

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Control Freak Chronicles

Sarah Tucker

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About the Book

At forty-four, Helena Treadwell thought she had everything sorted. After divorcing her control freak ex, Leonard Wallis, she and her nine-year-old son, Freddie, relocated to her home town of Castleford. She's made a happy home for them and has a successful career as a radio presenter. Finally she feels she's clawing back the control and confidence she lost to Leonard. But life is never simple for long . . .

Helena unexpectedly loses her job and Leonard announces that not only does he want Freddie to attend a private boarding school, he's also decided to move to Castleford to set up home with 'the other woman'. Suddenly Helena's losing control again, as her past comes back to unravel her future.

About the Author

An award-winning broadcaster and journalist, Sarah Tucker was a presenter on the BBC1 *Holiday* programme and, more recently, anchored *I Want That House Revisited* on ITV1. She is the family travel columnist for *Wexas Traveller Magazine* and travel columnist for *The Richmond Magazine*. She regularly contributes to women's magazines, the *Sunday Times Travel Magazine* and *The Guardian*. Sarah Tucker is the author of the *Playground Mafia*, *The Battle for Big School*, *School's Out* and three romantic comedies published by Harlequin.

Also available by Sarah Tucker

The Playground Mafia
Battle for Big School
School's Out

The Control Freak Chronicles

Sarah Tucker



arrow books

Always for Tom
And Caroline. And Helen T.

Author's Note

The idea behind this book came as a result of an interview I asked to do with a celebrity who shall be nameless and who is not in any way featured in the book. When I asked for the interview to be granted, their reply was concise.

I'd love to talk to you, but I would need to specify the exact moment, the time and place, where you sit and what you would be wearing. I will also give you the questions to ask and the order in which to do it in.

In researching this book and talking to psychologists about control freaks, I realised control freakery is nothing more than emotional abuse which our so-called civilised society finds increasingly acceptable, commendable and in some cases even celebrates. I began to feel I was surrounded by control freaks and that, indeed, through chance and circumstance, I may have become one myself. The nurturing a mother gives to her child, the barriers and goals set by teachers in the classroom, are totally different from the insidious forms of control that have grown in this country in the guise of what is good for us, the voter and the punter. Even Orwell could not have imagined 'Big Brother' would have been quite as surreptitiously realised as it has been, able to make lives and break with complete lack of guile, all for our entertainment. The media, the politicians, the law, the City, the church, all like to think they are in control of our minds and morals and motives and money, but ultimately no one has any control over anyone else. The only one who has control over you is you. Remember that the next time you are in the presence of a control freak, be

it your partner, your ex-partner, your boss, or any establishment for that matter, emotionally lording it over you.

A woman in her mid-forties is at my doorstep. It's not a good time for visitors. It's a week before Christmas and I have ten guests to prepare for and a soon-to-be ex-husband who I've just found out is on holiday in the Caribbean with his girlfriend. I've got to make this the best Christmas ever, as it's the last time that Freddie, my two-year-old, will have his mum and dad together with him on Christmas Day. I've been playing my Dido CD for the past two hours and I'm having trouble breathing.

The woman has dark hair, dark eyes, a wide-open face and looks shocked by my appearance - I must look wired and manic, but I don't care how distressed and dreadful I seem. I've got other things on my mind. I haven't slept in days and I've been in the process of tearing up my wedding album, which was extremely difficult to do for practical as well as emotional reasons, as the binder was particularly strong. I've also just opened a card from one of Leonard's friends, who has rather unkindly addressed it to him and Freddie. I don't even get a look-in any more; I'm already out of the equation. His friends knew about the girlfriend a long time before I did, it seems.

I've been signing all our Christmas cards to friends as 'Leonard and Helena (the current wife)', because for some psychotic reason my soon-to-be-ex has chosen a girl with the same name as me, presumably so he won't accidentally call out the wrong name in the middle of a passionate embrace. Leonard preplans his life with anal precision down to the last irrelevant detail, but this time he's surpassed himself. I feel like my family is falling apart and there's a stranger at the door.

'Yes?' I say, wanting to close the door as soon as I've opened it. My words resonate with a 'no, go away' quality that makes the woman take a step back.

'Hello,' she replies, looking hesitant and alarmed.

'I'm looking for Helena Treadwell?' she says, her voice firm but soft.

'I'm Helena Treadwell,' I reply, although I'm not feeling myself at this moment in time.

She looks at me for a while without saying anything while I look back, rapidly losing patience.

'I'm your sister,' she says. Or I think that's what she says. It could have been 'I'm your solicitor,' but even in my fraught state I realise that's ridiculous. Charles Rushbrook is my solicitor.

'You're my what?' I ask, looking at her as though she's speaking in a foreign language.

'I'm your sister,' she repeats.

'Yeah right, of course you fucking are,' I snap and slam the door in her face.

Prologue

'I want ideas that make me wet with excitement!'

Elliott Sterling, award-winning senior executive producer of High Light Productions, one of the UK's largest independent TV production companies, bangs his pen on the table and grimaces at his production team of thirty-something attractive young men, all hungry for his approval and eye contact.

He has been tapping the nib of his Mont Blanc ballpoint so hard it's started to make deep random pock marks on the highly varnished Canadian imported maplewood tabletop, but Elliott appears oblivious to the damage he's causing.

The group of five sit equidistantly around a table: Simon, Samuel, Luca, Jarred and Elliott. Each has an Orlando Bloom-style effeminate smoothness about him. They've been in the office for two hours now, slurping numerous cups of instant black coffee and fresh green tea, brainstorming ideas to present to the commissioning editors at ITV.

'We've all seen the commissioning letter from ITV and they want to fill the seven to eight weekday-evening slots. They want to encourage more forty-somethings to watch, and as all the forty-somethings I know are neurotic, self-obsessed baby boomers who want to be younger, live longer, don't want long-term commitment of any sort, and are fixated on the Ds - divorce, dating, debt and death (in short, delaying and denying) - they should be pretty easy to target. Don't you agree, guys?'

He looks round at his team like an agitated cobra who isn't quite sure which one he'll attack first, just knowing he will attack - eyeballing his team as they earnestly eyeball

him back, nodding furiously but offering no further suggestions.

Elliott looks down at his papers and shakes his head slowly, inhales long, deep, and audibly for effect and spits, 'Then why the fuck can't you come up with any fucking good ideas?' Everyone jumps at the first particularly venomous 'fuck', with the exception of Jarred Collins, a seasoned producer who's used to Elliott's dramatic outbursts.

Elliott sighs and crosses his arms, this time speaking in a sinister slow hiss.

'This commission is important to us. Ed Hardings, the ITV commissioning editor, says he's looking for something new, but I've looked at what he's asking for and it doesn't look new to me. It's just a hybrid of stuff that's worked in the past,' he says, standing up and walking round the table, throwing bits of paper on to it with each step he takes.

'Hardings wants jeopardy, but ironically he doesn't look as though he's willing to take any risks himself. He wants formatted fly-on-the-wall documentaries of punters getting it wrong and our experts putting them right, preferably with as much humiliation, tears, tits and bums as possible. In other words, nothing different at all, just the usual fatuous crap, although don't quote me on that last bit.' Elliott laughs at himself, and everyone in the room, except Jarred, starts to laugh along in a sleep-deprived, coke- and caffeine-infused hysteric.

'You've said nothing, Jarred,' Elliott says, obviously annoyed that his colleague didn't find his unamusing comment funny. 'Do you have anything to contribute? Do you have any tiny gem of wondrous wisdom, Mr Collins? Do you have anything that will get my juices flowing?'

Jarred winces at the thought of getting anywhere near Elliott's juices, but stands up and starts walking round the table ready to hand out some papers of his own.

Thirty-three, producer of creative TV gems such as *Abandoned in the Wilderness*, *Celebrity Abandoned in the Wilderness*, and *Who Do You Want to Be Abandoned with in the Wilderness?*, single, ambitious Essex-born Jarred has been aching to produce something with meaning, substance, integrity and the ability to win a BAFTA for a long time now. He grew up watching *The World at War* narrated by Sir Laurence Olivier in the hope he'd produce something similar, and now he has to work with Ant and Dec in an Australian jungle. Although his shows get good ratings, they don't inspire him and he's been totally bored with the industry he's idealised since childhood ever since he realised it's actually run by children, albeit precocious ones.

Jarred left college wanting to do something creative, unlike his friends, who chose the City and who now see him only as a creative, interesting and colourful guest to invite to their dinner parties to prove they know creative, interesting people, even if they're incapable of being any of these things themselves.

These days he feels just as boring and sold-out as his former classmates, but without the cash cushion they enjoy. His last assignment for Elliott was to produce the top hundred best dying scenes on TV, and in doing so he almost lost the will to live himself.

Unlike the others in the room, Jarred has worked with Elliott for over five years, hasn't been sacked or seduced by anyone in the office and has bounced back from the bullying and rumour-mongering about his sexuality, or lack of it. He's managed to stay focused, professional and come up with excellent ideas, most of which Elliott has stolen the credit for, but because of his talent he's kept his job and a year-on-year salary increase which bought him his first yellow Spitfire and a repossessed three-bedroom flat in Pimlico.

He's also gained the confidence of Heather, Elliott's efficient but brittle PA, having listened to her maudlin tales of bastard ex-boyfriends who all deserve to eat shit and die,

preferably slow, agonising deaths. As a result, Jarred isn't fazed by Elliott's bullying antics, mainly because he has more shit on Elliott than Elliott has on him - and Elliott knows it.

'I've got a different take on this, Elliott,' he says, dropping photocopied newspaper articles about education standards; stabbings; teenage suicides; teachers, parents, nannies and children striking in front of them all.

'Oh, education has been done to death, Jarred,' Elliott says, looking at the headlines. 'Who gives a fuck if people are thick or not. Most of the stuff you've worked on over the past few years has only been watched because the audience are stupid.'

Jarred laughs at this comment, more out of exasperation than because he finds it genuinely funny.

'Good to know, Elliott, but keeping to the point, education has not been, as you say, done to death and it hasn't been done in this way,' he says, continuing to hand the last batch of photocopies to Simon, who looks up at him and winks.

'The school system in this country is in a complete mess, do we all agree on that?' Jarred asks.

'That depends on what newspaper you read or politician you listen to,' Elliott says, 'and who gives a fuck if it is? The TV commissioning editors certainly don't.'

'If I can just finish, I'll explain,' says Jarred, taking a breath and realising - because Heather has told him about Elliott's latest squeeze - why her boss is in such a rush to leave. 'How many people do you know - let's put this more succinctly - how many men do you know that you consider to be real men?' he asks.

'What do you mean by *real*?' Luca counters, managing to look both confused and defensive. 'Do you mean straight?'

'No, nothing to do with sexual preferences,' replies Jarred, 'I'm talking about maturity. What turns a boy into a man? What is it that makes a man out of a boy? You know that old chestnut, a boy asks his mum what he'll be like when he

grows up and she tells him not to be so silly because he's a bloke and he'll never grow up. Why are so many men in their forties cracking up, saying they're feeling emasculated by women, turning to quicksand when they should be dependable rocks?'

'I blame the mother,' says Simon, sighing. 'Smothering rather than mothering.'

'I blame the father,' says Luca. 'Fathers are increasingly absent, emotionally abusive, infantile and self-absorbed when they are there, behaving like juveniles themselves.' He looks as though he's speaking from personal experience.

'I blame *the blame culture*,' adds Samuel, trying to cover all bases.

'Yes, yes, yes, we could get a psychologist to talk the hind legs off that one,' says Elliott, swivelling on his chair to the right then to the left, then to the right again, making the men around him go quite dizzy. 'My personal take on it is boys have too good a time of it when they're young because their mothers spoil them; they get used to the treatment, probably.'

'Interviewing a psychologist as a talking head is dull and doesn't make good TV, which wouldn't please Hardings. What I suggest is this,' Jarred says, taking a breath. 'There's a place called Castleford on the south coast which boasts the most successful schools in the country, as well as the lowest crime rates, so much so that they're de-manning the local police station by two because head office consider it a non-effective use of resources.' Jarred sweeps his arm dramatically along the table, knocking off a few of the photocopied sheets in the process and pointing to a recent article in the *Daily Echo* headlined CASTLEFORD COMES TOP OF THE CLASS, amongst the other tabloid and broadsheet headlines. SCHOOL COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE, WHAT IS CASTLEFORD DOING RIGHT WHERE OTHERS ARE FAILING?, FECKLESS PARENTS FAIL TO PASS ON LIFE SKILLS, SCHOOLS FACE GROWING PROBLEM OF HOSTILE PARENTS, EVERY SCHOOL HAS

AT LEAST ONE BAD TEACHER, PICKING UP YOUR CHILDREN: WE NEED YOUR FINGERPRINTS and ROBOTS ARE THE NEW CHILDMINDERS.

Elliott picks up and scans the Castleford article. 'So what you telling me? You're telling me this place produced men where men are men, and women are grateful. Well, there's a change. But it's already been done by these papers, so it's not news,' he argues sniffily.

'It hasn't been done by the papers,' Jarred interrupts, 'it's been touched upon in brief, as all papers do with any story. It's up to us to delve deeper. They've opened the door for us, now we need to walk in and see what we find.'

'There's no celebrity connection here,' Elliott says, scanning the papers again. 'Didn't anyone famous live in Castleford or at least go to one of these super schools?' he asks.

'Joey Whittaker, the crime writer; Michael Frost, the jazz musician; John Tremble, the sculptor; Dominic Field, the theatrical impresario; Jeremy Bishop, the Hollywood director; Tom O'Reilly, the millionaire philanthropist. We've even got a few women, Chantal Cooke, the eco-warrior who's married to Trent Hawes the actor who went to school there . . . ' Jarred says, reading from a list.

'And could we get any of these guys on?' says Elliott, looking slightly more interested.

'I don't know,' replies Jarred, shrugging his shoulders. 'It's early days yet, but I can easily find out. And I'm sure there'll be lots of natural talent on the ground - we could shadow some key figures in the community. If everyone thinks they'll be shown in a good light, they should be happy to let us in.'

'But what's this got to do with boys becoming men?' Elliott says, starting to scribble notes. 'Are we saying if you live in Castleford, or are educated at a school there, your son will grow up to be a man and you won't have to nursemaid him for the rest of his life?'

'I don't know, but all the research shows is that whatever it is, they're doing something right in this community. These ex-pupils are not just successful financially, they're rounded people. I've looked at their profiles and they're decent as well as successful. They are philanthropists on a huge scale, and they don't shout about it and they command respect and trust from those they work with. Plus they're all family men. They debunk that old adage that you have to be ruthless and manipulative to get on in life.'

'That's just a smokescreen. They're not decent. They just have great PR. They'll have skeletons in their cupboards,' sneers Simon, who's suddenly become interested, possibly because he's just split up with his partner, who's a teacher, and is therefore anti-schools for the foreseeable future.

'Joey Whittaker's books are great,' says Samuel. 'Hasn't his latest just been made into a film?' He looks around the table.

'I think so, the one about the—' starts Luca, but Elliott interrupts. His mistress is waiting and his bladder is full.

'Oh will you all shut the fuck up and let Jarred finish his pitch.'

Jarred continues. 'I've read their biographies. These guys are not money-driven, and they all talk about the passion they discovered when they were at school - at one school in particular, a boys' school, a state school - Castleford School. Why don't we produce a programme that people can actually learn from for a change, something positive and insightful, rather than one where we just sneer at people,' he sighs.

'Oh Christ!' bellows Elliott, throwing some of the press cuttings at him. 'You know why! Because that's what the punters want. That's what the advertisers want. That's what the likes of Hardings want. They want gladiatorial battles. They want to see people taken down a peg or two. They want to see them suffer, really suffer. The crap the characters get up to in soap operas makes them feel better

about their own inane little lives and petty little issues. Real-life documentaries are one better than that because the issues are for real. The crap is real. The plus side to a documentary like this is that it may well leave them feeling worse, feeling jealous, wanting more for themselves and their kids than they've got, and that's where the advertisers will come in, telling them how they can get all this stuff and giving them another short cut to happiness.' Elliott is looking at his watch and getting really agitated.

'That wasn't exactly my intention,' smiles Jarred, realising his idea may appeal to Elliott now, but for all the wrong reasons. 'The documentary would show them how it could be done rather than saying, this is how the other half lives and yah boo sucks to you. What's wrong with wanting more? If it's more of the right stuff. And this school, this place, these people, have obviously done something right. Perhaps it's being by the sea or something in the air, but there are other coastal towns with good schools that don't have these great results or these low crime rates. This place is special, I tell you, I'll stake my job on it.'

Jarred sits down and gathers together his papers, shrugging his shoulders, feeling at least he's tried.

Elliott says nothing, just staring into the air for a few moments - which seems like an eternity to the rest of the team. Then he speaks. 'OK, Jarred. I am going to put it forward because there's enough there to make it work. There's celebrity, or we could turn the local talent into celebrity. I know Harding is looking for soft documentaries again, and you're right, Jarred, there's a real concern for our kids, although nothing seems to have changed. I like the story about Londoners moving into the area and bringing their money with them. Promising to soak the rich is always a crowd-pleaser, and public resentment towards the wealthy is verging on pure hatred. Rich rage has become a fire that I would personally very much like to stoke. The wealthy upping the local house prices in these rural communities so

teachers can no longer afford to live in the area where they work – just like they’ve done in London. We might even get some bankers and City types pitching to this Castleford to spend their conspicuous bonuses, and making them even more conspicuous by putting them on TV. Yes, yes, I like it. This documentary could highlight that, too. We can never get to the underbelly of the seriously rich – they’re always too well connected and closed – but this might give us a chance.

‘Castleford as a place sounds pretty enough, sort of Sonning-by-the-Sea, and the summer term is a good peg. It could be *Bonfire of the Vanities* meets *Dead Poets Society* meets *Goodbye Mr Chips* meets *Looking for Mr Goodbar*. Love that dynamic. Lots of tension, possibility of tears and sacrifice, verbal and even physical violence. Like it, like it,’ he says, getting quite excited as he visualises the potential of blood-letting on sports day as parents argue about who’s doped their nine-year-old up with Mars Bars.

‘The London high-flyers moving into the community could really shoot themselves in the foot with their self-serving platitudes, and we’d be there to record them doing it, which I like and Hardings will like too. I’m gonna put this to Hardings as a revolutionary idea, ground-breaking, something it will take guts to produce, which will appeal to his ego and sense of adventure. And what’s more,’ he says, surveying the others, who are now looking uncomfortable, ‘none of you fuckers have come up with anything better. So, Jarred, if we do go ahead with this, you’re in charge of production. This is your baby all the way. What are you going to call it, *The Castleford Cure?*’

‘I don’t know yet,’ Jarred says, still in a state of shock that Elliott’s bought into the idea. ‘I’ll see how it develops and what themes emerge. I know this has gold in it somewhere. I can feel it. But I’ll need a really experienced film crew, perhaps two. There’s a guy called Will Stafford who’s sharp and may be available for at least six weeks,’ he says,

expecting Elliott to flinch. He doesn't. 'And I know the camera and sound I would like on the job.'

Elliott gets up and grimaces. 'Yeah, I know, I know,' he says, picking up his coffee cup and slurping the last cold dregs as he imagines his mistress on her knees, half naked, tied up and gagged, in suspenders and stockings purely for his pleasure. He allows himself a furtive smile and says, 'Now if that's all you've got for me, guys, I'm going for a piss.'

Chapter One

'I'm afraid we've got to let you go, Helena.'

Peter Bonham, my boss, is firing me. I know he dislikes doing this, as he is looking down at the desk and biting his bottom lip so hard it's starting to bleed. In the past when he's had to 'let go of senior people' as he puts it, he usually rings me up (he's not supposed to but he does) and tells me how difficult it is to fire someone, so I'm sitting in his office on the executive floor of Passion for the Planet's building momentarily feeling more sorry for him than I am for myself, but inside I'm crying.

I'm the fifth person Peter has fired today in the Passion for the Planet station cuts. He's been the MD of Passion for the Planet for the past decade, increasing the profile, revenue and audience figures year on year, a tall attractive man in his early fifties with an enigmatic smile.

'This is very difficult for me,' he says, nodding all the while as if desperately wanting me to nod back and empathise, 'because you have been a protégée of mine since you started four years ago, but due to cutbacks and refocus of the station, we've got to let you go.'

I'm torn between wanting to make this as difficult for him as possible but also realising he's been put in a position he can't escape from. I know well that feeling of hands being tied and being helpless, but I'm still going to put up a fight and pull every emotional and financial string I can.

This job has been a lifeline to me over the past years. It's not only given me new-found confidence and focus - it's given me a necessary and independent source of income separate from the sporadic maintenance provided by my ex.

It's offered me a voice to express opinions on everything from Gordon Brown's handling of the economy to Angelina Jolie's handling of Brad Pitt. I don't have an overwhelming interest in either subject, but the variety and pace of this place, the vibrancy and dynamism of the people I work with and meet, beats in every way the insularity and number-crunching monotony of my former job. I had been working as a PA for a director of a bank, meeting and greeting people who were even greyer and more homogeneous than the skirt suits I was forced to wear each day in the glass and chrome offices of NYW Banking Corporation. It took courage to leave a regular soul-destroying source of income five years ago, just like it took courage to leave a regular soul-destroying marriage two years before, but I took the plunge, did my journalism diploma by correspondence course, and got a job as a reporter. I worked hard, and made my way up the promotional ladder until I got the plum position of presenter on the mid-morning show. And now I'm being given the push.

Being a presenter at Passion for the Planet, at a time when I most needed it, all at once liberated me from my fears about the future and brightened my spirit, a spirit I thought had been all but crushed a decade ago. Not only did it give me courage to release myself almost entirely from what remaining financial control my ex had over me, but this job has helped so much in bringing back the old Helena I knew pre-marriage, I can hardly recognise the woman I was eight years ago. My self-esteem has gone up in leaps and bounds as I've met people I relate to, rather than those I have to relate to because I'm being paid to.

And then there's Freddie - my nine-year-old son and love of my life. A couple of years after he was born I divorced his dad, Leonard Wallis. For the past seven years I've been trying to remove Leonard from my life, and keep him in my son's.

I've loved the creativity of my job, initially researching on the morning programmes, finding guests to come on the shows, then learning to edit my interviews and sending in news reports for the bulletins, and eventually beating hefty competition (including much younger and better-known talent), ending up presenting the morning show when the effervescent and opinionated Victoria Stock left to take up a job as features editor of the *Daily Echo*. Victoria likes to appear as hard as nails, but she's a complete softie when you get to know her, as I have over the years. I remember the first time we met in a studio she looked me up and down and said, 'You look intelligent. We don't usually get intelligent here,' then introduced herself and asked what books I'd read recently. I hadn't read anything for years, but talked with knowledge and passion about the books I'd read for A level French literature: *L'Étranger* by Camus, *Eugénie Grandet* by Balzac and *La Symphonie Pastorale* by Gide. I then rambled on about Keats's odes and Jane Austen's greatest novels. She looked at me for a moment and laughed out loud. 'So you haven't read anything since your A levels either,' she replied, grinning widely at me. 'We'll get on fine.'

It was her job on the station I took when she decided to move on. Peter championed me in the selection process, arguing that I had a perfect broadcasting voice, an easy accessible manner, and listeners could relate to me, trust me. I've had the best of life coaches in Victoria, and Peter has always taken an interest in what I'm doing because Victoria has always had his ear, and I know, for a time, was also his mistress, until his wife found out. Victoria decided to put an end to the affair immediately, although Peter didn't want to, and I know she left her job and the station for that very reason. To this day Victoria says the position at the *Daily Echo* was a career move she had wanted to make for a long time, but I didn't believe that was her reason then and still don't now.

Since then, I've thrived and grown stronger on the discipline of the job, learning about the technicalities of presenting a show. I've come to appreciate more and more that my producer, George Tucker, is the one who makes the show happen - I'm merely a cog. For the past four years I've gone into the Passion for the Planet building in the early hours, kissing Freddie briefly on the forehead before he gets up for school, leaving my hard-working mum to do the school run, and have travelled up to London on the train and then the Tube. On my brisk ten-minute walk from Sloane Square Tube station where the wind whips round so violently at times I've seen grown men go flying like Mary Poppins, holding on to their executive brollies for dear life. I've always had a smile on my face when I've entered and left this building, but today will be different.

'I thought I would be one of the ones you would keep, Peter,' I tell him. 'The show is popular, one of the most popular on the station. I get excellent PR coverage for Passion for the Planet. We have great guests. Yes, I realise I'm not irreplaceable, but I've been adaptable, innovative about ideas for the show, and the station for that matter. I've doubled revenue to the business as well as doubling listeners. How can you let me go when I've done so much for the reputation as well as the bottom line of the station? This decision to get rid of me doesn't make business sense, let alone common sense!' I feel if I speak any more at this point, I will burst into tears, which will be embarrassing for Peter and for me, and getting emotional will not help matters. I've got to stay focused and stick to the facts.

'We've got to adapt to the present climate, and we're going to give someone else a chance,' Peter replies, his bottom lip now visibly bleeding. I get out a hanky from my pocket.

'Your lip is bleeding,' I say, handing it over.

He smiles, takes it and thanks me.

'It's not my decision to let you go. It's the board's decision. I was outvoted on this and I have to abide by the majority decision, no matter what my personal views are. Sandra Fellowes and Shane Whittaker will be replacing you,' he says, looking down at his papers.

'That couple! They're not even journalists! One's a footballer has-been and the other's a WAG - well, his wife, anyway. Haven't they just been on one of those celebrity reality shows? Don't think either of them even won it, despite getting their kit off, so why do we want them here at Passion, let alone taking my show?'

'Because their agent is also Tom Hardwick's agent, and as you know Tom is our main drive-time presenter and the star of the station. It seems Hardwick has been approached by our rival, and his agent has told our board in no uncertain terms Hardwick will only stay if we take on Shane and Sandra, and they want the morning slot.'

'Well tell them they can't have it then!' I shout. 'It would be bad enough losing my dream job to professionals with more ability than me, but it's an insult to lose out to people who possess fewer brain cells than Freddie's pet gerbils.'

Peter breaks into a smile, but I'm so annoyed I want to throw something.

'You have become an extremely accomplished presenter and reporter while you've been at Passion, and you've always been the consummate professional,' he says, although I don't feel I'm reacting to the news particularly professionally. 'I know there are a lot of opportunities out there for you, in all areas of the media.'

'I don't want any other area of the media, I love radio and I love my job. And what's more, everyone is being made redundant, everyone is cutting back on even the really high-profile celebrities, let alone people like me,' I say, realising by the look on Peter's face, no matter how much I try to reason with him, his hands are tied.

Peter gets up from behind his desk and walks round to me. 'I'm so sorry,' he says, starting to get all teary-eyed. This sets me off and we end up hugging each other and blubbing like a couple of flaky luvvies who've been nominated for Oscars and both lost. Then we start to laugh as we realise that's probably what we look like.

'Well, I give them a few months, six months max, and we'll be begging you to come back,' he says, drying his eyes with my hanky. 'One thing with radio is that the audience actually listens to what is being said. They can spot a dud a mile off. On TV they only care about what you look like. I personally think these two are going to do more damage to the station than losing Hardwick ever would, but it's a gamble the rest of the board are not prepared to take.'

'I realise that,' I say, 'and thank you for everything you've done for me. If I'm really pushed I can go back into working as a personal assistant to some corporate suit.'

'Oh God, don't get that desperate. You fought hard for this job. Don't take a step backward. Build on what you've done here and I'll keep my eyes and ears open for you. I have a lot of contacts in the business and you're too good to be wasted,' he says, looking at me as though he genuinely means it.

'Thanks, Peter,' I say, trying to smile through the tears, but they're still flowing. 'It's like a bereavement leaving this place.'

'Think of it as a trial separation. Don't worry, we'll come back to haunt you in six months - you just wait. Now you've got about a month's contract left, so there's plenty of time to think about what you want to do. I'll always be here for a chat if you want to discuss anything, and as I've said, I will put feelers out. Have you thought about what you want to do? Continue radio-presenting? Go into TV? Or do what Victoria did,' he blushes as he mentions her name, 'and move to a job on a paper?'

'I've hardly had time to think, Peter. You've only just fired me.'

'Let go of sounds better.'

'You've only just let go of me, then. But getting involved with TV would just drive me nuts. I can't think of anything worse, and there's so much crap on-screen as it is. At least radio was a cut above that. As for papers, I might give Victoria a call. I've kept in touch with her since she left a year ago.'

'Think it was eleven months ago actually,' Peter corrects, obviously keeping track of time better than I.

'And she may have some contacts and ideas as well, but I suppose at least in the meantime I can spend more time with Freddie and my parents.'

'That will be a plus. I know I should spend more time with my family,' he says, looking pensive. 'You know I love the station, apart from this bit,' he goes on, looking down at what presumably are redundancy notes on his desk, 'but I try to not forget why I'm really here, for my family. I try not to lose perspective about what's important. That's something I don't think you have ever been guilty of. You have always put family first, and I know you'll enjoy doing the school run with Freddie in the mornings now.'

'Yes I will, and I owe my parents a lot,' I say and smile, thinking about how I kissed Freddie this morning and he gently stirred before rolling over and going back to sleep. I wouldn't have been able to do this job if it hadn't been for my mum coming in each morning for the past year, like clockwork, never late, while I've had the presenter's job and needed help with Freddie. Now Mum will be able to have a lie-in. And my dad has been great too - helping me when I made the move to a cottage round the corner from them, finding out the property was for sale before the vendors put it on the market. He also helped me to strike a deal and pay for a deposit on a mortgage I wouldn't have been able to

afford or negotiate by myself. My parents have been there for me, and I've been there for them.

Freddie has been able to spend loads of time with his grandparents, and until last year used to walk with both of them at least once a week after school, to the beach at Castleford Point, skimming pebbles and playing tag, which he invariably won – my father being in his early seventies, my mother early sixties. My parents have been kept young by their grandchild and their active outdoor lifestyle, and look and behave ten years younger than their respective ages. On their walks together, they always laughed a lot at Freddie's stories. My son would delight in recounting tales about sharks and a man-eating octopus that he'd caught sight of, with such conviction I know he'll make a great actor one day. Or politician. And over tea back at their cottage, Dad would tell Freddie about his days in the army, and about being a tennis coach to the boys at the school Freddie now attends, Castleford School. Dad would boast about how he could 'thrash them' at tennis, which Mum had to explain to a much-concerned Freddie had nothing to do with caning or hitting or any form of punishment, but was simply Grandad's turn of phrase. Dad had been headmaster at Castleford, and had many happy memories of the school.

Mum would make her cakes, chocolate marble cake being her speciality, crammed with Smarties and Jelly Tots in the middle. That was and still is Freddie's favourite, and although I make my own version it's never as good as Grandma's because Grandma says so.

If I was late getting back from work, Mum would take Freddie to his clubs, football, rugby, tennis, swimming, karate and now drama, usually driven by Dad in their automatic green Civic. Mum had never taken her driving test, although I was always suggesting it to her, but she said she was happy to be the navigator as Dad made the best driver. But that all dramatically changed when my father had an operation on his knee less than a year ago and