

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Perfect Match

Jane Moore

About the Author

Jane Moore is a columnist for the *Sun* and *GQ* magazine. She regularly presents investigative documentaries, on subjects ranging from supermarket secrets and broiler chicken, through to food labelling and Britain's obesity crisis. She is also the author of the bestsellers *Fourplay*, *The Ex-Files*, *Dot.Homme* and *The Second Wives Club*. She lives in London.

'What makes this a page turner is the skilful presentation of human relationships' *Daily Telegraph*

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'A skilful exploration of complex human relationships' *Take a Break*

Also by Jane Moore

Fourplay
The Ex-Files
Dot.Homme
The Second Wives Club

JANE MOORE
perfect match



arrow books

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For Paul Duddridge

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Prologue

'Are you sure it's safe?' Joe hovered beside her, his face decidedly reluctant. 'I mean, shouldn't we be . . . you know, *careful?*'

'*Safe?*' scoffed Karen. 'Of course it's safe. I'm hardly going to get bloody pregnant, am I?'

She made a loud harrumphing noise and rolled on to her side, gently easing herself into the upright position, the weight of her bloated belly making her wince with discomfort.

Joe poked out his tongue playfully. 'I'm just worried about the baby. This is a mighty weapon you know.' He grinned and peered down at his misshapen boxer shorts.

'Well it can stand down,' she giggled, 'because I've gone off the boil now.'

She lowered her swollen ankles to the floor and gingerly attempted to stand up, hastily grabbing her dressing gown to shield her bulbous shape.

Joe was constantly telling her how attractive she looked, admitting it turned him on to know she was carrying his child. He would rain kisses on her belly whilst squeezing her rapidly expanding buttocks as if comparing a pair of over-ripe peaches left on the supermarket shelf.

But Karen didn't share his fondness for her distended abdomen. She felt unwieldy, sluggish and deeply unsexy, particularly as her due date had come and gone six days previously. It's fully cooked, she thought. All it's doing now is sitting in there, growing bigger and bigger by the hour, biding its time before it squeezes out of a very small space. The mere thought prompted her eyes to fill with water. For the umpteenth time, she glanced downwards and wondered

how her body was going to cope with the ravages of childbirth.

'It'll be *fine*,' soothed Joe, raising his eyes heavenward. He recognised her expression from the many other times when she'd actually voiced her fears. He stood up and walked around the bed, cupping her face in his hands, his kind brown eyes staring in to hers.

'Stop worrying,' he urged. 'Women have babies all the time . . . they say it's no worse than trying to push a medicine ball through the eye of a needle.'

She took a couple of seconds to compute what he'd said, then burst out laughing and shoved him with enough force to make him tumble back onto the bed.

'Bastard.'

He lay there grinning, then started writhing around, his hands fashioned as if clutching a large, spherical shape between his splayed legs. When he realised the joke was wearing thin, he propped himself up on his elbows for a few seconds.

'Right, come on.' Grabbing his jeans from the floor, he hopped up and down as he tried to put them on. 'Let's get serious and coax this little sod into joining us in the big, wide, scary world. If sex is off the menu, perhaps a takeaway chicken biryani will do the trick.'

*

'Jesus fucking Christ!'

Karen closed her eyes tight shut and pushed downwards with a strength she didn't know she possessed. Her face was puce from the effort, her hair matted to her forehead.

Joe's hand was clamped over hers, anxiety clouding his face. He had never felt so surplus to requirements.

He and Karen had attended only one antenatal class, at which they'd disgraced themselves with a fit of giggles when the men had been instructed to deep breathe in

rhythm with their partners. Joe was the first to crack, emitting a snort of such velocity that the teacher stopped her own breathing display to inquire after his welfare. A few seconds later, Karen went, her face contorted with the strain of trying not to laugh. When the teacher misinterpreted her efforts as emulating the expression of childbirth and complimented her, they lost it completely, shedding tears of mirth.

So that, and the hospital's sheet of A4 entitled 'What Dad Can Do', were Joe's only instruction in matters relating to childbirth.

Reaching down to a small black bag at his feet, he pulled out an Evian atomiser and pressed the top to release a fine mist of cool water on Karen's perspiring face. Her ensuing head-swivel made Linda Blair look angelic.

'What are you doing?'

Joe held up the spray by way of explanation. 'Cooling you down?' he ventured tentatively.

She looked at him with naked derision. 'Do you *seriously* think that's going to make me feel better?'

He studied the canister carefully, not wishing to make eye contact with the flared-nostril bed monster. 'Erm, no, not really. It was just on that list of things the hospital suggested I bring.'

'That's to make you feel useful,' she snorted, her lip curled, 'because once we're pregnant there's not much else for you to do . . . *aaaaaaaargh!*'

A contraction kicked in again and her whole body spasmed in agony. Joe grabbed her hand and glanced across at the midwife for reassurance. She was a West Indian of about fifty, with twinkly eyes and a broad, open smile you couldn't help responding to.

'Don't worry.' She flashed her teeth at Joe. 'This is all entirely normal. The abuse too.'

Positioned between Karen's knees, she peered downwards. 'I can see a lovely rim of hair, so keep pushing.'

One more big one and I'd say we'll get the head out.'

'Uuuuuurrrmmggghh!' The strain was etched on Karen's clenched, sweating face as she made yet another gargantuan effort. She was squeezing Joe's hand so hard, parts of the pinky flesh had turned white.

'That's it, that's it,' the midwife coaxed. She took a slight step back and gave a gentle sigh. 'There! The head's out. The hard bit's over. Now for the rest.'

'I can't, I can't.' Karen was crying slightly, rolling her head from side to side. 'I'm too tired.'

'Yes you can,' the midwife chided gently. She looked at Joe. 'Tell her she can.'

He was utterly terrified at the prospect of telling Karen *anything* to do with childbirth, so simply smiled in what he hoped was an agreeable and supportive fashion.

'Fuuuuuuuccccking *hell!*' she screamed, her head jerked forward with the effort of pushing. Her neck was so elongated that she resembled a tortoise emerging from its shell, but as soon as the thought popped into his head, Joe dismissed it. Now probably wasn't the time to mention the comparison.

Suddenly, there was a small squelching noise and a spray of fluid hit his face as the midwife seamlessly jerked the baby into the air. It was bloodied and slightly blue, its face contorted with rage but no sound emerging. She carried it to the far corner of the room and laid it on the scales, making a note of the weight. An ear-piercing cry punctured the silence.

'Is everything OK?' asked Karen, looking anxious.

'You want to worry when he *doesn't* cry,' said the midwife over her shoulder.

'He. It's a boy!' Karen turned back to Joe who was now sitting down, his face level with hers.

'You did it,' he smiled.

'We did it. Sorry I shouted at you.'

He shrugged it off and stroked her hair, moving a wet strand away from her eyes. 'I don't know why they bother giving fathers a list of things to bring,' he grinned. 'It should say in bold capitals "You are simply there to be blamed for everything and be shouted at". At least then we'd *know*.'

She was about to reply, but instead she squinted at his face and rubbed her finger down the side of his nose. 'You've got blood on your face.'

'I'm not surprised.' His expression was faux grim. 'That was unbelievably hard, painful work for me.'

Forming her thumb and forefinger into a pincer, she squeezed his cheek and made a clucking noise like a mother to a child. 'Diddums. You poor thing.'

The midwife returned to the bed, carrying the baby wrapped in a blanket. She placed it across Karen's chest, its dark, currant-like eyes peering out at its mother.

'Meet your little boy,' she said. 'I'll leave you alone for a minute.'

'It's a boy.' Karen looked up at Joe and smiled.

'I know. You already said.' He couldn't stop grinning. Using his forefinger to part the blanket slightly, he studied the child's face intently.

'Who does he look like?' she asked.

Joe was thoughtful for a couple of seconds then pursed his lips. 'If I'm honest? Mr Magoo.'

'Rude sod.' She peered at her little boy. 'You're beautiful, aren't you? You take after mummy's side of the family.'

The door creaked open and the midwife reappeared with a trolley bearing a bowl of water. She nodded at Karen's nether regions. 'Time to get you cleaned up.'

Joe extended his arms and scooped up the little bundle from Karen's chest, nestling the baby's head in the crook of his left arm. Walking over to the window of the delivery suite, he tilted his arm so the child was more upright, then studied the rooftops of London for the first time since he and Karen had arrived in a panic. With its riverside view of

the Houses of Parliament, he marvelled how the hospital hadn't yet been flogged to the richest penthouse developer and relocated to some backstreet wasteland.

Joe looked down. His son was staring back at him, a frown furrowing his already wrinkled brow, his shock of mousy hair still matted to his head. He made a small gurgling sound and moved one of his hands, a tiny finger emerging from beneath the blanket and curling round its edge.

Joe had never felt such a rush of pure and unconditional love for anyone in his life. When his friends had spoken of their experience of becoming a father, he'd smiled benevolently, secretly hoping they'd soon shut up and move on to the football.

But now he got it. Absolutely. That powerful rush of protectiveness and the deep-seated panic that someone, somewhere, might take advantage of his child or try to hurt him. It was all-consuming: the world had shrivelled in size, with only Karen and their son truly mattering to him, even other family members slipping to the periphery of his mind. All his hopes of one day travelling the world or owning a supercar were gone, channelled solely into his desire that his son should always be safe and happy. Here was a brand-new human being, blank computer software to be programmed by him and Karen. Responsibility, he mused, doesn't come greater than that.

Tilting his head forward, he placed a gentle kiss on the boy's slightly crumpled forehead.

'Hello, son. I'm your daddy. And I'll never let anyone hurt you.'

Chapter 1

Ben held on to the sofa and tried to pull himself up, his little legs wobbling with the sheer effort. He resembled a Saturday-night drunk stumbling home.

'Good boy!' Karen made a small clapping noise and he tried to copy her, waving his hands back and forth and falling on to his bottom in the process.

'Oops, thank goodness for padded nappies,' she laughed, grabbing him under the arms and gently levering him back in to position.

She glanced at the clock. Six p.m. Her happiness evaporated, replaced by a familiar tight knot of dread. Time to start the bedtime routine soon.

In most houses, this consisted of splashing happily in the bath, followed by a vigorous towel rub and tickle session, warm jimmy jams and a milky drink. But for Ben, the word 'bedtime' held a more sinister undertone.

The door swung open and Joe walked into the living room, a troubled but determined look on his face.

'Look at this, Daddy!' Karen pointed at Ben who had worked his way round to the side of the sofa.

'I know. He was doing it yesterday.' Joe moved purposefully towards his son, scooping him in to his arms. Ben looked up and smiled briefly before his body instinctively went rigid.

Within two seconds, he was writhing from side to side in a desperate bid to escape his father's clutches, his eyes black with fright, his face turning instantly pink with the exertion of his struggle.

Ben was only eight months old, but he had the stubbornness of a toddler, letting out a piercing wail that

consistently made his parents feel they were being repeatedly stabbed in the head.

'Leave it for a bit, eh?' Karen's face was chalky white as she watched her son try to battle against the inevitable.

'You *know* I can't do that.' Joe's expression was mutinous. Tightening his grip, he turned away and walked through the living-room door into the hallway, leaving her alone.

She stood like a statue, staring at the open doorway, then fell into the armchair with an air of hopelessness. She could hear Ben's screams fading as Joe climbed the stairs, then increasing again as they reached his bedroom above her head.

Knowing the torture his small body was about to endure, she couldn't bear to listen. Jamming her fingers into her ears, she rocked backwards and forwards on her elbows as tears started to course down her cheeks.

Half an hour later, Karen tentatively pushed open the door to Ben's bedroom and peered in to the gloom.

The only light came from his illuminated Thomas the Tank Engine lamp, but it was enough for her to make out the shape of Joe sitting next to the cot. The collapsible side was half down and his arm was hanging over the top, stroking his son's hair.

'I'm not sure I can do this much longer,' he murmured, not looking at her.

'How is he?' She tiptoed her way to the end of the cot and looked in. Ben was curled into the foetal position, his knees drawn in to his chest, his face puffed from crying.

'The painkillers have kicked in.' His voice was low but his tone was slightly brusque. 'He fought it but he fell asleep about five minutes ago.'

A wave of sadness washed over her. 'Poor little mite. Eight months old and all this trauma.'

Her eyes had adjusted to the half-light by now and she could see Joe looked shattered. His eyes were heavy with

strain and his hair mussed up, a sure sign he'd been running his fingers through it as he often did during times of high stress.

'And how are *you*?'

'As well as can be expected.' He gave a quick smile that didn't reach his eyes.

They lapsed into silence for a few seconds, both staring into the cot as Ben now snored gently, oblivious to his parents' concern.

'Bloody injections.' She let out a long sigh. 'Still, they have to be done.'

Joe shifted awkwardly in the hard, plastic chair she'd used for breastfeeding until three months ago. His brow furrowed. 'Yes they do. So please stop telling me to do them later and start backing me up, will you?' he muttered. 'It's bad enough having to stick a huge needle in my son every night, without you playing bloody good cop all the time.'

'I'm sorry. He just gets so upset.'

His expression softened slightly. 'I know. Weird isn't it? He's still only a baby yet he instinctively knows when it's time for his injection. Otherwise, he's pleased to see me.'

Joe stood up and walked around the cot until he was standing so close she could feel his hot breath on her cheek. He placed a hand on her arm. 'Come on, he's fine now.'

Following him down the stairs, Karen studied the back of his head, with his smooth, tanned neck and the broad shoulders she'd always found so appealing. The shoulders that could bear anything, including the burden of having to inflict pain on the son he adored.

He was thirty-six and in great shape for his age, a combination of good genes and an active lifestyle, pounding the pavements for an hour a couple of times a week. He was a 'proper bloke', as her friend Tania described masculine men, but he'd surprised her with his tenderness towards Ben from the second he was born. She knew his inherent kindness would make him a caring father, but his hands-on

approach, his enthusiasm to become involved in the day-to-day minutiae of his son's life, set him apart from other fathers she'd encountered at the doctor's surgery where she worked as a part-time receptionist.

Joe was an accomplished graphic designer, but work these days was hit and miss, so occasionally he took painting and decorating work when he could get it. The rest of the time he was happy to be seen pushing the buggy to the local shops and preparing the majority of Ben's home-cooked meals.

Karen, by contrast, was the ready-meal queen. Her job meant that she rarely cooked the evening meal and when she did, he'd often quip: 'What are we heating tonight?'

He'd already prepared tonight's dinner, a lamb stew with dumplings, thrown in the slow cooker six hours earlier. Over a bottle of wine, he told her about Ben seeing a little boy at the playground with the same teddy and how he'd tried to wrestle it from his grasp.

As Karen laughed, she reflected how much their conversation had changed since having Ben. Pre-children, they'd talked avidly about films, favoured or loathed, and shared gossip from each of their offices when Joe had worked full-time as a graphic artist for an advertising agency.

Now they were as likely to talk about Ben's bowel movements, or the revelation that he'd tried a new vegetable. They were both fascinated by their son, but knew better than to drone on endlessly about him to others. Unlike some who thought their child's every utterance and act would be of interest to the outside world, Joe and Karen knew there was nothing drearier and were happy to restrict such child eulogies to within their own four walls.

Ben's illness aside, she thought as she sipped her wine and smiled at Joe, life couldn't be better.

Nick and Stella Bright sat at their dining table, both silently watching a tourist boat glide past the window, its searchlights scanning the banks of the river for buildings of interest.

Nick raised a hand and waved. 'If you come back in ten minutes, I'll be having a shit.'

'They can't see you,' said Stella matter-of-factly, raising her eyes heavenward and feigning a yawn. This was a regular battle cry of his.

'Feels like it. Can't we get some curtains or something?'

'*Curtains?*' She spat the word as if he'd just suggested they paper the walls with images of Hitler. 'The whole *point* of having a riverside penthouse is to see the view.'

'What? A shitty old tourist barge, a couple of old tyres and God knows how many used condoms floating by? Nice.' He smiled to show he was joking. Sort of.

Stella loved modern, minimalist living. He'd have preferred a tall, traditionally decorated Georgian house in one of London's many picturesque squares, but as Stella had reminded him, he was at work most of the time and *she* was the one who ran their home and spent most time in it, so her preference took precedence. She also liked the extra security of an apartment block and the fact that a concierge took in parcels if they were out. She'd had enough of queuing at post offices with a 'while you were out' card clutched in her hand.

So here they were, having dinner in front of a plate-glass window, with Nick feeling as exposed to public scrutiny as a gorilla at London Zoo.

He popped a piece of bread in his mouth, made a couple of grunting, monkey-like noises, and looked up to see if Stella was laughing. But she was lost in a world of her own, staring down at her abdomen, her left hand resting on it.

Nick watched her for a while then let out a resigned sigh. 'I really *am* sorry. But what can I do?'

'I know, I know. I just wanted you with me . . . to see the first scan.' Her tone was conciliatory but weary.

Leaning forward, Nick squeezed her arm reassuringly. He kept his expression caring, but inside he was a little jaded, as if everyone wanted a piece of him. Not for the first time, the image of his clothes neatly folded on a beach flashed into his mind, the police milling around, searching for his body whilst he sat on a plane to Buenos Aires, off to start a new, uncomplicated life under an assumed name. But he knew he'd get bored after a couple of days and, besides, he loved Stella too much to ever leave her.

'I want to be there but I can't do that time because of Prime Minister's Questions,' he murmured. 'Can't you change the appointment to early morning instead?'

She smiled weakly. 'As Health Secretary, I think you need to do your homework on the NHS appointments system. The next available one would probably be when I've *had* the baby.'

He smiled, relieved the mood had shifted to being more light-hearted. 'Just as well I've got you to put me right then. Though in my defence, I *have* only been in the job for three months. But ask me anything about the rail networks and I could bore for Britain.'

'Don't remind me.' She crossed her eyes and grimaced.

Flicking her a playful V-sign, he wolfed down the last vestiges of pasta from his plate. 'Maybe I could pull a few strings at the hospital?'

'You will *not!*' She was horrified. 'Can you imagine if that got out? The press would murder you . . . and rightly so.'

Nick smiled resignedly and rubbed his hand back and forth across the top of his cropped hair. It was a habit of his since childhood, his comfort blanket when life felt turbulent or even slightly uncertain. Standing, he kissed the top of her head, inhaling so that her scent, a mix of musk and lemon verbena, filled his nostrils. It always calmed him. 'It'll be fine, you'll see.'

‘God, I hope so.’ She sighed heavily. ‘I couldn’t bear for something to be wrong.’

Nick had already taken a couple of paces away from the table, but turned and walked back, his expression one of mock chastisement. ‘Now come on, what did the doctor say?’

‘Think positive,’ she answered flatly. But it’s bloody hard after five years of trying, she thought. She was sick of the positive-thinking platitudes uttered by everyone involved in her pregnancy. She didn’t blame Nick, he couldn’t understand, but when her GP and gynaecologist took the ‘smile, it might never happen’ route she felt they were no better than the builders who bellow it from scaffolding at every passing female under thirty-five. Worse even, because the doctors *knew* the extent of her suffering. Nick’s voice punctured her thoughts.

‘Now, talking of swotting up on the NHS, I’d better go and do some.’

He wandered off in the direction of his study, leaving her sitting alone among the debris of empty dinner plates. Nick rarely did anything around the house, but Stella didn’t push it as she didn’t work. He earned the money; she ran the house. That was the unspoken deal.

Yet occasionally, when he needed to raise his political profile via the media, he would give interviews in which he’d yabber on about what a modern man he was and how his wife had to practically beat him away from the dishwasher.

These days, to be seen as even slightly old-fashioned and traditional was political death, despite the fact that behind the closed doors of Nick’s rural constituency, the majority of the electorate had the same deal. Trouble was, she mused, the middle-class intelligentsia of media commentators seemed to run the country and politicians had to jump to their liberal, progressive eco-tune.

She smiled at the thought of what an unreconstructed male Nick was and whimsied over the money her memoirs

would make, blowing the lid on government spin of the marital kind.

Letting out an unintentionally long sigh, she started to clear the table.

Karen lay in bed, flicking through *Hello!* magazine and wondering where all these celebrity women, whose relationships always floundered because they were 'too busy', found the time to look so well groomed. They must have manicurists on call 24/7, she thought, glancing down at her own chipped fingernails.

At thirty-two, she was still, as Joe put it, 'in good nick'. But she was aware that Ben's illness had taken its toll on her appearance through worry and lack of sleep. Her blue, almond-shaped eyes were striking, but the faint, dark circles under them betrayed her constant exhaustion. After years of having a dental hygiene routine drummed in by her mother, plus a couple of her formative years spent wearing an orthodontic brace, her teeth were impressively straight and white, producing a killer smile that illuminated her face. Trouble was, having a seriously ill child meant it wasn't put to much use anymore.

Once a fanatical cleanse-and-moisturise girl, now it was barely all she could do to run a wet wipe over her face before bed. Beauty routines faded into insignificance when your child was fighting a life-threatening illness.

Similarly, her trendy wardrobe of clothes had morphed into one of practicality, consisting mostly of T-shirts, jeans and her trusty old pair of pink Converse trainers. The only time she had to dress remotely smart was for the surgery reception from one till six p.m. most days.

Joe pottered around the bedroom, putting his clothes away and changing the batteries in the television remote. She marvelled that, physically, he hadn't changed much since the day they'd met: slightly less hair perhaps, if you looked *really* closely, with a chiselled but kind face that only

seemed to improve with age. Emotionally, though, she knew Ben's illness was destroying him. With every bone and muscle in his body, he wanted to protect his boy from life's ills, and yet here was this dreadful disease, eating away at Ben, and his father felt impotent to do anything about it. Worse, he was the one having to administer the drugs that caused Ben to scream out in raw, searing pain every night as the medication hit his bloodstream.

Consequently, a lot of her husband's natural *joie de vivre* had left him. Always the life and soul of any party prior to Ben's birth, now he was too drained by exhaustion, a shadow of his former, ebullient self. Out socially, he would still laugh a lot, but it was reacting to others rather than playing the clown himself. And Karen noticed his smiles rarely reached his eyes, which harboured a deep sadness and pain no pub anecdote could overcome, not even for a second. Not long ago, he'd told her that his favourite moments of the day were waking up, when for a few blissful seconds he felt everything was right with the world. Then his brain would click into gear and fill his mind with the unpalatable reality of Ben's wretched disease and the momentary reverie would evaporate. She knew what he meant: she felt the same way.

Closing her magazine, she threw it to the floor beside the bed. 'Hurry up with the light. Big day tomorrow.'

Joe nodded silently and walked over to the bed, his striped pyjama bottoms resting on his lithe hips, his chest bare. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he swung his legs under the duvet and rested his head on the vast bank of pillows he claimed he couldn't sleep without. Karen stared unblinkingly at the ceiling, waiting for him to flick the light switch. When he did, the light from the landing threw a hazy glow across the bed.

The weight of their pain and feelings of hopelessness bore down on them in the darkness. Karen's mind was full of it and she knew Joe's would be too, leaving no room for any of

the relaxed frivolity that sustained so many couples through the often mundane patches of married life.

She started as he suddenly shifted onto his side, turning to face her as he gently began kissing her mouth. Instinctively, she recoiled awkwardly. 'We need to sleep.'

He flopped back on his pillow and stared intently at the damp patch above their heads, a reminder of last summer's water-tank leak. 'It was just a goodnight kiss, that's all . . .'

They lay in silence, both as rigid as statues. Karen closed her eyes tight shut, knowing she should try and make amends but struggling to make the move. She loved Joe deeply and couldn't imagine being with anyone else, but the burden of having a sick child consumed her so greatly that there was little or no energy left for working hard at marriage too. Eventually, she turned over and snuggled in to his chest, placing a quick kiss on it.

'Sorry.'

He peered down at her for a moment, then moved an arm to stroke her shoulder, perfunctorily kissing the top of her head. 'Don't worry about it. Come on, let's get some sleep.'

Grateful the awkwardness had passed, she turned on her side and closed her eyes, desperate to succumb to her sensation of sleepiness. But as ever, her mind had other ideas, whirring through what might happen tomorrow and analysing every possibility. She and deep sleep had been strangers for some time, and she was too wary of Ben needing her in the night to take the sleeping tablets offered by her doctor.

Joe had turned over too, so they were back to back. But she knew, like her, he would only sleep fitfully, tormented by the worry and guilt of their son's suffering.

Chapter 2

Robert Pickering flicked through the medical notes in front of him and pursed his lips. He was a grey-haired man with a careworn face and half-rimmed glasses, an archetypal picture-book image of a doctor, something that reassured Karen. She knew he'd worked at the hospital for at least twenty years and, last-chance saloon as it was, had probably become inured to delivering bad news to countless parents.

Joe and Karen were sitting on uncomfortable, high-backed chairs in front of his desk, their expressions rigid with apprehension. Oblivious, Ben played with a small wooden train set, repeatedly pushing the engine back and forth across the linoleum-tiled floor.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Pickering removed his glasses and looked up at them. 'I'm afraid no one on the bone-marrow register is a close enough match.'

Karen shut her eyes tight as she struggled to control the well of nausea in the pit of her stomach. There were thousands registered, so she'd had high hopes of someone matching. She heard Joe clear his throat.

'And us?' His voice was cracked and he coughed again.

'I have everyone's DNA results here.' Pickering put on his glasses and pulled a sheet of paper out from the file, his expression impassive. 'All grandparents . . . no, I'm afraid.'

He placed it back and pulled out another, his pale blue eyes fixed directly on Karen. 'Mrs Eastman? Close, but unfortunately not close enough for this level of procedure. And Mr Eastman . . .'

He faltered slightly and stopped speaking, studiously examining the piece of paper in front of him. He blinked a few times then placed his glasses on the

desk and massaged the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. 'That's a no too. Sorry.'

Joe, who hadn't taken his eyes from Pickering's face, puffed out his cheeks and made a loud exhalation of air. Karen had turned deathly white. They stared at the consultant as if he was about to announce he'd been mistaken and that one of them could save their son's life after all.

'Maaaaaaaaaaaaa!' It was Ben, trying to get their attention. He was holding a little plastic man in his chubby hand, waving it delightedly, blissfully ignorant of the life-or-death conversation taking place above his blond, curly head.

'That's lovely sweetie,' smiled Karen, her face flushing with emotion. She turned back to Pickering.

'So what now?' She could hear her own voice speaking but felt disembodied. She wanted to get up and run, back to her younger years of no responsibility or heartbreak. She felt Joe's arm snake round her back and start to rub reassuringly between her shoulder blades.

'Diamond Blackfan Anaemia is very rare, as you know . . . ' Pickering paused and waited for their acknowledgement, which they duly delivered with a sombre nod. 'And in Ben's case, it's also impossible to cure without a bone-marrow transplant from a perfect match.'

They nodded again, having researched it so thoroughly on the internet they felt they could almost perform the procedure themselves.

'What's happened in other cases?' asked Joe. He and Karen had read about the experiences of others but wanted the generic, professional overview.

'Some have found a donor from the register and because it's one of those random conditions and not hereditary, one couple I know of are trying for another baby in the hope that it matches.'

Karen's spirits lifted, thinking that if he'd bothered to mention it then perhaps it was a viable option for them. She

turned to Joe and saw his eyes were alight with optimism.

‘We could do that,’ he urged.

She nodded back, her expression softening slightly.

But Pickering was pensive. ‘There’s only a one in twelve chance that a baby conceived naturally would match an older sibling, so it’s a hell of a lot to go through for no guaranteed result.’

Joe’s face clouded over again. Karen looked shell-shocked.

‘So it’s preimplantation genetic diagnosis then?’ Her voice was barely audible.

Pickering gave a half-smile. ‘You’ve done your research then.’

‘Yes, to a point. But there’s a lot of scare stories out there.’

‘In that case, let me give you the down the line, medical version.’ He sat back in his chair and pressed his fingertips together. ‘We put you through the IVF process, fertilise several eggs, then choose the one that’s the closest genetic match to Ben before implanting it for a normal pregnancy.’

Karen leaned forward earnestly. ‘And then the baby’s bone marrow will help cure him? No more blood transfusions or injections?’

He shook his head slowly, clearly recommending caution. ‘There’s no absolute guarantee. But it’s the best chance he’s got.’

Nick Bright lifted his red box from his knees and placed it in the seat well at his feet, making room for the large green file James Spender had handed him. He flipped it open and stifled a sigh so it escaped from the corners of his mouth. ‘God almighty, does this shit ever end?’

‘That’s the trouble with being Health Secretary,’ said James matter-of-factly. ‘It’s bad for your health.’

A mobile phone rang, a polyphonic version of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, filling the air with its doom-laden notes.

‘Hello?’ James’s tone was tetchy. He’d specifically asked not to be disturbed whilst he was briefing Nick on the way to the House of Commons and no one but the office had this number. Even his mother had to go via his PA. ‘No. Tell him I’m in a meeting and can’t be disturbed. Which is what I fucking told you to say to anyone who calls, so why you’re bothering me with this is beyond me.’

He flipped his phone shut with such ferocity that Nick flinched.

‘They don’t listen,’ he offered by way of explanation, smiling thinly. ‘Now then, let’s crack on.’

Nick had been working with his ‘spin doctor’ for only three months since getting the health job, but already he was daunted by James’s brutal manner. And, if he was honest, more than a little impressed by his thick skin that made rhinoceros hide seem diaphanous. If a security guard would take a bullet for his employer, James took the verbal brickbats, swatting away persistently awkward, off-message journalists as if they were annoying bugs.

This wasn’t the good cop, bad cop routine. This was angelic choirboy and serial killer. The deal was that Nick could pretend to be Mr Affable, seemingly willing to answer any question a journalist chose to throw at him, whilst James was the boot boy, stepping in with his size elevens and announcing that the Health Secretary couldn’t shed light on that particular inquiry for ‘security reasons’. James was in his early thirties and of average height, but he was heavily set and a look in his eye suggested he shouldn’t be messed with.

‘Right, first things first.’ James opened his copy of the *Post*, turning immediately to page eight and a glaring headline that read: ‘New poll says Labour’s future is not Bright’.

‘Shit!’ Nick stared down at it, shaking his head slowly. Poor poll results weren’t the end of the world and a policy announcement could tip the scales the other way, but the