

# 1

## KATE

Kate sees the familiar plaque on Dr. Williams' office door and feels a knot in her stomach. She doesn't know why, after all this time, it still affects her like this—she should be used to it by now. But every time she walks through his door she's filled with hope, and every time she walks back out, she feels utter despair and sadness, unable to believe that fate could be so cruel.

As if he knows what she's thinking, Matt grabs hold of her hand as they sit in the clinic's waiting room. Squeezing it, as if he is somehow able to transfer his boundless optimism onto her.

He kisses her head as she leans into him. "I think this might be the one," he says, over-enthusiastically, as if believing it hard enough will prove him right.

"It's certainly the *last* one," she says wearily.

"Let's see," says Matt with forced joviality.

"Kate!" exclaims Dr. Williams as he opens his door.

She should call him Ben, as he's requested a hundred times. But using his first name means she knows him well, and if she knows him well, it would be admitting how long this has been going on for.

"Doctor," she says, as she stands up and walks toward him with an outstretched arm.

"Good to see you," says Dr. Williams. "Matt, how are you?"

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The two men greet each other as if they're old friends, meeting at a football match. Kate finds herself wondering at what point the bonhomie will be replaced with the business in hand. She suspects it's when her legs are in stirrups and said hand is gloved.

"So, are we all ready?" asks Dr. Williams, now seated in front of them at his desk. He doesn't look up from his computer screen to see Matt's determined nod.

"Okay, so all your numbers are looking good," he says, almost to himself. "We've identified the strongest embryo which, I'm pleased to say, is of the highest grade."

Kate feels Matt looking at her, knowing that he'll be beaming from ear to ear, but she doesn't have the energy to return his eagerness because she's heard it all before. "*Highest grade,*" "*4AAA blastocyst,*" "*It doesn't get much better than this*"—all had been bandied around during their last three attempts, but it hadn't made that line go blue on the pregnancy test, had it?

Matt's enthusiasm had propped Kate up at first, when test after test proved inconclusive. She'd relied on his positivity to bring her back around the right way after they were told that the reason they couldn't get pregnant was due to "unexplained infertility."

"It means there's nothing wrong," he'd said as he practically skipped out of Dr. Williams' office three years ago.

Kate didn't have the heart to tell him that it also meant that there was "nothing right."

Instead, she'd adapted her diet, stopped drinking, and stood on her head after sex. But nothing had resulted in them being able to conceive, hence they now find themselves in the clinic. *Again.*

Once Kate's lying on her back with her legs in the air, she sings Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" in her head, to distract herself from the fact that there is a doctor, an embryologist, a nurse and a medical student all staring intently at her lady parts. *Gallileo Gallileo*, she hums, in an attempt to take herself to another place.

"Once you've had a baby, a smear test will be like just going to the hairdressers," her sister Lauren had offered when they'd inadvertently run into each other at the doctors. Kate hadn't wanted to share her infertility struggles, so had been caught on the hop. Of all the things she *could*

have said she was there for, a smear was the first thing that popped into her head. She could have kicked herself.

You would have thought that an older sister with three children would be the perfect antidote to the situation that Kate finds herself in. Someone who would sympathize, offer unbiased advice and a shoulder to cry on. But Lauren is not *that* person, or perhaps, more to the point, Kate doesn't *see* that person in her. Instead, she sees a woman who is living the life she had assumed *she'd* be living, and sisters or not, Lauren's perfect little set-up is not the kind of support network Kate feels she needs to be immersed in right now. *And anyway*, she thinks, *how could she possibly understand what I'm going through when she only has to look at her husband to get pregnant?*

She jumps as she feels a sharp pain in her groin.

"Okay, so we're inserting the embryo now," says Dr. Williams, though Kate doesn't know if he's talking to her or the eager student, who can't seem to get close enough to see what's happening.

As it turns out, it doesn't matter how many times you've been poked and prodded, it will *never* feel like going to the hairdressers.

She wants to push the invasive hands and instruments away, restore her dignity and tell them she's had enough of being treated like a laboratory rat. But then she looks at Matt, with his gentle smile and hopeful eyes. She could so easily take herself down the *why is life so unfair?* route, but in the rare moments of clarity, when she knows that having a good life isn't dependent on having a child, she is so grateful to have *him*.

She'd always wanted a baby with the husband she loves, more than anything in the world. Had been consumed by it at one point. But the pain and constant disappointment were taking their toll. If she'd had her way, they would have stopped at the third IVF attempt. She was exhausted, both physically and mentally; her nervous energy depleted by the tales she'd had to spin to friends and work colleagues who raised a knowing eyebrow whenever she refused an alcoholic drink.

"This is it," she'd said to Matt, a couple of nights ago, as they were snuggled on the couch watching TV.

She felt him stiffen and sit up straighter. "What, this is our last chance?" he asked, seemingly floored.

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Hadn't he noticed how tired she was? Seen her desolation every time they looked at a blank pregnancy test? Couldn't he see how their whole lives had been taken over by the process of getting pregnant?

"I've had enough," she'd said quietly.

"But we . . ." he stuttered. "Darling, we're so close now—I know it. We can do this."

Something inside her had snapped. "You keep saying *we*, as if we're going through this together."

He'd looked at her, hurt. "Aren't we?"

She chastised herself for taking her frustrations out on the person she loves the most. But isn't that always the way?

She thinks back to how carefree they'd once been. How they'd met on the newsroom floor of the *Gazette* and bonded over mutual banter about a loathsome editor. It had made the day go quicker, made the shifts under the editor's watch seem a little easier to bear. Whenever he'd march into the open-plan office, shouting his morning mantra, "Who are we going to throw to the lions today?," Kate and Matt would race to send each other an email with "YOU?" in the subject heading. It was a regrettable day when the editor himself received Matt's email.

"I'll miss working with you," said Matt, as he and Kate sat in the pub ruing their stupidity. "But every cloud has a silver lining."

She'd thought he was referring to his new job at rival newspaper the *Echo*. She couldn't stop grinning when he added, "Because now I can ask you out."

They'd spent blissful evenings trawling the pubs of South London and lazy weekend mornings reading the papers in bed. But now she can't remember the last time they'd done either.

Instead, they'd been referring to ovulation charts before they made love and subliminally avoiding social events with their pregnant and blessed-with-children friends, which seemed to be just about everyone they knew.

In their effort to have a baby, they'd lost the ability to be spontaneous. Ironically, they'd given up what should have been the halcyon days of pre-parenthood to the restrictions of being responsible for another human, despite the painful absence of one.

“Done!” says Dr. Williams with a flourish. He puts the catheter back on the tray and pings his gloves off.

“So, we’ve got two more in the freezer?” asks Matt. “Before we have to go through egg retrieval again, I mean?”

“Yes, we’ve got two more good quality embryos left to go on this cycle.”

“But even if they don’t work, we can still go again, can’t we?” Matt continues.

Kate doesn’t want to have this conversation. She has an urgent need to empty her painfully full bladder and all the time there’s a viable chance of a baby being inside her, she refuses to acknowledge that they’ll have to go through this again. Because that would mean that the little human being who is having to work so hard right now isn’t going to make it.

“Let’s concentrate on the here and now,” says Dr. Williams, as Kate swings her legs down to the floor. “So, just carry on as normal, and I’ll see you in a couple of weeks’ time for the blood test to see where we’re at.”

Kate looks to Matt and smiles. She can’t help but notice that he’s got his fingers crossed.



## 2

# KATE

“So, no Matt today?” asks Rose, Kate’s mum, as she bustles into the dining room carrying a tray of roast potatoes.

Lauren deftly lifts one out as Rose sets the tray down and bites into it, groaning with pleasure as it crunches.

“Afraid not,” says Kate. “He got called into the office at the last minute.”

“Ah well, no bother,” says Rose, going back into the kitchen. “I’ll do you a plate to take home.”

“So, what’s the big scoop of the day?” asks Lauren’s husband Simon, as he carves into the beef joint that’s resting in the middle of the table. Kate can’t help but feel that he’s taking her dad’s job away from him. “Or are you not allowed to tell?” he goes on.

“I could—” Kate lowers her voice—“but then I’d have to kill you.”

He laughs heartily at the joke he thinks she’s made, but, truth be known, nothing would give her more pleasure. She and Matt had often lain in bed thinking of ways to commit the perfect murder, and her sister’s husband always topped the list of potential victims. He’s tolerated rather than liked, and if it wasn’t for her mother wanting to keep the Sunday-lunch ritual going, Kate could quite easily never see him again. But hey, you can’t choose your family.

“Come on, seriously, I wanna know,” says Simon. “Do you and Matt

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share stories or are you bitter rivals? Fighting each other to the death for the best ones.”

Kate wonders whether he'd prefer to hear about the imminent cabinet reshuffle or the prostitute who's claiming to have kept a Premiership footballer up the night before a cup final, both of which she knows Matt is working on. She decides not to give Simon the satisfaction of either.

“I couldn't possibly divulge our pillow talk,” she says. “Lauren, pass me the carrots, will you?”

“I can't remember the last time we were all together,” says Lauren.

Kate can. It was three weeks ago, and on the way home, her and Matt had discussed how they might be able to stretch the weekly lunches to maybe every other week.

“I only do it for Mum,” Kate had said. “You know how she loves having us all over.”

“I know,” Matt had replied. “But it's dictating our weekends. I don't get much time off as it is, and when I do, no disrespect, I'd rather us two do something together.”

But in the last three weeks, that hadn't happened either, as Matt had worked, then Kate had been at a film festival, and now, this weekend, he's had to go into the office again.

“It's just that everyone's busy,” says Kate.

“Everyone but me,” laughs Lauren. “I'll be sitting at this table waiting for the roasties until my dying day.”

“Well, maybe you need to get a life!” Simon laughs.

It's funny how words are dependent on who says them. If Matt had said that, Kate would have taken it in the spirit it was meant; banter between two people who gave each other as good as they got. But from Simon's lips, the joke is lost, turning a flippant comment into something that sounds far more disrespectful.

The flash of disdain that crosses Lauren's eyes tells Kate she's not the only one who feels it.

“I'd imagine being a mother keeps you very busy,” Kate interjects.

Lauren rolls her eyes. “You have *no* idea.”

*You're right, I don't*, thinks Kate.



“In all honesty, now that I’m back on maternity leave, I don’t know how I had time to go to work,” Lauren says, laughing.

“It’s all about time management,” says Simon. “Imagine Kate when *she* has children; it’ll be like a military operation.” He laughs again.

“Not everyone wants children,” says Lauren, and Kate can’t help but feel dismayed at how misplaced and ill thought out her words are.

She fixes an insincere grin on her face, wondering how much longer she has to keep up with this charade of happy families. If Matt were here, he’d at least take some of the flak for her, stepping in to bat away the barbs.

“Some women want careers instead,” Lauren goes on.

Kate struggles to keep her expression neutral, but it feels like her cheek’s been slapped. “I don’t think you have to make a choice between having a career and having children,” she says.

Simon looks at her with an amused expression. “You can’t have both.”

“Why not?” asks Kate brusquely. “We’re perfectly capable. Just because we’re the ones who have babies shouldn’t mean our careers have to suffer while we have them.”

Simon rolls his eyes.

Kate looks to Lauren, shaking her head in the hope that she’ll get some sisterly support, but Lauren has turned away. Kate wonders when her sister became so spineless when faced with her husband’s old-fashioned views.

Up until their first child, Noah, was born five years ago, Lauren had dedicated her life to bringing *other* peoples’ babies into the world. In fact, Kate couldn’t remember a time when her sister *wasn’t* surrounded by children. She’d babysat for family friends as a teenager and had studied midwifery as soon as she’d finished secondary school, which was why she was well placed to make comments about forgetting your dignity when you give birth. Logically, Kate knew she should take her sister’s words as they were probably intended, yet she couldn’t help but feel they were aimed at her personally.

Simon sighs theatrically. “The proof’s in the pudding. Someone like Lauren, who has worked for the good old NHS for fifteen years, isn’t as high up as her peers who have chosen not to have children. Fact.”

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“When do you think you’ll go back to work?” asks Rose in an attempt to change the subject, although Kate is quite sure that she already knows the precise date. Lauren and their mum are close like that.

Lauren throws a glance at her husband. “I’m not due back until the end of the summer, but if we need the money, I might go back sooner.”

“Let’s hope that she still has a job by then,” says Simon. “If the current government have *their* way, the NHS won’t last for much longer.”

*Now, you just wait a minute. This government have gone all-out to secure the future of our healthcare system.*

Those are the words she knows her conservative father would normally have said, but there’s a deafening silence. Kate looks at the chair he’d once occupied, now sitting woefully empty in the corner of the room, and feels a very real physical tug on her heart.

It’s coming up to a year since he died, yet Kate can still hear him, still see him, sitting at his place around the table. They’d left his chair empty for the first six months, none of them able to remove it from where they gathered every Sunday, but gradually they’d moved a little this way and that, shuffling ever closer, until suddenly it had been banished to where only cobwebs grew. Kate had been a reluctant visitor ever since, finding the slow removal of the man she adored too painful to accept. Where she’d once looked forward to the family getting together, excited to hear about her father’s week at work and revelling in the heated debates between him and Matt, it had now become an effort. Without her ally, the dynamics seem to have shifted, and the once light-hearted, evenly matched pairings of her and her father versus Lauren and their mother now feel heavily weighted in her sister’s favor.

Whenever Kate calls her mother, Lauren seems to be adding her two pennies’ worth in the background. And on the odd occasion Kate’s dropped in to see the children, Rose is there, preparing dinner in Lauren’s kitchen. Maybe it’s always been this way, but now that her father isn’t round at *her* flat, helping her out with odd jobs, Kate notices it more.

She’d lost count of how many cups of tea she’d made him on a Saturday morning when Matt was invariably on a weekend shift, and Harry had taken it upon himself to fix a leak in the shower in his DIY-shy son-in-law’s absence. Kate had always managed to find a creaky door for him

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to oil, or a shelf to put up, despite being more than capable of doing it herself; the pair of them as good as each other for finding excuses to spend time together.

“I thought I’d get out from under your mother’s feet for a bit longer,” he used to say when he’d appear on her doorstep on his way back from watching Chelsea play at Stamford Bridge. By then Matt would be home, and they’d all sit and watch the late kick-off on the telly together.

“Do you think you two will have kids one day?” her dad had asked once, ever so casually. She and Matt had looked at each other as they weighed up whether to share their desperate struggle. If any member of the family were to know about it, it would only have been him, but then Kate thought of the sadness that would cloud his features as he contemplated his daughter’s childless future. She’d discreetly shaken her head at Matt and said instead, “We’d love them when the time’s right.”

“I’m going to make sure that whenever it happens and whatever it is, it’s going to be a Blues fan,” he’d said, smiling. “It’ll be chanting ‘blue is the color, football is the game’ before it can say, ‘dada.’”

“I don’t think so,” Matt, a lifelong Arsenal fan, had said, laughing. “I’m all right with its first words not being daddy, but if you think for one second that its favorite color is going to be blue instead of red, then I think we might have to put a restraining order in place.”

They’d all laughed together as Kate dared to imagine her father holding the hand of his grandchild, the pair of them wrapped in blue and white scarves as they made their way to the stands. The thought of it had made her want to cry even more than the prospect of it never happening. Now, though, the impossibility of both scenarios threatens to engulf her.

Kate takes her plate into the kitchen, unable to stomach her food or the conversation any longer. She stands facing the units with her hands spread wide on the worktop. *Just count to ten*, she can hear Matt’s voice saying.

*It would be a hell of a lot easier if you were here*, she replies silently.

She pictures him in the high-rise tower of the *Echo’s* offices, pacing up and down, raking a manic hand through his hair as he is forced to go to the wire on tomorrow’s front-page exclusive. Will the government insider get the names to him on time? Will the prostitute want more money, now

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that Real Madrid are rumored to be interested in signing her one-night stand?

Despite both of them being in the business for over ten years, the pressure never lessens, and the reliable sources were proving to be ever more *unreliable*. That's why Kate had opted to stay where she was, on the *Gazette's* showbusiness desk, instead of rising up through the ranks where the stakes and stress increased tenfold. She chose not to acknowledge that the bigger reason for not putting herself forward for promotion was that she'd not expected to be there for that much longer. But that was four years ago, when she'd thought that she'd have to hand over coverage of the next Oscars because she'd be too heavily pregnant to fly to Los Angeles. She honestly hadn't expected to be reporting on the fashion faux pas of Hollywood actresses ever again, but she'd been there for the last three years in a row, without even the merest hint of a bump.

"Are you okay, darling?" asks Rose, coming into the kitchen to fetch more gravy. "You look a little pale."

For the briefest of moments, Kate considers telling her why she might look peaky, why her temper seems to be on a short fuse and why *everything* everybody's saying seems to be rubbing her up the wrong way. But no, she and Matt had decided they'd do it together, when there was something to say, and anyway, Rose has already disappeared through the side door and into the garage.

"I don't like vegetables," says Noah, spitting out a mouthful of chewed-up swede as Kate walks back into the dining room.

"Come on darling, just a few more for mummy," says Lauren patiently.

"No! Vegetables are yucky."

Lauren looks at Kate, as if to say, *Aren't you glad you're not me?*

*You're exactly who I want to be,* Kate says to herself.

Over the years, she's fallen into the trap of gauging everyone's good fortune and sense of self-worth on whether they have children or not; using their ability to have a baby as some kind of currency that makes them rich beyond their wildest dreams. So in her eyes, Lauren is a multimillionaire. Though when she looks a little closer, she notices the finer details of what her sister's life might *really* be like. For example, the fact that her husband has almost cleared his plate while she is yet to start her dinner, as

she's too busy cutting up carrots for eighteen-month-old Emmy, chasing the peas that Noah is flicking onto the table, and maneuvering baby Jude's hungry mouth onto her breast.

The juxtaposition of the scene and her selfish thoughts jolt Kate into action.

"Here," she says, moving around the table to stand behind Emmy's highchair. "Let me do that."

Lauren gratefully gives her sister a child's plastic knife and fork while throwing a sideways glance at her oblivious husband.

"Thanks," says Lauren, as Kate cuts up Emmy's vegetables before kneeling to retrieve the errant peas.

It somehow feels easier to be under the table than sat around it. A place to hide from all the words that are said and unsaid. Kate can hear them forcing a conversation, changing the subject to one that isn't deemed to be in the least bit controversial, so that nobody gets on their high horse and threatens the equilibrium again.

She's still on the floor when the doorbell rings, and Rose huffs before putting her knife and fork down. "Who can that be on a Sunday afternoon? Simon, be a love and go and get that, will you?"

Kate watches as Simon walks out of the room, and waits to hear his voice at the door. The conversation is muffled and she strains to hear, relishing his discomfort as he no doubt listens to a Witness regaling him about the power of Jehovah, or a landscaper who just happens to have finished a garden down the road and has a few pergolas and statues left over.

Emmy is hitting Kate on the head with her plastic bowl and she waits expectantly for more peas to rain down on her.

"Oi, you little rascal," she laughs, grabbing hold of Emmy's bare foot. Just feeling her soft skin in the palm of her hand makes Kate's chest tighten and she swallows the tears that are prickling the back of her throat.

"It's someone looking for Harry," says Simon, as he walks back into the dining room with a young blonde woman behind him.

"*What?*" asks Rose abruptly, looking from the woman to Simon and back again.

Kate is still on her knees, surveying the scene across the top of the table.

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“Yeah, it’s actually Harry I’m after,” says the woman. “Harry Alexander. Is he around?”

Kate feels her blood run cold as her brain struggles to comprehend what this woman might want. But whichever way she looks at it, asking for a man almost a year after his death can’t be a good thing.

“Sorry, what is it we can help you with?” asks Kate, rising to her full height.

The woman looks at her feet as they shuffle from side to side. “It’s probably best if I speak to Harry first,” she says.

“Well, he’s not here,” says Kate tightly, her chest feeling like a coiled spring. “What is it you want with him?”

“Are you Lauren?”

Kate feels her mum shift beside her, but Lauren, she notices, is stock still. Even her swaying to comfort the baby has stopped.

“Sorry, who *are* you?” asks Kate, ignoring the question.

“I’m Jess,” says the woman, before clearing her throat.

“And what do you want with Harry?” asks Rose shakily.

Jess eyes her warily. “I need to talk to him. It’s really important.”

Kate looks to Rose. “I’ll let him know you came by,” she says, as her mother and sister’s heads turn in her direction. “What should I say it’s about?” she goes on, ignoring their perplexed stares.

The woman looks down at the floor again, summoning the courage she needs to say what she’s about to say.

“I’m his daughter,” she says, looking up. “Tell him his daughter came to see him.”

# 3

## KATE

“What?” gasps Kate, as the room spins around her. She looks to her mother, who is standing open-mouthed, as if frozen in time. “But . . . but that’s not possible,” she stutters, her voice sounding as if somebody has a hand around her throat.

“I think you’d better leave,” are the first words that Rose says. “I don’t know who you are or what you want, but you’ve no business coming here.”

“My name’s Jess and I just want to see my father—that’s all.”

“Well, he’s not here,” says Kate, feeling ever more present. “You’ve come to the wrong place. You’ve got the wrong man.”

“I’m sorry—I just wanted to—” begins Jess.

“You need to go—now!” barks Rose, in a tone that Kate hasn’t heard before.

“Can we not at least talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to say,” hisses Rose. “As my daughter says, you’ve come to the wrong place.”

Jess reaches into the handbag on her shoulder, pulls out a crumpled piece of paper and reads it. “It’s Rose, isn’t it?” she says, extending her hand, but Rose doesn’t even flinch.

“And you must be Kate, or are you Lauren?” She attempts a smile.

Kate stands firm, her jaw set, staring at the woman who has just thrown a grenade into her world.

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“Look, I can see this is a huge shock to you all,” says Jess. “And I’m sorry—I had no idea you didn’t know. Otherwise I would never have . . .”

Rose is beginning to shake, and Lauren sidles up beside her and puts a firm arm around her back.

“You need to leave,” says Kate, her voice belying the panic that is raging within her.

“But if I could just—”

“For God’s sake, he’s—” starts Rose, before Kate grabs her mother’s wrist, cutting her words off.

“. . . not the man you’re looking for,” says Kate, feeling as if her airways are being crushed.

“I just want him to know—” starts Jess.

“Get out!” screams Rose, making Emmy jump and dissolve into frightened tears.

“Look, I’m sorry, but you need to leave,” says Simon, stepping forward and holding an arm out toward the hall.

“I’m sorry,” says Jess tearfully, as Simon ushers her into the hall. “I thought you knew . . .”

“Just get out!” Rose yells again.

A moment later the front door shuts and everyone takes a sharp breath, none of them wanting to be the first to speak.

Simon coming back into the room breaks the almost hypnotic spell that seems to have been cast.

“Well, what the hell . . . ?” he smirks, stifling a laugh. Only *he* could make this worse.

Kate falls back onto a chair, feeling the air in her body rush out. She thinks of the embryo inside her and forces herself to take deep, steady breaths. In for three, out for four. But her chest constricts, making it feel as if it’s trapping what little air there is inside of it. She imagines blowing into a brown paper bag and closes her eyes as she pictures it inflating and deflating.

“M-mum?” stutters Lauren. “Are you okay?”

If Kate feels flooded by the unwanted guest’s announcement, she can’t even begin to think how her mother must be feeling. Rose’s eyes are glazed. “Yes, yes, I’m fine,” she says eventually. Her voice is barely more than a whisper and she coughs to clear her throat.



“So you don’t know who she is?” asks Lauren.

Rose numbly shakes her head.

“Well if you ask me,” says Simon, “there must be *something* in it. You don’t just interrupt some random family’s Sunday lunch and deliver a bombshell like that.”

“I have no idea what she’s talking about,” says Rose. “It doesn’t even make sense. None of what she said makes any sense.”

Kate’s head is in her hands as she contemplates what just happened, knowing that if she says the wrong thing or asks the wrong question, she won’t ever be able to retract it.

“Mum, could it be . . . ?” starts Lauren, looking to Rose, who turns to her with a face like thunder.

Kate looks to her mother and sister, their expressions mirroring each other’s; their eyes wide with fear and confusion, their lips pinched tight as if they’re biting down on the words that are threatening to spill from their mouths.

“Could it be *what?*” asks Kate.

“Nothing,” snaps Rose. “The girl’s got her wires crossed. It’s as simple as that. There’s no other explanation.”

Kate doesn’t know whether her mother is speaking about Lauren or the young woman who’s just turned up claiming to be her father’s daughter. *Her father’s daughter*. Just hearing those words in her head makes Kate’s throat clench as it battles the tears that are teetering behind her eyes.

For once in her life, she agrees with her mother—it’s just not possible. Harry was devoted to his family and devoted to *her*. She was Daddy’s little girl and they were like two peas in a pod, in every way, except for their looks. Where Kate had inherited her mother’s auburn hair and fair skin, that freckled whenever she so much as looked at the sun, Harry could be seen in Lauren’s wide-set eyes, straight narrow nose and one-sided dimple. The blonde hair that they’d once shared had grown more ashen on Harry in his later years, but he’d always looked distinguished—like the man she knew him to be. But what if he wasn’t? What if he was distinguished in an entirely different way? Conspicuously marked with the stigma of *another* family; a family he had kept secret from the rest of the world.

Her mind races back to the time when Jess would have been born.

She looked young,—early twenties maybe? Which would have made Kate barely a teenager. Those were the years when, during the school holidays, she used to accompany her father to his office, where he worked as a lawyer. She was adamant she'd follow in his footsteps, convinced she wanted to right peoples' wrongs.

"You're a real-life superhero," she'd once said, watching in awe as he spent the morning fighting for a mother's custody and the afternoon negotiating a fair divorce deal for a husband who had been cheated on.

He'd smiled modestly at her through crinkled eyes, but she knew her words mattered to him. As did everybody else's whose lives he touched. He wasn't how lawyers are so often cast; the epitome of a vulture preying on the vulnerable. He was an upstanding citizen who treated each and every one of his clients like a good friend. He had *always* been a superhero in Kate's eyes.

Yet now, she dares to contemplate the possibility that he might have been the very opposite.

"Why didn't you tell her he was dead?" asks Lauren, almost accusingly.

It takes a while for Kate to realize that she's talking to her.

"Because it's none of her goddamn business," Kate snaps. "Though I suppose if it were up to you, you'd sit her down, make her a cup of tea and tell her the whole story."

"And what's *that* supposed to mean?" says Lauren.

"It means that this would suit you, wouldn't it?" Kate glares at Lauren. "You'd love nothing more than to have Dad's memory tarnished."

"Why would I want that?" asks Lauren, fixing her sister with a cold hard stare.

"Because then you'd feel justified for treating him with such contempt for all these years."

"Girls, girls, please," says Rose, who's still visibly shaking and wringing her hands in her lap. "None of this is helping."

"So, what are we going to do?" asks Lauren.

"Nothing," says Kate.

"Don't you think she deserves to be heard?" asks Lauren incredulously. "You can't just dismiss what she said and ignore her."

"That's *exactly* what we're going to do," says Rose icily as she stares at her daughters.

# 4

## LAUREN

“Well, what d’ya know?” Simon smirks, as soon as Lauren has strapped all the children into the back seat of the car and gets into the front. She exhales, letting out the breath she feels she’s been holding in for an eternity. She doesn’t want to talk about it, but she doubts her husband will give her the choice. “Do you think there’s something to it?” he asks.

Lauren turns to look out the window, watching the pavement fall away as Simon pulls off. Jess’s sudden appearance is hard enough for *her* to get her head around. She hasn’t got the energy to face an interrogation from her husband.

“Who knows?” she says quietly.

“Who would have thought it?” Simon says, chuckling to himself. “The man who spent his life dealing with everyone else’s infidelities was up to no good himself.”

“It might not be all that it seems,” she says. “We shouldn’t jump to conclusions until we know the facts.”

Simon snorts, and she knows he’s about to do exactly that. He’ll enjoy flying in the face of controversy, especially if it will give him a ringside seat.

“All those times he spoke to me like I was a piece of dirt on the bottom of his shoe. All those times he tried to make me feel as if you were too good for me . . .”

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## 20 THE HALF SISTER

Lauren bites down on her lip, to stop herself from saying, *I am*.

“And all the while he was up there, in his ivory tower, he had a secret lovechild.”

Lauren takes a deep breath. It’s all very well having her own thoughts and feelings about her nearest and dearest, but she can’t bear to hear Simon saying them out loud. She’d never dream of airing her opinions on his own dysfunctional family, so she doesn’t expect, or want, to hear his views on hers. But she can sense he’s looking for a row, and she just doesn’t have the strength for another evening of arguments and sleeping on the sofa.

Although, if the truth be known, sleeping alone, even if it *is* on a secondhand couch, where no matter how she lies a spring sticks into her ribcage, is preferable to lying beside her husband right now. The admission saddens her, but these past few months it’s felt like every night has been a war zone which she’s had to navigate her way through, judiciously avoiding the grenades that Simon throws at her.

“What is it you do all day exactly?” he had tactlessly said when he came in from work the other night to find Lego on the living room floor and a pile of dirty laundry on the landing.

She used to wonder that herself, especially when she’d only had one baby to get up, change, feed and put back to sleep again. Some days, she’d not had time to shower, or even get dinner ready for when Simon got home.

But ironically, the more children they’d had, the more efficient Lauren had become with *her* time and *Simon’s* money, as she learned to stretch both to their full capacity. She’d mastered multi-tasking, and had become a wise shopper, searching out the best deals on meat and vegetables and eking the most out of every meal.

When Simon was working, the pressure eased off a little, as Lauren didn’t need to worry so much about where the next penny was coming from. But on the occasions he was laid off, which as a laborer on a building site were often, both their purse strings *and* Simon’s moods, Lauren noticed, were more difficult to manage.

“I cannot *wait* to see how this all plays out,” says Simon, still grinning, although his eyes are fixed firmly on the road. “It’s almost a shame that

he's not here to repent his sins. I'd love to see how he'd wriggle his way out of *this* one."

Lauren's chest tightens. She's not going to respond, but she doesn't suppose that's going to stop him saying what he wants to say.

"Can you imagine your mum?" he goes on. "She's going to go fucking ballistic if this all turns out to be true."

"Don't use that language in front of the children," says Lauren, although what she really wants to say is, *Don't you dare talk about my family as if we're just some sideshow put on for your own amusement.*

"They're asleep," snaps Simon, without checking.

A car pulls out in front of them. "Careful," calls out Lauren, dramatically slamming her hand onto the dashboard, hoping that the diversion will dispel the increasingly uneasy atmosphere. Simon honks his horn unnecessarily, but it doesn't distract him from his train of thought.

"Either way, I think we should all take some time out," he says.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," says Simon, turning to look at her for far longer than feels comfortable, "that we should take this opportunity to back off a bit."

"Back off what?" says Lauren, her patience wearing thin.

"From your family!" he exclaims. "With all this going on, there's really no need for us to be getting together every Sunday. We should wait for all this to calm down."

Lauren can't believe what she's hearing. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. We only go through this farce every week to appease your mother, so that she can fawn over the kids and play the dotting grandmother. But it seems that there's one or two bad apples in your family and until we find out exactly how rotten they are, it's probably best if we keep the kids out of it."

"This has got *nothing* to do with the kids," Lauren snaps, knowing that he's probably only saying it to rile her and get a reaction. She wishes she were strong enough not to give him one.

"I don't want them in a toxic environment," he says.

Lauren lets out an involuntary snort of disbelief. Can he hear himself? Does he honestly believe that being with her family for Sunday lunch is

more damaging to their children than the ominous black cloud that is hanging over their parents' marriage?

"You're being ridiculous," she says, as forthrightly as she dares. "The children enjoy seeing everyone and it's important to give them a sense of family." She refrains from adding that between his own alcoholic father and his mother's penchant for corresponding with prisoners, her family is, by far, the least dysfunctional, even in light of Jess's appearance.

He grunts derisively. "Who are you trying to kid? You can cut the atmosphere between you and Kate with a knife. You honestly think that gives the kids a true semblance of family?"

"But—" she starts defensively.

"I don't know why you bother," Simon says over her. "There's not exactly much love lost between you two, is there?"

As much as it hurts to hear the words out loud, maybe he's right. Why *do* she and Kate keep up the pretense that they get on? That they have things in common?

"She's my sister," says Lauren.

"Well, now you have another one," says Simon. "Maybe you'll get along a bit better with her."

Lauren's stomach turns over as she thinks back to the events of the past hour. When Jess had walked into the dining room of her parents' house, she'd known instantly who she was. She'd been rooted to the spot as she looked into eyes that were so like her own. She'd felt the air being sucked out of her as she watched the way Jess, startled like a rabbit in headlights, had overused her hands to combat her nervousness; a mannerism so like her own.

She'd wanted to go to her, to tell her the truth; instead of sending her on a wild goose chase, looking for a man who doesn't exist, but Kate had stepped in. As Kate *always* does, looking to take control.

For the first time, it occurs to Lauren how Jess's appearance will have affected her mother. She'd seemed shocked, as if it was so far removed from reality, that it couldn't possibly be true, but surely she can't be that naive? You can't live with someone for all those years and not know them. She chooses to ignore the voice in her head that says, *Isn't that exactly what you're guilty of?*

When they pull up outside their terraced house, Lauren lifts Emmy out and deftly unclips baby Jude's car seat, while Simon goes ahead carrying a sleeping Noah. She watches as he disappears up the narrow staircase, his shoulder knocking off a chip of peeling paint. She instinctively climbs the four steps to retrieve it from the threadbare carpet. Maybe, when he's in a better mood, she'll ask him again when he might be able to redecorate. The last four times she's asked, his stock answer has been "when I get round to it," but the paint chips are sharp and she worries about one of the children hurting themselves, especially Noah, who's taken to sliding down the stairs on his stomach.

"Right, I'm going to the pub," says Simon, as he comes back down the stairs.

"What, now?" asks Lauren from the sofa, where she's giving Jude his bedtime feed.

He looks at her. "I assume you haven't got a problem with that."

It's a statement rather than a question. There used to be a time, before the children, when they'd run something like that by each other first, not to ask permission exactly, but as a common courtesy. Now, on the rare occasion that *she* wants to go out, she has to clear it with him weeks in advance, and the event itself is like a military operation. The children's food, bath time and bedtime are timed with precision so that Simon doesn't have to do anything. He then proceeds to call her at least three times, to ask questions that fully grown men should really know the answer to, resulting in Lauren coming back home sober, and earlier than intended. She'd end up thinking that it really wasn't worth her while going out in the first place, and then she'd wonder if that was actually Simon's intention.

She watches as he walks into the kitchen, opens the fridge and drinks the milk from the carton. God, how she hates him doing that. Why can't he get a glass, like everyone else? He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Right, I'm off," he says, coming back into the living room a few minutes later with his car keys in his hand.

"Why don't you leave the car?" braves Lauren. "Get a taxi. You've already had a couple of drinks."

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“I didn’t know you were counting.”

“I’m just saying . . .”

He leans over her, with one hand on the arm of the sofa and the other behind her head. She instinctively holds Jude tighter to her as she feels his hot breath on her face.

“Why don’t *you* worry about women’s stuff and leave me to deal with the men’s?” he whispers.

She *could* take the comment as an attempt by her husband to divvy up their responsibilities, albeit chauvinistically. Certainly a few years ago, that was all it would have meant. But things have changed, and Lauren knows that Simon’s words are loaded; specifically chosen to intimidate her.

“*I’m* the man!” she remembers him shouting eighteen months ago as he pinned her up against a wall, smashing his fist into the door beside her head. Her legs had threatened to give way as wood splintered around her. “*I’m* the provider,” he’d gone on. “That’s *my* job—not your fucking father’s.”

She’d naively thought Simon would be happy that her dad had discreetly deposited five thousand pounds into their joint account. He’d obviously known they were struggling to make ends meet after Simon had been laid off work two months before. She, for one, had been grateful. It meant that she could do a food shop without worrying and not have to constantly justify the need to use the car instead of walking. But Simon hadn’t quite seen it like that, choosing instead to see it as Harry undermining his alpha-male status; wounding his fragile ego.

“If I’d wanted your parents’ money, I would have asked for it,” he’d yelled, his face turning a putrid shade of red. “But yet again, your father has seen fit to wield his almighty sense of self-worth.”

“He’s only trying to help,” Lauren had offered, desperate to diffuse the hostile situation she found herself in.

“So you asked him?” he’d said accusingly. “You went to your parents with your begging bowl?” Bubbles of anger had formed on his lip and Lauren could see the vivid red marks on his knuckles as his arms flailed in fury.

“No!” she’d said, though it sounded more like a yelp. “I would never ask them for money.”

“So, he just used his initiative, did he?” Simon had sneered, his face



still too close to hers. “He decided out of the goodness of his heart to help us, without you saying a word?”

Lauren had nodded feverishly. “Yes, yes. I swear I had no idea he would do that.”

Simon had hit the door with his open palm one more time before turning away. If the wall wasn’t there to support her, Lauren may well have fallen to the floor in a heap; drained of nervous energy.

“It doesn’t have to be a bad thing,” she’d chanced, after a minute or two of silence. “It will take the pressure off you—off us.”

Simon had laughed and shaken his head in apparent derision. “You think that’s why he did it?”

“Well, yes,” she’d said, confused. “Why else would he . . . ?”

“It’s not done to help us,” he said. “It’s done with the sole intention of making me look stupid—making me look less of a man.”

“But . . .” started Lauren.

“Don’t you see?” he’d said, grabbing hold of her arms. She’d instinctively flinched, but something in his eyes had changed. They had a look of what she’d fallen in love with all those years ago.

“This is what your dad does,” he’d said softly. “He makes you think he’s doing you a favor, but it’s all about making himself feel superior.”

*Was it?* Lauren had thought about the man she’d grown up with and couldn’t help but wonder if Simon might be right. Was her father’s incessant need to help everyone that crossed his path, always keen to champion the underdog, a pretense? She certainly remembered a time when he’d pretended to help *her*.

“You’re right,” she’d said. “We’ll give it back—tell him we don’t need it.”

She’d hated herself for sounding so conciliatory, but she learned that night that if that’s what she needed to do to keep the peace and create a happy home for her children, then so be it. It was a relatively small price to pay.

“I won’t be too late,” Simon says now, leaning in for a kiss. She can’t help but recoil at his ability to switch between Jekyll and Hyde in an instant.

“Okay,” she says quietly, suddenly desperate to get him out of the house.

As soon as she hears the front door close, her shoulders slump forward,

the pent-up nerves and tension flooding out. How had this happened? When had their marriage become so fraught with anxiety?

Lauren thinks back to when they first met eight years ago, at a bar close to King's College Hospital, where Lauren worked on the labor ward. Simon was on a job in nearby Lordship Lane and was obviously the joker in his crowd. He was charming and made her laugh which, after years of dating self-obsessed numbnuts, was a breath of fresh air. He also happened to be in the right place at the right time, as with her thirtieth birthday behind her, the old biological clock was ticking loudly in her ears.

She'd thought she loved him, or had at least convinced herself that she *could*. Yet gradually, as each year had passed, his ambivalence toward her had driven her insane. One day she was his be all and end all, the next he would casually cast her aside, as if she meant nothing to him. It was the not knowing *which* Simon would walk through the door each night that gave her the most anxiety. And despite being together for all this time, she is no nearer knowing what triggers him one way or another. The realization that she doesn't know what makes her husband tick, and even more importantly, what makes him stop, shames her.