I used cocaine to escape from myself. To escape from Jody. To escape –'

Frank grabbed her arm. 'Stop trying to run away. Jody's not going anywhere, and Mum can't look after her for ever. You . . . have . . . a . . . child. Deal with it.'

'It was one night, one stupid mistake, and I have to live with it for ever. Don't you see? It's like having a noose around my neck. I feel as if I'm being strangled. I can't do this, Frank. I can't be a mother, I just can't.' Laura laid her head on her arms and bawled.

'Laura, listen to me. This isn't a choice. You *are* a mother, you *have* a daughter. You've got to get that into your thick head.'

'It's not fair. You screw around all the time and never have to deal with consequences. No one thinks you're damaged goods. People don't look at you like you're dirt. You're not trapped having to look after a kid for the rest of your life. Why me? Why did I get so unlucky?'

'I can't answer that. All I know is that Jody's here and she needs a mother. And so far you're doing a shitty job. And, FYI, no guy wants to go out with a coke-head. Stop drinking so much as well – you're always pissed when you're out. Seriously, Laura, you've got to get your shit together and start looking after Jody properly. She's a great kid. If you stopped feeling so sorry for yourself all the time you might actually enjoy her.'

Laura cried harder.

'Come on, Laura. Look at the positives. You have a gorgeous little girl. Find your happy colour – purple or green or whatever the hell it is. Find it and look at it and focus on it. Come on!' Frank grabbed an apple. 'OK, look at this apple, focus your mind on the colour – greeeeeeeen . . . happyyyyy . . . greeeeeeeeeen . . . I love greeeeeeeen . . . I feeeeel happyyyyy now . . . greeeeeeeeeen.' He waved the apple in front of her eyes.

Frank was right about the colour but wrong about the emotion. All Laura could feel was panic.