

A high-angle, top-down photograph of a woman with blonde hair tied in a bun, wearing a red sleeveless dress and black shoes. She is walking down a wide, brown carpeted spiral staircase. Her right hand is resting on a dark wooden handrail. The staircase has metal balusters and a dark metal base. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

TAMAR COHEN

'I couldn't put this book down.
It haunted me for weeks.'

LISA JEWELL

The Broken

When close friends
split, take care whose
side you're on

About the Book

Best friends tell you everything; about their kitchen renovation; about their little girl's new school. They tell you how they are leaving their partner for someone younger.

Best friends don't tell lies. They don't take up residence on your couch for weeks. They don't call lawyers. They don't make you choose sides.

Best friends don't keep secrets about their past.

Best friends don't always stay best friends.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Acknowledgements

Read on for a preview of *When She Was Bad*

About the Author

Also by Tammy Cohen

Copyright

The Broken

Tamar Cohen

For Colin, with love and thanks

Lucie, aged four

I am scrunched up as small as small can be in my special place. My knees are right under my chin so that when I put out my tongue I can lick the scab on my right knee from where I fell off the swing in the playground. Scabs help you get better. You mustn't pick them. My heart is boom-booming in my chest and I have that sick feeling like when I needed to go toilet at school but didn't want to say and ended up in a warm puddle with my face hot and everyone laughing. It's not comfy sitting like this in my special place. My legs are hurting. Now I'm a big girl, nearly at big school, I don't really fit in my special place any more, but I daren't move. I must stay still as a statue. Sleeping Lions. It's dark in my special place and I'm frightened, but I mustn't make a sound. I must be quiet as a little mouse. Eek, eek, eek.

Or Mummy will find me.

1

'I'm leaving her.'

No response. Josh was fiddling with his mobile phone, trying to get it to stop autocorrecting a text he was composing to Hannah, so he wasn't really listening. He checked his texts assiduously these days before pressing Send, ever since coming back from a weekend at his parents' and unintentionally informing his mother he was homosexual instead of home. The truth was he hated texting, and was the only person he knew who still laboriously typed 'you' instead of the ubiquitous 'u'. And as for apostrophes – don't get him started. 'I thought you just said you were leaving Sash,' he chuckled, still worrying away at the keyboard, his broad fingers as unwieldy as sausages.

'I did. Look, would it kill you to pay a bit of attention?' There was something hiding in Dan's voice. A whine tucked away like a polyp under the surface of his normally cocky, over-egged Essex twang.

Josh looked up. 'You're joking, right? This is a joke.'

'Do I look like I'm fucking joking?'

Dan didn't in truth look like he was joking. His expression was strained and a little horrified.

'You can't.' It was a feeble thing to say, but Josh was too shocked to think of anything else. Dan and Sasha had been together for years. Eight or nine. Nearly as long as him and Hannah. And then there was September. She was still only four. 'What about the new kitchen?'

Dan and Sasha had only just finished moving the kitchen up to the top level of their art deco-style house so they

could take advantage of those views out across the cricket and tennis clubs towards Ally Pally, spread out along the top of the distant hill. Josh and Hannah had been at the inaugural dinner party to celebrate the end of all the months of dust and builders just a couple of weeks before, and he and Dan had ended up doing tequila slammers on the new concrete worktops.

‘Sod the fucking kitchen. That was Sasha’s idea anyway. I was quite happy with the old kitchen.’

‘But why?’

Dan put down his pint and fixed Josh with his wide-set blue eyes – the ones Hannah had once declared, in a drunken moment, to be ‘far too sexy for a man’, which Josh had tried hard not to mind.

‘We’re just not good together any more,’ Dan said, shaking his head. ‘Don’t get me wrong, Sasha is brilliant. I love her to bits. I’m just not *in* love with her.’

He kept his eyes trained on Josh’s while the clichés spilled out of him, as if intensity was proof of sincerity. But Josh, who had accompanied Dan on two stag weekends as well as countless lads’ nights out, had seen him give this look too many times before in too many less-than-sincere circumstances for it to be one hundred per cent effective. He sat back in his uncomfortable wooden chair with the saggy leather cushion, in the pub they always insisted on going to on match days, purely because it was so unappealing that they were always guaranteed a seat. Suddenly his head buzzed with adrenaline.

‘You’ve met someone else.’

Dan’s eyes widened still further, his raised eyebrows disappearing into his floppy dishwater-blond hair.

‘What are you talking about? Look, mate, I know it’s a shock, but sometimes people just grow apart. It doesn’t mean there’s someone else.’

‘Cut the crap.’ Josh wasn’t angry – mostly because he didn’t believe Dan was remotely serious. But neither was

he about to let him get away with feeding him some women's magazine bullshit. 'You wouldn't leave Sasha and September unless there was someone else waiting in the wings. I know you. *Mate*,' Josh trusted that anyone listening would realize he was using the word ironically, 'you're emotionally lazy.'

'Emotionally lazy?'

Dan bristled as if gearing up to protest, but then seemed to think better of it and slumped back down again. 'OK, you're right. I have met someone.' He glanced at Josh, checking how this had gone down. 'But we haven't done anything. What I mean is we haven't slept together.'

Josh knew he was lying. 'So who is she?'

His friend's eyes suddenly brightened, and he almost fell over his words in his delight at being given licence to speak of this new beloved. 'She's incredible. Amazing. Honestly, you have no idea. I met her on a shoot. Yeah, yeah, she's a model. Cliché, cliché. But she's not like all the rest. She's so smart and funny and down to earth.'

'And, don't tell me - "gorgeous".' Josh paused before the last word and traced exaggerated quote marks in the air with his fingers as he said it, to show he was being sardonic. But such subtleties were lost on Dan.

'No. She looks like the back end of a bus,' he grinned.

Josh struggled then to hide the wave of blind fury that swept over him out of nowhere. Anger was appropriate, wasn't it, in view of his friendship with Sasha? He refused to acknowledge, even to himself, that the anger might be overlaid with something else. Something acidic and powerful. It wasn't jealousy. Most assuredly, absolutely not. Why should he feel jealous of Dan when he was about to lob a live grenade into the heart of his family? 'Listen, Dan.' He put on the voice he used when he was talking to his pupils - reasonable, calm, but firm. 'Everyone needs an ego boost from time to time. What are you - thirty-five? Thirty-six?'

‘Oi, steady on! Just because you’re staring forty in the face doesn’t mean the rest of us are fucking ancient as well. Actually, I’m only thirty-four.’

‘Whatever.’ Josh was thirty-eight. It was hardly ancient. He was fairly sure he was younger than Robbie Williams, for instance. ‘Listen, Dan, most blokes our age’ – he enjoyed Dan’s momentary scowl at that – ‘who’ve been with the same woman for a long time get itchy feet. Do you think I’ve never thought about how it would be to be with someone else apart from Hannah?’ Briefly he wondered whether that was true. *Had* he ever seriously considered being with someone else? Really? ‘But the thing is, I know it wouldn’t be worth it. I’d be jeopardizing everything that’s important to me for what? For a brief thrill?’

Dan had started shaking his head when Josh was only halfway through this speech. ‘Look, I loved Sasha. That’s why I married her. But she’s not laid back like Hannah. She is totally neurotic – you know that. Understandable given what happened to her as a child, but fucking wearying to live with 24/7. Stuff goes on at home that you wouldn’t believe. She’s always testing me, do you know what I mean? She’ll say something really hurtful just to try to get me to lose my temper, and then it’s all “See, you can never trust anyone. All the people in my life who were supposed to care about me let me down.” Last week we were having a drink at our neighbours’ house and suddenly Sasha announces she has a headache and gets up and leaves, telling me to stay and she’ll be fine. Then when I get home she launches into me for not going with her to make sure she’s OK. It’s exhausting!’ Dan’s tone had taken on a shrill, self-justifying note. He looked up and caught Josh’s raised eyebrow. ‘OK, you’re right,’ he said in a strange, strangled voice suddenly quite unlike his own. ‘I know you’re right. I’d do anything rather than hurt Sasha. But what can I say, man? I’ve fallen in love. I realize now I was never really in love with Sasha. I wanted to look after her, but with Sienna

I've found an equal. Someone who can be a real life partner. I feel alive!

'*Sienna?*'

Dan shrugged. 'Yeah, yeah. But you can't blame her for her name.'

Josh found it hard to unstretch his eyes from their *Are you fucking kidding me?* expression. Of course. She would be called Sienna. Dan couldn't possibly have fallen for a Cathy or Melanie or Ruth. 'And how old exactly is *Sienna*?' His voice came out more sneering than he'd intended.

Dan pushed himself back from the table, dislodging the folded-up cardboard beer mat that had been wedged under one of the legs to stop it wobbling, and glanced around the pub. His guileless face, still cherubic even in his mid-thirties in that pretty-boy style that usually – Josh believed – puffs out to seed by fifty, betrayed, as ever, every emotion going on inside him just as surely as if he had subtitles running in a permanent loop along his forehead.

Josh was quietly satisfied now to recognize embarrassment in his friend's expression (not surprising) and shame (well, good). But there was something else as well, something Dan was trying very hard to hide. Triumph. That was it. On some level, Dan was *pleased* with himself.

'Don't laugh, OK, but she's twenty-four.'

'*Twenty-four!* For fuck's sake, you're a walking, talking cliché.'

'I know, I know. But she's really mature for her age. She has an old soul.'

'Yeah, don't tell me, you were lovers in a past life.'

Dan allowed himself a quick smirk before his face crumpled again, the even, pleasant features folding in on themselves like dough. 'Oh God, I feel awful about everything. How am I going to tell Sash? And September?'

For a second Josh almost felt sorry for him. He couldn't imagine turning his back on his own wife and child, packing up his things and moving out of his family home.

Just the thought of it made his heart race uncomfortably. Not waking up with Hannah's long, thick red hair tickling his face, or Lily's little hand on his arm, shaking him awake. '*Come on, Daddy, you big old sleepyhead poo-poo head.*' Not taking Toby the dachshund around the block before work, his breath coming out cloudy in the cold air, crossing paths with Janey from two doors down with her dribbling chocolate Labrador. Now *there* was a proper dog. Josh had been mortified when Hannah had first brought Toby home, a sausage on legs, a furry worm, all floppy ears and big mournful eyes. 'Just as long as you don't expect me to be seen with that thing in public,' he'd warned. Now, predictably, he doted on Toby, even more than Hannah and Lily did. Just because something started as a compromise didn't mean you couldn't end up loving it just the same.

He still couldn't believe Dan was serious about leaving it all behind – the familiar hot-water bottle of domesticity. Sure, he and Sasha bickered a lot, but it didn't mean anything. The next minute they'd be all over each other, often nauseatingly so. It wasn't perfect, but they were happy, surely? They were all happy.

Josh started to think about what all this could potentially mean for him and Hannah. Dan and Sasha had been their best friends since they all met when the girls were newborns. They socialized together, they helped each other out with babysitting. Dan and Josh had their Saturday football, Hannah and Sasha went to art galleries or their Thursday evening bookclub (which seemed to him to be largely an excuse to drink wine and complain about their husbands). The little girls were inseparable.

'We can still hang out together,' Dan said, as if he'd read Josh's mind. 'You'll love Sienna when you get to know her.'

'Dream on, mate.'

'What?'

'If you think you can just slot another woman into Sasha's place and we'll all be like an episode of bloody *Friends*,

you're living in cloud-cuckoo-land. Hannah would never stand for it. She's really loyal that way.'

'I know it wouldn't happen immediately. Just in time, that's all I meant. And don't worry, I'm going to give Sasha whatever she asks for. I don't want her or September to want for anything. I give you my word this is going to be the most civilized divorce in history.'

Josh gaped at him. 'So, let's just recap. You're leaving your wife of what – eight years? – for a woman a decade younger. And you think she's going to be happy to sit down over a nice cup of tea and make arrangements about dividing up her home, her *daughter*, for God's sake. You're fucking deluded.'

Dan coloured, his skin taking on the purplish hue of under-diluted Ribena. 'I'm not leaving her for Sienna. I told you, Sasha and I haven't been right for ages. We've never really been right. Living with her is like being on eggshells the whole time. I haven't been happy in years.'

'And don't tell me, you deserve to be happy.'

'Sure. Everyone does, don't they?'

Josh shook his head. 'I'm not going to get caught up in some existential debate about the nature of happiness.' He was properly angry now. 'I just don't happen to think you can build your happiness on the back of someone else's unhappiness.' Now who was talking in clichés?

Dan looked miserable, yet defiant. Josh recognized that look from his own teenage pupils.

'I know Sasha will be in bits at first. Of course she will. But I really believe that in the long run she'll realize it's the best thing for her. This way she's free to find someone who really appreciates her.'

Josh sighed. Now that it was sinking in that Dan actually was serious, he was feeling faintly sick. Until Dan, he'd never really had a close friend, not since school anyway. He was more the type of person who got included in group outings but not intimate gatherings. And once he'd met

Hannah, she was the only friend he'd needed. So he'd been pleased – grateful, even – to find himself accepted so readily into Dan's inner circle. And he was fond of Sasha, too, although she could be prickly sometimes. 'When are you going to tell her?'

'Tonight. That's why it's really important you don't tell Hannah anything until I've had a chance to talk to Sash properly. I know you two can't shit without giving each other a full description, but you've got to promise me not to say anything. I don't want Sasha to hear about this from anyone except me.'

Dan's face wore a noble expression and Josh had an uncharacteristic impulse to punch him in it.

'Oh, and whatever you do, don't mention Sienna. I'm not going to tell Sasha about her until she's got used to the idea of us splitting up. It would just confuse the issue.'

'What's there to be confused about? You're leaving her for another woman. Oldest story in the book.'

Josh's anger was mounting and Dan put up both his hands in mock surrender.

'Look, Josh, I get why you're upset. I'd feel the same if our positions were reversed. And I love you for being so protective of Sash. But the fact is, I *am* leaving her. I've made up my mind.' Dan said this as though making up his mind about something was all it took to make it so. As if he had only to formulate the intent for the deed to be done. His self-assuredness stoked Josh's fury. 'And what I really need is for you to help make it as painless as possible – for Sasha's and September's sakes. Not for mine. This thing with Sienna is still very early days. It might come to absolutely nothing. It'd be stupid to throw that into the mix now when we all need things to be as clean and simple as possible. I don't want to hurt Sash any more than necessary.'

'You're all heart.'

‘What?’

‘I’m not supposed to tell you. I was sworn to secrecy. But seeing as he’s probably telling her as we speak, and there’s a good chance she’ll turn up on the doorstep at any moment in the throes of a nervous breakdown, I thought it was only fair to warn you.’

Hannah had her hand clapped over her mouth, above which her pale-blue eyes appeared almost completely circular. ‘You’ve got to be kidding me. Oh my *God*. Poor Sash. What a bastard. What a complete and utter bastard.’

‘To be fair, he seemed pretty cut up about it.’ Josh couldn’t understand why he was defending Dan to Hannah. It wasn’t as if he had the slightest bit of sympathy for what he was doing. Still, some intrinsic friend-protection instinct was kicking in and he found himself trying to justify what Dan was doing. ‘You know Sasha isn’t the easiest person.’

‘And that makes it OK, does it, to cheat on her with a twenty-four-year-old and break a little girl’s heart?’

‘Twenty-four isn’t exactly a little girl—’

‘Don’t even joke about it, Josh. You know exactly what I mean. These are our friends, remember? How many Saturday nights have we spent round there? How many holidays have we been on together? He can’t split up over some stupid affair. He just can’t.’

Josh had the oddest idea that Hannah was talking about Dan splitting up with *them* rather than with Sasha. He remembered Dan’s face when he’d talked about Sienna, but this clearly wasn’t the time to suggest to Hannah that this might be more than a ‘stupid affair’.

‘I can’t believe it. I really can’t.’

Josh shifted along the battered wine-coloured velvet sofa Hannah had fallen in love with on eBay, which had required dismantling the door frame to get into the flat. He put a tentative arm around her, half expecting her to wriggle away, as she sometimes did these days. Now that Hannah was always so tired and their sex life had dwindled to

almost nothing, all physical contact between them seemed to carry extra weight, with the result that they didn't touch each other nearly as much – or as naturally – as they used to. He felt her shoulders trembling under his hand.

'Hey.' He tilted her face up towards him so he could see her properly, taking in the freckles he adored and she claimed to despise, and the mouth with its mismatched lips – the top one so thin and well defined and the bottom one almost indecently plump. 'Don't get so upset. Of course it's horrible, but we're still OK.'

Hannah's eyes, canopied by fine, surprisingly dark eyebrows, peered up at him through a glaze of tears. 'But they're our best friends. I thought they were so happy together. All those *I love yous* at the end of every phone conversation. Was that all a show? And if it can happen to them, what's to stop it happening to us?'

Josh pulled her closer, savouring the contact, and planted a kiss on the top of her head. Despite everything, he allowed himself a little smile. Trust Hannah to jump straight to the worst-case scenario. What was it that therapist had called her? A catastrophist. That's it. As if you could catch divorce from other people like the flu.

'Never,' he whispered into her hair.

After a moment, Hannah pulled away, looking utterly wretched. 'Oh, but when I think about little September, growing up without her father.'

'Not according to Dan. He thinks it will be the most amicable split in the world. He's got it all worked out. He and Sasha will sell the house and buy two flats within walking distance of each other. September will be able to see both of them whenever she wants to. She won't even notice they're not together.'

'What planet does he get this stuff from? He really thinks he's going to move in down the road with some bloody schoolgirl bimbo and everything's going to go on just as before?'

Hannah got to her feet and started angrily clearing up the remains of the Indian takeaway which were spread across the coffee table in front of them in a selection of foil containers, all smeared with orange- or ochre-coloured sauce. A tell-tale pink flush was sweeping across her normally pale cheeks, and Josh felt a twinge of alarm, remembering how he'd promised not to say anything to her.

'You're not going to call Sasha, are you? Dan made me promise I wouldn't tell you about any of it, but especially not about her. About Sienna.'

He was nervous now – conscious suddenly of having gone back on a promise, of having been compromised.

Hannah made a snorting noise at the name.

'No really,' Josh went on, ignoring it. 'He doesn't want it to get out about him seeing someone else. He says it will make things nastier than they need to be.'

'He should have thought about that before he got his dick out then, shouldn't he?'

Hannah stalked out of the living room, hands full of dirty plates and silver-foil cartons. Josh heard her clattering around in the tiny kitchen next door, and he tried to still the involuntary leap his thoughts had taken hearing Hannah say the word *dick*.

'Please, Hannah. Don't say anything. I should never have told you.'

She reappeared in the doorway and flung herself back on to the sofa, curling her long legs in their black leggings up underneath her. 'OK. But I just want you to know I hate lying to Sasha. It isn't right for him to ask you to do this. She deserves to know the truth.'

'Yes, but not from us. It's not our place. We have to stay neutral.'

'But how am I supposed to look her in the eye? Don't forget they're coming for lunch tomorrow.'

Josh slung his arm around her once more, emboldened by his previous success, and she snuggled back against him.

‘I wouldn’t bank on it,’ he said. ‘Dan says he’s telling her tonight. I can’t imagine they’ll be round here playing happy families tomorrow.’

2

'My head feels like there's a marching band inside it clashing cymbals and playing those big curly brass thingies and jumping up and down.'

'Why would a marching band jump up and down?'

'Don't bother trying to provoke me, Dan. I'm too ill to rise to it.'

Sasha was draped across the same sofa where Josh and Hannah had sat up far too late the previous night debating Dan's shock announcement. Her glossy black hair was fanned out across a threadbare brown faux fur cushion and one of her hands was flung across her eyes, all but obscuring her small neat features. Her legs in their skinny jeans were stretched out and she'd kicked off her Converse trainers so that she could rest her bare, brown, child-sized feet on Dan's Levi's-clad thigh. She looked a lot like someone with a hangover. She did not look like someone whose husband had just announced he was going to leave her.

'He couldn't tell her,' Josh whispered to Hannah as they were squeezed into the kitchen together preparing lunch. His cheeks, always rosy, were flushed pink by the heat fanning from the oven into the confined space, and he kept pushing his thick hair, which Hannah liked to point out was the exact colour and texture of a doormat, back from his overheated face. When he glanced at her, his greeny-brown eyes were smudged with worry. 'He was going to, but then their neighbours turned up unexpectedly.'

'Brilliant. So now we've got to sit across the table from each other pretending everything's hunky dory, while all

the time there's this . . . *time bomb* waiting to go off.'

'What else can we do?'

'I can't believe he's just sitting there, stroking her feet. It's so cruel.'

'Why are you two whispering in there? Do you hate us? Do you wish we would leave?'

At the sound of Sasha's voice, Hannah glared at Josh. She could hear September and Lily playing together in Lily's bedroom, September's voice loud and clear over Lily's gentle murmur. How many lazy Sundays had they passed in this way, the six of them? The realization that this might be the last was so savagely painful that Hannah, her hand frozen in the act of chopping up some fresh basil, suddenly felt she couldn't breathe.

'Yes. Go away and take your disgusting, unsavoury hangover with you,' called Josh, making a *Pull yourself together* face at Hannah.

Lunch was, as always, a long-drawn-out affair eaten at the heavy pine dining table which was squashed into the area behind the sofa in the living room, the kitchen in Hannah and Josh's two-bedroom garden flat being far too small to eat in. The girls joined them for the start of the meal, kneeling up on cushions that they placed over the seats of the wooden chairs and chattering to each other as they tucked into their mini portions of lasagne. September, six weeks older than Lily, led the conversation as usual, lurching from subject to subject seemingly without rhyme or reason. Hannah's heart pinched a little when she saw how her daughter's face scrunched up in concentration as she struggled to follow her friend, while at the same time furtively digging out suspicious unidentified vegetable matter from her dish with her spoon and laying it carefully on one side.

'Is it me or is everyone really flat today?' Sasha was seated at the head of the table, closest to the French windows that led on to the communal garden, where the

late-blooming flowers looked gaudy against the grey September day. Her eyes flickered from face to face expecting a response.

Hannah looked away. 'We're not being very good company today, are we? We're just a bit tired, that's all.' She gestured briefly towards Lily with her hand, as if blaming her for them being below par, and then immediately felt guilty. Poor Lily, she was so good. She didn't deserve to be made a scapegoat.

'Can we get down now?' September had finished her lunch and was rocking on her chair, her chocolate-brown curls quivering as she moved.

'I don't think Lily's quite finished yet. Maybe you could just wait a few—'

The rest of Hannah's gentle entreaty was drowned out by Sasha interrupting, 'Sure, poppet, you get down.'

Sasha turned to Hannah. 'Sorry, Hannah. I just didn't want Temmy to get fidgety. You know how tetchy she can be.'

Hannah smiled and hoped her irritation didn't show.

'Can I go too, Mummy? Please?'

Lily still had food on her plate, but she was already gazing after September, her lasagne forgotten, her blue eyes full of longing.

'No, Lily. You need to finish. Just that little bit on your plate.'

'But September didn't.'

'No, but September is a guest, and you're not. Which is why I'm telling you to finish up. Tell you what. If you eat four more forkfuls, you can get down.'

Hannah sighed inwardly as Lily loaded her spoon with the minimum amount of food possible and raised it to her mouth four times, counting in whispers under her breath, before throwing it down triumphantly and scooting off to find her friend. 'Thank you for the lovely dinner,' she called over her shoulder in a sing-song voice.

Hannah got up and started clearing away the plates. The incident with September had done nothing to improve her mood. It wasn't the first time Sasha had talked over Hannah. Sometimes she felt as if nothing she said actually mattered. Am I here, she wanted to say. Can you even see me? She kept forgetting about what Josh had told her about Dan, and then suddenly it would come flooding back to her, as shocking now as it was when she first heard it. In the kitchen, she angrily scraped food off the plates into the plastic container they used for collecting compost, perversely enjoying the harsh, grating noise of metal on china.

'You OK there?'

Dan had appeared in the doorway carrying the big white earthenware dish that had held the lasagne and the salad bowl, still half full.

Hannah said she was fine.

She couldn't look at him, focusing instead on the chrome bin that took up half the floor space in the cramped kitchen. Josh had told her it was too big, but she'd insisted on getting it after seeing the same one in Sasha's old kitchen. She'd never admitted he'd been right.

'You just seem a bit on edge, that's all.'

'I've got a lot on my mind.'

'Like what?'

'Like what do you think, Dan?'

She looked at him then. A look that saw him react first with surprise, then, after a second's delay, anger.

'He told you. The fucker told you.'

Dan was whispering, but his voice still hissed loudly around the compact room.

'Course he told me. We're married. We don't have secrets from each other.'

'He shouldn't have. He promised.'

Dan's face, normally so open and placid, was dark with rage, but Hannah pretended not to notice.

‘Look, Dan. I want to ask you, beg you, to think again. Look at everything you have to lose. Sasha, September. You’ll break their hearts. And for what? For a fling.’

‘It’s not a fling.’ Hannah had never heard Dan sound so hard, despite the whispering. He was always so charming, so ready to see everyone else’s point of view. ‘Listen, I know how you feel, but you don’t have a clue about how things are at home between me and Sash. And now I’ve met someone who makes me feel good about myself for the first time in years. And I’d be grateful if you and Josh would just butt out.’

‘Dan!’ Sasha’s voice came wafting from the next room. ‘Bring another bottle of red in, would you?’

Dan glared at Hannah before snatching up the bottle they’d brought round, still wrapped in its off-licence tissue paper, and stalking out.

‘Coming, my little lush!’

Alone in the kitchen, Hannah leaned back against the cooker and put her head in her hands. She and Sasha had had their moments over the four years they’d been friends. She could remember a handful of times when they’d snapped at each other over one thing or another (although, if she remembered rightly, she was pretty sure most of the snapping had come from Sasha), but she’d never once had a cross word with Dan. He was always the laid-back one. Always the one to smooth out tensions with a joke or a well-placed compliment.

For the first time, Hannah allowed herself to picture how life might be dividing their time between a separated Sasha and Dan.

It didn’t bear thinking about.

‘G’way!’

Hannah had been dreaming about *that night* again for the first time in ages. Battling into consciousness, her heart racing, her mind still filled with images of Gemma’s

battered head and her mum's twisted, angry mouth, her airways as always stoppered up with dread, it took her a while to calm down enough to translate the indistinct noise Josh had made into proper words.

'Go away,' he said again, more distinctly this time.

Both of them raised themselves on to their elbows and listened as the doorbell of their ground-floor flat sounded a second time, prompting a half-hearted bark from the vicinity of Toby's basket in the hall.

Hannah staggered to her feet.

She had always been better at getting up than Josh. Even before her skills in that area were honed by months and years of night feeds and bad dreams and brutal dawn risings, she'd never struggled like him with that middle dimension between sleep and wakefulness. She liked to be up and getting on with things. Lying awake in that dead early morning was when you had time to think, and there were things that Hannah really didn't like to think about. Anyway, life was already so short. Why wouldn't you make the most of what time you had?

Dragging on her old purple towelling dressing gown, and regretting as she always did that she'd not yet got around to replacing it, she made her way into the hallway. At least living in such a compact space meant you were never very far from the front door if you needed to open it.

'All right already,' she muttered as the bell rang a third time, a long desperate buzz.

'Mummy?' Lily's voice from her little bedroom across the hall was still soaked in sleep. With any luck she wouldn't wake up properly.

'It's all right, Lil. Go back to sleep.'

Up until this point, Hannah had been too focused on getting up and making sure Lily wasn't disturbed to think about what a ring on the door in the middle of the night might mean. But in the split second when she pressed the

buzzer on the intercom, she remembered what had happened the previous day.

‘It’s me. Sasha.’ If Hannah hadn’t already known who to expect, she’d never have recognized the voice that crackled through the intercom, deep and croaky and full of lumps.

Hannah buzzed her in and by the time she’d slid open both bolts and unchained the door that led from their flat into the communal lobby, Sasha was already there. She fell into Hannah’s arms, her wraith-like body shaking violently under her thin denim jacket.

‘Oh my God, Hannah,’ she said in that same choked, un-Sasha-like voice.

Hannah held her friend tight. ‘Come on, Sash,’ she murmured, aware that they were still standing in the open doorway, letting a cool draught into the flat. ‘Let’s go into the living room, hey?’

Sasha allowed herself to be led through the door at the far end of the hallway, where Hannah deposited her on the sofa.

‘I’ll make us some tea, shall I?’

If Sasha wondered why Hannah wasn’t quizzing her about what had brought her to their door in the middle of the night, she didn’t say. Instead she merely nodded. Her normally elfin features had puffed up so that her slanted hazel eyes, with their thick black lashes, were practically swollen shut.

Waiting for the kettle to boil, Hannah leaned her forehead against the cool fridge door, trying not to hear the gulping sobs coming from the next room. She felt guilty now for the times over the last few years when she’d wished Sasha ill. No, not ill, just for something in Sasha’s Sunday-supplement life not to go to plan for once, just something to make her life slightly less shiny and bring it more in line with Hannah’s own.

She’d never had a friend like Sasha before. If their babies hadn’t brought them together she probably still wouldn’t

have a friend like Sasha. The two women led such different lives they'd never normally have crossed paths, like a Venn diagram where the two circles bobbed about completely independently with no point of intersection. Unlike Hannah, Sasha hadn't gone to university but had had a series of glamorous temporary jobs instead in small boutique galleries and country-house retreats in exotic locations. She always seemed to know someone who could fix her up with something, and if not, the trust set up by her wealthy father could usually be relied on to come to her aid. After she met Dan, she'd stopped working altogether, even long before September came along, and, here's the thing, she never felt guilty about it. She spent her time on 'projects' to do with the house (a simple bathroom refit could easily turn into a four-month full-time job involving mood boards and teams of designers and builders) or arranging holidays or, after September was born, taking her daughter to art and music classes, even French classes, where young women with chunky, brightly coloured jewellery sat cross-legged on the floor and showed fractious toddlers pictures of smiley faces or suns or books and made exaggerated movements with their mouths as they pronounced each syllable. Hannah knew other women who didn't work, but none had that same sense of entitlement that Sasha did. 'Just till the kids start school,' they'd say, these other apologetic mothers. 'Childcare costs are so astronomical.' But Sasha would look at Hannah like a sleek Siamese cat and say, 'Why would I work if I don't have to?' And it would be Hannah who felt short-changed, as if something was lacking.

Hannah, on the other hand, was all about the guilt. Sometimes she wondered if it would be such an integral part of her if it hadn't been for what happened as a teenager, but at other times she felt that guilt was just woven into the thread of her DNA. She felt bad for the decisions she made, and the ones she didn't – for all the

people she imagined she'd let down. An ambitious girl from a largely unambitious background, she'd worked hard to get to university in London, switching from French to Journalism in her second year when her sister Gemma finally convinced her it was OK to do a subject she liked, rather than one she thought might be useful, and had worked harder still to gain her first staff job on a magazine for teenagers. She'd always imagined she'd take the minimum maternity leave and be straight back to the nine to five (or in her case more like ten to eight), but when Lily came along she realized how unsuited babies were to be slotted in around work like superfluous padding. Reluctantly she'd resigned from the magazine and gone freelance and now spent her days wildly oscillating between feeling guilt-ridden at spending too little time on her child, and guilt-ridden at spending too little time on badly paid freelance work. Even when she *was* with her daughter, she was feeling guilty at how boring she often found it, the whole monotonous routine of feeding and washing and playing and filling in those endless hours with repetitive games that had to be played again and again, and books you'd read so many times you thought you might explode at the sight of them. Nobody ever talked about the boredom – it was as though if you admitted it, you were admitting you didn't love your child.

Until she had Lily, Hannah had never even held a baby before. When friends from the office arrived in the hospital ward on their designer heels, bearing cellophane-crinkling bouquets of flowers that failed to fit into any of the yellowing plastic water jugs on offer, they squealed with laughter and horror at the sight of Hannah attempting to change a nappy.

In a panic she'd tried to make friends with other new mothers in the neighbourhood by joining a postnatal mother-and-baby group run by the local NCT. The first meeting had been a disaster. She hadn't been able to work

out how to put up Lily's new all-singing, all-dancing pushchair and had ended up, an hour and a half late, practically in tears, having run the half-mile to the hostess's house with Lily in her arms, arriving red-faced and out of breath with a screaming baby and aches in every muscle in her body. She'd had no idea a newborn could be so heavy – how had she carried this thing around inside her for the last nine months? The other women, or so it seemed at the time, had viewed her with suspicion, pulling their own babies a little bit tighter to them, smiling politely. On the second meeting, though, she'd met Sasha.

'I knew we were going to be friends for life when Hannah changed Lily's nappy right there in front of us and found a bright-red rubber band in her poo,' Sasha always liked to tell people. It was a funny story but it mortified Hannah still, the memory of that public exposure of her maternal inadequacy. The rubber-band incident, and a mutual wariness of the Proper Mums, as they soon christened the others, cemented their friendship. There's nothing like having babies of the same age to intensify and accelerate a bond. Though Hannah and Josh's two-bedroom flat could have fitted a million times into Sasha and Dan's three-storey pile it was still only a few streets away, in that mad schizophrenic way of London neighbourhoods. Soon they were in and out of each other's homes, introducing husbands, dogs, neighbours, becoming intertwined in each other's lives at a speed that would have been unthinkable in the past pre-Lily world.

When Hannah went back into the living room, bearing two mugs of steaming tea, she found Sasha curled up on the sofa in a foetal position, sobbing gently. Her tan leather bag that Hannah had been shocked to discover cost more than she earned in a fortnight was flung on the bottom end of the sofa, contents strewn, leaving no room for anyone else, so Hannah dropped a cushion on to the floor next to the coffee table and knelt on it, drawing her feet under her

bottom to keep them warm. Taking a sip from her scalding tea, she surveyed her friend in silence for a moment. She looked just like a child lying there, with her hair all over the place. Hannah's heart constricted as she watched Sasha's narrow shoulders shaking. How could Dan do this? Sasha had her moments, she could be controlling as hell and exasperatingly overdramatic. But she had a huge heart and was capable of impulsive acts of jaw-dropping generosity. And she was the mother of his child.

'Come on,' Hannah said, when she could bear the muffled sobbing no longer. 'Drink your tea and tell me.'

Sasha's eyes opened – well, as much as they could in their present puffy state. She looked a bit startled, as if she'd forgotten Hannah was even there. She heaved herself up into a sitting position and brought her knees up to her chin, pulling the faded Ramones T-shirt she had on under her denim jacket down over her legs as little boys sometimes do to give themselves freakishly large fake breasts.

'Oh Hannah. He doesn't love me.'

The words were pieces of broken glass, so painful that Sasha had to spit them out one at a time.

Instinctively Hannah leaned forward and flung her arms around her friend. 'I'm sure you're wrong,' she found herself saying.

'He told me,' Sasha continued, oblivious to the lack of surprise in Hannah's voice. 'He says he doesn't think he's in love with me any more. He says he needs to go away for a while, to have some space to work out what to do.'

Hannah's hand, which had been rhythmically stroking Sasha's shoulder, froze. He hadn't told her. The cowardly shit. He hadn't told her there was someone else.

'What am I going to do? I love him so much. I can't lose him. I just can't. September is not going to come from a broken home. She is going to have a proper family.'