RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Tale of Two Sisters

Anna Maxted

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About the Book

Lizbet and Cassie are close, yet far apart. After a clueless upbringing (their parents' basic childrearing beliefs: 'play a trombone, see a monkey, get some fresh air'), the two sisters strike out in opposite directions, both desperate to escape . . .

Cassie is skinny, clever, charismatic, successful – every right-thinking girl's worst nightmare. The one flaw in her quality-controlled life may be her marriage – and if there are any other flaws lurking, Cassie has them covered. Lizbet is plumper, plainer, dreamier – more concerned about the design on her coffee cup than whether she can afford her new house. She works reluctantly for *Ladz Mag*, desperate to make her name as a writer, but stuck writing embarrassing articles on sex. Her one achievement is her relationship with Tim, who thinks she's cute, not stupid for asking why Jesus has a Mexican name.

Despite Cassie being the favoured child, she and Lizbet have managed to stay friends. Perhaps because – as Cassie says – they've always wanted different things. But that's about to change. Confronted by challenges that they never asked for, forced apart by mistakes not their own, will Cassie and Lizbet ever realise the real meaning of sisterhood, or will true nature ruin everything . . . ?

About the Author

Anna Maxted lives in London with her husband Phil and their three sons, Oscar, Conrad and Casper. Anna read English at Cambridge and works as a freelance journalist. She is also the author of the international bestsellers *Getting Over It, Running in Heels, Behaving Like Adults* and *Being Committed*.

Also by Anna Maxted

Getting Over It
Running in Heels
Behaving Like Adults
Being Committed

A Tale of Two Sisters

Anna Maxted

arrow books

To Mary Maxted, with love

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Lizbet

Chapter 1

When my sister left her jungle villa after two weeks at the Datai, on the tropical island of Langkawi, she wrote a little note for the manager.

Dear Sir,
Nearly everything was perfect. However, I think one of the monkeys has a cough.
Sincerely,
Ms Cassandra Montgomery

When she returned home a fortnight later – she and George having gone on to stay at the Regent, in Chiang Mai – a thick cream envelope was waiting on the mat. Cassie tore it open.

Dear Ms Montgomery,
I am delighted that you and your husband enjoyed your stay. Thank you for pointing out that one of the monkeys has a cough. We have informed our vet.
Sincerely . . .

When Tim and I left our bed and breakfast accommodation on the Isle of Wight, I wrote a little note to the owners.

Dear Martyn and Tanya,
Sorry to leave early without saying goodbye. I hope the Garlic Festival was fun. It's just that the rain and the viral gastro-enteritis have reduced our previously great wealth of activities to watching daytime television and hanging over your khaki-green (or should I say khazi-green? Probably not!) toilet bowl. Also, Tomas's cold is getting worse – he claims that the 'horrid smell' – the pleasant Forest Blast air freshener! – makes his head hurt. And, it's quite hard to cater for an irate two-year-old's extraordinary dietary demands when you don't have a kitchen.
Best,
Elizabeth M

I never got a reply, which made me feel less guilty when Tim confessed that *his* parting message had been to piss against their wall.

The holiday might have been less of a strain were we not looking after our godson while his parents were in Japan for a funeral. We weren't bad, as godparents go, so I thought. Most people are pleased at the honour, counting it as evidence of what fine human beings they are. Their conceit wanes as fast as it takes for the child to open its mouth and say 'WAAAH'. Then they realise. This isn't a compliment, it's a contract. Your friends croak, the kid's yours. Even if they do manage to stay alive, the constant outlay on gifts is on a financial par with keeping a string of racehorses.

Though it was tempting, I didn't think that Jeremy and Tabitha had asked us because we were fabulous. Tim immediately suspected that they didn't have any gay friends. I also felt it was because they presumed that we were too childish ourselves to have children. I'd never *said,* but people assume. If you ever dared to enquire, you'd be appalled at the poor impression you make on even your closest acquaintances. 'Oh!' – on seeing your ramshackle cutlery collection mainly assembled from airlines – 'I'd have thought you'd have everything in matching silver!'

Tabitha and Jeremy lived next door, and from the day we moved in and Tabitha knocked with champagne, they were determined to love us. I'm not complaining. It was only a problem in that I felt anxious about living up to their kind expectations. The house was a deal tidier than it would have been, thanks to Tabitha's habit of popping in for a coffee most days. (I'd had to ban Nescafé Instant from the premises after a near fist-fight. 'Oh, I'll just have the cheap stuff, Elizabeth!' – 'Absolutely not, I'll make filter!' – 'No! I won't hear of it! Please don't go to any trouble!' – 'Tabitha, I insist, don't you dare, give me that jar!' etc. – 'Well, if you feel that strongly . . . !')

Tabitha had been there when Tim's German aunt had invited herself round to show off quite the plainest baby I'd ever seen. 'Hah!' she'd said, as I tried to resist the hypnotic lure of her enormous bosom. 'Elizabett is getting broody!'

I had met Tim's German aunt twice and the assumption I'd made of *her* was that she could never understand why another person might oppose her opinion.

'No, I'm not!' I heard myself say in a loud, cross voice. 'I'm not getting broody at all!' Then, so as not to appear petulant, I added, 'I like babies. They're very . . . small. I just don't want one *personally*.'

Tim's German aunt pulled the baby closer, and zoned me out of her eyeline.

Tabitha darted me a sharp look, and purred, 'All babies are beautiful, aren't they? And what a nice size. Is he feeding well?'

I hurried into the kitchen to make a great big cafetière of designer coffee with every last scrap of caffeine processed out of it, which I hoped would please everyone.

I felt like a wet cat for a long time afterwards. Till at least ten forty-five. I didn't like having to defend myself for what wasn't even a *decision*, yet. I was thirty at the time, and it didn't seem that long ago that I'd had to defend myself, aged fifteen, to Aunt Edith for not having a boyfriend. Not content with assuming that you were prim about cutlery, people assumed that you wanted children and were jealous of theirs. And commented openly! I couldn't decide which was ruder.

I had caught Tabitha's sharp look, and wondered what it meant. Six months later, when she and Jeremy invited us round for dinner, and Tabitha had grown to the fine shape of a ripening squash, it *sort of* made sense.

'We'd love to be godparents! What a lovely, lovely, er, thing!' I croaked, before Tim said something inappropriate, like, 'It's still half-fish, aren't you supposed to wait till it's born?' I loved Tim with all my heart but in social situations

he trod a fine line. Dinner parties were rare these days, what with everyone around us procreating, but when we were invited out, I'd spend the night with my hand hovering over his – less because we couldn't bear not to be touching than because the arrangement enabled me to gently suffocate any *faux pas* at its inception.

(Now I sound like a Tory wife, but the last time the pleasure of our company was requested, Tim announced to a rather smug guest who had moved to St Albans – a small town half an hour from civilisation – 'If I moved to St Albans, I'd feel like I'd failed.')

St Albans was a sore point. Tim was a designer. He'd designed a TV remote holder, a dartboard, an ergonomic footrest, all of which, despite painstaking computer-enhanced imagery, failed to sell to a manufacturer. Then, three years back, he'd designed a potty in the shape of a train. I have no idea why, as he had no knowledge of young children, beyond that gathered incidentally in supermarkets. He then borrowed thirty thousand pounds to pay for an injection mould. The TRAINing Seat™ required a 'particularly complex mould,' said the guy from Plastik Magnifik. The prototype was featured in *Best for Baby* magazine, billed as 'The Pot They Actually Want to Sit on!' This secured Tim a meeting with Woolworths, which led to an order for five thousand Trains. And when Tim mentioned his vision for a pink Fairy Throne, they went for that too.

While Woolworths wasn't the Conran Shop in style or kudos, it *was* a national chain, and Tim and I felt queasy with the promise of endless wealth. We all know that money doesn't buy happiness, but it buys lots of other nice things, which go a long way to compensate. He secured himself an agent, who brokered the deal – which was impressive enough to get Tim featured in *The Times*' business section. The headline: 'Sitting Pretty, the Potty Prince'.

This did little, as you might imagine, for Tim's credibility or, indeed, his popularity. Only his mother, who bought twenty copies of the paper, couldn't find fault. Not only had reports of his wealth been greatly exaggerated – tax, agent fees, etc. – but eighteen months later, barely long enough for the royalties to kick in, a rival store released a blue potty in the shape of a *racing car* (what dastardly genius) and – woe upon woe – a pink potty in the shape of a princess's pony.

It was a bit bloody inconvenient, to tell the truth, as we'd taken the agent at his word – 'This is new house money!' – and moved next door to Jeremy and Tabitha. It was also a trifle annoying in that all who knew us were convinced we were millionaires, and not for any glamorous reason either. (Though, *were* we millionaires, I think, in time, with intensive electro-shock therapy, we might have come to terms with the stinky-bottom foundations of our fantastic jet-setting multi-mansion lifestyle.)

My point is that – after finally opening our last bank statement – Tim and I had made the drive of shame to St Albans. Tim was entirely disagreeable about the whole exercise.

'Where *is* this place?' he said, as we tried to get out of it. And then, 'It's, like, *nowhere*.' And, finally, 'It feels like *death.*' And, soon after, 'The people are *different* outside London.' And, as we sped down the motorway, 'I'd be spending all my time wanting to escape from it.' And, as we approached our road, 'We're *bigger* than St Albans.' And, as we pulled into our drive, 'I'd rather move to *Australia.*'

This excursion wasn't mentioned to Tabitha and Jeremy – who were forever having work done on their beauteous house and, we feared, had little affinity with poor people. Particularly poor people who were godparents to their firstborn. I exaggerate. Not that my job as assistant to the deputy editor at *Ladz Mag* was pulling in a hefty wage, but if you can afford to donate seventy-eight pounds a month to a

health club, just to help it along with its profits when you haven't set foot in the place for seven months, because you can't bear the fat-girl finality of cancelling your membership, you're not, strictly speaking, poor.

We weren't, however, able to afford our lifestyle. Our neighbours were doctors and lawyers and bankers – people with serious jobs and serious pay packets – Tim and I had no business living alongside them. All we did was prat about with words and potties!

Hence the decision to spend this year's summer holiday in England. We booked late, which reduced our choices to the Isle of Wight. Everyone reacted like we were off to French Polynesia. Wonderful . . . marvellous . . . amazing beaches. It never occurred to me that these people were the same liars who'd assured me that I looked great in culottes. Then Tabitha came round, with sad news of the demise of a university colleague's father. They *had* to attend the funeral, in Tokyo. No point going all that way and staying less than a week. They were between nannies – Tabitha went through nannies like a tractor through muck – would we mind Tomas? I hadn't understood at first. Would we mind him doing what?

Then I got it.

'Would it be ok to take him to the Isle of Wight?'

Tabitha looked confused. I don't think she really believed in money worries, she must have thought I was being ironic.

'Of *course*!'

So Tomas came with us to the Isle of Wight. His luggage alone was worthy of Ivana Trump. The list of instructions on his welfare, daily routine, habits, likes, dislikes, favoured topics of conversation, preferred pastimes, allergies was as long as the New Testament. It was unfortunate that Tim left it in our hallway. It was also unfortunate that even before we left London, Tomas found and ate an unidentified object off the floor that he would only describe as 'blue'.

Prior to the ‘holiday’ I had considered myself to have a fine relationship with my godson. I babysat at least twice a month, and Tomas loved coming to our house, primarily to play with the cat litter (‘sand!’). We had conversations *easily* as advanced as the ones I had with Tim. I mentioned to Tomas, for instance, that in four months’ time, his mother was going to have a baby.

His response: ‘I hit baby, with stick. I sit on his head. I push him. I smack his bot.’

My response to his response: ‘Oh! Really? I’m sure you wouldn’t. I’m sure you’re very gentle with babies.’

His response. ‘I wear pink dress.’

En route to the Isle of Wight, our relationship deteriorated. I was frantic about his consumption of the blue object. Tim refused to be alarmed but this was just laziness. Actually, no ill effects from the blue object ever presented. Except that Tomas, despite being dressed like a lunar explorer, caught a cold. And Tim and I found that, even with a three-decade advantage, witwise, we were no match for a two-year-old.

There was no organic food on the Isle of Wight, only chips. Tabitha had said, ‘He won’t eat junk. He *loves* avocado.’

Not on our watch. The kid ate Coco Pops for breakfast. A jam sandwich (white bread) for lunch. Chips or pizza for dinner. Offer anything nutritious and he’d scream until his lips turned blue. He *made* us play his *Bob the Builder* video (‘no more than twenty minutes of Bob a day’) at least four times, morning and afternoon. He refused to go to bed till midnight. If it weren’t that he got up at six thirty – ‘I awake now!’ – you’d have thought he was a teenager.

We might have coped, were it not for the viral gastro-enteritis, which bypassed Tomas, but zeroed in on the runts of the litter, Tim and I, with ferocity. And did I mention the flies in our lounge? And our cold bedroom? And the mean weather? And the fact that no restaurant opened until seven. (‘Tomas eats dinner at five thirty, certainly no later.’) We got to the beach once, where Tomas fell in the sea three

times in ten minutes, soaking every item of clothing I'd packed for him. After three days of retching in a green bathroom, and little sleep – less, thanks to Tomas, than Tabitha, who phoned on the hour (we lied a lot) – we admitted defeat, and left early.

Two days later, we handed an only slightly snot-nosed Tomas back to his rightful owners, and crawled into bed to recover. We were no longer those naïve optimists who'd set off so carefree only five days before. Now we knew. That we would never holiday in England again. That we were not happy being poor. That we were *awful,* absolutely *awful*, with children. They didn't like us, we didn't like them, and please God let Jeremy and Tabitha live for ever.

I discovered I was pregnant two weeks later.

Chapter 2

I told Tim I was pregnant and he replied, ‘No you’re not.’

‘No, I am,’ I said, and showed him the stick.

‘Do another one.’

‘I have.’

‘Fuck,’ he said.

‘We must have.’

I’d had a bad feeling when I’d cried at an advert in which a small boy knocks on a door and presents a box of inferior confectionary to an old woman. I think she gave him his ball back instead of spearing it on the end of her stick. I considered myself intelligent but I was as easily turned as a door knob. Pry open my soul, and you’d be splatted with a sticky green gloop of materialism and gullibility. I’d see a product on the screen, say, Cornflakes – ‘Have you forgotten how good they taste?’ and think: have I? Maybe I have. Better check, and send Tim to the petrol station to buy a packet. But the weeping was suspect.

I felt sick and it was nothing to do with hormones. I was an idiot, a disappointment to myself, and there’s no worse feeling. I didn’t like babies. They frightened me. It was like a fear of spiders, except rational. At the magazine company, women swelled up routinely, disappeared for three months, returned in triumph as if from a heroic venture, portly figure half deflated, bearing a small screeching bundle, and everyone would crowd round – as if there was something *new* to see, when truly, all babies look alike and are thus given wrist tags in hospital. I’d hover at the back, a tight smile on my face, hoping I wouldn’t be forced to touch.

I didn’t *want* one.

It was my sister's fault. Cassie. She was five years younger. I remembered trudging up the hill with the Canadian nanny, Cassie roaring away in her pushchair.

'I don't want babies,' I said to the Canadian nanny. 'I prefer dogs.'

The nanny – she had hair that frizzed at the tiniest speck of moisture and hated England – replied, '*Well.* All the other ladies will be pushing their babies in prams, and *you'll* have a dog on a lead.'

Fine by me.

Cassie bit. You could muzzle a dog. She also required endless entertaining. There was no peace. It was like living with Henry VIII. A voracious eater, short-tempered, easily bored, scarily powerful. I became her substitute carer after the Canadian nanny was sacked by our mother for shutting Cassie in the walk-in larder while she watched episodes of *The Professionals* on the Video Cassette Recorder. (We were the first family I know to own a VCR. It was battleship grey and the size of a suitcase.) Cassie passed her time in the larder roaring, and eating raisins, which gave her severe diarrhoea.

The diarrhoea, in which an alarming number of unchewed raisins were clearly visible, plus a neighbour's casual remark to our mother, 'I always hear her screaming,' raised our mother's suspicions. She crept home early from the office, and caught the nanny *in flagrante* with Bodie and Doyle. Our mother was physically sick at the thought of Cassie being mistreated, but there was no question of her giving up work. She adored work. She was editor of a magazine entitled *Mother & Home.*

Dad was a concierge in a central London hotel – he liked his job, but would have left it for us – well, for her. But he didn't. I think he knew our mother would not have been comfortable with a house husband. Was there even a word for it then?

So Kristina, the Danish au pair, was employed. Blonde, beautiful, within days of her arrival she was snapped up by an Englishman with a sports car. Despite the zircon engagement ring, she remained in our house. She treated Cassie like a prize doll. I noticed that our mother was irritable around Kristina – who had a vague dreaminess and a smug aura – but she couldn't fault her childcare. I saw Kristina as a goddess. Our mother was glamorous, in a brittle way, but Kristina was *exotic,* even in track pants. Our mother murmured the word 'dumpy', but I didn't understand it, any more than I understood the box of individual white-paper-wrapped tubes in Kristina's bedroom drawer. ('Are they *cigarettes*?')

Every day Kristina would collect me from school, present me with a Curly-Wurly or a Flake, and talk to me as if I were an adult. Her boyfriend was a businessman. He had a house in Scotland. They'd marry in Denmark. She would wear a 'massive' dress like a princess. In return for these jewels of knowledge, I'd play with Cassie in the playroom while Kristina sat on the pink carpet and watched, a faraway look on her fairytale face. I didn't *like* Cassie, I just wanted to be near Kristina.

Cassie and I developed a relationship similar to that of two prisoners sharing a cell. Cassie was probably the drugs baron, I was the dodgy accountant. I devised a series of games that bored me comatose but enthralled Cassie. For instance, Magic Chick. I'd hurl Cassie's toy chick across the room like a cricket ball. Da-na, Chick had disappeared. I'd order Cassie to close her eyes and decide whether Chick should appear from the ceiling or the floor. Depending on Cassie's choice, Chick would drop on her head, or nudge her bottom. It was a compliment, I feel, to my powers of deception and authority, that Cassie continued to believe in Magic Chick a good three years after she'd publicly scorned our mother for referring to Father Christmas, and snubbed our dad for alluding to the Tooth Fairy.

Long after Kristina moved in with her Porsche-driving prince, I remained Cassie's chief of staff, ent. Without liking a single minute of it, I performed one-woman plays alongside a cast of bears, told long rambling tales about favourite toys, recreated *Dallas* inside Cassie's Pippa Doll house and read from her big fat Walt Disney book. *Snow White,* I recall, was my favourite, as I'd force Cassie to stare at the picture of the wicked witch with a wart on her nose until she cried. I also invented a game called The Bravery Test, which entailed Cassie sitting on hot radiators for as long as she could bear (max points for max pain).

I had no illusion that having a child was fun. I'd discovered the truth aged five. Kids ruined your life. And at least back then I'd had the benefit of backup. Our parents were not a constant presence, but they did their bit. Rather like our cat, Sphinx, who daily offers Tim and me withered leaves harbouring insects, or, if she's feeling flush, a frog, our parents were always bringing home small gifts that they hoped might appeal.

Our father was given a surfeit of flamenco dancer dolls – the hotel had a lot of Spanish guests – and Cassie built up a fine collection of gorgeous swirling ladies in scarlet lace, holding black fans up to their coy faces. He also received many key rings, and it became legend (it wasn't true) that I was obsessed with amassing these rather dull objects I had no need of. Our mother bought me a corkboard with a picture of a bee on it and a box of coloured pins which, hobbywise, sealed my fate. Aged twelve, I was the mortified owner of a hundred and thirty-two key rings – one of which was the shape of a fried egg – and no keys.

Our parents weren't intuitive, but they did pay the electricity bills, the mortgage, and provided food. Every weekend, we ate at The Harvester. Our father liked it because you could refill your plate at the salad bar unto infinity. (Now I think about it, while you *could* refill your plate at the salad bar unto infinity, I'm not sure you were *meant*

to.) Our mother sat there with a pinchy face, picking at a bowl of warm cottage cheese. Cassie and I ate fish nuggets – soon to be the eclipsed precursor of the poultry version – and chips.

It wasn't haute cuisine but it was better than dining on anything our mother had prepared. She was a dreadful cook. She tried, but every dish tasted foul. Even her porridge had lumps in it, when all she had to do was add milk and *stir.* Also, she rarely bothered to read labels, which meant she frequently added turmeric to our oats instead of cinnamon.

She and our father flailed about when it came to what one does to entertain children. Over the course of years, Cassie and I were hauled around all the stately homes in Britain – armour, tapestries, moats, really, the same every time – and on Sundays I'd humour our father by helping him to wash his Volvo. It would take an hour, turn my hands chapped and raw, and – as our water source was always a bucket not a hose – the car would remain dirty. Meanwhile, Cassie would be trapped in the kitchen helping our mother make a disgusting cake.

One thing man and wife were agreed on: fresh air. We spent a lot of time out of the house while our parents remained inside it. There was a sandpit in our garden, full of orange sand, which every local fox and feline assumed was a litter tray, and Cassie and I passed many a winter afternoon crouched on our haunches at its edge – we didn't dare sit on the wooden corner seats because a nest of spiders lurked beneath – cracking through its frost coating, scraping away purple worms and squirls of poo, digging through the orange sand to the brown mud underneath.

Our mother and father had a religious belief in itineraries: the Museum of Mankind, Whipsnade Zoo, the London Transport Museum. If Cassie and I had a fixed destination to stare at something hairy or engine-driven, they felt they had fulfilled their parental duty. Actually, Cassie and I preferred

the unscheduled time we spent squashing red berries at the back of the house, or climbing over the white fence at our garden's end to the daisy- and buttercup-filled lawns of the mental home beyond. Their grass was better than ours, because no one ever cut it, and I could make daisy chains the length of my sister. We only saw a mental patient once. ('Look,' said Cassie. 'You've got that jumper.')

I'm not sure that our parents trusted the imagination. They felt safer if we were formally occupied. Twenty years ahead of every supermodel, my favourite pastime was knitting. Aunt Edith had started me off – I couldn't start or finish, I could only do the middle bit – with ten little balls of brightly coloured wool. I embarked on the longest scarf in history. If you rolled it onto itself it had the span of a wagon wheel (not the chocolate sort, a real one). Aunt Edith gave me her cast-off wool, and I might have kept going for ever, except that one day the scarf was donated to a children's home, and the next day, our mother announced that I was going to have tennis lessons.

We weren't a sporty family, although our mother was good at Kaluki. It didn't help that my tennis racquet weighed about as much as a Le Creuset frying pan. Cassie got out of tennis by breaking the neck of every tennis racquet our parents bought her, on the first day. Hand her a Dunlop, she turned into a cat with a sparrow. It was swiftly decided that she was better suited to ballet. She wasn't. At one fairly desperate point – the Junior Arts & Crafts and Miss Pricket, the neighbourhood piano teacher, were oversubscribed – our parents decided that I should learn Hebrew. (Prayer books are literally sacred in Judaism and, after the tennis racquets, I don't think they dared risk it with Cassie.)

I was sent to the local synagogue on Sunday mornings, where an ancient Polish woman with sparse hair forced us to read from the Torah. For the life of me, I couldn't master the Hebrew alphabet, nor did I engage with the subject matter:

God, God, God. It never occurred to those in charge that a Hebrew translation of, say, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* might have more appeal to a gaggle of twelve-year-olds, and while, in retrospect, I admire the staunchness of their principles I do feel they ultimately scored an own goal.

I spent those interminable three hours at Hebrew classes marvelling at perspective – squinting, measuring between finger and thumb how tiny the blackboard duster appeared from where I was sitting (a centimetre, if that), when I knew for a fact it was the size of a brick. It made the minutes pass and invoked the wrath of the old crone, who screeched at me, 'All you do ees *peck peck peck*!' Here, she mimicked the shape of my finger and thumb, like a bird's beak, opening and shutting.

Funnily enough, it was Cassie who came to my rescue. She agreed to consider pony riding, but only if I came too. The stables' timetable clashed with the synagogue's, but so eager were our parents to please their younger daughter – or, indeed, to be guaranteed rid of her for a morning – that I was freed of that stale airless classroom the same week. Instead, I spent my Sunday mornings shifting horseshit in an enclosed space, while our parents paid handsomely for the privilege.

I didn't blame our mother and father for not understanding us. I didn't understand *them.* But I knew from experience that parenthood was a thankless task, one long concerted effort to get your ungrateful offspring to leave you in peace. And my parents were lucky. God help you if you didn't have money to throw at the problem (which Tim and I didn't). Not that it was any use in my current predicament, but – despite the shaky start and a few mild radiator burns – one good thing had emerged from my less than perfect childhood.

Cassie and I were great friends.

Chapter 3

When I was younger, the fact that abortion existed was like the fact that our parents' car existed – it was available as a convenience should I require it.

A few times I'd stared at a small white stick, until it deigned to reveal my future like a Roman emperor: thumb up, thumb down. You can always get rid of it, were the words hammering in my terrified heart, as I waited for the thin blue line to appear. Back then, it was always an *it.* Fear made me callous, I couldn't think beyond myself.

But now I was in a settled relationship (I'd love to chance upon a description of a long-term love affair that doesn't weld slippers to the feet of those involved.) I was also thirty-two. Not only were the policemen younger than me, the sports heroes, the singers, the actors, artists, were too. I had no excuse any more. I had got to the point where you look back on the skittering trail of your life so far, and think, phew, bypassed *that* dilemma by the skin of my teeth.

Getting rid of it was no longer an option. Tim and I couldn't even consider it.

That said, nor could we think of what would happen in nine months' time. Tim *said* he was happy. He communicated this by spending all day out of the house. He'd return, eventually, shaky and pale.

After a week of this curious behaviour, I decided to crash the party. The mystery was solved in minutes. We lived in a child-infested area, and everywhere Tim looked, fat fathers with thin hair and shocked expressions trudged along pushing buggies. Their deportment was a disgrace (as Tim's mother might say), they were *schlemiels* (as my Aunt Edith

might say), and the clothes they wore! Did they even care that they were men? Saggy baggy material shorts, shapeless, faded sweatshirts, white socks, unfashionable trainers – clothes for a life that was one long treadmill.

Tim had been spending each day slumped in the window of Starbucks, downing cappuccinos in half-pints, and watching his own future – and it looked a lot different from the dreams he'd pinned on his wall aged fourteen. There comes a day when a man realises that he will never be asked to play for Man U, that he is never going to win a grand prix, or be a millionaire by the time he's thirty – and, sitting in Starbucks, aged thirty-one, that day had come for Tim, with a scythe and a black hood and unfashionable trainers.

Meanwhile, *I* had thought vaguely of taking a small child to the ballet one day and everyone going 'Ahhh!', but this was the first time I had thought of the real consequences – or rather, had the consequences parade before me – and I had no sympathy. Had Tim seen the *women*? I thought of them as Mothers-Who-Don't-Give-A-Shit. Now that I was forced to face reality, I recalled a prime example living on the corner of our street. She was forty years old. I knew this because I'd heard her shouting it to Tabitha at seven o'clock one Saturday morning – 'I'm forty today! Harold's making a barbecue! Do come! Bring John, and, er, Toby!'

She looked fifty and I never *ever* saw her wear anything but an old grey tracksuit. Maybe she'd iron it for the barbecue. She might have been pretty but she never wore a scrap of make-up and her skin was dry and lined. Her black hair was streaked with grey, and it seemed like she never brushed it. What killed me was, she had a boy who must have been Tomas's age, and she only ever dressed *him* in an old navy tracksuit. 'I Don't Care' might have been written on her forehead. I worried that she was setting up the kid to be bullied.

‘We won’t be able to do *this* any more,’ said Tim, as we sat in our preferred local restaurant one Thursday night. He said it like he was joking, but I saw the naked fear. We won’t be able to do *this* any more . . . He said it about fifty times a day. If we went to the cinema: ‘We won’t be able to do *this* any more.’

‘Good,’ I said, after sitting through a particularly vacuous film about five unpleasant teenagers who are murdered one by one in a wood by a monster. ‘I don’t care about these people. They’re nasty and they deserved to be eaten. I’m from a different generation.’

‘You know *why* every other film is about teenagers? Because everyone older is stuck at home with their *kids*.’

This was undeniable. But as I pointed out, we happily lived in the age of the DVD, and if it emerged that he missed the cinema experience unbearably, I’d willingly shift an armchair to directly in front of the sofa, in order that Tim could enjoy the perimeters of each scene of our rented film around the silhouette of my head.

I shared his fear of change – of course I did. But there was a thrilling edge to my terror. Everyone makes such a *fuss* of pregnant women. I hadn’t done anything that anyone had thought was worth making a fuss over. There was no ‘since’ in that sentence.

I had pretended to myself that I could afford to see a private obstetrician. I often did this. I had a builder in, giving me quotes to convert our garage into a study. I had a decorator in, giving me quotes to paint our hallway, landing, and two bedrooms. I ordered the *Elegant Resorts* brochures for Europe and the Caribbean. I ordered the new Audi catalogue for Tim. I made enquiries as to what it might cost – should Tim ever ask me – to get married at Skibo Castle. (It cost Madonna a hundred and twenty grand to book all forty-seven rooms. Not *bad*, considering.) We received many respectful letters from people hoping to take our money,

and then we did precisely nothing until they gave up and left us alone. But the interim was fun.

I'd called the obstetrician's secretary. She had the same surname as he did, so I presumed she was his wife. 'How far gone are you? Seven weeks? You've left it too late. He's all booked up,' she said. Then she added, 'But you never know. Someone might have a miscarriage.'

I put the phone down on her and called my local surgery. I felt her bad taste and put a hand on my stomach before I realised. 'I'm sorry,' I murmured. 'I hope you didn't hear that.'

Then I ate a mango.

I became sullen with Tim, because I thought he was against us, even if he didn't realise it. Then one night he got a video out. Nothing remarkable. But there was one scene in which a gangster discovers his girlfriend is pregnant and beats her and she loses the baby. She runs away. Later, he goes through her stuff and finds two red sweaters she'd knitted. One is man-sized, and the other is so tiny. I tried not to cry but the tears ran down my cheeks. Then I looked at Tim and his eyes were as red as the sweaters.

He said, 'I feel I've let him down already,' and put his face in his hands and sobbed.

I pressed 'pause', put my arms around Tim, and kissed his hair. There was a muffled, 'Fucking St Albans!'

'That's mad,' I said. 'It's love they want, I promise. It's their relationship with you.'

He cheered up, and we managed a cute chat about a tiny person who looked like us.

But there was a cold scared part of me that agreed with Tim. I wanted the best for this baby. It was not a 'foetus' as the doctor had said, it was a baby, ok? I wanted this baby to have everything it needed. A BMX. A big house, *not* in St Albans. Babies were like dogs. They needed space to run around. I didn't want this kid to be born and despise us for everything we couldn't give it.