

# Joanne FEDLER

## *The Reunion*

In one weekend of secret mothers' business,  
everything can change ...





Joanne Fedler's books include *The Dreamcloth*, *Things Without a Name*, *When Hungry*, *Eat* and the international bestseller *Secret Mothers' Business*. Joanne studied law and is a former women's rights advocate, counsellor of abused women and CEO of a not-for-profit advocacy centre. When she's not writing, drinking coffee or exercising, she sometimes ventures out into the world to teach creative or life writing, including journeys with Women's Own Adventure to exciting destinations all over the world. She's raised money for abused women, breast cancer research and post-natal depression. Joanne lives in Sydney, close to a beach, with her husband and two teenage kids. She spends a lot of time meditating, reading and patting her cats.

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**Joanne  
FEDLER**

*The Reunion*

ARENA  
ALLEN&UNWIN

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The paper in this book is FSC® certified.  
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*This book is dedicated to all mothers and daughters  
but especially to Lisa and Kaitlyn*

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## Author's Note

Writing *The Reunion* gave me a chance to go away with a bunch of girlfriends to Kangaroo Valley in the New South Wales Southern Highlands for a weekend, during which we drank, cooked, walked, talked and even planked—responsibly and in the name of research. This book is poised on that fuzzy line between fiction and non-fiction. Many of the conversations in this book are adaptations of real conversations I've had with my girlfriends or ones I've overheard women having with each other in parks and the school playground. However, this is mostly a work of fiction. Whatever resemblance the characters bear to me, my husband, my children, or any of my actual girlfriends is more or less coincidental, even though the most bizarre stories and conversations probably did take place.

It's easy to imagine there is no magic, drama or excitement in a day that starts with school drop-off and ends with a family meal around a table. And yet, motherhood keeps giving me plenty of material to work with. After the unexpected success of *Secret Mothers' Business*, I've learned that women love to read about the truth of our lives, as unglamorous as they sometimes are.

Celebrity mothers like Posh and Angelina may travel, walk red carpets and have the paparazzi trailing their every move, but for the rest of us motherhood is largely filled with minutiae and small labours. Most of what we do goes unnoticed and unapplauded. But it's not only in the wide

world of political posturing and big business that large change happens. In the quiet conversations women have among themselves, small shifts of autonomy, personal choice and growth can occur, miracles hatch and women are reborn into themselves. This book is about the ordinary struggle to be a few unexceptional things—a good person, a good mother and a good friend. It records the belittled victories and unmourned tragedies of self-denial that happen to women as they navigate the transitions motherhood and friendship necessitate.

Gandhi said his life was his message. As women and mothers, our lives are our stories.

Joanne Fedler  
Sydney  
September 2011

# What You Need to Know About Us

## ***Jo***

Age: 44

Been with Frank, my BFF, for sixteen years; married for eight.

Kids: Jamie (13) and Aaron (11)

Behind the scenes: Three am insomnia; fibroids recently removed; invasive puckering setting in.

## ***Helen***

Age: 49

Coming up for sixteen years with David.

Kids: Nathan (13), Sarah (12), Cameron (10) and Levi (6)

Behind the scenes: Going to need a hysterectomy one of these days, it's all just collapsed in there; chronic tinnitus, middle-age spread, libidinal death.

## ***Ereka***

Age: 46

Still with Jake. Such a good man.

Kids: Olivia (13), Kylie (11)

Behind the scenes: Suspected diabetes; still need to lose thirty kilos. At least.

## **CJ**

Age: 48

Divorced. Living with Kito for past two months.

Kids: Liam (15), Jorja (13) and Scarlett (11)

Behind the scenes: Going for a tummy tuck soon, doing regular Botox (*can't you tell?*).

## **Maeve**

Age: 48

Unmarried—actually, divorced, but that was a lifetime ago.

In a casual relationship with Stan for five years.

Kids: Jonah (23)

Behind the scenes: *Why on earth would anyone want to know the personal details of my health? Like most women my age, I'm perimenopausal and my teeth creak, but are you going to write that?*

## **Summer**

Age: 41

Married to Craig (hubbie number three) for almost a year.

*We're, like, so going to Fiji for our one-year anniversary.*

Kids: Jai (16), Airlee (15) and Jemima (9)

Behind the scenes: Everything works just fine—maybe a teensy bit of cellulite.

## **Virginia**

Age: 49

Unmarried and childless.

Behind the scenes: Early menopause (womb death); early stages of rheumatoid arthritis.

## The Kind of House You'll Never Own

'You are no bloody fun anymore,' Helen mutters.

I teeter along the cobblestone pathway behind her like a groupie in stilettos after too many martinis, dragging my suitcase on wheels. The full-blooming lavender flanks us as we make our way towards the front door of this—take my word for it—mansion. You know: the kind of house you'll never own. Not in this lifetime. Though this is hardly a 'house', a term usually associated with the modest four walls people live in. *This* is boasting. Its shoulders are caped in poison-green ivy, and it winks its windowed eyes at us. I wonder what sort of a millionaire owns this place and where they are now. Probably on their island in the Caribbean.

This is also, you might be jealous to know, our rented home for the weekend. Helen thought a girls' weekend would snap me out of my depression. But I keep telling her I'm not depressed. There are tons of reasons for the insomnia.

*'I wish I had a mother who actually cared.'* Those were Jamie's last words before she slammed the phone down on me while I was parking in the driveway not three minutes ago. And I'm not calling back. I won't take that crap. She's thirteen and three-quarters. You get used to the hatred around this age.

That said, last week, when she ripped the head off that little bobbing-headed squirrel—the one attached to my

dashboard with the *World's Greatest Mum* sash—well, that hurt. 'The whole art class had to make them. We had no choice,' she'd yelled as if, given the option, she might have chosen something like *The World's Most Controlling Mum*. I was fond of that squirrel. Beheaded, it's a reminder of all I've done wrong as a mother.

'Just turn off your phone,' Helen says. As if the phone is the one who loathes me. She wrestles with the keys we'd picked up from the estate agent in Bowral. I'd waited in my car, flicking through *Deadly Peril and How to Avoid it*, which Aaron left on the back seat this morning and for which, no doubt, there'll be another school library fine. I could take it out of his pocket money again. But then I'll get a call from the school saying this time, he's selling his Pokemon cards or DS games in the playground. In the ten minutes that Helen was gone, I learned how easy it is to die from botulism, puffer fish and frozen toilet waste—the sort of freakish things it's apparently crucial for an eleven-year-old boy to know.

'They'll survive without you for a weekend. Just be unavailable.'

Helen and I have different parenting styles. Hers is the 'let them get on with it' kind. Mine is the type where I'm always graduating from one worry (like SIDS, choking on small objects and drowning in shallow water) to another (crossing roads, going unaccompanied into public toilets and getting rides with friends' boyfriends who've only just got their licences). Which, if you think about it, says more about the society we live in—that rapists and appalling drivers coexist with my children—than it does about me. Safe passage. That's all I ask for my kids. From here to adulthood. But wherever I turn, danger seems to lurk. You can't open the newspaper these days without taking a Valium. Shark attacks. Car accidents. Skiing mishaps. Terrorists. And let's not forget the paedophiles. I adore Alice Sebold, but I have

to say *The Lovely Bones* didn't help. So if Jamie thinks I'm going to let her go off to Borneo for three weeks to climb some godforsaken mountain and trek through rainforests teeming with savage wildlife, she's grievously mistaken. And she says I don't care.

Helen unlocks the door and we find ourselves standing in a dimly lit entrance hall which opens out into a vault of light ahead.

'Phew,' I say. By 'phew' I mean a lot of things. Like 'Crikey, chandeliers!' and 'What's that smell?'

'Mildew,' says Helen.

Whatever it is, it's on the wrong side of neutral.

'Despite the smell it's not a bad place for a reunion,' she says.

'Well, it's not exactly a reunion, since half of us are missing,' I remind her.

We had, you must believe me, big plans after our last get-together, that infamous night at Helen's mother's house—could that have really been *six* years ago? We all made extravagant promises about meeting up several times a year, and avowed the importance of bonding with girlfriends, getting away from husbands, and putting ourselves first once in a while. But after Levi was born, Helen disappeared. Like a bona fide missing person. The fourth child finally tipped the scales and down she went. But she's back, as wonderfully vibrant and larger than life as ever. She organised this weekend. As if her life depended on it. 'If I don't get away from my family, I'm going to murder someone,' she'd declared cheerfully.

I have half the number of children Helen has, and there are days when I barely manage to stuff that last dish in the dishwasher and swipe the floor with the wet towels from the bathroom, before collapsing onto my bed with a 'don't-even-think-about-it' look in Frank's direction. Who knows how she

found time to source this *large Victorian mansion, sleeps eight, on three acres of undulating countryside with immaculate gardens including a fountain, pergola and its very own dam?* She's the busiest person I know but somehow she always finds time to do the fun things. It's a mystery, really.

Helen's remark about me not being any fun anymore is—let me state for the record—a dramatic overstatement. I haven't found Jesus or become a Seventh-day Adventist, Scientologist or an organic vegan. I haven't given up alcohol or had another baby (which, by the way, *she* did—and then who was no fucking fun?). This grotesque exaggeration is all because I didn't order the deep-fried soft-shell crab from the Thai takeaway as we drove through Bowral, and she's taken it a little personally. She appears to have forgotten that I let her shave my pubic hair the day before my wedding. As a group activity where cameras were involved. And about that time she got me so wasted on cocktails on a harbour cruise that I threw up in my own lap. I *do* know how to have fun. These days I just do it with a calorie-counting book and a pedometer.

I follow Helen into a living room from whose ceiling you could suspend a trapeze if the circus came to town. Light pours in through the high windows. In the corner, like an ageing film star who still commands the room's attention, on ink-black tiptoes stands a grand piano.

'Good space for a party, don't you reckon?' she says.

The room wants you to slide across its floors on your knees like that girl in *Flashdance*. But I can't because I might put my back out and then I really won't be any fun.

In front of us looms a grandiose staircase with stained-glass windows illuminating the landing. The stairwell then splits into two and curves up both to the right and left, so you have options going up or down. As a kid I always

dreamed of living in a house like this. A house like in *Gone with the Wind*.

‘What time are the others arriving?’ I ask.

‘Whenever. Who cares? Relax. We’ll have first choice of the bedrooms.’

Not that it matters. I barely sleep these days.

‘And who’s the friend CJ’s bringing?’

‘Dunno. Don’t care. Chill out. It’ll be fine.’

I’d love to be this casual. Who wouldn’t? But with CJ, you never know. She’s a lawyer. And she’s got poor emotional boundaries. For all we know, she could be bringing one of her clients along with her, a gambler, a prostitute or a drug addict— you know, the type of person I’m devoting my life to preventing my kids from becoming. Although, come to think of it, such people are fabulous entertainment value at a dinner party. At the very least, they take your mind off your own problems.

But untested dynamics are always a gamble. And this is such a rare weekend away. Then again, how bad can it get? Our last get-together was different. We were all friends, or mostly. Our kids were at the same preschool so at least we could bitch about the same vile mothers. But that’s changed. For starters, Fiona doesn’t live in Sydney anymore. After her battle with breast cancer, she and Ben bought some land near Byron Bay, sold up, moved and built an eco-shack out there where she runs her massage practice and grows her own vegetables. She had so much chemo she lost her eyebrows. But she’s living the life she’s always wanted to live. When I last spoke to her, she had just harvested her first basket of home-grown strawberries and she sounded happier than I’ve ever heard her.

We all saw it coming: Liz and Carl divorced after her affair. Liz is now even more of a big-shot in the advertising world and spends half the year in Europe. When you Google her

you get over a hundred thousand hits. Liz and I tried to keep in touch at first but our emails eventually dwindled. It's understandable that when you start over you'd want to shed the life you had when you were married. Losing a few friends is just part of the fallout. I'm glad Carl remarried. I once bumped into him and his new wife down at Bronte Beach with his and Liz's kids, Chloe and Brandon. They looked the picture of the 'happy family', so maybe there really is life after divorce.

We invited Dooly to our weekend trip but it was just 'impossible' for her to get away. Last time I saw her was after her mother's funeral, when I popped in with a large pot of chicken soup. She said something like, 'Just knowing she'll never call me up to make me feel bad about myself makes me feel even worse.' In those words she summed up what is totally fucked up about mother-daughter relationships.

We agreed not to invite Tam. Last contact I had with her was a post I put on her Facebook wall to say 'Congratulations' from me and Frank after her new baby was born. She never responded. I think she always hated my guts.

I'd have been happy to have a weekend away with just Helen in a fancy hotel with twenty-four-hour room service, but she said that if we got a few more takers, we could get a beautiful place, somewhere 'out in the country'.

We asked Ereka and CJ for old time's sake, though we haven't seen either of them in years. Ereka can only come for one night—it's never been easy for her, because her daughter, Olivia, has brain damage. And CJ, who's apparently in a new relationship, texted back asking, *Can I bring a friend?* Helen was all for it, having worked out what Blind Rise Ridge was going to cost, and said the more the merrier—and having some new blood might be fun.

I invited a couple of friends, including Maeve, who I met at a talk at the local library by a Buddhist nun who'd been on a solo retreat in a cave for the past eight *years*, which I guess is the meditation equivalent of extreme sports: no TV, no conversation, no laundry. Maeve, can I just say, could be Susan Boyle's younger, more attractive sister. The observation is irresistible. At first I was distracted by her black leather boots and the trench coat it turned out she'd sewn herself, covered entirely in buttons she'd collected from countries she's travelled to. And that was before I noticed up close she has one green eye and one brown eye, as if God couldn't make up his mind.

'You know who you remind me of?' I began.

'Susan Boyle?' she answered wryly.

I guess she'd heard that before.

Things picked up when we agreed that the nun was terrifically serene but a terrible public speaker. By the end of the evening we'd swapped cards, and when I looked at hers the next morning I discovered she's actually a professor of social anthropology. I emailed her the next day and we met up for lunch at a little café near the university. After I wondered aloud why our food was taking so long, she told me how the San Bushmen make venom using larvae of small beetles, poison from plants, snake venom and poisonous caterpillars and that they sometimes wait up to three *days* for their large prey to die. I guess forty-five minutes for a caesar salad wasn't the end of the world.

Maeve was married once ('a long time ago') and now has an on-off relationship with Stan, a divorced professor of modern history. Her adult son, Jonah, is travelling through South America with his guitar and his girlfriend. Her biggest worry is her next academic article; her biggest headache is marking two hundred exams twice a year. She gardens, sews, goes to wine tastings and museum exhibitions, and

does tai chi at five thirty pm twice a week just when I'm working out what to feed everyone for dinner. Someday my life will be just like that. Except probably with Frank.

Maeve smiled helplessly when I asked if she carries a photo of Jonah in her wallet. I guess not all mothers feel the need to show off their offspring at the slightest provocation. I on the other hand even wear a necklace with Jamie and Aaron's names and birthdates on little silver circles, which I never take off.

Maeve tells the most fascinating stories about the cultures and customs of the tribes she's studied, some of which you'd rather not hear while you're eating. If I hadn't met Frank and had kids when I did, I'd have also done something grand and humanitarian involving world travel. I'd also probably know how to say 'Where's the station?' in Zhuang and Igbo. I'd be able to tell you how the Tongans bury their dead and the Amish celebrate marriages. Instead I can cover A4 books with adhesive plastic without getting bubbles and make board games to illustrate the effects of global warming—skills the Tongans would no doubt find fascinating. And anyway, Frank renewed my subscription to *Getaway* magazine for our anniversary.

I haven't had to hang out with Maeve while our kids did swimming or karate lessons. I don't have to feign interest in her brilliant child's achievements or listen to stories of his behavioural problems. We talk about Jonathan Franzen's books and Julian Assange's Wikileaks. Over unhurried lattes. Motherhood barely rates a mention. Like menstruation or menopause: we're all going through it, one way or the other, but why bring it up?

'I've never been away on a girls' weekend before,' she said when I invited her. So everything's got to be perfect.

I also invited Alison, from my Saturday morning Pilates class. She's a paediatrician with two kids and lives with her

girlfriend Polly. Helen got all atwitter thinking we'd have a real lesbian with us on our weekend. I wondered about inviting Polly too, but figured that since this is a getaway from our partners, Alison also needed to get away from hers and the vagina was neither here nor there. And besides, someone's got to stay with the kids. But then Alison texted to say she was on call for the weekend and couldn't come after all. I'm going to have to make it up to Helen somehow.

When it came to Virginia, Helen and I had to have a long chat. Virginia and Helen go back to the first grade together. Which is lovely for them. But here's the thing: Virginia is single. And has no kids. Not even adopted or steps. In fact there's absolutely no-one she's answerable to, enslaved by or encumbered with. Not that these disqualify her from fitting in per se. She's also a location scout for a television network and travels all over the world. So I guess we're in for a whole weekend of some child-free glamour girl filling us up with stories about this fabulous shoot and that glorious destination. I'm already crippled with anticipatory envy. 'Great,' I told Helen. 'Some new conversation. And it'll stop us from spending all our time talking about our kids.'

This house is big enough for twenty of us is what I'm thinking as we walk through the living space, which gives you the reverse feeling of 'intimate', whatever that may be. On the left wall is a monstrous mirror in an ornate gilt-edged frame with leaves, bunches of grapes and little dust-encrusted angels. It genuinely doubles the size of the room. Someone liked things big around here.

'Look at us,' I say.

'Yes, look at us,' Helen says, not looking.

'We look good,' I say.

'Speak for yourself.'

What I love about Helen is that she's still wearing the daggy tracksuit pants I've known her to wear for the past

ten years we've been friends, with a trace of what I hope is breakfast porridge on her right knee. She sleeps in her clothes and walks around in her pyjamas. Everything is a shade of navy blue or black to hide dirt, and loose with elasticised waists. The only makeup or facial product I've ever known her to apply is the nappy rash cream she carries in her bag and uses as a lip moisturiser. If she were on the market, she'd be described as *a warm and welcoming substantial family home, oozing character, low maintenance and great value for money*. Vanity isn't one of her vices.

Suddenly, three huge creatures come into focus behind me and I swivel. It's not a happy sight. The ad said nothing about this. Jutting out from the opposite wall are three decapitated creatures. One looks like a wild boar, the second a deer with sculpted antlers and the third a buffalo.

'That fella looks like Fritzzy—a guy I went out with before I met David,' Helen says.

'You dated a guy who looked like a water buffalo?'

'Without the tusks.'

Their dark eyes gleam at me in varnished suspicion.

'Why would anyone shoot a living thing?' I say under my breath.

'Adrenalin. Testosterone. Sport. The thrill of the hunt.'

'How am I going to relax this weekend with them staring at us?'

'They're not staring. They're dead,' she says, waving her hands in front of them. 'See? No blinking.'

I'm not a vegetarian, you understand. It's not that. I turn away from their cold eyes to take in the old gramophone, burgundy suede sofa and old grandfather clock, its face blankly frozen on quarter to ten even though it's past noon. Nothing here belongs to us, but we've paid good money to 'make ourselves at home' for the weekend. But it's odd to

do that in a stranger's house. It feels a little voyeuristic—the way second-hand stuff always makes me feel. Blind Rise Ridge, despite its splendour, is a place that's been left behind. I can almost smell its sadness.

'A fireplace . . .' I sigh.

'Only thing that's off limits is the piano. It's being auctioned next weekend.'

Not that I can play. But why put temptation in people's way?

After Helen's heavy-handed cocktails, you never know who might come down with an irresistible case of the 'Chopsticks'. I've seen things get out of hand before.

Helen plonks herself down noisily in one of the cosy armchairs studded with cushions and puts her feet up on a pouf. 'I'll have a champagne and cranberry juice, thanks.'

'You mean this place doesn't come with a butler?'

'The butler was extra,' she says with a sigh.

'Bummer.'

'C'mon, let's check out the upstairs.'

My first boyfriend, Travis, once said to me that when you pick a bedroom, you pick your dreams. His words have stuck. But it turns out that only four of the eight rooms have beds in them. I don't mean to complain, but the ad did say eight.

One of the rooms is a study with a stinkwood desk and chair, the other a mini-library with books lining the walls, including a full set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and a series called *Australia in the War* bound in red leather. The third room looks like it was once a child's nursery, with blue ducks on yellow wallpaper, a wooden rocking horse in one corner, and a little pianola with a stool tucked between its legs in another. Along the top of the keyboard runs a hand-painted fresco of horses and children running and playing

flutes and lutes. There was once magic here. I'm not being sentimental; it's just that my kids' playroom is all electric screens and Made in China plastic junk. As I leave, I see how the height of growing children has been marked in steady succession on the doorframe and suddenly feel wistful, thinking about how fast Jamie and Aaron have grown up.

The last room at the end of the corridor is locked. Helen checks all the keys in her bunch. None of them opens it.

'What do you think's in there?'

'A couple of corpses, maybe some bottled body parts in formaldehyde,' says Helen, with what I hope is a twinkle in her eye.

I laugh and say, 'You're a cruel person.'

The four available rooms all have bay windows, which push up against the outside like breasts in a wonderbra. Two have double beds and two have two singles. Aha . . . *sleeps eight*. Helen dumps her bag in the master bedroom with an ensuite, saying she'll happily share the double bed with anyone who can stand her snoring and farting.

That's lovely for her, but can I just say, at this stage of my life sharing is not my idea of caring. I've shared way too much of myself over the years. And it's not over. I still share a bed, a bathroom and my vagina with Frank. Even after fifteen years together, I find the tireless presence of another person in my bedroom—even good old Frank, whose body noises and smells I could pick out of a line-up even if blindfolded, and which I'd probably miss if he ran off with his secretary—a challenge. He says I snore. I'd rather choke on my own vomit than verbalise this, but really, if I do, that's when I actually sleep. You understand just how much I was counting on having my own room? Now it looks like I'm going to have to endure the humiliation of keeping someone else up.

I pick a room with two single beds that looks out over a little secret garden tucked around the west side of the house. The garden has a stone birdbath choked with leaves, a fountainhead, a pond and angel statues enclosed by a semicircle of fruit trees with withered lemons. Not so long ago Jamie would have skipped into it gleefully, in search of fairies. These days the only *Glee* she gives a toss about is at seven thirty on Fridays on Channel Ten.

I open the antique cupboard with butterflies hand-painted on its doors. It's empty except for a few hangers, lined with handmade embroidered hanger covers. Whoever lived here had time on her hands.

The bathroom no longer conjures up the strawberries and cream it was once hoping to. The pink tub squats on its brass claw-footed heels, the enamel worn down the centre. The sink wears a skirt of chintzy roses, matched by the curtains at the window, like a fat girl at a disco, badly advised. At the far end stand a toilet and a bidet hunched over like an old married couple. I can see what someone once had in mind, but it's the elderly bathrooms and kitchens which ruin the charm of old places, like the skin on a woman's hands and neck that give away her age despite any renovations she may have had to the rest of herself.

I call for Helen as I walk down the staircase. You can get lost in a place this size.

'In the kitchen,' Helen yells. I follow her voice into the outsized kitchen where battered copper pots and pans hang watchful as helicopter parents above the hob.

Helen is packing away the triple-cream brie and gorgonzola in the fridge. In the fridge door is a bottle of Baileys and on the top shelf a store-bought tiramisu. Not a thing there I can touch, really.

'Dunno what you're going to do when it comes to my meal,' says Helen, laughing.

She's doing dinner tonight, I'm on tomorrow night. Lunch and breakfasts have been divided up among the others.

But I'm not a complete schmuck. I've brought all my own food for this weekend, because when it comes to food, you cannot trust Helen. She will as easily slip vodka in my diet Coke as she would cream into my soup. And that's the thing about friendship. You've got to know what lies your best friend will tell to your face to get you drunk, stoned or simply keep you on her team.

I unpack my healthy offerings from my esky. 'There's more to life than vegetables, you know,' Helen says.

I ignore her. I suggest we divide the fridge into two sections: the guilt-free side and the indulgence side. 'As if anyone will even notice,' Helen huffs. 'You're the only one who cares.'

I wish Jamie could hear that.

Helen grabs the takeaway we'd bought in town and leads the way back into the lounge room, where we open the doors onto a wrap-around veranda which looks out over an overgrown medley of lavender, rosebushes and other flowering plants. There is an empty birdcage on the dusty glass-topped table, a hammock slung over the railing, two suspended cocoon-like chairs and—I am charmed by this—a row of coloured but very dusty bottles hanging from string from the rafters. A stone pathway cuts its way down a slope that leads to a pergola next to a small body of water.

'God, what a view,' Helen sighs.

A forest hems the horizon and the undulating hills are ribboned in shades of pistachio and cinnamon.

I put my arm around Helen and squeeze her.

'This was a good idea.'

She nods.

'No-one was murdered here or anything?'

‘Why d’you think we got such a great deal? Just mind the bloodstains on the carpet.’

I can tell she’s joking. She is joking, right?

‘Just be happy and enjoy the moment.’

I remove my arm from her shoulder. She knows how to get to me. Okay, so I never have to regift her birthday presents. When she brought me back a leaf from the Bodhi tree from India last year—smuggling it through customs—I cried. She told me how she’d dived for it, along with thousands of other tourists, as it wafted to the ground. But she got there first. And you wouldn’t want to get into a fight with Helen, trust me. Frank looked at the leaf and said, ‘She probably picked it up off the streets of Delhi.’ But Helen wouldn’t lie to me about something that important. She’s held my hand as I shivered in terror before a routine colonoscopy, stuck by me when Frank and I went through that rough patch, and distracted me from grief, homesickness and several miniature crises in both Aaron and Jamie’s lives by dragging me to the movies and stuffing me full of Maltesers. She’s propped me up through some hellish times. Maybe now that the kids are getting older we’ll get to see more of each other.

‘So where are the owners?’ I ask. ‘What’s this place’s story?’

Helen just waves her hand dismissively.

‘No idea. Who cares? For the next forty-eight hours, Blind Rise Ridge belongs to us. Our rules—piano excluded. And right now, this afternoon has got soft-shell crab written all over it.’

## The Long-lost Outdoors

There are no missed calls or new messages on my iPhone. I slip it into the pocket of my jeans. Helen opens her container, eyeing me as I open my prawn and papaya salad, *without* the peanuts. It is a nest of bean sprouts and shaved carrot. über-healthy.

She takes a deep-fried crab leg and bites into it, then moans with pleasure. 'You have to taste the crab.'

'It's a hundred per cent fat. You might as well drink a bowl of whale blubber.'

'D'you reckon all this denial has made you any happier?'

She takes another bite of the crab which is sprinkled with chilli and coriander.

'It's made me thinner. Hey, you hate coriander.'

'Not anymore. I love it now.'

'Since when?'

'For about a year.'

'You can't just start loving coriander and forget to tell me. You're supposed to confide in me.' The hell she used to put me through when I wanted to add a few sprigs of coriander to a salad or a stir-fry.

'When do I get to see you? I have to organise a girls' weekend away to spend any time with you.'

The last time we caught up, Helen invited me to meet her at a free lecture on 'Surviving your Adolescent Daughter' at

the public hospital where I certainly learned a few things about what girls of twelve are getting up to these days and embarrassed myself by not being able to answer at least three of the ten questions on sexual health. Since Frank has made it clear that sex education is my department when it comes to the kids, I figured I'd better brush up on my skills so I can answer the questions Jamie and Aaron have started posing, like, 'How do people get gay?' and 'Should a boy wash his hands before he touches a girl "down there"?' The answers to which, I confess, I don't have at my fingertips. Helen didn't even have time to grab a coffee after all the jibber-jabber about condoms and menstrual moods. All we managed was a handful of whispered chuckles while the lecturer glared at us like we were feral schoolgirls. Still, seeing her always makes me feel better.

Helen waves a piece of crab under my nose.

'Stop it.'

'You know, since you went to that food fascist, you've lost your . . . *joie de vivre*. I don't even see the point in a get-together like this if you're not eating.' She is cross, not just teasing.

'What does this look like?' I say, holding up my salad bowl. 'I *am* eating. Just not fatty things.'

Since I began my new eating plan just before my fortieth birthday and lost a heap of weight, there has been a latent hostility between me and Helen; because she's lost her partner in gastronomic crime. While I was having salad for breakfast, lunch and dinner, Helen was having a new baby—a boy, just as my pendulum predicted. While she was changing nappies, I was changing eating habits. While she was losing her mind in sleep deprivation, I was losing half a kilo a week.

These days I interrogate everything I eat as if it were a teenager on a Saturday night: *Just how much transfats are*